

Political aspects of the spanish inquisition of spain essay



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1. Introduction

The Spanish Inquisition is well known all over the English speaking world as a historical episode connected to religious persecution and torture. Most people know little about the actual dimensions of the issue or even its basic facts, other than its association with a medieval Catholic backed, anti Jewish religious pogrom. In actual fact the story of the Inquisition is, in many ways, an integral part of the history of Spain at the zenith of its powers, a period of around three hundred years that saw the country become a major sea going power and the main coloniser of South America.

In Spain the Inquisition represented the efforts of the Monarchy to control heresy and forcibly dominate Jewish and Muslim converts to Catholicism, for a period of three hundred years. The inquisitions became tools for extortion, vendetta and violence and gained global notoriety as one of the most violent and infamous manifestations of the catholic religion.

The truth is that the Spanish Inquisition was particularly severe, strict, and efficient because of its strong ties with the crown. Its major targets were the Marranos (converts from Judaism) and Moriscos (converts from Islam), many of whom were suspected of secretly adhering to their original faiths. During the 16th century, Protestants and Alumbrados (Spanish mystics) seemed to be the major danger. Often serving political ends, the inquisitors also exercised their dreaded functions among the converted Indian populations of the Spanish colonies in America. (Froehlich)

The Inquisition was authorised in 1478 by Pope Sixtus IV and instituted by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain in 1480. In actual fact, the <https://assignbuster.com/political-aspects-of-the-spanish-inquisition-of-spain-essay/>

Inquisition was in the nature of a judicial system, which comprised of courts or tribunals headed by Inquisitors. The tribunals could receive complaints about the practice of heresy and crypto-Judaism in Christians and had royal authority try and punish the accused, on being found guilty. The establishment of the Inquisition was a very curious happening in the sense that the monarchs of one of the most powerful countries of Europe used the authority of the Catholic Church to legitimise and provide religious sanctity to a state-controlled institution, which dealt primarily with the investigation and punishment of religious heresy.

It is very probable that when Ferdinand and Isabella decided to institute the Inquisition, little would they have imagined that it would develop into a many armed hydra, travel to other countries in Europe and cause immense harm to humanity for a long period of time. For them it was little more than a political exercise aimed at using the Catholic Church and religion to unite the country under one religious umbrella and at the same time rid the country of crypto-Judaism practiced by the Jewish converts.

It is the objective of this essay to investigate the Spanish Inquisition and the reasons for its institution, religious, economic, social and political. The essayist has focused on the political ramifications of the Inquisition, particularly those existing between the Catholic Monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand and Pope Sixtus IV. The essayist has referred to a number of texts, journals and magazine articles, available physically and on line, all of which have been listed in the bibliography.

2. The Founders of the Spanish Inquisition

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The Spanish Inquisition came into being at the behest of the Catholic Monarchs of Spain with the authority of the Pope of the Roman Church. Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon are collectively known as the Catholic Monarchs. As individual monarchs of Castile and Aragon in their own right, their formal union led to the unification of Spain. Theirs was a truly unique partnership of absolute equality, symbolised by their joint motto “ Tanto monta, monta tanto, Isabel como Fernando” (“ It amounts so much, so much it amounts, Isabella as Ferdinand”).

Ambitious and powerful monarchs, their goal was the territorial consolidation and the political and religious unification of Spain. While political and territorial issues were handled with force, diplomacy and aggression, as the situation demanded, their objective of religious unification resulted in an uncompromising effort to rid Spain of people belonging to other religions.

The Church of Rome was headed by Pope Sixtus IV from 1471 to 1484. He was a warring Pope who, in the fine tradition of leaders of the church appears to have spent a good deal of time fighting numerous battles with neighbouring Italian princes during his papacy. He signed the authorisation for the Spanish Inquisition at the request of King Ferdinand of Aragon, in 1478. While Sixtus IV did share the Catholic Monarchs’ desire for religious unification, Ferdinand needed to apply political pressure to obtain his assent to the inquisition.

