

The “Refugee Crises” of the 16th and 17th Century

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In the early modern period, Spain and Portugal carried out dramatic mass expulsions that affected more than half a million people of Jewish or Muslim faith. Revisiting the fate of these populations helps to put into perspective the refugee crisis that the world is currently facing.

Europe today is a point of arrival for populations coming from countries at war—Muslims but also Christians of Iraq and Syria. By contrast, during the early modern period, Europe was a point of departure for thousands of Jews and Muslims persecuted in Spain and Portugal. The religious policies implemented in those countries led to unprecedented emigration flows. Irregular and difficult to quantify, these flows concerned more than half a million people. A historical perspective helps to see the scale of displacements over the long term and to make comparisons with the current period.

“Many Have Drowned at Sea”

The first wave resulted from the conquest of the Kingdom of Granada (the last Muslim state of the Iberian Peninsula) by the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella. In 1480-1500, thousands of Muslim residents—above all the elites—left for the Maghreb because they did not want to fall under the rule of Christian kings. The former king Boabdil departed with his large retinue. This emigration may have concerned 40,000 people in total.

Building on their victory, the Catholic Monarchs decreed in March 1492 the expulsion of the Jews of Spain, adults and children, within a period of three months. Between 100,000 and 300,000 left for Morocco, Italy and even the Holy Land, yet thousands more were baptized to avoid the terrible conditions of the trip. “Many of them have drowned at sea, died of plague or, more often, of hunger,” deplored Pico della Mirandola.

In 1497-1498, the expulsion decreed by Manuel I emptied Portugal of its Muslim population; the Jews, for their part, were forced to convert as the king had closed the ports following the expulsion decree. Likewise, the expulsion decrees that hit the Muslims of Castile in 1502, and then those of Aragon, Catalonia and Valencia in 1525 did not result in mass emigration, as most opted for conversion. It is true that departure was authorized only through the Atlantic ports, which made it impractical. Muslims, for the most part peasants attached to their land, hoped that they could continue practicing Islam or that they would be rescued by the Ottoman Empire, which was the great Islamic power of the time.

These decrees were a double-edged sword. They pushed those who resisted conversion to leave, so as to isolate the converts who remained from their former religion. But the ideal of unity in the Christian faith entertained by the Spanish and Portuguese sovereigns collided with realities: the refusal of the “Old Christians” to integrate converts of doubtful fidelity, the failings of the Church and, above all, the cultural resistance of the “New Christians”—the *Conversos* (Jews and descendants of Jews) and *Moriscos* (Muslims converts and their descendants).

The courts of the Inquisition hunted down those who were still attached to the religion of their forebears. The punishments were terrible: the stake for the more serious “crimes of faith,” confiscation of property, financial ruin and shame cast on their entire family.

The Fates of Emigrants

These persecutions, of varying intensity depending on the regions and periods, continued until the eighteenth century. They produced illegal emigration flows, as Moriscos and Conversos were forbidden to leave legally. Complicities were needed to find a ship or cross the Pyrenees. A large number of Portuguese Conversos settled in Spain, where the Inquisition caught up with them in the seventeenth century. Others discreetly boarded for Bordeaux, Bayonne and, further north, the Netherlands, but also via the Mediterranean for Italy, Venice, and the Ottoman Empire. In the seventeenth century, Amsterdam, London, Bordeaux and Lübeck became centers of the Sephardic Diaspora.

Contacts continued between exiles and their family members who had remained in the Iberian Peninsula. Some figures moved from one world to another—often merchants, sometimes spies, who put their knowledge of Spain in the service of its enemies. For the exiles, the departure from Spain was the occasion to discover a traditional Judaism that was different from their secret rituals. In Venice, the “Marranos” (a pejorative epithet for Conversos) were forced to choose their affiliation: remaining in the city as Christians or living in the Ghetto as Jews, with any subsequent crossing of the religious frontier giving rise to the risk of sanctions.

Amsterdam housed a large Sephardic community that was highly involved in the re-Judaization of arrivals. While this reconfiguration of identity posed no problem for most of them, it did sometimes end in failure: This is reflected in the trajectory of Uriel da Costa, who, after leaving Porto for Amsterdam in order to live a Judaism he had known from reading the Bible, violently rejected the teaching of rabbis, was excluded from the community, and committed suicide in 1640.

Similarly, but with different implications, thousands of Moriscos emigrated through the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century, in a flow that was discreet yet alarming for the authorities. There was constant hostility between Spain and the cities of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, which were part of the Ottoman Empire. Privateers—among whom there were renegades, Christians of various origins who had converted to Islam—conducted raids on the Spanish coasts and captured inhabitants to enslave them or release them for a ransom following a difficult stay in “labor camps.”

