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The expulsion of the Moors and their heirs,
vividly outlined in two gripping accounts,
has clear parallels with 21st-century Europe

The Moor's Last Stand: How Seven Centuries of Muslim Rule in Spain Came to an End by Elizabeth Drayson

Blood and Faith: The Purging of Muslim Spain, 1492-1614 by Matthew Carr

Giles Tremlett

For centuries, visitors from the rest of Europe were disgusted by Spain. The problem was not that city streets remained unpaved, or that its rough mountain roads could not accept wheeled carriages. What turned visitors' stomachs was the way Spain tolerated religious minorities. Until the end of the 15th century, thriving populations of Jews and Muslims - almost 10% of the population - practised their religion openly and proudly. "We Germans call them rats," scoffed one visitor.

The insinuation was that Spain was not a proper European country. How could it be, if it put up with such people? Europeans were meant to be Christians. So when Isabella of Castile - the remarkable queen who helped shape Spain's identity - and her husband Ferdinand of Aragon expelled "their" Jews in 1492, they did so to loud applause from elsewhere. England, for example, had done the same thing two centuries earlier. The conquest of the last Muslim kingdom of Spain in Granada - whose king, Boabdil, is the subject of Elizabeth Drayson's charming and eye-opening *The Moor's Last Stand* - provoked even wilder joy that same year. Isabella and her husband followed this up with forcible conversions of Spanish Muslims. Yet even that was not enough for purists such as Martin

Luther or the supposedly saintly Thomas More, who damned Spaniards as "faithless Jews and baptised Moors". As if in reply, Philip III expelled 300,000 descendants of Spain's Muslim population who had converted to Christianity, the "moriscos", early in the 17th century. The human cost was ghastly. But, it was thought, Spain was finally pure.

In the intolerant times of Brexit, Le Pen and Trump, all this might sound familiar. Matthew Carr, whose magnificent *Blood and Faith* charts the tragic end of the moriscos, sees clear parallels with current "bitter, acrimonious, and often bigoted debates". The morisco expulsion of 1609 was "a monumental historical crime" from which he seeks lessons for today.

Spain had long hosted the three religions of the book. Jews appeared first, while Roman legionaries brought Christianity and Islam arrived with overwhelming force when north African invaders swept across Spain in the 8th century - giving rise to the long Christian *reconquista* that Isabella and Ferdinand finished off in Granada. In Muslim Cordoba, scribes produced 60,000 books a year, while the largest library elsewhere in Europe boasted just 600. The inscriptions on the tomb of King Ferdinand III of Castile, who died in 1252, are written in Latin, Arabic, Spanish and Hebrew. Spain, meanwhile, came to boast the world's largest population of Jews.

This did not make it a multicultural arcadia. The supposed bliss of Spanish



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convivencia, or “living together”, has been wildly exaggerated. By Boabdil’s time, for instance, the only Christians in his kingdom of Granada were slaves, refugees and licensed traders. Christian Spain, in turn, “tolerated” religious minorities but never treated them as equals. They fell instead under the personal protection of monarchs, which explains why Isabella believed that “all the Jews in my kingdom are mine”, to do with as she wished. In Aragon, the eastern part of Spain ruled by Ferdinand’s family, “Moors” or “Saracens” (as they were known, and called themselves) accounted for 30% of the population in some places, where their cheap labour kept the great noble estates functioning. “Whoever has Moors has gold,” was a popular saying. Envious Christian neighbours were regularly whipped up into lynch

mobs by populist preachers. With violence never far away, “voluntary” conversion was often no such thing. That is why many Jews converted in the 14th century. It also explains why the Spanish inquisition was set up – with Isabella believing, in this case wrongly, that most families with Jewish ancestors were fake Christians. With the moriscos, however, the opposite was true. Few properly embraced Christianity. To contemporaries, then, ethnic and religious cleansers were heroes. Despite the repulsion that it provokes today, the inquisition barely raised eyebrows. It was, in any case, less cruel and bloody than the witch-hunts that swept through much of Europe.

Few years, or places, have packed so many pivotal events into a single year as Spain in 1492. Christopher Columbus set off on his madcap voyage of discovery, seeking Asia but finding the Americas – where he planted the flag of Isabella’s Castile. He began a world-transforming exchange of plant and animal species between continents, while exporting the terrors of gunpowder, sharpened steel and smallpox.

His voyage also started a centuries-long shift of global power away from the sophisticated, non-Christian east to the rugged seafaring nations of the

Atlantic rim (which soon engaged in transatlantic slavery). Yet, for a Christendom traumatised by the loss of Constantinople to the Turks, the key event in 1492 was the conquest of Granada.

Drayson does a splendid job of putting flesh on Boabdil’s story. The Nasrid dynasty’s spectacular home in the Alhambra palace complex overlooking Granada had long been a place of intrigue and bloodshed. When his father took a Christian slave girl as his new wife, Boabdil’s aristocratic mother Aixa felt humiliated. Her sons eventually turned against their father, other relatives took sides and control of the fractious kingdom passed from one group to another. Boabdil was a magnificent sight, riding into battle on a white horse, dressed in brocade and velvet, with a dark red and gold helmet. But he was a bad general, who was twice captured by his Christian opponents. On both occasions he bought his freedom with a pledge to make war on his relatives.

