

United Spain

1400 to 1520

TRASTAMARA KINGS TO DEATH OF FERDINAND

Era Summary—United Spain

The reign of Isabel and Ferdinand (1474 to 1516) was a critical period for Spain and its major events, including the Unification of Spain, the Conquest of Granada, the Inquisition, the Expulsion of Jews, and the Discovery of America affected all of Europe. Several of these events concerned conflicts between the Spanish Jews and the Catholic Church. They are therefore controversial and most Spanish histories (including those in the Heritage Library) are written from an anti-Spanish-Catholic point of view. This bias is so commonplace it is called the "Black Legend". (Read more about the Black Legend [here](#)).

The Jews of Spain—Before recounting the history of fifteenth century Spain, therefore, it may be helpful to provide some background on the 'Sephardic' Jews of Spanish history, and their history of conflict with the Catholic Church and Spanish governments.

Spanish Jews inhabited the Iberian Peninsula since the age of Solomon when they engaged in trade with 'Tarshish'. Their numbers likely increased in the 2nd century B.C. following the fall of Carthage. By the age of Visigoth Spain (450-711), Jews were a prosperous upper class already established as traders, land-owners, financiers, doctors, and tax-collectors. The conflicts between Spanish Jews and the Catholic Church go at least as far back as the sixth century when the Council of Toledo put restrictions on Jewish activities and ownership of Christian slaves.

The Spanish Jews were suspected to have taken sides in the Visigoth Civil War against Roderic, and to have assisted the Moors in their conquest of Spain. It is certain that Spanish Jews considered Moorish Spain to have been a Golden Age and many Jews held high offices of State during the Cordoba Caliphate. So the suspicion of Jewish loyalty to Moors rather than Christians was a long-standing cause of concern. But there are several other deep-rooted factors that poisoned Jewish-Christian relationships in Spain.

- Spanish Jews did not assimilate but rather existed as a 'state-within-a-state'. The Jews were cosmopolitan with commercial connections to many other regions, so their loyalty to local governments was often in question.
- The history of antagonism between Spanish Jews and Christians involved extremely serious accusations of bigotry, slander, persecution and pogroms on one side, and of heresy, exploitation, usury, treachery, and ritual murder on the other. No middle ground was possible between these extremes.
- Most Jews, especially those involved in trade, medicine, tax-farming, and finance, associated primarily with the wealthy and powerful. And many Christian leaders, including kings, bishops, and even popes effectively protected the Jews and took their side in conflicts. So the conflict between Christians and Jews was largely class-based, rather than strictly religious.

All these factors fed into strong anti-Jewish sentiment among most Christian commoners and a corresponding contempt for working-classes Christians among many Jews. At the same time, Jews often served as financiers and advisors to Spanish kings, including Isabella and Ferdinand. And a significant number of Jews did convert to Christianity, especially after the disastrous massacres of 1391. A number of well-known saints, including Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and many Jesuits were 'conversos' of Jewish heritage. In fact, even Tomas Torquemada, 'The Grand Inquisitor' himself was of Jewish ancestry.

Union of Castile and Aragon—Isabel of Castile was born sixty years after the 1391 pogroms and by that time civil wars and anarchy had returned to the Peninsula. Both her father John II and her elder brother Henry IV were weak kings who squandered the wealth of the kingdom leaving Castile deeply in debt. Since Henry was childless, Isabel was named as heir to the throne and she accepted on the condition that she could choose her own spouse. Her choice was Ferdinand, prince of Aragon, the second largest kingdom in Spain. Their union brought most of the peninsula, excepting Portugal, under a united crown.

Isabella's first task upon coming to the throne was to fend off other claimants by fighting a three year War with Portugal. Due to Ferdinand's military ability, Isabella's skillful management of domestic difficulties, and the help of key advisors the Catholic monarchs succeeded in their endeavors. The young couple united the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, pacified the Spanish nobles, made peace with Portugal, and brought competent leadership to the Peninsula for the first time in memory.

The measures that needed to be taken to restore order in the kingdom of Castile after years of misrule were very significant. The kingdom was deeply in debt and somewhat lawless. Isabella's reforms include changes in land management and the establishment of local militias to restore law and order. During this period she relied on both Jewish and Catholic advisors. Some of her most important advisors included her confessor Tomas Torquemada and Cardinal Cisneros Ximenes, and her Jewish financial advisors Don Abraham Seneor and Isaac Abravanel.

From the beginning Isabella and Ferdinand were popular with the people and this was their greatest defense against the schemes of the nobles. After putting the kingdom of Spain on solid footing, Isabella put her energies into making marriage alliances with her five children. She succeeded in marrying a son and a daughter into the Hapsburg dynasty, and other daughters into Portuguese and English royal houses. But in her last years tragedy struck. Her only son, heir to the Spanish throne, died suspiciously at an early age. Her eldest daughter also died and another daughter went mad. Isabella herself preceded Ferdinand in death after a commendable reign of thirty years.

