

ALICIA GIL LÁZARO

Hope beyond the Sea. Perceptions of the Return to Spain among Immigrants Seeking Assisted Repatriation from Mexico (1910-1930)

This text aims to contribute to strengthening the link between emigration and maritime history by examining the processes of return. The form of return addressed here is repatriation – or return subsidised by the state of origin – and the community studied is that of Spanish immigrants who settled in Mexico in the first third of the 20th century. Political and economic crises forced many to write the Spanish Consulate in Mexico City requesting a free ticket to return to Spain, as they could not afford the transatlantic journey on their own. The text first introduces some considerations on the relationship between Spanish migration studies and maritime history, next discussing the process of repatriation as legally established in this period and put into practice in the mentioned case. Thirdly, it analyses the discursive elements of identity in the applications for tickets, as well as the consideration of the maritime space in the immigrants' imaginary.

Keywords: identity; maritime history; Mexico; repatriation; Spanish immigration.

Introduction

This text aims to contribute to strengthening the link between emigration and maritime history by looking at the processes of return. The form of return addressed in these pages is repatriation – or return subsidised by the state of origin – and the community studied is that of Spanish immigrants who settled in Mexico in the first third of the 20th century. Political and economic crises forced many to write the Spanish Consulate in the Mexican capital requesting a free ticket to return to Spain, as these individuals lacked the resources to assume the cost of the transatlantic journey on their own.

Spanish immigrants in Mexico were mainly young single males, who constituted a low-skilled labour force. The community was always just a fraction of the Mexican population and quite small when compared to other immigrant groups settling in the Americas. Its influence in Mexico dates back to the last third of the 19th century when it had grown into an

economically flourishing group that was well positioned in relation to political power and the social elites. Even so, a large part of the colony was made up of employees, shop assistants and artisans who emigrated in the first decade of the 20th century, when the flow of people leaving Spain for the Americas intensified. Most of them came from the north of the Iberian Peninsula, specifically from the regions of Galicia, Asturias, Santander, the Basque Country, northern Castile and Catalonia.

From 1911 onwards, the situation of the Spanish became very complicated due to revolutionary violence and the growth of anti-Spanish prejudices brought along with it; they were accused of being former colonisers or new exploiters, and the group close to the inner circle of the deposed dictator, Porfirio Díaz, was especially reviled. Several hundred Spaniards died during the Mexican Revolution, with many others having to leave the country, and the new revolutionary state even decreed many expulsions of immigrants (Yankelevich, 2006). A less studied aspect is that of those men who lost their jobs and livelihoods in the conflict and were left without resources to return to their places of origin. Letters from applicants requesting repatriation filled the consular desks, but very few were lucky enough to receive the desired passage to escape their situation and return home. After the Revolution, a domestic economic crisis in the mid-1920s revived applications for passage, and a few years later the economic crisis of the Great Depression had a similar effect on jobs, and once again immigrants tried to return with Spanish state-subsidised passage.

The correspondence that arrived at the consular offices, on the basis of which this analysis is constructed, condenses the substantial information about the mental and emotional construction with which the Spaniards understood their return: their hope was reborn beyond the sea. For these immigrants, their origin, their homeland and their alternative lay beyond the ocean, and the aim of these letters was to cross it again. A new horizon of possibilities was summed up in this action, and the challenge was to overcome the serious obstacle imposed by the sea itself.

Likewise, the mention of Spanish identity is constant in the epistolary documentation, as the applicants believed that in doing so, they could make their desire to return a reality by invoking a discourse whose aim was to sway the emotions of those officials in a position to help them and show that returning to the mother country was the highest ideal to which they aspired.

We assume the idea that population movements, regardless of their nature or motivation, or the direction of the flows, lead to new ways of constructing, interpreting or organising, symbolically or effectively, the spaces in which they interfere. The following pages analyse the way in which immigrants

conceived the maritime space as the obligatory passage to overcome difficulties, focusing their hopes on obtaining that desired repatriation ticket.

The text first introduces some considerations on the relationship between Spanish migration studies and maritime history. It then discusses the process of repatriation as it was legally established in this period and as it was put into practice in the mentioned case. Thirdly, it analyses the discursive elements of identity in the applications for tickets, as well as the consideration of maritime space in the immigrants' imaginary. Finally, some brief conclusions and a reflection on the relevance of these analytical frameworks in migration studies are offered.

Maritime History and Migration Studies

Maritime history has played a prominent role in Spanish historiography for centuries, with its predominance in the discipline resting upon the great themes of modern Spanish history, such as the feats of discovery and conquest from the 16th century onwards, or the establishment of transoceanic routes for exploration and trade (Martínez Shaw, 2014: 35-41). Later on, other issues such as advancements in navigation, shipbuilding and maritime economic activity (from fishing to the slave trade) also became increasingly important (Alfonso Mola, 2018: 564). The encounter of maritime history and migration studies, however, can be considered a relatively recent phenomenon, with its origins more associated with the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Be it voluntary or forced, intercontinental emigration – with the sea as an unquestionable reference – did not penetrate into the inner circle of the approaches to traditional maritime history with the same intensity, arriving only belatedly and in a somewhat sidelong fashion. In fact, once the study of outward population mobility made its way into Spanish historiography, historians' main concerns instead emphasised the relationship with the land, that is, the influence of these great displacements on the shaping of the modern nation-state, on its economic development or on social organisation, whether in Spain or in the emigrants' countries of destination (Núñez Seixas, 2014: 23-52).

