Nostalgic Nation Branding: Philo-Sephardism and the Reimagining of Spanish Identity in the 2015 Citizenship Law

Alicia VERGARA

The paper explores the depiction of Sephardic and Jewish identities within the 2015 Spanish citizenship law for descendants of Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492, arguing that the law has been deployed as a nation branding tool. Drawing on theories of belonging and liminality, the paper investigates how Spain employs Philo-Semitism and Philo-Sephardism as tools to reshape its national image, portraying Sephardic Jews as an integral but lost component of Spanish heritage. Through a comparative analysis with Germany's case of the so-called "Jewish contingency refugees" of the 1990s, the study questions the underlying motives behind Spain's citizenship law. The paper, therefore, explores the role and place of Philo-Sephardism in the discussions of the law, and how the portrayal of Jews is entangled with Spain's revision of its history, responsibility, and self-perception. It demonstrates not only how Spain engages in rewriting its past in favourable terms but also uses the very law as a way of presenting itself in a new light at present. The paper, therefore, contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving narrative of Philo-Sephardism and its impact on Spain's diplomatic strategies, potentially reflecting broader trends in the diplomatic utilisation of Jewish history worldwide.

Keywords: Spain, Sephardim, Jews, identity, nation branding

Alicia Vergara holds a DPhil in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Oxford and an MSt in Jewish Studies from the same university.
✉ aliciavergara@outlook.de| https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6296-2681
© 2026 Alicia Vergara

DOI: 10.14712/24645370.5652

This text is available under Diamond Open Access and the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (BY-NC) licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Introduction

> "Nosotros ordenamos además en este edicto que los Judíos y Judías cualquiera edad que residan en nuestros dominios o territorios que partan con sus hijos e hijas, sirvientes y familiares pequeños o grandes de todas las edades al fin de Julio de este

> año y que no se atrevan a regresar a nuestras tierras y que no tomen un paso adelante a traspasar de la manera que si algún Judío que no acepte este edicto si acaso es encontrado en estos dominios o regresa será culpado a muerte y confiscación de sus bienes."[1]

Under the reign of the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile, the Edict of Expulsion was issued in March 1492 in Spain. The decree must be understood not as a project of cultural homogeneity in a modern national sense, but as part of a confessional state-building process centred on mandatory Catholicism and the exclusion of religious plurality.

Recent historiography has emphasised that early modern and modern Spanish political conflicts revolved around the role of Catholicism as the foundation of the polity, rather than around ethnic or cultural uniformity.[2] This confessional logic continued to shape political discourse well into the 19th century, even after the formal abolition of the Inquisition. The estimated number of Jews forced to leave their homes ranges from around 40,000 to as high as 200,000 people. Faced with the harsh choice between exile and conversion to Christianity, many Jews opted for the latter to avoid expulsion. Others left for neighbouring Portugal, or crossed the Mediterranean to settle in North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, or Italy. However, the conversion of those who stayed did not guarantee safety. Converts too faced suspicion, persecution, and discrimination that reached its peak during the time of the Spanish Inquisition but lasted even beyond its abolition, as seen in the case of the continuous discrimination of the Chuetas in Majorca.[3]

1 *Alhambra Decree*, 31 March 1492, Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, https://www.cervantesvirtual.com (accessed on 23 November 2023). Author's translation: "We further order in this edict that Jews of any age who reside in our reigns or territories leave with their sons and daughters, servants, small or large family members of all ages at the end of July of this year and that they do not dare to return to our lands and do not take any step to trespass. If any Jew who does not accept this edict and is found in these reigns or returns, he will be sentenced to death, and his property will be confiscated."

2 GONZALO ÀLVAREZ CHILLIDA, *El antisemitismo en España. La imagen del judío (1812–2002)*, Madrid 2002.

3 The Inquisition was an institution that was set up as an ecclesiastical court to detect and sentence Christians who had transgressed against church law. It was first introduced by the Spanish monarchs in 1478 and only abolished in 1834. The first *auto de fé* (literally "act of faith" but in the context of the Inquisition "sentencing," often by burning) took place in 1481 in Seville. However, the Inquisition soon became active all over the Spanish kingdoms and the Portuguese and Spanish overseas

What followed was a long period of Jewish absence. That situation only began to change significantly in the 19th century with the settlement of some, mostly Ashkenazi, families in Spanish cities, as well as the establishment of the Spanish protectorate in North Africa, intensifying interactions between the Spanish military, administration, and local Sephardic Jews. As we shall see, this accelerated the rate at which Jews were nationalised in Spain.

In 2015, the Spanish parliament eventually approved a law that would allow descendants of Jews expelled from Spain in the 15th century to apply for Spanish citizenship based on their Sephardic ancestry. According to that law, proposed by the previous Minister of Justice, Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón, those showing proof of such ancestry and a *special connection* to Spain could apply for citizenship until 2019.[4] Many Jews and non-Jews around the world heeded that call. An interesting observation made once the data became available was described by *The Times of Israel* in 2019: At least 27% of over 153,000 applications for Spanish citizenship under the new law were not Jewish, according to religious Jewish law, or Halakha.[5] The countries spearheading the list of places from which the applicants hailed were not Israel, the United States, France, or Turkey, but Latin American countries such as Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela.

In the congressional debates leading up to the adoption of the 2015 law, the Minister of Justice at the time, Rafael Catalá Polo, said: "Sefarad is no longer a nostalgia but a home in which it should not be said that the

colonies. See ALVARO SANTAMARIA ARANDEZ, *Sobre la condición de sos conversos y chuetas de Mallorca*, Espacio, Tiempo y Forma. Serie 3, Historia Medieval 10/1997, pp. 219–261.

4 According to interviewees from the Jewish community, but also Spanish historians and social scientists, Gallardon's decision to propose the law was both a result of the pressure from the Jewish Federation and the fact that he had previously been the President of the Autonomous Community of Madrid where he had worked closely with the local Jewish community. Therefore, he was more attentive to their needs and requests. It should be further noted that, initially, the window for applications was limited to three years, but it was then extended by an additional year.

5 CNAAN LIPSHIZ, *At Least 27% of Applicants under Spain's Sephardic 'Law of Return' Are Not Jews*, https://www.timesofisrael.com/at-least-27-of-applicants-under-spains-sephardic-law-of-return-are-not-jews/ (accessed on 18 September 2023).

Jews feel at home – because the Spanish-Jews are in their own home, in the home of all Spaniards, whatever their belief or religion."[6]

Polo's comment shows how similar the terminology used in the 2015 citizenship law is. Words such as *Sefarad*, *Spanish*, or *Spanish-Jew* suggest simultaneous closeness and distance. The use of these words raises the question whether some terms can be used interchangeably or if they are weighted differently according to their distance from an (imagined) Spanish core-group identity.

I argue that the discourse contained in and surrounding the Spanish law highlights two important elements: 1) it offers insight into the ways non-Jewish actors participate in the debate around Jewish identity, and 2) it reflects Spain's own concern with Spanish identity. The latter is at the heart of this paper.

Spain and the Sephardim Before the 2015 Citizenship Law

My research suggests that Philo-Sephardism, at least today, is not so much a movement or worldview but a discourse with two facets. One facet contains a story about Spain, and the other about Jews. Leaning on Foucault's idea that "history is one way in which a society recognises and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked,"[7] and emphasising the importance of discourses within subject and form of expression, I argue that Spain's constant reshuffling of its history is as much a part of the changes and continuity in Philo-Sephardic discourses as it is a tool for reshuffling history itself.[8]

6 RAFAEL CATALA POLO, *Speech in the Spanish Congress*, *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso*, 20 November 2014, p. 59.

7 MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Archaeology of Knowledge (2nd ed.)*, London 2013, p. 7.

8 Questioning the objectivity of researchers, Robert Merton wrote that "once the historian elects to write the history of a time other than his own, even the most dedicated Insider, of the national, sex, age, racial, ethnic, or religious variety, becomes the Outsider, condemned to error and misunderstanding." See ROBERT MERTON, *Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge*, The American Journal of Sociology 78/1972, no. 1, p. 32.

