

Reconquista and Spanish Inquisition

Jessica Whittemore (education-portal.com)

Muslim Control Of Spain

The **Reconquista** and especially the **Inquisition** encompass one of the darkest times in Spanish history. It was a time when faith, greed and politics combined to bring about the deaths of many.

Let's start with the Spanish Reconquista. In simpler terms, the **Reconquista** was the attempt by Christian Spain to expel all Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula. In the 8th century, Spain was not one united nation but instead a group of kingdoms. In the early 8th century, these kingdoms of Spain were invaded by Muslim forces from North Africa. Within a few years of this invasion, most of Spain was under Muslim control. In fact, the Muslims renamed the Spanish kingdoms **Al-Andalus** or **Andalusia**, but for our purposes, we're going to stick with Spain. Since the Muslims were an advanced society, Spain prospered.

The Muslims were also very tolerant of other religions, allowing Muslims, Christians and Jews to basically take up the same space. However, Muslim political leaders were very suspicious of one another, which led to disunity among the many kingdoms. This disunity opened up the doors for Christian rule to seep in, and while the Muslims kept firm control of the southern kingdoms of Granada, Christian power began taking hold in the northern kingdoms of Aragon, Castile and Navarre. By the end of the 13th century, only Granada remained under Muslim control.

Expulsion Of Muslims And Jews

Through all this turmoil, Spain remained a prosperous land where trade flourished and towns grew. However, in the 14th century, war between the Muslims and the Christians continued and reached its boiling point under the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon to Isabella of Castile in 1469. With these two tying the knot, the large Christian kingdoms of Aragon and Castile united and set their sights on the rest of Spain. In 1482, they began their quest to purge Spain of Muslim rule by invading Muslim-held Granada. In 1492, only a decade later, Muslim Granada surrendered, and the reconquering of Spain for the Catholic faith, or the **Reconquista**, was complete.

But the story doesn't stop here, since the time of the Spanish Reconquista was also the time of the Spanish Inquisition. To explain, even before the fall of Muslim Granada,





Ferdinand and Isabella saw themselves as defenders of the Catholic faith and Spain as the 'Land of the Blessed Virgin.' For them, conquering the Muslims just wasn't enough. The Muslims and Jews also needed to get out of their newly Christian lands. In 1492, the King and Queens ordered all Jews to leave Spain or be killed. A similar royal order was given to the Muslims in 1502. Many Spanish Jews and Muslims fled Spain, mainly to the Ottoman Empire (modern Turkey and Greece, the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa). Of course, since many Jews and



Muslims didn't want to leave, but they also didn't want to be killed by zealous Catholics, they outwardly converted to the Catholic faith. Converted Jews took on the name **Conversos**, while converted Muslims took on the name **Moriscos**. No matter their names, Ferdinand, Isabella and their cronies weren't completely convinced of these converts' sincerity, and thus the Spanish Inquisition began.

The Inquisition Takes Hold

In 1478, Ferdinand and Isabella asked permission from the Pope to begin the **Spanish Inquisition** to purify Spain from heretics and nonbelievers. In 1483, they appointed **Tomas de Torquemada** Inquisitor-General for most of Spain. Torquemada, along with the King and Queen, became obsessed with the idea that the new converts to Catholicism were feigning their new faith in order to escape persecution. The monarchs also feared these 'pretend converts' might rise up against them, giving the Muslims a chance to regain power.



Under the authority of the monarchs, Torquemada established local **tribunals**, or courts of judges for the Inquisition. **Heretics**, another word for anyone believing or practicing anything that goes against the Catholic Church, were brought before these tribunals. Heretics included Muslims, Jews, Protestants, the sexually immoral, witches and pretty much anyone else the tribunals chose. Unlike courts today, tribunals were not established to prove guilt or innocence, because by the time a person stood before the tribunals, they were assumed guilty. Instead, these tribunals were established to gain a confession of heresy from the accused.

