

The People's Crusade

The Crusade known as "The People's Crusade" was an 'unofficial' Crusade that arose in 1096 AD, as a result of Pope Urban pleading with the people of Europe to go to the rescue of Christians in the near-East, who were under the threat of attack by non-Christian forces. It is also known as the "Peasants' Crusade", the "Paupers' Crusade", the "Popular Crusade" and the "Poor People's Crusade".

The Christians in question were the citizens of the **Byzantine Empire**, which had transitioned from the former **Eastern Roman Empire**, who were mainly of **Greek** origin. They had long followed a separate Orthodox rite from the Roman Catholic Church, which had, eventually, resulted in a schism between the two Christian churches in 1054 AD.

The **Byzantine Empire** had always been on the frontier of Christian Europe with the **Arab** Middle-East, but, from 1071 AD, it suffered persistent attacks from the **Seljuq [Selkuk] Empire**, who were Sunni Muslims of **Turko-Persian** origin, intent on undermining **Byzantine** authority in Anatolia and Armenia, which allowed for the gradual **Turkification** of Anatolia.

By the time Alexius I became Emperor of the **Byzantine Empire**, in 1081 AD, the **Seljuq [Selkuk] Empire** had expanded their rule over almost the entire Anatolian plateau. This was an area of some 30,000 square miles, taking such strategically and religiously important cities as Antioch and Nicaea, where the **Seljuqs [Selkuks]** founded their capital, being just 56 miles from Constantinople, the capital of the **Byzantine Empire**.

Alexius, therefore, found it expedient to make conciliatory noises towards the Papacy in Rome and, in 1095 AD, sent ambassadors to appear before Pope Urban at the "Council of Piacenza" (*a town in north-western Italy*). They sought help, from the West, in the form of mercenary forces, or western volunteers, being sent to assist Alexius to repel the **Seljuq [Selkuk] Empire** from Anatolia and restore it into **Byzantine** control.

In July that year, having promised the **Byzantines** that they had his support, Pope Urban returned to his homeland of France to recruit men for the expedition. In November, his travels culminated in the "Council of Clermont" (*a town in central France*), where, according to the various speeches attributed to him, he gave an impassioned sermon to a large audience,

including **French** nobles and clergy, against "The Saracen". This had been a collective name, since **Egyptian** and **Roman** times, for the **Arabic** people of the Middle East.

Pope Urban talked about the violence of **European** society and the necessity of maintaining the Peace of God; about helping the **Greeks (Byzantines)**, who had asked for assistance; about the crimes being committed against Christians in the east; and about a new kind of war, an armed pilgrimage, and of rewards in heaven, where remission of sins was offered to any who might die in the undertaking. It is, allegedly, during this speech, that the enthusiastic crowd responded with cries of *Deus vult!* ("God wills it!").

During the rest of 1095 and into 1096 AD, Pope Urban spread the message throughout **France**, and urged his bishops and legates to preach in their own dioceses in **France**, **Germany**, and **Italy**. Pope Urban had planned the departure of the Crusade for the 15th August 1096 AD, but it is now clear that the response to his speech was much greater than he could ever have anticipated, resulting in a number of unexpected bands of peasants and low-ranking knights gathering together and setting-off for Jerusalem on their own.

The peasant population of northern **Europe** had been afflicted by drought, famine, and disease for many years and some of them seem to have envisioned the Crusade as an escape from these hardships. Spurring them on had been a number of meteorological occurrences, beginning in 1095 AD, that seemed to be a divine blessing for the movement, including a meteor shower, aurorae [oh-ror-ay], a lunar eclipse, and a comet, among other events.

Millenarianism, the belief that the end of the world was imminent, was very popular in the early 11th century and it experienced a resurgence. While Pope Urban might have expected a few thousand knights, he ended up with a migration numbering up to 15,000 of mostly unskilled fighters, including women and children.

