

Female & Minority-Religion Fighters: Patterns of Medieval Acceptance

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*Page 32v of MS I.33 (an early-1300s German fencing manual) showing a lady named Walpurgis winning.
Image downloaded from wiktenauer.com.*

Introduction

- **There were indeed times and places where female and minority-religion fighters were accepted parts of Medieval society.**
 - Challenge: Finding these specific times and places.
- **In researching medieval Jewish fighters, I found a wider, general pattern in where people researching female and minority-religion fighters can usually find those as well.**
- **Look for where:**
 1. Society needs troops more than they can afford to be picky about where those troops come from.
 2. Society has fighters from other normally-marginalized groups.
 3. Being a member of a normally-marginalized group makes you **more** desirable as a fighter.

Example of a desperate-for-troops society granting more rights to multiple groups: 12th Century Spain & Portugal

- **Commoners: Christian kingdoms, desperate for troops to fight the Muslims, creating “commoner-knights.”**
 - Christian commoners (not just nobles) settling ex-Muslim lands.
 - Those who serve armored and mounted for the crown get tax breaks and increased status.
- **Jews: Spanish kingdoms and Portugal offer Jews a similar deal.**
 - In some cases, Jews are even given castles to hold by themselves.
- **Women: Military order of female knights: *The Order of the Hatchet*.**
 - Honors the women who fought off the Muslims besieging Tortosa in 1149 when the men were considering surrendering.
 - Gives them and their descendants tax exemptions and precedence over the men at all public meetings.
- **Not perfect equality, but better than the medieval norm.**
 - *So when you look, look for “better” but don’t expect perfection.*

Other examples of the three conditions

- **#1. Societies that need troops more than can afford to be picky.**
 - Viking shieldmaidens: DNA analysis recently confirmed that a 10th century warrior's grave with a sword, axe, shield, etc. is a woman's.
 - Sassanian Persian noblewomen: Some women served in elite armored and mounted units, including in command positions.
 - Long tradition of women warriors in the steppe – the original Amazons.
- **#2. Fighters from multiple normally-marginalized groups.**
 - 14th C Lithuania: Pagans, Jews, & Muslims fighting for a Catholic kingdom.
 - Fighting the Teutonic knights, who sell *Reisen* as pagan-killing safaris even after Lithuania converts in 1386.
 - Lithuania keeps tolerating its pagans and brings in Jewish and Muslim troops from the Crimea.
- **#3. Being an “other” making you more attractive as a recruit.**
 - The Varangian Guard: Bodyguards who can't take over if the boss dies.
 - Jewish privateers vs. Spain: *The enemy of my enemy makes for loyal recruits.*
 - Spain expels its Jews in 1492. Many don't survive, others seek revenge.
 - Privateers include Sinan Reis (based in the Ottoman Empire) and Rabbi Palache (based in Holland).

Caution: Need to check your sources when researching

- **Just because a source says the fighters you're looking for didn't exist doesn't mean they didn't.**
 - Professor Valerie Eads' 2006 paper "*Means, Motive, Opportunity: Medieval Women and the Recourse to Arms*" examined accounts of crusader battles where some sources said women fought.
 - Turkish and Christian soldiers' accounts said that women did and provided details. Clerical accounts of the same battles said women didn't.
- **Just because a source gives an example of the fighters you're looking for doesn't mean the example is real.**
 - Spanish fresco of the 1431 Battle of Higuera shows a unit in the Muslim army whose flag has 6-pointed blue stars on a white field. Wikipedia says this therefore shows a Jewish unit.
 - However, medieval Muslims used that star too. And the age when Jews fought for Spanish Muslims ended three centuries before the battle.

