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QUEEN
ISABELLA I
1451-1504



Today, most people only remember Isabella I of Castile as the queen who financed Christopher Columbus's voyage across the Atlantic. In reality, she was an energetic and capable ruler, who made a whole series of crucial decisions which profoundly influenced Spain and Latin America for centuries, and which indirectly affect many millions of persons today.

Since most of her policies were decided upon after consultation with her shrewd and equally capable husband, Ferdinand of Aragon, and since they were carried out with his close cooperation, it seems reasonable to consider them as a joint entry in this book. However, Isabella's name has been chosen to head this article because it was her suggestions which were adopted in their most important decisions.

Isabella was born in 1451, in the town of Madrigal, in the kingdom of Castile (now part of Spain). As a young girl, she received a strict religious training and became a very devout Catholic. Her half-brother, Henry IV, was king of Castile from 1454 until he died, in 1474. At that time, there was no kingdom of Spain. Instead, the present territory of Spain was divided among four kingdoms: Castile, which was the largest; Aragon, in

the northeast portion of present-day Spain; Granada, in the south; and Navarre, in the north.

In the late 1460s, Isabella, who was the probable heir to the throne of Castile, was the richest heiress in Europe, and various princes sought her hand. Her half-brother, Henry IV, wished her to marry the King of Portugal. However, in 1469, when she was eighteen years old, Isabella slipped off, and despite the opposition of King Henry, married Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Aragon. Angered at Isabella's disobedience, Henry named his daughter Juana to succeed him. Nevertheless, when Henry died, in 1474, Isabella claimed the throne of Castile. The supporters of Juana did not accept this, and a civil war followed. By February 1479, Isabella's forces were triumphant. King John II of Aragon died that same year, and Ferdinand became the king of Aragon. Thereafter, Ferdinand and Isabella ruled most of Spain together.

In theory, the two kingdoms of Aragon and Castile were still separate, and most of their governmental institutions remained separate. In practice, however, Ferdinand and Isabella made all their decisions together, and to the best of their ability acted as the joint rulers of Spain. Throughout the twenty-five years of their combined rule, their basic policy was to create a unified Spanish kingdom governed by a strong monarchy. One of their first projects was the conquest of Granada, the only portion of the Iberian peninsula which was still under Moslem rule. The war commenced in 1481; it ended in January 1492, with the complete victory of Ferdinand and Isabella. With the conquest of Granada, Spain assumed almost exactly the same territorial boundaries that it has today. (The small kingdom of Navarre was annexed by Ferdinand in 1512, after Isabella had died.)

Very early in their reign, Ferdinand and Isabella instituted the Spanish Inquisition. The Inquisition was an ecclesiastical tribunal which combined the powers of judge, jury, prosecuting attorney, and police investigators. It was notorious both for the ferocity of its punishments and for the gross unfairness of its procedures. Suspects had little or no opportunity to refute the charges against them. They were not informed of the full

testimony against them, or even of the names of their accusers. Suspects who denied the charges brought against them were often subjected to gruesome tortures until they confessed. At a conservative estimate, at least two thousand persons were burnt at the stake during the first twenty years of the Spanish Inquisition, and many times that number received lesser punishments.

The Spanish Inquisition was headed by the ultra-fanatical monk, Tomás de Torquemada, who was the personal confessor of Isabella. Although the Inquisition had been authorized by the Pope, it actually was under the control of the Spanish monarchs. The Inquisition was used partly to establish religious conformity, and partly to stamp out political opposition to the monarchs. In England, the feudal lords always retained enough strength to check the power of the king. The Spanish feudal lords also had once been powerful; however, the Spanish monarchs were able to use the Inquisition as a weapon against defiant feudal lords, and were thereby able to establish a centralized and absolute monarchy. They also used it to gain greater control over the Spanish clergy.

However, the principal targets of the Inquisition were those persons suspected of religious deviation, and in particular, Jews and Moslems who had become nominally converted to Catholicism, but who continued to practice their former religions in secret.

At its inception, the Inquisition was not directed against professing Jews. However, in 1492, at the insistence of the fanatical Torquemada, Ferdinand and Isabella signed a decree ordering all Spanish Jews to either convert to Christianity or leave the country within four months, leaving their property behind. For the roughly 200,000 Spanish Jews, this order of expulsion was a disaster, and many died before reaching a safe haven. For Spain, the loss of a high proportion of the country's most industrious and skilled tradesmen and artisans proved a severe economic setback.

