Book Review: "What were the crusades?" By J.Riley-Smith

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ABSTRACT: This review critically examines J. Riley-Smith's book What Were the Crusades?, focusing on his effort to provide a comprehensive definition of crusades. Structured as a systematic exploration, Riley-Smith offers a framework that identifies essential criteria for legitimate crusades, including just cause, papal authority, the taking of a vow, and the benefits granted to crusaders, particularly indulgences. The review contrasts Riley-Smith's pluralist perspective with traditionalist views, which limit the definition to campaigns aimed at Jerusalem, and discusses the broader implications of recognizing other crusading campaigns. It also highlights the challenges posed by popularism and generalism in crusading scholarship. Ultimately, while acknowledging the centrality of Jerusalem in crusade discourse, the review asserts that Riley-Smith's inclusive framework serves as a valuable contribution to understanding the complexities of crusade history. The book is recommended for readers seeking a well-structured analysis that balances historical evidence with theoretical insights.

With the objective to provide a comprehensive definition of what constitutes a crusade, J. Riley-Smith structured his book *'What were the crusades?'* as a systematic exploration of the topic. It provides readers with a legal framework of what encapsulates a legitimate crusade. Such requirements, which are the *sine qua non* of the definition of a crusade for pluralists include, just cause, papal authority, the taking of a vow, and the subsequent benefits bestowed upon the crusaders, the most important being the indulgences.

For Riley-Smith a crusade must have a just cause, which entailed a religious obligation to defend or recover Christian land (p.25). Most importantly, a crusade had to be announced by the Pope, for the benefit of indulgences was contingent on papal authorisation (p.27). The taking up of a vow turned the crusaders into pilgrims, placing themselves under the temporary jurisdiction of the church, leading to Riley-Smith's brilliant argument that crusades then became penitential wars ranked the same as a pilgrimage (p.88). By setting this legal framework for the classification of crusades, the author creates an umbrella term, which embraces conflicts that took place away from the Holy Land including campaigns in the Iberian Peninsula, the Balkans, the Baltics, Western Europe, and North Africa. The soft pluralist instance propelled by Riley-Smith is mainly concerned with the religiosity behind the crusading movement observable in its initiation, authorisation, and organisation. This school of thought appeals to historians because of its centralist position on the meaning of the crusades when compared to traditionalism or generalism.

Contemporary crusading scholarship has recently been divided into four categories by Giles Constable.[1] Traditionalists restricted the "authentic" crusades to the Holy Land, consequently excluding campaigns in other theatres of war. Like Riley-Smith, pluralists focus on how crusades were initiated, authorised, and organised, allowing the inclusion of all campaigns that enjoyed the privilege of indulgences. Popularists are those who focus on the essence of the crusading movement as the mobilisation of the common folk driven by religious fervour. Lastly, generalists adopt a far wider classification of the crusades by recognising them simply as a holy war. Propelling the debate by requesting an "unambiguous, lucid, and generally accepted definition of the term 'crusade,'" H.E. Mayer's traditionalist view—that the only true crusades were those directed at Jerusalem—sparked a fierce discussion among scholars.[2] His views ignore numerous campaigns undertaken to different locations with the same purpose—to defend Christendom. C. Tyerman condenses Mayer's opposition to campaigns directed away from the Holy Land by claiming that the "institution that was originally devised for the Jerusalem campaign" was used for "different purposes under the disguise of some theoretical association with the Holy Land".[3] Henceforth, Riley-Smith's revisionist arguments for an all-inclusive definition of the crusades are a challenge to the *status quo* of crusade scholarship and should be assessed in such a manner.

In the line with the arguments made by Riley-smith, pluralism offers a gap-filling definition of the crusading movement by focusing on the main element that caused its creation and the fuel that kept its engine going, namely religion. Traditionalism, as an outdated theory, finds itself stuck in the conundrum posed by G. Dickson, "what crusades are is not necessarily what the crusades were […]". In contrast, pluralists attempt to reconcile the *crucesignati* of different epochs to the movement they championed unimpeded by mere location. As traditionalists strictly buttress the significance of Jerusalem, they simultaneously undermine the importance of some religious forms and indulgences in the formation of a crusade.[4] Ignoring the pillars that caused the call to arms from all corners of the social hierarchy is to ignore the very essence of the movement itself.