A charismatic monk and powerful orator, named Peter the Hermit of Amiens (*a town in Northern France*), was the spiritual leader of the movement. A former soldier, Peter was a short, elderly man whose face was almost as long and sad as that of the donkey he always rode. He wore simple garments, which were filthy, and his bare feet had not been washed in years. He ate no meat or fruit, living almost entirely on wine and fish. It is uncertain if he was present at Clermont, but he was one of the first to preach in favour of a Crusade and soon leapt to fame as an emotional revivalist. Thousands of peasants eagerly took the cross at his bidding.

This also gave rise to the alternate title of "Crusade of the Paupers", which term, in the Middle Ages, indicated a status as impoverished, or a mendicant ward of the Church, namely: living on hand-outs. Peter organized and guided the paupers as a "spiritually purified and holy group" of pilgrims who would, supposedly, be protected by the Holy Ghost.

He vigorously preached the Crusade throughout northern **France** and **Flanders** and claimed to have been appointed to preach by Christ himself and, he, supposedly, had a divine letter to prove it! It is likely that some of his followers thought he, not Pope Urban, was the true originator of the Crusading idea.

It is often believed that Peter's army was a band of illiterate, incompetent peasants, who had no idea where they were going and who believed that every city, of any size they encountered on their way, was Jerusalem itself. This may have been true for some, but the long tradition for pilgrimages ensured that the location and distance of the city were well-known. While the majority of the army were unskilled in fighting, their numbers also included well-armed soldiers and nobles, some of whom were also well-trained fighting knights.

On 12th April 1096 AD, Peter halted at Cologne (*now in western **Germany***) to preach to the **Germans** and gather more Crusaders. This also had a second motive, which was to raise much-needed funds. Although he had always given his every coin to the poor, he now realized that he could not lead his followers on such a journey without a war chest.

The preaching of the "First Crusade" inspired an outbreak of anti-Jewish violence. Following years of Catholic suspicion and distrust, Jews were perceived as just as much an enemy as Muslims. They were held responsible for the Crucifixion of Christ, and they were more immediately visible than the distant Muslims. Many people wondered why they should travel thousands of miles to fight non-believers when there were already non-believers closer to home.

When thousands of **French** members of the "People's Crusade" arrived at the River Rhine, they found that they had run out of provisions. To restock their supplies, they began to plunder Jewish communities for food and property. These attacks were but the first in what is now referred to as the "German Crusade", or the "Rhineland Massacres", an undistinguished episode in the history of the Crusades, but the telling of it is a story for another time.

Not all Crusaders, who had run out of supplies, resorted to murder, some, like Peter the Hermit, used extortion instead. While no sources claim he preached against the Jews, he carried a letter with him, from the Jews of **France**, to the community at Trier on the River Moselle (*now in western Germany*). The letter urged the community to supply provisions to Peter and his men. A chronicle of the time records that the Jews were so terrified, by Peter's appearance at the gates, that they readily agreed to supply his needs.

Meanwhile, back in **France**, Peter's original group of followers, both the poor and the high-ranking nobles, who brought thousands of men-at-arms with them, had assembled and were waiting to hear from Peter to start their march to the Holy Land. They included a capable **French** knight, Walter Sans-Avoir, lord of Boissy-sans-Avoir (*a northern region of France*), a man well-experienced in warfare, who became their leader.

Impatient with the many delays, Walter Sans-Avoir and the other nobles decided not to wait any longer and the **French** set out on their journey. He sent messengers ahead to request permission from King Kolomon I of **Hungary** to pass through his lands. Permission was granted, and the passage was completed with little incident. The **Byzantine** Emperor, Alexius I, had established stores along the route of the approaching Westerners, but they could not begin to feed the hordes approaching his borders. He now learned that a second, much larger throng, led by Peter, was also on its way.

On 8th May, the **French** arrived at the city of Belgrade in **Syrmia** (*now the capital of Serbia*), located at the intersection of the River Sava with the River Danube, near the border with **Byzantine** territory. The Belgrade commander was taken by surprise, having received no instructions on what to do with them, he refused them entry and sent messengers racing to the provincial governor in Niš [Nish] (*now in southern Serbia*), asking for advice. Governor Nicetas [Nik-ee-tas], a conscientious but lacklustre leader, in turn, requested guidance from Alexius in Constantinople.

