

The People's Crusade

By: Ava Black

Junior Division

Individual Research Paper

Word Count: 2,296

Thesis: The peasants who started the people's crusade compromised their Catholic beliefs and morality by destroying towns and killing innocent people. The people's crusade caused much unnecessary conflict, even before the armies made it to the Holy Land. The people's crusade was unorganized and poorly planned. Many lives could have been saved and many cities spared.

On November 27, 1095, Pope Urban II gave a momentous speech at a council at Clermont, a city in France, to some of the most powerful people of Europe.¹ The speech proclaimed the start of the first crusade. It is commonly misunderstood that Pope Urban II said that anyone who fought in the crusade would be able to go to heaven, and that the crusade would serve as penance for their sins. That is not the case. Rather, what the Pope said was that fighting in the crusade was a just cause. The soldier's service in the crusade would serve as penance for any sins committed by them during the crusade. The soldiers still had to go through the same reconciliation process for their sins as any other Catholic. The peasants who started the people's crusade compromised their Catholic beliefs and morality by destroying towns and killing innocent people. The people's crusade caused much unnecessary conflict, even before the armies made it to the Holy Land. The people's crusade was unorganized and poorly planned. Countless lives could have

¹ Weidenkopf, Steve. "The Real Story of the First Crusade." *The Real Story of the First Crusade* | *Catholic Answers*, 2 Aug. 2017, www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/the-real-story-of-the-firstcrusade

been saved and many cities spared. Even to this day, the crusades make a difference in our society. Pope Urban II's speech started nearly 200 years of crusading.² The speech has many different versions, but they all say the same thing: The first crusade was about to commence.

One reason the crusade started was to take back the Holy Land, Jerusalem, for the Catholic church, the only Christian religion at the time. It had been previously taken over by Muslim invaders, nearly 400 years prior to the speech.³ Pope Urban II spoke about how the invaders were disrespecting the Holy Land. He said that the muslim invaders did not have their hearts devoted to Christ. Urban II told of the ways the invaders were destroying churches or changing them entirely, by destroying the altars and putting christian blood in the vases of the baptismal fonts. He told the crowd that the invaders were terrible people, and that the Catholic church needed to take the land back.⁴ At the end of his speech someone shouted "Deus Vult!" which means "God wills it". The chant was taken up by the crowd. Out of the crowd, and deafening shouts, a bishop named Adamar fell to his knees in front of the Pope. He said that he would lead any Christian to take back the Holy Land.⁵ Pope Urban II knew that he might not have very many people take part in the crusade, so he made a promise. It is commonly mis-understood that the

² "The Crusades." *History Learning Site*, 5 Mar. 2015, www.historylearningsite.co.uk/medieval-england/the-crusades/.

³ ExtraCreditz. "Europe : The First Crusade - I: The People's Crusade - Extra History." *YouTube*, YouTube, 8 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI5B2U7S0&t

⁴ Peters, Edward. "The Version of Robert the Monk." *The First Crusade: the Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Materials*, Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, pp. 2-5

⁵ ExtraCreditz. "Europe : The First Crusade - I: The People's Crusade - Extra History." *YouTube*, YouTube, 8 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI5B2U7S0&t

Pope said that for anyone who fought in the crusade, it would serve as a penance for all of their sins, so they could go to heaven. The real meaning of what he said is that fighting in the crusade was a right and just cause. Serving in the crusade would serve as penance for any sins the soldiers committed by being in the crusade, but they still had to be sorry and confess their sins as they normally would.⁶ This was the first time a Pope had ever made this momentous promise.⁷ News of this crusade and the special grace spread like wildfire, mostly thanks to a man called Peter the Hermit.