3. The Politico-Religious Reasons for the Spanish Inquisition

The kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, which were to later consolidate into the Spanish Kingdom, had a multi-ethnic, multi religious population when Isabel
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and Ferdinand came to power. The Muslim invasions that had started many centuries ago had led to a sizeable Muslim population, which coexisted with the Jews and the Catholics.

The last few centuries had however seen the gradual pushing back of Muslims from mostly all of Europe in what came to be known as the “reconquests”. The desire for Catholic reunification led to the mass expulsion of Muslims and Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. While some Jews went to Portugal and thousands of Muslims moved to Africa, many thousands preferred to stay back in familiar surroundings and hold on to their possessions. They were allowed to remain if they converted to the Catholic faith and many of them exercised their option. Jewish converts came to be known as Marranos and Muslim converts as Moriscos.

The ostensible reason for the authorisation and establishment of the inquisition was the belief that many converted Jews and Muslims practiced their original faiths in secrecy and remained unfaithful to the Catholic religion.

At that point, when the entire peninsula was ruled by Christians, resentment against Jews and Moslems grew. Most of the later fled to North Africa, but this was less of an option for Jews who found themselves subject to widespread anti-Semitism. Many converted to Christianity but this merely changed prejudice against them from religious to racial and raised the problem of those who had only pretended to convert while continuing to practice their old faith behind closed doors. (Hannam)

Apparently, the Inquisition was established to ensure that Jewish and Muslim converts stayed true to their new faith and did not use the option for conversion to protect their social status and material belongings. The actual reasons, according to most historians, were more broad reaching and meant to satisfy specific political aims. These are stated below.

- To establish political and religious unity. The Inquisition allowed the monarchy to intervene actively in religious affairs, without the interference of the Pope. At the same time, Ferdinand and Isabella's objective was the creation of efficient state machinery; thus one of their priorities was to achieve religious unity to promote more centralized political authority.
- To weaken local political opposition to the Catholic Monarchs. Strengthening centralized political authority also entailed weakening local political opposition. Resistance to the installation of the Inquisition in the Kingdom of Aragon, for example, was often couched in terms of local legal privileges
- To do away with the powerful converso minority. Many members of influential families such as the Santa Fes, the Santangels, the Caballerias and the Sanchezes, were prosecuted in the Kingdom of Aragon. This is contradicted, to an extent, by the fact that Ferdinand, King of Aragon, continued to employ many *conversos* in his administration.
- Economic support. Given that one of the measures used with those tried was the confiscation of property, this possibility cannot be discarded. (Spanish Inquisition)

Very clearly the Spanish Inquisition was a political decision taken by Ferdinand and Isabel to unite Spain, strengthen their own positions, weaken local opposition to their monarchy and eliminate the economically powerful Jewish converts; to whom the monarchy owed large sums of money. Accordingly Ferdinand approached Pope Sixtus IV to authorise the setting up of an Inquisition in Spain. Sixtus was however, extremely reluctant to sign the authorisation and relented only after Ferdinand threatened to withdraw support to his kingdom of Sicily

5. Political Differences between the Catholic Monarchy and the Catholic Church

It was very clear right from the beginning that the Catholic Monarchs intended to keep the complete administration and the operation of the Inquisition with the Monarchy and use the Catholic Church only to legitimise it and provide it with papal authority. Thus, while the Pope authorised the Inquisition in 1478 it was established only in 1480 by Ferdinand and Isabella. Furthermore, the Inquisitor's name was to be decided by the monarchy but announced by the Pope. At every step it was ensured that all actual decisions would be taken by the monarchs but with the ostensible support of the Pope. The Catholic Church remained opposed to and resentful of this state of affairs and considered it to be a breach of privilege that rightfully belonged to the Church. There was however, very little the church could do in this matter because Sixtus IV needed Ferdinand and Isabella to be his political and diplomatic allies in his conflicts with Italian princes.

The church was also apprehensive of being party to the atrocities committed in the name of the Inquisition. In this context it is pertinent to note that the first twelve years of the Inquisition were its harshest years in terms of the number of executions carried out. Most historians agree that out of the approximately five thousand executions that happened during the three hundred year history of the Spanish Inquisition, three thousand occurred in the first twelve years. Sixtus IV had expressed his deep dissatisfaction and concern about the perceived excesses of the Inquisition but to no avail, as the monarchy did not dilute its hold on the Inquisition or allowed the Catholic Church anything more than a token association with the judicial process.

