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# ETHNIC REPATRIATION AS A CULTURAL PROJECT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF KAZAKHSTAN, GERMANY AND ISRAEL

This article explores ethnic repatriation as a fundamentally cultural process in which returning to the historical homeland is shaped not only by legal and demographic mechanisms but by symbolic, narrative, and identity-based dynamics. Through a comparative analysis of Kazakhstan, Germany, and Israel, the article examines how each state frames repatriation policies through different cultural logics and how these frameworks affect the lived experiences of returnees. Special attention is given to the tension between legal belonging and cultural recognition, the transformation of diasporic identities, and the symbolic negotiation of national inclusion. The novelty of the study lies in its application of a comparative cultural studies framework, moving beyond traditional migration policy analysis. Repatriation is approached as a form of cultural imagination, in which returnees not only re-enter a national space but reshape the very meanings of nationhood, kinship, and memory.

**Keywords:** Cultural identity, diaspora, ethnic repatriation, memory, symbolic belonging, cultural adaptation, Kazakhstan, Germany, Israel.

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## Қазақстан, Германия және Израильді салыстырмалы зерттеу мысалында этникалық репатриацияны мәдени жоба ретінде зерттеу

Бұл мақалада этникалық репатриация заңнамалық және демографиялық тетіктермен қатар, символдық, нарративтік және сәйкестік аспектілері арқылы іске асатын мәдени процесс ретінде қарастырылады. Қазақстан, Германия және Израиль мысалдарын салыстыра отырып, мемлекеттердің репатриацияны қандай мәдени логикамен түсіндіріп, оның қайтарылған азаматтардың күнделікті өміріне қалай ықпал ететіні талданады. Мақалада заңды мәртебе мен мәдени таныпу арасындағы шиеленіс, диаспоралық бірегейліктің трансформациясы және ұлттық қауымдастыққа символдық түрде қосылу процестері сипатталады. Зерттеудің жаңалығы – дәстүрлі көші-қон саясаты шеңберінен шығып, репатриацияны мәдени зерттеулер тұрғысынан салыстырмалы әдіспен қарастыруында. Репатриация бұл мақалада тек отанға оралу емес, сонымен қатар ұлт, туыстық және тарихи жады ұғымдарын қайта құру процесі ретінде ұсынылады.

**Түйін сөздер:** мәдени бірегейлік, диаспора, этникалық репатриация, жады, символдық тиесілілік, мәдени бейімделу, Қазақстан, Германия, Израиль.

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## Этническая репатриация как культурный проект: сравнительное исследование Казахстана, Германии и Израиля

Настоящая статья рассматривает этническую репатриацию как культурный процесс, в котором возвращение на историческую родину сопровождается не только правовыми и демографическими механизмами, но и сложной символической и идентификационной динамикой. Сравнивая три национальных кейса – Казахстан, Германию и Израиль – авторы анализируют, как государства реализуют политику возвращения, используя различную культурную логику, и какие социокультурные последствия возникают для самих репатриантов. В частности, внимание уделяется различию между юридическим признанием и культурной интеграцией, напряженности между диаспорной идентичностью и национальным самовосприятием, а также роли языка, памяти и символических границ. Новизна исследования заключается в применении сравнительного культурологического подхода, выходящего за рамки традиционного анализа миграционной политики. Репатриация интерпретируется как форма культурного воображения, в которой репатрианты не только возвращаются, но и переопределяют само понимание нации, принадлежности и памяти.

**Ключевые слова:** культурная идентичность, диаспора, этническая репатриация, память, символическая принадлежность, культурная адаптация, Казахстан, Германия, Израиль.

### Introduction

Migration has consistently occupied a central place within scholarly debates, reflecting the interplay of social, cultural, political, and historical dynamics that shape human mobility. While earlier scholarship primarily addressed migration through economic motivations, labor market demands, and policy frameworks, contemporary perspectives increasingly emphasize the cultural dimensions of migratory processes. Within this emergent framework, ethnic return migration assumes special significance, as it embodies the culturally symbolic act of reconnecting with ancestral homelands – shaped by collective memory, identity construction, and narratives of belonging.

Unlike labor migration, driven largely by economic imperatives, ethnic return migration involves profound cultural motivations: the desire for reconnection with an idealized homeland, preservation of ancestral heritage, and reaffirmation of collective identities. This phenomenon raises critical questions concerning cultural identity formation, collective memory, cultural hybridity, and symbolic boundaries constructed around national belonging.