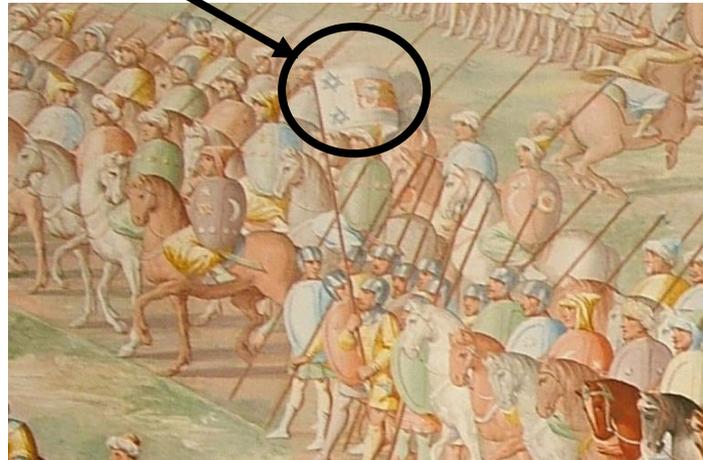


Image from Wikipedia Commons

“Acceptance” doesn’t mean *everybody* accepts you.

- **Example: Southern France up to the Albigensian Crusade (early 1200s)**
 - Rights for multiple groups.
 - Jewish fighters documented as early as 507.
 - Women owned land in their own right and could be head of households.
 - Tolerated many sects of Christianity the Catholic Church deemed heretical.
- **Not everybody accepted this...**
 - When the Countess of Foix attended a debate between Catholic and sect representatives, the Catholic representatives told her to leave and go sew something.
- **... But many did, and provided support.**
 - 1210: The Bishop of Toulouse formed a White Company to raid the homes of Jews and non-Catholic Christians. In response a mounted and armored Black Company was formed, fighting the White Company in the streets of Toulouse.

If tolerance gets you more troops, why does it end?

- Many causes but those urging attacks consistently gain from such attacks.
 - Hatred repeatedly pushed because it's profitable financially and politically.
- **Example: The Black Death in the Holy Roman Empire, 1348+.**
 - Before the Black Death, Jews were part of German city militias and could bear arms in self-defense.
 - When the Black Death hits, rumor spreads that it's the Jews' fault, resulting in mobs massacring Jews.
 - Many people realize at the time this is nonsense: Pope Clement IV tells the clergy to oppose such attacks. Despite this, many nobles and bishops urge mobs to blame and kill all the Jews anyway.
 - **Financial gain:**
 - Those particular nobles and bishops are often deeply in debt to Jews.
 - People who join attacking mobs get to loot.
 - Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV sells pardons for the attacks.
 - **Political distraction:**
 - Mobs scared into blaming an expendable minority for their problems aren't blaming/attacking nobles, bishops, or emperors.
 - "*Divide et impera*".

Amoral self-interest does not always predict actions.

- It often does, but “often” is not “always”.
 - Individuals choose, and their choices matter.
- **Example: Spanish vs. Portuguese policies re Jews, 1212–1480s.**
 - 1212 – Major Muslim defeat at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa.
 - Within half a century, all Iberian Muslim kingdoms fall except Granada.
 - Jewish fighters no longer needed to help win the *Reconquista*.
 - In Spain, steadily increasing attacks and restrictions on Jews.
 - 1368: In the Castilian Civil War, Henry Trastamara’s general tells his troops to take no prisoners “on account of the great number of Jews and infidels” in the enemy army.
 - In contrast, most Portuguese kings continue to value Jews as subjects.
 - 1366: In his royal charter for Lisbon’s Jews, Portuguese king thanks them for their continued armored and mounted service to the Crown.
 - **Similar military, economy, etc. to Spain’s but different royal mindset.**

Summary

- **If you want to find times/places where women and minority-religion fighters were accepted parts of their society, look for where:**
 1. Society needs troops more than they can afford to be picky about where those troops come from.
 2. Society has fighters from other normally-marginalized groups.
 3. Being a member of a normally-marginalized group makes you **more** desirable as a fighter.
- **Look for better than the medieval norm, but don't expect perfection.**
- **Consider your sources and always take them with a grain of salt.**
- **To understand why good conditions end, ask “Qui bono – Who benefits?”**
 - Hatred can be profitable – financially and politically.
 - However, also remember that people choose – and sometimes they choose tolerance over hate.