

## The expulsion of the Moriscos, 1609–14: still more questions than answers

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Had there been a newspaper in Madrid in 1609, the headline on September 22 would have been a Trumpist's dream come true. It would have read something like "the king decrees that all Muslims are to be expelled from Spain, whether they are true Muslims or not." The article itself would have gone on to explain the decision of the Council of State to exile from Spanish territory virtually all the descendants of the former Muslims of Spain who had converted (or had been converted) to Roman Catholicism, a process which had begun during the later Middle Ages and which had been officially declared "mission accomplished" in 1526. Those who devised the policy and signed the decree that put it in motion would have been pleased to learn what we can see in retrospect: that it was the largest such migration in early modern European history.

As a historian of early modern Europe, that is, the period covering the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, I have long been interested in the parallel experiences of the two major persecuted minorities of early modern Spain, the converted Jews (Conversos) and Muslims (Moriscos). Like most of my colleagues, I am *not* often called upon to link my work to the present; and the truth is, I very much welcome the opportunity to do so. As a historian who lives in Europe today, the hypothetical headline mentioned above sounds all too familiar, although to be fair, Spain is one of the countries in Europe where one hears *least* about expelling Muslims, and this despite the fact that it has a relatively large Islamic population, in large measure of Moroccan origin. In fact, one of the more encouraging features of politics in Spain now is the relative lack of a right-wing political party or faction calling for anti-Muslim measures, of the sort one finds in virtually the rest of the continent and beyond. Explaining why is a job for a sociologist, political scientist, or perhaps a social psychologist. The task here is a different one: to discuss another very visible differential between Spain and the rest of western Europe. That is the accrual in the Iberian Peninsula beginning in the Middle Ages of a large population of Muslim origin, some of whose



Figure 2.1 Pere Oromig, *Embarque de los moriscos del Grau de Valencia*, 1612. Painting, Valencia, Fundación Bancaja, permanent collection. Public domain.

members genuinely converted to Christianity, while others remained faithful to their ancestral religion. The group as a whole was known as the Moriscos, and are the focus of this chapter.

One way to start discussing the expulsion of the Moriscos is to ask about the relevance for the present day of the expulsion of 1609. As noted above, at first sight the expulsion which began in 1609 seems ready-made for consideration in light of recent events in Spain and elsewhere in Europe (more on this below). After all, it created a strong precedent for mass mobility by migrants between the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa – albeit in the direction opposite to that of today’s insistent flow. This is merely one of the similarities between these events that also enshrined very visible differences. The most obvious divergences include the forced, as opposed to voluntary, nature of the two mass movements, along with the direction in which the flow was/is headed. Another telling difference was that at least officially, the expulsion from Spain of the Moriscos was justified not so much as a political measure; instead, the principal rationale for it was religious. Various pragmatic arguments in its favor were offered, and certainly shaped not only the measure but also an important part of popular opinion regarding it. But the crucial justification for the expulsion was the failure on the part of the descendants of former Muslims to shed their ancestors’ belief in Islam. It goes without saying that this is a complex issue, which

raises complex questions of credibility, the possibility or even desirability of pluralism within a confessional state, contemporary understandings of the relations of this confessionalism with political strength or weakness, and the like. Thus what this chapter does is to outline some of the principal questions raised by the historical experience of Spain's Moriscos. At the same time it will focus on what the recent and quite flourishing historiography regarding the Moriscos and their fate has to suggest (Domínguez Ortiz and Vincent, 1997; Vincent, 2007; Márquez Villanueva, 1998; Harvey 2005; Bernabé Pons, 2009).

The basic facts can be quickly stated by mentioning a few key dates:

- 711: the conquest of Spain by Muslims largely of North African origin;
- 722: the (fairly mythical) beginning of the “Reconquest,” or effort by Christians in northern Spain to regain territory by expanding southward;
- 1236: the Christian “recapture” of the Muslim metropolis of Córdoba, followed by Seville in 1248, which left the southern kingdom of Granada as the sole territory under Muslim control;
- 1492: the *Wunderjahr*, which saw not only the final conquest of Granada by Christian armies under king Ferdinand of Aragon and queen Isabella of Castile, but also the expulsion of the Jews and the successful voyage of Christopher Columbus to the western hemisphere;
- 1502: the decision by Ferdinand and Isabella to expel all Muslims from the kingdom of Castile who would not convert to Christianity;
- 1526: the extension of this policy under their successor Charles V to the Crown of Aragon and the rest of Spain;
- 1568–71: a major armed revolt in Granada by Moriscos (former Muslims now converted to Christianity and their descendants), which ended in defeat, widespread destruction, and the dispersal of the survivors of what had been the largest nucleus of Moriscos in Andalusia throughout the rest of Castile;
- 1609: the final solution, i.e. the expulsion of (in theory) all Moriscos – approximately 300,000 in number – from Spanish territories, mostly to Muslim states in North Africa.

The expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain thus comes at the end of a long timeline. It clearly involved a migration, and while some might be put off by the use of that word, given the sheer amount of state-sponsored coercion involved, most social scientists would have no problems with the term. That it was forced did not mean that it was not a migration. In fact, one can properly refer to it as the largest such migration in early modern European history.

It moreover was, or is, an event long encrusted in various mythologies. Some date from the time, and others have a more recent origin. The principal message – and purpose – of the contemporary mythology was apologia,



Figure 2.2 Vicent Mestre, *La Expulsión en el Puerto de Denia*, 1613. Painting, Valencia, Fundación Bancaja, permanent collection. Public domain.

that is, defense of what turned out to be a highly controversial event. Such efforts focused on both official and unofficial discourse. It is also important to note that only one side of this debate, that of approval, was allowed to be heard in public (Magnier, 2010). The other side, which included criticism of this measure, could reach the public sphere via print or the pulpit only indirectly. One partial result of this skewed situation was that the most vocal contemporary public criticism of the expulsion was voiced by Spain's enemies or rivals in the international arena. And the way many people today read this long-ago event echoes in part this critical discourse. (NB: I emphasize "in part," because these critiques also contained claims and suppositions that virtually all scholars now would not agree with.)

The overriding question today is not so much the simple one of whether the expulsion was a good or bad measure. Historians and others focus on a more complex agenda, one that centers on exactly what happened, why it happened, and what resulted from its happening. Other queries flow from these basic ones. One is whether the expulsion was justified in terms of the factors its partisans adduced as causes. In other words, were the reasons given for the expulsion at the time valid ones in the eyes of contemporaries and subsequent generations of Spaniards who were the beneficiaries or victims of its effects. Another is whether this decision was justified in terms of its effects. This means inquiring whether its impact was successful in the eyes

not only of its supporters at the time, but also according to the subsequent judgment of Spaniards and others in the future. Reconstructing the debates among historians over these questions would be a long and arduous task, in part because until recently there has not been a solid enough consensus in this regard. However, historians now benefit from a very lively historiographical moment enriched by ample new research based, in part, upon new sources. Thus the rest of this text will briefly review several major discussions that recent research has produced, and then make some final remarks regarding the directions in which future discussions seem to be heading.

New research and rethinking of the history of the Moriscos has produced various insights. First, we now understand better the political relations between converted Muslims and the Christian majority in early modern Spain. These focus on at least two major themes: the most violent episode in the history of the Spanish Moriscos, the Granada revolt of 1568–71 alluded to above; and above all, what has most attracted new attention, the expulsion itself. Numerous scholars have examined both sets of events in close detail, and with closer attention to precise context. For example, thanks to fine-grained research of the sort found in Rafael Benítez's reconstruction of the trajectory that led to the final decision for expulsion in 1609, we now can see more clearly how much it was the product of a very specific moment, one that saw a weak monarch and his equally beleaguered favorite opting for this move under considerable pressure caused by events and political initiatives elsewhere (Benítez Sánchez-Blanco, 2001; Ehlers, 2006; García-Arenal and Wiegers, 2014). One can also now draw attention to recent revealing work on the international dimensions of the expulsion. One example is a recent issue of the Italian journal *Quaderni Storici* edited by Giovanna Fiume and Stefania Pastore (Fiume and Pastore, 2013). Stressing the mixed reception of the exiled Moriscos in Italy, they document important differences in local responses to this new and rather puzzling category of immigrants. These outsiders met with inconsistent responses even in the parts of the peninsula that were under the direct or indirect control of Spain. This was also true even of independent entities such as Papal Rome, which harbored grave doubts about the practical as well as theological aspects of the expulsion, although it chose not to express them in public.

