Refugees in Western Europe

Introduction

In other areas that we will study in this module, widespread refugee movements in the late 17th century were a new phenomenon that reflected widespread social breakdowns taking place. Not so in Europe, which was awash with refugees already for almost two hundred years. Indeed, Nicholas Terpstra, a history professor at the University of Toronto, has convincingly argued that that religious refugees first became a mass phenomenon in history around 1490s–1520s. There is no doubt that developments internal to Europe were generating these refugees.

Late Medieval Jewish and Muslim Refugees

The process that led to these refugee crises in European history started in the Middle Ages, when most Latin (or Western) Christians in Europe developed an understanding of place of the world that we can all 'sacral communalism.'* According to this worldview, members of a community were bound together not just as fellow residents, but as a sacred community of the faithful, whose salvation was tied to one another. In such a situation, perceived threats to the body of the faithful – called heretics or infidels – posed existential dangers both to individual members and to the community..

Thus, all residents were expected to be a part of the local parish church. Those who were not (because they were Muslim or Jewish or because they were Christians who held unorthodox beliefs or lacked spiritual commitment) posed a threat to the community. In cases when noble territories consolidated into large-scale states – usually through a mix of marriage alliances and military expansion – sacral communalism could apply to states too. In such cases, rulers regarded those they saw as heretics and infidels as dangers not only to their divinely-appointed authority, but to the kingdom itself.

* This did not include the Eastern Orthodox Church or smaller non-Nicene Christian groups of Christians.

Key Terms:

Sacral communalism

The Spanish Inquisition

Conversos

The Reformation

Huguenots

Edict of Nantes

Dragonnades
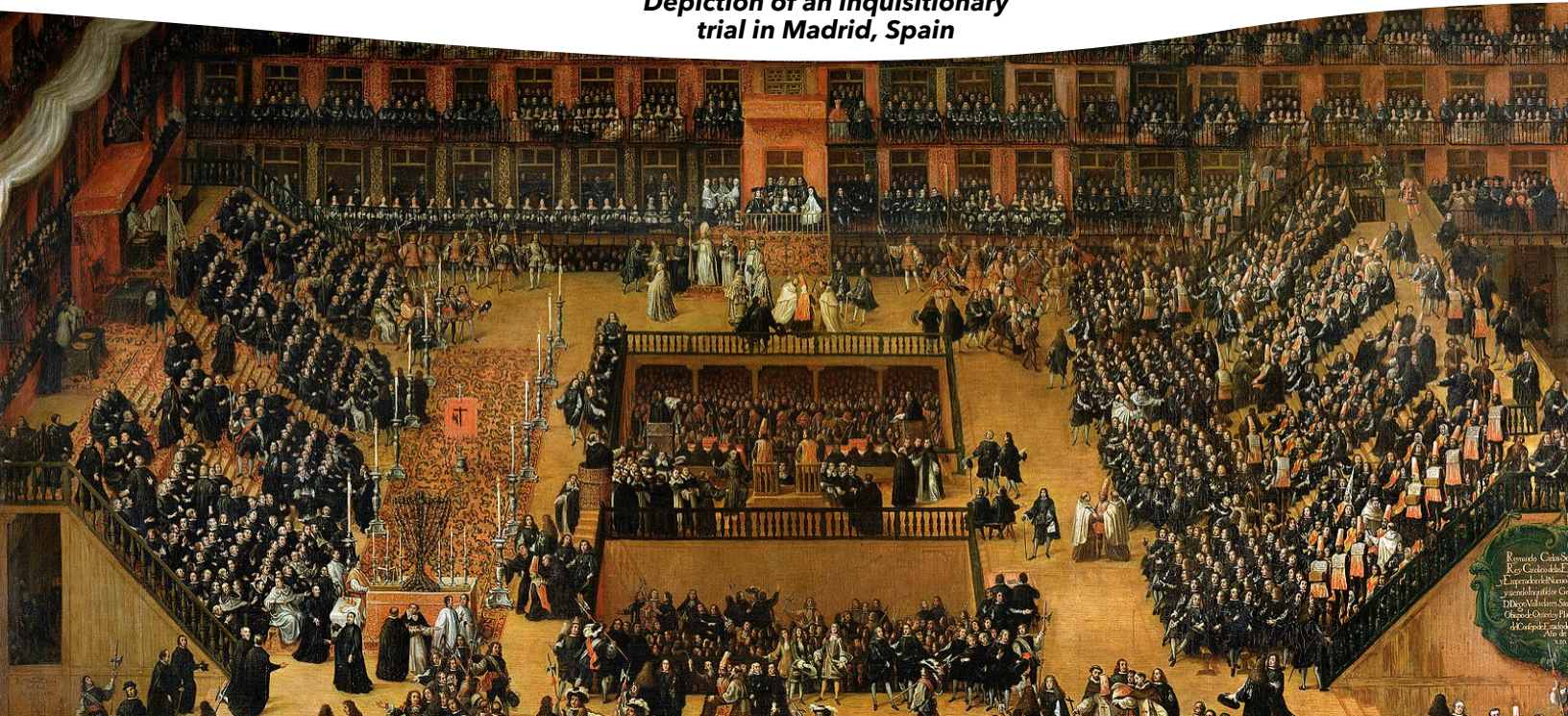

Map of Europe, c. 14th century

The most dramatic example comes from Spain. Spain did not exist as a kingdom until 1479, as the result of a marriage alliance between two kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula, Castile and Aragon. The monarchs of the new combined kingdom waged a crusade against the Muslim Nasrid Kingdom of Granada, to their south. At about the same time, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella sponsored to the creation of the Spanish Inquisition, a type of church court aimed at punishing heretical Christians. The first target of this new court were ancestors of Iberian Jews who had been forcibly converted to Christianity a century before, who were suspected of practicing Judaism in secret. The first public burnings of these so-called 'judaizers' took place in Seville in 1481. Thousands more executions followed. After Spanish armies defeated Granada in 1492, the monarchs decided to purge threats to Spain's sacred communalism, expelling all Jews from the kingdom.

Map of the Iberian Peninsula showing Granada, prior to unification of Castile and Aragon

From that point on, Jews who remained in Spain were assumed to have converted to Christianity, and thus now fell under the jurisdiction of the Spanish Inquisition. These people were called *conversos*, regardless of whether they practiced Judaism in secret, became devout Christians, or (commonly) fell somewhere in between. From 1492, prosecutions of *conversos* before the Inquisition for practicing secret Judaism skyrocketed. Tens of thousands of Jewish refugees fled to North Africa, the Italian Peninsula, and the Ottoman Empire (mostly to areas in present-day Turkey, Greek, Israel, Lebanon, and Syria). This was one of the most dramatic forced expulsions of a religious and ethnic minority from a large kingdom ever undertaken.

Depiction of an inquisitionary trial in Madrid, Spain

Emilio Sala Francés' painting, The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain (in the year 1492)

Spain was not alone in expelling Jews during this period. While during the Middle Ages, Jewish communities had often thrived in Christian-dominated lands, the 15th and 16th centuries saw a dramatic reversal, as Christians embraced the dangerous desire for religious purity characterized by sacral communalism. But it was not Christianity as a whole that was to blame. Catholic Church officials sometimes even defended Jewish communities from militant lay populations, who drove Jews from many cities in Italy and through the German-speaking lands. Other Christians defended Jews too, in part because they wanted to protect scholars of Hebrew who could read ancient sacred texts. But overall, the trend was clear: as Christian sacred communalism spread and intensified, Jewish public life, learning, and worship nearly ground to a halt in Western Europe between the 1470s and the 1570s. Some Jews converted to Christianity. Others fled as refugees to eastern Europe, often to the Ottoman Empire or the kingdom of Poland-Lithuania.

Something similar happened to Western Europe's Muslim population, which centered in the Iberian Peninsula. When Spain's monarchs expelled Jews, they still ruled over hundreds of thousands of Muslims. In the heartlands of the Spanish kingdom, the government soon offered them the same choice as it gave Jews: convert or leave. Elsewhere, where there were large populations of Muslims and the government had a weaker presence, the government restricted public expression of Islam – by burning Korans, for instance. By 1526, like with Jews, the crown began considering Muslims who remained to have converted to Christianity, and thus subject to the jurisdiction of the Spanish Inquisition.