Historical Background: 19th Century Spain and Philo-Sephardism

> "Considero que la ley aprobada y el acto que celebramos reafirman el deseo de que esas llaves [...] abandonen el Halo de la leyenda para representar ahora una nueva y definitiva apertura de las puertas de España a los hijos de Sefarad."
>
> — *Spanish King Felipe VI in his speech on November 30, 2015, a few months after the Citizenship Law 12/2015 was adopted.*[9]

According to Pablo Bornstein, debates on Jewish presence and legal status in modern Spain must be situated within broader conflicts over citizenship, sovereignty, and national belonging. Liberal sectors associated Jewish emancipation with constitutionalism and civil equality, while conservative and Catholic actors viewed Jews primarily through inherited religious categories and anxieties about moral and social order. Jews were thus imagined more often than encountered, functioning as symbolic figures in debates about Spain's modernity and decline.[10]

The emergence of the Philo-Sephardic movement fell into a time of three significant historical developments of the mid-19th century: The abolition of the Inquisition in Spain, the almost total loss of Spain's overseas colonies, and the Spanish conquests in North Africa. The advocates of Philo-Sephardism aimed at restoring Spain's global influence and prestige.[11] The definitive abolition of the Spanish Inquisition in 1834 closed an important chapter in Spain's history after years of oscillation between abolition and restoration.

Even after centuries had passed, at the beginning of the 19th century, various royal decrees upheld the continuous prohibition of Jews from entering the reign.[12] It should be noted, however, that although the Inquisition had been abolished, only in 1865 did it cease to be an obligation to inform about one's "blood purity" (Limpieza de Sangre) for the sake of marriage and public office.[13] Additionally, legislative changes from

9 Author's translation: "I consider that the law approved and the act that we celebrate it reaffirm the desire for those keys [...] to abandon the halo of legend to represent a new and definitive opening of the doors of Spain to the children of Sepharad."

10 PABLO BORNSTEIN, *Reclaiming Al-Andalus: Orientalist Scholarship and Spanish Nationalism*, Liverpool 2020.

11 MAITE OJEDA-MATA, *Modern Spain and the Sephardim: Legitimizing Identities*, London 2015.

12 URIEL MACIAS, *Los judíos en la España contemporánea: historia y visiones, 1898–1998*, Cuenca 2000, pp. 137–152.

13 The "blood purity statutes" divided Spanish society according to Catholic and non-Catholic descent. Certain professions were reserved for only those people who

Spain's 1812 constitution marked the introduction of nationality laws, distinguishing between *Spaniards* and *Spanish citizens*. This differentiation facilitated the inclusion of populations from colonial territories while ensuring the metropolis retained political authority. Following the loss of vast parts of its empire in the early 19th century, Spain faced the challenge of maintaining control over its remaining colonies in the Pacific and Caribbean. The Spanish-American War of 1898 further accelerated Spain's imperial downfall, as the United States emerged victorious, gaining control of former Spanish territories such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. However, the Spanish conquest of Tetouan a few years earlier, in 1859, revealed a geopolitical shift in Spanish interests and opportunities.[14] Fuelled by the re-orientation and the liberal revolution of 1868, the first Philo-Sephardic voices were heard among Spanish politicians and intellectuals. Philo-Sephardism did not constitute a coherent or universally benevolent movement, but rather a selective discourse shaped by colonial, diplomatic, and ideological interests. As Gonzalo Álvarez Chillida demonstrates, positive representations of Sephardim often coexisted with antisemitic stereotypes, particularly regarding economic utility, loyalty, and cultural authenticity. These representations were instrumental rather than emancipatory.[15]

Figures such as Adolfo de Mentaberry, a Spanish diplomat in Istanbul, highlighted positive interactions with Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire in similar terms to the one echoed in the law: "However, strangely enough, they have no resentment against us. They always treat us very well and listen to us with stunned delight."[16] Diego de Coello, another Spanish diplomat in Istanbul in the late 19th century, was amazed by how the local Sephardi community "still remembers after four centuries

could prove an "old" Christian lineage; Jewish and Muslim converts to Christianity were thus labelled as others and saw themselves limited in their freedoms regardless of their sometimes religious devotion. See JOSHUA GOODE, *Impurity of blood: defining race in Spain, 1870–1930*, Baton Rouge 2009; DAVIDE ALIBERTI, *Sefarad: una comunidad imaginada (1924–2015)*, Madrid 2018.

14 Although initially welcomed by the local Jewish community, the 1862 Spanish withdrawal from Tetouan without concern for the Jewish population left under difficult circumstances highlighted the problematic Spanish activities in the region. For more, see DAVIDE ALIBERTI, *Sefarad: una comunidad imaginada (1924–2015)*, Madrid 2018.

15 G. ÀLVAREZ CHILLIDA, *El antisemitismo en España*.

16 D. ALIBERTI, *Sefarad*, p. 38.

its beloved fatherland, Spain."[17] Publications claiming the "discovery of Sephardim," such as Ángel Pulido's article on how he encountered travellers on a ship on the Danube speaking a strange and old Spanish, as well as the romanticising construction of past religious tolerance under Spanish Kings, were meant to serve Spanish interests and masked geopolitical aspirations.[18] Sephardic Jews were seen as strategic bridges at a time when other European nations were dividing the continents by force amongst themselves. However, the collision between Spanish colonial interests and a desire to maintain cultural purity within peninsular Spain led to a selective application of Philo-Sephardism and, often, only half-hearted concessions.

Other Spanish intellectuals, such as Count Juan Antonio Rascón y Navarro, a Spanish diplomat who served in Frankfurt and Constantinople in the mid-19th century, took the idea of a past Spanish loss into the present and advocated for a re-settlement of Jews to Spain to boost its tumbling economy: "Si se fijaran los Hebreos en las principales ciudades de la península [...] se podían establecer líneas de vapores desde Sevilla hasta Odesa [...]. Si a esto siguiera la fundación de un instituto español de segunda enseñanza (como las escuelas reales de Alemania) en Constantinopla u otro en Salonica, donde hay setenta y tantos judíos precedentes de España, nuestras relaciones mercantiles con Turquía tomarían un vuelo inmenso."[19] Philo-Sephardism, although in name benevolent towards certain Jewish communities, did hold on to and disseminate well-known anti-Semitic tropes such as Jewish wealth and economic affinity in a seemingly positive way.

17 D. ALIBERTI, *Sefarad*, p. 43.

18 References to the Middle Ages, "Convivencia," and the end of it coinciding with the beginning of the Spanish empire in 1492 were frequently present. The idea of Convivencia played a crucial role in legitimising Spain's presence in Northern Africa, positioning it as the country best prepared to occupy Islamic countries for historical reasons. *Reparative Citizenship for Sephardi Descendants: Returning to the Jewish Past in Spain and Portugal (1st ed.)* (eds.) DALIA KANDIYOTI, RINA BENMAYOR, New York–Oxford 2023; AOMAR BOUM, *The Performance of Convivencia: Communities of Tolerance and the Reification of Toleration*, Religion Compass 6/2012, no. 3, pp. 174–184.

19 Juan Antonio Rascón y Navarro, cited in D. ALIBERTI, *Sefarad,* pp. 41–42. Author's translation: "If the Hebrews settled in the main cities of the peninsula [...] steamship lines could be established from Seville to Odessa [...]. If this were followed by the founding of a Spanish secondary school (like the German schools) in Constantinople or another in Thessaloniki, where there are seventy-odd Jews from Spain, our commercial relations with Turkey would take an immense leap."

Many authors cite General Primo de Rivera's decree of 1924 as a decisive turning point in the relations between the Spanish State and Sephardim in North Africa, the Balkans, and Turkey. Although it did not specifically name Sephardim as such, it became a tool for some Sephardic Jews around the Mediterranean to gain Spanish citizenship.[20] The decree was aimed at the local political and economic elites to better the Spanish standing in the region, where other European countries were advancing similar plans of strategic patronage.[21] This decree, like the Spanish citizenship law of 2015, was limited in its length (applications could be submitted until 1930) and scope (it included a line stating that "the petitioner should assert that he will not settle in Spain").[22] It is perhaps no surprise that only few heeded that call. However, it was nevertheless perceived as a win by the Philo-Sephardic advocates of the time, foremost Ángel Pulido, a Spanish senator who published several cornerstones of Philo-Sephardic literature, the most cited one being "Españoles Sin Patria y la Raza Sefardi."[23] Figures such as Ángel Pulido operated within liberal regenerationist frameworks, while their proposals remained compatible with Catholic national narratives that continued to marginalise Jews within peninsular Spain.

