

Mid-East e-News

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Welcome

An article was in preparation on Muslims in the Russian republics and border states. Here, as an introduction to it, is some background to the Chechnya conflict and the tragic Beslan siege that resulted in so much loss of life. I wanted to include a picture of the Totiev family, but if you choose you can go to the web site given at the bottom of this page and look for an update on their situation.

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Islamic Interface – Beslan

As students lined up in the playground of Beslan Middle School, a line of armed Chechen rebels confronted them, herding them and their parents into the school Gym. After a 3-day siege more than 300 died, including most of the guerrillas. Who were they, and why did this happen?

During the Soviet state, various ethnic regions were given a measure of autonomy, as *republics* within Russia. In the northern Caucasus these included Daghestan on the Caspian Sea, Chechnya and Ingushetia as one autonomous republic, and Alania (North Ossetia). Most Ossetians are Russian Orthodox Christians, though there is a minority Muslim population. During Stalin's rule a number of Caucasian groups were deported to central Asia. This included the Ingush in the region of Prigorodnyy Rayon. The Ossetians were encouraged to occupy this region but, in 1992, after the breakup of the Soviet Union there was some violence as Ingush attempted to return to this area.

Chechnya's struggle for independence continues, and in recent months has intensified, bringing Middle-Eastern style terrorism to the heart of Russia.

1995 1000 held hostage in hospital

2002 Oct. Moscow theater siege

2004 Feb 6 Bomb in subway car kills 41

May 9 Bomb in stadium kills 24, inc.

Chechen president

Aug 24 Bombing of 2 airliners - 90 die

Aug 31 Moscow car bomb kills 10+

Sep 1 Beslan school siege - 300+ die

Most Chechen and Ingush tribes had been part of the Orthodox church since the Middle Ages, but during the 1800s and 1900s they adopted Sunni Islam. They resisted Soviet attempts to control their religious practices, and it was partly as an attempt to control this type of rebellion that Stalin permitted the establishment of the ethnic republics. From the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 Chechens fought fiercely for total independence, and Russia has consistently refused it, with Yeltsin sending an military invasion in 1994 which destroyed much of Grozny and caused the deaths of 40,000. Nearly half a million Chechens & Ingush fled to other parts of Russia. A Peace Treaty signed in 1997 was not honored, and fighting has continued since 1999.



When the Middle School in Beslan was stormed by Russian forces many children were killed. Amongst those who had children at the school were the families of the Totiev brothers, Taymuraz and Sergey, pastors of the Evangelical Baptist Church in Beslan. I quote from a letter received from Russian Ministries, based in Wheaton, Illinois.

Tragically, out of the eight Totiev children who were in the school, only two have survived. Children of Taymuraz and Ria Totiev who were killed: Larissa (14), Luba, (12), Albina, (11), Boris (8). A daughter named Magina was found, released from the hospital, and is recovering at home.

Children of Sergey and Bela Totiev who were killed: Dzerassa (15), Anna (9). A son named Azamat, 12 years old, is in the hospital and is being treated for a severe eye injury.

The Totiev brothers live in houses next to each other. Between 1,500-2,000 people gathered in front of their homes, including many Christians who came from other areas to support the Totievs who are loved very much. Neighbors of the Totiev family told them with tears in their eyes, "You lost your children, but we feel like they were our children too. They were shining lights on our street" [referring to their good behavior and helpful spirit]. Others in the crowd began cursing and vowed to take revenge against the terrorists. Pastor Sergey Totiev, who lost two children in the siege, stood up at the end of the service and said, "Yes, we have an irreplaceable loss, but we cannot take revenge. As Christians, the Bible teaches us that we must forgive. Vengeance is in God's hands."

(www.russian-ministries.org)

The First Crusade

Pope Urban II preached the first crusade on November 25, 1095, calling upon knights of Christendom to free the Holy Land from the rule of Islam. Elsewhere in Europe Islam was being repelled, as in the 'toe' of Italy, Sicily, Sardinia and Majorca. The *reconquista* had already begun in Spain, with *El Cid* having captured Valencia.

Raymond of Toulouse may have been primed by the Pope, because he leapt to his feet immediately the speech was over and committed himself to leading a crusade to Jerusalem. That the Pope was offering forgiveness from sins for those who took part may have been some incentive.

The main movement began in 1096, led by nobles from provinces in France, Germany (the Holy Roman Empire) and the Low Countries (see inset). Converging on Constantinople, the Byzantine capital, where Alexius was suspicious of the western crusaders. Refusing to allow them into Constantinople until they had sworn fealty to him, he also had them promise to return to his control any territory they won from the Seljuks.

