

# **The Spanish Inquisition**

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# Contents

<i>List of Maps and Plates</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Chronology</i>	xii
<b>1 The Historiography of the Inquisition</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction	1
Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-century Literature	3
The Black Legend	4
Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century Literature	5
Twentieth-century Scholarship	8
The Inquisitorial Data-bank	12
The Four Seasons of the Inquisition	14
Conclusion	20
<b>2 The Inquisition as an Institution</b>	<b>21</b>
The Office of Inquisitor General	21
The Council of Inquisition	24
The Inquisition in the Provinces	26
The Procedures of the Inquisition	30
The <i>Auto de Fe</i>	37
The Finances of the Inquisition	42
Inquisitors General of Castile and Aragón, 1483–1818 (Appendix)	44

<b>3</b>	<b>The Inquisition and the <i>Converso</i></b>	<b>47</b>
	Anti-semitic Tensions in Spanish Society	47
	The Statutes of <i>Limpieza de Sangre</i>	50
	The Beginnings of the Spanish Inquisition	56
	The Expulsion of the Jews	62
	The Portuguese New Christians	66
<b>4</b>	<b>The Inquisition and the <i>Morisco</i></b>	<b>72</b>
	1492–1525: Co-existence and Conversion	73
	1526–1550: Respite	76
	1560–1570: Coercion and Revolt in Granada	79
	1570–1600: The End of Tolerance in Aragón	81
	1600–1609: The Route to Expulsion	83
	1609–1614: The Aftermath	85
<b>5</b>	<b>The Inquisition and Protestantism</b>	<b>90</b>
	Illuminism and Humanism under Attack	91
	Innovation in Religious Life Condemned	96
	The Protestant Challenge, 1558–1559	101
	Inquisitorial Censorship and the 1559 Index	108
	Biblical Scholarship under Scrutiny	112
<b>6</b>	<b>The Inquisition and Minor Heresy</b>	<b>114</b>
	Religious Instruction	115
	Religious Deviance:	117
	(a) Blasphemy	117
	(b) Bigamy and sexual promiscuity	121
	(c) Solicitation	125
	(d) Superstition and witchcraft	128
<b>7</b>	<b>The Decline and Abolition of the Inquisition</b>	<b>135</b>
	The Inquisition under the Bourbons	135
	The Cortes of Cádiz, 1810–1813	139
	Restoration and Abolition, 1814–1834	142
	Goya's Inquisition	144
	The Balance of History	151

Contents ix

<i>Glossary</i>	157
<i>Bibliography and References</i>	160
<i>Index</i>	169

# 1 The Historiography of the Inquisition

## **Introduction**

The Inquisition was one of the most powerful and polemical institutions used by the Roman Catholic Church to eliminate heresy and protect the unity of Christendom. Although tribunals were operative in Bohemia, France and Italy in medieval times, it is the Spanish Inquisition – first established in the kingdom of Castile in 1478 under Queen Isabella I and suppressed 356 years later in 1834 under Queen Isabella II – which has left its mark on the whole history of western civilization. While sharing many features of the Aragonese tribunal set up to deal with the threat of Catharism emanating from French territories in the thirteenth century, the Spanish Inquisition was different in one fundamental respect: it was responsible to the Crown rather than the Pope and was used to consolidate state interest. It soon acquired a reputation for being a barbarous, repressive instrument of racial and religious intolerance that regularly employed torture as well as the death penalty as punishments and severely restricted Spain's intellectual development for generations. The rigours of the Inquisition gave rise to the so-called 'Black Legend' – an image of Spain as a nation of fanatical bigots, that was popularized by her foreign (mainly Protestant) enemies in the mid-sixteenth century, and which survived long after the tribunal's final extinction.

Given the controversy surrounding its existence and reputation, the Spanish Inquisition has generated an enormous volume

## 2 The Historiography of the Inquisition

of historical literature. This has been shaped over the centuries by a number of factors. These include the political, social and ideological viewpoints of scholars, their access to and interpretation of relevant sources and the climate of the age in which they were written. Beyond being simply a historical phenomenon, the Inquisition has become a historiographical phenomenon, forging a number of 'schools' and 'generations'. Historians have traditionally looked at the institution from a variety of perspectives. Those approaches that predominate are: its persecution of minority faiths in the name of orthodoxy; its political role as a tool of the authoritarian state; the amount of corruption, torture and prejudice that underpinned its activities; the support and opposition it generated in society; and the extent to which it contributed to Spain's political, cultural and economic decline. In terms of its overall reputation, observers have tended to divide sharply in their judgements. For some liberal writers it was an expression of all that was 'bad' about the autocratic regime that ruled Spain for generations, while for others of more conservative persuasion it represented all that was 'good'.

