

The Fourth Crusade

Thesis

The events of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 had no bearing on the eventual fall of the Byzantine Empire.

Sources

Primary Sources

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Perspectives

The perspectives of the Byzantines were well represented in our research. However, we realize that this may create a bias in our research; therefore, we have also attempted to include as many sources as possible from the Crusaders perspective.

Argument

Declaring War

The Fourth Crusade was declared on the final day of December in 1199, by Pope Innocent III, with intentions of liberating the holy land through Egypt. The original plans would be abandoned, as eventually the crusaders made other plans to invade the city of Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. Doing so, would re-establish a Christian presence.

The Byzantine people were unaware of their declining power, and the violence that lay ahead of its people. Militarily, the government was quickly weakening, there was virtually no navy, and those who were enrolled in the army were receiving land grants instead of wages.¹ Much of their army was staffed by Normans and Franks, despite the fact that many Byzantines despised the Franks. There was no better time for the Crusaders to attempt to defeat the unbeatable. However, when it came to crusading and gaining power and land, Pope Innocent III knew nothing about this, so he would need to turn to someone who did, and so he found the Venetians.

Personal Interest

Many modern historians have taken the side of the Byzantines, blaming Venetian greed (as well as Papal ambition) for diverting the fourth crusade towards Constantinople.² The Church was driven towards the goal of reunifying the East and West, while the Venetians were driven by greed and revenge. The Venetians were a group of people from the Republic of Venice, who were looking to increase their wealth and status. Enrico Dandolo also had personal interest in the attack.

¹ A Short History of the Middle Ages Pg. 209

² Outside and Inside the Fourth Crusade Pg. 727

Dondolo was the Doge of Venice during the time of the fourth crusade, meaning that he was the leader of the Republic of Venice. This job was frequently occupied by one of the more elderly men of the republic, and Dondolo was eighty-five when he took over the title.

Dondolo was a blind man, and there are two stories that are given explaining the reason for him being blind. The first story claims that Dondolo was a part of a confrontation, and received a blow to his head, and lost his vision. The other, and more popular, story claims that in 1171, he was blinded by the Byzantines during an assembly. Whatever, the reason, he desired revenge over the Byzantines.

The First Attack

The crusaders made their departure on July 10, 1203. Compromise had to come quick between the crusaders as the knights wished to fight by land, and the Venetians wished to push through by water, so each side decided that they would do what they wished.³

Little was done to defend Constantinople in the beginning. The Greeks destroyed a common bridge that was to be taken by the attackers, but the crusaders rebuilt the bridge, and the defenders did little to resist after that. The initial attacks took place on July 16th, with the Venetians achieving success attacking the harbour walls. The Venetians were successful in breaking through the imperial landing dock.⁴ However, as time would pass, the Venetians would run into a great resistance by the Varangians.

A fire was set to many of the houses that found itself close to the walls protecting the city, and thanks to an unfavourable wind, the fire spread inward throughout the city, burning

³ The Conquest of Constantinople Pg. 99

⁴ The Conquest of Constantinople Pg. 103

much of the buildings. Smoke from the fire rose as a signal to all Byzantines that they feared most, the invaders had broken into the city.

What the citizens did not realize is that the Venetians had sent word to Dondolo that assistance would be needed if they were to continue the assault, but Dondolo concluded that it would be best if his men abandoned the ground they had gained.⁵

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<http://www.mynetbizz.com/pages/istanbul/the-fourth-crusade.cfm>

Change of Power

Because of this invasion, and lack of action, the popularity of Emperor Alexius III plummeted even lower than where it had been prior. Alexius III had gained his title by forcing his father, Isaac II off the throne, and putting him into jail along with Alexius IV. Alexius III had talked of leading a group into battle to help push back the Venetians, but in the end, he fled in

⁵ The Conquest of Constantinople Pg. 107

the middle of the night. Leaving Byzantine with no leader, Isaac was brought out of jail to act as Emperor. Word of this news reached the Crusaders very quickly, and given the mess Constantinople was in, they decided to act.

Instead of continuing the assault on Constantinople, they tried to become involved. The Crusaders claimed that if Isaac II was going to be emperor, then Alexius IV would have to be released, and would act as co-emperor. In order to gain their support, Alexius IV agreed that if he was emperor, he would pay the balance that the crusaders owed to the Venetians, furnish money and provisions to enable them to conquer Egypt, send an army of 10,000 men to Egypt, support 500 cavalymen as a guard for the Holy Land and submit the Greek Empire to the Pope and thus re-establish the unity of the East and West.⁶ Isaac II had concerns over the deal as he was aware of the financial difficulties the empire was enduring, and knew that the agreement signed upon could not be upheld, but despite his discouragement, the deal was signed.

