



*Hattin* by John France.

New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015. Pp. xix, 218. ISBN 978-0-19-964695-1.

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In this concise, informative account, historian John France (US Military Acad.) provides a fascinating overview of one episode in the long and bloody conflict of civilizations. He also shows that the legacy of the battle of Hattin (1187) continues to have an influence on conflicts in the twenty-first century.

*Hattin* is a recent installment in its publisher's "Great Battles" series designed both for serious students of military history and a broader general readership. In the last two decades, a welcome resurgence of scholarly work on the Crusades has cleared away many long-standing inaccuracies in the historical literature. In this vein, John France, a noted specialist in medieval history, has now dedicated a monograph to the battle of Hattin.

More than providing an account of medieval warfare, the book's real purpose is to tell a *human* story. Many earlier histories have portrayed the figures of the period as overly emotional products of a more fanatical and less rational age than our own. France, however, prefers to see them as fully human individuals with the same ambitions, concerns, and limitations as persons in any age. "Hattin arose out of bitter religious hatred, but to portray it simply as a battle between people inspired by religious hatred would be a caricature. Both King Guy of Jerusalem and Saladin were members of rival ruling military elites struggling with one another for domination in the Middle East" (167).

After presenting a famous quotation from a First Crusade participant reveling in the bloodletting of the enemy in July 1099, France reflects: "This is ideological warfare of a kind horribly familiar to the generations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since such hatred was at the root of what happened at Hattin, its genesis must be explored before we can understand the significance and consequence of the battle" (2). Implicit here is a reminder of the great carnage of World Wars I and II or the brutal terrorist attacks and drone strikes of the present day and of the uncomfortable reality that medieval crusaders and jihadists may not be so different from ourselves.

*Hattin* is that rare book that offers something for everyone. Nonspecialist readers will find enlightening the author's retelling of the mostly forgotten story of the repeated assaults of Muslim aggressors on Spain, France, Italy, and Sicily during the early Middle Ages. "For 300 years Islamic states and adventurers harassed southern Europe under the flag of holy war, and these assaults embedded in western consciousness a real fear of Islam as an alien, aggressive, and deeply threatening religion, some sort of menacing paganism or monstrous perversion of Christianity whose success challenged the one true faith" (7). Only at the end of the eleventh century did Europe finally possess the resources and will to respond with military force.

William McNeill has claimed that history at its core is collective memory. If so, mistaken or selective memories have too often fueled violent hatreds. Today, in both the Islamic and Western worlds, the Crusades are remembered mostly as unprovoked invasions of the Near East. Modern jihadists have capitalized on this selective remembrance, enlisting their soldiers by a simplistic representation of the Crusades as the first act in the bloody drama pitting Muslim East against Christian West. *Hattin* is a powerful reminder that history tells a more complex story.

France has written an instructive and entertaining account of the events surrounding the battle of Hattin. Chapter 3, for example, opens with this captivating lead-in: “At the root of the crisis was Baldwin IV’s leprosy” (64). On one side of this decisive battle was a divided realm and a contested throne vacated by a leper king who died without a direct heir apparent. The Latin Kingdom was in turmoil. Powerful barons in the north were led by the capable and seasoned Raymond of Tripoli; people to the south, in and around Jerusalem, gave allegiance to young Guy of Lusignan, a recent émigré from Europe with blood on his hands. It is difficult to imagine a Hollywood screenwriter concocting a more intriguing storyline.

On the other side of the conflict stood Saladin, a local military leader born among a despised (Kurdish) ethnic minority. Yet his ambitions and political acumen enabled him to outmaneuver more socially acceptable rival Islamic leaders to become the champion of the Muslim East. Despite their many differences, the opposing sides had much in common, including the fractious nature of their feudal armies. Only a strong leader who could promise success in battle—and abundant booty—could keep his unwieldy formations together. “Prestige, and especially military prestige, was the slender thread on which Saladin’s power hung. The same, of course, applied to the Frankish states” (55). This was the reality that drove the two rival armies to their climactic showdown at Hattin.

Both amateur and serious students of military history will appreciate France’s command of tactical and logistical issues. For example, he presents intriguing details of the composition and marching formation of the ill-fated Latin army, including how many knights traveled abreast on the road to Hattin and the water consumption rate for man and horse alike. He also meticulously describes the topography of the battlefield and the tactical details of the engagement. The reader misses only maps of the march and of the battle itself.