Recent research has also uncovered and interpreted a great deal of material regarding the social and economic history of the Moriscos. Much of this has focused on the longer term, and continues longstanding and valuable local work in, for example, notarial archives and Inquisition records. The cumulative effect of this new knowledge has been the slow conversion of rumors and stereotypes about Moriscos, often engendered and diffused by their enemies, into better documented social and economic history. Thus, for example, we now have a much finer appreciation of the degree of

stratification within Morisco communities. The dominant stereotype in the past was that Morisco settlements were largely undifferentiated, that is, that their members subsisted at the same general level of poverty, and practiced the same economic activities, which were by and large limited to agriculture. We now have a keener appreciation of the existence of greater variation in Morisco economic initiatives, as well as of significant distinctions among Moriscos at the local level, as well as among different types of Morisco communities at a regional level. Predictably, differences among Morisco activities often were more visible at this latter level, and engendered stereotypes that contrasted Castile, for example, with Valencia or Granada, all large areas which housed varied agricultural patterns and social systems (García-Arenal, 1978; Tapia Sánchez, 1991; García Ballester, 1993; Colás Latorre, 1993; Halavais, 2002).

One of the most important developments has been the recent intense focus on Morisco elites, defined in social and economic as well as political terms – which immediately raises the crucial question of the differing degrees of assimilation of these elites into existing power structures. This is, moreover, one of the many questions where one finds it useful to distinguish between the experiences and opportunities of the Moriscos as opposed to the *conversos*, or converts from Judaism, who underwent a parallel experience of largely forced (and similarly incomplete) assimilation into the Christian majority (Stuczynski, 2000; Amelang, 2013; Ingram, 2009). In this regard one of the subjects which has attracted more attention recently is the curious recognition of the existence of a Morisco nobility. That certain descendants of Muslims – especially those related to the royal Nasrid family which ruled Granada at the time of its conquest by Ferdinand and Isabel in 1492 – not only claimed a specific aristocratic status in early modern Spanish society but also were unquestionably recognized as nobles by the authorities and by public opinion is something which decidedly did not happen in the case of the *conversos* (Soria Mesa, 2008; Núñez Muley, 2007).

Much more could be said about this new socio-economic history of the Moriscos. It comes as little surprise to find, for example, greater attention paid to gender differentiation within Morisco communities (Perry, 2005; Martín Casares, 2000; Surtz, 2001). One could easily point to other interesting new work which has similarly revealed much about the forms of distinctiveness and hierarchy in Morisco communities that came into the open thanks to the expulsion itself. The latter obliged the Moriscos to mobilize and convert what resources they had into more mobile forms of capital. The subsequent activation of networks of contacts in order to export this wealth brought to the surface the existence of a cohort of Moriscos with more resources than virtually anyone had suspected. And some of the most interesting information on this question comes from recent research on the clandestine

transfer by expelled Moriscos of substantial financial resources across the French border as reported by the Spanish government's wide-ranging espionage networks (Bernabé Pons and Gil Herrera, 2013).

The other major issue being debated in the social history of the Moriscos – and the one that has perhaps done the most to alter traditional views – has been the question of the relations between Moriscos and their “Old Christian” neighbors at the local level. Both the decrees of expulsion and the apologetic literature that appeared in order to justify it constantly asserted, and even took for granted, the existence of profound hostility between the so-called Old versus New Christians. However, the late British scholar Trevor Dadson recently produced an enormous study – almost 1400 pages long – that reconstructs the strenuous efforts, not only by the Moriscos of a small town in La Mancha to defy the expulsion order, but also the equally determined initiatives of their Old Christian neighbors to help them stay in Spain. Dadson's exhaustive documentation and keen eye for reading between the lines of official papers has converted this book into the most innovative (and influential) recent study of the social and economic history of the Moriscos of the past generation. Its principal revelation regards the unquestionable integration of the Moriscos into this rural community, as manifested by the strenuous efforts by both the local inhabitants and their more distant seigneurial lord to retain a large ethnic group whose members were seen as crucially helping to maintain the prosperity of the town during an era of deepening economic decline (Dadson, 2006, 2014; O'Banion, 2017).