The final conquest of Granada had as much to do with Nasrid infighting as with the vast array of Castilian cannons which meant that castles and walled towns could no longer just lock their doors and dig in for long sieges. “These are the keys to this paradise,” Boabdil said as he surrendered Spain’s most sophisticated city. Legend has it that he then trotted off up what is now known as the Slope of Tears and across the Pass of the Moor’s Sigh while his mother rebuked him for weeping: “You do well, my son, to cry like a woman for what you couldn’t defend like a man.”

The terms of surrender were generous, allowing Muslims to practise their religion and guaranteeing that “no Moor be forced to become a Christian”. Boabdil did less well; Drayson reveals the many ways in which the Nasrid monarch, who was originally given lands in the rugged Alpujarra sierras near Granada, was pushed into leaving for north Africa a few years later.

With Boabdil out of the way, Isabella and Ferdinand reneged on their promises and Castile’s Muslims were forcibly converted. Yet these moriscos were



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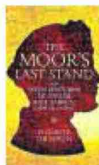


always treated and taxed as if they were not “real” Christians, with their cultural customs – songs, dances, clothes and henna dye – subject to strict restrictions. Even washing could get them into trouble. A secret, banned literature – written in Spanish, but with Arabic letters – helped keep Islam alive. Many, if not most, moriscos were still secret Muslims when Philip III carried out his final act of ruthless religious cleansing.

Over the previous century Spain had fashioned the world’s first global empire and some see in the expulsion of the moriscos – who left behind abandoned villages, untilled lands and depleted towns – the seed of future decline. Pro-fascist 1930s British historians Louis Bertrand and Sir Charles Petrie nevertheless praised an expulsion that, to them, stopped it becoming “one of those bastard countries which live only by letting themselves be shared and exploited by foreigners”. Carr, instead, sees an example of “a powerful majority seeking to remake or define its own cultural identity through the physical elimination of supposedly incompatible minorities”.

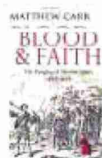
And therein lies a problem, since the 20th century provides more obviously relevant examples of such elimination. It also indicates, since the examples include Turkish Armenia as well as Nazi Germany, that this is not a uniquely western, Christian phenomenon. Perhaps the finest piece of wisdom to emerge from Spain came from the Count of Cabra. “Since the good things of the past were not constant,” he reportedly told Boabdil after his capture, “present misfortune can also change in a similar way”.

Giles Tremlett’s *Isabella of Castile: Europe’s First Great Queen* is published by Bloomsbury.



232pp, Profile, £17.99

To order *The Moor's Last Stand* for £15.29 go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £10, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99.



288pp, Hurst, £12.99

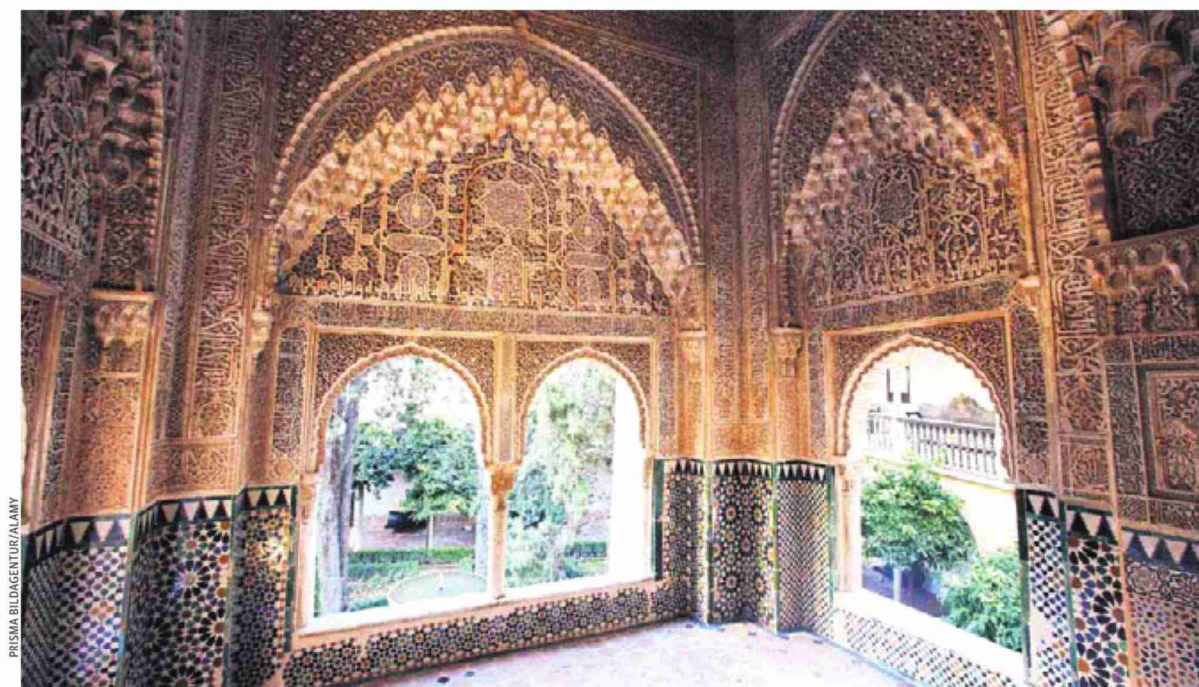
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