

Group B

Expulsions of Jews and Muslims from Spain: Impact on Morocco

In the Iberian Peninsula (today's Spain and Portugal), Christian kingdoms in the north gradually pushed southward, taking territories from the Muslims who had ruled Spain/Portugal since the early 8th century. This process was called the 'reconquista' ('reconquest'). As areas of the Iberian Peninsula fell to Christian armies, the religious balance of the population shifted until Spain had become a predominantly Catholic country, albeit with large Muslim and Jewish minorities. In 1492, Granada, the last Muslim kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula fell, ending more than 700 years of Muslim rule in southwestern Europe.

The newly victorious Spanish government ended the religious pluralism of the previous centuries. The Alhambra Decree expelled the Jews from Spain and began a period of intolerance toward Muslims. (Similarly, Portugal expelled both Jews and Muslims in 1497 – though many Portuguese Muslims relocated to Spain rather than leaving the region.)

At first, Spanish Muslims, known as 'Mudejars,' had some freedom of religion. Within a few years, however, Muslims were being forced – through torture and imprisonment – to convert to Christianity. Many 'Moriscos' (as Muslim converts to Christianity, and later their descendants, were called) continued to practice the Muslim religion in secret, which put them at risk from the Spanish Inquisition, a council that prosecuted anyone who differed from strict Catholic beliefs/practices. Religious intolerance, persecution, and forced conversions – along with frequent attempts to prevent Muslims from emigrating – resulted in several Muslim revolts, such as a revolt from 1499 to 1501, a second revolt in the mid-1500s, and the War of the Alpujarras from 1568 to 1571.

Finally, between 1609 and 1614, the majority of Muslims and their descendants – several hundred thousand people – were forced out of Spain. Most of them settled in North Africa, in what is today Morocco.

At the same time, in the second half of the 15th century, approximately 300,000 Jews lived in Spain. Their lives, like those of Spain's Muslims, were about to undergo a difficult transformation.

Life for the Jews of Spain had varied greatly over the previous centuries. In Al-Andalus (Muslim Spain), Jews – as well as Christians – were tolerated and were contributing members of society. By contrast, in the Christian kingdoms in the northern parts of Spain, the position of the Jews was less favorable. There were waves of anti-Jewish violence in the late 14th century with hundreds of Jews killed and much Jewish property destroyed or looted. Jews converted – either voluntarily or forcefully – to

Christianity were called ‘Conversos.’ However, conversion often just added to difficulties as “old” Christians – and sometimes the dreaded Spanish Inquisition – regarded the Conversos with distrust, often accusing them of secretly practicing the Jewish faith.

When in 1492, the Spanish forces of Ferdinand and Isabella conquered Granada, the last Muslim kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula, the Jews of Granada were confronted with the challenges facing their co-religionists in the northern part of Spain. Shortly after the end of the war, the Spanish government issued the Alhambra Decree, expelling the Jews from Spain. Over 200,000 Jews converted to Catholicism to avoid expulsion; between 40,000 to 100,000 Jews were forced out of Spain.

Many of the expelled Jews and Muslims resettled in Muslim lands: in what is today Morocco and in the Ottoman Empire. Often, they shared a common bond of suffering and loss. (Together, they founded the beautiful Moroccan city of Chefchaouen.)

Some Moriscos expelled from Spain in the 17th century – between 1609 and 1614 – found an interesting way to get revenge: as pirates! From the 16th-19th centuries, piracy was endemic along the ‘Barbary Coast,’ stretches of the southern Mediterranean and North Africa’s northern Atlantic Coast, named ‘Barbary’ by Europeans because of the Berber inhabitants of the region. In these areas – some Ottoman-controlled, others Moroccan – Muslim pirates carried out raids against European shipping and coastal areas. They captured both material goods and human beings. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of European Christians were captured and enslaved.

In the 17th century, those pirates operating out of the Moroccan Atlantic-coast cities of Salé and Rabat were mostly ‘Moriscos,’ Spanish Muslims who had been expelled from Spain between 1609 and 1614. Angry at being driven from their homes by Christians, they took the opportunity to avenge their losses and regain financial security by plundering Spanish ships and land, taking captives and seizing goods. (Unlike pirates in other parts of the ‘Barbary’ coast, these pirates focused specifically on attacks against Spain.) From about 1624 until 1668, Salé formed an independent republic before being once again incorporated into Morocco.

Footnote: In 2014, Spain agreed to offer Spanish citizenship to Jews expelled from Spain in 1492. No such provision has been offered to the descendants of the Moriscos.

Research Topics

1. Why were the Mudejars (Spanish Muslims) and Moriscos (Muslim converts to Christianity) important within the Christian kingdoms of Spain? Describe their achievements, particularly evident in architecture, as well as the difficulties that they faced.
2. How were Jews and Conversos (Jewish converts to Christianity) treated in late medieval Spain? What problems did they face, and how did they persevere?
3. What happened to the Jews who went after the Alhambra Decree expelling them from Spain? Where did they go? What difficulties and successes did they find when resettling in different places?
4. How did the Jews and Muslims get along in Morocco from 1492 until 1912 (end of Moroccan independence)? What were the high points and low points of Jewish life in Morocco in early modern times?
5. What challenges and triumphs were faced by the Moriscos and the Jews who resettled in Morocco after their expulsion from Spain?
6. What were the goals, successes, and challenges of the pirates of Salé in the 17th century?