Peter went around and told everyone about the crusade. He told them all about the special graces the Pope was offering, but he did not understand the full extent of the special grace. Men and women from all over came to be a part of the crusade. Many Crusaders were thieves and the sound of the special grace was exactly what they wanted. Peter was not the only one who went and spoke of the crusade, Pope Urban II himself went around France and told everyone about the crusade. Many people bankrupted themselves just to join in the crusade. The responses from the people that Peter gathered was not the response that Pope Urban II wanted. He wanted knights and people with experience in war. That was not the response that came. Most of the people who arrived did not have any sort of experience fighting in war, and even fewer had weapons.

⁶ "Penance." *Penance* | *Catholic Answers*, 1 Dec. 1995, www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/penance

⁷ ExtraCreditz. "Europe : The First Crusade - I: The People's Crusade - Extra History." *YouTube*, YouTube, 8 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI5B2U7S0&t

Another key purpose of the first crusade was to unite all of christianity. At that time christianity was very segregated. There was even a different pope named Clement III, known as the “antipope”, which means he was wrongfully elected and was not the rightful pope at the time.⁸ Clement III was living in Rome and claimed to be the “rightful pope”. Pope Urban II wasn't even allowed in Rome, that's why he was in France.⁹ When Pope Urban II gave his speech to start the crusade, it was partly to unite all Christians to fight against their common enemy and get back the place they all wanted, Jerusalem.¹⁰ Alexious Comenus, the emperor of the Byzantine empire, went to the Pope to ask for help to defeat the Seljuk Turks.¹¹ The Byzantine empire was a part of the Roman empire. Turks had forced them out of Anatolia, now known as Antalya, the main city of his empire. Alexious wanted food, weapons and thousands of soldiers so they could get their empire back. Pope Urban II set a date for the crusade to start in August so the knights could get prepared for battle. The peasants were so excited for the crusade to start that they went off to war well before the time that was set for the soldiers to depart. People of all different experiences in war went off to get the Holy Land back, without having orders to do so from the Pope. As one can imagine, this didn't go very well, uniting all of christianity was not going to be simple.¹²

⁸ “Antipope.” The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 1. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907. 31 Jan. 2018 www.newadvent.org/cathen/01582a.htm

⁹ ExtraCreditz. “Europe : The First Crusade - I: The People’s Crusade - Extra History.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 8 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI5B2U7S0&t

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

Prior to Peter leading his group to the Holy Land, a group from France led by Walter Sans Avoir, set off to start the war on their own. They went through Hungary without interruption, but things went downhill when they made it to Belgrade.¹³ John Comnenus, the leader there¹⁴ was very confused when the crusaders arrived. He was told the crusaders were not going to be there for at least a half year. He was also expecting well-trained men and knights, not untrained peasants of all ages. So, he sent word to Constantinople, now known as Istanbul, asking what to do with them. He asked the crusaders to stay outside the town peacefully until he received further instruction. The crusaders did the opposite. They set fire to the buildings, stole most of the food, water, and supplies, all while murdering the townspeople. Some people even went back through Hungary, a place they made it through peacefully, they tried to steal all the goods from a local market. The townspeople saw what they were trying to do and got them out of the market. The local Byzantine garrison captured the crusaders and punished them. The crusaders then went under escort to Constantinople.¹⁵

By this time, another group that wanted to be a part of the crusade led by Count Emicho, left Germany. Count Emicho learned of what Peter was saying and he decided to lead his own group to crusade. They were headed toward Jerusalem. After traveling for several miles, instead of continuing to the Holy Land, they

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "John II Comnenus." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 5 Oct. 2010, www.britannica.com/biography/John-II-Comnenus.

