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FAMOUS CRIMINAL PHRASES: LIMPIEZA DE SANGRE

Ivan Ivlampie(a)*

(a) Ph.D. Associate Professor, Dunarea de Jos University from Galati, Romania,

E-mail: ivanivlampie @yahoo.com,

Abstract

History of mankind has recorded numerous proverbial phrases of great cultural significance. There are, however, such phrases that have a different, social-political meaning. In previous studies, we have highlighted the expressions égalité, fraternité and что делать? This study presents and analyzes the phrase limpieza de sangre. Present on the territory of the Iberian Peninsula starting with the 15th century, the purity of blood formula remains in force until 1870. In this case, we consider a form of racial discrimination, with systematic victims and persecutions, involving several actors: the State, the Church - through the Inquisition, the civilian population. Targeted are the ethnic groups and minorities brought to the European peninsula by the hazard of history. Limpieza de sangre is the evil that, when projected onto the Other, justifies crimes, banishment, forced conversions, social and professional discrimination.

Keywords: limpieza de sangre; Inquisition; racial discrimination; intolerance;

1. INTRODUCTION

Although it is a product of the 15th century in the Spanish society, the phrase limpieza de sangre should be considered an effect of the experiences of the historical past, which, when combined with the visions and intentions of the Spanish present, with the European ideology of those times, will give birth to a formula on which a nation has been founded.

Geographically speaking, Spain is said to be the head of Africa and the tail of Europe, a metaphor that can also be accounted for culturally. The Muslim invasion of 711 and the seven-year conquest of the peninsula allowed for the coming into Europe of both the Eastern civilization and the lost or forgotten culture of Greek and Roman Antiquity. The domination of three up to eight centuries created in Iberia a melting pot mixing the influences of various cultures. It is not, however, just the ideas that clash and interfere, but, equally important, people. In this Hispanic-Moorish melting pot, war would alternate with peaceful exchanges, ethnic and religious differences, with mixed marriages and conversions. A relative tolerance has imposed among the two societies, each with their own hierarchy, described as follows by historian Pierre Vilar: "For Muslims, it consisted of Arab rulers, Berber soldiers,



then renegade Christians and then Christian autochthonous population, named Mozarab, while for Christians, of the Spanish clergy and nobility, old Christian commoners, reconverted Mozarabs, newly converted Christians and, lastly, Mudejares [Muslims who lived on Christian soil] who had kept their faith, customs and judges. Let's also add the Jews, respected for a long period of time." (Vilar, pp. 17-18).

Reconquista (722-1492) was the reaction of the Christian kingdoms in the north of the peninsula to the Islamic conquest. A Christian crusade different from the rest of the European crusades, an intermittent and long lasting war, the Reconquista created kingdoms and allowed for the discrepant ascension of some and rare moments of unity, as was the one of 1212, which resulted in the extraordinary victory from Las Navas de Tolosa. The centuries-long holy war produced a state of mind of expansion and independence, stimulated honor and pride and gave birth to the knightly ideals. Enthusiasm would come over all social categories, from grand and small nobility to commoners, who would ensure the repopulation of the reconquered areas. Even the clergy, understanding the importance of the armed fight for faith, would militate within the paradigm of expansionist reasoning, which would favor, among old Christians, the maintaining of social balance. The independence spirit and the local vanity of the victories achieved determined the political disintegration of Spain during the Reconquista rather than its unity. The effects would be visible in the long-lasting process of centralization and unification of the state, in which the purification of blood would play an important part.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Limpieza de sangre is a formula in a political ideology that would dominate Spain in the 15th-19th centuries. It is based on the distinction between the so-called pure blood and the impure blood. The pure-blooded are Spanish, original dwellers of the Iberian Peninsula, genuine believers and Christians, while the other dwellers of different faith or race, are considered impure. The premise is thus a simple but primitive prejudice. The phrase originated from the habit of the Spanish noblemen who, in the battles with the Moors, would tuck up their sleeves to display their blue veins, visible owing to the white color of their skin. This way, they would emphasize their superiority to the Moors, whose dark skin made impossible the visibility of the blue color. By birth, the blue-blooded warriors are pure, as they are not contaminated with the ones with darker skin. The idea of racial superiority is thus asserted.