The object of this study is diasporic communities returning to their ancestral homelands through state-led repatriation programs. The subject of the study is the cultural dynamics of such returns, including the negotiation of identity, symbolic belonging, and memory in the context of national repatriation initiatives.

This article compares three culturally significant return programs: Kazakhstan's Qandas initiative, Germany's Spätaussiedler policy, and Israel's Law of Return. While shaped by different histories, all three countries present the returnee as a cultural subject – a carrier of memory, language, ritual, and symbolic affiliation. Each policy creates expectations of cultural continuity, even as returnees encounter unfamiliar social realities, hybrid national identities, and contested definitions of authenticity.

The main aim of this study is to explore ethnic repatriation as a cultural process of belonging, negotiated through memory, discourse, and lived experience. To achieve this aim, the article sets out to:

1. Compare repatriation policies in Kazakhstan, Germany, and Israel from a cultural perspective;

2. Examine how cultural identity and collective memory influence the returnee experience;

3. Analyze the symbolic narratives produced by both state and migrants;

4. Identify cultural boundaries and tensions encountered in the reintegration process;

5. Investigate how returnees construct hybrid or adaptive identities in response to cultural contradictions.

These research tasks are embedded in a cultural studies methodology that emphasizes discourse, narrative, and symbolic representation as keys to

understanding migration not only as movement but as cultural transformation.

This investigation proceeds from the hypothesis that ethnic repatriation, despite legal and ethnic legitimacy, often leads to cultural dissonance between imagined homelands – shaped by diasporic memory – and the realities of modern nation-states. The success or failure of return migration is determined not solely by state policy or kinship, but by the extent to which cultural belonging is recognized and negotiated within receiving societies.

By comparing these three contexts, this article aims to advance a nuanced understanding of ethnic repatriation as a fundamentally cultural phenomenon. Rather than focusing narrowly on policy effectiveness or demographic impact, it investigates how repatriation engages deeper cultural questions: how diasporic identities are reshaped through the return, how symbolic narratives of belonging and memory are enacted, and how returnees culturally negotiate their inclusion or marginalization within the imagined national community. The novelty of this study lies in its cultural studies-oriented comparative framework. While most prior scholarship on repatriation has emphasized legal status, economic integration, or policy implementation, this article foregrounds the symbolic, narrative, and identity-based dimensions of return migration. Ultimately, ethnic repatriation emerges as a productive site for cultural analysis, revealing the intricacies of identity formation, the endurance of symbolic boundaries, and the ongoing reconfiguration of collective memory in response to migration.

**Literature review**

The study of migration has been historically shaped by grand theories and structural paradigms. Early accounts such as Goodrich (1936) conceptualized migration as a response to economic imbalances and population redistribution, laying the groundwork for demographic studies of mobility. Later, Massey et al. (1993) outlined the foundational economic and systemic logic of global migration flows, emphasizing push-pull factors, cumulative causation, and network theory. In a similar vein, Castles and Miller (2013) theorized migration as a consequence of globalization and post-colonial restructuring, placing emphasis on labor flows, transnational networks, and state control mechanisms. These classical frameworks, while illuminating structural conditions, often overlook the cultural dimensions of how migrants understand and narrate their journeys.

Against this backdrop, a shift in scholarly attention toward diasporic identity, symbolic belonging, and cultural memory marked the emergence of a more interpretive tradition. Early contributions by Cohen (1996), Armstrong (1976), and Marienstras (1989) offered typologies of diasporas not only based on displacement but also on cultural cohesion, myth of return, and symbolic homeland construction. Sheffer (1986) extended this line of thinking by emphasizing the role of modern diasporas as political and symbolic actors who maintain homeland orientations, influence state policies, and construct return narratives not only through emotional attachment but also through political lobbying and identity maintenance. Marienstras, in particular, questioned the assumption that diasporas possess an innate desire for territorial return, emphasizing instead the historically contingent and discursively constructed nature of belonging. This pivot was further deepened by Anderson (2006)**,** whose concept of "imagined communities" foregrounded the narrative construction of national and ethnic belonging. These works began to position migration not just as movement, but as identity work**.** Seton-Watson (1977) similarly emphasized that nations are not natural but historical constructs, often shaped by elite discourse, political contingency, and cultural invention – a view that resonates with the tensions evident in state-led return migration programs.