The Fall of Granada —While Isabella is credited with managing the domestic affairs of state, it was Ferdinand's martial ability that resulted in the successful conquest of Granada, the last Moorish stronghold in Spain. Granada had existed as a vassal state of Castile for over 250 years, but a strong leader and unified country were needed in order to motivate the Spanish barons to fight against the Moors instead of each other.

The conquest began in 1482 after a border skirmish when Ferdinand retaliated for Moorish aggression by taking the town of Alhama. From that point on, the Spaniards returned every

spring and gradually conquered Moorish territory. The critical port town of Malaga was taken in 1487 and the capital city of Granada fell in 1492.

The original terms of surrender allowed the Moors to remain in Spain and practice their religion. But seven years later the Spanish monarchs reneged on the agreement and insisted on conversion or exile. The change in policy was motivated by the fear of Ottoman pirates who threatened coastal towns in Spanish dominions. Isabel and Ferdinand believed that the potential for treachery by Spanish Mohammedans was too great a threat to the Christian realm.

Conversos and the Inquisition—By the time Isabel and Ferdinand came to the throne, thousands of Jews had converted to Christianity. Unfortunately, many Jews felt they had no choice but to convert so there were many false conversions. Most of the false converts were harmless but others were malicious, inclined to treachery when they rose to important positions in the Church or government. Besides treason and injury, other problems with conversos arose when their Jewish relations pressured them to apostatize or retaliated against them for "informing" on them.

These problems existed long before Isabella and Ferdinand came to the throne, but as they fended off rival claimants and contemplated war with Granada, they decided they needed to deal with internal threats. The Spanish Inquisition was established early in their reign to deal with the problem of false converts. The monarchs believed a Church tribunal was the only way to guarantee the safety of true and blameless converts as well as to expose the perfidious ones. Several influential conversos recommended this course of action to Isabella, and Tomas Torquemada himself, the 'Grand Inquisitor' was himself a converso.

From the Jewish point-of-view the attempt to ferret out false converts was a vicious witch hunt. The inquisition was set up to reward confessions, but authentic confessions frequently involved implicating others so the whole process opened the door to all forms of recrimination and exposure. Historians disagree about the number condemned by the inquisition, and the seriousness of the charges against them. Most who confessed to false conversions were offered leniency, but even so, the entire process caused enormous dissention within Jewish and Crypto-Jewish communities. For this reason exaggerated accounts of inquisitorial tortures are a standard part of the 'Black Legend'.

Child Murder and Expulsion of the Jews—Unfortunately, instead of healing anti-Jewish sentiment, certain notorious Inquisitions that exposed actual crimes against Christians only enflamed popular feeling against Jews (i.e., Pedro de Arbues, Holy Child of La Guardia murders). Although some historians give the impression that all charges of child murder were mere hysteria, there is *considerable evidence such events did occur*. Such crimes would be unthinkable to God-fearing Jews who abhor murder, but considering that a certain number of Spanish Jews were likely of Phoenician heritage, the charges of ritual child sacrifice are quite plausible.

The reaction of Christians in Spain against the 1490 'Holy Child of La Guardia' murder inquisition was extreme. The incident was a direct cause, not only of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain two years later, but also of a series of "blood purity" laws, that excluded Jewish converts from most Church and government offices. The anti-Jewish feeling was so strong that conversos

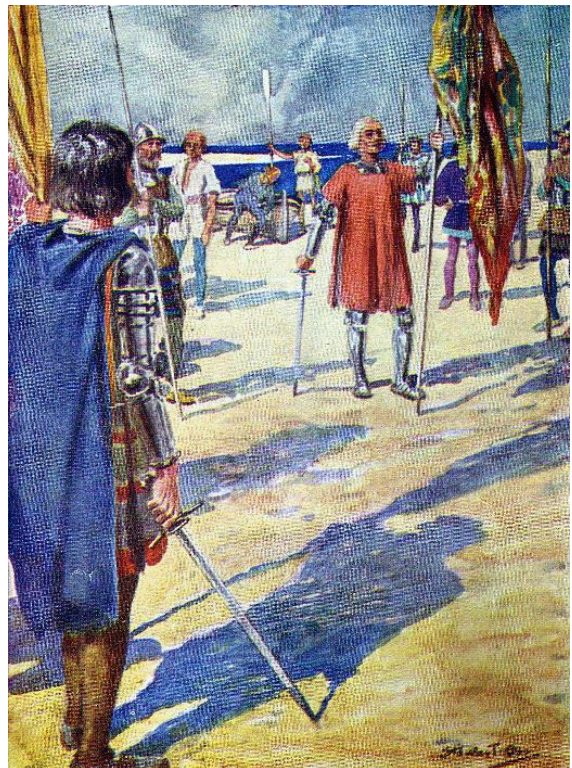
were prohibited even from joining religious orders. The animosity towards Jews in Spain continued for generations and the Inquisition was established throughout almost all Spanish dominions.