Since the mid-1970s, a new school of historians have examined the institution afresh from more objective multi-disciplinary standpoints that have challenged the findings of traditional scholarship. For example, it is now acknowledged that the Spanish Inquisition was a far less repressive instrument of ideological control than had hitherto been thought, and that torture and the death penalty were only rarely applied – almost exclusively during the first two decades of its existence. By comparison, other European countries, including England, France and Germany, continued to burn heretics until well into the seventeenth century. Furthermore, the Spanish Inquisition was not solely concerned with the pursuit of religious minorities: a significant part of its work involved interacting with ordinary Spaniards in the local context, correcting aspects of their behaviour and belief. Nor was the Holy Office as powerful an institution as previously envisaged. In practice it had to accommodate itself to the jurisdiction of other organs of government, as well as to that of the Church and the Crown. It frequently wrestled with conflicts of authority within its own ranks. This chapter will look at the changing trends in our perception of the Spanish Inquisition over five hundred years of history.

## Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-century Literature

From the middle of the fifteenth century, prior to the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition, polemical literature was being published which stirred up anti-semitic tensions in society. Some of it was generated by the descendants of Jews who had converted to Christianity (known as *conversos*) and sought to distance themselves from the beliefs of their forefathers. Pablo de Santa María, Archbishop of Burgos (1415–35), figured among them. He wrote a tract in 1432 (*Scrutinium scripturarum*) in which he criticized those Jews who stubbornly resisted conversion. Much more controversial and racist in tone was Alonso de Espina's book,  *Fortalitium fidei contra Judaeos*, published in 1460. In it the Franciscan friar detailed the transgressions of *conversos* (including their observance of Jewish rites and fake compliance with Christian ones) and called for legal action to be taken against those found guilty of such practices. His proposals were later to serve as a blueprint for the policy of the Spanish Inquisition (Beinart, 1981, pp. 9–20). By contrast, Friar Alonso de Oropesa, the general of the Jeronimites (a late medieval order of friars), advocated the tolerance and education of *converso* heretics in his *Lumen ad revelationem gentium* of 1465, an attitude supported by the Archbishop of Toledo, Alfonso Carrillo (1466–82) (Kamen, 1997, pp. 33–5).

When the Spanish Inquisition began its operations in 1480, it aroused a variety of responses. The contemporary historian and local Andalusian priest, Andrés Bernáldez, in his chronicle, *Memorias del reinado de los Reyes Católicos*, completed by 1509, justified the need for the tribunal from a characteristically zealous Old Christian perspective (i.e. that of a Christian by birth). He recorded that over 700 converted Jews had been burnt and more than 5,000 punished at the hands of the Sevillian Inquisition by 1488 and triumphantly declared that 'the heretics of Córdoba, Toledo, Burgos, Valencia and Segovia, and the whole of Spain were discovered to be all Jews [...] Since the fire is lit it will burn until [...] not one of those who judaized is left' (Bernáldez, 1962, pp. 102–3, 251). On the other hand, Fernando del Pulgar, secretary to the Catholic kings and a New

## 4 The Historiography of the Inquisition

Christian by birth (i.e. a convert to Christianity of Jewish or Muslim descent), took a more sympathetic stance. In correspondence with the Archbishop of Seville, Don Pedro González de Mendoza, in the early 1480s, Pulgar criticized the cruel activity of the Inquisition in Seville. While agreeing that *conversos* who continued to practise their old faith should not be tolerated, he argued against persecution, advocating that persuasive, educative methods should be adopted to bring them back into the Christian fold: ‘To burn them would be an extremely cruel and difficult act and would force them to flee in desperation to places where no correction would ever be expected of them’ (Cantera Burgos, 1972, p. 308; Beinart, 1981, pp. 36–9). His was not an isolated view. Friar Hernando de Talavera, confessor to Queen Isabella, was another influential dissenting voice. He advocated in his *Católica impugnación* of 1487 that ‘neither the Jew nor the Moor should be punished for keeping their faith [...] nor should they be forced to adhere to the Catholic faith’ (Fernández de Madrid, 1992, p. lvi). Such controversial opinions, many voiced from within the Church itself, were probably more widespread than the historical evidence suggests but were silenced for political reasons.

### **The Black Legend**

The term ‘Black Legend’ is, surprisingly, of recent origin, attributed to the Spanish journalist Julián Juderías, in an essay written in 1912. It refers to an attitude that was prevalent in northern European thinking in the second half of the sixteenth century when international criticism of the Inquisition began to emerge in those countries politically and ideologically opposed to Spain. Protestant pamphleteers in the Netherlands, German states, England and France vigorously promoted its savage reputation via the printing press. The legend, some of it generated by Spanish Protestant exiles, was designed to promulgate the blackest facts about Spain and its rulers to serve as a warning of the consequences of Spanish hegemony in Europe. Accordingly, Spain became synonymous with all forms of repression, brutality, religious and political intolerance, as well as with intellectual



and artistic backwardness. The Spanish conquest of America helped to advance the legend, drawing upon the shameful, barbarous treatment of native Amerindians by the conquistadors, as documented by contemporary observers. Bartolomé de Las Casas was perhaps the most outspoken critic of Spanish colonialism in the New World. In his *Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* of 1542, he described with great passion the atrocities committed by Spaniards against innocent Indians and prophesied that the conquering nation would itself decline as a result.