In this evolving discourse, return migration became a particularly rich site for exploring the tension between ancestral longing and lived reality. As Horevitz (2009) argues, anthropology has increasingly approached migration not as a unidirectional process of relocation, but as a deeply embedded practice of identity reconstruction, emotional negotiation, and cultural production. As Brubaker (1998) argues, return programs often presume cultural sameness where hybridity or dissonance exists. Joppke (2005) similarly critiques the instrumental use of "ethnic return" in liberal states, while Cohen (2008) and Safran (1999) offer cautionary readings of diasporas that seek return but encounter symbolic dislocation.

In the Kazakhstani context, this tension is acute. Numerous scholars (e.g**.** Diener, 2005; Cerny, 2010; Barcus & Werner, 2010**)** have highlighted how Qandas returnees confront a nation that is linguistically and culturally unfamiliar. While they may be recognized as ethnic Kazakhs, their Soviet or Chinese diasporic experience places them outside dominant cultural expectations. Bonnenfant (2012) and Bokayev et al. (2012) further note how state-driven

repatriation policies reproduce narrow definitions of "Kazakhness," excluding those who speak Russian. Integration becomes not just logistical but profoundly symbolic.

This symbolic dissonance is mirrored in German and Israeli cases. For instance, Spätaussiedler from the former USSR – legally accepted as Germans – often face cultural suspicion and marginalization (Münz & Ohliger, 2003; Brubaker, 1998). Despite their "return," they are socially marked as outsiders. Similarly, in Israel, the Law of Return operates as a sacred national myth, but returnees from Ethiopia, Russia, or Latin America frequently experience racial, linguistic, and religious barriers (Pogrund, 2016; Gonen, 1975).

At the theoretical level, cultural theorists like Stuart Hall (1990) and Homi Bhabha (1994) offer valuable tools for reading these contradictions. Identity is not retrieved at the border – it is negotiated, fractured, and often improvised upon arrival. Alba and Nee (2014), Berry (1997), and Gordon (1964) debate assimilation vs. hybridity, while Wimmer & Glick Schiller (2003) urge scholars to question the very nationalist assumptions that underpin migration categories.

In the case of Kazakhstan, Amangul (2012), Kalshabayeva et al. (2016), Akhmetova (2016), and Terlikbayeva (2017) all demonstrate how Qandas returnees navigate schools, institutions, and state discourse as culturally ambivalent actors. Their integration is shaped more by symbolic boundary-work than by legal frameworks. The same applies in Germany and Israel, where belonging is policed through language, appearance, religious practice, and discursive categories of authenticity.

This article therefore builds on existing literature but moves beyond policy-centered or demographically focused studies by examining ethnic repatriation as a culturally embedded and symbolically contested process. The necessity of this research lies in the fact that return migration – while often framed as a natural re-entry into national belonging – reveals deep symbolic contradictions and identity negotiations that remain underexplored across diverse contexts. By comparing Kazakhstan, Germany, and Israel, this study highlights how different historical and ideological frameworks produce parallel cultural tensions for returnees. The novelty of this approach lies in its comparative cultural lens: it does not limit itself to a single national case or legal analysis but foregrounds the symbolic logic, discursive frameworks, and identity work involved in ethnic repatriation. Such a design allows for a richer, transnational understanding of return not as return to sameness, but as a site of cultural production and struggle.

**Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative comparative analysis, adopting cultural studies methodologies to examine ethnic repatriation in Kazakhstan, Germany, and Israel. The research focuses on how returning diasporic groups experience and interpret cultural identity, collective memory, symbolic belonging, and cultural practices related to their return.

Data were collected from secondary sources, including official policy documents, scholarly analyses, ethnographic accounts, media narratives, and historical texts. The methodological framework emphasizes discourse analysis, cultural hermeneutics, and narrative inquiry. These analytical tools allow investigation into how states and returnees narrate belonging, authenticity, homeland, and diaspora, uncovering deeper symbolic meanings and cultural tensions within repatriation practices.

The analysis was conducted in three steps. First, a thorough review of cultural narratives and symbolic constructions within official repatriation policies was conducted. Second, narratives from returnees' accounts were thematically coded, identifying common cultural tensions, symbolic struggles, and identity negotiations. Third, a comparative analysis across the three countries illuminated shared cultural dimensions and unique local adaptations.

This article conducts a thematic synthesis of existing qualitative research, policy documents, and ethnographic accounts related to return migration in Kazakhstan, Germany, and Israel. Thematic coding was applied to secondary data drawn from scholarly literature, state discourse, and documented returnee experiences as presented in prior studies (e.g., Diener, 2005; Bonnenfant, 2012; Remennick, 2003).