"The choice for blue for blood is explained, for the most part, by the fact that the costumes, coats of arms and especially cordons and ribbons of decorations were azure-colored back then, blue also being the preferred, representative color of high aristocracy. This way, they wanted to single themselves out from the order of clergy, who had adopted red-colored clothing (hence the name Cardinal Red) and especially from "the green coats" of the folk (green being the color of the commoners and, accordingly, considered vulgar)" (Berg, pp. 321-322)

It is interesting that this Spanish idea seduced the entire European aristocracy, segregating the population on the two levels, according to the color of their blood. However, unlike the rest of Europe, as we will try to prove, in Spain, this discrimination would not operate only at the caste level, would not be socially limited, but would become a tool of eugenics through terror.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is the Spanish specificity of blood-based discrimination? From the above, it would be reduced to that it becomes a weapon of a new crusade. One may also add that this crusade is fought on the Christian continent, on a territory that reentered the possession of Christianity without the allogeneic factors to represent any imminent danger.

Spain was geared towards blood-based discrimination when it could come down just to the color of the skin, as the Europeans would do in their colonial empires, even with genocides involved, in some cases. What was the reason for this much more radical solution here, in 'Europe's tail'?

Can we identify and qualify among the actions of consolidating the Spanish nation some acts as going under the category of genocide? And if that is the case, whose responsibility are they?

4. RESEARCH METHODS

The end of Reconquista coincides with the competition of the Spanish kingdoms in the unification of the peninsula. Portugal leaves this competition with its strong separatism and with its acquiring the

independence that would further mark its status as a self-contained nation. With the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon to Isabella of Castile, the rule of the Catholic kings began, thus laying the foundations of the modern Spanish nation. This process will be long lasting, in the context of the centrifugal political movements of claiming regionalist privileges.

The first Catholic kings understood that the tool of political unification of the kingdom could only be the Catholic religion. It had to be imposed on Jews and Muslims, by conversion. In the case of a refusal, the method applied should be expulsion. In this context, in 1478 is founded the institution that would supervise the process of religious unification: the Spanish Inquisition. Subject to Rome, in fact, it carried out its activity independently from the papacy, up to its dissolution in 1820. The general Inquisitor is appointed by the king and there is a complete overlapping of the state apparatus and the inquisitorial power. This cooperation of the two powers is satisfactorily argued by Bartolomé Bennassar in his article, "The Inquisitorial Power" (chap. III).

Until the imposition of the religious unification policy, there had been mutual tolerance in the Christian, Mosaic and Muslim communities. This fact was the result of the military balance between the Moors and the Christians, a balance upset after the victory of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212). Gradually, the spirit of the Reconquista would act against the other communities in the peninsula. In the 14th century, things become even more serious because of various calamitous events, such as the plague, economic depressions or military conflicts. These events arouse in the public consciousness the need of finding a scapegoat. The chosen one was the Jew. As in other places in Europe, in Spain too, pogroms were targeted against the ones considered guilty for the black plague. In 1391, Jewish neighborhoods were under attack in many cities: for example, in Seville, more than 4,000 people died. The result of these anti-Semitic actions was their massive conversion to Christianity, accepting baptism being the only means of saving one's life. Conversions would continue after these pogroms, but public opinion was that the new Christians were false Christians, that they were secretly practicing their old rituals and religion. The violence against the newly converted burst out in 1449 in Toledo, during a popular riot led by Pero Sarmiento. The rioters were opposing a tax whose collector was a converted Jew, Alonso de Cota. The crowd entered his house, ransacking and setting it on fire. Many of the Jews converted to Christianity who fought back were hung in the public square. Sarmiento decided that Christian converts would no longer have the right to testify in trials or hold public office in the city administration, under the penalty of death and seizure of assets. This event is the debut of the process of racial discrimination and the starting point of the practice of *limpieza de sangre*, which gradually becomes general, at both territorial and professional levels.

