

## Book Review / Nirxandina Pirtûkan

### A review of *Saladyn i Krucjaty* by Piotr Solecki,

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## Abstract

Following review evaluates the first biography of sultan Salah Ad Din written in Polish language by the historian Piotr Solecki, under the title *Saladyn i krucjaty* (*Saladin and the crusades*). It summarises its content, pointing out not only the lacks and mistakes, but also its good features. The use of sources is being critically discussed. The review begins with presenting some of the references to Ayyubid sultan in western culture: Polish historical novel *The Leper King* by Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, published in 1937, as well as the movies *The Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) by Ridley Scott and *Arn the Templar* (2007) by Peter Flinth. This introduction places Solecki's biography in the wider cultural context, showing how it fits into the long lasting interest in the figure of Salah Ad Din.

**Keywords:** Saladin, Crusades, Middle Ages, Kurdish

## Saladyn i Krucjaty

(Saladin and The Crusades)

In the western world, Salah-ad-Din Ayyub (usually referred to by the Latinized version of his name, Saladin) remains one of the most recognizable Muslim leaders. Throughout the years, his persona has been featured in novels, films, and even computer games. In the first decade of the present century, he appeared as an important character in two cinematic productions distributed worldwide: *The Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and *Arn the Templar* (2007).

The first motion picture, directed by American filmmaker Ridley Scott, shows the last months of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, led by the lethally sick King Baldwin IV the Leper, who tries to prevent the confrontation with the growing power of the Islamic empire led by Salah ad-Din (starred by the Egyptian Muslim actor Ghassan Massoud). The latter also cherishes peace, negotiating with the king of Jerusalem. He surpasses most of his Christian opponents in

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honor and wisdom, showing great patience with numerous provocations. Finally, reacting to personal harm (his sister gets murdered during her travels by the notorious crusader lord Renald of Chatillion), he declares war with the new Christian king, Guido de Lusignan. The other motivation is constant pressure from the *ummah*, urging him to recapture the city of Jerusalem for Islam. The film, bringing a pacifist message, depicts religious leaders—priests and mullahs—as bloodthirsty war-mongers, and asks a question about the role of religion in instigating violence.

The second film by Danish director Peter Flinth, presents a far too idealistic and therefore unreal image of Saladin. Telling the story of a Scandinavian aristocrat who becomes a knight Templar and shows him rescuing the famous sultan from the hands of desert bandits. In return, Salah-Ad Din welcomes him to the campfire and starts a friendly conversation with his savior. This would have been very less probable, since Saladin hated the Knights' Orders—Templars and Joannites—whom he perceived as ideological enemies of Islam; after the victorious battle of Hittin (1187), he ordered the execution of those who were taken captive.

The figure of sultan Salah-Ad Din appears also in several works of European literature, including the 1937 novel *The Leper King* by Polish author Zofia Kossak-Szczucka (1889–1968). Her book forms the second volume of the “crusader trilogy”, including also *The Crusaders* (orig. *Krzyżowcy*, 1935), telling the story about a Christian conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, as well as *Without the Weapons* (orig. *Bez oręża*, 1937), dealing with the unfortunate fifth crusade (1217–1221). Kossak-Szczucka, a devoted Catholic, presents a critical approach towards Christian medieval expeditions to the Middle East, describing them as a quest for power and wealth rather than sanctity.

This opinion is clearly visible in *The Leper King*, covering the very same events that inspired the screenplay of *The Kingdom of Heaven*. Sultan Saladin appears in the final chapter, fighting his battle against the crusader armies. He is humble, not underestimating his enemies, as well as merciful; after the victory, the conquest of Jerusalem, he forbids any massacre of its inhabitants and orders the protection of churches. The defeat of the crusaders does not give him joy; he rather regrets the bloodshed that resulted from the violation of the truce. The last scene, in which the Muslim leader meditates about the will of God, allows Kossak-Szczucka to question the morality of the crusades.

Recently Polish historian Piotr Solecki, fascinated with the topic of crusades for years, decided to describe Salah Ad-Din in a more critical and objective way. His research resulted in the first biography of a famous sultan written in Polish, originally published in 2011 under the title *Saladin and the Crusades* (orig. *Saladyn i krucjaty*). The following review refers to the second addition from the year 2014. Solecki's book, which is 236 pages long, is divided into 22 chapters, preceded by an introduction and concluded by an epilogue. The publication also includes a timeline, bibliography, illustrations, and maps.

