The Reconquista:
The Complications of Just War and the Possibility of Genocide

By: Matthew A. Delanoy

Advisor: Dr. Christopher Bellitto

Reader: Dr. Brid Nicholson

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Matthew Delanoy

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"To me an unnecessary action, or shot, or casualty, was not only waste but sin."
- T.E. Lawrence

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Abstract

Historians who specialize in the study of the Holocaust and genocide often view the medieval period as merely a precursor to the genocides that dominated the 18th, 19th, and 20th century. These historians typically argue that the medieval period marked a shift from tribal prejudices to more extreme and widespread religious intolerance; one example being the evolution of tribal anti-Judaism to religious anti-Judaism which would later influence racial anti-Semitism. However, the medieval period was much more than a stepping stone in genocide studies; it was in fact a period plagued by violence and social injustices, which may qualify for categorization as genocide. One such event was the *Reconquista*, the campaigns fought by the Christian Europeans to reclaim lands taken by the Muslims from the eighth through the fifteenth centuries which resulted in the ethnic cleansing of both Jews and Muslims from Spain.

My thesis will be broken down with two central purposes. The first is my expected conclusion that, via my research of primary and secondary sources, the *Reconquista* was indeed genocide--not in the traditional view of what defines genocide as Raphael Lemkin argued, but following the revisionist, extra-legal, and "post liberal" definition of genocide which includes cultural as well as physical destruction as argued by historians such as Peter Balakian. The second part of my thesis will look at the misconception of military historians and historians of genocide who typically view war and genocide as separate occurrences; that is to say that genocide may accompany war and war may accompany genocide but the two are not intrinsically linked. Instead, my argument is that in dealing with holy war and total wars such as the *Reconquista*, genocide or at least genocidal actions are a natural aspect of war that cannot be ignored.

Introduction:

Genocide, Victimology, and Interpretations of Genocide

The study of the Holocaust and genocides in historical terms is a difficult and complex subject. Few other subjects stir the emotions and attract a variety of opinions and ideas from historians, sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, theologians, and academics of other fields as genocide studies do. The majority of these individuals focus on more recent genocides, that is to say genocides during and following the post-Columbus colonial period. One could argue this is due to the more readily available source material. However, by doing so, certain aspects of historical inquiry are not explored. As academics in the field of genocide studies, it becomes imperative to investigate events where destruction of human life occurred, to research primary sources and secondary sources, and based on said findings, come to a conclusion whether genocide occurred or was attempted. One such event or series of events that cannot be overlooked is the *Reconquista*.

Traditionally, the *Reconquista* has been viewed as a standalone event in medieval studies and predecessor to the Age of Exploration. In its most elementary view, the *Reconquista* was merely its etymological definition: the Spanish reconquering. However, this is not entirely accurate. The Reconquest was much more complex than a mere war to reclaim lands. The Reconquest served as a backdrop for the emergence of holy war ideology and some of the worst atrocities committed in the Middle Ages. It was not revenge that drove the Reconquest, but a multitude of factors; the largest and strongest push for reconquest was in fact spurred on by the religious zealotry that the crusades produced. For all intents and purposes, the ideas in this paper will be presented using the "pluralist" interpretation of the *Reconquista*, which is the notion that the crusades were not merely campaigns to the east to reclaim Jerusalem, but also applied to the

spiritual and military campaigns to the Iberian Peninsula.[1]

The Reconquest cannot be broken down simply as a mere war or series of wars. The sheer length of time, the political twists and turns, the tide of war constantly turning, alliances being forged and broken all complicate the situation. A common misconception is that the Reconquest was Islam versus Christianity. It was simply not so. Christians fought alongside Muslims, Muslims fought alongside Jews, and relative peace and harmony occurred often in the many kingdoms of Iberia. However, holy war ideology and interpretations of just war theory would inevitably break this peace and lead not only to total war, but in many regards, genocidal actions.

Genocide, arguably the worst crime committable by an institution or group, comes from the Greek word *genos*, which translates to race, birth, or genus and the suffix *cide,* which translates to kill or massacre. Coined by Raphael Lemkin in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust, this new crime was brought to the forefront of the international community as the Holocaust had so drastically changed how the world viewed human atrocities. This rally call led to the creation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, there is no law without language, no language without ambiguity, and therefore no law without ambiguity. That is to say that law while supposedly absolute and uncompromising, is up to individual interpretation of those who enforce and then pass judgment.