The first Catholic kings, Ferdinand and Isabella, turn racial and religious discrimination into state policy. From 1481 to 1492, measures were taken to enclose the Jews in ghettos and to banish the non-converts. The banishment order of March 31st, 1492, applying to the entire Spanish territory, resulted in the conversion of more than 200,000 people. The ones who did not accept baptism, around 150,000 people, were exiled. The new converts increased the number of those suspected of heresy. The Inquisition was fully legitimized to define and exercise its reason of being. In 1481, in Seville, takes place the first *auto-da-fé*, six people being burnt at the stake. After this moment, the number of those sentenced to burning at the stake is unprecedented. The exile, death penalty, imprisonment and the seizure of assets were the first forms of manifestation of ethnic purging.

The wave of cruelty of the Inquisition from its foundation until the former half of the 16th century will diminish as a result of Jews' extermination and self-exile. This allowed the institutionalization of the *limpieza de sangre* principle. The old Christians prevented the half-blood's access to universities, to military and religious orders, and forbade their holding public office or inquisitorial positions. (Ironically, Torquemada, the first Inquisitor and Isabella's advisor in the matters of religious unification, was one of those conversos later on persecuted because of *limpieza de sangre*.) Mixed marriages were also forbidden.

Purity of blood brought fear related to ascendancy to Spain. Gradually, the test of blood purity would degenerate by falsifying documents and genealogies and by bribing witnesses. Such practices could not be avoided since half-bloodedness was a reality throughout the centuries and since it had been noted, in full 15th century, that the noblest families had Jewish blood.

The procedure of trying the purity of blood was carried out with the candidate's testimony that he did not have Moor or Jewish origins. On his knees, with the right hand on the Bible, the questioned would indicate the names of his parents and grandparents and his place of birth. The Church and Council

delegates would then organize an inquiry to assert the truthfulness of the declaration. Then, there was an interrogation pursued by an inquiry commission which would travel in the field to question witnesses. Following the report of this commission, the candidate was admitted or rejected. Just as the direct descendants of Moors or Jews, the rejects were sentenced to inaptitude. They were banished from all public offices and, had they infringed these interdictions, they were subject to substantial fines.

A new wave of repression of the Inquisition spread after the annexation of Portugal by the Spanish crown (1580-1640). After the banishment edict of March 31st, 1492, a great number of Jews had found refuge in Portugal, which had a tolerant policy. This policy came to an end in 1547, when Rome instituted an Inquisition court, similar to the Spanish pattern. The auto-da-fes affected a small number of people, but in 1580, with the burning at the stake of 222 Marranos (Christianized Jews who were still faithful to Judaism), the warning signal was clearly received. A massive exodus to Spain and the American colonies began, although the legislation forbade the Jews' access to the Indies.

In Spain, the new exiled lived peacefully until 1624, thanks to the large sums of money delivered to the royal treasury, which was in great impasse at the time. But, in 1625 and 1626 a new wave of arrests bursts out, mostly targeting the Portuguese Marranos. The Crown's financial quandary makes it address the wealthy banking oligarchy of the converted Jews instead of resorting to the bankrupt Genovese bankers. Four years before losing Portugal, the Spanish Inquisition is unleashed on their new bankers, seizing large amounts of their money and arresting and banishing people. After 1640, owing to their Portuguese origin, the Marranos became even more suspected. More than 12,000 wealthy families chose the exile, which the commoners could not afford. Until the end of the 17th century, the Inquisition did their job: arrests, seizures of assets, and burnings at the stake.

The last wave of repressions took place during the reign of Philip V (1700-1746), with similar consequences. Catherine Brault-Noble and Marie-José Marc, in their article 'Religious and social unification. Minority suppression' (Bennassar, chap. V) describe the final forms of persecutions against the Jewish communities in the following terms: "Towards the middle of the 18th century, the conversos community was no longer a serious religious problem. The last wave of repressions triggered the decline and annihilation of the Judaic practices in Spain. At the end of the 18th century, the trials against conversos were scarce. (...) This fast diminishing was the consequence of the lack of 'raw material' and of the evolution of thought." (Bennassar, pp. 137-138).

