

The Most Evil Men in History Torquemada

In 1482, in a monastery in Central Spain, a Catholic monk was appointed to the Spanish Inquisition. From this day, Friar Tomas de Torquemada would begin a career renowned for its cruelty of persecution.

As head of the Spanish Inquisition, Torquemada was responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent Spaniards. Known as The Black Legend, he spread fear throughout Spain. Thousands were arrested, interrogated and mercilessly tortured. Many more were burned alive at the stake.

“Torquemada wasn’t evil. He was worse than evil. He was the Satan par excellence.”

In the name of his religion, Torquemada forced almost every Jew out of Spain, destroying their lives forever.

Tomas de Torquemada was born in Valladolid in Central Spain in 1420. As a young man, he became a Dominican monk, a Catholic order known for their extreme devotion to the Church.

“Many of the first Inquisitors were Dominican friars. They seemed to have been regarded as the sort of shock troops, as it were, of the Catholic Church, and of the Papacy in particular.”

“Torquemada was a theologian and therefore a very exact and faithful product of his Dominican order.”

At the time, Spain was a series of kingdoms with their own rulers, racked by civil wars throughout the 15th century. An uneasy stability arrived in the 1470s with the marriage of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon.

“They wanted to unite religions in Spain and of course the power was in the hands of the Christians but cultural union wasn’t achieved and religious union wasn’t achieved either because there were three religions in Spain. The Christians, the Muslims and the Jews.”

By the time Ferdinand and Isabella came to power, Torquemada was Prior of the Monastery of Santa Cruz in Segovia. Evidence of the relationship between Torquemada and the crown can still be seen above the door to the Priory.

“In the same church you can see St. Dominique holding the cross. Then the cross is also being held by two hands coming out of two shields. They symbolize Ferdinand and Isabella. At the bottom, you can see two dogs fighting two cats. The dogs are the Dominicans and the cats symbolize heresy or vices.”

“There was a horrible Latin pun that was used describe them: *Domini canes*, the hounds of the Lord.”

“They accepted that because they wanted to be the defenders. Just as a dog defends a place, they wanted to defend their religion.”

Having been the childhood confessor to the devoutly Catholic Isabella, Torquemada’s influence over the queen was enormous and they shared one obsession: religious purity and the threat of heresy.

"People start trying to fix belief as it should be and to write down (a) what should be believed, orthodoxy and (b) what shouldn't be believed, heresy which of course tends to be the opposite. The ideology of inquisition was, "We have heresy in our midst and it's up to us to try and root it out." Eliminate from the Christian body a large number of people who are contaminating it and who represent a threat to their belief."

As far as Torquemada was concerned, the real heretics or unbelievers were not the Jews or the Muslims but the Conversos, former Jews or Muslims who had converted to Catholicism but were suspected of not being true to the faith.

"In simple terms, what happens is by the middle of the 15th century, Conversos who are actually baptised Catholic Christians are being treated in the same way, under the same suspicion, with the same accusations being made against them as Jews."

"One of the commonest phrases that's used in the charges that the Inquisition made when it eventually got going in the 1480s was that the accused Converso, quotes, "held Jews to be more their neighbors than Christians" and this is part of the build-up of the case, as it were, against the Conversos as being dodgy Christians, false Christians."

In 1483, Ferdinand and Isabella put huge pressure on Pope Sixtus IV to appoint Torquemada as Spain's Inquisitor General.

"His relationship with the Queen was so great that she looked up on him as the Messiah. She looks up upon him that he's a messenger of Christ and whatever he was doing was absolutely right and correct."

His fanatical devotion to his religion made him the perfect candidate for the job and with the support of Crown and Papacy, he began to hunt down the Converso heretics.

"He was all-powerful. Having political power and being the head of the Inquisition, he held an enormous amount of power."

"Arrest the heretics. Cross-examine them. Draw up a list of heresies to be identified. We are concerned to repress and to exterminate, and they had...need to be taken very seriously."

Torquemada produced a handbook of instructions bearing his signature detailing how these Conversos, or secret Jews, were to be identified.

"They are identified Judiasing as the keeping of Jewish ritual practices, of cooking all the weekend's meals on a Friday night, of changing the sheets on a Friday night. They get their supplies from the Jewish suppliers and not from the Christian ones, so as to keep the dietary laws of Judaism, Kosher laws."

"Spain eats a lot of pork because at that time, eating pork was a sign of being Christian."

Torquemada created a climate of fear throughout Spain. Neighbor denounced neighbour and thousands of suspected Conversos were arrested and thrown into prison, where many of them starved. Once brought before the Inquisition, the Conversos were cross-examined. Torture was often used to extract confessions of heresy. One account involves a cobbler from

Cuidad Real. A Converso suspected of heresy, he had a rag forced into his mouth and water poured through it until he almost drowned.