[1] G. Constable, 'The Historiography of the Crusades', reprinted in idem , Crusaders and Crusading in the Twelfth Century (Aldershot, 2008), pp. 3– 32.
[2] H. E. Mayer, The Crusades (Eng. trans. by J. Gillingham of 1965 Geschichte der Kreuzzüge , 1st edn Oxford, 1972), 281– 6
[3] Tyerman, Christopher. *The Debate on the Crusades, 1099-2010*, Manchester University Press, 2011. 220
[4] G. Dickson, 'What are the crusades?', in *The Crusader World*, ed. A.J. Boas (London, 2015), 693

Generalists have successfully explained the development and standardisation of holy wars within European geopolitics. Evolving from the Augustinian concept of just war (*bellum justum*), for Erdmann holy wars arose from the combination of two elements, the Christianisation of the state and the principle that the defence of the church against its enemies was encouraged by God.[5] The proliferation of holy warfare in the minds of Christians in the west shapes the generalist understanding of the crusades, hence this theory is characterised by a lack of classification as it views all holy endeavours equally. However, when compared to the framework offered by Riley-Smith the generalist argument offers an unrealistically broad interpretation of the term "crusade". Riley-Smith's understanding of the crusades as a penitential holy war ripped with benefits, such as the guarantee of protection of property and family of the crusaders, ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and indulgences preserves the uniqueness crusades represented to medieval society (p.68-69).

The brilliance of Riley-Smith's pluralist stance is noticeable when contrasted with popularism's narrow focus on the individual religiosity of the campaigns, which is dismissive of leadership and other aspects exclusive to crusades. The author is certainly right in affirming that serving God, the Church, or Christianity was only a secondary motive of crusaders, for benefitting themselves by indulging in the benefits of "self-sanctification" dominated popular motivations for joining the movement (p.58). Evidently, this argument is incongruous with G. Dickson's emphasis on the mythistory of the peregrinatio puerorum as a miraculous, unheard-of, magical occurrence.[6] Sprung by religiosity with no chance of success, the Children's Crusade is the quintessential example of a true crusade for popularists. In trying to be inclusive of lesser-known expeditions by analysing their composition and motives, popularists dismiss the characteristics of the crusading expeditions at their onset. These characteristics are buttressed throughout Riley-Smith's work but are precisely elucidated in his mentions of Pope Gregory VII's letters that outline the crusades as a holy war, requiring papal authorisation, containing eternal rewards, and directed at Jerusalem (p.89).

[5] Erdmann, Carl et al. *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade : Foreword and Additional Notes by Marshall W. Baldwin / Carl Erdmann.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,, 2019. 3-34
[6] Dickson, Gary (M. Gary). *The Children's Crusade : Medieval History, Modern Mythistory.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. p.16

At this stage Riley-Smith's argument reaches an impasse, for the pluralist argument despite its desired inclusiveness is obliged to accept the greater significance of Jerusalem. The need for the author to justify that the crusader vows and privileges in an array of campaigns were "as authentic as those to and in the aid of Jerusalem" demonstrates the special status of crusades to the Holy Land (p.xi). Therefore, the main weakness of Riley-Smith's definition of "crusades" is its dependency on Jerusalem while simultaneously attempting to underplay its importance by prioritising cause, leadership, and benefits. Another pluralist weakness is the platitudinous practice of gifting indulgences vaguely mentioned in *'What were the crusades?'*. Riley-Smith notes that Innocent III and his successors placed an unprecedented faith in the power of sermons to galvanise inscriptions, to the extent of granting indulgences to those who simply listened to them (p.37). The grant of indulgences to non-combatants reduces the importance and exclusivity of the gift, which was initially reserved for those who defended the faith as pilgrims. Considering the paramount emphasis on the grant of indulgences for the composition of a "crusade" sustained by pluralists, its prolific usage by the papacy in the later stages of the crusading movement shadows the initial objectives of the movement. Although campaigns need to abide by the framework listed by the author to be considered a crusade, the non-exclusivity of certain practices weaken the pluralist argument by overextending the definition. Alternatively, traditionalism offers an uncomplicated classification of the "crusades", simply demanding the objective of a campaign to be the Holy Land.

'What were the crusades?' is a brilliant read for those seeking to understand the complex structure and politics of the crusades. Offering readers a well-structured analysis of the movement, Riley-Smith includes a plethora of primary sources and factual accounts while quietly propelling his pluralist instance on the definition of the movement. After analysing the schools of thought on the crusades and comparing the other theories to Riley-Smith's own, it is evident that the author's centrist response to the debate instigated by Mayer is strong and comprehensive. While its strength is limited by the recognition of Jerusalem's overarching significance in the birth of the crusades, it nevertheless provides a satisfactory alternative to the restrictive definition of traditionalism. Concluding, the framework provided by the author in his work describes and justifies every requirement a campaign must meet to be considered a crusade, and therefore shines amongst crusading scholarship.

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