This was all accomplished in a public ceremony known as the **auto-de-fe'**, in which the accused were brought out and their sentences were read. Although these ceremonies began more like solemn masses, years into the Inquisition they had degraded into public

parties with people coming to watch and celebrate the suffering of others.

If a heretic did confess, they were often still beaten, stripped of their property, and at times imprisoned. Making things even more nuts, the accused were strongly 'persuaded' to cough up the name of another heretic. Like a bloody pyramid scheme, the list of heretics grew with every confession.

With every accusation, the coffers of Ferdinand and Isabella grew as thousands were stripped of their wealth. Although the Inquisition was presented as a way to purify Spain, history tends to think money had a whole lot to do with it. The fact that a huge number of the Inquisition's victims were from the wealthier Jewish community lends great credence to this idea.

Torture Devices

If a heretic refused to confess or refused to name names, things got very, very nasty. In order to 'persuade' the misguided heretic to confess, torture ensued. One of the Inquisition's favorite tools for 'helping' people see the light was the **strappado**, where the hands of the accused were tied behind his back while a rope was slung over a brace in the ceiling. The heretic was then lifted up into the air and bounced up and down. This almost always caused shoulders to pop out of sockets and very often caused heretics to somehow see the light.

The **rack** was another favorite among the inquisitors. Using this little gem, the heretic's hands and feet were tied or chained to rollers at both ends of a wooden frame. The torturer then turned the rollers, causing the heretic to be stretched. This caused the joints of the body to stretch until they dislocated, which usually ended in one of two



ways: the person confessed or their arms and legs were ripped from their bodies. Not

surprisingly, seeing someone else on the rack was often enough to make the next guy in line confess.

Oddly enough, the tribunals of the Inquisition didn't usually pronounce death sentences on their accused. Yes, many did 'happen' to die while being persuaded to confess, and the whole thing was really just a matter of semantics, or wording. However, the inquisitor's job was to bring a person back to faith, and since a dead guy can't really confess, inquisitors weren't



officially in the execution business. Instead, they'd torture a person right up to the brink of death, take all their property and then hand them over to the secular authorities for execution. This was usually something boring like being hanged, beheaded or burned at the stake.

The End Of The Inquisition

As the Spanish Inquisition escalated into a paranoid pointing of fingers and death, even the Pope lost his stomach for its cruelty. In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII tried to introduce the process of appeals into the Inquisition, but Ferdinand basically told him to mind his own business while threatening death to anyone who dared appeal to Rome. Not only did this cause more violence; it also proved the monarchs, not the Pope, were in control of Spain.

Although the Inquisition began to lose steam in the 16th century, the rumblings of it lasted for generations, not coming to an official end until 1834. With the death of thousands, the Inquisition and the Reconquista are generally considered the darkest days of Spanish history. However, the fear they levied also served to unite Spain under the guise of the Catholic faith. In the end, it was not the Pope who led this faith; it was the very wealthy and very feared Ferdinand and Isabella. Sort of makes one wonder if perhaps, just perhaps, the lesson title shouldn't be 'When Spain Went Crazy', but instead, 'When Two Cunning Rulers Hatched a Ruthless, Ruthless Plan.'

Questions

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper

1. What turning point of Spanish history took place in the 8th century?
2. What conditions in Islamic Spain allowed the Christian kingdoms to take over the country?
3. What was the last region of Spain left in Muslim hands by the 13th century?
4. Who were Ferdinand and Isabella, and how did their marriage change Spain?
5. How did Jews and Muslims react to the royal orders of expulsion?
6. What was the stated goal of the Spanish Inquisition?
7. How would you define the term "heretic"?
8. What was one possible economic reason for the Inquisition?
9. What tactics were used to get confessions from accused heretics?
10. Who had more control over the Spanish Inquisition, the Pope or the King?
11. How did the Inquisition come to an end?