The tragedy of the Spanish expulsion of Jews is well documented. The exiles were forced out of a country their ancestors had called home for thousands of years due to the crimes of a few of their number. The Sephardi Jews scattered all over the Mediterranean, preferring port cities where they could participate in trade. Portugal, Italy, and Turkey were a few countries known for harboring the exiles. Many found their way to the New World, often disguised as 'Portuguese' Christians, and taking care to settle in realms such as Brazil that were free from the Inquisition. Over time a large community of Jews settled in the Netherlands and made Holland a world-wide trading power. From there they accompanied William III to England and helped establish British Banks, Publishing, and Trading companies.

Columbus and the New World—One of the most far-reaching of Isabel's policies in Spain was to fund the voyage of [Christopher Columbus](#). This investment formed the basis of Spain's claim to the New World and laid the foundation of the Spanish Empire. Columbus first approached the Spanish court in 1486 and waited six years before he was granted the resources he needed. Between 1492 and 1502 he completed four voyages exploring much of the West Indies and Central America. Unfortunately, Columbus was a less successful governor than a navigator, and he soon lost control of New World territories to political enemies and ambitious fortune-seekers.

In the earliest years of Spanish exploration, the initiative for exploration and conquest was driven largely by privately funded explorers rather than being masterminded by the Spanish crown. While Columbus explicitly asked for and received support from the Spanish Crown, [Balboa](#), [Ponce de Leon](#), [Cortez](#), [Pizarro](#), and [De Soto](#), all undertook ambitious expeditions largely on their own initiative.

Until well into the 16th century, the Spanish monarchs had limited resources and little direct control over activities in the New World. Effective laws and governing bodies took a generation to get established, and in many cases, government support was only provided after "proof" of riches had already been established. Isabel is credited for opening the door to New World exploration, but she died twelve years late with only the faintest idea of where that door would lead.



Timeline—United Spain

UNION OF CASTILE AND ARAGON

- 1454 Corrupt reign [Henry IV of Castile](#), older brother of Isabela.
- 1469 Marriage of [Ferdinand of Aragon](#) and [Isabel of Castile](#).
- 1474 Death of Henry IV causes war of succession for throne of Castile.
- 1479 Victory of Isabella and Ferdinand over Joanne of Portugal for throne of Castile.
- 1476 Isabella establishes militia, Santa Hermandad, to return law and order to Castile.
- 1480 Isabel reforms finances and property taxes in Castile and pays off debts.
- 1491 Marriage of Isabel's daughter to Prince of Portugal ends with death of husband.
- 1496 Marriage of Joanna of Castile to Philip the Fair, Duke of Burgundy.
- 1497 Suspected poisoning death of Isabel's only son John, heir to the throne of Castile.
- 1498 Death of Isabel's eldest daughter following second marriage to king of Portugal.
- 1504 Death of Isabel.
- 1506 Second Marriage of Ferdinand to Navarre princess fails to produce heirs.
- 1512 Ferdinand conquers the greater part of Navarre.
- 1516 Death of Ferdinand; Hapsburg grandson [Charles V](#) inherits throne of Spain.
- 1516 Cardinal Ximenes serves as regent until Charles V comes of age.

FALL OF GRANADA

- 1482 [Ferdinand of Aragon](#) takes city of Alhama, begins conquest of Granada.
- 1487 Fall of Malaga, second largest city in Granada.
- 1492 Capital of Granada captured; [Boabdil](#) surrenders city to Isabel and Ferdinand.
- 1499 Most Moors in Granada convert to Christianity or face exile.
- 1509 Spanish forces under Ximenes take Moorish stronghold of Oran in Africa.

EXPLORATION OF HISPANIOLA

- 1486 Spanish monarchs reject proposals of [Columbus](#) but provide him with a pension.
- 1492 Isabella supports Columbus' expedition. West Indies discovered October 1492.
- 1493 Second Voyage. Seventeen ships, 1200 men, settlement on Hispaniola.
- 1498 Third Voyage ends in arrest. Bobadilla appointed governor.
- 1499 Alonso Ojeda and Amerigo Vespucci explore coast of South America.
- 1502 Nicolas Ovando replaces Bobadilla, brutally 'pacifies' rebellions in Hispaniola.