Following the genocides of the early 20th century, Lemkin made great strides by helping to define genocide in its most legal and straightforward way. His attempt was to ensure the convention was a success and therefore needed strict guidelines as most laws seemingly need. In

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[1] Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 21.

this legal interpretation, the crime of genocide was henceforth dictated as this, killing members

of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately

inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in

whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly

transferring children of the group to another group.[2] Lemkin's definition also included who

would be accountable or punishable for the crime of genocide which included the actual

perpetrators, conspirators, inciters to commit genocide, those who attempt genocide, as well as

those complicit in the crime of genocide.

Major factors go into defining genocide as well which include agents, victims, goals,

scale, strategies, and intent. This is significant just as similarly we make distinctions between

what defines war. Obviously a skirmish between two rival groups such as the police officers and

a criminal organization does not count as a war just as murder does not count as genocide. This

requires some interpretation as well however. Looking at events such as the controversial

revenge blanket bombing of Dresden by Allied Forces complicates the question. Was a civilian

population targeted? The answer is yes, but it was not part of a larger scale effort to destroy the

German population. Such an event would constitute a war crime but not the crime of genocide.

The targeting of non-combatants and civilians is typical of genocidal tendencies and actions, but

the scale and intent are the more defining determinants.

Since the 1940's and 1950's, a newer post-liberal interpretation of genocide began to

enter the realm of academia and the international community. This post-liberal interpretation

included the notion of cultural genocide. Historians such as Peter Balakian have helped this

interpretation grow by claiming that it is not merely the destruction of the individual or the

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[2] UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, 9 December 1948, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 78, p. 277, http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3ac0.html (accessed 9/02/2014)

people that is genocidal, but the attempt or act of destroying the culture of a people is equally genocidal in nature. This is, however, difficult to define or in a legal sense, convict.

To understand this post-liberal interpretation of genocide, one must first define what a group and an individual is. This is not easy as it brings up moral, philosophical, scientific, and religious debates. If a group or individual is stripped of everything that makes the group or the individual unique or has cultural ties to, are they truly the same? In looking at the historical *Reconquista* in Spain which ended in the 1492 and 1502 expulsions of Jews and Muslims, those residing were essentially given three choices, death, expulsion, or conversion. Adolf Hitler and the radical Nazi Party, who defined people on racial lines and therefore conversion was not an option, dreamt of a Germany pure and without Jews and other undesirables, so did the Christian kingdoms of Spain. The methods may have been drastically different, but the result was still the same. While German Jews lost their lives, Spanish Jews and Andalusian Muslims were forced to accept a new religion, die, or embark on a long and treacherous journey which many perished.

One of the most undeniable and defining features in nearly all genocides from the ancient period to modernity is the self-perception of the perpetrators as victims or at least potential victims themselves. Before delving into the question of the *Reconquista*, clarification on the victim turned perpetrator relationship must be clarified. This is akin, though on a much larger level, to a bullied individual becoming a bully himself. According to Theravive counselors, "Bullies are very often people who have been bullied or abused themselves. Sometimes they are experiencing life situations they cannot cope with, that leave them feeling helpless and out of control."[3] In essence, this is a passing down of violent or abusive tendencies, which has the potential to repeat multiple times like a disease passed between perpetrator and victim.

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[3] "The Psychology of Bullying," *Theravive.* 2014. http://www.theravive.com/research/The-Psychology-Of-Bullying (accessed 08/22/2014)

This psychological and social response, in terms of historical significance, can be far larger in both numbers and response. While the example of bullying usually involves one individual, the victim turned bully or perpetrator has the potential to resonate within entire societies. A subjugated group, if given the opportunity or takes the opportunity through political or violent measures can become the dominant group. This conceptually, is difficult to understand; after all, modern humanitarians and activists call for equality and equal representation within societies. No humanitarian would have issue with a slave rebellion that resulted in the emancipation of a previously subjugated group. However, if this slave group was given greater power and then in turn discriminated against the previous subjugators, that would be a different story; the story of victims becoming perpetrators.

