

## **The Persecution of the Jews and Muslims of Portugal. King Manuel I and the End of Religious Tolerance (1496–7) [The Medieval Mediterranean. Peoples, Economies and Cultures, 400–1500. Volume 69]**

**Review Number:**

797

**Publish date:**

Monday, 31 August, 2009

**Author:**

François Soyer

**ISBN:**

9789004162624

**Date of Publication:**

2007

**Price:**

£95.00

**Pages:**

352pp.

**Publisher:**

Brill

**Place of Publication:**

Leiden

**Reviewer:**

Ariel Hessayon

If quincentenaries are anything to go by, then 1492 is now commemorated principally for Christopher Columbus's transatlantic voyage of exploration rather than either the conclusion of Ferdinand's and Isabella's eleven year conquest of Islamic Granada – which completed the Reconquista – or the expulsion of Jews from Castile and Aragon. Although the beginning of a so-called Spanish Golden Age during which painting, music and literature flourished is sometimes dated to 1492, while the reign of Manuel I of Portugal (1495–1521) is remembered both for Vasco da Gama's expedition to India that laid the foundations for the Portuguese seaborne Empire as well as its innovative, ornamental architectural style (Manueline), the late 15th-century Iberian Jewish experience offers a doleful counterpoint. Even heeding Salo Wittmayer Baron's warning against a self-pitying 'lachrymose conception of Jewish history', that is of constructing a narrative mainly based upon exile, persecution and martyrdom, the extent of Jewish suffering in Christian lands at the dawn of the modern era must be fully acknowledged. For expulsion was not a rarity but a common occurrence. Thus during the Middle Ages Jews had been periodically expelled from France (1182, 1306, 1311, 1327, 1394), as well as from Gascony (1287), Anjou (1289), Maine (1289), and England (1290). Moreover, during the 15th century Jews were expelled from German-speaking towns, cities and territories – including Linz (1421), Vienna (1421), Cologne (1424), Dresden (1430), Speyer (1435), Augsburg (1440), Bavaria (1442, 1450), Erfurt (1458), Mainz (1470), Bamberg (1478), Würzburg, (1488), Heilbronn (1490), Mecklenburg (1492), Pomerania (1492), Halle (1493), Magdeburg (1493), Lower Austria (1496), Carinthia

(1496), Styria (1496), Nuremberg (1499), and Ulm (1499); from Switzerland – Geneva (1490); from parts of the Italian Peninsula – Perugia (1485), Vicenza (1486), Parma (1488), Lucca (1489), Milan (1489), Florence (1494), and Naples (1496); from Mediterranean Islands – Sardinia (1492), and Sicily (1492); from Provence (1498); and from Iberian soil – Castile and Aragon (1492), Portugal (1497), and Navarre (1498).

The majority of these Jews fled and over roughly the next century and a half dispersed to North Africa (Cairo, Ceuta, Fez, Larache, Orán (expelled 1669), Tangiers, Tlemcen, Tunis); the Balearic Islands (Ibiza, Majorca); the Aegean Islands (Crete, Rhodes); France (Bayonne, Bordeaux, Montpellier, Nantes, Rouen, Toulouse); the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Antwerp); England (London); the Italian States (Ancona, Ferrara, Livorno, Mantua, Ragusa, Rome, Turin, Venice); Bohemia (Prague); Poland; the Ottoman Empire (Adrianople, Constantinople, Gaza, Hebron, Jerusalem, Safed, Salonika, Tiberius); India (Bombay, Cochin, Goa, Ormuz); the East Atlantic Islands (Canary Islands); West Africa (Senegal); the Caribbean (Barbados, Curaçao, Jamaica); North America (New Amsterdam); Mexico (Acapulco, Campeche, Mexico City, Veracruz); Brazil (Bahia, Pernambuco [expelled 1654]); Surinam; and Peru. This diaspora, which Soyer notes in his conclusion (p. 290), reminds us of the far reaching consequences of events at the heart of his book. For the Jewish population of late fifteenth-century Castile has been estimated at between 60,000 and 70,000, that for Portugal during the same period at a maximum of 30,000 (pp. 44, 104) – making the combined communities the largest in the world at that time.