The main areas where this relationship with maritime history has begun to take shape have been confined to the analysis of emigrant journeys and have taken a social or economic perspective: the conditions under which they were undertaken (which often prefigured a hostile encounter with the ocean before, during and even after the crossing); the shipping companies that carried them out and the agents or consignees who established contact with the emigrants. Notable in this regard are Alejandro Vázquez González's research on the transport conditions of Galicians (2015) and

Martín Rodrigo Alharilla's research on the main Spanish shipping company and its owners (2007a, 2007b). The analysis of the public policies of the Spanish State towards the migration issue has also had an impact on this relationship between migration and maritime history, since the main regulations regulated certain aspects, such as boarding, conditions on board, ship owners' obligations, passenger restrictions and others (Fernández Vicente, 2014). Thus, for example, the reports drawn up by emigration inspectors on transatlantic crossings have constituted first-hand sources with respect to this complex link between the sea and emigrants (Cañabate Pérez, 2008; González Martínez, 2016), while the clauses relating to the return subsidy in the first general Law on Spanish Emigration of 1907 emphasised certain aspects, such as the protection of shipwrecked persons (Gil Lázaro, 2015: 198-199).

The relationship between the sea and emigration has been slow to emerge, however, although there seems to be a general agreement in more recent times as to the influence of the maritime space in the construction of national identity in contexts of transnational mobility. The appropriation of this space by individuals involved in migratory processes makes it necessary to question those partial constructions subject to national frameworks and to approach their study from a transnational point of view, where territorial borders are much less tangible and the sea is proposed as a shared social space – which unites and separates at the same time – yet subject to different economic, political, symbolic or discursive “uses” (Manning, 2013; Starkey, 2020).

Indeed, in the past decade, the theme of overseas migratory diasporas has notably and increasingly become the object of study in the light of theoretical paradigms such as transnational history, operating in a perspective which, according to Núñez Seixas (2020: 22-23), places the emphasis on “the links, the networks of connection and the relationships existing between the units studied”,¹ and which has as one of its favourite themes the experiences of those who move amongst them: travellers, emigrants, and exiles. To these would be added the actions of formalised international organisations or networks (*ibidem*). From this point of view, migrations and diasporic communities have been approached in a particular way, as networks or webs of transnational relations that are subject, in turn, to specific dynamics (Amelina and Barglowski, 2019: 31-39; Saunier, 2013).

Repatriation: A Point of Return

Questions relative to the return and repatriation of immigrants to their homelands have been long ignored in the history of Spanish great migration

¹ This and all translations are by the author.

during the time of Second Industrial Revolution. Contemporary authors conventionally assumed that migration was a one-way process, a point of no return (Sánchez Alonso, 1992: 447; Fernández Vicente, 2014: 266). Most historiographical studies have variously focused on moments of departure, the migrants' journey, and their arrival, settlement, and integration in new lands. But it is only in recent decades that there have been a few important theoretical and empirical contributions to the subject of return migration (Erice, 1999; Frid, 2001; Núñez Seixas, 2005; Soutelo, 2007) and some specific studies on repatriation processes from different parts of the Americas (Hernández González and Hernández García, 1993; Marsal, 1969; Naranjo Orovio and Moreno Cebrián, 1990; Yanes Mesa, 2009). This research builds upon and takes forward such concerns by describing a process of repatriation.

Between 1880 and 1930 more than four million Spaniards immigrated to Latin America. Historical research has highlighted the existence of high return rates for Spanish emigrants before 1930, estimated at around 50% of departures (Yáñez Gallardo, 1994: 220-225). Mexico was not necessarily their chief destination, but many indeed arrived in the country.² Some even held prominent roles as wholesale merchants and industrial entrepreneurs, gradually exercising significant political influence in pre-revolutionary Mexico (Cerutti, 1995; Gamboa Ojeda, 1999; Marichal, 1999). Important academic studies have clarified the diverse endeavours of the economic elite of Spaniards in Mexico (Gutiérrez Domínguez, 2021). At the same time, silence attends the rest.

Research on Spanish migration has generally favoured the diplomatic and economic aspects above social or cultural ones, although in more recent years concise and systematic studies have reviewed the social and demographic attributes of these processes (Lida, 1997). Spanish repatriation from Mexico has not been studied in a systematic way. Of course, there are scattered allusions in historical surveys to the settlements and presence of poor Spaniards in Mexico during the 20th century as well as general statements regarding their return migration as being caused by political unrest during the revolution and that consulates responded with assistance.³

² In 1910, the Spanish community in Mexico numbered around 30,000 individuals, a much smaller number than in other countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Cuba. This was the time of the group's greatest demographic growth, with a majority concentration in the capital, around 12,000, approximately 2% of the city's population. It was the largest foreign group in Mexico until the 1930s (Salazar Anaya, 2010).