Walter demanded food for his followers, but the available supply was far too small to feed such a multitude. Walter and his troops began to pillage the countryside for food, forcing the Belgrade garrison commander to call out his troops, when skirmishes occurred between them and the Crusaders, with several Crusaders being killed.

To make matters worse, sixteen of Walter's men had travelled back across the River Sava to Semlin (*now Zemun*), a suburb of Belgrade, and tried to rob a market. They were caught and stripped of their armour and clothing, which was hung from the castle walls, and they were sent back over the river naked, as a warning to others. Eventually, Walter and his men were allowed to carry on to Niš [Nish], where they were provided with food, by Nicetas [Nik-ee-tas], who sent the Crusading horde on to Constantinople under escort.

Meanwhile, back in Cologne, with a small military escort of lesser **German** nobility leading his rabble of Crusaders, Peter, finally, left around the 20th April 1096 AD, and began his trek eastward for the Holy Land, following in Walter's footsteps. They took the usual route along the River Rhine and the River Neckar to the River Danube. Peter rode on his donkey and the **German** knights on horseback, while wagons carried such stores as they possessed and his war-chest of money, but the vast majority travelled on foot. When the roads were good, they managed to travel 25 miles a day.

By the time Peter reached Sopron on the **Hungarian** border, the ranks of his army had swelled to close to 20,000. King Kolomon of **Hungary** received Peter's emissaries with the same benevolence he had those of Walter, warning them only that any attempt to pillage would be punished. They crossed through **Hungary** without incident during May and early June and reached Semlin on the 20th June.

In Semlin, seeing the sixteen suits of armour of Walter's Crusaders hanging from the walls, Peter's Crusaders became suspicious and the sight sent wild rumors flying through the Crusaders' ranks. Hostility toward the **Hungarians** grew until, eventually, an argument over the price of a pair of shoes in the market led to a riot. This turned into an all-out assault on the city by the Crusaders, led by Geoffrey Burel, in which 4,000 **Hungarians** were killed and a large store of provisions stolen.

Then, frightened of King Kolomon's reaction, the Crusaders hastened to cross the River Sava into **Byzantine** territory. They took all of the wood they could find from local houses and built rafts. The governor, Nicetas [Nik-ee-tas], who had travelled to Belgrade to meet Peter, sent troops in barges to control the crossing by keeping them to fording at one place, but Peter's mob resisted every attempt to keep it under control. Nicetas realised that he had insufficient troops to control the mob and retired back to Niš [Nish], where the military headquarters were located. On his departure, the people of Belgrade deserted the town and fled to the mountains.

By the 26th June, Peter's army forced its way across the River Sava. When the troops tried to keep the Crusaders along one specified route, Peter's men attacked them. Several of the troops boats were sunk and the troops captured and put to death. The Crusaders, having no opposition, entered the town, which they pillaged and burned.

They departed from the River Danube and marched south-east for seven days, arriving at Niš [Nish] (*in southern **Serbia***) on the 3rd July, when Peter's very first act was to demand food. Nicetas [Nik-ee-tas] agreed, if Peter would provide hostages as a guarantee of good conduct and move on as soon as possible. Peter agreed and two of the army's leaders, Geoffrey Burel and Walter de Breteuil, were handed over.

Nicetas [Nik-ee-tas] had already informed Alexius of Peter's approach and was awaiting the arrival of the official escort. However, realising that it was dangerous and impractical to have such an unruly mob remaining at the city's walls, Nicetas [Nik-ee-tas] agreed to provide food for Peter's army to Constantinople if they would leave straight away. Peter agreed and the next morning the Crusaders set out and, as this was still Christian territory, their ranks were swelled by several of the local people.

Following a dispute with some locals the previous night, a few **Germans** set fire to a group of mills as they departed the city. Nicetas [Nik-ee-tas] dispatched troops to attack the rearguard and take hostages. When Peter was alerted to what had happened, he attempted to negotiate their release, but rumours of treachery abounded and some other members of his army assailed the city's walls, but were rebuffed. Then another group attacked the walls and Nicetas [Nik-ee-tas] sent out his entire garrison against the Crusaders, resulting in Peter's army being routed.