This intricate tapestry of historical events, legislative changes, and intellectual debates underscores the complex evolution of Spain's relationship with Sephardic Jews. The complexities of identity, colonialism, and geopolitical considerations intertwined, shaping the Philo-Sephardic discourse surrounding a community. Nevertheless, various characteristics seem to be part of the different elements of Spanish Philo-Sephard-

20 JOSE ANTONIO LISBONA, *Cuanto os hemos echado de menos*, Madrid 2023; CARLOS YEBRA LOPÉZ, *Medievalist Passports: Contested Rights of Return for the Descendants of Medieval Iberian Jews and Muslims*, in: Al-Andalus in Motion: Travelling Concepts and Crosscultural Contexts, (eds.) Rachel Scott, Abdoolkarim Vakil, and Julian Weiss, London 2021, pp. 227–251.

21 The decree allowed "former protected Spanish subjects or their descendants" to apply for Spanish citizenship if they were able to show registration in a Spanish register. See J. A. LISBONA, *Cuanto os hemos echado de menos*, p. 39.

22 ISABELLE ROHR, *The Spanish Right and the Jews, 1898–1945: Antisemitism and Opportunism*, Eastbourne 2007, p. 27.

23 Pulido claimed that the Sephardim exhibited a stronger connection to Spanish identity compared to other groups of the Iberian Peninsula, including the Basques and Catalans, and criticised these groups for their perceived weaker attachment to the Spanish language. See the facsimile edition of ÁNGEL PULIDO, *Españoles sin patria y la raza sefardí*, Madrid 1993.

ism, including: 1) an imagined continuous love for Spain by Sephardic Jews; 2) an imagined forgiveness and lack of resentment by Sephardic Jews; 3) a professed regret of the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian peninsula because of the believed economic, cultural and intellectual loss; 4) the idea of Sephardim as a reminder of a great Spanish past in which diversity, strength, and geopolitical importance defined the state; and, 5) Sephardim as a reminder of a somehow "purer" Spain by holding on to collective memories and cultural derivates of a past, old and "authentic" spoken Castilian Spanish, such as Ladino and Haketia.[24]

Spain, the Nazis, and the Holocaust

The atrocities committed on October 7, 2023 in Israel by Hamas shook up local Jewish communities in Spain, becoming the main focus of online platforms and in-person meetings. During my fieldwork trip in Spain, I witnessed a situation that accentuated how parts of the Jewish community there connected their current fears and hopes for protection to Spanish history. Against the backdrop of a conversation about which political parties are the allies of Spanish Jewry today, one person tried to fend off criticism of the PP (Partido Popular), arguing that it had been the PP-led government that had passed the 12/2015 citizenship law.[25] The person added that, without the law, there would be fewer people in the Jewish community. Another person replied that had it not been for the Franco dictatorship and its alliance with Nazi Germany, there might be even more Jews in Spain today. The conversation then turned to objections brought forward by individuals siding with the first speaker by bringing

24 Ladino, also referred to as Judeo-Spanish or Judezmo, is the language spoken and written by the Sephardic Jews, originating from Iberian Jews exiled from Spain and Portugal at the end of the 15th century, who settled primarily in the Ottoman Empire, which resulted in an influx of Turkish, Greek, and other languages spoken in the region. Haketia, also known as Western Judeo-Spanish, Haquetia, or Jaquetia, is the language spoken and written by the Sephardic Jews, who also originated from Jews exiled from the Iberian peninsula at the end of the 15th century, but settled primarily in North Africa, having a greater Arabic influence in the vernacular of the Jews in the region.

25 The Partido Popular (People's Party) is one of Spain's two large political parties. It is ideologically conservative and part of the group of Christian-democratic parties in the European Parliament.

in stories of Spanish ministers and diplomats who had protected Jews during the Second World War (WWII).

The different opinions in the observed interactions can be found in recent Spanish historiography and public political statements. The preamble of the Citizenship Law from 2015, for example, includes a description of Spain's involvement in saving thousands of Jews from the atrocities of the Shoah.[26] However, this is a very particular reading of Spain's position and role during WWII. Spain's role regarding Jewish refugees, especially concerning Sephardic Jews, could be described, in the best case, as ambivalent and complex. Initial numbers, often pushed by the Franco regime itself, estimate that between 48,000 and 60,000 Jews escaped deportation to concentration camps due to Spanish assistance. However, recent research has revised the numbers to between 30,000 and 35,000, with 8,000 more saved by diplomatic interference.[27]

Francoist attitudes toward Jews must be understood within the framework of National-Catholicism, which combined authoritarian nationalism with traditional Catholic anti-Judaism rather than racial antisemitism in the Nazi sense. During the war, the attitude of the Spanish state toward the fate of Sephardic communities was disinterest, and it was occasionally even characterised by animosity. This attitude is best highlighted in the statements of the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Francisco Gómez-Jordana, on December 28, 1944: "There are many hundreds of Sephardim with Spanish nationality in Europe, either in concentration camps or about to go to them, and we cannot bring them to Spain and settle in our country because this is in no way convenient for us, neither does the Caudillo authorise it, nor can we leave them in their situation as Spanish citizens because this can give rise to serious press campaigns abroad, especially in America, and cause us serious international difficulties."[28] In another instance, the Minister pointed out that the laws which had enabled Sephardic Jews to attain Spanish citi-

26 D. KANDIYOTI, R. BENMAYOR, *Reparative Citizenship for Sephardi Descendants*.

27 JOSE ANTONIO LISBONA, *Más allá del deber: La respuesta humanitaria del Servicio Exterior frente al Holocausto*, Spanish Ministry of Exterior and Cooperation 2015.

28 In Spanish, the word "caudillo" generally means military leader, but when prefixed with the definite article, it almost exclusively refers to General Francisco Franco. For more, see J. A. LISBONA, *Cuanto os hemos echado de menos*, p. 43.

zenship years earlier had been put in place for strategic and colonial reasons: "I believe that it cannot be ignored that these Sephardim are not truly Spanish, and, in many cases, it is questionable whether they possess our nationality, even when they do, it is a pure political fiction since it is known that 450 years ago they were expelled from our territory, with which they have no spiritual contact of any kind, having been granted nationality in some cases mainly for the purpose of our commercial and cultural expansion in the Levant."[29]

Minister Jordana's statements highlight the Spanish state's internal disinterest in offering asylum to Sephardic Jews and simultaneous suspicion of them at a time when help was most needed. Despite the efforts of individual diplomats, often acting against government instructions, to save Jews all over mainland Europe, the regime's ambiguity persisted. Perhaps the most shocking part of its "neutrality" was that, while the regime dragged its feet and left the German offer to repatriate a significant group of Sephardim to Spain unanswered, it did intervene in so-called "arianizations" of Jewish properties. Condemning these attitudes, the Spanish historian Jose Antonio Lisbona writes: "Once again in history, Spain's interest in its Jews is sadly also determined by economic factors."[30] After WWII ended, measures were taken to prevent liberated Sephardic Jews from choosing Spain as their residence, and officials were instructed to invalidate wartime documentation.[31]

The end of WWII produced a radical rewriting of Spanish-German relations. (It should not be forgotten that the Franco regime won the Spanish Civil War, partly due to German support, such as the famous bombing of Guernica.) Following growing isolation, the Franco regime asserted its role as a saviour of Jews fleeing Nazi persecution, cultivating an image in which diplomatic dissidents, who acted independently, were, in fact, formal actors carrying out Spain's official wartime policy.[32] Stories such as that of the Minister of Foreign Affairs from July 1945, Martín Artajo, sending a report titled "A summary of the extensive protective work carried out by Spain in favour of the Sephardim" to the governments of various European countries and the United States, are,