The campaign against Muslims took longer than that against Jews, but in 1609, King Philip III of Spain expelled anyone whose ancestors had been Muslims from Spain, many of whom still practiced Islam, despite the decades long campaign of repression. Some 300,000 refugees fled, mostly for North Africa.

Expulsion of the Moriscos at the Port of Denia, 1613

Reformation-era Refugees

This mass phenomenon of religious refugees expanded even more as a result of the Reformation, which split the Latin Christian Church into rival factions starting in the 1520s. Those who stuck with the pope became known as Roman Catholics. Terms for the others changed over time, but generally, historians often call non-Catholics who come out of the Western Christian tradition 'Protestants,' named for a group in 1529 who 'protested' against measure to suppress their dissenting beliefs. Conflicts between Protestants and Catholics were most widespread, but violence also emerged between competing Protestant groups.

In the sixteenth century, the most intensive religious violence took place in France and the Netherlands, where civil wars tore apart society. The two conflicts had important similarities. In both places, the most important Protestant minority were members of the Reformed, or Calvinist tradition. In both places, these Reformed Protestants built key alliances with opponents of royal centralization (mostly nobles and city leaders). In both places, a widespread commitment to sacral communalism mixed with deep differences about true doctrine and disagreements about the proper political order. The result of this volatile mixture was widespread violence committed by ordinary people and state agents alike. Finally, in both places, Reformed refugees fled their homes in dramatic numbers, mostly for safely in either England or the Holy Roman Empire, a large, and diverse array of affiliated states to the east in lands that today are mostly Germany and Austria, Czechia, and parts of present-day Poland.

Map of the Dutch Republic (in Orange), 1621-1628

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If there were similarities between the civil wars in France and the Netherlands, their outcomes were also distinct. In the Netherlands, the Reformed Protestant-affiliated rebels manage to secure control of much of the north. The rebel government gradually emerged as a decentralized republic – the Dutch Republic – where, because of their key role in supporting the rebels in the civil war, Reformed Protestants took over the public churches.

However, since Reformed Protestants only made up some 10% of the population, local officials had little power to enforce sacral communalism as strictly as officials elsewhere. Members of other Christian churches worshiped discretely in private houses. They faced harassment or fines if they made a public show of their dissent, but were generally left be.

King Philip II

Portuguese Jewish Synagogue, Amsterdam

Did you know?

Fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, some Jewish families moved from Portugal to Amsterdam.

Explore more about this history, and the story of one of these individuals here:

- [Uriel Dacosta, a Portugues Jew in Amsterdam](#)

This kind of begrudging toleration of religious dissenters gave a space for Jews – mostly Jews from families who had fled Spain described earlier – to begin worshipping discretely as well by the 1590s. Curiously, these Jewish refugees did not identify as "Spanish Jews" but as "Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation." This phrasing recognized their Iberian heritage without identifying with Spain, which they widely detested. They could embrace being Portuguese because many of them had lived in Portugal for a time before fleeing persecution there for the Dutch Republic.

The so-called Portuguese synagogue of Amsterdam became the largest publicly operating Jewish house of worship in Western Europe operating since waves of anti-Jewish hostilities of the previous centuries.

Meanwhile, in the southern Netherlands, the Spanish king regained and consolidated control. As he did, the Catholic Church too regained its monopoly on public worship. Reformed refugees in the south flooded to the north. The Dutch speakers joined the Dutch-speaking Reformed churches in the Republic. People from the French-speaking (Walloon) areas of the Netherlands formed French-speaking refugee churches in cities like Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam, and Leiden.

The St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of French Huguenots in Paris, 1572

In France, the civil wars turned out completely differently. There what began as a two-sided war between rebels and the royal government, by the 1580s turned into a three-sided war. Almost all the rebels were members of the Reformed faith, and called themselves Huguenots. After two decades of warfare, the monarch remained Catholic, but now hoped for political compromise that might keep the kingdom together (under the current dynasty, of course!). More militant Catholics who refused any compromise, calling themselves the Catholic League, formed an alliance with the Spanish king. This three-way war continued into the 1590s. When King Henry III died in 1589, according to French law, his successor would be Henry of Navarre, who was also the head of the Huguenot armies. Of course, the Catholic League would never accept a heretic as their king! By 1593, in order to secure support for his reign, Henry of Navarre publicly converted to Catholicism. It worked. The following year, he was crowned as King Henry IV.

