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## Spanish Expulsion of the Jews

One of the most dramatic events in European history, the so-called Reconquest (Reconquista) of Spain was consolidated in 1492 when Christian forces finally conquered the Muslims who had controlled the bulk of the Iberian Peninsula for over 700 years. Central to the Christian conquistadores' political ideology was the idea that they needed to purge Spain of everyone who was not a Christian. They thus determined to expel not only all of the Muslims of the country but also the Jews. Thus, 1492 was the year of the Reconquista's completion as well as the biggest expulsion of Jews from a country in medieval European history.

The history of Jews in Iberia is long and storied. Jews had lived in Spain since Roman times and, since the Muslim conquests of Iberia in the eighth century, had thrived there. As monotheists, Muslims considered Jews *dhimmi*, or "people of the Book," and granted them rights to practice their own faith, conduct their internal communal affairs with autonomy, and take part in public life alongside Muslims and the other prominent *dhimmi* group, Christians. Although Jews and Christians were required by Islamic governments to show deference to Muslims and pay a special poll tax, they were otherwise granted tremendous toleration in comparison to their coreligionists living under Christian rule in other parts of Europe. Further, though there were periods of persecution against Jews (which were much less frequent under the Muslim rulers of Spain), Spanish Jews enjoyed, for the most part, more than seven centuries of relative prosperity and acceptance in Islamic Spain.

By the 15th century, however, the Christian monarchy of Castile was prominent and Islamic governance was faltering against the Reconquista movement. As the Christians conquered portions of Iberia that had been controlled by Muslims for centuries, they allowed the Roman Catholic Church to exercise its authority through a process known as the Inquisition. The Inquisition was a system of purging the Church of ideas deemed heretical and of forcing conquered Muslims and Jews to convert to Catholicism. Beginning in the 14th century, Jews who lived in the regions already conquered by the Castilians and their Christian allies converted in large numbers to Christianity. However, many believed that they were merely faking their conversions and practicing Judaism secretly (a claim that many scholars today assert to be correct).

Those converts were increasingly held suspect by the leaders of the Inquisition; by 1480, the king and queen of Aragon and Castile, Ferdinand V and Isabella I, had thousands of newly converted Jewish families murdered. However, attacking the converts was not the final step of their plan against the Jews. Highly influenced by the Spanish leader of the Inquisition, Tomás de Torquemada, Ferdinand and Isabella set out with a new plan for the Jews of Spain once they had finally defeated the Muslims in January 1492. Under the influence of Torquemada, the monarchs of a newly unified, fully Christian-ruled Spain issued an edict of expulsion against all Jews in March 1492, to be enacted within four months. This edict, known as the Alhambra Decree, demanded that Spain and all of its possessions be completely free of Jews by July 31.

The next four months were disastrous for the Jews of Spain. The decree denied Jews the right to take their property or wealth with them, thereby forcing them to liquidate their possessions for dramatically reduced prices. For hundreds of thousands of Jews, securing admission to other countries was a problem. Moreover, many Jews

were murdered in the process of trying to flee. It was common for ship owners to contract passage to North Africa with Jews and then murder them at sea and dump their bodies into the ocean. Many rumors, moreover, swirled that Jews had swallowed diamonds and other valuable pieces of jewelry. As a consequence, many Jews were disemboweled while trying to flee the country.

Approximately 70,000 Jews attempted to convert to Christianity to escape expulsion. However, it was not uncommon for these Jews to come under fire by the Inquisition, particularly since Torquemada himself believed that no converted Jews could be trusted and all should be purged from the country. Those who did stay and who escaped later expulsion were required by the Inquisition to intermarry with non-Jews and completely abandon all traditions that could be linked back to their former lives.

Those Jews who did escape murder and the Inquisition in their quest to flee Spain largely ended up in such places as North Africa, Turkey, and the Netherlands. Indeed, such Muslim leaders as the Ottoman sultan Bayezid II were excited to welcome Jews into their lands, believing that they would usher in greater prosperity and culture. The Netherlands became the first of the Western European nations to readmit Jews, and the population of Spanish Jews in Amsterdam grew successful.

Eventually, Jews who traced their lineage back to Spain became known as the Sephardim; they often maintained their vernacular dialect, Ladino, which is a type of medieval Spanish written in Hebrew characters. Although many of the survivors of the expulsion went on to find refuge in other countries, they never forgot the trauma of leaving their homes in Spain, nor the hardships of those who were not lucky enough to survive the period of Inquisition and expulsion. Even to this day, Spain has one of the smallest populations of Jews in Europe, a legacy of the intolerance shown them during the Reconquista and its aftermath in 1492.

### Further Reading

Marcus, Jacob Rader, and Marc Saperstein. *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Source Book, 315-1791*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2000; The Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture (<http://www.sephardicstudies.org/decreed.html>).

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[back to top](#)

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