29 J. A. LISBONA, *Cuanto os hemos echado de menos*, p. 44.
30 J. A. LISBONA, *Cuanto os hemos echado de menos*, p. 42.
31 J. A. LISBONA, *Cuanto os hemos echado de menos*, p. 43; ENRIQUE MORADIELLOS, *El Holocausto y la España de Franco*, Madrid 2022.
32 E. MORADIELLOS, *El Holocausto y la España de Franco*.

therefore, no surprise, but align with state policies at the time.[33] Postwar narratives portraying Spain as a "saviour of Jews" served a clear diplomatic purpose: international rehabilitation and alignment with Western powers during the Cold War.[34]

The Cartas de Naturaleza

> "The problem is that when you have to make a rule that is no longer a discretionary act by the Council but is regulated in black on white, you have to define who the recipient of the rule is. And that is very difficult. That is when it is decided to define not the Sephardim but the recipients of the exception on two grounds. One is that they are descendants."
>
> — *Interview with Elorriaga Pissarik, a politician of the conservative Spanish Partido Popular, 2023.*

The *Cartas de Naturaleza*, a form of acquiring nationality in Spain, operates as a gracious and discretionary mechanism.[35] Governed by royal decree, they are granted or withheld by the government, taking into account exceptional circumstances. The Minister of Justice promotes it, presenting it to the Council of Ministers. Applicants for this type of fast-track citizenship have to provide documentation supporting the claim for exceptional circumstances which warrant Spanish citizenship. The historical context of *Cartas de Naturaleza* traces back to the Republican Constitution of 1931, offering foreigners the possibility of extending citizenship rights to those who had resided within the republic under prescribed conditions. This moment marked the first instance of Sephardim being granted the opportunity to acquire Spanish nationality.[36] Catalá

33 Martín Artajo had been appointed by General Franco in 1945. He was a monarchist and leader of the Spanish organisation Acción Católica (Catholic Action). It was under Artajo that, in July 1945, the Foreign Ministry ordered the annulment of all documentation that facilitated the settling of Sephardic Jews holding Spanish citizenship in post-war Spain. According to Correa Martin-Arroyo, the Communique 2088 further ordered "to avoid as much as possible the entry and settlement in Spain of those Sephardim whose previous residence was abroad." See PEDRO CORREA MARTIN-ARROYO, *'Histoeuropeanisation': Challenges and Implications of (Re)writing the History of Europe 'Europeanly', 1989–2015* (MA thesis), Warsaw: College of Europe, 2012–2013, p. 94.

34 G. ÀLVAREZ CHILLIDA, *El antisemitismo en España.*

35 The term would perhaps best be translated as "fast-track citizenship".

36 One of the problems of the "cartas de naturaleza" was that it did not fit the requirement of having to give up their previous nationalities, e.g. Israeli and Turkish

Polo, the former Minister of Justice of the Spanish Partido Popular, in a session at the Congress of Deputies on November 20, 2014, highlighted the utilisation of *Cartas de Naturaleza* for the acquisition of nationality by Sephardic Jews.

This publicised process, however, faced various challenges, particularly when a surge in applications occurred in the early 2000s. This surge made it evident that this system would no longer serve to facilitate a few exceptional applications for Spanish citizenship: "The problem that arises is that [...] the Council of Ministers has to make its agreements public. And then they say, first, we have made ten Sephardic Jews Spanish, then 40, then 200. There comes a time when it is public knowledge that you are doing this to hundreds of [...] people, and then there is an avalanche of requests," said Elorriaga Pissarik. The other, more practical and imminent problem was the collapse of the bureaucratic system due to a large number of applicants: "And then the system collapses because the principal idea of that system is that suddenly there is a very good football player and you make him Spanish, but you do not make the whole English league Spanish. It is not designed to attract people by the hundreds. They are supposed to be exceptional, singular cases [...]. Then, it [the process of granting citizenship to Sephardic Jews] stopped. And then, when it was cut off, a problem was created because there were thousands of files in processing. There were cases identical to those that had been previously approved that were suddenly not being processed," explained Elorriaga Pissarik. Pissarik noted that the system, designed for exceptional and singular cases, struggled to handle the sudden influx of requests, causing a backlog for which the 12/2015 Law was framed as a solution for the Ministry of Justice and the Jewish Federation, and posed a challenge for the Ministry of Exterior.[37]

nationality: "The issue of dual nationality. Many Israelis in the previous concession processes that had taken place from 2004 to 2015 had not intervened and those who had requested were mainly Turks and Venezuelans. But they had not been Israelis. They are very few, one or two. Three, I think. This was the only problem" (Interview with Jose Antonio Lisbona, 2023).

37 According to Carolina Aisen of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain, the Jewish communities rallied the Ministry to improve access to Sephardim Jews from Turkey and Venezuela, especially for humanitarian reasons. She also said that about 4,000 to 4,500 applications got stuck in the system. Furthermore, according to various interviewees, there were clear tensions between the Ministry of Justicia and the Ministry of External Affairs because the latter feared that the "solution" to the problem of the "cartas de naturaleza" through a citizenship law would lead

The 2015 Citizenship Law

"Ley 12/2015, de 24 de junio, en materia de concesión de la nacionalidad española a los sefardíes originarios de España"[38] is the official title of the law at the centre of this paper. One does not even need to read the preamble to encounter some of important questions. To whom is the law addressed? The answer seems clear: It is addressed at Sephardim originating from Spain.

For many reading the law's title at a first glance, there might be little to object to or question. A person might think, "Sephardim – those are the Jews whose ancestors were expelled from Spain in 1492". However, why add the additional "originarios de España"? As one of the lawmakers pointed out, Sephardic has at times been used for all non-Ashkenazi Jews, not just those with familial roots in Spain: "This insistence on the expression 'Sephardic originating from Spain' aims to undo the misunderstanding that occurs when every non-Ashkenazi Jew is called Sephardic."[39] To clarify that the law was not directed at what is usually labelled as *Mizrachi* or *Middle Eastern Jews*, adding these three words can limit misunderstandings among Jewish applicants: "For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs put many objections to the matter, and they did that because they said 'hey, if I do this [...] I have to process it in the various consulates – that is impossible because 50% of the Jews living today consider themselves Sephardic. Therefore, almost half of the Jews will come and ask for nationality'," stated Elorriaga Pissarik.

Nation Branding, Heritage, and Philo-Semitism: The German Case of the Jewish Kontingentflüchtlinge

Several authors analysing the Spanish citizenship law compare the Spanish case with other European countries that have also offered to restore

to a bigger work-load for the Ministry of Exterior, specifically the various Spanish consulates abroad.

38 Law 12/2015. (2015, June 24). Ley 12/2015, de 24 de junio, en materia de concesión de la nacionalidad española a los sefardíes originarios de España. Author's translation: Law 12/2015, of June 24, granting Spanish nationality to Sephardim originating from Spain.

39 RAFAEL CATALÁ POLO, *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, 20 November 2014, p. 60.

citizenship, e.g. Holocaust survivors (who had previously held such citizenship) and their descendants.[40]

Germany is, as perhaps best shown in Konrad Adenauer's quote, the country that is most frequently brought up in connection to the question of responsibility, guilt, and reparation concerning its Jewish population. While Karl Jaspers is concerned with the question of guilt (he divides it into four types: criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical) and positions himself against demands by those who are not implicated in the Holocaust,[41] the question of the necessity and usefulness of public apologies has not ceased. In *Towards a Membership Theory of Apologies,* Melissa Nobles poignantly questions the common conception of state apologies, presented as being driven by regret and guilt ("We had committed so many injustices against the Jews"), arguing that they are driven by rational motives such as easing relations with former belligerents ("The power of the Jews even today, especially in America, should not be underestimated"). Post-war Germany is, therefore, one of the great examples of the use of apologies as a tool to focus the attention on the past with strong "implications for the future."[42] The German case is not presented as a moral benchmark but as an analytical parallel illustrating how Philo-Semitism can function as a nation-branding strategy.

