

BIG BANG: The Birth of ...

Modern Spain

By Alexander Peters





On the second day of January 1492, Boabdil, the last Moorish ruler in Spain, reluctantly handed over the keys of Granada and the beautiful Alhambra palace to the Christian monarchs, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. This was the catalyst for an extraordinary time. By the end of the year, Christopher Columbus had discovered the Americas and, within thirty years, Spain had unexpectedly exploded, like a meteor, onto the international scene to become the dominant power in Europe. Rich, powerful and newly intolerant, Spain had finally come of age, after a sustained history of disunity and international impotence.

In fact, until 1492 Spain had never been united for long, in any meaningful sense, as a single nation. Over a thousand years it had been invaded or colonised by the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Vandals and the Visigoths. Finally, in 711, the Moors crossed into Spain and, helped by ferocious Berber mercenaries, subdued most of the Iberian peninsula.

The Moors remained in Spain for almost 800 years, bringing technical advances and tremendous scholarship into the country. They were also remarkably tolerant to other cultures and religions allowing Jews, Christians and Moors to live together in relative peace. Córdoba became the capital of 'Al Andalus' (Moorish Spain) and was famous throughout Europe for its learning and extraordinarily beautiful architecture.

But Moorish rule was opposed almost from the start, initially from the tiny Asturias in the 8th century. Then, over hundreds of years, Christian forces gradually pushed Moorish control ever southwards. From the 11th century the removal of the Moors took on a strongly religious aspect, consistent with the hysterical Christian fanaticism of the time. Increasingly, the Reconquista was seen as tantamount to a Crusade, with a medieval vision aiming to create a strong and independent Christian Spain. However, as the Moors were slowly repelled, a series of independent fiefdoms and kingdoms emerged throughout Spain, splintering any potential national unity.

A major step towards unifying Spain finally occurred when the two most powerful kingdoms were effectively joined by the marriage, in 1469, of Ferdinand of Aragón and Isabella of Castile. By chance, this not only firmly allied two powerful families, it also brought together two remarkably competent leaders who ruled as equal partners. Isabella was clearly a feisty, politically astute and determined woman, whilst Ferdinand was a master diplomat of Machiavellian talents.

Ferdinand and Isabella immediately set out to remove the last remaining Moors from their strongholds in Granada, whilst securing and extending their own authority throughout their domains. Over ten years, the Moors in Granada were remorselessly overwhelmed by a sustained and determined campaign that honed Ferdinand and Isabella's military into a battle-hardened and experienced force. This was to prove important in the years to come, as Spain extended her influence to the Americas and secured her future territories in Italy and further afield. ▶



Of course, after nearly centuries of occupation, Spain had numerous Moors and Jews who had integrated over the generations, albeit retaining their own distinct religions and customs. Indeed, to its credit, Spain had become one of the most heterogeneous countries in Europe and one renowned for its toleration. However, this was a concern for Ferdinand and Isabella, who were understandably worried that a possible 'fifth column' of indifferent loyalties remained in a

country still struggling to unify under a national identity. In 1478 the Inquisition was formed, with the radical and brutal hypocrite, Tomás de Torquemada, created Grand Inquisitor in 1483.

The Inquisition was a vital political tool for Ferdinand and Isabella, as it was the only institution with undisputed authority throughout the kingdom. It served to 'purify' the population into hard line Catholic Christians and was devastatingly effective in attacking or weakening political opponents. As the appointment of the Grand Inquisitor was in the sole remit of Ferdinand and Isabella, it provided them with a critical implement with which to tighten their control over Spain. In 1492 all Jews who had not converted were expelled and, in 1502, the Muslims in Granada were

told to convert or leave the country. Spain was fast losing its tolerance and laying the grounds for the Counter Reformation, later in the century, when it would become a pillar of hard-line European Catholicism.

By extraordinary fortune, in the very year that Spain gained its independence from the Moors, Christopher Columbus was finally authorised to find a route to India and China by going west across the Atlantic – appropriately known as the 'Sea of Darkness' by the Moors. After five weeks sailing, Columbus found the Bahamas, thinking that he had come across India. In fact, of course, he had touched upon the Americas, until then an unknown landmass. During the course of three further journeys, he was to discover South America and make the previously inconceivable concept of crossing the Atlantic an almost pedestrian event.

The importance of Columbus' discoveries was not lost on Ferdinand and Isabella and they agreed, at the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, with King John II of Portugal to divide up the New World. A north-south line was drawn through the Atlantic, with Portugal agreeing that Spain had a right to possession of all lands lying to the west. Effectively, Portugal gained modern day Brazil, whilst Spain benefited from the enormous but still unknown territories of the rest of the Americas.

For Spain, 'ownership' of the Americas was to have a profound effect that cannot be underestimated. In modern terms it was like a poor country finding fantastic reserves of oil on its territory. Within three decades, Spain was to have access to an almost inexhaustible supply of gold and silver with which to fund the country's extraordinary growth and international ambitions. Spain's monarchs would become the richest in Europe and have power unthinkable to any previous Spanish ruler.

