

## Reading 2: Spain in 1492

**Background:** In 1492, Europe was not yet a major power. Individual countries were at war and were still recovering from the devastating effects of the bubonic plague, which wiped out a third of the population of Europe in the 1300s.

The Ottoman Empire, historically known as the Turkish Empire (1300-1923), controlled the entire Eastern Mediterranean and coast as well as much of the land over which traders had gone to Asia for centuries. The Ottomans either stopped trade or charged such high taxes on goods that trade with the West became unprofitable.

Countries in Europe were very eager to find a sea route to Asia, where they could make huge profits in silk and spices. This led countries close to the Ottoman Empire (primarily Spain and Portugal) to explore possible sea routes. The Portuguese found sea routes to Asia by going around the bottom of Africa. This was a long and expensive voyage, but profitable. Spain also wanted to find an easier passage to the Indies.

At the same time, Spain was involved in a war with people of North Africa known as Moors. Spain had been made into one country by the marriage of Fernando and Isabel, each of whom ruled large amounts of territory. The Moors controlled parts of what is now southern Spain, and Fernando and Isabel were determined to conquer them and make Spain a completely Catholic country.

**January:** Defeat of the Moors in the South (Grenada)

**March:** Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand (English spelling) issue a decree that all Jews must leave Seville and Castile

**April:** Christopher Columbus signs an agreement with the king and queen to find a new route to the Indies and is given a royal commission to outfit his fleet. He has worked for seven years to persuade the monarchs that this trip is feasible, but only now can they focus on it.

Isabella and Ferdinand order that all Jews are to be expelled from Spain. Estimates range from 40,000 to 100,000 killed and their lands and wealth stolen. The sultan of the Ottoman Empire, a Muslim, sends ships to help the Jews escape and gives them shelter in Turkey. Because Christians could not lend money to each other, Jews were often the only source of financing for large projects. They were not allowed into other occupations. With the Jews gone, Spain would need other sources of income.

**October 12** Columbus's ships, the *Nina*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria* make landfall on a Caribbean island he names San Salvador (now in the Bahamas). He believes he has reached China or Japan.

Adapted from <http://www.historyorb.com/events/date/1492> and *Columbus: His Enterprise, Exploding the Myth*, by Hans Koning (revised 1991)

For more on the Ottoman Empire:

<http://geography.about.com/od/historyofgeography/a/The-Ottoman-empire.htm>