Throughout, the author shows an extraordinary command of the primary sources, both Christian and Muslim. His book is replete with citations and quotations of relevant contemporary chroniclers. For all the enmity between the opposing societies, the sources concur in their reports of those two fateful days in early July 1187. France perceptively analyzes the politics behind the shifting alliances among various powers, sometimes even between Muslims and Christians. For example, he offers a rational explanation of the Second Crusade’s culmination in a disastrous siege of Damascus, a former ally of the Latin Kingdom. He argues that, in the circumstances, Damascus was a logical military objective. He similarly clarifies the strategic choices facing Guy of Lusignan and his army before Hattin. They could have chosen a defensive strategy based on manning fortifications and allowing Saladin to lay waste to their agricultural fields. Alternatively, they could have chosen an offensive approach, leaving their fortifications lightly defended while challenging Saladin to a battle of maneuver in the countryside. France concludes that both options were sensible and offered a fair chance of success. In the event, the battle was decided not by an inherently flawed strategy but by Saladin’s tactical outmaneuvering of the Latin army to cut off its access to water sources and force it to fight on terrain of his choosing.

The book does have a few flaws. Oddly, France defines Hattin as an important but not a decisive battle, because it did not end the ongoing conflict between Europe and the Middle East. Decisive battles seldom end wars, but they always definitively turn a war’s direction toward an inevitable conclusion, as did the battles of Gettysburg, Midway, or Stalingrad. Hattin forever changed the state of affairs in the Near East. The title “King of Jerusalem” and the way of life in the Crusader States would never be the same. Indeed, Western influence in this region would be muted for the next five hundred years.

The author also mistakenly attributes to Pope Urban II the concept of “salvation through slaughter.” This catchy phrase lacks a basis, however, in the historical sources. In discussing Urban’s support of the Spanish Reconquista, a prelude to the First Crusade, France writes that

Urban was offering what was later called an indulgence, the substitution of one kind of penance—in this case killing Muslims in order to liberate Tarragona—for other more traditional forms like self-denial... Killing thus became a positive act equal to making a charitable donation, and effectively created a new path to heaven—salvation through slaughter. (18)

This is not true. In both his Tarragona appeal in 1089 and his First Crusade appeal of 1095, Urban called upon Christian knights specifically to recapture lost Christian territory, not kill Muslims. He was offering penance to crusaders because of the suffering they would inflict not on their enemies but on themselves by fighting in the wars of reconquest. In stark contrast is Osama bin Laden's 1998 declaration of war against the West, which France references in chapter 5. That call to arms urged all good Muslims to kill Americans wherever they found them. Unlike Urban II nine hundred years before him, bin Laden did invoke "salvation through slaughter."

Finally, France repeatedly describes Saladin as a humanitarian: "In the wake of his great victory Saladin was merciful to his defeated enemies, albeit for his own political purposes. There is little sense that the current [twenty-first-century] ferment will throw up such a humanitarian figure" (168). Ironically, France seems to endorse here the very mythology that he so carefully deconstructs elsewhere in his book. The talented Saladin's political and military skills enabled him to prevail over countless rivals and adversaries in his successful quest to unify a historically divided region of the world. He also altered the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean for the next five centuries. That alone makes him a great figure in history. However, as France himself tells us, Saladin also had captured Christians beheaded or sold into slavery, and during the Third Crusade he ordered his men to take no prisoners. These are not the impulses of a humanitarian in any age, even if the only Christians he mistreated were those most offensive or resistant to his policies. A true humanitarian is judged by how he treats not the best but the worst of his opponents. No one would consider the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) "humane" because it beheads and enslaves only the most objectionable of its captives. The same logic applies to the angst-inducing American use of enhanced interrogation techniques against a handful of captives during the US war on terror. Genuinely humane societies, be they medieval or modern, do not murder, enslave, or torture their captured enemies. Saladin was clearly no Francis of Assisi (a contemporary figure who proves that true humanitarianism was possible even in an age dominated by jihad and crusade).

These reservations aside, I highly recommend *Hattin* as a welcome corrective study of the Crusades and their enduring legacies. Drawing amply on the pertinent primary sources, John France has dispelled a number of misinformed and persistent prejudices that even now fan the flames of violence. In short, *Hattin* is very much a book for our times.