Based on this theory of repeating violence, how are we to interpret the various genocides that stain human history? Surely not all genocides follow this simple pattern. Could something so terrible, cold, and destructive be summed up merely claiming that violence and persecution are merely cyclical social and psychological responses that result in genocide? That answer is ultimately no as many factors play a role in such things. Many victims of bullying respond quite differently with some becoming highly successful, despite their abuse. However, the bullying does put the victim at greater risk to become a bully himself, similarly to that of a whole society.

From a historical perspective, the victim to perpetrator theory can take many forms, which is highly influenced by the societies themselves and the times in which they reside. In its simplest form, one could break down victim turned perpetrators into three distinct groups. The first group would be those engaged in a physical conflict with another group, who then turns to genocide as retaliation, retribution, or to defeat the possibility of future conflicts. The second group would be those politically or socially subjugated by a dominant class, who given the

opportunity would switch roles. The third and most complex group would be those with a less tangible feeling of being victimized, those who view they have been wronged or threatened by a group in a racial, religious, or philosophical way.

Let us first look at the first group, those victims who suffered physically or were engaged in combat and then turned to genocide and mass murder. This, to most, is one of the simplest to comprehend. When considering the events surrounding a war, tensions quickly rise. Local populations cry out for an eye for an eye and hard-liner politicians and military minds may argue that any means is justifiable in the end as long as it brings peace or victory.

One ancient example of this would be the Punic Wars fought between Rome and Carthage. From the 260's BC to 146 BC, Rome and Carthage fought three massive wars. The first war was merely over territory and Carthage was defeated. Years later, the combat was ensued when Hannibal invaded Rome winning key and decisive victories such as the battle of Cannae which resulted in the deaths of over 50,000 Roman legionnaires. According to Dr. E.L. Skip Knox, no one had ever had such success against the Romans on the battlefield.[4] Despite this, Hannibal and the Carthaginians failed to conquer Rome and left defeated. According to Knox, the Third Punic War was agitated by Roman senators such as Cato seeking to destroy completely Carthage before they could rise up again.

> Cato's slogan was implemented in typical thorough-going Roman style. The walls of Carthage were torn down, the city put to the torch. The citizens were sold into slavery and the Senate passed a decree that no one could live where Carthage once stood.[5]

While never fully proven, myths about Romans salting the land of Carthage to make it barren and fruitless still remain. Men were slaughtered. Women and children were sold into

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[4] E.L Skip Knox."The Punic Wars: The Battle of Cannae," *Boise State University.*
http://europeanhistory.boisestate.edu/westciv/punicwar/09.shtml (accessed 8/11/2014)
[5] E.L Skip Knox."The Punic Wars: The Third Punic War," *Boise State University.*
http://europeanhistory.boisestate.edu/westciv/punicwar/17.shtml (accessed 8/11/2014)

slavery. In layman's terms, Carthage was utterly destroyed, city and people alike. In this case, Rome turned to genocide due to the fact that they felt they had no other choice in dealing with Carthage and for retribution for the previous two Punic Wars. Other smaller such examples can be seen historically in combat situations where soldiers massacre villages or maim and kill prisoners of war. Atrocities such as this are sadly commonplace in almost every known war.

Looking at the second group of perceived victims turned perpetrators, those politically or socially subjugated who then turned on their former dominant class; the genocide of Rwanda is a prime example. This genocide, waged against the Tutsis by the Hutus, was one of the most horrific human atrocities in memory due to the amount of press coverage, world knowledge and lack of speed in intervening, and the primitive and brutal ways the Tutsis suffered. According to Robert Melson, "This was the real thing: more than a half-million Tutsi murdered – three quarters of the population – and the attempt by the Rwandan state and the Hutu majority exterminate every last Tutsi."[6] Why would the Hutus slaughter so many of their own countrymen? The answer lies in the colonial rule of the Germans and Belgians who once owned the land; choosing to rule through the Tutsis and making them a superior race and class above the Hutus, giving them special treatment and privilege.[7]As years passed, resentment of the Tutsis by Hutus, political in-fighting, armed conflicts, and a society largely uneducated and illiterate made the perfect breeding ground for violence. According to Melson, "The genocide resulted from the deliberate choice of a modern elite to foster hatred and fear and to keep itself in power, but that elite found a ready willingness on the part of the Hutu masses to join in the slaughter."[8] Radio stations called for the killing of cockroaches and traitors and the masses obliged, most

