

Spain and the Inquisition

The reign of Isabel and Ferdinand in the years leading up to the Reformation was of enormous consequence for Spain, the Catholic Church, and all of Europe. During the first years of their reign they united the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon and made major reforms within the government, centralized power among diverse kingdoms, reduced crime, and put kingdom's finances in order. But these were only the initial reforms of an exceedingly influential reign. In later years they succeeded in driving the last of the Moors from their stronghold in Granada, sponsored Columbus's voyage of discovery, and established Spanish colonies in the New World. These were achievements of monumental importance for all of Christian Europe.

The firm leadership of the Spanish monarchs greatly improved the government of the realm, but many of their reforms extended to the Church in Spain. Some of the actions taken by Isabel and Ferdinand that had far reaching consequences for the Church included:

- Reformed Spanish religious houses and clergy, and appointed worthy bishops.
- Established Spanish Inquisition to address heresy and false conversion.
- Decreed that all Jews must leave the kingdom of Spain.

Reforms of Isabel and Ferdinand

In 1468, when Isabella of Castile, married Ferdinand, King of Aragon, the two most important States on the Iberian Peninsula were united. Their combined realm included territories in Italy, Sardinia, and Balearic Islands as well as most of the Iberian Peninsula. The two ruled for over thirty years and set an example of competent Christian government that has rarely been exceeded. The condition of Castile when they came to power was desperate and over their thirty year reign they did much to reform both Church and state. According to Wikipedia: Isabel "reorganized the governmental system, brought the crime rate to the lowest it had been in years, and unburdened the kingdom of the enormous debt her brother had left behind. Her reforms and those she made with her husband had an influence that extended well beyond the borders of their united kingdoms."

In order to reform the Church Isabel appointed good bishops and filled important posts in her court with men of great sanctity. She helped set in motion reforms of religious houses that encouraged later saints to complete the work. Isabel's work to reform the Church greatly influenced the Catholic Reformation two generations later. Many of the leading theologians of the council of Trent were Spanish and some of the reforms they recommended for the whole church were based on those Isabel and her bishops had made in Spain. When the Protestant Revolt did occur, the heresies of Luther and Calvin did not take hold of Spain and Spain produced many of the greatest reformation era saints (i.e. Ignatius, Francis Xavier, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, John of God, Lewis Bertrand, and Francis Borgia.)

Spanish Jews and the Inquisition

One of the greatest difficulties Isabel and Ferdinand had to deal with while they tried to unify and reform their kingdoms was the status of the Jews and *Conversos* (Jews who had converted to Christianity) in their kingdom. The position of the Jews in Spain was controversial long before the reign of Isabel and Ferdinand. Spanish Jews had a history of allying with Moors against

Christians during centuries of Moorish occupation and as Ferdinand prepared to conquer Granada he considered the possible disloyalty of Spanish Jews to be a serious concern.

There was a large Jewish population in Spain and many were relatively wealthy. Jews were often merchants or money-lenders by profession, and so they were a both privileged and persecuted minority. Certain Jews enjoyed great influence with nobles, who appreciated the services they provided, but at the same time, they were often disliked by the common people and subject to discrimination under Spanish law. In order to avoid persecution and restrictions placed on Jews many Spanish Jews had converted to Christianity. Unfortunately not all of the conversions were sincere and those who converted mainly for material advantages were often suspected of treachery. A suspicion arose that certain Jews who had been converted and raised to high positions in Church and State were still in league with their nation and plotting against the Spanish sovereigns.

Isabel and Ferdinand had difficult problems regarding Spanish Jews. They had to deal with three different situations of Jews in their realm.

- **Jews** who openly practiced Judaism, but who were restricted from certain activities and position by Spanish Law.
- **Conversos** who were sincere Christians but suffered retaliation from their Jewish friends and relatives.
- **Crypto-Jews** who feigned conversion for material advantage but were often disloyal or treacherous towards the Church or government.

It was the desire of the Spanish monarchs to protect loyal Conversos from abuse and temptation by non-converted Jews, while also protecting the Church and their kingdom from infiltration and abuse by Crypto Jews. Since it was impossible to tell the difference between good and disloyal Conversos without some investigation, using an ecclesiastical court such as the Inquisition to root out heretical Christians, appeared to be an obvious necessity. It was mainly to deal with this difficult problem of Crypto-Jews, or Jews falsely posing as Christian, that the Spanish Inquisition was established.

As a matter of historical record, the Spanish Inquisition was largely successful in the task it set before itself. Tens of thousands of Spanish Christians suspected of heresy or insincere conversion were examined but most were either vindicated or allowed to recant their errors. Only a small percentage were executed and many of those were either obstinate heretics or those found guilty of crimes or treason. The Inquisition worked in Spain by rooting out the worst heretics and removing treasonous Christians from positions of influence, but it also discouraged mischief-making Jews from making false conversions by establishing the precedent that crypto-Jews would be examined and prosecuted.

As a result of the Inquisition, Spain was able to maintain its Christian identity during the turbulent years of the Reformation and was able to establish Catholic Christianity as the state-religion throughout its empire. The inquisition functioned as an ecclesiastical court and records were kept of many proceedings, so historians who have examined the original records have generally concluded that much of the complaints by Protestant writers about the abuses of the inquisition are greatly exaggerated. The extreme vitriol heaped upon the Spanish inquisition by enemies of the Catholic Church is evidence of its effectiveness.