- 1510 First Spanish colony on mainland established at Darien by Balboa.
- 1513 [Vasco Nunez Balboa](#) discovers the Pacific Ocean
- 1513 [Ponce de Leon](#) searches for the fountain of youth, discovers Florida

SPANISH JEWS AND CONVERSOS

- 1478 Spanish Inquisition established, independent of Roman influence.
- 1480 Ottoman sack of Otranto, massacre of Christians increases fear of treachery.
- 1483 Tomas Torquemada, a Franciscan of Jewish descent, named Grand Inquisitor.
- 1490 Ritual murder of 'Holy Child of La Guardia' enflames anti-Jewish sentiment.
- 1492 Spanish Jews forced to convert or face expulsion.
- 1492 Conversion of Abraham Seneor, Jewish advisor to Isabel and Ferdinand.
- 1492 Shepardi Jews settle in Portugal, Italy, Netherlands, and Ottoman domains.

Characters—United Spain

UNITED SPAIN

Henry IV of Castile 1425–1474	Infirm and degenerate king of Castile, older brother of Isabella I. Named Isabella his successor.
Isabel of Castile 1451–1504	Pious and stalwart queen of Spain, unified diverse kingdoms, reformed finances, conquered Granada, financed Columbus.
Ferdinand of Aragon 1452–1516	King of Aragon who ruled united Spain with Queen Isabel. Drove the Moors out of Granada.
Hernan del Pulgar 1451–1531	Spanish knight under Isabella and Ferdinand who gained fame during the Reconquista for daring exploits.
Gonsalvo de Cordova 1453–1515	Spanish general who fought in Granada and Italy; pioneered modern tactics of warfare.
Cardinal Ximenes 1436–1517	Influential cardinal-minister at the court of Isabel and Ferdinand. Did much to reform both Church and government of Spain.
Juana of Castile 1479–1555	Daughter of Isabel, mother of Charles V, and heir to the throne of Castile. Deposed by Ferdinand due to insanity.

GRANADA

<u>Mohammed Alhamar</u> 1191–1273	Founder of the Nasrid dynasty in Granada. Agreed to make Granada a vassal state of Castile.
<u>Muley Abdul Hussan</u> 1440–1490	Last Sultan of Granada. Fierce opponent of Christians, but lost control of Granada.
<u>Boabdil</u> 1460–1527	Briefly replaced his father on the throne of Granada before surrendering to Ferdinand.
<u>Aben Humeya</u> 1520–1568	Moorish prince who escaped from Granada, led the Morisco Revolt, and continued to fight until his death.

EARLY SPANISH EXPLORERS

<u>Christ. Columbus</u> 1451–1506	Genoan sailor, sponsored by Isabela of Spain, who crossed the Atlantic Ocean and discovered the Americas.
<u>Martin Pinzon</u> 1441–1493	Spanish navigator who sailed with Columbus on first voyage, but later feuded with him.
<u>Alonso de Ojeda</u> 1465–1515	Spanish conquistador who made several daring expeditions to the new world. Associate of Vespucci and Pizarro.
<u>Nunez Balboa</u> 1475–1519	Helped establish a Spanish colony in Panama and discovered the Pacific Ocean.

SPANISH JEWS AND CONVERSOS

<u>Torquemada</u> 1420–1498	Dominican priest who was a confessor of Isabella I, and was influential in establishing the Spanish Inquisition.
<u>Teresa of Avila</u> 1515–1582	Mystic Nun who reformed the Carmelite order, and wrote books on prayer. Doctor of the Church.
<u>Ignatius of Loyola</u> 1491–1556	Founder of the Jesuits order, dedicated to the Pope. Important counter-reformation figure.
<u>Abraham Seneor</u> 1412–1493	Spanish rabbi, financier, and trusted counsellor of Isabella of Castile. Converted to Christianity in 1492 when Jews were expelled from Spain.
<u>Isaac Abravanel</u> 1437–1508	Jewish minister, tax-farmer, and counsellor who assisted Ferdinand in financing the conquest of Granada. Refused to convert when Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492.
<u>Luis de Santangel</u> 1430–1498	Finance minister of Isabel and Ferdinand of converso origins. Largely financed the voyage of Columbus from his own funds.

Recommended Reading—United Spain

CORE READING ASSIGNMENTS

Ober - [Spain: A History for Young Readers](#) [Ferdinand and Isabella](#) to [When Spain was Great](#) (5)

Horne - [Story of the Greatest Nations: Spain](#) [Ferdinand and Isabella](#) (1)

SUPPLEMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Bonner - [A Child's History of Spain](#) [The Christians of Northern Spain](#) to [The End of Ferdinand and Isabella](#) (15)

Abbott - [The Romance of Spanish History](#) [The Marriage of Isabella](#) to [Domestic Sorrows](#) (7)

Morris - [Historical Tales: Spanish](#) [The Key to Granada](#) to [The Great Captain](#) (7)

Howard - [Isabella of Castile](#) *entire book*

Imlach - [The Story of Columbus](#) *entire book*