The political differences between Ferdinand and Sixtus on the issue of the Inquisition reached its height when the Pope brought out an edict withdrawing the authorisation for setting up the tribunals from the kingdom of Aragon. In this edict the Pope sharply criticised the procedures of the courts and stated as follows.

many true and faithful Christians, because of the testimony of enemies, rivals, slaves and other low people—and still less appropriate—without tests of any kind, have been locked up in secular prisons, tortured and condemned like relapsed heretics, deprived of their goods and properties, and given over to the secular arm to be executed, at great danger to their souls, giving a pernicious example and causing scandal to many (Spanish Inquisition)

This show of resistance was however destined to die out and in 1483 the Pope, under severe pressure from King Ferdinand signed a fresh “ bull” (edict) authorising the establishment of an Inquisition in Aragon, and clearing

the way for Ferdinand to appoint Inquisitors. The initiation of the Spanish Inquisition witnessed immense political activity and disagreement between the Catholic Monarchs and the Church of Rome. However, apart from the temporary hiatus in Aragon caused by the withdrawal of the Inquisition by the Pope, Ferdinand was mostly able to get his way and force the Church to back his initiative for the elimination of heretics.

6. The Working of the Inquisition

The first two Inquisitors of the Spanish Inquisition were appointed only in 1480, two years after the signing of the bill. In the next few years numerous people were charged with heresy and tried by the Inquisition. Limited only to Castile in the beginning, Inquisitions were set up in other cities in the next few years, as also in Aragon despite strong resistance from the Pope. A formal protocol dictated the working of the tribunal and laid down procedures governed the selection of Inquisitors, receiving of complaints, framing of charges, recordings of confessions, procedures for penance and punishment.

Over the years the Inquisition gained notoriety as a vehicle for persecuting Jewish and Muslim converts, as well as Protestants. The mode of working, where the tribunal accepted anonymous complaints about a person's religious beliefs, was blatantly unfair to the accused and used by people to settle old scores in business and social disputes. The practice of recovering the expenses of the tribunal from the assets of the accused led to forfeiture of assets by the monarchy and the detention of alleged heretics in horrific conditions, much before their conviction. Excruciating physical torture was

used regularly and execution by various savage methods including burning at the stake was fairly common.

The Inquisition continued for three hundred years with the active backing of successive monarchs of the unified Spanish Kingdom. Thousands of people were tried for heresy and severely punished. It was finally abolished in the early 1800s because of social and political pressures created by the French Revolution and the attendant cross border movement of ideas of religious and social equality.

7. Conclusion

The Spanish Inquisition is remembered today as one of the darker manifestations of the Roman Catholic Church. Ironically, the Church had very little to do with the establishment of the Inquisition and nothing at all with its functioning. It was the handiwork of Monarchs who used religion as a tool to establish the hegemony of their rule, unite their subjects and eliminate opposition from people who had the potential to express disenchantment with their policies; namely the Jewish and Muslim converts.

The establishment of the Inquisition at the hands of Ferdinand and Isabel saw the development of sharp political disagreement between the Monarchy and the Church, which was then headed by Sixtus IV. While the Church had achieved immense political power in Europe over the centuries of its existence, the Popes remained vulnerable to numerous political threats.

They had created many enemies because of their ambitions and their desire to increase their political and religious influence. Ferdinand was able to use these vulnerabilities of the Church and pressurise Sixtus IV to authorise the <https://assignbuster.com/political-aspects-of-the-spanish-inquisition-of-spain-essay/>

establishment of the Spanish Inquisition and continue to back it even while the machinery of his monarchy would have sole powers for its implementation.

The Spanish Inquisition continued for three hundred years and is still regarded as a darker facet of the Catholic religion. The fact however remains that the Vatican had very little to do with its excesses and it was more a tool used by despotic monarchs to further their imperial and political objectives.