Among the most critical accounts of the work of the Inquisition written outside Spain was that of the English Protestant John Foxe. Drawing upon Las Casas' condemnation of Spanish brutality, he exaggerated the Holy Office's repressive practices so as to propagate anti-Catholic opinion. In his *Book of Martyrs* of 1554, he wrote of 'the extreme dealing and cruel ravening of these Catholic Inquisitors of Spain, who, under the pretended visor of religion, do nothing but seek their private gain and commodity, with crafty defrauding and spoiling of other men's goods' (Maltby, 1971, p. 35). The work that had most influence on the propagation of the Black Legend was *Sanctae Inquisitionis Hispanicae Artes (A Discovery and Plaine Declaration of sundry Subtill Practices of the Holy Inquisition of Spain)* written by the pseudonymous author Reginaldus Gonsalvius Montanus (most likely a Protestant Spaniard who had been associated with Lutheran activity in Seville). The book describes the cruel procedures of the Inquisition in graphic detail. It was published in Heidelberg in 1567 in Latin and was soon reprinted in several languages. The wide dissemination of the text was to be a major contributory factor to the persistence of anti-Spanish and anti-Inquisition propaganda in Protestant northern Europe for close on four centuries (Kinder, 1997, pp. 75–6).

## **Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century Literature**

It was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that the lid was lifted on the Inquisition from the inside. Juan Antonio Llorente worked first as a fiscal secretary to the bishop of

## 6 The Historiography of the Inquisition

Burgos, then as a commissioner for the tribunal of the Inquisition located in Logroño (1785), and subsequently as secretary of the Supreme Council of Inquisition (the *Suprema*) in Madrid (1788). In the 1790s he entered the service of Manuel Godoy, the enlightened minister of Charles IV, whose political persuasions he shared, and began writing a series of essays on the reform of the Holy Office which won him favours at court. He used the opportunity afforded by the French invasions of Spain (1808–14) and the liberal reforms that followed (including the temporary abolition of the Holy Office) to write a ‘true’ history of the Inquisition, based on his own experience and access to its archives. In 1813, on the return of Ferdinand VII to the Spanish throne and the revival of the Holy Office, he left for France where he wrote his most celebrated work, *Historia crítica de la Inquisición española* (*Critical History of the Spanish Inquisition*) published in Paris in 1817. It was soon translated into several languages, including Spanish in 1822. Llorente pointed to the failure of the Church to provide *conversos* and *moriscos* (Jewish and Moorish converts to Christianity) with adequate religious instruction as a factor that led them to revert to the practice of their old faith. ‘The Inquisition maintained and strengthened its hypocrisy, punishing only those who knew no better; but it converted nobody. The Jews and Moors were baptised without proper conversion’, he wrote (Llorente, 1980, I, p. 8). He criticized the Inquisition for inhibiting the development of the arts, industry and trade, and condemned inquisitors for being motivated by financial greed rather than religious uniformity. Llorente, despite the bad press he received in Spain (leading to his excommunication from the Catholic Church in 1823), nevertheless captured some of the discrepancies inherent in the Inquisition’s evolution, acknowledged by many of his contemporaries. Essentially he felt that the institution had exceeded the limits of its authority and that its powers should now be returned to the Crown and the Church. Llorente’s study was to have a major impact on nineteenth-century historiography, provoking both supportive and defensive reactions. Its publication coincided with the beginning of the Inquisition’s demise as an institution and may even have hastened it (García-Cárcel and Moreno Martínez, 2000, pp. 95–101). Despite the tight grip exercised by

the Inquisition in matters of censorship, criticisms of the institution circulated freely both inside and outside Spain. The American historian William Prescott in his *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella* (1837) followed Llorente's line of argument by drawing attention to the destructive, repressive force of the Inquisition, deeming it to be responsible for 'centuries of unspeakable oppression and misery' (Prescott, 1854, p. 292).

Llorente apart, the majority of nineteenth-century Spanish historians of the Inquisition were members of the secular clergy or the religious orders studying the tribunal of the faith from a Catholic perspective and a Tridentine mentality. They included José Amador de los Ríos who saw the Inquisition as ultimately serving justifiable political ends (1848) and Orti y Lara who supported the Inquisition's crusade against heresy as inspired by God and essential to the preservation of Spain's national identity (1877). Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo in his *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles* (1880–2) maintained that the Spanish Inquisition was a fundamental instrument of the Catholic state. By separating out the faithful from the unfaithful it strengthened the religious unity of the Spanish kingdoms and, by extension, their political cohesion (Menéndez y Pelayo, 1992, I, p. 894). These theories were suitably adapted for propaganda purposes by the Franco regime in the mid-twentieth century in the crusade it led against the enemies of Fascism.