All this new work has done much to alter our understanding above all of the impact of the expulsion. As a result, historians are now more inclined to accept the hypothesis that there were both many more Moriscos exempted from exile, as well as many more returnees after having been expelled, than we had previously thought. Given the nature of the documentation, and the obvious need to keep most of this absorption in secrecy, we will never be able to document this dimension of Morisco history with any exactitude. Still, there is no mistaking the tendencies now coming to the fore thanks to this innovative (and strenuous) research.

Finally, great strides have been made recently in the spiritual and intellectual history of the Moriscos. For obvious reasons, this field has largely been in the hands of professional Arabists, who continue to labor on many of the topics of basic philological and religious historical research that began to be addressed in the later nineteenth century. The more visible work in this field includes the preparation and publication of new editions and translations of key texts, including the following examples:

- The first-person account of the so-called “Mancebo” or “young man” of Arévalo, a town in Old Castile (*Tratado*, 2003). This refers to the

first-person journal of an anonymous Morisco who at some point in the 1530s was sent by the elders of his community to communicate with other nuclei of crypto-Muslims in central and southern Spain while he studied to become an Islamic spiritual expert. The text provides fascinating accounts of conversations with a wide swath of individuals and groups, most notably a 93-year old illiterate Muslim woman nicknamed the “Mora de Ubeda,” famous for her extraordinary oral knowledge of the Qur’an. It also provides an unusually revealing view of the health of crypto-Islam in different regions of the peninsula in the transition from the first to the second generation following the final conversions.

- Various anti-Muslim works, that is, polemics aimed at detaching former Muslim readers and even clerics from their traditions. One of the most revealing and influential among these is a series of dialogues which the Erasmian humanist (and descendant of converted Jews) Bernardo Pérez de Chinchón published in 1535 under the title of the *Anti-Quran* (*Antialcorano*, 2013).
- In my view the most unusual among these primary sources is an autobiographical text which appeared in the form of a travelogue, by an Andalusian Morisco named Ahmad ibn Qasim Al-Hajari. After starting in Granada, where the author was recruited as a young man to serve on the team of translators of the so-called “lead books” (more on these below), the author escaped to Morocco, where he soon prospered as a political adviser and diplomat. Al-Hajari was then sent as an ambassador to France, and while there traveled widely in Europe before finally returning to North Africa, where he eventually settled in Egypt. The text gives a truly unique glimpse into how a Muslim of Spanish background perceived early modern Europe, and includes reconstructions of his conversations with a wide range of scholars, clerics, government officials, and other interlocutors. It also provides what was perhaps the most succinct summary of the Moriscos’ dilemma: their need to practice “the religion of the Christians openly and that of the Muslims in secret” (Ahmad ibn Qasim Al-Hajari, 1997: 64).

But scholars have broken new ground in other ways in addition to editing important texts. One good example of strenuous and innovative work with local sources is Amalia García Pedraza’s research in Granada’s notarial archives in pursuit of reconstructing attitudes toward death among local Moriscos, especially the more assimilated ones who lived within the city walls (García Pedraza, 2001). And most influential here has been the work of Mercedes García Arenal, an unusually prolific and wide-ranging scholar who has gathered a large circle of colleagues and students to collaborate with her and her frequent co-author Fernando Rodríguez-Mediano in a lengthy series of projects. One useful starting point for following her work – a fair amount of which is available in English – is their joint contribution



to a growing body of research and analysis regarding what was easily the most bizarre episode in the entire one-hundred-year history of the Moriscos, the scandal of the *Plomos* (lead seals) of Granada (Barrios Aguilera and García Arenal, 2006; Harris, 2007; García-Arenal and Rodríguez Mediano, 2010; García-Arenal, 2016).

This refers to the “discovery” in Granada beginning in 1588 of a series of objects, mostly lead seals bearing inscriptions in Arabic, that referred directly to the earliest moments of the Christian evangelization of Spain purportedly led by the Apostle James the Greater. Their messages included numerous and frankly shocking revelations, especially the news that the Virgin Mary had been a speaker of Arabic. This surprise was joined by many others, including the existence outside the New Testament of a fifth gospel written in that language, and which reinforced the notion of the existence of an alternative revelation whose geographical center was the city of Granada. Numerous studies of this bizarre episode have been written in the wake of this discovery, which continues to attract the attention not only of Arabists but also of specialists in early modern cultural as well as religious history.