Many were slain. Many others were captured and were to spend the remainder of their lives in captivity. The army of the "People's Crusade" was scattered and Peter, along with Rainald de Breis, Walter de Breteuil and about 500 men, fled east. Peter feared that they were the sole survivors, but, on the following morning, about 7,000 others caught up with them, whereupon Peter discovered that he had lost his war-chest of money.

They continued east and, at the deserted town of Bela Palanka (*in south-east **Serbia***), they halted and gathered the local harvest, as they had no food. Whilst doing so, they were joined

by many more stragglers, so that, when they continued on their way, they found that they numbered about 30,000. This meant that the Crusaders had lost about a quarter of their army.

They reached Sofia (*now the capitol of **Bulgaria***) on the 12th July, where they were met by their **Byzantine** escort, who supplied them with food and ensured they did not linger on their onward journey. The locals were friendly and moved by their stories, giving them money, horses and mules. On their journey to Adrianopolis, they were met by more envoys from Emperor Alexius, who reported that he had been forgiven Peter and his people for their crimes, as they had been sufficiently punished, which caused Peter to weep with joy at the great favour shown by the mighty potentate.

Most of the paupers failed to make their way out of Roman Catholic jurisdiction. The majority were incapable of being provided for by the various lordships and dioceses along the way and either starved, returned home, or were put into servitude. While a substantial number were captured and sold into slavery, by the various **Slavic** robber barons in the **Balkans**.

On his arrival in Constantinople on the 1st August, Peter was pleased to be reunited with Walter Sans-Avoir and his men, as well as a number of bands of **Italian** Crusaders, who had arrived at the same time. They combined into a single group, of about 30,000, and encamped around Constantinople.

Following his arrival, Peter was summoned to the court for an audience with Alexius, who was anxious to assess him. Peter, lean, ugly, burned brown by the sun, and still dressed only in his ragged and filthy cloak, must have seemed an odd figure amid the silks and splendor of the **Byzantine** courtiers. He was welcomed by Alexius, who gave him money and advice.

It has been much-debated whether Alexius sent the Crusaders away without **Byzantine** guides, knowing full well that they could be slaughtered by the **Turks**, or whether they insisted on continuing into **Anatolia** despite his warnings. It is known that Alexius warned Peter not to engage the **Turks**, whom he believed to be superior to Peter's motley army, and to stand fast, until more seasoned knights and men-at-arms arrived and an effective campaign could be launched. However, the army's indiscipline and disruptive behaviour meant that Alexius could not tolerate its presence for long at his city.

Since its arrival, Peter's army had made itself a growing nuisance, as the increasingly hungry paupers turned to crime. They committed endless thefts, pilfered the imperial stores, broke into palaces and villas, and even stole the lead from the roofs of churches. It was, therefore, on the 6th August 1096, a matter of 5 days after its arrival, that Alexius had his navy ferry the army of the "People's Crusade" across the Bosphorus Strait into Anatolia.

At first, the Crusaders' raids into **Seljuk** [Selkuk] territory were short-lived and timid. They robbed and pillaged nearby villages, not caring that the villagers were fellow Christians, who, contrary to the exaggerated reports heard in **Europe**, were tolerated within the Islamic world as fellow 'People of the Book', although they had an inferior social status and were more heavily taxed, in accordance with the Islamic tenet of 'Koran - tribute or the sword.'

On reaching Nicomedia (*an ancient **Greek** city, now in **Turkey***), which had lain deserted since it was sacked by the **Turks** 15 years previous, an argument broke out between the **Germans** and **Italians** on one side and the **French** on the other. The **Germans** and **Italians** split-off and elected a new leader, the **Italian** Rainald de Breis, who took charge of 10,000 men, comprising Lombards and Alemanni, which also included 200 knights. While, for the **French**, Geoffrey Burel took command of 20,000 **Normans**. Peter had lost control of the "People's Crusade".