The transfer of the archives of the Spanish Inquisition from Simancas, near Valladolid, to the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid at the beginning of the twentieth century (1914), and their subsequent re-cataloguing, marked a further turning point in the development of the institution's history. It facilitated scholars' access to extensive archival evidence, studied by only a select few up to this juncture, including the American historian Henry Charles Lea. In his monumental four-volume *A History of the Inquisition of Spain* (1922), Lea challenged the apologetic approach of much traditional Spanish scholarship to produce a detailed, critical study of the institution's role and influence. Lea's work was, not surprisingly, fiercely condemned by traditionalists, including the Jesuit historian Bernardino Llorca, and was not published in Spanish until 1982–4. Despite the considerable advances in inquisitorial research made by Lea, as well as

## 8 The Historiography of the Inquisition

by other contemporary foreign scholars, including Ernest Schäfer in 1902–3 and Marcel Bataillon in 1937, until the middle of the twentieth century the Spanish Inquisition continued to be examined by native historians from predominantly conservative perspectives as an institution dedicated to the suppression of Jewish, Islamic and Protestant heresies. It was not until the death of General Franco in 1975 that the history of the Inquisition began to be treated with greater objectivity and impartiality by Spanish scholars, free from the ‘politicization’ that had dominated nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship. It is highly significant that this flourishing of revisionist inquisitorial historiography has coincided with Spain’s own process of political and social democratization.

### **Twentieth-century Scholarship**

Detailed research carried out since the late 1970s by a new generation of international scholars has fundamentally challenged the traditional approach to inquisitorial scholarship and prompted a thorough reappraisal of its role. Where British scholarship is concerned, Professor Henry Kamen stimulated this sea change in his pioneering *The Spanish Inquisition* (1965) which exploded the myth surrounding the Black Legend. Twenty years later he updated his findings in *Inquisition and Society in Spain in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1985), offering a revised summary of the advances in inquisitorial research. His latest contribution, *The Spanish Inquisition: An Historical Revision* (1997), adds the findings of the most recent scholarship. Kamen emphasizes the multi-faceted nature of the institution and its marginal impact on civil liberties. Although it was established with a specific jurisdiction over converted Jews, it soon acquired the power to enquire into the behaviour of any Christian man or woman, dead or alive. Inquisitors’ definition of heresy became subject to multiple interpretations of a social, moral, cultural and ideological nature. What interested them was how far the accused deviated from the orthodox norms of social acceptability rather than what he or she thought or believed. The Inquisition came to mirror the broad realities of time

and place, accommodating itself to different needs and circumstances across the Spanish regions. According to Kamen's thesis, this is what enabled it to survive for over 350 years.

Differing points of view have emerged among twentieth-century Jewish historians of the Inquisition. Benzion Netanyahu, in his controversial work *The Origins of the Inquisition* (1995), saw the reason for its establishment in purely anti-semitic terms. According to his viewpoint the Crown was racially motivated in setting up the Holy Office and concealed its prejudices by exaggerating the numbers of crypto-Jews, the majority of whom were actually sincere Christians. On the other hand, Haim Beinart in *Records of the Trials of the Spanish Inquisition in Ciudad Real, 1483–1485* (1974) and Yitzhak Baer in *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* (1961) both affirmed that the Inquisition was set up to resolve a specific socio-religious problem created by the expansion of the *converso* class and was not anti-semitic in nature. In their view, inquisitors were correct to regard *conversos* as Judaizers, many of whom continued to practise their former faith in secret.

The work of modern historians, including Jean-Pierre Dedieu's *L'Administration de la Foi. L'Inquisition de Tolède, xvie–xviii siècle* (1989), Sara Nalle's *God in La Mancha. Religious Reform and the People of Cuenca, 1500–1650* (1992), Stephen Haliczer's *Inquisition and Society in Early Modern Europe* (1987a) and Bartolomé Bennassar's *L'Inquisition Espagnole, xv–xix siècle* (1979), has revealed the important contribution that inquisitorial sources are able to make to the social and cultural history of Spain. Each defendant was subjected to a rigorous interrogation upon arrest. They had to provide details of their family background, occupation, level of literacy and the circumstances surrounding their accusation (which might include reference to moral behaviour and superstitious practices). Following the Council of Trent (1545–63), which established a wide-ranging programme for reform within the Catholic Church, the Inquisition became concerned about the level of religious instruction of the people and incorporated a test of doctrinal knowledge into its interrogation procedures. From the mid-sixteenth century it became a kind of 'teaching machine'. Via the edict of faith (the public announcement of crimes of heresy)

## 10 The Historiography of the Inquisition

and the *auto de fe* (the public denunciation of those accused of heresy) it set out a code of accepted practice for Catholics on matters of sexuality, blasphemy, magic and sorcery. Defendants were required to recite the four basic Church prayers, make the sign of the cross and confirm the regularity of their attendance at communion and confession. The analysis of this carefully recorded information has led to a number of fascinating studies into the culture, belief and mentality of Old Christian Spanish society in the early modern period. The following example (a declaration made before the tribunal of Toledo by a construction worker, Antonio Márquez, aged 25) tells us about the principal pattern of a Spaniard's life, his geographical and professional mobility, childhood experiences and adult education:

