

Stephanie Ormond: Laidlaw Scholarship Research Proposal

Research Question: The New Western Wall: the use of the Crusades in the rationale of far-right organisations and what this reveals about the readings of its history.

This research project would examine how the use of the Crusades in the rationale of far-right organisations was influenced by underlying issues in some interpretations of its events as shown from contemporary accounts to post-9/11 rhetoric. It would involve the critical analysis of symbolism and propaganda utilised by Christian nationalist and Islamic fundamentalist groups in conjunction with a discussion on the manipulation of the historical writing at different levels. Hence, this would include varying portrayals of the Crusades; comparisons in historiography by academics from the nineteenth century onwards; and the significance of international perspectives in Europe and the Middle East. The format of this research would be presented as a 4000 word written piece accompanied by an audiovisual summary. Overall, the objectives of this research would be to prove that the crusade history used to justify the discourse of far-right organisations originates from the deliberate misinterpretations of contemporary sources and the imperialist ideas perpetuated in the nineteenth century. In turn, demonstrating how the aforementioned factors have subsequently led to the prominence of politicised and racialised readings of the Crusades in popular culture and online.

Having studied the eleventh to the thirteenth century crusades for A-Level History and being a member of my sixth form's Amnesty International, this project would highlight my interest in the manipulation of history to justify oppressive socio-political agendas. Furthermore, the presence of far-right "counter-protestors" at Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and coverage of the Charlottesville Riots in 2016 have also influenced my decision to explore the justifications for far-right rationale which appear to be a harsh rebuttal against human rights movements. Confronting the controversial and often inaccurate utilisations of crusade history within far-right rhetoric would be highly important for all historians to acknowledge. Of course, this issue is certainly not exclusive to crusade history. It reflects a deeper problem concerning the refusal to acknowledge more objective views of historical events in popular culture especially if they involve correspondence between cultures, nations, and values. After all, the recent riots at the US Capitol demonstrate how significant the manipulation of historical events can be as a precursor to bold displays of violence. However, the assumption cannot be made that some have not already responded to this issue as seen in historian Dan Jones's article in *Time*.¹ Nonetheless, the weaponization of medieval history for the sake of perpetuating

¹ Dan Jones., "What the Far Right Gets Wrong About the Crusades", *Time*, October 10, 2019, <https://time.com/5696546/far-right-history-crusades/>

religious and/or racial “purity” perhaps calls for a change in the role of historians to adopt a focus on preventing radicalisation on the basis of their scholarship.

Essentially, the outcomes of this research would build on previous investigations into the significance of the manipulation of history amongst far-right organisations in the form of a report. Additionally, the research itself could be a beneficial contribution to the push for re-examining the ways in which history is taught in British schools by implementing the recognition of imperialist and colonial portrayals in older academic writing within the KS3 and KS4 curriculum.

Recently, conversations have emerged by both those beyond and within the digital generations who have expressed their concerns on how visual media of current and historical events is being manipulated to create the so called “alt-right pipeline” through unsuspecting and often entertaining formats.² Theoretically, this could be to help the refinement of AI software designed to recognise and block extremist content on social media which have only been recently adopted by counter-terrorism services in the UK. By actively involving crusade historians and historians of other fields in the development of such detection software, trends can be recognised and incorporated into it via the acknowledgement of parallels between far-right rationale and the distortion of historical events. In turn, this could potentially enable the wider restriction of extremist content online by targeting all digitised blades of far-right rhetoric.

Finally, my research title demonstrates the necessity of interdisciplinary dimensions for this project due to the interweaving of humanities subjects including history, politics, and theology. Additionally, the involvement in researching visual material also means the possibility of collaborating with the Faculty of Arts and Humanities Filmmaker in Residence to produce an audiovisual presentation summarising the research project. In turn, the content of this research will involve information spanning from North America, the Middle East and across Europe since although far-right organisations advocacy for the “purification” of societies, ironically this rhetoric is transnational.

² Kevin Roose., “The Making of a Youtube Radical”, *The New York Times*, June 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html>

References

Jones Dan., "What the Far Right Gets Wrong About the Crusades", *Time*, October 10, 2019. URL: <https://time.com/5696546/far-right-history-crusades/>

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