³ The main source of information was the Archive of the Spanish Consulate in Mexico. Here not only is all the mail between the most distinguished consuls in Mexico and the Secretary of State in Madrid kept, but also an amazing collection of letters that poor immigrants wrote to the Consulate telling of their problems and asking to be repatriated.

Therefore, how did institutions, political and social networks influence this process of repatriation? How was return organized? As of 1907 repatriation became a legal figure regulated in Article 46 of the Spanish Law on Emigration, by which 20% of the total number of immigrants who entered a host country during a specific year had the right to be returned to Spain, with half priced tickets handled by the consular offices in those countries.⁴ This law was part of the context of growing state intervention in social affairs that had begun in other European countries at the end of the 19th century and which led to the gradual adoption of measures to protect emigrants at ports of departure, during the journey, and at their destination. In Spain, the migratory cycle began late due to the serious backwardness of agriculture and the predominance of day labour in much of the country, the limited industrial drive of urban centres, and the protectionist policies of the Spanish state, all of which inhibited departures until the last decades of the 19th century. It was only when Spain began to grow that the mass exodus could begin, and this happened above all in the first decade of the 20th century. It was then necessary to regulate the process in a general way, and the Italian migration law of 1901 was taken as a model. The new legal norm adopted a similar sense of protection to that of the former law and was in effect for many years, well into the Franco regime.⁵

In Mexico approximately three thousand people obtained tickets subsidized by the Spanish Government to go back to their homeland (between 1910 and 1936).⁶ While it was mostly Spanish men who had migrated to Mexico (Salazar Anaya, 2010), repatriation, on the contrary, affected whole families: more than half of the returnees were part of family structures, where women and children had an important presence.⁷

⁴ *Emigration Law*, 21st December 1907, Chapter IV, Article 46. General Inspection of Emigration, 1932: 15.

⁵ In 1924 a new legal text synthesized the legislation passed in 1907 and the following years (Pérez Prendes, 1993). This text was known as the *Emigration Law and Regulations, the "consolidated text" of 1924*. Article 89 established that shipping companies had to return to Spain those emigrants who were not accepted at the ports of arrival free of charge. It also obliged them to repatriate, again for half the price of the ticket, a number of persons not exceeding 20% of the emigrants (Chapter IV, Article 47 of the 1924 Emigration Law). A Ministerial Order of 29 March 1946, already during the dictatorship, provided for the continuation of the legislation enacted in 1924, which would not be replaced by new legislation until 1962. See "Law on the Basis of Emigration" 22nd October 1960.

⁶ The available information gives a figure of 2,366 returned emigrants as repatriated "on behalf of the Spanish State", to which should be added at least 600 more individuals to whom the Spanish Charitable Society provided free tickets. An estimate of the percentage of the total Spanish population in Mexico in 1930 is close to 10% for the period (Gil Lázaro, 2015: 249).

⁷ General Administration Archive (GAA), Spanish Consulate in Mexico (SCM), boxes 9600 to 9838. Funds relating to Repatriations, 1910 to 1936. The documentation allows us to confirm that children usually accompanied adults with whom they had direct family ties.

Despite the law and the consular efforts to comply, repatriation, in fact, took place basically thanks to the social networks and efforts of the Spanish community in Mexico City. Relatives, friends, neighbours, employers, and fellow workers both socially and economically supported the return home of the most vulnerable groups: the poor, the ill, the elderly, orphans, and widows. Letters of recommendation, contributions, collections at religious or social events, lotteries and other similar strategies turned ethnic solidarity into train tickets to get to the port of Veracruz, ship passage to Spain, and train tickets, again, to get from the Spanish ports to their hometowns.⁸ Also, the elite groups mobilized their resources for this purpose, sponsoring charity banquets and other similar events and they used their political influence on the Spanish Diplomatic Mission on behalf of those requiring repatriation.

Charitable organizations founded by the Spanish in America generally allocated part of their budget for repatriating those immigrants who were in poor health, elderly or homeless, sometimes directly participating in obtaining the return tickets.⁹ Even though associations used to represent a minority portion of an emigrant population in a given place, they have also been regarded as key elements in articulating transnational spaces for connecting geographically distant communities (Portes *et al.*, 2007). The Spanish Charitable Society, located in Mexico City, undertook this task by providing free tickets for many and even short-term lodgings in its own facilities for those who had already left their homes.¹⁰ The Consulate General of Spain in Mexico, in charge of allocating the tickets, appointed this association to select the applicants to be benefited. The selection process was carried out under strict surveillance by the organization and required an investigation of the applicants' nationality, work history, honesty, morality, and economic need.¹¹

⁸ GAA-SCM, boxes 9600 a 9838. Fonds relating to Repatriations, 1910 to 1936. Consular correspondence and copy books of letters.

⁹ GAA-SCM, box 9762, Spanish Charitable Society to the Chargé Affairs, 7th November 1927. "List of subscribing organizations". Practically all immigrant associations participated to a greater or lesser extent in the repatriations by financing tickets, organizing subscriptions or recommending applicants to the Consulate.