Following Isabel David's and Gabriela Anouck Corte Pinto's argument, which posits that the Portuguese citizenship law from 2015 is an act of nation branding, this text contends that the Spanish 12/2015 citizenship law, too, is a *heritage tool* for nation branding and an example of how an outsider group, namely the Spanish state, constructs Jewish identity.[43] I further argue that the type of nation branding, based on

40 D. KANDIYOTI, R. BENMAYOR, *Reparative Citizenship for Sephardi Descendants*; ALFONS ARAGONESES, *Uses of Convivencia and Filosefardismo in Spanish Legal Discourses*, Rechtsgeschichte – Legal History 26/2018, pp. 200–219; ALFONS ARAGONESES, *La "nacionalidad reparativa" entre derecho, historia y justicia: A propósito de la última reforma de la ley alemana de nacionalidad*, InDret: Revista para el Análisis del Derecho 2/2022, pp. 57–87.

41 KARL JASPERS, *Die Schuldfrage*, Heidelberg 1946.

42 MELISSA NOBLES, *The Politics of Official Apologies*, Cambridge 2008, p. 2.

43 Isabel Alexandra de Oliveira David contents that the law attempts to promote an idea of historical rehabilitation based on a narrative of cultural and racial tolerance. See I. A. DE OLIVEIRA DAVID, *Reparative Citizenship for Sephardi Descendants*, p. 53–72. Furthermore, according to David Lowenthal, the difference between history and heritage is that while history's role is exploring past events, which we are mostly detached from by time, heritage's role is to revise past events and to reframe

a Philo-Semitic narrative and imagined Jews used in the Spanish case, has already been exemplified by Germany in the 1990s. This section will, therefore, offer an overview of one of the most exemplary cases – the quota refugees from the former Soviet Union in Germany – and describe its use and implications for nation branding.

A lot has been written about the life of Jews in Germany after WWII.[44] German-Israeli relations have also been the subject of extensive study.[45] Increasingly, scholarship has focused on the celebrated German *Erinnerungskultur* or *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.[46] In the latter case, the literature deals mainly with either German attitudes towards Jews, e.g. in surveys about anti-Semitism, or with the analysis of the German state towards the Holocaust through memorials, public commemorative events, and especially the German *Staatsräson* of its support for the State of Is-

them in current light and stories by highlighting or constructing anachronistic narratives. Another tool for reframing the past can be achieved by highlighting specifically positive stories, or by doing the exact opposite, namely actively forgetting certain events or actors. The purpose of heritage studies can, among other things, be seen in commemorative policies such as the widely esteemed/acknowledged German *Erinnerungskultur* and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In this case, we can see the various expressions of heritage. See DAVID LOWENTHAL, *The heritage crusade and the spoils of history*, Cambridge 1998.

44 MICHAEL BRENNER, *Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart: Politik, Kultur und Gesellschaft*, Munich 2012.

45 ROLF VOGEL, *Der deutsch-israelische Dialog: Dokumentation eines erregenden Kapitels deutscher Außenpolitik*, Boston–Leiden 2021; YEHUDIT AUERBACH, *Turning-Point Decisions: A Cognitive-Dissonance Analysis of Conflict Reduction in Israel-West German Relations*, Political Psychology 7/1986, no. 3, pp. 533–550.

46 The literal translation of *Erinnerungskultur* is "remembrance culture" and *Vergangenheitsbewältigun*g could be translated as "a coming to terms with the past." Criticising the German use of memorialisation to position itself as a moral gatekeeper, Keskinkilic and Langer denounce: "The perpetrator nation is currently engaging in a new variant of remembering in order to never forget: it burdens itself with the responsibility not only to remember Auschwitz but to remind others of Auschwitz in the way it, the perpetrator nation, sees fit. But it also burdens itself with the responsibility of fighting the anti-Semitism of others and, in doing so, creating its own expanded, watered-down definitions of anti-Semitism and dealing with the German genocide of the Jews of Europe as a model for combating all anti-Semitism and everyone accused of genocide." See OZAN ZAKARIYA KESKINKILIC, ARMIN LANGER, *Fremdgemacht & Reorientiert – jüdisch-muslimische Verflechtungen*, Berlin 2018; SUSAN NEIMAN, *Learning from the Germans: confronting race and the memory of evil*, London 2020; PANKAJ MISHRA, *Memory Failure*, London Review of Books 46/2024, no. 1.

rael.[47] While most of the publications resonate with a positive analysis of the German goodwill to right its wrongs, an increasing number of authors have begun to critically analyse the German state's public memorialisation of the Holocaust, focusing on the intentions of the state behind the attitudes and public expressions.

Analysing Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, and especially its public demonstrations through a rational choice framework, authors such as Pankaj Mishra, Thomas Altfelix, Frank Stern, and Esra Özyürek describe Germany's use of its Holocaust commemoration, together with its attitudes towards Jews and Israel, as a way of presenting Germans as rehabilitated, and Germany as a moral state.[48] This research builds on the assumption that social in-groups do not tend to assess out-groups positively – or, to put it in Nobles' words, "Governments are not in the habit of apologising for their injustices, let alone those perpetrated by former governments in distant and not-so-distant pasts."[49] It moreover presumes that groups break this habit if it enhances the in-group status and that Philo-Semitism[50] has been construed as a genuine manifestation of guilt and repentance for the Holocaust by succeeding German governments – a relatively new nation branding tool which has been adopted and adapted by Spain. Altfelix and Stern suggest that Philo-Semitism has been used as a tool for public policy that was necessary post-WWII,

47 In a speech in front of the Israeli Knesset, then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel said: "This historical German responsibility is part of the matter of state (Staatsräson) of my country. This means that for me, as German Federal Chancellor, Israel's security is never negotiable. And if this is the case, then *these cannot be empty words* in the moment of truth." See ANTJE WIENER, *Staatsräson*: *Empty Signifier or Meaningful Norm?: A Fundamental Norm with Unknown Meaning*, https://verfassungsblog.de/staatsrson-empty-signifier-or-meaningful-norm/ (accessed on 19 June 2026).

48 THOMAS ALTFELIX, *The "Post-Holocaust Jew" and the Instrumentalisation of Philosemitism*, Patterns of Prejudice 34/2000, no. 2, pp. 41–56; FRANK STERN, *The whitewashing of the yellow badge: antisemitism and philosemitism in postwar Germany*, Jerusalem 1992; P. MISHRA, *Memory Failure*; ESRA ÖZYÜREK, *Subcontractors of guilt: Holocaust memory and Muslim belonging in postwar Germany*, Redwood City (CA) 2023.

49 M. NOBLES, *The Politics of Official Apologies*, p. 1.

50 The term Philo-Semitism in this text includes the idea of anti-anti-Semitism, which has become increasingly popular in publications criticising the German state for its self-assigned role in fighting and persecuting anti-Semitism. To paraphrase Elie Wiesel ("The opposite of hate is indifference, not love"), the opposite of anti-Semitism would not be Philo-Semitism, but a-Semitism. See Elie Wiesel, *U.S. News and World Report*, 1986.

at a moment in which Germany had to rapidly re-imagine itself as an ally of the Western forces vis à vis the Soviet Union. Today, this Philo-Semitism has become part and parcel of the image that the German state has created for itself: a polity that has incorporated guilt and remembrance as vital components of its national identity.[51]

In practice, this has meant highlighting Jewish visibility in public spaces (including the promotion of art, interreligious projects, and academic research), supporting Israel, and orally advocating for the repatriation of Jews to Germany.[52] Today, this position has gone so far as to mean that German authorities sanction activities and people critical of the State of Israel, such as seen in the case of journalist and writer, Masha Gessen. Gessen published an essay in *The New Yorker* in December 2023 in which they argued that treating the Holocaust as a "singular event", without comparisons, limited the lessons that could be learned to prevent future genocides. In the same article, Gessen compared the conditions in Gaza after October 7, 2023, with those in Nazi concentration camps, which led to stark criticism from German left-leaning foundations such as the Heinrich Böll Stiftung.[53] Gessen's position has been increasingly shared by other Jewish and non-Jewish authors and activists.[54]

While the support of Jewish (re-)immigration to Germany after WWII was neither fervid nor followed by significant changes, this shifted in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[55] The case of the Jewish *Kontin-*

51 This text follows Cohen Daniel's definition of post-WWII Philo-Semitism as a "broadly conceived as positive discourse on Jews" that "can [...] recycle antisemitic themes, recreate Jewish otherness, or strategically compensate for Holocaust guilt." It is a term that was first used in 1879 by anti-Semites such as Heinrich von Treitschke, who spoke of the "blind philosemitic zeal of the Progress Party." For more, see ASHER COHEN, BERNARD SUSSER, *Israel and the politics of Jewish identity: The secular-religious impasse*, Baltimore 2000, p. 118; M. BRENNER (ed.), *Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland.*

52 It is debated whether, until the 1990s, there were actual attempts to promote immigration or whether that was a theoretical position (Stern, 1992).