The initial chapter outlines the history of crusades, starting with the preceding period of Arabic conquests in the 7th century and ending with the failed crusade of King Louis IX of France in 1270. It also provides a good insight into the Middle Eastern politics of that time. The next chapter traces the early years of the future sultan, from his birth as Yusuf ibn Ayyub in the town of Tikrit in 1137 until his promotion as one of the commanders of Seljuq Atabeq Nur ad-Din in 1152. The author highlights the Kurdish origin of Saladin, describing the rise of the Ayyub family. In the third chapter, one can read about Amalric III's (king of Jerusalem) expeditions to Egypt and Nur ad Din's intervention in this country, led by Salah ad-Din and his

uncle Shirkuh. The following chapter discusses the rise of Saladin to the position of Egyptian vizier, the deposition of Fatimide khalif Al-Adis in 1171, and the reestablishment of Sunni Islam in his former reign. In the fifth chapter, we find a story of Saladin's seizure of Damascus after the death of Nur ad-Din in 1174. Chapter six focuses on Salah ad-Din's administration of Egypt, whereas the next one focuses on his further war with Nur ad-Din's dynasty as well as the Syrian branch of the Nizarite sect, led by Rashid ad-Din Sinan. The eighth chapter presents the battle of Montgisard in 1177 with the king of Jerusalem, Baldwin IV, lost by Salah ad-Din. Chapter nine deals with the subsequent Muslim-Christian clashes, also mentioning Saladin's rise to power in Aleppo in 1183. Chapter ten describes the political situation in the Kingdom of Jerusalem between 1174 and 1186. The escalation of enmity between this state and the Muslim Empire created by Salah ad-Din, resulting in the battle of Hittin (1187), forms the topic of Chapter 11. The following three chapters relate to the further advance of the sultan's army and the conquest of Jerusalem, whereas the next three relate to the Third Crusade undertaken by European monarchs: German Emperor Frederic Barbarossa, king of France Philip II August, and Richard the Lion Heart, ruler of England. The reader follows their departure from Europe, their adventures on the way to the Middle East, their struggle with Muslims from the siege of Acre to the battle of Arsuf, and the signing of a truce between the sultan and Richard the Lion Heart. Chapter Nineteen presents the last years of Saladin and a short remark about the fate of the dynasty he created. The twenty-first chapter lists sources relating to the reign of Salah ad-Din and also the most important biographies written in the XIX and XX centuries by Western and Middle-Eastern scholars. Chapter twenty-one compares Muslim and Christian memory and perception of the crusades. The last chapter reflects on the contemporary view of Saladin and his presence in popular culture (including the previously mentioned films *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Arn the Templar*).

When evaluating a biography, one must appreciate its narrative style, which presents complex issues in a clear, vivid, and entertaining way. Trying to fulfill his goal, the author several times expresses critical opinions about Salah ad-Din. Relying on Arabic sources, he mentions that the future pious leader of Islam in his youth didn't abstain from practicing earthly pleasures such as drinking wine; three times he also refused to join the Hajj undertaken by the members of his family. His poor commandment in the battle of Montgisard is pointed out as well.

A Polish historian reminds us that Saladin, usually merciful, was able to commit atrocities if he perceived them as necessary. Apart from the previously mentioned massacre of Templars and Joannites, during his campaign against the crusaders, he burned the fortress of Antartus to set a terrifying example. His conquest of Jerusalem, usually positively contrasted with the bestial behavior of European crusaders in 1099, wasn't free from atrocities either; the Arabic chronicle by Imad ad Din mentions the abuse of women by Saladin's soldiers. In fact, the sultan's approach to the people of Jerusalem was that of a businessman: he took them as slaves yet provided the possibility of buying freedom.

Another advantage of a biography by Piotr Solecki is the description of the sultan's internal policy in Egypt. Unfortunately, the author does not focus on it much, the topic of the book being mainly the role of Salah ad-Din in the history of crusades, as suggested by the title. The list of advantages can be closed by maps that are readable, precise, and completed by the dates of important events.

Nevertheless Solecki's book is not free from several mistakes, most significant concerning the conquest of Cyprus by Richard the Lion Heart. Quoting French historian Regine

Pernoud, he repeats her wrong information about the ruler on an island: at that time it had been governed by the usurper Izaak Komnen, not “emperor Izaak Angelos”. The British specialist on the Byzantine Empire, Steven Runciman, whose monumental synthesis about the crusades is being mentioned by Solecki in his bibliography, provides the proper version; unfortunately, the Polish author seemingly did not use it to verify his statement. The second mistake refers to Guido de Lusignan, described in one place as the “son in law” of King Baldwin IV. In fact, he was his “brother-in-law”. In describing the mobilization of a Christian army prior to the battle of Hittin, the author mentions the Turkopole Cavalry, recruited among the indigenous Christians and converted Turks, using only the name of the formation without any explanation of its origins. In a few places there are misspellings and inconsequences in transcription: King Amalric is several times referred to as “Almaric”; the name “Nejah” is one time given in English, another time in Polish (“Nedżah”).

In the description of German engagement in the Third Crusade, there is not a single remark about the creation of the Teutonic Knights’ Order, which is definitely important information in this context. Basing his research on Arabic sources, Solecki ignores the main Latin chronicle relevant to the epoch he deals with, “A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea” by archbishop William of Tyre. Confronting this work with the relations of Arabic historians could have given interesting results. Furthermore, there is only one short reference to the novel “The Leper King” by Zofia Kossak Szczucka; her portrait of Salah ad-Din is not mentioned. The final lack worth mentioning are indexes; their presence could definitely facilitate the usage of the reviewed biography for academic research. Reassuring, in spite of certain shortcomings, the biography of Saladin by Piotr Solecki constitutes an interesting and readable introduction to the life of a Kurdish sultan.