I was born at La Solana and raised in my father's house until age ten. It was there I learned to read and write . . . I've been a choir boy in my village. At that age I went with my father to the kingdom of Valencia, in the service of Mosen Guillén, a cleric, for three years. From there I returned to my village and stayed there five or six years, working with my father. Then I went off to the kingdom of Murica, to Orihuela, nearly six months, learning the craft of bricklayer. I next went to Madrid, where I stayed three or four months, working at my trade on the king's projects; then to Toledo, and next to Valencia with a merchant named Pedro de Valencia, and Alonso Alvarez, another merchant, son of Antonio Alvarez Díaz, with whom I remained two years, always travelling. Then I moved to Segovia and, since I was not well, I returned after spending a month and a half there. Then I worked on the King's projects at Aravaca, from whence I returned to Toledo, where I am now living with a certain Tapia, and from where I was taken as a prisoner to the Holy Office. (Dedieu, 1986, p. 165)

We now have a more detailed knowledge of the diversity of practice that characterized the Spanish Inquisition at regional level from a number of recent studies made of its provincial tribunals. The activity of the Valencian Holy Office, studied in detail by Ricardo García-Cárcel in *Orígenes de la Inquisición española. El tribunal de Valencia, 1478–1530* (1976) and *Herejía y sociedad en el siglo xvi. La Inquisición en Valencia, 1530–1609*

(1980), can be divided into two distinct phases. From its foundation until 1530 it tried about 2,350 people, 90 per cent of whom were *conversos* suspected of being backsliding Jews. Seven hundred and fifty of them were put to death for their crimes. Between 1530 and 1609, the tribunal brought around 4,250 defendants to trial. Over two-thirds of them were *moriscos*, of whom 24 suffered the death penalty. The tribunal of Santiago in north-west Galicia, the subject of a study by Jaime Contreras, *El Santo Oficio de la Inquisición de Galicia: poder, sociedad y cultura* (1982), dealt with a very different clientele from that of Valencia. Originally established in 1574 to combat the supposed Protestant menace along Spain's remote north coast, it prosecuted foreign heretics, including Lutherans and Portuguese *conversos*, but also Galicians themselves, charged with the lesser offences of blasphemy and bigamy. In the seventeenth century, both institutions underwent change. In the case of Valencia, it rose in status, while that of Santiago became more peripheral in standing and riddled with corruption.

In *Frontiers of Heresy: The Spanish Inquisition from the Basque Lands to Sicily* (1990), William Monter explores the institutional development of all those tribunals governed by the Aragonese Secretariat (Zaragoza, Navarre, Barcelona, Valencia and Sicily), created in 1517 and abolished in 1618. Opposition to the Holy Office was intense in the Aragonese lands, particularly among the political elite who feared its impingement upon their local laws known as *fueros* and therefore their ability to govern themselves with minimal royal interference (Monter, 1990, p. 321). Monter maintains that an appreciation of the essential differences between the Aragonese and the Castilian Inquisitions (beyond the formality of their bureaucratic separation) is essential for a proper understanding of the history of the Spanish Inquisition. He argues that, with the decline of Jewish and Protestant persecutions in Castile from mid-century, the geographical focus of inquisitorial activity shifted to the Crown of Aragón. From 1570 the Aragonese Inquisition extended its jurisdiction over a variety of offences not commonly pursued or encountered in Castile. Its most prominent victims were *moriscos*, and foreign immigrants suspected of Lutheranism as well as those accused of witchcraft and sodomy. By avoiding disciplining the Old

## 12 The Historiography of the Inquisition

Christian community for crimes such as blasphemy, superstition and ignorance in matters of the faith, as was the custom in Castile, and concentrating instead on marginal elements of local society, the Aragonese Inquisition gained the 'political' support and respect of their quasi-autonomous subjects. According to Monter, it thus became 'a respected agent of royal authority'. It also gained a reputation for the harshness of its punishments: 2 per cent of victims of the Aragonese tribunals were condemned to death in person as compared to 1.6 per cent in Castile between 1540 and 1700. Most of these deaths occurred at the height of its activity between 1570 and 1625 (Monter, 1990, pp. 48–9). Following the expulsion of the *moriscos* (1609–14) the work of the Holy Office declined in Aragón and from 1625 the Castilian Inquisition again regained its primacy (Monter, 1990, pp. xii–xiii). The activity of the Inquisition was thus conditional upon the prevailing social and political climates in Castile and Aragón and to some extent reflects the balance of power between the centre and the periphery.