Timeline

711-1492 Moorish occupation of Spain	1478 Formation of the Inquisition by Papal Bull	1492 Reconquista completed with the fall of Granada; Spain united under the rule of Ferdinand and Isabella	1494 Treaty of Tordesillas dividing the unknown world between Spain and Portugal	1513 Vasco de Núñez de Balboa reaches the Pacific	1521 Hernando Cortés defeats the Aztecs and becomes Governor of Mexico
1469 Marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castille	1483 Appointment of the Grand Inquisitor (Tomás de Torquemada)	Christopher Columbus' 1st voyage of discovery to the Americas	1499 Moorish uprising	1516 Ferdinand dies	1531-33 Francisco Pizarro defeats the Incas
		Alhambra Decree expelling all Jews	1502 Muslims in Granada told to convert or leave Spain	Charles I proclaimed king	
			1504 Queen Isabella dies	1519 Charles I of Spain becomes Holy Roman Emperor Charles V uniting the House of Bourbon with the House of Habsburg	

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Who's Who

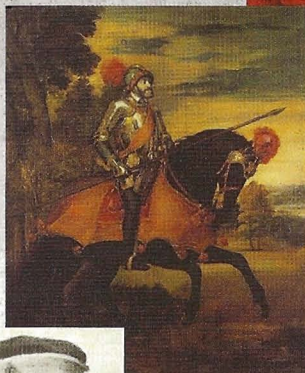
FERDINAND OF ARAGÓN 1452 - 1516 ▶

- King 1492 - 1516
- A master diplomat and administrator

ISABELLA OF CASTILE ▶

1451 - 1504

- Queen 1492 - 1504
- Feisty, religious and strong



◀ CHARLES I OF SPAIN

(Holy Roman Emperor Charles V)
1500 - 1558

- King 1516 - 1556 (abdicated in favour of his son Philip II)
- Brought to Spain the Netherlands, part of modern Germany and Italy
- Spoke "Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men and German to my horse."



◀ GONZALO DE CORDOVA (The Great Captain)

1433 - 1515

- First 'modern' general
- Re-organised Spanish army

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS ▶

1451 - 1506

- In 1492 found the Americas
- 4 voyages of discovery
- Claimed Americas for Spain



◀ HERNÁNDO CORTÉS

1485 - 1547

- Insubordinate
- Conquered the Aztecs with 600 men
- Made Mexico City the most important in the Americas



◀ FRANCISCO PIZARRO

1471 - 1541

- Illiterate and illegitimate: a driven and cruel man
- Ruthlessly conquered Inca Empire with 168 Spanish soldiers
- Founded Lima

TOMÁS DE TORQUEMADA ▶

(Grand Inquisitor)

1420 - 1498

- Appointed Inquisitor General in 1483
- Travelled with 50 mounted guards and 250 armed men
- Fanatical and chief supporter of the expulsion of the Jews
- Synonymous with torture and hypocrisy



◀ If the overthrowing of the Moors was the catalyst for modern Spain, then access to the Americas was to become the means to greatness. However, Spain's acceleration was to be given a further critical and incredible push. In 1516, Ferdinand died, Isabella having pre-deceased him in 1504. Through a quirk of fate, the throne passed to their grandson, Charles I, who inherited the lands of no less than four European royal houses, including that of the Habsburgs.

By 1419, after enormous bribery, Charles I of Spain consolidated his power by becoming Holy Roman Emperor (Charles V), making him, by far, the most powerful ruler in Europe. Spain now controlled the Low Countries (roughly the modern day Netherlands), vast tranches of Germany, Naples, Sicily and, of course, a fast developing empire of fabulous value in the New World.

And in that New World matters moved with extraordinary speed, due to the actions of a few intrepid, ruthless and driven men. By 1521 Hernando Cortés had subdued the Aztecs and by 1533 the Inca Empire had been brutally destroyed and brought under the control of Spain by the cruel and relentless actions of Francisco Pizarro. As each year passed, Spain's American territories and associated riches were increasing at a rate that made other European country's efforts look paltry by comparison.

By the 1520s Spain had, for the first time, become a recognisable, modern state and one ruled by a single, undisputed and absolute monarch. It had also become a country with a defined, albeit imposed, national identity - as a Catholic Christian state. Furthermore, through Charles I's extensive inherited territories throughout Europe, Spain had suddenly, and improbably, become a major power broker within European affairs. And, of course, with colossal wealth coming to Spain from its New World colonies, Spain was actually in the enviable position of being able to exert its influence, whether by bribes or military means.

Unfortunately, Spain's explosively sudden Golden Age was not to last long, even if the idea of a unified state of Spain was never again to be seriously disputed. The following centuries were to bring costly wars, often fought as Spain sought to act as a bulwark of Catholicism against Protestantism. Perhaps more damaging, ironically, was its long term relationship with the decaying Habsburg Empire and the Wars of Succession that erupted periodically over the next two hundred years.

Finally, Spain also made the critical mistake of relying too heavily on its wealth from across the Atlantic. It made no serious effort to industrialise and little of the riches produced by its colonies were used to invest within Spain itself, to develop a strong self-perpetuating infrastructure. Power and wealth in Spain remained within the hands of the monarchs and a self-absorbed aristocracy, resulting in a country of tremendous inequality, poverty and oppression.

What happened so explosively between 1492 and 1530 created Spain and defined its very future. Like a shooting star, it had a brief glorious period, before decaying into one of the most economically and politically backward states in Europe. It is only in the past thirty years that the country has regained its dynamism and energy, having discarded its religious intolerance, gained political stability and developed a powerful economic base. Let us hope that Spain's future has now been built upon firmer foundations than those of the 16th century. ☒