Spanish Inquisition — Summary

- Spanish Inquisition instituted by Isabel and Ferdinand soon after they came to power, in order to deal with problems of Crypto Jews and false conversions
- Crypto Jews held high positions of power, were suspected of abuses against Christians
- Many Jews were wealthy and powerful, but suspected loyalty was to other Jews, not Spain.
- The Turkish Massacre of Christians in Otranto (1580) was blamed on crypto-Jewish traitors and resulted in an expansion of the Inquisition.
- Many cases of treachery and conspiracies against Christians were uncovered and documented by the inquisitors.
- Inquisition was effective in rooting out Crypto-Jews and discouraging false conversions.
- Anti-Catholic reports on torture and abuse of Inquisition have been wildly exaggerated.
- Statistics vary, but generally agree that of over 50,000 cases examined over two hundred years, only one to three percent resulted in execution.
- The Inquisition aided in reform of the Church in Spain and was a bulwark against the spread of heresy during the Reformation.

The Conquest of Granada and Spanish Moors

Soon after they came to power, Isabel and Ferdinand determined to free all the Spaniards still subjugated to the Moslem yoke and to rid their country of the Moors. A brief but desperate contest followed during which the Moors lost one fortress after another. The valor of the Moors was crippled by divided counsels among their leaders. Granada surrendered in January, 1482, and Boabdil, the last king of the last Moorish State in Spain, withdrew with the remnant of his people to Africa. Thence for a hundred years the former masters of Spain harassed their old thralls, but never again did they obtain a foothold in the land.

The Moors who remained among the Spaniards became a serious difficulty to the sovereigns. Liberty of worship was guaranteed to the Moors, but Ferdinand and Isabella attempted to convert them and offered advantages to those who became Christian. This conflict of interest caused the sincerity of the conversions of Moorish converts to Christianity (called Moriscos) to be doubted. At the same time, the unconverted Moors considered the converts traitors and persecuted their countrymen who had yielded. Frequently enough, hot-blooded Spaniards, would see themselves as bound to defend the converts and retaliate. The unconverted Moors, in turn, revolted and when subdued, they were offered conversion as a condition of peace. But pressured conversions were often false. Allowing the Moors to continue practicing their religion, while incentivizing them to convert appears to be a humane policy, but it created a new set of problems, including Crypto-Moors, and a traitorous minority within a Christian kingdom.

The problems with Crypto-Moors mirrored that of the Crypto-Jews, and the Inquisition was also applied to Moorish subjects.

Expulsion of the Jews from Spain

The Spanish Inquisition was established in 1478 and it addressed the difficulties in distinguishing between Christians of Jewish descent who were sincere in their conversion, and Crypto-Jews. The laws of the Church only applied to baptized Christians, however, so the inquisition had no jurisdiction over Jews who openly practiced their own religion unless they were accused of a crime. It did, however, bring certain conflicts between Jews and Christians into the open.

Bad feeling between Jews and Christians long-predated the reign of Isabel, and during her early years she favored the protection and toleration of Spanish Jews. However, a number of cases brought before the Inquisition exposed not only treachery among some Crypto-Jews, but also the degree to which certain Jews pressured Conversos to apostatize. Isabel feared that the large Converso population, which accounted for about half of all Spanish Jews, could not live in peace with constant pressure to return to their Jewish faith. This was particularly true after the scandal involving the **Holy Child of La Guardia** greatly heightened anti-Jewish sentiment within Spain. In a case that enflamed the entire country, a Crypto-Jew confessed to the ritual crucifixion of a Christian child. The incident underscored the underlying hostility between Christians and Jews, and the difficulties separating good Jews from bad actors.

Eventually Isabel and Ferdinand concluded that expelling the Jews from Spanish dominions was the only path towards permanent peace. In 1492, just a few months after the final conquest of Granada, they signed the **Alhambra Decree** ordering the expulsion of all practicing Jews from both Castile and Aragon within three months' time. This was an enormous and unexpected blow to the Spanish Jews. Many had live on the Iberian Peninsula for over a thousand years and were forced to pack and move all their belongings in only a few months. Spanish Jews still had the option of converting to Christianity, but knowing that their conversions would be treated with suspicion and that they could be subjected to the inquisition discouraged many from choosing that path.

The exact numbers are not known but an estimated 100,000 Jews had to sell all their belongings and leave Spanish dominions. Some set sail for Africa or Italy, where Jewish communities existed in most Port cities. Others went to Portugal, where they were welcomes as traders and merchants, and helped develop the Portuguese Empire in Brazil and Asia. Still others went to France oar the Netherlands, and some even settled in America, especially on the Island of Jamaica.

Many of the Jews who were exiled from Spain, however, could not forgive either the Spanish nation or the Catholic Church for the way they had been treated. Much of the anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish propaganda, and greatly exaggerated reports of the abuses of the Inquisition that have circulated since the time of the Reformation, can be traced back to the Jewish community that was forced from its ancestral home by the Alhambra degree.

Alhambra Decree — Expulsion of Jews from Spain — Summary

- Primary cause of expulsion was negative influence of Jews on Converso population and rampant anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians.
- Expulsion occurred after 'Holy Child of La Guardia' scandal inflamed anti-Jewish feeling.

- Jews who refused to convert were forcibly exiled. At least one hundred thousand left Spain.
- Jews were allowed to take valuables they could carry and were forced to sell most property.
- Some fled to Ottoman Empire and helped to finance Ottoman Wars and Barbary pirates.
- Some fled to Portugal and helped develop Portugal Empire in Brazil and Asia.
- Some fled to Netherlands or Germany and helped finance the Protestant and Dutch Revolts.
- Some helped establish trading colonies in Spanish Americas especially on Island of Jamaica.
- Expulsion increased anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish sentiment among Jews.
- Within a few years of the expulsion Isabella lost two children, five grandchildren, three sons-in-law, and one daughter went insane.