In the aftermath of this new wave of research García-Arenal and Rodríguez-Mediano went on to organize a major European research project known as the CORPI initiative. Its aim was to make further progress in the reconstruction of scholarly familiarity with the fundamental and integral part Islam and the Arabic language played during this pivotal period. The newest development here has been their effort to trace how inter-religious polemic during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fostered in southern Europe the development of variants of religious and philosophical skepticism similar to those which emerged in northern Europe in the wake of Western Christianity’s splitting into Catholic and Protestant factions (not to mention the older and still ongoing polemics between Christians and Jews that served as another indirect fount of skepticism). Among the first fruits of these excursions into unexplored territory has been a collection of essays from the members of the project, which cover an impressively wide range of topics in Christian and Jewish as well as Muslim history (García-Arenal, 2016; Kimmel, 2015; Pereda, 2017).

If we step back from all this activity and try to get a reading of the scholarly situation now, one senses that the present is marked neither by iron consensus nor by fierce combat among the historians of Moriscos. Instead, what prevails is slow but steady change and updating within the general contours of agreement and disagreement among the specialists, and above all real, visible progress in the forging and dissemination of both specialized and general knowledge regarding a broadly defined collective that has not received the historiographical attention that it deserves. Above

all, what has taken place in the last generation has been a significant shift in focus away from the dominant themes of the past, especially the near-exclusive emphasis that assumed that Moriscos were crypto-Muslims, or rather, that assumed that they were *solely* crypto-Muslims. This had of course been the overriding assumption and concern of their persecutors. One crucial result of the broader approach summarized here is that the Moriscos have taken on a more plural and differentiated profile. They now are approached as individual members of communities with specific types of resources and support at their disposal. They moreover mobilized these resources, both material and immaterial, as best as they could as they sought to cope with continuous but far from uniform hostility and mistrust on the part of the Old Christian majority and its leading institutions.

Needless to say, there are many parallels between the general experience of the Moriscos in early modern Spain and the specific case of the recent wanderings Rachid Nini recorded in his diary and which Anna Tybinko analyzes in her companion chapter. (It's almost as if al-Hajari had stayed in southern Spain instead of wandering through northern Europe.) And Raquel Salvatella's project, as outlined in Chapter 10 below, similarly explores a fascinating present-day counterpart to the bygone past of the Moriscos. Seen from these various perspectives the Iberian peninsula stands out in western Europe for the near millenium during which Islam flourished there alongside Christianity and Judaism. The expulsion of the Moriscos in the seventeenth century, which put an end to this lengthy era of mutual accommodation, marked a new period and policy of uniformity and intolerance that would only gradually be dismantled by the consolidation of modern liberal democracy in the twentieth century. Developments along the way included Spain's acquisition of an empire in northwest Africa, now reduced largely to the two maritime urban enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. These two cities serve as the friction points – or gateways of opportunity, depending on one's point of view – for numerous sub-Saharan migrants eager to make their way, above all, to France in search of betterment for themselves and their families. That two cities which developed originally as citadels for imperial expansion should now function as conduits for – or conflictive obstacles to – economic migration is a situation rich not only in irony, but also in deep frustration and even collective as well as individual tragedy.

Somewhat by surprise, both the Spanish enclaves in North Africa and Moroccan migration into Spanish territory emerged as international news items just as the final version of this chapter was submitted for publication. In May 2021 a diplomatic crisis erupted between Spain and Morocco as an unspecified number – at least ten thousand, according to media reports – of undocumented migrants crossed unexpectedly from Moroccan territory

into the Spanish enclave cities of Ceuta and Melilla. This sudden influx was widely attributed to the suspension of habitual police controls on the Moroccan side of the border, most likely as a form of retaliation against the admission into a Spanish hospital for medical treatment of a prominent leader of the “Polisario Army,” a movement strongly opposed by the Moroccan government, which seeks independence for the Western Sahara region. Spanish border police forces were quickly overwhelmed by this surge and military units were dispatched to control this unanticipated demo-diplomatic situation. The crisis has drawn attention to what is widely seen as an anachronistic European presence in African territory, yet one that can also serve as a gateway to higher standards of living and political freedom for the inhabitants of a continent widely acknowledged to house thoroughly corrupt and authoritarian political systems. As such it provides an intriguing contrast – as well as more than a bit of overlap – with the historical experience of the Moriscos, many of whom crossed the same borders (in different directions) in earlier centuries, as they participated in very different conflicts.

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