¹⁵ ExtraCreditz. "Europe : The First Crusade - I: The People's Crusade - Extra History." *YouTube*, YouTube, 8 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI5B2U7S0&t

decided to attack the local Jews. The Jews were less well armed, making them an easier target.¹⁶ The band of crusaders arrived in Worms, Germany, on May 18, 1096. That day would soon go down in history. The crusaders started a massacre that would last several days and result in 800 murdered Jews.¹⁷ Count Emicho and his crusaders went all around Germany, destroying their own cities. They stole supplies, and murdered most of the Jewish population.¹⁸ This was a series of massacres spanning through France and Rhineland. There were 10,000 crusaders that went through the Jewish cities.¹⁹ The Catholic church almost universally opposed the massacre. There are several heroic stories of bishops that tried to save the Jews. A bishop in Worms took the Jews and hid them in his house. Sadly, the crusaders found them and killed them, nearly 800 were killed there. The bishop of Mainz also hid Jews in his house. He even ordered for the town to fight against the attackers. In Mainz, the locals raised gold for a bribe for the crusaders to stop attacking. The crusaders took the bribe then continued attacking. The bishop heard about this then got his soldiers and began fighting against the crusaders. After brutal fighting, the people of Mainz won the battle and forced the crusaders out of the town. The attackers did not stop there. They gathered more people to

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Glatt, Benjamin. "Sanctifying God in the Rhineland Massacres." *The Jerusalem Post* | *JPost.com*, 18 May 2016, www.jpost.com/Christian-New/Sancrifying-God-in-the-Rhineland-massacres-45467.

¹⁸ ExtraCreditz. "Europe : The First Crusade - I: The People's Crusade - Extra History." *YouTube*, YouTube, 8 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI5B2U7S0&t

¹⁹ Glatt, Benjamin. "Sanctifying God in the Rhineland Massacres." *The Jerusalem Post* | *JPost.com*, 18 May 2016, www.jpost.com/Christian-New/Sancrifying-God-in-the-Rhineland-massacres-45467.

join them in battle and attacked again. This time the crusaders won.²⁰ After the massacre, thousands of Jews were murdered. The massacres are now known as the Rhineland Massacres.²¹ By starting the massacres, the crusaders completely compromised orders from the pope and compromised most Catholic beliefs. They continued to Hungary where they were blocked at the border. They tried to attack but were defeated.²²

Peter had already left Cologne in April and was headed toward Jerusalem. Peter had gathered about 40,000 people to join him. His group of crusaders was made up of women, children, elderly, and a few untrained knights. When they made it to the Hungary border, the King of Hungary almost didn't let the new crusaders through the country because the people of Hungary were worried that the cities would be destroyed again. To make sure that the cities would be safe, the two made a deal. The deal said that the crusaders could go through Hungary if they promised not to harm the people or destroy Hungarian towns. Peter very willingly agreed to the compromise and the crusaders were let into the country.²³ When the crusaders made it to a town that the previous crusaders tried to loot, things quickly turned for the worst. Several of the crusaders got in an argument over a pair of shoes. The argument quickly escalated until it was a battle. Some

²⁰ ExtraCreditz. "Europe : The First Crusade - I: The People's Crusade - Extra History." *YouTube*, YouTube, 8 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI5B2U7S0&t

²¹ Glatt, Benjamin. "Sanctifying God in the Rhineland Massacres." *The Jerusalem Post* | *JPost.com*, 18 May 2016, www.jpost.com/Christian-New/Sancrifying-God-in-the-Rhineland-massacres-45467.

²² ExtraCreditz. "Europe : The First Crusade - I: The People's Crusade - Extra History." *YouTube*, YouTube, 8 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI5B2U7S0&t

²³ Ibid

crusaders continued to raid the city. They stole food and killed about 4,000 Hungarians. The crusaders fled to the Byzantine border before they could get caught by the Hungarian army.²⁴ The Byzantines knew of what happened in Hungary so they got a mercenary force to keep everything under control. The force was instructed to make sure that when the crusaders had to cross the Sava River that they crossed the bridge in a very slow and orderly manner. In doing so, the Byzantines could watch them and make sure that the crusaders were not roaming free in the country. The crusaders became very impatient because they were taking too long to cross the bridge. The crusaders attacked the Byzantine troops. They then proceeded to pillage throughout Byzantium. When they came to Belgrade they burned and looted the city. They continued through the country and raided along the way to Niš.²⁵ Awaiting their arrival, the Byzantine governor prepared as many troops as possible. When Peter and the crusaders got to Niš, the two leaders met. The governor wanted Peter to wait at Niš until an escort could take them to Constantinople. The crusaders agreed under a condition that all of the crusaders would be fed while they waited. The governor would have to feed 40,000 crusaders plus all the people from Niš. Soon after, the governor had to choose between who to feed. To avoid this he told the crusaders to go to Constantinople without escort. On the way out some crusaders burned down a mill, it quickly escalated and forces were called in to stop them. The forces were ordered to take hostages rather than killing whenever possible. Peter hoped to