As Soyer observes, the fate of Spanish Jewry has attracted greater scholarly interest than that of their Portuguese brethren. Indeed, his book is the first to deal specifically with the 1496–7 persecution of both Jews and Muslims in Portugal. Since the 19th century the prevailing view has been that Manuel's dramatic break with his predecessors' policy of religious toleration was motivated by his desire to rule over the entire Iberian Peninsula by marrying Isabella of Castile's and Ferdinand of Aragon's eldest daughter. But that marriage alliance was conditional on the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Portugal; a proviso with which recklessly Manuel complied, thereby creating a religiously homogeneous Catholic polity (pp. 5–6, 180, 268–70, 282). Soyer, however, argues that there is little evidence to suggest that the sudden arrival of thousands of Jews expelled from Castile in 1492 created the conditions which lead to the tragedy in Portugal five years later. In fact he believes it 'difficult to detect any real long-term social and economic impact upon Portugal' (pp. 7, 137). Furthermore, though conceding that Manuel was pressurised by Isabella and Ferdinand, Soyer suggests that Manuel acquiesced to the expulsions in order to secure 'a long-lasting settlement with his powerful Castilian neighbours which would assure the King of peace at home and give him the freedom to devote his attention and resources towards overseas expansion and war against the infidel' in North Africa (pp. 181, 280). Finally, Soyer maintains that Portugal's relatively small Muslim minority was expelled so that Manuel could 'boost his image' as a potential crusading Christian king rather than as a consequence of inflexible Spanish demands (pp. 270–2, 277–9). This argument is developed in five chapters that deal successively with the Jewish and Muslim minorities in Portugal during the medieval period up to the 1480s; the social impact of the arrival in Portugal firstly of forced Jewish converts to Christianity (variously termed *conversos* – Spanish for turncoats or converts, *marranos* – meaning pigs or swine in Spanish, or *Cristãos novos* – that is New Christians), then of tens of thousands of Jewish refugees expelled from Castile; political developments between 1492 and 1496 encompassing the death of João II and accession of Manuel I in October 1495; the promulgation of the expulsion edict in December 1496 and forced conversion of Portuguese Jews in 1497; and the concomitant expulsion of the Muslim population (pp. 7–8).

Soyer's first chapter paints a generally positive if variegated picture. The Jewish presence in Iberia, as he emphasizes, 'predated both the Islamic conquest and the creation of Portugal by many centuries' (p. 27). Having described Jewish and Muslim communal organization, including the various judicial and administrative roles filled by their leaders, he examines the range of heavy taxes (both direct and indirect), tributes and services imposed upon the communities, in return for which they were placed under royal protection. More interesting still, Soyer also traces the social impact of increasingly restrictive legislation requiring Jews and Muslims to live in separate quarters of towns (*judiarias* and *mourarias*); the imposition of the death penalty for Jews or Muslims having sexual relations with Christians, as well as for Christians

converting to Judaism or Islam; and the requirement that Jews and Muslims wear distinctive symbols on their clothing as badges of identification (this even applied to Muslim slaves). Yet despite outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence, this 'never reached levels even remotely comparable to the rest of the Peninsula, especially Iberia' (p. 70). Nor did the Portuguese crown or clergy generally engage in campaigns of either forced conversions or aggressive anti-Jewish or anti-Muslim preaching. Indeed, laws protected Jews and Muslims from murder or injury, the desecration of their sacred places and the observation of their religious festivals (p. 59). They even had their own places of worship, schools and cemeteries, as well as butchers who could practise ritual slaughter (p. 80). Nevertheless, Muslims and Jews were, as elsewhere 'entirely dependent upon the protection and goodwill of the Crown', and though Portuguese monarchs had been 'remarkably consistent in their attitudes towards their non-Christian subjects' for most of the 15th century that was about to change (p. 83).

Chapter two deals with the immediate and short-term consequences of Pope Sixtus IV's 1478 bull granting an inquisition in Castile. With new tribunals set up during the 1480s and 90s throughout Castile and, despite considerable opposition, Aragon too, this terrifying institution aimed at preventing New Christians from reverting to Judaism. For though Jewish sources, particularly rabbinic documents – which were mainly concerned with questions of marriage and inheritance of property – tended to regard New Christians as willing apostates rather than forced converts, the earliest phase of the Spanish Inquisition was clearly directed against them. Consequently, it is unsurprising to learn that those Castilian conversos who fled from Seville and other regions were regarded unfavourably by Portuguese rabbis. Their arrival also 'provoked a hostile response from the municipal authorities of Portuguese towns' (p. 96). Thus they were expelled from Lisbon in August 1484 and barred from entering Porto. Furthermore, following the murder of an inquisitor in Saragossa João II ordered an Episcopal inquisition into the religious beliefs of the 'marranos'. According to a contemporary chronicler, severe repression followed: 'some were burnt, others were imprisoned for life' – though Soyer has found no corroborating evidence in the registers of the Portuguese chancery (p. 100).

