

# Peace and Violence among 19th-Century Latter-day Saints

## Overview

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is founded on the teachings of Jesus Christ. The virtues of peace, love, and forgiveness are at the center of Church doctrine and practice. Latter-day Saints believe the Savior's declaration, found in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, that "blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."<sup>1</sup> In Latter-day Saint scripture, the Lord has commanded His followers to "renounce war and proclaim peace."<sup>2</sup> Latter-day Saints strive to follow the counsel of the Book of Mormon prophet-king Benjamin, who taught that those who are converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ "will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably."<sup>3</sup>

Despite these ideals, early Latter-day Saints did not obtain peace easily. They were persecuted, often violently, for their beliefs. And, tragically, at some points in the 19th century, most notably in the Mountain Meadows Massacre, some Church members participated in deplorable violence against people they perceived to be their enemies. This essay explores both violence committed against the Latter-day Saints and violence committed by them. While historical context can help shed light on these acts of violence, it does not excuse them.

## Religious Persecution in the 1830s and 1840s

In the first two decades after the Church was organized, Latter-day Saints were often the victims of violence. Soon after Joseph Smith organized the Church in New York in 1830, he and other Church members began settling in areas to the west, in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Time and again, the Saints tried to build their Zion community where they could worship God and live in peace, and repeatedly they saw their hopes dashed through forcible and violent removal. Mobs drove them from Jackson County, Missouri, in 1833; from the state of Missouri in 1839, after the governor of the state issued an order in late October 1838 that the Mormons be expelled from the state or "exterminated"<sup>4</sup>; and from their city of Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1846. Following their expulsion from Nauvoo, Latter-day Saints made the difficult trek across the Great Plains to Utah.<sup>5</sup>

As Latter-day Saints faced these difficulties, they sought to live by revelations to Joseph Smith that counseled them to live their religion in peace with their

neighbors. Nevertheless, their adversaries in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois resented the Saints' differing religious beliefs and social and economic practices. They also felt threatened by the Saints' growing numbers, which meant that Mormons could increasingly control local elections. These opponents attacked the Saints, first verbally and then physically. Church leaders, including Joseph Smith, were tarred and feathered, beaten, and unjustly imprisoned. Other members of the Church were also the victims of violent crimes. In the most infamous incident, at least 17 men and boys, ranging in age from 9 to 78, were slaughtered in the Hawn's Mill Massacre.<sup>6</sup> Some Latter-day Saint women were raped or otherwise sexually assaulted during the Missouri persecutions.<sup>7</sup> Vigilantes and mobs destroyed homes and stole property.<sup>8</sup> Many of the Saints' opponents enriched themselves with land and property that was not justly theirs.<sup>9</sup>

The expulsion from Missouri—involving at least 8,000 Latter-day Saints<sup>10</sup>—occurred during the winter months, heightening the suffering of the thousands of refugees who lacked adequate food and shelter and were sometimes subject to epidemic diseases.<sup>11</sup> In March 1839, when Joseph Smith, imprisoned in Liberty, Missouri, received reports of the suffering of the exiled Latter-day Saints, he exclaimed, “O God, where art thou?” and prayed, “Remember thy suffering saints, O our God.”<sup>12</sup>

After being driven from Missouri, the Saints were initially welcomed by the people of the neighboring state of Illinois and found peace for a time in Nauvoo. Ultimately, however, conflict arose again as non-Mormons and dissenters from the Church renewed their attacks. Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were brutally martyred by a mob in an Illinois prison despite the promise of the state's governor that the brothers would be protected while in custody.<sup>13</sup> Eighteen months later, beginning in the cold winter month of February 1846, the main body of the Saints left Nauvoo under tremendous pressure. They settled in temporary camps—what would now be called refugee camps—on the plains of Iowa and Nebraska. An estimated 1 in 12 Saints died in these camps during the first year.<sup>14</sup> Some of the elderly and poor initially remained in Nauvoo and hoped to join the main body of Saints later. But a mob forcibly expelled them from Nauvoo in September 1846 and then desecrated the temple.<sup>15</sup> One non-Mormon who passed through the Saints' camps shortly thereafter wrote, “Cowed and cramped by cold and sunburn, alternating as each weary day and night dragged on, they were, almost all of them, the crippled victims of disease. ... They could not satisfy the feeble cravings of their sick: they had not bread to quiet the fractious hunger cries of their children.”<sup>16</sup> The scope of this violence against a religious group was unprecedented in the history of the United States.

Church leaders and members repeatedly attempted to gain redress from local and state governments; when these petitions failed, they appealed unsuccessfully to the federal government to correct past wrongs and gain future protection.<sup>17</sup> Latter-day Saints long remembered the persecutions they experienced and the unwillingness of government authorities either to protect them or to prosecute their attackers.