¹⁰ Between 1910 and 1923, the Annual Reports of this charitable institution record a total of 697 tickets granted to compatriots. Vide Spanish Charitable Society (1923), *Memoria que la Junta Directiva de la Sociedad de Beneficencia Española presentó a la Junta General celebrada el 29 de diciembre de 1923 acerca de los trabajos llevados a cabo desde el 1 de diciembre de 1922 Report presented by the Board of Directors of the Spanish Charitable Society to the General Meeting held on 29 December 1923 on the work carried out since 1 December 1922*. [Annual Report 1922]. México: Typography and Lithography "La Carpeta".

¹¹ Spanish Charitable Society, *Annual Report 1925*, p. 9. General Regulations of the Spanish Charitable Society, Article 3, on the attributions of the Repatriation Qualifying Commission.

What were the motivations for returning? Repatriation was continuous during this period, however, there were different moments when it rose above the average.¹² The Mexican Revolution of 1910 triggered the first important process of repatriation of Spaniards from Mexico City, especially during the most difficult years of the civil conflict between 1913 and 1917. The most critical moment was 1915, known as “the year of hunger”, when the capital was affected by a food shortage. Wheat and other basic grains could not be delivered to the city because the access roads had been destroyed. War also destroyed crops in the fields and in granaries. The breakdown of the porfirian monetary system and the issuing of paper money by rival factions sent prices sky high and led to food hoarding, speculation, looting, other abuses and even starvation. Much of the city’s population was unemployed (Rodríguez Kuri, 2010: 141-162). That year, more poor Spaniards than ever before requested repatriation tickets from the Consulate.¹³ The lack of resources, the loss of jobs and the inability to find new ones, the using up of all their savings, illness and homelessness were the most frequently cited motives for seeking repatriation at that time.

The second substantial movement in this direction occurred at the end of the 1920s and intensified over the following decade. This was primarily caused by the economic crisis that beset Mexico in the aftermath of the armed clashes affecting citizens and aliens, Mexicans, and migrants. Now poor Spanish immigrants faced extra pressure to return home given the nationalist regulations enforced by the Mexican government after the Great Depression (Yankelevich, 2012). By issuing restrictive labour laws, the Mexican state wanted to aid and assimilate its own returnees, that is, those Mexican migrants expelled from the United States at that time (Alanís Enciso, 2017). This served to precipitate the already desperate situation of poor Spanish immigrants.

In addition, restrictions on the arrival of more immigrants, be they Spanish or others, further exacerbated the situation. Since the number of charity tickets given to Spanish petitioners in Mexico to return home depended on the number of tickets sold to Spanish immigrants coming to Mexico, the situation of poor Spaniards wanting to return was acutely aggravated.¹⁴ Finally, in Mexico the hostility toward Spaniards was sharpened by Hispanophobic feelings (Yankelevich, 2006).

The precise social and kinship networks of ethnic solidarity among the Spaniards in Mexico that had sustained the poor among them were no longer

¹² The average was around 150 returnees per year (Gil Lázaro, 2015: 250-256).

¹³ GAA-SCM, box 9665, Funds relating to Repatriations, 1915.

¹⁴ GAA-SCM, boxes 9700-9762, Funds relating to Repatriations, 1922-1930.

effective given the laws that dictated that Spanish entrepreneurs should employ a workforce that was at least 90% Mexican.¹⁵ At the same time, it was precisely such solidarities that encouraged the well-off Spaniards in Mexico to establish associations and charities to aid their fellow countrymen to travel to Spain by paying for their return tickets. This was important not only because the costs of overseas travel were prohibitively expensive but also because Spanish public institutions were inefficient and even unconcerned about the problem of returning Spaniards given the political turmoil Spain was experiencing under the Second Republic (Tabanera, 1999: 73-75).

Getting a Ticket to Cross the Sea

Correspondence is often considered an essential way to penetrate the private dimension of emigration and the imaginary of its protagonists, the most direct access to a mental universe often polarised between geographical, symbolic and discursive “two seashores” (Cunha, 2015: 284). However, the letters that motivate our analysis present an essentially hybrid character. On the one hand, they were written in the handwriting of the immigrants, men and women from subaltern social groups, “simple peasants who became grocers” in the words of Núñez Seixas (2014: 48), and in being such, they might find it difficult to express themselves in writing. On the other hand, this was correspondence addressed to the official authorities representing Spain in Mexico and were intended to request a free boat ticket to return to their homeland. The migrants’ narrative thus emerged from their private and subjective world but was conditioned by the fact that it had to be read by those to who they would plead for help achieve a potentially unreachable goal. Thus, it should not be surprising that a tragic – often extreme – tone was employed where problems, perhaps deliberately amplified, seemed to have no other solution than leaving the country.¹⁶ The elites of the migrant community as well as the consular staff and associations used to refer to these immigrants as the “indigents of the colony” and they themselves also presented themselves as such:

[...] it being absolutely impossible to suffer any longer the horrendous situation in which this country has been plunged, as we lack the resources not only to return to our homeland, our beloved Spain, but also to face the most urgent needs, such

¹⁵ Federal Labor Law passed on 31st March 1931. *Official Journal of the Federation*, 28th August 1931, “General Provisions”, Article 9, page 4.