When Granada had surrendered, the peace treaty provided that the Moslems living in Spain were to be permitted to continue practicing their religion. In fact, however, the Spanish govern-

ment soon violated this agreement. The Moors therefore rebelled, but were defeated. In 1502, all Moslems living in Spain were forced to choose either conversion to Christianity or exile—the same choice that had been presented to the Jews ten years earlier.

Although Isabella was a devout Catholic, she never permitted her orthodoxy to interfere with her Spanish nationalism. She and Ferdinand struggled hard and successfully to insure that the Catholic Church in Spain was controlled by the Spanish monarchy, rather than by the Pope. This was one of the reasons why the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century never made any headway in Spain.

The most notable event of Isabella's reign, of course, was the discovery of the new world by Christopher Columbus, which also occurred in the fateful year 1492. Columbus's expedition was sponsored by the kingdom of Castile. (However, the story that Isabella had to pawn her jewels to pay for the expedition is not true.)

Isabella died in 1504. During her lifetime, she had given birth to one son and four daughters. The son, Juan, died in 1497. The best known of her daughters was Juana. Ferdinand and Isabella arranged for Juana to marry Philip I (the Handsome), who was the son of the Austrian Hapsburg emperor and was also the heir to the kingdom of Burgundy. As a result of this extraordinary dynastic marriage, Isabella's grandson, the Emperor Charles V, inherited one of the largest empires in European history. He was also elected Holy Roman Emperor, and was the wealthiest and most powerful European monarch of his time. The territories which he either nominally or actually ruled included Spain, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, most of Italy, and parts of France, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia, in addition to a large portion of the Western Hemisphere. Both Charles V and his son Philip II were ardent Catholics who, during their long reigns, used the wealth of the New World to finance wars against the Protestant states of northern Europe. Thus, the dynastic marriage arranged by Ferdinand and Isabella influenced the history of Europe for almost a century after their deaths.

Let me try to summarize the accomplishments and influence of Ferdinand and Isabella. By their joint efforts, they largely succeeded in creating a united kingdom of Spain with essentially the same boundaries that Spain has retained for the last five centuries; they created a centralized, absolute monarchy in Spain; the expulsion of the Moors and the Jews had important consequences both for the exiles and for Spain herself; and their religious bigotry and establishment of the Inquisition had profound effects on the entire future history of Spain.

This last point merits some discussion. In the simplest terms, one might say that the Inquisition placed Spain in an intellectual strait jacket. In the centuries following 1492, most of western Europe underwent an enormous intellectual and scientific flowering. Not so Spain. In a society where the expression of any deviant thoughts placed one in danger of arrest by the Inquisition, it is not surprising that originality was lacking. Other European countries allowed some diversity of opinion. In Spain, the Inquisition permitted only a rigidly orthodox Catholicism. By 1700, Spain was an intellectual backwater compared with the rest of western Europe. Indeed, although it is five centuries since Ferdinand and Isabella established the Spanish Inquisition, and over 150 years since the Inquisition was finally abolished, Spain has still not fully recovered from its effects.

Furthermore, Isabella's sponsorship of Columbus's expedition insured that most of South and Central America became Spanish colonies. This meant that Spanish culture and institutions—including the Inquisition—were established throughout a large portion of the Western Hemisphere. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that just as Spain was intellectually backward compared with most of western Europe, so the Spanish colonies in South America became intellectually less advanced than the English colonies in North America.

In considering where Isabella should be ranked on this list, one factor to be considered is whether much the same events would have occurred without her. It is true that the crusading spirit was already very strong in Spain, because of the 700-year-

long struggle to reconquer the Iberian peninsula from the Moslems. However, when that struggle ended successfully in 1492, Spain had a choice of directions in which to go. It was Ferdinand and Isabella—particularly Isabella—who set the course of Spain in the direction of uncompromising religious orthodoxy. Without her influence, it seems quite possible that Spain would have remained a reasonably pluralistic society.

It is perhaps natural to compare Isabella with the more famous Queen Elizabeth I of England. Elizabeth was at least as capable as Isabella; furthermore, because of her comparatively humane and tolerant policies, she seems a far more admirable ruler. But she was less of an innovator than Isabella, and none of her actions had as profound an influence as did Isabella's establishment of the Inquisition. Although some of Isabella's policies were quite abhorrent, few monarchs in history have had as far-reaching an influence as she had.