The purity of blood also targeted the descendants of the Moors. Unlike the conversos, elements of incipient bourgeoisie with a high cultural level, the Moors preponderantly belonged to the rural proletariat. After the conquest of Granada (1492), this minority was forced to choose either baptism or banishment. By 1526, it was said that there were no longer Muslims in the country. These forced converts (Moriscos) were also suspected of not having chosen Christianity in earnest, of secretly practicing Islam and of being still faithful to their old food and hygiene habits, as well as to their customs related to birth, marriage, funerals, celebrating and fasting. In addition, the Moriscos would stand out with their clothing and their language, algaravia.

After each forced baptism, there followed the armed riot of the converts, which was usually ended with official reactions that ratified the complete assimilation. The children's Catholic education policies, the seizing of Islamic literature and the encouragement of mixed marriages faced the resistance of this social category. Diligent, austere, enterprising and content with small earnings, the Moriscos enjoyed the protection of the seniors who would exploit this workforce, but were despised by the majority of Christians, who hated and feared them.

In what concerns their heretic practices, the Inquisition acted abusively especially at the level of seizing their assets. The burning at the stake, targeting the religious leaders and abjurers, occurred much more rarely than in the Jews' case. And if the latter managed to mingle with the Christian society, the Moriscos could not be assimilated. This determined Philip V to order general banishment. From 1609 to 1614, around 300,000 Moriscos left Spain.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The politics of the Inquisition had, in its beginnings, a religious motivation. The Catholic kings supported it as they were interested in religious unification. The religious exclusivism in its initial stage, as a spiritual follow-up to the Reconquista, corresponds to a real necessity. Becoming a day-by-day

bureaucratic issue, the activity of the Inquisition ends up being pursuing other criteria: people's hatred, the Crown's financial problems, the economic rapacity of the institution itself. *Limpieza de sangre* is the formula that matches these new criteria, adding to the obsession of religious unity. "The status of *limpieza de sangre*, created exclusively by the old Christian, marked by his own military prestige as victor against the Moorish heresy, inoculated the Castile mentality with the concept of racial and social discrimination." (Bennassar, p. 139). Although baptism saved many of persecutions, *limpieza de sangre* remained a barrier to their social affirmation. It would strike at the most dynamic economic sectors, and thus, the Spanish society failed to enter the capitalist world. The victory of Catholic unity is also the disdain for making profit and for the idea of labor. The spiritual hegemony that the Catholic kings tried to impose on Europe, as an expression of the obsession of internal religious unity, would eventually lead to the ruining of the State finances. In this respect, the persecution of the Inquisition has proven useless. The spiritual masters of the people, the monks and the clergy tried, as a follow-up to the Reconquista, to carry on fighting and win the final victory based on a biological principle: the blood. As in any battle, blood spill was present, but, on a civilian front, spilling blood is genocidal. The two ethnic groups were almost erased from the society. The ones who remained in Spain were pursued, caught and sentenced. Their number is still hypothetical." (Bennassar, p. 139).

Limpieza de sangre, as the Inquisition's tool and mass psychosis, was the greatest restraint of the development of Spain, which failed a great destiny, considering its colonial conquests. Religious psychology deeply permeated the national psychology, and it is probably not hazardous that Spain's favorite show is *Corrida*.

In her book, *L'Occident et les Autres: histoire d'une suprématie*, Sophie Bessis inquires: "In the history of the West, does Nazism leave the impression of an inventor or an heir? Must we regard it as an accident or as a result inscribed in the possibilities of a history that started centuries ago, in the Spanish age of that *limpieza de sangre*, as the latter's monstrous but logical apostasy?" (Bessis, p. 69) The question is challenging and represents a path to the research of a new form of genocide, in another space and in another time.

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