On 31 March 1492 Isabella and Ferdinand signed the edict ordering all Jews living within the borders of Castile and Aragon to convert or leave before the end of July. While contemporary and early modern estimates put the number of Castilian and Aragonese Jewish exiles who found temporary refuge in Portugal at anywhere between about 93,000 and 300,000 people, Soyer suggests – drawing on the work of Tavares – that 'even including clandestine entries the total number of Jews who entered Portugal in 1492 is unlikely to have surpassed 30,000' (p. 111). All the same, that is still a considerable figure; especially considering that Portugal's total population then was barely one million. Nor, as Soyer recognizes, can the terrible suffering of Castilian Jews who entered Portugal be 'underestimated or ignored' (p. 136). Accordingly, many Castilian Jews had little choice but to sell their property at discounted prices before paying a considerable tax to enter Portugal. Even so, João II declared that only 600 families would be permitted to settle. Those without special royal licences were largely confined to refugee camps located close to the border with Castile. Appalling sanitary conditions, however, led to deadly epidemics. Prevented from going into neighbouring border towns for fear of spreading plague the survivors, who had been given eight months to depart, eventually made their way to Porto, Lisbon and Setúbal, where they hoped to board ships bound for North Africa. But once on the high seas the Jews were robbed and their women raped by unscrupulous mariners; some ships' captains even reportedly strayed off course in order to sell their desperate passengers food and drink at extortionate prices. Finally, on disembarking the Jews were assaulted and robbed by the garrisons of the Portuguese North African strongholds of Arzila and Tangier, as well as suffering harassment by the local Muslim population. As for the remaining Castilian Jews, who may or may not have been hampered from leaving Portugal – Soyer disagrees with the opinion of many modern historians here – the majority of the 600 families settled in and around Évora. Their fate, however, is 'impossible to reconstruct due to the absence of any surviving royal registers for the crucial years' (p. 120). Then there were those caught attempting to enter Portugal without paying the entrance tax. They were enslaved. So too were perhaps as many as 2,000 Jewish children, who were seized from their parents and sent to the equatorial island of São Tomé. Perhaps understandably a significant number of exiles converted to Christianity and then returned to Castile. All of which suggests that while Soyer may be correct in asserting that the long-term effect of flooding Portugal with conversos and almost half the Jewish population of

Castile may have been minimal, that is only because João's brutal policies had rapidly cleansed his lands of Jewish immigrants without moveable wealth.

Little wonder that as early as 1494 the Jews of Lisbon reportedly feared meeting the same fate as their Castilian brethren. On 4 December 1496 João's successor Manuel ordered a sermon announcing the expulsion, prompting many Jews to draw parallels with the exodus from Egypt (pp. 186–93). Like Pharaoh, Manuel supposedly changed his mind and on learning that the majority of Jews preferred exile to conversion decided to force the issue. Fearing that 'the kingdom would remain like an empty fishing net, for [they] ... possessed most of the kingdom's wealth', he issued writs preventing Jews from leaving Portugal by ship without a special royal licence (p. 194). Like Isabella and Ferdinand, Manuel 'ordered the confiscation of all synagogues, religious schools and any other buildings or property that had been communally owned by Jewish *communas* in Portugal' (p. 198). The Great Synagogue of Lisbon, for example, was acquired by the Crown and granted to the Order of Christ in exchange for a chapel (p. 202). Hebrew books were also seized. Despite their value, many were sold cheaply while others were publicly burned at Lisbon (pp. 206–9). Then a week before Easter 1497 Jewish children were seized from their parents with the intention of dispersing them throughout the kingdom where they would be raised as Christians. Eyewitness accounts and inquisitorial trial dossiers indicate that they were forcibly baptised, yet most of the adults held steadfast. After refusing enticements to convert, Manuel lured them to Lisbon from where they hoped to embark for a new life. Instead thousands were crammed into a park behind the Estaus palace. There they suffered terribly. Reportedly deprived of food and drink, the Jews were dragged to nearby churches for baptism. Those that still resisted were 'condemned to be burnt' (p. 226). Others committed suicide. It was, in the words of Rabbi Abraham Zacuto, 'a forced conversion on a scale never before witnessed' (p. 239). As for the survivors who had preferred nominal Christianity to death, they were granted 20 years immunity from official scrutiny. Yet popular hostility remained undiminished. Following an inflammatory sermon preached at Lisbon by a Dominican on Easter Sunday 1506 more than 3,000 New Christians were massacred over several days and their bodies, according to the chronicle of Damião de Góis (1502–c.1574), burned on a bonfire. New Christians were later accused of causing an earthquake and their situation became even more dangerous in 1536 when Pope Paul III relented to political pressure and issued a bull establishing the Inquisition in Portugal. Only in 1821 was this Portuguese Inquisition officially abolished (p. 295).

By contrast Portugal's smaller Muslim minority was largely expelled in 1497. Contrary to some recent scholarship, Soyer suggests that it is difficult to detect increasing Christian anti-Muslim sentiment in late medieval Portugal. Indeed, despite the outbreak of anti-Muslim riots at Valencia in 1463 the Christian rulers of Iberia's kingdoms feared reprisals against their co-religionists living in the Islamic Near East if they mistreated their Muslims. As a result the Portuguese Muslims, unlike the Jews, were allowed to leave with their children. Some may have migrated to Castile, where the Islamic population was converted in 1502. Others certainly went to North Africa.

All in all then, this is a thoroughly researched work that makes use of a variety of sources in several languages, including Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese. I found it generally persuasive and certainly an important contribution to the fields of Portuguese, Jewish and Islamic history.

September 2009

The author declined to respond to this review

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/797>

### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3776>