The two groups of Crusaders spurred each other on, with each moving more boldly against nearby towns. The **French** grew wealthy, as they returned, many times, with their booty, which sight aroused great jealousy amongst the **Germans** and **Italians**. The two groups next marched westward along the coast, until they came to the fortified camp of Cibotos (Greek) or Civetot (Crusader). From there, they marched into **Seljuk** [Selkuk] territory, pillaging and killing **Greek** Christians in the worst ways imaginable.

In September, thousands of **Frenchmen** marched inland to the provincial capital of Nicaea (present-day Iznik). En route, they passed through several Christian villages and commandeered the newly gathered harvests, mercilessly massacring any peasants who tried to resist. It was recorded that they dismembered some of the babies; others they put on spits and roasted over a fire. Those of advanced years, they subjected to every form of torture.

The **Frenchmen** had no chance of breaching Nicaea's 6,000-meter-long walls with their 240 turrets, but they did have some success in raiding the suburbs. Nicaea was a **Seljuk** [Selkuk] stronghold and the provincial capital of the **Sultanate of Rûm** (the **Turkish** name for that part of

the former **Eastern Roman Empire**). At that time, the **Seljuk** [Selkuk] Sultan of the region, 16-year-old Kilij Arslan ibn Süleyman I, was engaged in a war with rival **Turks** in the eastern part of his Empire - a conflict that had already taken the life of his father.

Despite his many spies, the young sultan was taken by surprise when the foreign raiders turned up at Nicaea. He immediately dispatched a cavalry patrol, but the **Turks** were hopelessly outnumbered, and the 'Franj' (a general **Turkish** and **Arabic** term for any foreigners, which soon evolved into 'Franks') cut them to pieces. Only a few survivors returned. Kilij Arslan, whose name means "Sword Lion", believed that he had lost prestige and wanted immediate revenge, but his advisers convinced him to wait. [*Aslan - The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*] In September 1096 AD, two weeks after the attack on Nicaea, some 6,000 of the **German** and **Italian** Crusaders, under Rainald, including some priests and bishops, set-out in the same direction taken by the **French**. They looted as they marched, but, unlike the **French**, they spared the Christians. The 'Franj' circled around the city of Nicaea and marched off toward the east, taking the ungarrisoned fortress of Xerigordon [Zurri-gordon] by surprise on the 18th September, with a view to using it as a base to raid the surrounding countryside.

Kilij Arslan ordered his general, Elchanes [El-kah-nez] to deal with the Crusader's raiding parties with his troops, which were mostly mounted archers. Three days later, on the 21st September, the **Seljuk** [Selkuk] army arrived, under Elchanes [El-kah-nez], and the "Siege of Xerigordon" began. The speed of the **Turkish** mounted troops surprised the **Germans** and **Italians**. They had not expected to be besieged and were unprepared and without adequate supplies. Moreover, there was no water system inside the fortress. The stream that supplied the area flowed through a valley outside the castle walls.

One of those present recorded: "Our people were in such distress from thirst that they bled their horses and asses and drank the blood; others let their girdles and handkerchiefs down into the cistern and squeezed out the water from them into their mouths; some urinated into one another's hollowed hands and drank; and others dug up the moist ground and lay down on their backs and spread the earth over their breasts to relieve the excessive dryness of thirst."

The Crusaders hoped for a relief force from the **French**, but that never came. For eight days, the Crusaders resisted thirst and a rain of arrows and smoke from the **Turks**. On the 29th September, Rainald sued for terms and amazed his besiegers by offering himself and his men to fight with the **Turks** against the other Crusaders. The **Turks** promised only to spare the lives

of those who renounced Christianity. Rainald and a few others did so and were sold into slavery and were sent to Khorasan (a region in north-eastern **Persia**). Those who refused to abandon their Christian faith, were put to the sword.

After the disastrous defeat for the Crusaders in the "Siege of Xerigordon", Kilij Arslan became more confident. According to **Arab** historians, he sent two spies to Civetot to spread glowing tales of the **French** success at Xerigordon, to ensure that the **Europeans** remained calm. That worked, until a man arrived, who had somehow escaped from Xerigordon, told of the slaughter of the **European** force.

