

B2. Expulsion of the Jews from Spain, 1492

Approximately 300,000 Jews lived in Spain in the second half of the 15th century. 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.

In the Christian kingdoms in the northern parts of the Iberian Peninsula, Jews' position 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.

As the Christian kingdoms of the north gradually 'reconquered' the lands under Muslim rule in a process called the 'reconquista,' the position of the Jews became even more serious. In 1492, the Spanish forces of Ferdinand and Isabella conquered Granada, the last Muslim kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula. Shortly after the end of the war, the 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.

Footnote: In 2014, the Spanish gave the descendants of the Jews who had been expelled the right to Spanish citizenship. They did not give this same right to the descendants of Muslims who were also expelled.

Assignment: Imagine that you are a Spanish Jew in the late 15th century. Write 2 diary entries, each at least one double-spaced page long. Choose names for your characters that are authentic. Also, include at least 5 facts or factual details drawn from the history/geography of the area. (Be sure to look up additional information in addition to the information found in this reading.) Underline the pieces of information you include in each of your diary entries.

-- In one diary entry, you are a Jew living in Christian-dominated Spain in 1490. What is your life like? What difficulties have your people faced in the last century or so? (Look up the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and look at the situation leading up to it.) What are your hopes – and fears – for the future?

--In another diary entry, it is 1493, and you were forced from your home in Spain the previous year. Now you are living in North Africa (today's Morocco). What difficulties have you faced since you left Spain? What do you miss about your home there? What is different about the people living in your new home? (Language? Culture? Religion?) What do you have in common? How do you feel about what happened to you in Spain?