Still, the hardliners in the Catholic League would not trust such an obvious display of insincerity. Henry IV continued making public displays of his Catholicism as his armies captured Catholic League-controlled towns, including Paris. By 1595, even the pope recognized Henry IV's rule. The last renegade Catholic League forces surrendered in January 1598. The king then turned to negotiate a peace settlement with the Huguenots whom he had forsaken. By April, he issued the Edict of Nantes, which granted limited religious freedoms to Reformed Protestants in exchange for peace. The Catholic Church remained the official state church, and the freedoms came with some pretty strict limitations and in later decades, state harassment of Protestants would return. But in Huguenot strongholds, like the southern city of Nîmes, Reformed Protestants could exercise their faith and still retain the same civil rights afforded to Catholics.

Engraving of the Proclamation of the Edict of Nantes

The Sack of Magdeburg, 1631, considered among the most devastating episodes of the Thirty Years War

Western Europe faced other waves of persecution and warfare that produced refugees as well. When Protestants took over in England, Catholics fled as refugees. Italian Protestants fled to the Swiss lands. The Holy Roman Empire saw refugees through the sixteenth century, but nothing like those that emerged as a result of the Thirty Years War (1618–1648) which saw devastating death rates at more than 50% of the population in some areas.

Meanwhile, Jews from Central and Eastern Europe facing increased anti-Jewish violence there were moving back to Western Europe, where larger and more stable Jewish communities were emerging in places like Amsterdam. The 'Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation' provided some support for these new waves of refugees, though social divisions between the two groups remained strong because of differences in language, religious rituals and, most importantly because the newcomers were much poorer than the 'Portuguese' Jews.

Huguenot Refugees from France, 1670s-80s

By the 1670s and early 80s, religious violence was waning in Western Europe. The Spanish Inquisition remained in operation, but prosecutions for heresy had steeply declined. Meanwhile, the Dutch Republic had gained a reputation as a haven of religious tolerance, and was hosting open advocates of new ideas supporting religious toleration as a moral value. Sacral communalism was not dead by any means, but in some places the dream of spiritual and doctrinal uniformity was looking increasing unrealistic.

And then, in 1685, King Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, once again banning all Protestant worship in France. The move alarmed Protestants, and sent waves of refugee running for safety. The shift in law followed an increasing anti-Protestant policy that had been building for years. Starting in 1681, Louis XIV began sending troops known as *dragonnades* to harass and intimate Protestants, aiming to coerce them into converting to Catholicism or else abandoning France. In many cases it worked. Scared Protestants renounced their faith or fled as refugees.


Map of Amsterdam, 1701

Protestant engraving of a dragonnade forcing a Huguenot to convert, 1685

But the revocation of the Edict of Nantes altogether was more abrupt and dramatic in its impact than the sending of *dragonnades*. According to the new royal proclamation, only Huguenot pastors (and their families) had permission to flee France. The rest would simply have to abandon their faith. In fact, the vast majority of Huguenots did abandon their faith, as the king commanded.

Still, some 150,000 refugees (historians disagree about this estimate) fled, often in secret, for the Dutch Republic, England, Protestant states in the Holy Roman Empire, and the Swiss lands. For the most part, the Huguenots who fled were of relatively high social status, in part because Huguenots were generally wealthier and better educated than the French population as a whole, but also because the wealthiest among them were better able to afford the expense needed to escape safely. In the Dutch Republic, the largest host of Huguenot refugees, most joined the French-speaking refugee churches that had formed a century earlier.

In some ways, the Protestants fleeing France in the 1680s were very much like the other religious refugees who had escaped persecution and warfare through the last two centuries of escalating religious intolerance and conflict. Indeed, one might see this exodus as one of the last major refugee movements of this period of European history, since in the next century governments increasingly embraced practices and policies promoting religious toleration.