¹⁶ Hence, they contained frequent spelling mistakes, an insecure handwriting pattern with abundant colloquial turns of language, and, at the same time, lavished expressions of thanks and politeness and a constant reverence for authority.

as our food, as there will come a short period of days when we will not even have a piece of bread to put in our mouths and what is more pitiful is that our innocent children will also lack it, giving rise to painful scenes of desolation and hunger in our homes. It is to avoid this that we come to you begging you to give us passage to Spain, and with this we will not only be eternally grateful to you, but you will do a great work of charity.¹⁷

Returning home meant crossing the Atlantic Ocean again and the applicants did not have the means to do it on their own. Indeed, they needed significant help. This is the basic idea around which the main arguments of the letters were based. Individuals relied largely on the resources of others – public or private – for the realization of a project consciously perceived as a crucial new step in their lives, as had been the departure itself: the ocean voyage. Unlike the first time, they were familiar with the adversities involved in this step and were not afraid to take it, and yet this horizon of return, this new crossing of the ocean, was often accompanied by an uncertainty that was likely to be similar to the first. In the representations of emigration in this period, the sea is a central symbolic element, since the very act of emigrating was determined by the physical overcoming of this barrier, by the economic possibility of crossing it. As we said, such is the emotional burden long associated with the image in Spain that immigrating to the American continent was considered a definitive journey from which there was no return. This idea fuelled a very negative view of the migratory phenomenon, which was blamed for causing the depopulation and ruin of the country because the assumption in circulation at the time was that the physical manpower of Spain's inhabitants constituted the country's greatest wealth (Fernández Vicente, 2014). The sea meant estrangement and, in many ways, oblivion.

Thus, among the recurrent arguments with which the letter-writers justified their request were allusions to maritime space as the main obstacle that prevented them from being with their families again, from returning to the land of their birth, from rebuilding their way of life: “[...] and as I am short of money, I beg you to grant me a passage, as this sea is the only thing that prevents me from joining my family”;¹⁸ “Beyond the ocean, I have a son who can take care of me, but I don't have the money to leave and he can't pay my fare either [...]”.¹⁹ However, the sea also represented the way back

¹⁷ GAA-SCM, box 9665, to the Spanish Consul in Mexico, 22nd July 1915.

¹⁸ GAA-SCM, box 9762, Anastasio Briz to the Spanish Consul in Mexico, 23rd October 1928.

¹⁹ GAA-SCM, box 9838, Manuela Esteban to the Spanish Consul in Mexico, 2nd June 1933.

home and with it a renewed expectation of a better life: “[...] I can’t wait to set sail again and I know that this wait will take me back to my family and my village, from which I should never have left. I am here alone, without work and without a future, and crossing the sea again gives me new hope”, said one widow.²⁰ The same sea alternately united or separated the migratory experiences of origin and destination, depending on the perception of the individuals.

Of course, those seeking passage did not merely associate the maritime space with their return journey home. The geographical origins of immigration to Mexico referred mainly to a less urbanised periphery of the northern coast of the Iberian Peninsula (Gil Lázaro, 2015: 45). Most of them, therefore, had been born in towns and villages close to the Cantabrian coast; thus, the sea would have been a spatial reference of the first order from their childhood. The migratory experience in Mexico City, on the other hand, confronted them on a daily basis with a landscape and a reality where the sea disappeared, to be subsumed by a land space and extraordinarily urban when compared with the rural environment from which the majority of the group hailed. The sea was left far behind in the midst of their daily concerns, work and sociability. In contrast to the main North and South American destination cities of immigration, such as Buenos Aires, Havana, Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo, all of them ports of arrival or close to the coast, Mexico City certainly stands out for its distance from the maritime space in the migratory stays, and this specificity would mark the discourses contained in the letters analysed. Thus, the sea represented a return to their roots, to their way of life prior to emigration, an idealised space given how they had become estranged from it in an environment that had become hostile. Life in a maritime context creates and reproduces social relationships and ways of thinking and perceiving oneself, as Patrick Manning argues (2013: 2-5). But the redefinition of identity in the migratory framework comes from the interaction of land and maritime spaces, with the importance of the temporal factor that marks the changes in the construction of identity sustained between these two land-sea contexts. As Starkey notes, “the sea permeates deeply into peoples’ lives” (2020: 378).