53 MASHA GESSEN, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: How the politics of memory in Europe obscures what we see in Israel and Gaza today*, https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-weekend-essay/in-the-shadow-of-the-holocaust.

54 P. MISHRA, *Memory Failure*; ON THE MEDIA, What Israelis Are Seeing on TV – EXTENDED VERSION, https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/episodes/what-israelis-are-seeing-tv-extended-version (accessed on 11 January 2024).

55 After WWII, Jewish communities in West and East Germany were re-established, but their member numbers were far smaller than before the war. In the 1950s, the Central Council of Jews in Germany counted 15,000 members in all of West Ger-

gentflüchtlinge ("quota refugees"), unknown to many, began in East – not West – Germany.[56] In 1988, the East German government initiated a series of activities, hoping to improve the economic relations between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the United States and legitimise a sovereign East German state. These included the invitation of prominent Jewish figures to East Germany and the decision to allow Jews from the former Soviet Union into the GDR.[57] At first, these Jewish immigrants were not included in the reunification agreement between East and West Germany on October 3. However, the newly established government soon understood the value of such policies for the newly unified German state. Jews hailing from the former Soviet Union were allowed to migrate to Germany as *Quota Refugees*, based on the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees from 1951. Both the government and opposition parties agreed that these Jews should be allowed the right to settle in Germany, citing a historical responsibility towards Jews and the memory of Germany before the rise of National Socialism. Being aware of how such a step would be perceived outside Germany, Dietrich Wetzel of the Green Party at the time said: "This response will also be understood internationally as indicating the extent to which reservations about and fears of the new Germany are justified."[58] However, like many politicians after him, Wolfgang Schäuble made it clear that this was going to be a special treatment of an exceptional group, which should not be mistaken for an invitation to other migrant groups, saying: "By definition, the Federal Republic is not a country of immigration."[59]

many, while the German Democratic Republic counted 8,000 in 1949. See WILLI JASPER, *Ein neues Judentum in Deutschland? Fremd- und Eigenbilder der russisch-jüdischen Einwanderer*, Berlin 1999.

56 In contrast to other ethnic minorities, such as the Russian-Germans, the Jewish minority did not have what is referred to in the sociological and anthropological literature as "thick culture" – a common language, eating traditions, clothing and religious practices. For the Jews, the only concise expression of their ethnic affiliation was an entry in the population register, a purely technical and administrative step.

57 In October 1988, the President of the World Jewish Congress, Edgar Bronfman, visited the GDR. See YFAAT WEISS, LENA GORELIK, *Die russisch-jüdische Zuwanderung*, in: Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland, (ed.) Michael Brenner, Munich 2012, pp. 379–418; JULIUS SCHOEPS, *Russische Juden in Deutschland: Integration und Selbstbehauptung in einem fremden Land*, 1996.

58 M. BRENNER (ed.), *Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland*.

59 ANDREA DERNBACH, *Politik: „Wir sind kein Einwanderungsland"*, https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/wir-sind-kein-einwanderungsland-6593176.html

It should be highlighted that, unlike in the case of Russian-Germans who had been living for centuries in what today is known as the former Soviet Union, and German Jews who had been stripped of their German citizenship during national socialism, the case of the *quota refugees* was not about the repatriation of people with family ties to Germany, but about the repatriation of a people: Jews. The acceptance of these immigrants was bound to the expectation that they would "revive the tradition of the German-Jewish Enlightenment that had distinguished a town or city in its heyday."[60] By repopulating the dwindling Jewish communities of the country and highlighting the German past before WWII, Germans attempted to "travel back in time into a German-Jewish past, or, rather, into their notion of an imagined earlier local Jewish community."[61] This situation created an expectation of *Jewish identity performance* and the insistence for the new immigrants to join the already existing Jewish communities and rebuild the old ones.[62] They would have to be religious and have a discernible Jewish identity. According to Gorelik, this was also the argument that was brought forward by German policy-makers to justify the preferential treatment of this migrant group over others.

This initiative presents obvious problems, as it undermines both the concept of refugee status and pressures people with disparate life trajectories and motivations to fit into a miniature park of a polished German past. Furthermore, there were practical problems. The German government did not rely on a halakhic definition of Jewishness but granted residency to those who had at least one Jewish parent and did not belong to another religious community, their spouses and children. This situation meant that, while it is true that the Jewish communities in Germany experienced a significant boost in members, many of the new immigrants did not (and oftentimes could not) join the local Jewish communities. In some cases, it was because they did not conform to Halakhic definitions of Jewish identity (e.g. the mother was not Jewish); in other cases, it was because they viewed Jewishness more as an ethnic than a religious identity or because they did not identify strongly, or at all, as Jews.

(accessed on 7 December 2006).

60 Y. WEISS, L. GORELIK, *Die russisch-jüdische Zuwanderung*, pp. 393–394.

61 Y. WEISS, L. GORELIK, *Die russisch-jüdische Zuwanderung*, pp. 393–394.

62 Jasper, for example, describes how Jews were eroticised in Germany in the 1990s when, e.g. the magazine *Marabo* used images of Jews with prayer shawls and Israeli flags next to a text describing the disconnect to Jewish traditions by the newcomers from the Soviet Union. See W. JASPER, *Ein neues Judentum in Deutschland?*

The case of the *Jewish quota refugees from the former Soviet Union* is, therefore, an excellent example of how Philo-Semitism has been used as a nation branding tool and continues to be used for public diplomacy. Unlike nation-building, nation branding is not primarily directed at the in-group, the "us", but about informing an "other" about the nation.[63] According to Anholt, this requires a process of "strategy, substance and symbolic actions", meaning understanding the place of a nation in relation to others, introducing an element with the goal of changing (or upholding) that place, and communicating that action.[64] Anholt is especially careful to differentiate between aims. Nation branding, he argues, is not about increasing tourism but improving the image of a nation (in our case, the German and Spanish nation-states) by making it relevant through cultural participation "in the global conversations on the topics that matter to people elsewhere and everywhere."[65] The "elsewhere", according to Anholt, can be the scrutiny and approval by influential countries such as the US (in the case of post-WWII Germany) and regional groups such as the European Union (in the case of 2015 Spain).

Thus, analysing the body of the Spanish Citizenship law – especially the preamble and its previous iterations, as well as the discussion of the law in the Spanish Congress of Deputies and the various interviews, and drawing on the nation branding elements of the *Jewish quota refugees in Germany* and the historical review of Sephardic-Spanish relations – I argue that it is possible to understand some of the Spanish state's understanding and desired perception of itself.

63 PER STAHLBERG, GÖRAN BOLIN, *Having a soul or choosing a face? Nation branding, identity and cosmopolitan imagination*, Social Identities 22/2016, no. 3, p. 286.

64 SIMON ANHOLT, *Beyond the Nation Brand: The Role of Image and Identity in International Relations*, in: Brands and Branding Geographies, (ed.) Andy Pike, Cheltenham 2011, pp. 7–8.

65 S. ANHOLT, *Beyond the Nation Brand*, p. 9; JUSTIN HART, *Historicizing the Relationship between Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy in Jessica Gienow-Hecht,* in: Nation Branding in Modern History, (eds.) Carolin Viktorin, Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, Annika Estner, Marcel K. Will, New York–Oxford 2018, pp. 221–230.