*Reception of Huguenot refugees by the Great Elector in 1685*
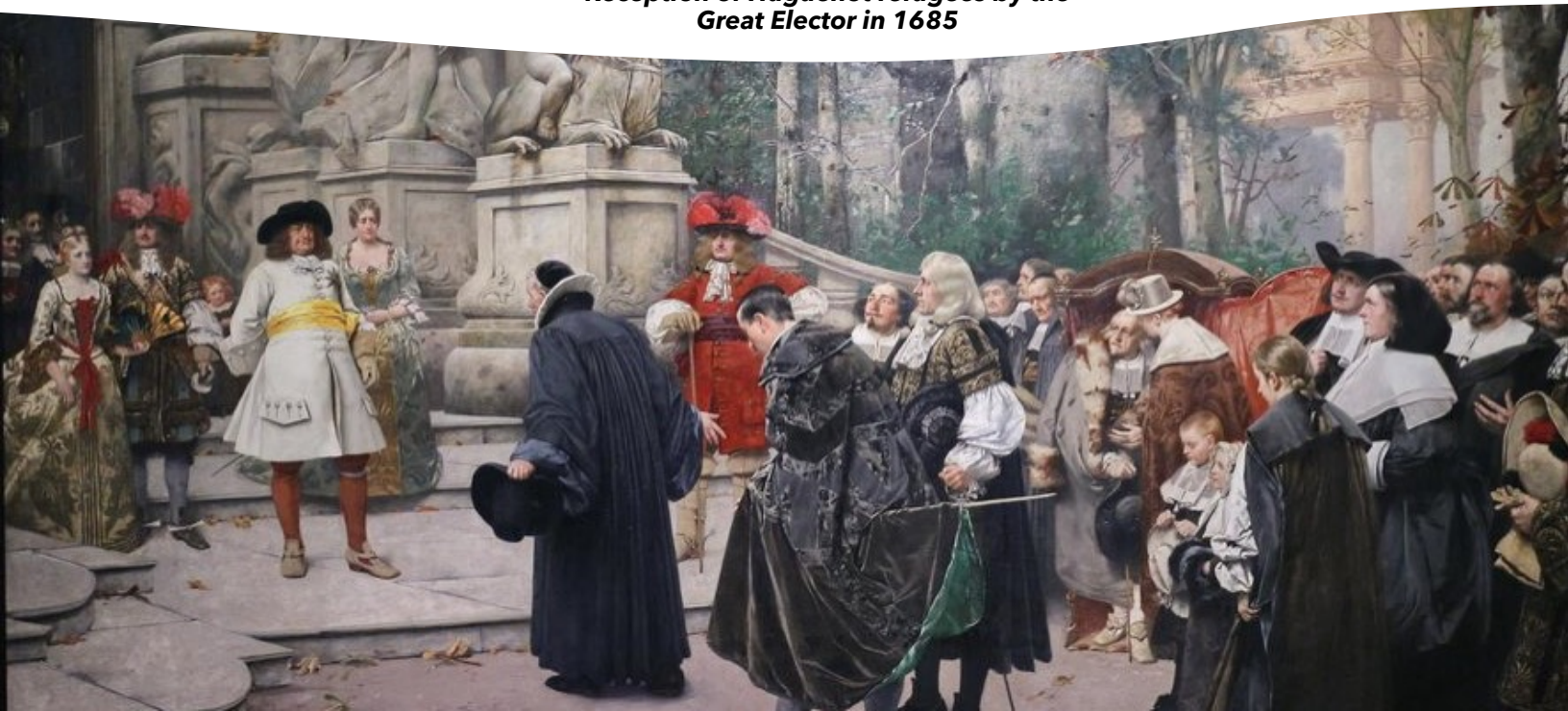
But the Huguenot diaspora was also distinct from nearly every refugee crisis of the following centuries, with the exception of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. In those two examples, more than in any other of the intervening years, the refugees were self-conscious about their shared experience and aware that others across Europe were eagerly observing their fate. In the 1490s, Spanish Jews understood their lives to be replaying the sacred dramas of the Hebrew Bible. They had also draw on international alliances in the diaspora for support. However, Jewish refugees still faced widespread anti-Semitism from Catholics and Protestants alike, and so had to proceed cautiously and discretely wherever they moved.