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

make an agreement with the governor that the crusaders would be allowed to go through peacefully, but by this time the crusaders were completely under their own control and Peter could no longer lead them. They attacked Niš completely on their own, and continued to compromise what Pope Urban II instructed, and compromise their faith. The governor lost his patience and ordered the troops to stop taking hostages and kill the crusaders. The crusaders lost badly. Peter fled to the hills, but by the time what was left of the crusaders found Peter, a quarter of Peter's troops were gone, along with all their supplies, food and money.²⁶

By the time the Niš battle was lost, tens of thousands of crusaders and civilians had been murdered, the first crusaders had successfully burned, pillaged, and looted cities all throughout Hungary, Byzantine and Germany. Tens of thousands were killed²⁷ and yet, none of the three early crusader groups had even made it to the Holy Land. They had spent their money, supplies, and food pillaging cities on the way to the Holy Land. Jerusalem is still being fought over today. The people's crusade was only one part of the whole first crusade. Many crusades happened throughout the next several decades, but only the first and third crusades were successful.²⁸ The first crusaders went completely against what Pope Urban II had instructed them to do, and the crusaders compromised morality and their Catholic teachings. I believe that the crusaders started fighting in the crusade

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ ExtraCreditz. "Europe : The First Crusade - I: The People's Crusade - Extra History." *YouTube*, YouTube, 8 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI5B2U7S0&t

²⁸ "The Crusades." The Crusades, history-world.org/crusades.htm.

with good intentions, but didn't follow through with them. Without question, this war went down in history and will forever be remembered in the Catholic church.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Peters, Edward. "The Version of Robert the Monk." *The First Crusade: the Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Materials*, Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, pp. 2–5

Copy of the speech that Pope Urban II gave announcing the first crusade.

Secondary Sources

ExtraCreditz. "Europe : The First Crusade - I: The People's Crusade - Extra History." *YouTube*, YouTube, 8 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIs5B2U7US0&t

The story of the crusaders. The story of the three groups that tried to make it to the Holy Land

ExtraCreditz, director. *Europe: The First Crusade - II: Peter the Hermit - Extra History*. 15 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAodRUPN7IE.

The story of Peter the Hermit and his crusaders traveling to Jerusalem.

Glatt, Benjamin. "Sanctifying God in the Rhineland Massacres." *The Jerusalem Post* | *JPost.com*, 18 May 2016, www.jpost.com/Christian-News/Sanctifying-God-in-the-Rhineland-massacres-454267.

The story of the Rhineland Massacres, and the effects on the city.

"Penance." *Penance* | *Catholic Answers*, 1 Dec. 1995, www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/penance.

The correct definition of penance in the Catholic church.

"The Crusades." *The Crusades*, history-world.org/crusades.htm.

Only the first and third crusades were successful.

"The Crusades." *History Learning Site*, 5 Mar. 2015, www.historylearningsite.co.uk/medieval-england/the-crusades/.

How long the crusades lasted.

The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "John II Comnenus." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 5 Oct. 2010, www.britannica.com/biography/John-II-Comnenus.

The name of the leader in Belgrade.

Weidenkopf, Steve. "The Real Story of the First Crusade." *The Real Story of the First Crusade* | *Catholic Answers*, 2 Aug. 2017, www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/the-real-story-of-the-first-crusade.

The dates of the first crusade.