Panel: “Heresy, Inquisition, and the State”

Rebecca Jacobs

Title: Spain’s Complex Image: The Connections Between the Black Legend and the Spanish Inquisition

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Paper written for: History J495: Senior Seminar “Medieval Heresy” (Fall 2013)

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Abstract

The Spanish Inquisition: an evil, dominating institution imposed upon the people of Spain, used to persecute, torture, and kill Protestants that is just one illustration of the barbarous, greedy, and backwards Spanish character. This popular image or any variation of this image was an untrue and exaggerated image that often characterized the Spanish Inquisition and the nation of Spain until the twentieth century. The goal of this paper was to trace the origins of the Black Legend (the traditional literature that criticized the people, history, and national character of Spain due to cruel treatment of Native Americans in the country’s conquests, and for participation in heinous acts that demonstrated negative aspects of Spanish character, such as the Spanish Inquisition) through the Spanish Inquisition to illustrate how the Black Legend was created and how this ideology warped public perception of the image of Spain and the Spanish Inquisition. This paper concludes that the negative image that Spain acquired, which arose from the Black Legend, was a result of the subjective writings of English Protestants angered by religious differences, Dutch Protestants in conflict with Spain over the Revolts of the Netherlands, Spanish missionaries, like Bartolome Las Casas, who were disheartened by the treatment of indigenous people during Spanish conquest, and criticisms from French Enlightenment thinkers, such as Montesquieu, who used examples of Spanish fanaticism and barbarianism to account for Spain’s lack of progress during this time. As a result of the works from these sources, the Black Legend has created a bias that has affected how the popular audience, as well as how historians have viewed the Spanish Inquisition. As more and more has been discovered about the Black Legend and its relationship to Spain, the historiography of Spain and the Spanish Inquisition has rapidly evolved to illustrate a less biased, more comprehensive picture of Spain from the late fifteenth to early nineteenth centuries. Using primary and secondary sources from the time period, as well as secondary sources on the Spanish Inquisition and Black Legend from more recent scholars, this paper traces how opinions have changed about both the Black Legend and the Spanish Inquisition through academia and public opinion and also examines the complex relationship between the Black Legend and the Spanish Inquisition.
Bibliographical Note

Rebecca made extensive use of secondary sources from the time period to trace the relationship of the Black Legend and the image of Spain, as well as supplemented these with primary sources from the time period, such as the writings of Bartolome de Las Casas. She also used contemporary secondary sources from scholars like Henry Kamen and B. Netanyahu to examine the Spanish Inquisition, as well as used anthologies that helped trace the effects of the Black Legend through each region and time period discussed in the paper.