In Callen, a 15 year old girl was arrested, stripped and then whipped until she agreed to testify against her mother. Her mother was eventually burned.

In Toledo, in 1486, 750 Conversos – men, women and children – were processed by the Inquisition and marched in a parade of shame through the streets. They were forced to wear a Sambenito, a yellow robe with a red cross. It was a sign that they had sinned against the true Church. An eyewitness kept a diary describing the fate of these Toledo Conversos.

"They went in procession from the Church of St Peter Martyr in the following way: The men were all together in a group, bare-headed and unshod. In their hands were unlit candles and they went along howling loudly and weeping, and tearing out their hair, no doubt more for the dishonor they were suffering than for any offence they had committed against God. At the door of the Church were two priests who made the sign of the cross on each one's forehead, saying, "Receive the sign of the cross which you denied and lost through being deceived." When this was over, they were publicly allotted penance and ordered to go in procession for six Fridays, disciplining their bodies with scourges of hemp cord."

For those convicted of a second offence, the sentence was death by burning. In what were called auto da fé, or acts of faith, Torquemada's Inquisition sentenced up to 2000 Conversos to the stake.

"People, for their own private reasons, denounced others who showed no visible signs of being heretics or of being Jews, and carried that evidence to an outset tribunal who is not in the least interested in the truth or otherwise of the evidence but is willing, for its own reasons, to pursue an ideological crusade against people who are diverging from the true faith."

In one incident in Medina, southern Spain, the local Inquisitors wanted to acquit several prisoners because of lack of evidence. Torquemada flew into a rage, insisting they be burned immediately.

Even if the heretic managed to escape the stake, an effigy of him was burned instead. The only concession made to the heretic was that sometimes, they were strangled to death before the stake was lit, or green wood was used so that the smoke choke them to death before they burned.

"We could even explain their continuous existence by the fact that they went out looking for further heresy, in order to justify their continued existence."

So extreme was Torquemada that even the Pope was forced to write, objecting to his methods, but Ferdinand and Isabella defended their favorite Friar.

"His name doesn't help because 'Torquemada' is the Spanish version of 'The Burnt Tower', and the fact that part of his name is 'Quemada' meaning 'to burn', and that the Inquisition was notorious for burning its heretics, makes Torquemada's image emerge as a sinister figure."

Torquemada took his obsession with blood purity further with one of his most chilling innovations. The Limpieza de Sangue, or Purity of Blood document, was devised so that

anyone with any Jewish blood in their lineage was excluded from holding public office or denounced as a heretic.

"And certainly it is true that in these years, racial discrimination, Limpieza de Sangue, begins to take off. Torquemada seems to have believed in it. When he founded his new convent in Ávila of the Dominican Order, one of the rules of the foundation: excluded from membership people, who are of Jewish origin. From then on, many other institutions in Spanish society tend to adopt this method of discrimination, which obviously is, frankly, racial."

But the greatest irony of all is that Torquemada himself was of Jewish ancestry.

"What we know about him is that he comes from Old Castile, that he was a Dominican Friar, that he had achieved some seniority, and that he comes from a Converso family himself."

"His uncle was a famous ex-Jewish clergyman who rose very high in the Church and became a cardinal in Rome."

"Not least as a protector of Jewish Christians against precisely the kind of accusations that were being made in Spain itself."

"We could see Torquemada as an example showing that a new Christian to be more Christian than the rest of the Christians. People that convert into one religion, usually they show more zeal than the people who are raised into that religion."

Torquemada's zeal would find its next victims amongst one of Spain's oldest communities, the Jews.

Towards the end of the 1480s, Torquemada's power and influence were at their height. His Inquisition had tried thousands of Conversos, or secret Jews, but as far as he was concerned there was a greater threat of heresy, from the Jews themselves.

"If you go to Toledo for example, if you see the magnificent synagogues and you close your eyes, you can almost see the Spanish Jewish community still there. And wherever you turn, you will see the mark that the Jewish people left there."

The Spanish Jews were an old and established part of Spanish society, holding positions in all areas, even in Ferdinand and Isabella's court.

"The Inquisition had been in existence for 12 years. It had been struggling against what it saw as the problem of the heresy of the Conversos, without reaching any satisfactory solution."

Torquemada believed that the root of his problem with the Conversos lay in their contact with the Jewish community. The way forward was to demonise the Jews. His plans were given a boost in 1490. In the small village of La Guardia, 6 Conversos and 5 Jews were accused of kidnapping and crucifying a Christian child. This incident, probably fictitious, became known as the Holy Child of La Guardia.

