

# Overview of Spanish History

## The Spanish Empire and the Black Legend

Much of the history of Spain is glorious, and the story of the rise and fall of the Spanish Empire is one of the most fascinating episodes in world history. Although the influence of Spain declined in the 18th and 19th centuries, during the late Middle Ages Spain was a great power in Europe and throughout the world. Spanish and Portuguese explorers discovered the New World and established a sea-route to Asia, and their stories are among the most dramatic and consequential in world History.

The early history of Christian Spain was deeply influenced by centuries of conflict with the Moslem Moors who occupied parts of the Peninsula for over 700 years. The Spanish Christians of the Iberian Peninsula fought relentlessly to reclaim their land from a hostile power, and their long struggle against the Moors hardened the Spaniards into bold but chivalrous warriors with a fierce loyalty to the Catholic Church.

The Spanish and Portuguese proved themselves not only the most courageous warriors in Europe during the Middle Ages, but also the best sailors. The tremendous advances in ship-building and navigation that led to the opening of trade routes and to the discovery of America, were mostly attributable to Iberians.

In the New World the Spaniards settled and civilized an entire continent in only a few generations. There were unquestionably cruel abuses of natives and tragic exploitation, but neither the King of Spain or the Church officially condoned mistreatment of the native population and laws were proclaimed that demanded the natives be protected rather than enslaved. But good intentions were unable to repress the greed of Spanish adventurers and the first Viceroy who attempted to enforce the "New Laws" in Latin America was promptly overthrown. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church did Christianize the natives, there was much intermarriage, and mixed-race children were common from the earliest generations of Spanish rule. Natives who failed to adopt the Spanish language and customs were frequently treated as second-class citizens, but they were recognized as Spanish subjects rather than exiled and obliterated, as they were in Anglo-Saxon territories.

The fortunes of the Spanish Empire declined with the death of the last Hapsburg king and a European wide war was triggered by the question of Succession to the Spanish throne. Eventually, however, much of the Spanish controlled territory in Europe was lost and the remaining Empire fell under the influence of France and the Bourbon monarchy. The Spanish Bourbons were mediocre rulers and the influence of Spain declined during the 18th century and 19th centuries. One of the most interesting and misunderstood periods of Spanish history, however, occurred during the early 19th century, when Napoleon invaded Spain and overthrew the Bourbon monarchy. At the time, all of Europe was under the heel of Napoleon, yet the Spaniards, shockingly, effectively resisted Napoleon's regime, and for 100 years afterward

**Anglo-Saxon Bias and the Black Legend**—In spite of the historic achievements of the Spaniards, many histories of Spain, especially those written in English, suffer from anti-Spanish or anti-Catholic biases. From the age of the Reformation, the interests of Spain were largely in conflict with those of England so when entrusted to the pens of Anglo-Saxons, the story of Spain and its dominions does not fare well. According to Wikipedia, the "Black Legend" refers to:

"A style of historical writing that demonizes the Spanish Empire in a politically motivated attempt to morally disqualify Spain and its people, and to incite animosity against Spanish rule. The Black Legend particularly exaggerates the treatment of the indigenous subjects in the territories of the Spanish Empire and non-Catholics in its European territories."

This summarizes the tone and content of much English historical writing on the subject of Spain and its dominions. In many of these stories, the bias is not immediately obvious, but it is nearly always present. The anti-Spanish bias is most serious when dealing with treatment of the Catholic Church, but it is also evident in a bias in favor of Republican over monarchical forms of government. The liberal Republican governments imposed on Spaniards in both Latin American and Spain were corrupt and deeply unpopular, yet in most stories of Spanish history, the overthrow of the legitimate government and confiscation of Church and common property is hailed as 'liberation'.

The Protestant Reformation occurred in England at a time when the forces opposed to the Catholic Church were nationalistic, but still strongly Christian. It therefore ushered in an era of greater political liberty and Christian pluralism. The forces opposed to the Catholic Church in the 19th century, however, were far more atheistic and corrupt, and most of the 'Liberal Republicans' of Spain sought only to plunder the Church rather than reform it. It is difficult for liberty-loving Anglo-Saxons, committed to constitutional, republican forms of government, to see the problems of replacing a degenerate Christian monarchy with a corrupt atheistic republic, so English writers tend to support the liberal promises of Spanish republicans and ignore their corrupt and authoritarian tendencies.

### Historical Divisions of the Spanish Empire

<b>Romans and Visigoths</b>	Punic Wars in Spain Moorish Conquest	250 B.C. 711
<b>Moorish Spain</b>	Battle of Guadalete Fall of Granada	711 1492
<b>Reconquista</b>	Reconquest of Toledo Death of Ferdinand	1050 1516
<b>Exploration</b>	Prince Henry the Navigator Discovery of Mississippi	1430 1540
<b>Hapsburg Spain</b>	Charles V, Emperor War of Spanish Succession	1516 1700
<b>Bourbon Spain</b>	Peace of Utrecht Spanish Civil War	1712 1931
<b>Mexico</b>	Conquests of Cortez Mexican Revolution	1520 1921
<b>South America</b>	Conquests of Pizarro Early 20th Century	1525 1921