

## CRUSADE, CHILDREN'S

Frederick H. Russell,  
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**CRUSADE, CHILDREN'S.** The usual view of the Children's Crusade of 1212 depicts the departure of thousands of children from France and Germany to follow a boy prophet who would lead them to Jerusalem and convert the Muslims. Armed only with the conviction that God would part the waters and allow them to cross to the Holy Land without wetting their feet, the children streamed south to the Mediterranean amid great suffering. The anticipated miracle did not occur; and, instead, greedy merchants lured them into ships with promises of free passage to the Holy Land. The children were then shipwrecked or sold into slavery in North Africa.

Scholarship shows this picture to be more legend than fact. There seem to have been in 1212 at least two popular movements, one in Germany and one in France. Their similarities allowed later chroniclers to lump them together as the Children's Crusade.

The German movement began first, in the early spring, led by a boy named Nicholas from around Cologne. Wearing the sign of the cross and carrying banners, the growing throng wended its way amid great tumult up the Rhine and crossed the Alps into Lombardy. Some 7,000 arrived in Genoa in late August. The waters did not part as promised by Nicholas, and the band seems to have broken up. Some left for home, while others may have gone to Rome or Brindisi. Still others may have traveled down the Rhône to Marseilles, where they were probably sold into slavery. Few returned home, and none reached the Holy Land.

In France, a shepherd boy named Stephen from Cloyes, a village near Châteaudun, claimed in June that he bore a letter from Jesus Christ for the king of France. Eventually attracting a reported crowd of 30,000, Stephen proceeded to St. Denis, where he

was seen to work many miracles. Acting on advice from the University of Paris, Philip II ordered the crowds to go home, and most of them evidently did. The movement caused less commotion in France than in Germany; none of the contemporary sources mentions any plans of the French throngs to go to Jerusalem.

Later chroniclers embellished the scanty facts of these processions with flights of fantasy and imagination. While firm conclusions are difficult to draw, recent research indicates that most participants were not children—at least not very young children. The throngs were composed of people of both sexes and all ages drawn from the marginal classes of rural society—shepherds, younger sons, laborers, wage earners, drifters—who had little wealth or security to lose by leaving home.

The movement probably spread from Germany to France, where popular religious emotions had been excited by itinerant preachers and the Albigensian Crusade. Most of the participants were probably imbued with the ideal of apostolic poverty, whereby the unarmed poor could accomplish in the Holy Land what the wealthy, well-armed, and powerful had been unable to do in the Third and Fourth official Crusades. Thus they hoped to purge the crusading movement of its materialistic and chivalric motives by resuscitating the power of the pilgrim armed only with divine aid.

The Children's Crusade was never an official crusade, though its genesis and appearance resembled one. Clerical observers saw in its sufferings and failure the work of the devil. Yet the religious hysteria it evoked shows that the poor could be agitated by the ideals of their superiors. Its events are less important than the ideals that motivated it and the legends that later chroniclers based on it. Later movements of the poor, for example that of the Pastoureaux in 1251, as well as the popular imagination, both medieval and modern, were similarly intoxicated by the supposed power of the poor, the pure, and the young.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Peter Raedts, "The Children's Crusade of 1212," in *Journal of Medieval History*, 3 (1977), summarizes the sources, issues, and literature. George Zabriskie Gray, *The Children's Crusade* (1870, repr. 1972), is fanciful and unreliable.

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