Peter had departed for Constantinople to try and obtain military support from Alexius. The other leaders held an emergency meeting and wise counsel held them in place for a few days, as they waited for Peter to return. Then word came that the **Turks** were advancing on the camp. Civetot would have been the best place for the Crusaders to meet them, but others argued otherwise. Walter Sans-Avoir, one of the few knights who remained tightly loyal to Peter, advised the troops to wait for Peter's arrival, but they ignored him.

A group, led by Geoffrey Burel, tired of waiting, opposed such defensive tactics and argued that it would be cowardly to wait and that they should move against the **Turks** right away. Cries of 'Cowardice!' outweighed reason and his will prevailed. Spurred into action, the army decided to go in search of the **Turks** instead.

On the morning of the 21st October 1096 AD, the entire army of 20,000 **French** marched out toward Nicaea, leaving women, children, the old and the sick behind at their camp. Three miles from Civetot the road entered a narrow, thickly wooded valley, near the village of Dracon. The Crusaders marched noisily along, in a laughing, joking mob, with the knights at the head of their column. According to **Arab** history, many of the knights were not even wearing their armor.

The **Turks** used the hills and woodlands to their advantage. They hid and waited silently until the enemy was within their midst and then subjected the Crusaders to volleys of arrows, who were cut down in their thousands, including knights and horses. Then the showers of arrows were replaced by rank after charging rank of disciplined **Turkish** horsemen. The few remaining knights, the heavy cavalry from the West, fought hard and bravely, but a great many of them were slaughtered, helpless against the masses of light cavalry from the East.

The Turks were a foe to be greatly admired and respected; they were fearless, valiant and lions in battle. They were mostly renowned for their skill as bowmen. They used light, composite bows, designed to release arrows at amazing speeds. They shot arrows from foot, but also while riding atop their horses. Their armor, unlike that of the Europeans, was made of a lighter material, yet protective, giving them the ability to move swiftly.

The undisciplined Crusader army soon panicked and, within minutes, was in full rout, pursued by the **Seljuk** [Selkuk] army. The "Battle of Civetot" had not taken long, but most of the Crusading army were slaughtered. Amongst them were Walter Sans-Avoir, who was, allegedly, pierced by seven arrows.

Those who did survive fled back to Civetot, hotly pursued by the **Turks**, who killed many of them as they fled. In the camp, women were cooking, and priests celebrating morning mass, when a vast cloud of dust was seen rising in the distance. Then, the surviving Crusaders stumbled into camp in headlong flight, but they could not outrun the **Turkish** horses.

When the non-combatants saw their 'soldiers' racing into camp, their eyes ablaze with terror, they attempted to escape, but were massacred mercilessly. Somehow, in the midst of battle, the **Turks** took a liking to a tiny handful of children and spared their lives. After the first heat of battle had waned, a few others, who surrendered, were taken prisoner to be sold into slavery.

About 3,000 Crusaders managed to escape the immediate attacks of the **Turks** and obtain refuge in an abandoned castle near the sea-shore, which then came under siege by the **Turks**. The survivors included Geoffrey Burel, who had done the most to bring about the disaster, and Walter de Breteuil, as well as many other knights, almost all of whom were badly wounded.

When dusk fell, one of the escapees found a boat and crossed the sea to Constantinople and reported to Peter and the Emperor Alexius the disastrous news. The Emperor despatched a battle squadron of his navy, at the sight of which, the **Turks** raised the siege and withdrew inland. Miraculously, almost all 3,000 survivors returned to Constantinople, where they were given quarters, but their arms were removed from them.

The ill-conceived "People's Crusade" had come to an ignominious end, after only six months, but, inadvertently, it had laid the groundwork for the better organized armies that followed it. When Kilij Arslan saw how easily his 'Saracen' army had annihilated the 'Frank' invaders, he felt

that there was nothing to fear from the **Europeans** and was dismissive of the "First Crusade" when it landed on his shores, but that, Eminent Preceptor, is another story.