### **The Inquisitorial Data-bank**

One of the most significant advances in inquisitorial research in recent decades has been carried out by the Danish ethnographer-historian Gustav Henningsen, and the Spanish scholar Jaime Contreras. In 1972 Henningsen and Contreras embarked upon a quantitative study of almost 50,000 summaries of trial records (*relaciones de causas*) – classified according to types of crime committed – of the 21 regional tribunals of the Spanish Inquisition over the period 1540–1700 to produce a statistical 'data-bank' of its activities (see table 1.1). Their systematic analysis of the evidence has revealed a number of important new perspectives on its history. First, the Inquisition was nowhere near as bloodthirsty and repressive an instrument of ideological control as commonly perceived. The holocausts of the 1480s were short-lived. For most of its active history the execution rate remained below 2 per cent – an average of five people per year. Torture and the death penalty were only rarely applied – almost exclusively during the early years of its existence. Second, the pursuit of



**Table 1.1** Categories of crime and numbers of accused dealt with by the Spanish Inquisition, 1540–1700

	Aragón		Castile		Total per crime	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<i>Major Heresies</i>						
Judaism	942	3.6	3,455	18.4	4,397	9.8
Islam	7,472	28.8	3,345	17.8	10,817	24.2
Lutheranism	2,284	8.8	1,219	6.5	3,503	7.8
Illuminism	61	0.2	82	0.4	143	0.3
<i>Sub total</i>	10,759	41.5	8,101	43.1	18,860	42.2
<i>Minor Heresies</i>						
Propositions	5,888	22.7	6,229	33.2	12,117	27.1
Bigamy	1,591	6.1	1,054	5.6	2,645	5.9
Solicitation	695	2.7	436	2.3	1,131	2.5
Acts against Inq.	2,139	8.3	1,232	6.6	3,371	7.5
Superstition	2,571	9.9	961	5.1	3,532	7.9
Miscellaneous	2,247	8.6	771	4.1	3,018	6.7
<i>Sub total</i>	15,131	58.4	10,683	56.9	25,814	57.7
<i>Total trials</i>	25,890	100	18,784	100	44,674	100
<i>Death sentences</i>						
In person	520	2.0	306	1.6	826	1.8
In effigy	291	1.1	487	2.6	778	1.7

Source: Contreras and Henningsen, 1986, p. 114

‘Major Heresy’ (as practised by *conversos*, *moriscos*, Illuminists and Lutherans) accounted for little more than 40 per cent or two-fifths of inquisitorial activity between 1540 and 1700 – the central period of the Inquisition’s existence. Third, from 1540 the Holy Office was overwhelmingly concerned with the unorthodox behaviour of Old Christians accused of ‘Minor Heresy’, including outbursts against the faith (referred to as ‘propositions’), blasphemy, unrestrained sexual behaviour, superstitious practices and opposition to the Holy Office. These lesser offences constituted three-fifths (just under 60 per cent) of inquisitorial business. The investigations of Henningsen and Contreras suggest that in the post-Tridentine period Spanish inquisitors were kept

## 14 The Historiography of the Inquisition

far busier by the misdemeanours of Old Christians than by those of dissident religious minorities. Having all but eliminated the incidence of Major Heresy, the primary function of the Holy Office during the 1560s and 1570s became that of prosecuting the sin of popular ignorance and of instructing Spaniards on matters of morality and the faith in accordance with the recommendations of the Council of Trent, a task it undertook with characteristic efficiency. Sixty-six per cent fewer cases of Minor Heresy came before the tribunals of the Inquisition after 1615. Finally, the data-bank study reveals that the activity of the Inquisition declined dramatically during the seventeenth century. Between 1560 and 1614 an average of 507 cases were examined per year; this figure fell to 168 cases per year between 1615 and 1700. By the late eighteenth century the Inquisition bore little resemblance to what it had been in 1480. Any judgement of the institution must therefore take into account the historical period and context in which it operated (Contreras and Henningsen, 1986, pp. 100–29).

### **The Four Seasons of the Inquisition**

The most detailed set of trial statistics has come from Jean-Pierre Dedieu's exhaustive study of around 12,000 cases brought before the tribunal of Toledo, situated in the heart of Castile, over its entire existence between 1483 and 1820. On the basis of his research, Dedieu proposed that the activity of the Inquisition as a whole be divided into four distinct 'seasons' or chronological periods, according to prevailing religious, social and political conditions (Dedieu, 1979a, pp. 15–41; Contreras, 1997, pp. 35–52).

#### *First period: 1480–1525*

During the first 30 years of its life over half of all those tried by the Spanish Inquisition were brought before its tribunals. This was the period of maximum repression when victims were hounded out without mercy and punishments were applied with full rigour. The motivation for such extreme intolerance was the fear that newly converted Jews (*conversos*) might contaminate

their Christian neighbours by their continued practice of Jewish rites and so threaten the authority and stability of the established Church. As baptized Christians, they were guilty of heresy against the faith. Toledo, Ciudad Real, Seville, Córdoba, Valencia and Barcelona were the main focal points of inquisitorial activity in these early years. The strategy was very similar in each urban location: inquisitors sought to break the internal cohesion of *converso* communities and to expose Jewish cells within families and neighbourhoods. On arriving in a town, inquisitors would meet with local officials and request their collaboration in calling people to a 'Sermon of the Faith', held in their church on Sunday after Mass. An edict was read out listing manifestations of Jewish heresy and inviting, in the first instance, self-confession and reconciliation to the Church within a defined 'period of grace'. But those who confessed their own guilt also became informants: their practice was linked to that of others.

