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Blood and Faith

The Purging of Muslim Spain

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Between 1485 and 1501, some 2,000 Conversos were burned to death, including 250 in Toledo alone, in the bloodiest period in the Inquisition's history.

Even as the Inquisition conducted its ruthless investigation of Marrano heresy, tens of thousands of Jews continued to openly engage in the same rituals and practices that were leading others to prison and the stake. Because they had not converted, they remained outside the jurisdiction of the Inquisition, which nevertheless blamed them for having lured their former co-religionists away from their adopted faith.

The more the Inquisition uncovered evidence of judaizing among the Conversos, the more its officials argued that the presence of unconverted Jews was exacerbating the problem. Some talked of exterminating the Jewish population altogether. Others urged Ferdinand and Isabella to remove them from Spanish soil. The Catholic Monarchs were initially reluctant to take such a drastic step. In 1490 however, as the war in Granada was moving toward its conclusion, a sensational crime was uncovered in the town of La Guardia in Castile, where a group of Jews and Conversos were accused of the hideous ritual murder of a Christian child.

No body was ever found, nor was it even clear that any family in La Guardia even lost a child, but in the course of a sixteen-month Inquisitorial interrogation, two Jews and five Conversos confessed to having crucified the child and cut out his heart as part of a black magic ritual supposedly aimed at the Inquisition itself. On November 16, 1491, the Jewish members of the group were publicly torn apart with hot pincers and the Conversos burned at the stake for what was almost certainly a fabricated crime. The case of the "Holy Infant of La Guardia" appeared to bear out the worst fantasies of a Jewish conspiracy to undermine Christian Spain, and Torquemada personally ensured that it received maximum publicity. It may also have persuaded the Catholic Monarchs to undertake the radical solution to the Converso problem that followed the surrender of Granada.

The physical removal of unwanted populations was not a new phenomenon in Renaissance Europe. In the ancient world, Rome frequently deported rebellious populations as a form of collective punishment or security measure; the Jewish diaspora was itself the result of one of these punitive deportations, which followed the Jewish revolt against Roman occupation of Judea and the destruction of the second temple of Jerusalem. During the Middle Ages, Jews

were expelled by various Christian rulers, beginning with the expulsion of the Jewish population from England by Edward I in 1290. Partial expulsions of Muslims were also carried out or attempted within Spain's Christian kingdoms in the course of the Reconquista. But all these events were superseded by the calamity that overtook Spanish Jewry in 1492, when Ferdinand and Isabella signed an edict at the Alhambra on March 31 that condemned the continued interaction between Christians and Jews "who, it seems, seek always and by whatever means and ways they can to subvert and to steal faithful Christians from our holy Catholic faith and to separate them from it."⁸

Declaring that their decision had been reached after careful consultation with "prelates, great noblemen . . . and other persons of learning and wisdom," the Catholic Monarchs ordered all Jews in their kingdoms, whatever their station, to convert to Christianity or leave Spanish territory within a period of three months and forty days. In that time, they were expected to sell their property, pay their debts, and conclude their business affairs. The proclamation of this edict in April caused consternation and despair among the Jewish population of Castile and Aragon. As many as 50,000 Jews chose to convert, including the leading Jewish rabbi and royal treasurer Abraham Senior. Between 100,000 and 150,000 Jews preferred to go into exile rather than abandon their faith. Throughout the summer of 1492, Jews made their way to Spain's borders and ports in an exodus that was described by the priest and chronicler Andrés Bernaldez:

All of them confiding in their blind hopes left the lands of their birth, children and adults, old and young, on foot and in wagons, and the caballeros on asses and other beasts, and each journeyed to a port of embarkation. They went through roads and fields with many travails and fortunes, some falling, others rising, others dying, others being born, others falling sick, so that there was no Christian who did not feel sorry for them and always invite them to be baptized. And some sorrowfully converted and stayed, but very few. And on the way the rabbis heartened them, and had the women and youths sing and play tambourines to cheer the people, and so they went through Castille and arrived at the ports.⁹

Virulently anti-Semitic and an Inquisition official himself, Bernaldez, like many Christians, blamed these sufferings on the Jews, whose obstinate adherence to "the depraved Mosaic heresy" had led them to "deny the Savior and true Messiah, our Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ, whose arms are always open to receive them." The fate of these exiles was often terrible. Some

were murdered on the ships that were supposed to transport them or drowned in storms or died of cold and starvation. One shipload of Jewish passengers bound for Naples was decimated by cholera and dysentery and generated an epidemic among the local population. Many Jews were transported to North Africa. Though some found safe haven in ports and cities, many were dumped on isolated coasts and beaches, where they were robbed, killed, or raped by nomadic Muslim tribesmen. Some Jews were so broken by this treatment that they returned to what Bernáldez called “the land of civilized people” and agreed to be baptised.

The overwhelming majority never returned to Spain. Many found a better reception in the territories of the Ottoman Empire, where Sultan Bayazid reportedly expressed his astonishment at the “Spanish kings who could throw out a people as clever as the Jews.” Some settled in Turkey, others in Greece, the Balkans, and North Africa. Many Jews went to neighbouring Portugal, where they were initially well received. In 1497, however, the Portuguese king Manuel I gave them the same choice between baptism or exile—a condition imposed upon him by Ferdinand and Isabella in exchange for the hand of their daughter Isabella. The Portuguese expulsion added a new touch of cruelty when Manuel ordered that all Jewish children under the age of fourteen were to be taken from their parents to be brought up as Christians. This was partly intended to induce their parents to convert, so that Portugal could fulfil its commitment to Spain while still retaining a population that was regarded as a valuable economic resource. Though most Jews converted, some abandoned or even killed their own children.