The In-Group: What Spain Sees Through Its Sephardic Reflection

The 12/2015 citizenship law allows us to explore the notion of the *Spanish in-group*, including Spain's notion about itself and how the country wishes to be perceived. It delves into Spain's multifaceted reflection through its Sephardic lens. This lens serves as a mirror reflecting not only the historical narrative of Sephardic Jews but, more significantly, Spain's identity and self-perception.

Olabarria Muñoz, in a parliamentary session, questioned the connection between Sephardim and contemporary Spain, saying: "Because the language they know is ancient Castilian, it is not the Spanish language spoken in the Spanish state today [...]. What is the linking element? How is it measured? It is a question that I ask myself and that I want to share with the members of this commission regarding the connection to Spanish culture. How is it done? By getting a certificate of having participated in a 'sevillanas course' or having participated in a Spanish tortilla-making course?"[66] The interrogation is, therefore, about a fundamental question: What is Spanish identity or *Hispanidad* in this context? What are these Spanish cultural elements that bind Sephardim to Spain today?

Drawing from David Lowenthal's insights in *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, this section explores how heritage alters history and, in the case of the 12/2015 law, manipulates the portrayal of past actors. Rather than condemning historical actors, the law selectively reinterprets them through liberal humanitarian lenses, omitting conflicting evidence. In these accounts, stories of the Sephardic community being helped by past actors from Spanish history are highlighted. The stories that do not harmonise with this positive portrayal are omitted. This simultaneous referencing and omitting demonstrates the concurrent process of celebrating and forgetting selectively. In this section, I will scrutinise this language. To do this, I will make use of Lowenthal's concept of updating the past by garbing it in present-day guise. This process aligns with Lowenthal's notion of "updating the past", but it must also be understood as a response to unresolved tensions in Spain's reckoning with Francoism and Catholic nationalism.

66 OLABARRIA MUNYOZ, *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, 25 March 2015, p. 6.

The lacuna where accounts of Spain's historical persecution and persecutors should be found is suggestive: it shows the effort to create a unilateral narrative of forgiveness, reflecting Spain's approach to dealing with its complex historical legacy. The section further explores the intricate dance between memory and amnesia in the formation of national identity, drawing parallels between Spain's handling of Sephardic history and its efforts to reconcile with Francoist Spain. By examining how Spain navigates the legacy of Sephardic persecution and expulsion, this section sheds light on the complex interplay between heritage, historical revisionism, and the construction of national narratives.

There are four ways in which Spain is portrayed in the 2015 citizenship law: 1) Spain as its "old self", 2) the liberal and open Spain, 3) Spain as saviour, and 4) the absentee Spain.

1. Spain As Its "Old Self"

The law harkens back to a Spain reminiscent of its *old self*, invoking a romanticised past. To quote of one of the Spanish ministers at the time:

> "We are here repairing a historical debt, a historical debt with Jewish communities that had been in Spain for almost two thousand years, which probably starred in the most brilliant periods of coexistence in our history at that time when Spain was Roman and Gothic Hispania, Al-Andalus for those of the Muslim religion and Sepharad for our Jews, and who have known, after the Diaspora, in five hundred years, to maintain the love, traditions and language – Ladino – that unite them to Spain."[67]

This statement echoes Spain's attempt to remind itself and the world of an idealised historical era – an *old Spain* that stretches beyond the Golden Age, reaching into the 19th and 20th centuries.

The further reference to the *Real Decreto* of December 20, 1924, exemplifies this sentiment, emphasising the exceptional circumstances under which Sephardim acquired Spanish nationality already before 2015. This historical reference creates a positive echo of the dictatorial Spain

[67] JOSE MANUEL GARCIA MARGALLO Y MARFIL, *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, 11 June 2015, p. 20. José Manuel García-Margallo y Marfil, a member of the People's Party, served as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2011 to 2016.

under Primo de Rivera without mentioning it as such.[68] Additionally, the formation of a favourable opinion toward Sephardim, dating back to the times of Isabel II, introduces the idea of a centuries-old Spanish openness towards Jews. Rather than anchoring this sentiment in a specific historical event, the law links it to a person: Isabel II. There is an inherent irony in this association. Isabel II's namesake, Isabel I, was the monarch who expelled the Jewish community from the peninsula in 1492. Shifting the attention to Isabel II could be read as an effort to re-brand the negative associations with the name, an effort to disassociate the Spanish royal family from the persecution of Jews. The text adopts a clear nation branding strategy through overt Philo-Semitism, positioning Spain as the benevolent entity that extends a hand to Sephardim. The phrase, "Spain that has not stopped longing for that lost part [Sephardim] of itself since 1492", depicts Spain as a state that has somehow remained unflinchingly loyal to Jews, skirting the very fact of their maltreatment and expulsion.[69] As far as is possible, the persecution of the Sephardic community is kept at arm's length from the state and figures who personify Spanish institutions.

As we navigate this exploration, it is crucial to consider the diverse audiences for this law. Beyond the direct beneficiaries, the law seems to address internal and external audiences. Some statements resonate with the party's voters, while others aim to evoke a sense of Spanishness among the general population. Simultaneously, certain elements may be strategically crafted to communicate Spain's values and historical reconciliation to a broader international audience, such as the European Union.[70]

68 Miguel Primo de Rivera y Orbaneja was the Spanish dictator who ruled as prime minister of Spain from 1923 to 1930 during the last years of the Bourbon Restoration.

69 RAFAEL CATALA POLO, *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, 20 November 2014, p. 61.

70 The European Union has increasingly fashioned itself as a moral union in addition to an economic and, to some extent, cultural union. In its legislation, it has enshrined moral values such as solidarity, pluralism and tolerance, which mean the protection of democratic procedures and human rights – and especially the protection of minorities. See MENTOR LECAJ, *The determination of the European Union in the international promotion of human rights*, International Journal Vallis Aurea 7/2021, no. 1, pp. 81–90; TORE VINCENTS OLSEN, *Why and How Should the European Union Defend its Values?*, Res Publica 29/2023, no. 1, pp. 69–88.

2. *The Liberal and Open Spain*

One of the strongest elements of the self-portrayal of Spain within the framework of the 12/2015 law is probably its re-imagination as an open, liberal, pluralistic, and moral entity. The decision is presented as a desire for a benevolent reencounter: "It was a decision motivated by the desire to contribute, after almost five centuries of distance" (12/2015 Law), where the use of words such as "contribution" seem to reference the voluntary character of the law, while the word "alejamiento" in this context is both descriptive but also a tool to blur the cause for the state of distance.[71]

Special acknowledgement is given to historical initiatives put in place by figures such as Fernando de los Rios and Senator Ángel Pulido, presenting Spain as a supporter of the Sephardic cause: "Minister of State Fernando de los Ríos, the Presidency of the Government studied the possibility of granting, in a general way, Spanish nationality to the Sephardic Jews of Morocco, but the idea was abandoned due to the opposition found in some Maghreb circles" (12/2015 law). The establishment of institutions such as the Alianza Hispano-Hebrea en Madrid in 1910 and the Casa Universal de los Sefardíes in 1920 further reinforced the idea of the outstretched Spanish hand. However, the repeated reference to doors being opened "forever" contrasts with the temporal limitations set by the law, emphasising a continuous narrative of inclusivity (12/2015 law). The government at the time studied the possibility of granting Spanish nationality to the Sephardic Jews of Morocco indiscriminately, but the idea was abandoned due to the opposition found in some Maghreb circles. The 2015 law, therefore, presented itself as a long-awaited and planned idea: "[...] in the face of the intolerance of past times, a new space of coexistence and harmony, which forever reopens the doors of their former country to the communities expelled from Spain" (12/2015 law).