Morisco emigrants who returned with privateers in order to guide them were complicit in these operations. Another road to exile passed through the Pyrenees to Marseille and, from there,

to the Maghreb or Istanbul. The Moriscos also took the route traced by the Conversos to Bayonne or La Rochelle, from where they then headed towards Muslim states.

The Expulsion of the Moriscos

Following the great rebellion of the Moriscos of Granada in 1568-1570, the entire Morisco population was considered as a threat to the security of Spain, as apostates (“as Muslim as those of Algiers,” said one adviser of Philip III) and as traitors who might revolt locally and conspire with the Huguenots of Béarn or with Morocco. Spain then saw itself as a Catholic stronghold threatened by the enemies of the faith—whether Protestant, Jewish or Muslim.

This fear of the enemy within was one of the major reasons for the decision taken by Philip III on 4 April 1609, after years of debates among theologians and royal advisers, to expel the Moriscos. Some advisers remained committed to the effort of integrating the Moriscos, which included drastic measures to eradicate the transmission of Islam: the dismantlement of Morisco communities, their dispersal into small groups within Spain, the education of their children outside the family environment, the ban on Arabic and Morisco garb, and the mandatory consumption of pork and wine. Others advocated expulsion, so as to overcome the consequences of a conversion they deemed a mistake and a failure. Lastly, some recommended outright elimination.

The genocidal option was rejected in favor of expulsion, which was a recognized political tool at the time: Across Europe, expulsions of minority groups were carried out as a means of unifying the social and political body through the elimination of “undesirables.” What prompted Philip III to favor general expulsion was probably his desire to improve his image, which had been tarnished by the truce he had signed with the Dutch Protestants. In driving out the Moriscos, the King wished to be remembered by posterity as were the Catholic kings, through following the model of the 1492 expulsion of the Jews.

While theologians considered retaining the most integrated Moriscos, the decrees of 1609-1610 concerned all Moriscos regardless of the details of their convictions, which gave the operation its character as forced mass migration. In the space of one year, one region after another, Spain was emptied of 90% of its Morisco population, with the last phase of expulsion extending until February 1614. In total, 270,000 people were driven out of Spain. The points of arrival were Algiers, Tunis and Morocco, in seemingly balanced proportions between these three regions. More than 60,000 Moriscos reached Provence or Languedoc, and tens of thousands arrived in Italy. But only a few thousands settled in those places, as the majority of migrants eventually joined Tunis.

Moments of Crisis

Was it possible to escape this deportation? Some exceptions were allowed, especially for the disabled elderly and for children less than four years of age who could be left behind by their parents, because of the dangers of the journey.

Mixed couples led to a subtle distinction: The “Old Christian” husband could stay with his Morisco wife and children under six years, while the “Old Christian” wife could stay with her young children but lost her Morisco husband and children over six years of age. Sources indicate that children were snatched from their parents, and that young Morisco girls and boys were

present in Spain in the following years. Yet, overall, families were not separated. Morisco nuns, monks and priests, as well as slaves deprived of their freedom, were not concerned by the decrees.

Apart from their physical survival, the main problem of the evicted was financial. The Valencian Decree (1609) authorized the Moriscos to leave with the property they could carry; hence the images of women adorned with all their jewelry, and the stories of families stripped by brigands on the way to the port or by Bedouins on the African coast. These outflows of wealth were prohibited thereafter, but the most affluent Moriscos took their property along with them—for instance, the forty Granada merchants who, in 1610, filed a complaint with the French consul in Tunis against the sea captain who had allegedly robbed them of one hundred thousand crowns of gold—or had it transported, with the help of Portuguese Conversos, via long-standing routes for the trafficking of counterfeit currency.

The large-scale expulsions of 1492 and 1609 were moments of crisis comparable to those we are currently facing: The risk of sinking in the Mediterranean, disease, hunger and robberies were also the lot of migrants at the time. Like refugees today, the latter were not equal in their misfortune: The ability to mobilize money and networks was a vital asset. These displacements were the result of the authorities' political will to eliminate religious minorities—a will that is also found in the territories held by ISIS, in the policy of persecution of Christians, but also (and this is an essential difference from the events of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) in the mode of ethnic cleansing and genocide as concerns Yazidis and other groups.

An important difference between the two periods is the relative indifference of the populations who saw the Jews and Muslims depart (from Spain or Portugal) or arrive (in North Africa or elsewhere): Mechanisms of solidarity remained internal to the communities concerned, whether Sephardic or Morisco. Lastly, whereas we have only a few images or testimonies of these forced displacements, media and social networks today help to produce accounts of refugees' travels, to mobilize humanitarian solidarity... but also to arouse concerns in the host societies.

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