The brutal extirpation of Spanish Jewry dealt a fatal blow to the legacy of medieval coexistence. It also marked a new threshold in Spanish history that would hover over the Muslim population throughout the coming century. Not only had Spain’s rulers embraced the mass removal of an unwanted population in order to ensure the religious unity of their subjects, but the state had demonstrated that it had the logistical capacity to organize a deportation on an unprecedented scale. The removal of the Jews did not bring an end to the Converso problem, which continued to torment Spain for another two centuries, but its importance lies in the fact that it was generally regarded by leading Christians both inside and outside Spain as a triumphant achievement. Peter Martyr of Anghieri later praised his sovereigns as “the wisest of men” for having purged their realms of an “infected herd,” while the title of Catholic Monarchs was bestowed on Ferdinand and Isabella by Pope Alexander VI partly as a tribute to their decision to expel the Jews.

Historians have long debated the extent to which the expulsion was motivated by religion, economics, or anti-Semitism. Hatred of the Jews was certainly a factor, though neither Ferdinand nor Isabella were personally anti-Semitic, and Jews and Conversos enjoyed prominent positions in the royal court. There is no doubt that many Christians profited from the expulsion, from speculators who bought Jewish land and property cheaply, to debtors who evaded their Jewish creditors. The Crown also benefited from the confiscation and sale of Jewish communal property and the imposition of an embarkation tax on exiled Jews. But Ferdinand and Isabella also rejected offers of a substantial payment from Spain’s chief Rabbis to persuade them to waive the edict, and the Crown probably lost more than it gained in the long term from the expulsion in economic terms.

Ferdinand himself described the removal of the Jews as a selfless gesture that was intended to protect the Conversos “despite the great harm to ourselves, seeking and preferring the salvation of souls above our profit and that of individuals.”¹⁰ We do not need to take such piety at face value. The spiritual salvation of the Conversos may well have been a motive, but religion and reasons of state were rarely separate in Renaissance Spain. The expulsion was partly intended as a sop to more extreme anti-Semites, whose hatred always had the potential to turn against the monarchy itself. But it was also influenced by the climate of messianic religious fervor that gripped much of Spain and Europe in the last decades of the fifteenth century. It was a period in which many Christians lived in expectation of an imminent Day of Judgment and the beginning of a new Christian millennium, or *renovatio mundi*.

On the eve of the War of Granada, a number of prophetic texts circulated in Spain, which predicted the coming of El Encubierto, the Hidden One, or the “great bat” depicted in the Book of Revelation, who would defeat the Antichrist and usher in the End of Days and a new Christian millennium. According to the widely circulated “letter of revelation” written in 1486 by a Castilian nobleman named Don Rodrigo Ponce de León, Ferdinand himself was the Hidden One, who was destined to “subdue all kingdoms from sea to sea, and he will destroy all the Moors of Spain.” To some Spaniards, the conquest of Granada confirmed Spain’s destiny as a “New Israel” that had been chosen by God to undertake the reconquest of Jerusalem. Columbus’s search for a new route to the Indies was partly intended to make possible a double-pronged assault on Islam from east and west.

Columbus even took with him an Arabic-speaking Jewish translator, who

began speaking Arabic to the bemused indigenous inhabitants of Cuba in the belief that they had landed on Muslim soil. In a letter to Ferdinand and Isabella written in 1493, Columbus promised "that in seven years from today I can provide Your Highnesses with five thousand mounted troops and fifty thousand foot-soldiers for the war and conquest of Jerusalem, upon which proposition this enterprise was taken."¹⁴ The Catholic Monarchs clearly shared these aspirations to some extent. In 1494, bulls of crusade were circulated in Spain to generate support for a military expedition to North Africa. Three years later, Spain seized the Moroccan port of Melilla and acquired the first of its military and trading outposts in North Africa.

Whether Ferdinand and Isabella saw the removal of the Jews as a prelude to a new crusade is open to question, but the belief that the internal purification of Spain was necessary in order to win divine support for external conquest was to prove a recurring theme over the coming century. The new drive toward religious unity also served an internal political function. In a country that was still a conglomeration of kingdoms under Castilian hegemony rather than a unified state, Catholicism provided a sense of collective purpose and a common identity that could be shared by all Spain's subjects. Not only was religion necessary to sustain the domestic authority of the monarchy, but it also served to legitimize Spain's actions internationally, by making these actions synonymous with the interests of the faith as a whole.

At a time when dukedoms, principalities, and city-states across Europe were beginning to coalesce into larger territorial entities, religious uniformity was seen as a prerequisite for social peace and internal political stability by all European rulers. But the presence of Spain's large Jewish and Muslim populations presented formidable obstacles to the realization of this objective. Not only were they ethnically distinct from Christians, but both minorities were a continual reminder of an Islamic presence that was regarded both inside and outside Spain as an abomination. Their presence was particularly anomalous in a country that presented itself as the sword of Christendom. Despite the celebration of Ferdinand and Isabella's victory at Granada in Europe, many leading Christians continued to regard Spain as a suspect country that was riddled with Jews, Moors, and heretics—suspicions that were confirmed rather than diminished by the extent of the Inquisitorial purges that were taking place.

This then, was the Spain of the Catholic Monarchs: a country forged in centuries of holy war against the infidel and intent on further conquest on behalf of the faith, a country where religious chauvinism was accompanied by

shame at its Semitic heritage, a country tormented by notions of purity and defilement, a country where even the most innocuous expression of religious or cultural difference could lead men and women to the stake. With Spain purged of Jews and dreaming of crusade and conquest abroad, the attention of its rulers now turned toward the infidel populations who remained within its borders.