The chosen comparative cultural approach ensures comprehensive insight into the symbolic and identity dimensions of ethnic return, highlighting how repatriation reshapes cultural narratives, memory, and practices within receiving societies.

**Discussion**

***Kazakhstan: Between Kinship and Cultural Distance***
Kazakhstan's ethnic repatriation policy, initiated after its independence in 1991, aims to restore demographic and cultural ties with Kazakh diaspo-

ras dispersed during the Soviet era, mainly in China, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and Russia. The state's efforts were formalized through the Oralman policy, later renamed Qandas, which has brought over one million ethnic Kazakhs "home" since independence. Yet, return migration has been marked not by seamless reintegration but by cultural, linguistic, and symbolic tensions between repatriates and locals. As Zardykhan (2016) compellingly argues, repatriates are often caught between their symbolic elevation as saviors of Kazakh identity and their practical marginalization as culturally "foreign" others – a duality that both fuels and frustrates Kazakhstan's nation-building narrative.

In the early years of independence, the Kazakh government officially labeled repatriated ethnic Kazakhs as Oralmans, a term derived from the Kazakh verb oralý ("to return"). While initially intended as a neutral legal category, the term gradually acquired stigmatizing connotations, distinguishing returnees from local Kazakhs and reinforcing perceptions of cultural difference. In everyday usage, Oralman began to carry implications of backwardness, foreignness, or lack of integration. Recognizing this, in 2021 the state officially replaced the term with Qandas ("blood relative" or "kin"), signaling a shift toward more inclusive and culturally affirming language.[1] This terminological change reflects not only a semantic update, but a broader ideological effort to frame repatriation as a kin-based reunification rather than a bureaucratic process of reintegration. Kuşçu (2013) argues that such discursive shifts are crucial to understanding Kazakhstan's nation-building project, as the language surrounding returnees reflects deeper anxieties about authenticity, loyalty, and the boundaries of national identity. Her analysis of public debates reveals how repatriates are caught between official narratives of cultural unity and public skepticism regarding their "Kazakhness."

Despite ongoing challenges, the policy itself reflects Kazakhstan's cultural priority of reviving national identity and historical memory through the reintegration of global Kazakh communities. As Bonnenfant (2012) argues, the state's repatriation discourse strategically constructs the homeland as both an ethnic and symbolic space of return, where returnees are invited to participate in a culturally restorative nation-building project. The state promotes

the use of the Kazakh language among returnees, offers cultural orientation programs, and encourages symbolic participation in national rituals and public life. These measures reveal that repatriation is not only a demographic effort but also a cultural project of postcolonial nation-building. Repatriates are expected to function as both beneficiaries and agents of the country's evolving cultural narrative, contributing to the re-Kazakhization of society.

Yet the lived experience of return reveals stark contrasts. Returnees often speak dialects or other languages (Chinese, Uzbek, Mongolian), adhere to different customs, and retain diasporic worldviews shaped by their places of exile. Werner and Barcus (2009) show that for many Kazakhs in Mongolia, the idea of return was not only motivated by ethnic affinity but also complicated by transnational mobility narratives, shifting economic priorities, and redefined notions of "home." As Portisch (2012) shows in her ethnographic study of Kazakhs in Western Mongolia, many returnees come from communities that developed distinct educational values, religious practices, and notions of cultural continuity that differ from those promoted by the Kazakh state. These divergent social experiences complicate integration and challenge the expectation of automatic cultural affinity. Dalelkhan et al. (2018) specifically analyze return migration from China, revealing how structural immobility, border regulations, and identity fragmentation complicate the reintegration of Chinese-born Kazakhs, despite their formal eligibility for return. Barcus and Werner (2010) specifically analyze the case of Kazakhs from western Mongolia, highlighting how their transnational migration between 1990 and 2008 produced distinct cultural expectations and community dynamics that clashed with bureaucratic norms and social perceptions in Kazakhstan. Scholars such as Diener (2005), Barcus and Werner (2010), and Bonnenfant (2012) highlight how Qandas face symbolic marginalization despite official inclusion. Bokayev et al. (2012) and Cerny (2010) describe tensions in schooling, employment, and gender norms, where returnees are often perceived as less "modern" or "integrated" than local Kazakhs. Amangul (2012) and Kalshabayeva et al. (2016) note that youth in particular struggle with identity dualism and uneven cultural expectations. In this sense, the very project that aims to restore cultural unity often reproduces internal symbolic boundaries.