From Constantinople the Crusaders decided to travel overland, attacking and defeating Muslim forces at Nicaea and repelling attacks as they crossed the mountain ranges in south central Asia Minor. They defeated one of the Seljuk sultans Kilij Arslan, and continued their way to Antioch, occupying it after a long siege in June of 1098. They were enabled to do this by a Christian guard who opened one of the city gates to the besieging army. The Crusaders were then themselves attacked by another Seljuk army

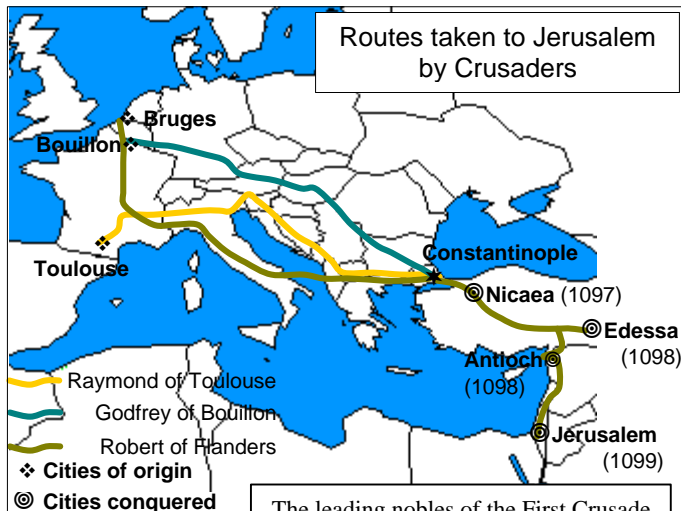
Legends surround the capture and defense of Antioch. It is said that the martyrs of the march through Asia Minor fought with the Crusaders against the Turks, ensuring the success of the siege. Once Antioch had been captured the knights were elated by the apparent discovery of the *Holy Lance* in the city. This was purported to be the lance used to pierce Jesus' side while he hung on the cross.

(from Nineveh/Mosul) and defeated by the leadership of Bohemond, who proclaimed himself Prince of Antioch in the city.

Though it was Seljuk control of the Holy Land that had been the impetus for the Crusade, by the time the Crusaders arrived at the walls of Jerusalem in 1099 the region had been conquered by the Fatimids, a Shiite dynasty based in Egypt. The siege of Jerusalem caused as much privation for the Crusaders as it did for the inhabitants, and by the time the city was taken, on July 15th, 1099, the 15,000 strong force was starving.

Once in the city, the Crusader force began a general massacre that lasted for days. During this time the whole population – Muslims and Jews – was killed, the Jews being burned alive in their central synagogue. Muslims were slaughtered in the Al Aqsa Mosque, where they had gathered for sanctuary, which they were not given. Godfrey was made 'Protector of the Holy Sepulchre,' (refusing to be crowned as king in the city of Jesus' crucifixion).

Within a year Godfrey was dead and his brother, Baldwin did become 'King of Jerusalem'. During his reign, and after, the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem ('Latin' emphasizing the *Roman Catholic* nature of the conquest) was expanded, and institutions established which strengthened their hold on the Holy Land. Baldwin promoted the formation of orders of knights to provide security for pilgrims in a still-unfriendly region, and to maintain hospitals where residents and travelers could receive care. Amongst the first of these were the Knights Templar and the Knights of St. John.



The leading nobles of the First Crusade

- ◆ Godfrey of Bouillon
- ◆ Baldwin of Boulougne
- ◆ Robert of Flanders
- ◆ Robert of Normandy
- ◆ Stephen of Blois
- ◆ Raymond of Toulouse
- ◆ Bohemond of Taranto
- ◆ Tancred of Hauteville



The tower of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The original church is Byzantine (4th Century), but much of the modern layout is of Crusader origin.

Israel – People Groups (1)

When one walks through Jerusalem, the walled Old City or the commercial ‘downtown’, the whole world is on display. Besides the tourists – a world in (and to?) themselves – the Israelis themselves are a constant reminder of the world of the *diaspora*. Of the Jews scattered throughout the world – plus some whose ancestors never really left the region – many have returned (some figures I have found indicate about 30% of the world’s Jewish population now lives in Israel) in the process called *Aliya*, the reverse of the diaspora. These immigrants have brought their culture with them; their language, dress and habits mark them out as being from Russia, Yemen, Morocco, Germany, or wherever they originated.

Many Jews are quite secular in habit, not keeping *Halakh*, observing the Sabbath, as we might expect. Surveys in the late 1980s suggest that the secular Jews comprise around 2/3 of the Jewish-Israeli population.

The term used to identify religious Jews in Israel is



Orthodox. Orthodox Jews themselves are variegated (visibly they

differ in dress and customs) according to strictness of application of the scriptures *and* degree of isolation from the secular society in which they live. Tensions between secular and orthodox began with the rise of Zionism. In the early days of the 20th Century the Orthodox (in Europe and elsewhere) saw Zionism as a human attempt to enforce God’s will. That they were more passive at this turning point of history brought them, in turn, criticism from the Zionists. With the turn of events in the 20th century, the Holocaust in particular, the Zionist goal was inevitable, and the state

was established in 1948. The tension between Orthodox and secular is profound when one sees that secular Zionism is seen to have been effective in the establishment of an Israeli state, one that might

Halakah (Hebrew, "path" or "way"), in Judaism, the body of traditional law that is based on rabbinical interpretation and supplements the scriptural law contained in the Pentateuch, the Law of Moses.
Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2000. © 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation.

otherwise (were in not for its secular nature) have been the desire of the Orthodox Jews.



cooperate with the secular Zionists – and non-Zionist Orthodox Jews who, like the Neturei Karta, reject the Israeli State as being neither instituted nor directed by God. These are often referred to as *Ultra-Orthodox*, but even there we can see political differences. Agudat Israel is one such group, which initially rejected the Israeli state but more recently has been willing to cooperate with it. The ultra-Orthodox groups tend to choose to settle in neighborhoods together – such as Mea Shearim. There they can be distinguished from one another by the traditional religious garb they have brought from their countries of origin.