The distance between Mexico City and Veracruz, the main port of departure on the Gulf of Mexico, was bridged by train. This imposed an additional burden on applicants for repatriation. Having to pay for the railway fare reintroduced repatriation applicants to the discursive logic underlying their need for repatriation. A widow and her daughter, whose train tickets

²⁰ GAA-SCM, box 9652, Report of Mr. Braulio Sánchez’s widow, 19th September 1913.

had been stolen at the station before leaving for the port, were forced to ask for help to buy new tickets, and in her letter, she expressed her anxiety “to finally see again that immense sea that we miss so much and that for so long has been denied to us in this place”. In a similar way, an Asturian aspired to return to see the shores of his native Llanes, after decades in the Mexican capital struggling to eke out a living and later involved in the crisis of the early 1930s.²¹

On the other hand, studies of nationalism in the diaspora have highlighted the central idea that migrants maintain symbolic and material ties to the territory of origin, based on a spirit of return to the homeland (García Sebastiani and Núñez Seixas, 2020: 11). Indeed, the very concept of diaspora is associated with distance and nationalism, with the preservation of national identity outside the borders of the territory of origin (Cohen, 2008). Indeed, one of the basic axes of these arguments aimed at moving and convincing the readers of the letters was the idea of returning to the homeland. The usual expression of affection for the land of origin – the *mother country* – was usually accompanied by a reaffirmation of Spanish nationality, the exhibition of a valid passport or the letters of recommendation that corroborated it:

[...] I have been unemployed for some 14 months and I understand that given the current circumstances of the country, it is not possible to meet the needs of my family, consisting of my wife and eight children. I appeal to you to beg you to do me the favour of providing tickets for my whole family, with the aim of moving to our beloved homeland [...] I must state that my wife is Spanish, as well as all my children were also born in El Ferrol [...].²²

Those who wrote these lines, moreover, presented themselves as honest and patriotic Spaniards: “[...] humanly speaking, our effort and our will to continue fighting in a foreign country is exhausted [...] I can bring you letters from distinguished people who know me and would have no objection to endorse my conduct as an honest and patriotic man”.²³ In the letters of recommendation this was also the usual argument: “[...] he is a good Spaniard, an honest craftsman who we have found to be ill, lacking

²¹ GAA-SCM, box 9676, Natalia Rosas, widow of García, and Carmen García Rosas to the Spanish Consul in Mexico, 23rd February 1918; box 9761, Justo Cairla to the Spanish Consul in Mexico, 21st April 1931.

²² GAA-SCM, box 9665, Alfredo Vera to the Spanish Consul in Mexico, Mr. Emilio Moreno Rosales, 8th April 1915.

²³ GAA-SCM, box 9762, to the Spanish Consul in Mexico, Mr. Emilio Zapico, 1928.

resources and without work, and his circumstances being quite difficult, the only solution to his condition is his prompt return".²⁴

Their perception of the situation led them to think of Spain as some sort of lost paradise, as returning to their origins, a chance to start over, hope for those who still had relatives to look up when they went back.²⁵ And on the contrary, Mexico appeared as just the opposite, a place where there was no hope:

[...] Francisco Guarrochena Larisgoitia, single, 32 years old, unemployed clerk, who, lacking work and consequently scarce resources and lacking the most indispensable means of subsistence [...] and having no hope of improving his situation in this country, I beg your Excellency for a repatriation ticket.²⁶

Applicants sought return under these circumstances only as a last resort, when other options had proved unfeasible, or when they had run out of money and their situation had become unbearable and untenable. They used to say that they turned to their consular representatives because they had no other choice. They used the records where they were designated by those in positions of power as homeless, poor, or dispossessed. No details were spared when addressing their situation, as long as their misfortune could soften the hearts of the officials. The identity they shared, as Spaniards and immigrants, the unbreakable bonds with the homeland to which they longed to return, and their profound respect for Spanish officials, were the central arguments.

Shipping companies became important institutional actors in the repatriation of immigrants. Advances in steam navigation, faster and safer journeys and cheaper fares allowed the companies to develop a discourse of emigration as a journey with a probable return, an experience that did not in any way disassociate individuals from their land of origin. This was an important stimulus to fill their ships with migrants and to nurture among them the desire to return home in a relatively short period of time, something that the overall return figures as well as the new modalities of temporary labour migration seem to corroborate (Keelling, 2012).

Migrant communities had in the companies a constant and permanent reference that the ocean could be crossed as many times as they wanted,

²⁴ GAA-SCM, box 9822, Spanish Charitable Society to the Spanish Consul in Mexico, Mr. Teodomiro Aguilar. Report of Isidro Llanos, 4th February 1932.

²⁵ Having family members waiting for them in Spain functioned as an indispensable requirement at certain times and for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children and young women.

²⁶ GAA-SCM, box 9676, Francisco Guarrochena Larisgoitia to the Spanish Consul in Mexico, 3rd July 1919.

thanks to them. The ethnic press in destination contexts is a good example of the regular presence of shipping companies in community life, through the advertising of their routes, prices and services. But propaganda was also channelled in other ways, such as the consignees' attendance of institutional events in the ports of destination, their regular contacts with associations for the management of repatriation tickets and, moreover, their closeness to the consular authorities. The State and the shipping companies – above all the *Compañía Trasatlántica Española* – maintained a constant relationship through the consulates, not always free of tensions, which were often caused by the conditions under which the free tickets established in the migration law were negotiated, an ambiguous regulation that did not clarify the true role of the economic actors and the regulation of their obligations.