Nonetheless, the cultural ambitions of the Qandas policy remain significant. It operates as both a discursive tool and a national myth, reconnecting

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[1] The replacement of *Oralman* with *Qandas* was officially introduced through a presidential decree in May 2021. This shift reflects growing sensitivity to the symbolic and social meanings of migration terminology and a broader emphasis on kinship-based identity in national discourse.

fragmented histories and diasporic memories to a shared homeland. The transition from Oralman to Qandas illustrates the evolving role of language, symbolism, and identity politics in shaping post-Soviet belonging, a shift also reflected in changing state rhetoric and media discourse (Dukeyev, 2017). As such, Kazakhstan provides a compelling example of how cultural policy is mobilized not just to welcome returnees, but to perform the nation.

### *Germany: Legal Kinship, Cultural Distance*

Germany's return migration model is built on legal recognition of ethnic descent, embedded in the Aussiedler and Spätaussiedler laws. These frameworks entitle individuals of German ancestry, primarily from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, to obtain citizenship and resettle in the "historic homeland." On paper, this model reflects a form of ethno-national inclusion – a state offering repatriation rights to its extended cultural family.

Yet in practice, belonging proves more fragile than citizenship alone can guarantee. The category of the Spätaussiedler is socially marked in ways that legally vanish but culturally endure. Returnees often speak Russian, bear Slavic names, or embody behavioral codes shaped in Soviet or post-Soviet contexts – all of which contradict the unspoken sociocultural parameters of Germanness. These include proficiency in standard German (not dialect), familiarity with German bureaucratic etiquette, secular outlooks, and tacit adherence to the norms of individualism, punctuality, and structured professionalism.

While legally "home," Spätaussiedler frequently face symbolic marginalization. They are labeled Russlanddeutsche, a term that linguistically ties them not to the national ideal but to a peripheral past. This reflects what Shibutani and Kwan (1965) conceptualize as ethnic stratification – a process where legally recognized groups are still culturally ranked, with some identities relegated to lower symbolic status despite formal inclusion. This form of cultural estrangement has been well-documented by scholars such as Brubaker (1998), Münz and Ohliger (2003), and Safran (1999), who point to the paradox of returnees who possess citizenship but lack symbolic citizenship – the everyday recognition as members of the cultural nation.

Germany's case is distinct in that it offers one of the most structured, bureaucratically consistent repatriation systems in Europe. Yet this precision does not eliminate its contradictions. The German state implicitly expects returnees to "pass" as cultural insiders – to erase traces of hybridity, to seamlessly merge. Those who fail to do so are quietly othered. As Berry (1997), Alba and Nee (2014), and Favell (2005) argue, such pressures reflect an assimilationist logic more than an inclusive pluralism – one that demands cultural conformity under the guise of integration and conceals implicit norms about language, behavior, and identity within the modern nation-state.

This cultural tension underscores a deeper insight: descent-based return does not guarantee cultural belonging. In the German case, ethnicity opens the legal door, but cultural conformity remains the ticket to full social inclusion. The result is a repatriation policy that, while highly organized and materially supportive, continues to replicate symbolic boundaries – boundaries that remind returnees that even among kin, some are still strangers.

### *Israel: Repatriation as Return to Covenant and Cultural Nationhood*

Among the three cases, Israel presents perhaps the most ideologically charged and religiously rooted model of ethnic repatriation. Its foundational repatriation framework, known as the Law of Return, grants every Jew the right to immigrate to Israel and acquire immediate citizenship. Unlike Kazakhstan's kinship-based model or Germany's ethno-legal approach, Israel's system fuses ethno-religious identity with national belonging, anchored in the idea of aliyah – the "ascent" of the Jewish soul returning to its promised homeland.

This model is culturally distinct not only because of its theocratic overtones but also because of the centrality of memory, trauma, and messianic longing in the Jewish diasporic consciousness. The Law of Return operates as more than immigration policy; it is a ritualized cultural act, a fulfillment of historical destiny rooted in biblical, post-Holocaust, and Zionist narratives. Scholars such as Safran (1999), Gonen (1975), and Shain (2005) point out that aliyah combines symbolic, spiritual, and national meanings, making repatriation into a cultural ritual of belonging.

At the same time, tensions between legal Jewishness and cultural integration persist. While Orthodox Halakhic definitions of who is a Jew shape religious law, the state's broader legal definitions often include non-Halakhic Jews, mixed families, or secular migrants from the former USSR. This has led to the phenomenon of "liminal citizens" – legally Jewish yet culturally marginal. As Cohen (1996) and Brubaker (1998) have observed, symbolic inclusion in Israel often requires not just descent, but

religious conformity, Hebrew fluency, and alignment with dominant national narratives.