They often lamented that they experienced religious persecution in a land that promised religious freedom.<sup>18</sup> In the face of this extended persecution, some of the Saints, beginning in 1838, responded on some occasions with defensive—and at times, retaliatory—actions of their own.

### **Violence and Vigilantism in the 19th-Century United States**

In 19th-century American society, community violence was common and often condoned. Much of the violence perpetrated by and against Latter-day Saints fell within the then-existing American tradition of extralegal vigilantism, in which citizens organized to take justice into their own hands when they believed government was either oppressive or lacking. Vigilantes generally targeted minority groups or those perceived to be criminal or socially marginal. Such acts were at times fueled by religious rhetoric.<sup>19</sup>

The existence of community-based militias also contributed to this culture of vigilantism. Congress passed a law in 1792 requiring every able-bodied male between 18 and 45 years of age to belong to a community militia.<sup>20</sup> Over time, the militias turned into the National Guard, but in early America, they were often unruly, perpetrating acts of violence against individuals or groups perceived to be opponents of the community.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the Latter-day Saints' communities in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and Utah were all located in the western frontier regions of the United States, where community violence was readily sanctioned.

### **The Mormon Missouri War and the Danites**

The isolated acts of violence committed by some Latter-day Saints can generally be seen as a subset of the broader phenomenon of frontier violence in 19th-century America.<sup>21</sup> In 1838, Joseph Smith and other Church members fled from mobs in Ohio and moved to Missouri, where Latter-day Saints had already established settlements. Joseph Smith believed that opposition from Church dissidents and other antagonists had weakened and ultimately destroyed their community in Kirtland, Ohio, where only two years before they had completed a temple at great sacrifice. By the summer of 1838, Church leaders saw the rise of similar threats to their goal of creating a harmonious community in Missouri.

At the Latter-day Saint settlement of Far West, some leaders and members organized a paramilitary group known as the Danites, whose objective was to defend the community against dissident and excommunicated Latter-day Saints as well as other Missourians. Historians generally concur that Joseph Smith approved of the Danites but that he probably was not briefed on all their plans and likely did not sanction the full range of their activities. Danites intimidated Church dissenters and other Missourians; for instance, they warned some dissenters to leave Caldwell County. During the fall of 1838, as tensions escalated during what is now known as the Mormon Missouri War, the Danites were apparently absorbed into militias

largely composed of Latter-day Saints. These militias clashed with their Missouri opponents, leading to a few fatalities on both sides. In addition, Mormon vigilantes, including many Danites, raided two towns believed to be centers of anti-Mormon activity, burning homes and stealing goods.<sup>22</sup> Though the existence of the Danites was short-lived, it resulted in a longstanding and much-embellished myth about a secret society of Mormon vigilantes.

As a result of their experience in Missouri, the Latter-day Saints created a large, state-sanctioned militia, the Nauvoo Legion, to protect themselves after they moved to Illinois. This militia was feared by many who saw the Latter-day Saints as enemies. But the legion avoided offensive or retaliatory action; it did not respond even in the crisis leading up to the mob murders of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum in June 1844 or in the aftermath of those murders. When the governor of Illinois ordered that the legion disband, the Saints followed the instruction.<sup>23</sup>

### **Violence in Utah Territory**

In Utah, aggression or retaliation by Latter-day Saints against their perceived enemies occurred most frequently during the first decade of settlement (1847–1857). For many, the scars of former persecutions and the trek to the Rocky Mountains were still fresh and personal. As they tried to carve out a living in the Utah desert, the Saints faced continuing conflict. Many factors worked against the success of the Latter-day Saint venture in Utah: tensions with American Indians, who had been displaced by Mormon settlement and expansion; pressure from the U.S. federal government, particularly after the public announcement of plural marriage in 1852; uncertain land claims; and a rapidly expanding population. Community leaders felt an unrelenting burden of responsibility, not only for the spiritual welfare of the Church but also for the physical survival of their people. Many of these leaders, including Church president and territorial governor Brigham Young, simultaneously held ecclesiastical and civil offices.

### **Latter-day Saints' Relationship with American Indians**

Like other settlers in frontier areas, Latter-day Saints occupied areas already inhabited by American Indians. The tragic history of the annihilation of many Indian tribes and the devastation of others at the hands of European immigrant settlers and the United States military and political apparatus has been well documented by historians. Settlers throughout the 19th century, including some Latter-day Saints, mistreated and killed Indians in numerous conflicts, forcing them off desirable lands and onto reservations.