It has been estimated that, at most, around 2,000 people died at the hands of the Inquisition in the period up to 1530, while perhaps as many as 15,000 were 'reconciled' – disciplined, but not sent to the stake. The Inquisition, although less brutal than we might have imagined, nevertheless generated an atmosphere of acute fear in Spanish society: fear of heresy on the one hand and fear of the consequences of being denounced on the other. Heresy, of course, was less real than imagined. It was a suitably explosive concept that, given the prevailing religious climate, was deliberately exaggerated to justify the institution's ends. Modern evidence suggests that what really lay behind the Jewish witch-hunt were deep-rooted social tensions and divisions that originated during the Christian Reconquest of Spain in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and that subsequently found their expression in the regime of religious and racial victimization pursued via the Holy Office. The practices of the Inquisition in its early years were arbitrary, including the acceptance of false witnesses who made unsubstantiated charges, the confiscation of goods and property and the indiscriminate use of torture. Its 'success' can be measured by the dramatic decrease in trials of Judaizers after 1520 and the subsequent reduction in the number of regional tribunals. We should not forget that only a relatively

## 16 The Historiography of the Inquisition

small proportion of the *converso* community came in contact with the Inquisition during the years of terror. The majority were well integrated into Christian society and accepted its values and traditions, so much so that they were barely recognizable as converts.

### *Second period: 1525–1630*

This long period of over a century in the Inquisition's history has been the focus of much recent research. It was a period of relative stability in institutional terms: tribunals and procedural methods were both well established. In terms of its area of responsibility, this was fundamentally altered by the emergence of the Protestant Church in northern Europe and the potential threat this posed to the established Church. The Inquisition responded by widening its net of inquiry, firstly to encompass Protestant heresy (of negligible impact in Spain) and subsequently other forms of minor deviance from Catholic belief. In so doing, it considerably expanded its power base in Spanish society. The Catholic Church meanwhile engaged in its own process of reform, prompted by the proceedings of the Council of Trent, which as we have seen encompassed a renewal of the doctrines of faith and their moral and ethical application to the lives of orthodox Christians. While parish priests instructed their flocks, inquisitors undertook to ensure that the ideals of Trent were being carried through in practice and abuses corrected. What they encountered on their visitations were wide-ranging forms of conduct that revealed a misguided, widespread misunderstanding of what it meant to be a Catholic. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the work of the Inquisition became dominated by cases of minor heresy. Old Christians were brought before its tribunals for committing blasphemy, bigamy or sodomy, for ignorant outbursts about the faith, for superstitious beliefs and for loose moral behaviour. They received punishments appropriate to their offences: a public penance, a fine or service as a rower on the Spanish galleys. In the eyes of the Catholic hierarchy, the end justified the means: to extend the mission of the Church and enforce an absolute adherence to its structures of belief. There were physical limitations to the work of inquisitors in this field:

some rural areas were simply too difficult to reach and here, as a result, ignorance in matters of the faith persisted.

The Inquisition was not solely concerned with Protestants or Old Christians during this second phase of its activity. In the late 1560s, following the renewal of disturbances in the Alpujarras region of Granada and the advance of the Turk in the Mediterranean, it hardened its pursuit of *moriscos* (Moorish converts), suspected of committing religious offences. Forced to convert to Christianity at the beginning of the century, the *moriscos* lived in separate communities (concentrated in Granada in the south and Valencia in the east) where they preserved intact their native traditions and beliefs. All attempts to incorporate them into the Catholic Church failed. As a result they remained marginalized and their presence was increasingly resented by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities who were unable to deal with them effectively. The policy of repression culminated in the expulsion of the *moriscos* from Spain between 1609 and 1614.

### *Third period: 1630–1725*

The Inquisition continued to play a vigilant role in the pursuit of minor heresy but a less prominent and vigorous one. Instead it was the crypto-Jew who once again fell victim to its procedures over this period. In 1492 a number of Spanish Jews settled in Portugal where they officially became *conversos* in their adopted land. For most of the first half of the sixteenth century they lived free from any form of religious or ethnic persecution. The Portuguese Inquisition, operative from 1547, allowed this situation to prevail in exchange for financial concessions. However, following the subjection of Portugal to Spanish rule in 1580, the Inquisition stepped up its activity against New Christians and dealt with them harshly. Over 200 were condemned to death in 50 *autos de fe* held in Lisbon, Evora and Coimbra between 1581 and 1600. This resulted in an influx of Portuguese New Christians into Castile, hoping for greater compassion from the Inquisition in Spain than they now found in their native land. They also brought with them highly sought-after skills in commerce and finance which they were able to trade for immunity from

inquisitorial prosecution. At the beginning of the seventeenth century arguments were being voiced in senior religious and political circles in favour of adopting a more tolerant attitude towards the *converso* community, which helped to support their cause. A papal brief of August 1604 allowed for 400 Portuguese New Christians to be absolved from past offences and released on pardon from imprisonment in exchange for a payment of nearly 2 million ducats to Philip III. During the years following the pardon, many *cristaos-novos* flocked to the Spanish court to offer their financial services to the Crown. But when the terms of the pardon expired six years later and persecutions resumed, many Portuguese New Christians fled Spain.