Furthermore, the Israeli model reveals deep sociocultural boundaries between different waves of returnees: Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, and post-Soviet Jews experience varying degrees of cultural recognition (Gonen, 1975). Studies have shown that Mizrahim often faced systemic disadvantages in Israel's educational and employment systems, while post-Soviet Jews encountered linguistic and cultural gaps with dominant Zionist narratives (Remennick, 2003; Rebhun & Waxman, 2004). This stratification shapes not only material outcomes but also symbolic belonging. The aliyah from the USSR, in particular, challenged Israel's linguistic and secular assumptions, introducing Russian-speaking Jews who identify more with Soviet cultural capital than Zionist mythology.

Despite these frictions, the Israeli case exemplifies how repatriation can function as a national mythos – reinforcing cultural memory, sacred space, and historical continuity. The return is not only geographic but metaphysical, inscribing the returnee into a long narrative of exile and redemption. Thus, repatriation here becomes a form of cultural enactment: a symbolic homecoming that reaffirms Israel's identity as both a modern state and a spiritual homeland.

### *Comparative Analysis: Three Cultural Models of Return*

Taken together, the cases of Kazakhstan, Germany, and Israel reveal three distinct cultural models of ethnic repatriation. Kazakhstan approaches repatriation as a postcolonial project of cultural restoration, aiming to reconnect with a fragmented diaspora and revive a suppressed national identity. Germany treats repatriation as a legal recognition of ancestral belonging, yet falls short of offering symbolic cultural inclusion to returnees shaped by foreign sociopolitical contexts. Israel, by contrast, enacts repatriation as a sacred covenant – a return not only to territory but to a metaphysical identity shaped by religion, memory, and historical trauma.

Despite these differences, all three cases expose a common paradox: legal inclusion does not necessarily guarantee cultural acceptance. Returnees often experience a gap between juridical recognition and symbolic belonging, especially when their diasporic identities diverge from dominant national narratives. Language, religion, education, and collective memory become sites of negotiation – where returnees must often perform, translate, or even suppress parts of themselves to "fit" the cultural mold of the homeland. As Fassin (2011) argues, modern migration policies frequently operate through a logic of "conditional inclusion," where the act of welcoming simultaneously imposes expectations, surveillance, and symbolic hierarchies. Repatriation, though framed as kinship-based return, thus functions as a governmental project of cultural filtering. Returnees often experience a gap between juridical recognition and symbolic belonging – a dissonance that persists despite formal citizenship or legal status (Münz & Ohliger, 2003; Joppke, 2005).

These models also illuminate different cultural priorities: Kazakhstan emphasizes ethno-linguistic revival; Germany insists on bureaucratic clarity and linguistic assimilation; Israel invokes messianic symbolism and historical redemption. Repatriation, in all cases, serves as more than a demographic or political tool – it becomes a stage where the nation imagines itself, confronts its boundaries, and reaffirms (or contests) the meanings of identity and kinship.

### Conclusion

This article has argued that ethnic repatriation is not merely a legal or demographic process, but a culturally embedded and symbolically charged phenomenon. By comparing Kazakhstan, Germany, and Israel, the study has demonstrated how repatriation policies reflect divergent cultural logics – kinship revival, legal recognition, and sacred return – and how these frameworks affect the lived identities of returnees.

Across all three cases, a recurring contradiction emerges: formal inclusion often coexists with symbolic exclusion. Returnees are welcomed home in law but remain distant in cultural terms – marked by language, behavior, religion, or memory. This dissonance highlights the limitations of juridical models of belonging, especially when they fail to accommodate the complexity of diasporic subjectivities. Repatriation, in all cases, serves as more than a demographic or political tool – it becomes a stage where the nation imagines itself, confronts its symbolic boundaries, and rearticulates its cultural identity (Cohen, 2008; Brubaker, 1998).

The article's contribution lies in applying a cultural studies-oriented comparative framework to repatriation – a field often dominated by policy

analysis or legal discourse. It shifts the focus from administrative mechanisms to symbolic narratives, from integration metrics to identity negotiations. This approach reveals repatriation as a stage where nationhood is performed, not only through inclusion but through the drawing and redrawing of cultural boundaries.

Ultimately, ethnic return is shown to be a space of tension and transformation – where migrants do not simply return to a homeland but actively participate in reshaping its meanings. Repatriation thus becomes a critical lens through which to explore how nations remember, imagine, and recreate themselves.

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