Unlike most other Americans, Latter-day Saints viewed Indians as a chosen people, fellow Israelites who were descendants of Book of Mormon peoples and thus heirs to God's promises. As Church president, territorial governor, and territorial superintendent of Indian Affairs, Brigham Young pursued a peace policy to facilitate Mormon settlement in areas where Indians lived. Latter-day Saints learned Indian languages, established trade relations, preached the gospel, and

generally sought accommodation with Indians.<sup>24</sup> This policy, however, emerged unevenly and was inconsistently applied.<sup>25</sup>

Peaceful accommodation between Latter-day Saints and Indians was both the norm and the ideal. At times, however, Church members clashed violently with Indians. These two cultures—European and American Indian—had vastly different assumptions about the use of land and property and did not understand each other well. Mormons often accused Indians of stealing. Indians, meanwhile, believed the Mormons had a responsibility to share goods and livestock raised on Indian tribal lands. In areas where Mormons settled, Indian experience with Europeans had previously consisted mostly of mutually beneficial interactions with trappers and traders, people who passed through the land or briefly dwelled on it, not staked permanent claim to it as the Mormons did. These misunderstandings led to friction and violence between the peoples.<sup>26</sup>

In late 1849, tensions between Ute Indians and Mormons in Utah Valley escalated after a Mormon killed a Ute known as Old Bishop, whom he accused of stealing his shirt. The Mormon and two associates then hid the victim's body in the Provo River. Details of the murder were likely withheld, at least initially, from Brigham Young and other Church leaders. Settlers at Fort Utah did, however, report other difficulties with the Indians, including the firing of weapons at settlers and the theft of livestock and crops. Brigham Young counseled patience, telling them to “stockade your fort, to attend to your own affairs and let the indiens take care of theirs.”<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, tensions mounted at Fort Utah, in part because local Mormons refused to turn over those involved in the murder of Old Bishop to the Utes or to pay reparations for his death. In the winter of 1849–1850, a measles epidemic spread from the Mormon settlers to the Ute camps, killing many Indians and heightening tensions. At a council of Church leaders in Salt Lake City on January 31, 1850, the leader of Fort Utah reported that the Utes' actions and intentions were growing increasingly aggressive: “they say they mean to hunt our Cattle. & go & get the other Indians to kill us.”<sup>28</sup> In response, Governor Young authorized a campaign against the Utes. A series of battles in February 1850 resulted in the deaths of dozens of Utes and one Mormon.<sup>29</sup> In these instances and others, some Latter-day Saints committed excessive violence against native peoples.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, for the most part, the Saints had more amicable relations with Indians than did settlers in other areas of the American West. Brigham Young enjoyed friendships with several American Indian leaders and taught his people to live peacefully with their Indian neighbors whenever possible.<sup>31</sup> Some Indians even distinguished between “Mormonees,” whom they considered friendly, and other American settlers, who were known as “Mericats.”<sup>32</sup>

### **The “Reformation” and the Utah War**

In the mid-1850s, a “reformation” within the Church and tensions between the Latter-day Saints in Utah and the U.S. federal government contributed to a siege

mentality and a renewed sense of persecution that led to several episodes of violence committed by Church members. Concerned about spiritual complacency, Brigham Young and other Church leaders delivered a series of sermons in which they called the Saints to repent and renew their spiritual commitments.<sup>33</sup> Many testified that they became better people because of this reformation.<sup>34</sup>

Nineteenth-century Americans were accustomed to violent language, both religious and otherwise. Throughout the century, revivalists had used violent imagery to encourage the unconverted to repent and to urge backsliders to reform.<sup>35</sup> At times during the reformation, President Young, his counselor Jedediah M. Grant, and other leaders preached with fiery rhetoric, warning against the evils of those who dissented from or opposed the Church. Drawing on biblical passages, particularly from the Old Testament, leaders taught that some sins were so serious that the perpetrator's blood would have to be shed in order to receive forgiveness.<sup>36</sup> Such preaching led to increased strain between the Latter-day Saints and the relatively few non-Mormons in Utah, including federally appointed officials.

In early 1857, U.S. President James Buchanan received reports from some of the federal officials alleging that Governor Young and the Latter-day Saints in Utah were rebelling against the authority of the federal government. A strongly worded memorial from the Utah legislature to the federal government convinced federal officials the reports were true. President Buchanan decided to replace Brigham Young as governor and, in what became known as the Utah War, sent an army to Utah to escort his replacement. Latter-day Saints feared that the oncoming army—some 1,500 troops, with more to follow—would renew the depredations of Missouri and Illinois and again drive the Saints from their homes. In addition, Parley P. Pratt, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, was murdered in Arkansas in May 1857. News of the murder—as well as newspaper reports from the eastern United States that celebrated the crime—reached Utah in late June 1857.<sup>37</sup> As these events unfolded, Brigham Young declared martial law in the territory, directed missionaries and settlers in outlying areas to return to Utah, and guided preparations to resist the army. Defiant sermons given by President Young and other Church leaders, combined with the impending arrival of an army, helped create an environment of fear and suspicion in Utah.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Mountain Meadows Massacre**

