

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Haim Beinart. *The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain.* Oxford and Portland, Ore.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002. xix + 591 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-874774-41-9.

Reviewed by Elka Klein (Department of Judaic Studies, University of Cincinnati)

Published on H-Judaic (July, 2002)

This book represents the fruits of decades spent in Spanish archives. Much of Beinart's scholarship on Jews and *conversos* in fifteenth-century Spain has long been available in English, but his monumental *Gerush Sefarad*, published in Hebrew in 1994, was until now inaccessible to the non-Hebrew reader. Beinart discusses the expulsion from Spain in minute detail. Chapter 1 addresses the political background for the expulsion, arguing that it must be seen as the joint and equal decision of Ferdinand and Isabella. Chapter 2 discusses the edict of expulsion itself, including the original text and its full translation. Chapter 3 turns to the problems faced by deportees (Beinart's preferred term for the expelled Jews) in liquidating their property, not only houses and land but the numerous assets which they were forbidden to take with them; it includes a community-by-community discussion of the fate of communal property. Chapter 4 addresses the settlement of debts, both those owed by Christians to Jews and those owed by Jews to Christians. Chapter 5, "The Implementation of the Edict," discusses the complex logistics surrounding the actual departure, as well as the tribulations of the deportees. Chapter 6, one of the briefest in the book, looks at Jews prosecuted for smuggling contraband out of the kingdoms. Chapter 7 examines those who chose to return after the expulsion, notwithstanding the requirement to convert, and addresses their motives as well as the practical problems which they faced, including the reclaiming of property often originally sold at a loss in 1492. Chapter 8, at almost ninety pages almost a little monograph in itself, discusses the family of the powerful court Rabbi Abraham Senior, whose apostasy in 1492 made him perhaps the most high-profile of those who chose to convert rather than to leave. Chapter 9 offers a counterweight, in the form of a brief discussion of the almost equally prominent Abravanel family, who by contrast chose exile from Spain in 1492. The book concludes with a variety of descriptions of

the expulsion by contemporaries, Jewish and Christian. Beinart's passion for his subject, his sympathy in particular for the exiles, and his knowledge of the fifteenth-century sources all shine through in this book.

The erudition in this book and the attention to detail are both an advantage and a disadvantage. In chapter after chapter, Beinart provides city-by-city accounts, including for example thirty-four pages on the liquidation of synagogues, and sixty-five pages on the fate of individuals who returned from exile. This detail will make it a useful reference for a reader interested in a particular region or city of Spain. It also emphasizes the greatest strength of this book, which is that it conveys to the reader the immense complexity of the expulsion at a bureaucratic level as well as at the level of human experience. The expulsion was not experienced uniformly across Spain: regional custom, local conditions, and individual quirks all affected the outcome in diverse locales, and the reader of Beinart's book cannot help but realize the difficulties of generalizing about the experience of all deportees.

That being said, this is a book full of trees, but lacking in a forest. The reader unfamiliar with the topic can drown in detail, without the interpretive hand one expects an author to extend. One looks in vain at the end of the long discussions of individual local experience for some attempt to synthesize, to point out patterns which the reader may not have discerned. There are exceptions, such as the discussion of the problems faced by those who returned (pp. 403 ff), but they are far too few. The amount of detail in some places is so overwhelming that I was unsure of what I had learned from this book, even where I thought I saw significant patterns (for example, I think that royal officials played a significant if not consistent role in trying to prevent exploitation of Jews trying to collect loans at a time of great

vulnerability, but I would have liked that perception confirmed).

The reader of this book not only receives little guidance in interpreting the data so generously provided, but receives little orientation in the copious scholarly literature on what is a rather contentious subject. One would never guess the depths of disagreement among scholars on such subjects as the goal of the expulsion, its impact on Spain, the relative roles of Ferdinand, Isabella, and the Inquisition, the intentions of Abraham Senior. On a more tangential level, we learn little about the fidelity of the conversos to Judaism, or on the condition of the Jews in the fifteenth century. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that no attempt was made to update the bibliography with the numerous relevant works published since the original Hebrew edition appeared in 1994 (including Bentzion Netanyahu's controversial 1995 book, *The Origins of the Inquisition in Spain*, which takes some very different positions from Beinart's). It would also have been helpful to the non-Hebrew reader if references had been added to the English translation of Baer's *History of the Jews in Christian Spain* as well as to the Hebrew original.

A less serious but nonetheless significant problem

is the short shrift given to the Crown of Aragon, the smaller component in the joint kingdoms ruled by Ferdinand and Isabella. Beinart's own research has focussed on the larger kingdom of Castile, and he—along with many other scholars—takes the Castilian experience as normative, while discounting the significant constitutional, social, economic and political differences between Castile and Aragon and their impact on the Jews. Hispanists know that “Spain” did not yet exist in the fifteenth century, and understand the role that the reigns of Ferdinand and Isabella played in the merging of what were still two separate realms, but general readers, including Jewish historians who specialize in other lands, may not be aware of this.

In conclusion, *The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* provides much useful data on the diverse experiences of Jews in Spain during the last years of the fifteenth century. For specialists familiar with the scholarly debates, it offers grist for their discussions; for scholars interested in the Jews of particular locales, it offers quick summaries on varied topics. For novices, its greatest value may be to increase awareness of the enormity of the project undertaken by Ferdinand and Isabella when they decided to expel their Jews.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Elka Klein. Review of Beinart, Haim, *The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6518>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.