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[6] Robert Melson."Modern Genocide in Rwanda." *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective,* edited by Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 325.
[7] Melson."Modern Genocide in Rwanda," 329.
[8] Melson."Modern Genocide in Rwanda*,"* 333.

often with the machete and home tools. The world stood idly by for too long and did not intervene before the Tutsis were almost completely destroyed. In this instance, genocide was the result of a perfect storm of opportunity and a long stemmed hatred of the Tutsis who had been in the dominant class.

As said previously, the third type of perceived victim turned perpetrator was the most complex and difficult to explain. Those who fall into this category could feel a racial or biological threat, though none may exist. These perpetrators almost suffer from paranoia or illusion of threat, usually created by stereotypes, lies, and racism. The prime example would be the Holocaust. In a practical sense, the Jews, who accounted for such a small percentage of the population that they in no way could topple Germany militarily, were no physical threat. However, the Nazis viewed them as part of an international syndicate hell-bent on destroying the non-Jewish world through breeding, back-dealing in politics and causing Germany to lose World War I, creating communism, and controlling the world media, banks, and other infrastructures. While this was entirely untrue, the Nazis believed it undeniably and from this, the Nazi plan of destruction was given life. These three types of perpetrators share a sense of victimhood and all see themselves as being wronged, almost balancing, fixing, protecting, or saving themselves. While this theory does not apply to all genocides and every perpetrator, it is an alarming coincidence that so many historically follow this trend.

Christian Spain by the 15th century had in fact taken on the motivations of all three of the categories of victims turned perpetrators. They had been victimized by bloody wars that spanned centuries, they had suffered in the *dhimmis* system under Muslim rule, and the perceived threat of Islam itself had roots dating back centuries as well.

Given the lengthy history of the *Reconquista* and the complicated and shifting nature of governments and politics during this period, to argue that genocide occurred is much more difficult than the genocides of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Still, what becomes apparent is that both the Christians and Muslims were guilty of many acts of violence, human rights violations, and pogroms throughout the campaigns. However, the Christian kingdoms of Spain in the 15th century made a decisive change in their protocols of dealing with non-Christians. These exclusionary actions, expulsions, forced or coerced conversions and mass murders were indeed genocidal in nature.

Chapter 1

From Conquered to Conquerors: The Islamic Invasion and the Beginning of the Reconquest

In order to come to an understanding if genocide played a role in the *Reconquista*, one must look at the relationship between the Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Europe and primarily Spain and what was the political, religious, and military atmosphere like in its regions. Spain by the 600's was a blend of Visigoth and Hispano-Romans who practiced Athanasian Christianity as well as a sizeable Jewish population. The relations between Jews and Christians had been complicated and often violent. This was heavily influenced from the prejudices that evolved in the ancient period. Tribal anti-Judaism was the first form anti-Semitism to take root. This form originated in the Middle East in the ancient period of history before Christianity. According to Phyllis Goldstein, many stereotypes of Jews including impossible goals of conquest became prevalent in this time.[9] However, Goldstein remarks this was not unique or uncharacteristic when two civilizations came into contact with each other, though the Jews resisted more than most groups and for this incurred more violence and mistrust. Conquered groups were supposed to be subjected to the will of their masters. The Jews during the ancient period were set apart by their faith and refusal to accept the gods of their masters and by many accounts suffered more than other groups and this trend would continue into Visigothic Spain as Jews did not convert nor entirely assimilate into Visigothic culture.

During the early years of the creation of this Visigoth state some hundred miles away, the religious prophet Muhammad was setting into motion a radical development in human history, the creation of Islam. Islam spread with great rapidity throughout the Middle East and Africa.

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[9] Phyllis Goldstein. *A Convenient Hatred: The History of Anti Semitism.* (Brookline: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 2012), 103.