At the peak of this tension, in early September 1857, a branch of the territorial militia in southern Utah (composed entirely of Mormons), along with some Indians they recruited, laid siege to a wagon train of emigrants traveling from Arkansas to California. As the wagon train traveled south from Salt Lake City, the emigrants had clashed verbally with local Mormons over where they could graze their cattle. Some of the members of the wagon train became frustrated because they had difficulty purchasing much-needed grain and other supplies from local settlers, who had been instructed to save their grain as a wartime policy. Aggrieved, some of the emigrants threatened to join incoming troops in fighting against the

Saints.<sup>39</sup>

Although some Saints ignored these threats, other local Church leaders and members in Cedar City, Utah, advocated violence. Isaac C. Haight, a stake president and militia leader, sent John D. Lee, a militia major, to lead an attack on the emigrant company. When the president reported the plan to his council, other leaders objected and requested that he call off the attack and instead send an express rider to Brigham Young in Salt Lake City for guidance. But the men Haight had sent to attack the emigrants carried out their plans before they received the order not to attack. The emigrants fought back, and a siege ensued.

Over the next few days, events escalated, and Mormon militiamen planned and carried out a deliberate massacre. They lured the emigrants from their circled wagons with a false flag of truce and, aided by Paiute Indians they had recruited, slaughtered them. Between the first attack and the final slaughter, the massacre destroyed the lives of 120 men, women, and children in a valley known as Mountain Meadows. Only small children—those believed to be too young to be able to tell what had happened—were spared. The express rider returned two days after the massacre. He carried a letter from Brigham Young telling local leaders to “not meddle” with the emigrants and to allow them to pass through southern Utah.<sup>40</sup> The militiamen sought to cover up the crime by placing the entire blame on local Paiutes, some of whom were also members of the Church.

Two Latter-day Saints were eventually excommunicated from the Church for their participation, and a grand jury that included Latter-day Saints indicted nine men. Only one participant, John D. Lee, was convicted and executed for the crime, which fueled false allegations that the massacre had been ordered by Brigham Young.

In recent years, the Church has made diligent efforts to learn everything possible about the massacre. In the early 2000s, historians in the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints scoured archives throughout the United States for historical records; every Church record on the massacre was also opened to scrutiny. In the resulting book, published by Oxford University Press in 2008, authors Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard concluded that while intemperate preaching about outsiders by Brigham Young, George A. Smith, and other leaders contributed to a climate of hostility, President Young did not order the massacre. Rather, verbal confrontations between individuals in the wagon train and southern Utah settlers created great alarm, particularly within the context of the Utah War and other adversarial events. A series of tragic decisions by local Church leaders—who also held key civic and militia leadership roles in southern Utah—led to the massacre.<sup>41</sup>

Aside from the Mountain Meadows Massacre, a few Latter-day Saints committed other violent acts against a small number of dissenters and outsiders. Some Latter-day Saints perpetrated acts of extralegal violence, especially in the 1850s, when fear and tensions were prevalent in Utah Territory. The heated rhetoric of Church

leaders directed toward dissenters may have led these Mormons to believe that such actions were justified.<sup>42</sup> The perpetrators of these crimes were generally not punished. Even so, many allegations of such violence are unfounded, and anti-Mormon writers have blamed Church leaders for many unsolved crimes or suspicious deaths in early Utah.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

Many people in the 19th century unjustly characterized the Latter-day Saints as a violent people. Yet the vast majority of Latter-day Saints, in the 19th century as today, lived in peace with their neighbors and families, and sought peace in their communities. Travelers in the 19th century often noted the peace and order that prevailed in Mormon communities in Utah and elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the actions of relatively few Latter-day Saints caused death and injury, frayed community relationships, and damaged the perception of Mormons as a peaceful people.<sup>45</sup>

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints condemns violent words and actions and affirms its commitment to furthering peace throughout the world. Speaking of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, Elder Henry B. Eyring, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, stated, “The gospel of Jesus Christ that we espouse abhors the cold-blooded killing of men, women, and children. Indeed, it advocates peace and forgiveness. What was done here long ago by members of our Church represents a terrible and inexcusable departure from Christian teaching and conduct.”<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the Church’s history, Church leaders have taught that the way of Christian discipleship is a path of peace. Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles connected the Latter-day Saints’ faith in Jesus Christ to their active pursuit of love of neighbor and peace with all people: “The hope of the world is the Prince of Peace. ... Now, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, what does the Lord expect of us? As a Church, we must ‘renounce war and proclaim peace.’ As individuals, we should ‘follow after the things which make for peace.’ We should be personal peacemakers.”<sup>47</sup>

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### **Church Magazines**

“The Mountain Meadows Massacre,” *Ensign*, September 2007

### **Study Manuals**

“Nauvoo under Apostolic Leadership”

*Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual*, chapter 24

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“The Utah War”

*Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual*, chapter 29

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## Media

### **Audio**

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