Tension Builds

For the next few months there was extreme tension between the Greeks and Venetians, and towards the end of the year, any foreigner caught by the Greeks was murdered. And it did not take Alexius IV long to realize that he would not be able to uphold his end of the bargain, so at the end of the year, he announced he would not acknowledge his agreement to the crusaders. Feeling outraged, all eyes of the crusaders were turned back to Constantinople.

The Church preached to its people that this Crusade was a just cause, and that this was God judging and punishing the disrespect of the Greeks for turning their backs.⁷ Preachers

⁶ The Fourth Crusade Pg. 225

⁷ The Conquest of Constantinople Pg. 138

offered absolution to anyone who would be willing to give their lives to the battle. Those who died in the war would receive an eternal reward, thus making war on the Greeks a penance.

Approximately 20,000 men were involved in the preparation of this attack on Constantinople, and it was agreed that all focus should be placed on the walls fronting the Golden Horn. On April 8th, the Crusaders would make their way to Constantinople.⁸

Back to Constantinople

The attackers arrived the next day, on Friday, and found themselves facing a strong southward wind, preventing them from getting as close to the walls as they had hoped, resulting in the first round of attacks being an utter disaster for the crusaders.

Crusaders feared the possible outcome based on the first day, and on that Friday evening, it was decided by the Bishops and Abbots that the assaults would continue. They reminded their men that the Greeks had turned their backs on God, and that justice soon would arrive. Leaders decided to wait until Monday to make another attack, so the ships could be refitted.⁹

At sunrise, on April 12, every crusader was in place to resume battle, only this day, a north wind would push them closer to the city walls. Ships were able to get close enough to the walls that they were able to tie themselves to the towers with rope. Such closeness allowed invaders to cross over onto the tower. There were enough invaders on the towers, that the defenders fled, leaving the crusaders in possession of some of the towers, and flags of the bishop were installed, marking their territory.¹⁰ The crusaders were able to push their way

⁸ The Conquest of Constantinople Pg. 141

⁹ The Conquest of Constantinople Pg. 143

¹⁰ The Conquest of Constantinople Pg. 143

through the city, and opened up the gates, allowing for more Venetians to enter the city. The further the crusaders pushed, the further back Emperor Alexius IV would retreat.

In the attack, the Venetians had no mercy, killing all who stood in their way, including women and children. The Crusaders were unaware of how much was accomplished in the first day, and they figured it would take a month to take over the city, so for that reason, they decided that they would set up camp for the night. They camped close to the city walls, so that in the event of a surprise attack by the Greeks, they would quickly be able to flee. All were told to stay out of the city, and to be prepared for anything. One group of crusaders were convinced that there would be an attack, so once again, a fire was set. The fire spread throughout the city, destroying half of the city's buildings.

Left Without an Emperor

Alexius tried to rally his troops, but fear had won, as most of them were more concerned with burying their goods. Knowing that if he was caught, he would be murdered, Alexius took the daughter of Alexius III and her mother, and fled the city through the Golden Gate, which was normally reserved only for the entries of emperors. And as the night went on, many of the Greeks would also flee.¹¹

The End of an Era

On Tuesday, April 13, the Crusaders fully expected to enter another day of hard battle, but were unaware of the events that transpired the previous night. They awoke to an empire that was without a leader, and without a defense. Prior to their first attack, it was decided that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the booty would go to the Venetians and the other $\frac{1}{4}$ would go to the crusaders, six

¹¹ The Conquest of Constantinople Pg. 148

crusaders and six other Venetians would choose an emperor, the emperor would take a quarter of the lands, and the rest would go to the two invading parties.¹²

The Greeks had ultimately given up. Three emperors failed to bring stability to Constantinople, and little was done to protect it from outside invaders. The city and empire belonged to the crusaders, at least for the time being.

A Map of the Byzantine Empire



<http://www.crystalinks.com/byzantine.html>

¹² The Conquest of Constantinople Pg. 139

The Fourth Crusade in Constantinople



<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/delacroix/crusader>

Significance

As future educators of Social Studies and Science, it is important for students, as well as teachers that when an event, or experiment takes place, it has not necessarily ended because a date has said so, or that you found your hypothesis was correct. We live in an evolving world where the significance of events are constantly changing, and in play.

Social Studies and Science is about taking evidence and examining it in such a way so that we can learn from it in the future. Failure to do so could result in a number of things, and in this case, it resulted in the destruction of what was once considered a mighty empire.

Conclusion

By dissecting the events of the Fourth Crusade within the Byzantine Empire one is able to see how the Empire deteriorated based on the actions from within and invading pressures. The Byzantines were exposed as being fearful, and not nearly as powerful as once imagined. Although they were able to gain back some of their dominance in less than a decade, it was clear that the empire had a weak spot.

The Ottoman Empire would be the final factor in the takedown of the Byzantines in 1453. The Fourth Crusade would be evidence to the Ottomans that Constantinople could be breached.