

Erna Paris. *The End of Days: A Story of Tolerance, Tyranny and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1995. 327 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57392-017-9.

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## Good Moors, Bad Catholics

Erna Paris tells us the history of Jewish life, in what later became Spain, from the Moorish invasion in 711 until the expulsion of 1492. She includes an “Afterword” on the fate of the Conversos, who had converted from Judaism to Catholicism, and an “Epilogue” comparing medieval Spain with nineteenth and twentieth-century France and Germany. The author’s special interest is in explaining why Iberian society moved from a tolerant and multicultural society under the Moors—as she says—to one of the most intolerant in Europe, expelling the Jews and establishing the Inquisition which persecuted many Conversos.

*The End of Days* is based on the careful study of most scholarly works that have been written the history of the Jews in medieval Spain. In Paris’ bibliography we find nearly all the relevant names: for example, Baer, Beinart, Kamen, Amador de los Rios, Caro Baroja etc. The book is full of vivid descriptions of historic events, made more vivid by the author’s skillful use of quotations from contemporary documents placed in the mouths of various protagonists. She shows how a journalistic style can go hand in hand with scholarly diligence.

Paris begins with the anti-Jewish riots in most parts of the Iberian Peninsula in 1391, and then goes back in time. A brief overview of Jewish life under the Moors is followed by short chapters on the Christian part of the peninsula after 711 and in the fourteenth century. The book’s center of gravity lies in the hundred years between the pogroms of 1391 and the expulsion of 1492.

She then describes the wave of conversions which

started in 1391, the persecution of Jews and, later, of conversos, the creation of a national Spanish inquisition, and finally the origins of the infamous decree of expulsion in 1492. The author argues that the turning-point marking the end of tolerance and “multiculturalism” came in the mid-fourteenth century. She suggests several reasons for this change, starting with foreign, that is, French influence. “French fanaticism” is given great weight, repeatedly, but it is never explained why Christian Spaniards were so susceptible to this fanaticism (pp. 59-60, 74, 84, 115). A second reason, according to Paris, was the prominent role of Jews in tax collection (p. 74). Third, she mentions “the centuries-long campaign of the medieval Catholic Church to destroy religious pluralism in Spain” (p. 157). It could succeed because the monarchy, traditionally “bound to defend the Jewish minority” in the fifteenth century “declined to challenge the usurping power of the Church” (p. 114). A fourth reason is presented as a general axiom: “economic and political instability historically nurture racism” (p. 124).

The fifth argument is that the Spanish kings strove for national unity which presumed religious uniformity (pp. 239, 245, 267). As a sixth reason, she invokes “natural disasters,” occurring before both the 1391 pogroms and the 1492 expulsion (p. 239). Lastly, Paris argues, Christian society had tried to assimilate the Jews through conversion, but this had not altered the “cultural and economic patterns” of the Conversos“ (p. 268). None of these arguments is without merit; they could well contribute to the understanding of accelerating discrimination, culminating in the expulsion of the Jews. The problem is that

Paris does not form the individual points into a systematic, logically cohering, historical explanation.

Contradictory formulations are common. Regarding the lower strata of Iberian society, for example, Paris states: "The Visigoth ideal of religious exclusion had spread from the clergy to the population at large" on page 90. But on page 94, we read, "at street level, multireligious Spain was not dead yet." Similarly, some pages later, Paris deals with the Purity of Blood Statutes against the Conversos, in uncertain fashion (p. 128): "In the daily life of towns and villages, ordinary Jews, Moors, Christians, and new Christians maintained relatively cordial relations," but then we are soon informed: "Blood purity became a powerful weapon in the hands of the overtaxed peasantry and town proletariat" (p. 132).

The book is good when it describes. The notable lack of theory would not necessarily disqualify it as a valuable introduction to Spanish-Jewish history for the general reader. But there are serious problems with even this limited function. The book is full of anachronistic concepts and terms that are not capable of describing the real situation. This is the most striking flaw of the book, in my opinion. The author, however, is untroubled: "I have," she writes, "also used contemporary terminology such as multiculturalism, racism, pogrom, etc. to describe conditions and events that occurred before any of these words were voiced" (p. 22). She declines to discuss the legitimacy, or even the advantages and drawbacks of doing so. The results can be disconcerting: Spain after the establishment of the Inquisition was "Europe's first fascist

state" (p. 167); the Jews of fifth-century Hispania enjoyed "equal rights" (p. 36); "laissez-faire policies of the Muslims" (p. 53); Tariq the Moor's "legacy of tolerance" (p. 133); the Reconquest was a "struggle between two nations, one multireligious and liberal, the other exclusive and profoundly conservative" (p. 40).

Erna Paris draws an ahistorical picture of a liberal, tolerant Muslim Spain and contrasts it with an intolerant Christian Spain. What she neglects is the fact that both societies had epochs of more or less religious freedom, but anything like the religious tolerance we know from Western democracies never existed in medieval societies. For Muslims as for Christians (and also for Jews) the "other religions" were scorned and, if possible, their adherents degraded. Such a lack of appreciation for historical perspective does not contribute to our understanding of the medieval world, its values and behaviors. Paris describes the Iberian Peninsula between 711 and 1492 as if it were something like a twentieth-century society, only five hundred to a thousand years premature. The Epilogue's attempt to compare medieval Spain and modern Germany can, on so weak a foundation, produce only superficial parallels and distortions. The book, elegantly written though it is, helps us to understand neither Spanish-Jewish history nor the Holocaust.

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