Policy was reversed again in the mid-1620s. Under pressure from Philip IV, who was facing a serious financial crisis, the Holy Office granted Portuguese financiers suspected of crypto-Judaism a temporary reprieve from prosecution, facilitating their access to financial contracts and trading agreements throughout the Spanish Empire. By 1640 half of the loans that the Crown depended upon to service its debts were negotiated by Portuguese New Christian bankers. For traditionalists within the Church this was tantamount to the needs of a bankrupt exchequer being put before the preservation of orthodoxy. A plan put forward by the first minister Olivares to allow exiled Jews to return to Spain, first discussed in 1634, raised further serious concerns. When Portugal re-asserted its independence from the Spanish monarchy in 1640, the Inquisition responded by re-launching its attack on the minority of Portuguese New Christians left in Spain – now turned political opponents. Whole families were apprehended in Madrid. The tribunals of Toledo and Cuenca recorded dramatic increases in numbers of trials of crypto-Jews. The rigorous pursuit of Portuguese New Christians, which intensified during the 1650s, once again revived latent anti-semitic tensions in Spanish society. By the end of the seventeenth century, the first generation of Portuguese New Christians had effectively been wiped out but the Jewish convert, on account of his class and wealth more than his creed, was to remain the irreconcilable enemy until well into the following century.

*Fourth period: 1725–1834*

During the final phase of its existence, the Holy Office found itself in conflict with the philosophical and intellectual currents emanating from France that influenced the policy of the Bourbon monarchy in Spain. Philip V (1700–46) did not seek to abolish the Inquisition but rather to bring it under his direct control. However, attempts to limit the temporal and jurisdictional authority of the Inquisition were greeted with staunch resistance from conservative forces within society. During the first half of the eighteenth century, the Inquisition was effectively controlled by the Jesuits who firmly rejected ideas and beliefs associated with the French Enlightenment and its pursuit of ‘reason’ and ‘progress’. But the Society was soon to fall from favour. In 1767 Charles III expelled the Jesuits from Spain and in the following year issued a royal edict urging inquisitors to concern themselves with matters of the faith while the Crown assumed control over censorship. The Inquisition was fast becoming a caricature of a bygone age when it acted as guardian of the ideologies of the Habsburg regime. Its privileged position in the sacred order of society was now considerably diminished, along with its sphere of activity. Only three to four cases per year came before the Toledan tribunal in the later eighteenth century compared with over 200 during the sixteenth century. Ninety per cent of trials now concerned moral rather than heretical offences. The Napoleonic invasions of 1808 hastened its permanent demise as a growing rift emerged between the philosophies of Church and State. The Inquisition’s firm opposition to liberal thinking and social change generated by the French Revolution brought calls, outlined at the Cortes of Cádiz of 1810–13, for the suppression of its privileges and the abolition of its legal powers on the grounds that it was an unconstitutional organization. The anti-inquisitorial lobby included members of the clerical estate seeking to reclaim authority over what it deemed to be its functional areas. The Inquisition enjoyed a stay of execution under Ferdinand VII, restored to the throne in 1814, but its days were numbered. In 1830 a papal brief revoked its powers in matters of heresy. On

15 July 1834, after 356 years of existence, the Holy Office was formally abolished by royal decree.

## **Conclusion**

On 12 January 2000, to mark the Catholic Church's Jubilee, Pope John Paul II issued a document entitled *Memory and Reconciliation* in which he asked for forgiveness for the errors of the Church over its 2,000-year history. These included the medieval crusades, the excesses of the Inquisition, the persecution of Jews and the abuses inherent in the conquest and evangelization of the New World. Two years earlier a symposium on the Inquisition was held in Rome, at which the papacy took full responsibility for its historical role in the extirpation of heresy. This public act of self-criticism and apology followed in the wake of some 25 years of revisionist research by historians of the Inquisition which has attempted to put aside the ideological polarization that characterized the writing of its history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a result of their substantial efforts and innovative approaches (to which the author is heavily indebted), we are now able to review the role of the Spanish Inquisition from a much wider, dispassionate perspective. This book aims to separate out some of the myths from the realities surrounding one of the most notorious institutions in history via a broad synthesis of current, alongside traditional, trends in inquisitorial research.