The fact that the shipping companies were generally reluctant to provide subsidised tickets or to reduce prices (raised in critical times by international shipping consortiums) did not prevent them from creating and expanding a discourse that was inclined to present themselves as part of a nation that supported the return home of the victims of migratory processes, crises or misfortune. They thus presented themselves as the symbolic and real connection between communities and the nation of origin. The granting of passages could depend on multiple factors, but without them, there was no way to cross the ocean. Immigrants knew this. Their references to *Trasatlántica Española* often took on the tenor of veritable demiurges of migratory experiences.

Furthermore, the group's primary institutions ideologically connected the repatriation efforts to principles of charity and patriotism as the core values that guided them. It was also understood that the response of the applicants, or the favoured ones, demanded an absolute compliance and subordination to their will, based on the fact that they were beneficiaries of a most generous, abnegated and selfless action: carried out in the name of God and the homeland.

The institutional actors were driven by “a high moral and patriotic duty” and service to the nation, the aim of which was to return to Spain as many immigrants in need of help as possible.²⁷ The Spanish Consul Carlos Badía Malagrida (1921: 83) expressed the consular authorities' duty to help these immigrants:

We come, finally, to consider an extreme, which, if in the chronological order in which emigration events take place, is always the last, for reasons of humanity and patriotism it deserves preferential consideration. I refer to the need to repatriate poor emigrants, the elderly, minors and the sick [...].

²⁷ Spanish Charitable Society, *Annual Report 1927*, p. 10.

For its part, the Sociedad de Beneficencia summed up its repatriation work as follows:

[Repatriation is a] Holy word that fills with joy the hearts of many of our compatriots, some of whom, because of their advanced age, others because of illnesses that render them unfit for work, and because of an absolute lack of resources, had lost the consoling hope of returning to the mother country.²⁸

However, the presence of indigents among them posed a problem for the Spaniards in Mexico because the economic and political elites wanted nothing to jeopardize their own standing and position of honour within Mexico City's elitist circles or in the eyes of the Spanish Government. The Spanish community believed it had to present a united front to outsiders, and extreme economic differences – homelessness or indigence – had no place in this framework. Thus, in crucial situations, their support of free repatriation worked as an escape valve to relieve internal tensions, to eliminate the disruptive elements in an established order and to homogenize differences. The goal of appearing to be a unified community also led them to maintain that in the migration process they had all been poor when they left Spain, so it was a moral obligation to help those who had been left behind on the path to economic stability. The Spanish Consul said in 1929: "It is my wish to help this poor family by preventing this woman, my recommended one, from appearing in this city as if she had been abandoned by us, which is something that should always be avoided, especially at the present time".²⁹ This was stated by a wholesale merchant in the capital who sent the Consulate a donation along with a note supporting the idea of organizing a committee "to resolve the unpleasant matter of so many indigent Spaniards in need of repatriation".³⁰

The Spanish Charitable Society's support for the most fragile part of the Spanish community was a constant expense, so it was more convenient for its finances to repatriate than to maintain a solution with no way out and no improvement for an indeterminate period that could become prolonged. Thus, the Society not only repatriated its own sick, asylum seekers or externally treated patients, but also helped to repatriate many others by providing letters of recommendation from its doctors and favourable

²⁸ Spanish Charitable Society, *Annual Report 1907*, p. 11.

²⁹ GAA-SCM, box 9761, the Spanish Consul in Mexico to the manager of the shipping company Compañía Trasatlántica Española, 4th May 1929.

³⁰ GAA-SCM, box 9761, Andrés Illanes to the Spanish Consul in Mexico, Teodomiro Aguilar, 13rd August 1931.

reports from its advisory committee to the Consulate. The repatriation of widows with children or poor women, for example, alleviated the institutional inability to care for the female and child sectors of the group. But it was the sick migrants who enjoyed a certain preference, as their repatriation would enable them to avoid becoming dependent on the institution. The medical reports often emphasized the urgent need to send the chronically ill to Spain in order to cure them, as in Mexico it would be nearly impossible for their health to improve. Sometimes local geographical factors that prevented healing would be alluded to, such as the climate or the altitude of the Valley of Mexico: “[...] The undersigned medical surgeons, legally authorized to practice their profession, certify that: the patient of this asylum, Mr. José Fernández Mier, who suffers from chronic bronchitis, needs to be returned to Spain, so that he can find relief”.³¹ Paradoxically, the proximity to the sea was another of the most recommended remedies: “[...] We permit ourselves to enclose a medical certificate from Dr. Godoy Álvarez in which he advises our recommended patient to stay on the coast for a long time in order to improve the illnesses that afflict him”.³²

Conclusion

If we understand maritime history as the study of the relationship between humankind and the sea, we have to think that there is still a long way to go in the study of the intense and complex relationship that emigrants established with the Atlantic maritime space at the time of the great migratory wave between the 19th century and the first third of the 20th century. In the perception of the Spanish immigrants settled in Mexico that we have studied in this text the sea represents the way home and the end of their hardships. It brings them closer to their homeland, their own, a space revalued on the basis of the negative experience of living in Mexico. Their identity seems to be strengthened in the course of the repatriation process. And their fortunes having failed, their time in the country of destination has run out, yet in their requests hope is reborn beyond the sea. A free return ticket is all they need to cross the ocean again and start over from the beginning.