"The case of the Holy Child of La Guardia is a key example of typical anti-Semitic hysteria. Anti-Semitism already existed and would already go on existing. One case of hysteria in itself might add fuel to the flames, but the flames were already there."

Torquemada fanned the flames of anti-Semitism by distributing the story to other parts of Spain. It had the desired result. The men were eventually found guilty of cutting out the child's heart and using it in magical rites. The accused were eventually all burned at the stake within sight of Torquemada's abbey at Ávila.

"In the eyes of the Church, being a Jew really was a sin because it was the deliberate rejection of the God of Israel."

Determined to sever links between the Conversos and the Jews, Torquemada decided that there was only one course of action: expel the Jews from Spain.

"Their real problem was the context of there being a permanent Jewish presence which always gave support to the Conversos in their attitude. Take away that context, take away the Jews and the Conversos would have no cultural support to back them up."

"In the late 1480s, the Inquisition lobbies steadily. Torquemada is still leading this at this stage, that they lobby the crown for the crunch time to be legislated for."

"And so it made sense to everybody to get rid of the Jews."

Under appeal from Abraham Señor, a Jewish courtier who had helped in arranging their marriage, Ferdinand and Isabella wavered about the expulsion of the Jews.

"Abraham Señor tried to persuade Ferdinand and Isabella to allow the Jews to remain in Spain in return for the Jewish community giving them a tremendous amount of gold."

When Torquemada heard about Abraham Señor's offer, he flew into a rage.

"And the King and Queen thought seriously about it because which King or Queen would not? And Torquemada, hearing of the possibility that they might change their mind, burst into the royal chambers and threw 30 pieces of silver in front of the King and Queen and said, "Judas sold Christ for 30 pieces of silver. If you wish to sell Christ again, here is the money.""

"He was the mastermind behind the Inquisition and he was the one who was responsible for all the cruelty and the tragedy that our Jewish brethren suffered in Spain at the time."

"Certainly Torquemada was the decision behind the decree to expel the Jews because one of the texts which was recently discovered of the expulsion of the Jews says expressly that "The Inquisitor General has advised me to expel the Jews."

Bolstered by Torquemada, in March of that year, Ferdinand and Isabella issued an edict of expulsion that gave Spanish Jews until July to accept baptism or leave the country. Its terrible words read, "We command all Jews and Jewesses of whatever age, that they depart from our said kingdoms and dominions with their sons, daughters, manservants and Jewish attendants, or they shall incur the penalty of death without further trial or declaration or sentence."

The thriving Jewish quarters of the main Spanish towns were emptied of their inhabitants.

"After we had been exiled from Spain, our ancestors have vowed never to go back to Spain because of the sufferings we suffered and for no reason either, just simply because you are a Jew."

In Segovia and elsewhere, synagogues were taken over and claimed for the Catholic Church.

"Actually when the edict of expulsion in 1492 was issued, many Jews of Segovia didn't want to leave so they moved to outside the walls of Segovia, to the cemetery, asking the King to pardon them or somehow make an exception for them. Of course it was to no avail. They had to leave."

Torquemada the devout friar profited directly from the expulsion. In 1494, Ferdinand and Isabella gave him the Jewish cemetery at Ávila for use by his own monastery. It's thought that anywhere between 70 and 300 thousand Jews were forced to give up their homes and possessions, fleeing to Portugal, North Africa or other parts of the Middle East.

"And there were terrible tragic scenes at that time because very often the ships that would take them away would charge a fortune and then when they were in the middle of the sea, they would just kill them all and throw them overboard."

For those Jews who remained in Spain, Torquemada made sure they were converted.

"There's no question at all about it, that what has happened in Spain is also a mini Holocaust. Of course we seem to forget about it because it happened 500 years ago. But it is a mini Holocaust. Torquemada, he is the culprit. He is the symbol of evil."

To this day the expelled Spanish Jews, wherever they ended up, are known as Sephardic Jews, from Sepharad, the Hebrew word for 'Spain'.

"Even to this day, we still say a prayer, asking the Almighty to help our brethren who are imprisoned by the Spanish Inquisition. So when we recite that prayer today, we historically think of all those human beings who suffered because of the fact that they wanted to serve their God in their way."

Torquemada's relentless pursuit of the Conversos and the Jews would continue for another six years as the Inquisitor General tortured, burned and expelled his way towards a pure, Christian Spain. For today's Spanish Jews, Torquemada's actions were echoed in Nazi Germany over 400 years later.

"The Jews who went back after the Holocaust of Germany went back virtually immediately after the termination of the war, whereas the Jews waited some 450 years before they reestablished Jewish communities in Spain."

But the man who had caused so much suffering to so many thousands would escape any retribution. In 1498, at his monastery in Ávila, Tomas de Torquemada passed away peacefully.