The law highlights Spain's efforts to communicate the values for which it wishes to be known internationally through initiatives such as the visit to a Madrid synagogue by King Juan Carlos, underscoring a narrative of an open, diverse, and tolerant Spain – including its monarchy: "This law that will be approved today says a lot, without a doubt, about what we were in the past but also about what we Spaniards are today and

71 Author's translation of "alejamiento": "distancing."

what we want to be in the future, because the open Spain, diverse Spain, tolerant Spain of Felipe VI today is the one that has culminated a long process of reunion with those who for more than half a millennium have carried the language, culture and memory of Spain with them [...] Why has this issue mattered to me, have I been very active and am still active in the Middle East peace process? The position of this Government, as you know, is an unalterable position, coherent and consistent with what our doctrine is, which is that we are for the two-state solution: a secure Israel with a Palestine at peace."[72]

In essence, the law is portrayed not only as a reflection of Spain's nation-branded past but also as a statement about how the state wishes for its present and future to be perceived: "[...] consensus that does not go against anyone but in favour of our own identity as a tolerant and plural country."[73] The law, therefore, serves as a powerful tool in nation branding, shaping a narrative of Spain as a nation committed to tolerance, diversity, and historical reconciliation.

3. Spain As Saviour

The 2015 law furthermore draws an image of the Spanish nation-state as not only benevolent towards Jews but as their saviour and protector. The law, for example, highlights the efforts of Spanish diplomats to protect Jews during World War II. These stories of humanitarian efforts, dissident at the time, were emphasised in order to rewrite the history of Spanish attitudes and actions during the war. While the courage of the various diplomats is indeed commendable, this narrative selectively omits, for example, the state's involvement with Nazi Germany.[74] Moreover, it is, at best, a selective and, at worst, an outright dismissive telling.

The idea of the Spanish saviour as the polar opposite to the atrocities of Nazi Germany finds itself towards the end of the law's preamble: "The course of World War II placed approximately two hundred thousand

72 ELORIAGA PISARIK, *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, 11 June 2015, p. 20.

73 RAFAEL CATALA POLO, *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, 20 November 2014, p. 61.

74 One part of the law goes even as far as to suggest Spain as a victim by proximity: "The brutal sacrifice of thousands of Sephardim is the imperishable link that unites Spain with the memory of the Holocaust" (12/2015 law).

Sephardim under German administration. Flourishing communities in Western Europe and, above all, in the Balkans and Greece suffered from Nazi barbarism with shocking figures such as the more than fifty thousand deaths in Thessaloniki, a city with deep Sephardic roots. The brutal sacrifice of thousands of Sephardim is the enduring link that unites Spain with the memory of the Holocaust. [...] Thousands of Jews thus escaped the Holocaust and were able to rebuild their lives" (12/2015 law).

The saviour narrative is not ideologically neutral: it is contested primarily by left-wing and peripheral nationalist parties, while centre-right actors emphasise reconciliation without apology. This divergence reflects long-standing fractures in Spanish memory politics, not merely disagreements over Jewish history.

4. The Absentee Spain

The last characteristic of Spanish self-representation is its absence in certain parts of the text. In the case of negative actions perpetrated by the Spanish state and nation – e.g. the 1492 expulsion, the persecution of Jews before and converts after, the discrimination and geopolitically driven acceptance of only a few – is not mentioned as such. Instead, the lawmaker obscures the state's (or the nation's) responsibility through the use of the passive voice, e.g. "[...] the expulsion [...] represented one of the greatest intellectual, cultural and plurality losses that have impoverished the State in all these areas," or "By the imperative of history, the Jews once again embarked on the paths of the Diaspora."[75]

The criticism of Spain's actions only arises in commentaries by mostly left-wing and separatist parties: "Spain had some of the oldest anti-Semitic laws in the West, such as the law of the Visigoth Sisebut in the year 612; a law that limited the right of property to Jews and provided for the death sentence of any Jew who converted a Christian. I think these things are worth remembering. As you know, the convert, in turn, was sold as a slave. These are our antecedents, the antecedents that today we

[75] INYARITU GARCIA, *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, 11 June 2015, p. 11; Law 12/2015. (2015, June 24). Ley 12/2015, de 24 de junio, en materia de concesión de la nacionalidad española a los sefardíes originarios de España.

want to repair."[76] This criticism even led the Basque party EAJ-PNV to demand for an official apology to be included in the law: "The Explanatory Memorandum of the Bill must explain in greater depth the historical arguments that justify the approval of the law, as well as include an apology to the Jewish people, as Portugal has done, for the historical error that led to the expulsion of the Sephardim in 1492."[77]

Conclusion

This article argues that Spain's 2015 Sephardic Citizenship Law is best understood not as the culmination of a linear tradition of tolerance, but as the product of ideological transformation within Spanish conservatism and the strategic deployment of Jewish history in nation branding. Drawing on historians such as Gonzalo Álvarez Chillida and Pablo Bornstein, the analysis demonstrates that Jews have long functioned as symbolic figures in Spanish national narratives, reflecting internal conflicts over identity, religion, and modernity. The 2015 Citizenship Law for Sephardim was presented as a continuation of a long-standing discourse and raises questions about the law's intended audience – whether it appeals to Jews and Sephardim, the international public, or Spaniards themselves.

Philo-Sephardism has been a crucial element in the narrative that seeks to recreate the Spanish past beyond the *siglo de oro.*[78] This diplomatic nation branding strategy has employed various methods, including the instrumentalisation of Philo-Semitism and Philo-Sephardism. Philo-Semitism emerged as a powerful tool for nation branding, framing Jews as a lost community that could have been beneficial for Spain, were it not for their expulsion.

The law's comparison with the case of Germany, particularly the case of the *Kontingentflüchtlinge*, provides a backdrop for understanding Spain's approach to nation branding through citizenship laws. Drawing on Thomas Altfelix's concept of the "Post-Holocaust Jew," this study

76 SILVIA DIEZ GONZALEZ, *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, 11 June 2015, p. 13.

77 CONGRESS OF DEPUTIES, 19 February 2015, pp. 16–17.

78 The years 1492–1659 are often referred to as the "golden century" in terms of prosperity and advancement.

analysed Spain's efforts in light of its 2015 citizenship law, demonstrating how it fits into a broader discourse that has spanned decades. The paper questions whether Spain's motivation for the law was to attract Jewish populations or to appeal to an international audience by adopting a Philo-Semitic stance, mirroring strategies employed by other countries. The synthesis of theory and fieldwork material reveals that, similar to Germany, the Sephardic Jewish communities desired a law, yet they were not the architects of its design. Instead, the law serves as a nation branding tool, where Jews are expected to play a specific role in the narrative, namely that the Sephardic community must be thankful and loyal. The agency they are given is as compliant beneficiaries; in a more pessimistic reading, they are entirely passive.

Despite similarities with Germany, differences emerge in the objectives of the nation branding strategies. Germany aims to increase its Jewish communities and their visibility, while Spain's law suggests a lack of intent to grow this minority. This distinction becomes apparent when examining the effects of the law and its impact on the political and religious dynamics within each country. One notable difference lies in the emphasis on Sephardim as witnesses of Spanish history, which accentuates the 15th century as the beginning of the Spanish nation-state. This narrative contributes to the construction of a distinctly new Sephardic identity, separate from the broader Jewish in-group definition. Spain's adoption of Philo-Sephardism as a nation branding strategy has created a parallel identity, Sephardism, positioning it as a subgroup of Spanishness or *Hispanidad*.

As we move forward, the evolving dynamics between Spain, its Jewish communities, and the international community may continue to shape the narrative of Philo-Sephardism and its role in Spain's nation branding efforts. Other countries such as Germany, Portugal and even China[79]

[79] Since 2000, Israelis and Jews have gained visibility and popularity in China, which is expressed through memorials for the local historical Jewish communities and the investment in research projects and centres and activities such as the "Israeli Culture Week" in 2017. Mary Ainslie suggests that the increased positive notion of Jews and Israel (brave, strong national identity, advanced and innovative) is connected to similar notions in what she calls the "British Imperial world." See MARY AINSLIE, *Understanding Chinese Philosemitism: Judaism and Israel as soft power in contemporary China*, in: The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power (2nd ed.), (eds.) Naren Chitty, Lilian Ji, Gary D. Rawnsley, London–New York 2023, pp. 392–403.

have been described by researchers as using national Philo-Semitism as a soft power to improve diplomatic and economic relations. Considering the existing scholarly work on the diplomatic use of Philo-Semitism in China and Portugal, but also the use of the *Convivencia* (coexistence) in Morocco and Spain, we may be witnessing the beginning of a trend to use and shape Jewish history as a nation branding tool.