This study has explored the return process as underpinning the wide-ranging interplay between social ties, ethnic solidarities, and the quotidian understandings of nation and nationality that both shaped and were shaped by the

³¹ GAA-SCM, box 9677, Medical Certificate from Mr. José Fernández Mier, Spanish Charitable Society to the Consulate of Spain in Mexico, 16th September 1917.

³² Spanish Charitable Society to the Spanish Consulate in Mexico, 5 July 1917.

migrant community. Focusing on the critical event of repatriation, it tracked the meanings and practices of immigrants as they negotiated and remapped everyday relationships of community and solidarity and wider networks of the public sphere and state power, the one arena feeding into the other terrain. This allows the exploration of the salient yet shifting boundaries of ethnicity, locality, family, kinship, and nationality as expressing identities, homelands, and their reworking at a cathartic historical juncture – namely, that of repatriation enforced by states – and creating communities. This study has addressed the institutional dimensions of these processes, but primarily through the perspectives of subaltern subjects who experienced and negotiated repatriation.

More than 400 applications had accumulated on Spanish consular desks by the beginning of the nineteen-thirties. Some people waited for months, even years, to see their dream of starting over in Spain come true. The most frequent complaints about the long waiting periods usually referred to institutional inefficiency, disguised hypocrisy and the importance of being well connected, the selfishness of the elite and the sensation of having been forgotten by the Spanish Government. As has been emphasized in these pages, studies of diaspora nationalism highlight the central idea that migrants maintain symbolic and material ties with the territory of origin, based on a spirit of return to the homeland, but questions remain about the role that the state and its welfare policies actually played in maintaining these ties with the “expatriate nation”.

On the other hand, the letters of appreciation, from those who made it back, referred to ethnic solidarity, the great human principles of those who handled the repatriation funds, the charity and the highly patriotic values of those who had made it possible for them to return home:

Mr. Emilio Moreno, Megico [sic]. We are now in our home which we longed for so much when we were in that strange country, and we would be failing in a sacred duty, if after you have favoured us so much (we can say you have spared our lives) we did not address you to thank you a million times for us and for our families.³³

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³³ GAA-SCM, box 9651, Paracuellos de la Vega (Cuenca), Rosendo Carrasco to the Spanish Consul in Mexico, Mr. Emilio Moreno Rosales, 15 July 1913.

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Alicia Gil Lázaro

Facultad de Ciencias del Trabajo, Universidad de Sevilla
C/ Enramadilla 18, CP 41018, Sevilla, España
Contact: agil3@us.es
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5217-5246>

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Esperança para lá do mar. Perceções do regresso a Espanha entre os imigrantes que procuraram repatriação assistida do México (1910-1930)

Neste texto, o objetivo é contribuir para o reforço da ligação entre a emigração e a história marítima tendo em conta os processos de retorno. A forma de retorno aqui abordada é a repatriação – ou o retorno subsidiado pelo Estado de origem – e a comunidade estudada é a de imigrantes espanhóis que se instalaram no México, no primeiro terço do século xx. As crises políticas e económicas forçaram muitos deles a escrever ao consulado espanhol na capital mexicana solicitando um bilhete gratuito para regressar ao seu país, uma vez que não tinham recursos para fazer a viagem transatlântica por sua conta. Primeiro, apresentam-se algumas considerações sobre a relação entre os estudos sobre a migração espanhola e a história marítima. Em seguida, discute-se o processo de repatriação tal como foi legalmente estabelecido neste período e como foi posto em prática no caso mencionado. Em terceiro lugar, analisam-se os elementos discursivos de identidade na solicitação dos bilhetes, bem como a consideração do espaço marítimo no imaginário dos imigrantes.

Palavras-chave: história marítima; identidade; migração espanhola; México; repatriamento.

Espoir au-delà de la mer. Perception du retour en Espagne parmi les immigrants recherchant le rapatriement assisté du Mexique (1910-1930)

Dans ce texte, on vise à contribuer à renforcer le lien entre l'émigration et l'histoire maritime en regardant les processus de retour. La forme de retour abordée ici est le rapatriement – ou le retour subventionné par l'Etat d'origine – et la communauté étudiée est celle des immigrants espagnols qui se sont installés au Mexique dans le premier tiers du xx^e siècle. Les crises politiques et économiques ont forcé beaucoup d'entre eux à écrire au consulat d'Espagne de la capitale mexicaine sollicitant un billet gratuit pour retourner dans leur pays, car ils ne disposaient pas des ressources nécessaires pour faire le voyage transatlantique à leurs propres frais. On introduit d'abord quelques considérations sur la relation entre les études sur la migration espagnole et l'histoire maritime. On aborde ensuite le processus de rapatriement tel qu'il a été légalement établi dans cette période et comment il a été mis en pratique dans le cas précité. En troisième lieu, on analyse les éléments discursifs d'identité dans les requêtes de billets, ainsi que l'appréciation de l'espace maritime dans l'imaginaire des immigrés.

Mots-clés: histoire maritime; identité; immigration espagnole; Mexique; rapatriement.