The Huguenots in the diaspora did not have to be so cautious. They self-consciously embraced an identity of suffering victims of Catholic intolerance in their efforts to secure financial support and legal protections from fellow Protestants around Europe. In the years after 1685, Huguenot authors presented themselves as the victims, self-consciously styling themselves as "*Le Refuge Huguenot*." They also tied their story as part of a continued struggle against Catholicism that their hosts' Protestant ancestors had faced a century earlier. Pastors, like Pierre Jurieu and Élie Benoit, wrote dramatic histories recounting Huguenot sufferings. The Huguenot exodus from France was accompanied by the most self-conscious propaganda campaign designed to garner support for refugees ever seen. By describing it as propaganda, I don't mean to suggest that it was entirely disingenuous. The refugees' plight was real. Here I use the word propaganda because authors self-consciously stressed certain stories and ignored inconvenient facts in order to present a morally simple narrative crafted to stir the sympathies of an audience they intentionally targeted in order to gain favor. In 2022, Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his cabinet in war-torn Ukraine engaged in a very similar propaganda campaign, largely targeted at an audience of people like me (and maybe you too). The fact that I recognize that effort as a coordinated operation does not mean am less sympathetic to Ukrainian refugees' plight. But it does help me remember that refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar facing mass displacement might not have the same training or resources targeted at tugging at my heart strings.
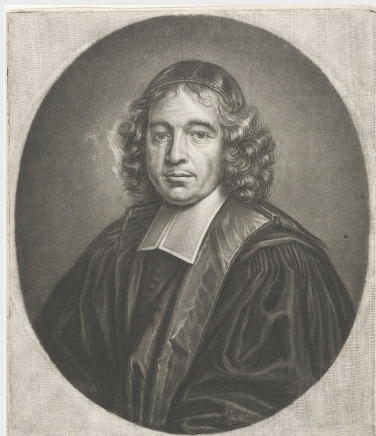
Pierre Jurieu
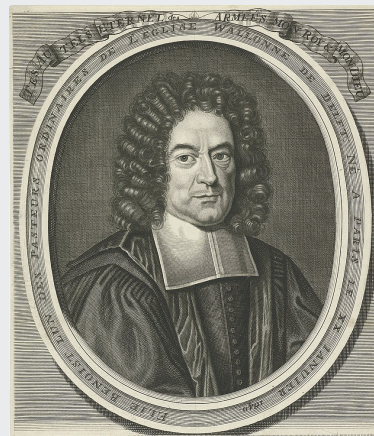
Élie Benoist

Meanwhile, let's make one last comparison with between the Huguenot and Jewish refugees from Spain after 1492. Some Jews had fled from Spain to southern France, where they still lived at the time of Louis XIV. The increasingly militant pro-Catholic position taken by the French king around 1680 included anti-Jewish pressure as well as well as anti-Protestant activities. In 1682, the king expelled the Jews living in the southern city of Marseille from his kingdom.

The following year, he expelled Jews from three French colonies in the Caribbean. The king even discussed expelling all Jews from France. In the face of increasing pressure, probably some Jewish families did leave for more hospitable climes. However, after the massive exodus of Huguenot refugees fleeing France following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, King Louis abandoned these plans. After all, so many of the Huguenots who opted to flee had included wealthy merchants important to France's trade and industry. As the king watched so many prosperous subjects flee, he worried of the financial damage that the revocation might entail. He also now worried that an expulsion of Jews would similarly lead wealthy Jewish merchants and traders to leave as well. Thus, France's small but relatively prosperous Jewish population largely remained. Ironically, the expulsion of Protestants from France helped avert the expulsion of Jews.

This last point also is a useful reminder that, while sometimes people present anti-Semitism as perpetual and unchanging, such claims are not nuanced enough to match historical reality. In fact, by the late 17th century, vibrant Jewish communities had emerged in cities and at princely courts around Europe. Often poorer and less powerful Jews were protected and financially supported by wealthier and more influential Jewish patrons who were merchants, traders, and government officials that princes did not want to leave. That's not to say that anti-Semitism had disappeared. Even the most prominent Jewish merchants of Amsterdam faced anti-Jewish prejudices. Still, two centuries after the expulsion from Spain, families of Jewish refuges had built a thriving community for themselves in the Dutch Republic. And in the refugee center of Amsterdam, at least, the Jewish refugees worshiped only a half mile (800 meters) away from where the Huguenot refugees worshipped.

Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, c. 1666

Further Reading

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