

# **Changing the State's Story: Understanding the Sources of Change in Official Narratives of Traumatic Historical Events**

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## ***Abstract:***

In the past couple of decades, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of calls for states to apologize for, or come to terms with, past atrocities. However, despite a wide-ranging academic literature on memory, questions of when and why states change their official narratives of traumatic historical events have been largely overlooked. This essay offers several answers to these questions, drawing on insights from related academic work, and on my own research into the sources of change in Turkey's and Japan's official narratives of traumatic pasts. First, the distribution of power and change therein, in both the domestic and international spheres, frame possibilities for and obstacles to change in official narratives. Second, domestic debate, academic research and bottom-up mobilization can result in changes in states' narratives, but it is often indirect and gradual. Third, direct change can result from: domestic leadership or regime change, the discovery or publication of new evidence, or bilateral international pressure. However, different sources of international pressure produce different types of change. Finally, this essay draws attention to the feedback effects that often result from changes in official narratives, and which can later act as powerful constraints on or pressures for further change.

*Essay written for the Irmgard Coninx Stiftung Berlin Roundtable on Memory Politics,  
21-26 October 2009*

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## **Introduction**

In the past couple of decades, it has been widely observed that there has been a tremendous increase in the number of calls for states to apologize for, or come to terms with, past atrocities; as well as in the interest in and attention to how states and societies interpret and frame contemporary understandings of the past.<sup>1</sup>

As part of this broad trend, many states have been the focus of domestic and international scrutiny for the ways in which aspects of their pasts are remembered and commemorated. Turkey and Japan have both been the subjects of intense scrutiny and pressure for the ways in which traumatic events in their nations' histories are officially narrated. In Turkey's case, its narrative of the Armenian genocide, which took place between 1915 and 1917, has been criticized and challenged. In Japan's case, its overarching narrative of the Second World War, as well as individual narratives about discrete events and policies during the war, have been attacked and disputed. Moreover, activists, academics organizations and states have called on the Turkish and Japanese governments to revise their official narratives of these events. In some cases, activist organizations have lobbied their own governments to officially commemorate and recognize the Ottoman government's commission of the Armenian genocide; or the Japanese government's use of slave labor and sex slaves ('comfort women'), colonial policies, medical and germ warfare "experiments," mistreatment of prisoners of war, and massacres, such as the Nanjing massacre. In other cases, international governmental and non-governmental organizations have evaluated these events. In addition, groups and individuals in each of these societies have challenged the official orthodoxy about these events, and have called on their own governments to reassess their official versions of history.

### **Why is this important?**

Given this welter of interventions, challenges and competing narratives, it is imperative to understand the impact of different types of pressure on states' narratives of traumatic pasts. This is important for two broad reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> This apology trend has been noted by many commentators, journalists and scholars, including Marrus (2007: 76) and Nobles (2008: 4).

First, it is important to understand whether and how different pressures impact changes in official narratives, because the exertion of pressure is often politically costly for many of the actors involved. In this regard, challenging the state's official version of history can be dangerous for citizens of these states, who can be physically threatened and intimidated by ultranationalists.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, calling on these states to change their official narratives of traumatic historical events can damage bilateral relations and set back cooperation between the perpetrator state and the state calling for change. Finally, states' foreign policies can be hampered and/or partially driven by their reactive (and even preemptive) responses to external pressure to change their official narratives of these events. Thus, because there are material consequences that can follow from states' and other actors' choices to push for change in these narratives, it is important to understand the likely outcomes of different types of pressure, so that states and other actors can better weigh their own potential actions and reactions.

Second, understanding how and when states change their official narratives of traumatic historical events is important because such narratives connect deeply with other aspects of domestic politics, with the bases of national identity and political legitimacy,<sup>3</sup> and with the foreign policy goals that these states set and are able to achieve. Because these narratives inform and shape many aspects of these states' politics and societies, often in subtle but nevertheless consequential ways, it is important to understand both why these states' official narratives are strongly resistant to change, and when and how such sources of resistance are overcome.<sup>4</sup>

### **Hasn't this been studied?**

Despite the fact that states (along with other institutions, such as the Catholic Church, or the United Nations) are increasingly called on to 'recognize,' 'address' and apologize for traumatic

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<sup>2</sup> In January 2007, the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was assassinated, and one of the central motivations for the killing was that he had spoken and written prominently about the Armenian genocide. There have been similar instances of violence, intimidation and threats of violence by ultranationalists in Japan.

<sup>3</sup> I am not the first to note the connection between national narratives of the past, national identity, and political legitimacy. See, e.g., Maier 1988; Nozaki and Inokuchi 2000; Yamazaki 2006; Olick 2005; Yoshida 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Thelen emphasizes that "...understanding moments in which fundamental political change is possible requires an analysis of the particular mechanisms through which the previous patterns were sustained and reproduced....an understanding of political change is inseparable from—and indeed rests on—an analysis of the foundations of political stability..." (1999: 399).

and often shameful aspects of their pasts, and despite the by now well-developed and wide-ranging academic literature on memory, the questions of when and why states change their official narratives of traumatic historical events have been largely overlooked. Answers to these questions can, of course, be deduced from some of the rich body of academic research that has focused on different aspects of the politics and sociology of memory. Recent work has demonstrated that factors such as domestic debate (Art 2006; Maier 1988), the ideology of domestic political elites (Nobles 2008), a bottom-up social movement/mobilization (Yoshida 2007: 55; Nobles 2008), and shifts in great power politics (Bloxham 2005) can lead to changes in states' official narratives. However, most research focuses on one particular type of change in official narratives (e.g., the issuance of official apologies), or on one indicator (or 'site') of a state's official narrative (e.g., museums, textbooks or commemorative speeches).<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, other research focuses on the myriad ways in which a traumatic past is remembered and narrated within a single realm – usually within *either* the domestic sphere, *or* the international sphere. Thus, while the factors mentioned above, along with other factors (such as regime change, or pressure by a victim state), can lead to change in official narratives, the different *types* and *patterns* of change that result from these factors are not often or consistently explained.

### **Accounting for change**

Systematically answering the questions of when and why states change their official narratives of traumatic historical events, and what factors lead to and impede such change, necessitates a focus on official narratives themselves.<sup>6</sup> Combining insights and arguments from others' work on memory, politics and history, with my own research into the sources of change in Turkey's and Japan's official narratives of traumatic pasts,<sup>7</sup> yields several broad findings.

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, scholars of both Japanese and East Asian politics and history have primarily looked not at official narratives, but at societal attitudes toward history issues (Seaton 2007; Saaler 2005); at the role of history issues in bilateral or trilateral relations (Lind 2008; He 2004; Whiting 1989); or at particular 'sites' at which controversies over history are played out (Breen, ed. 2008).

<sup>6</sup> An exception is Bodnar (1992).

<sup>7</sup> This essay draws on research conducted for my dissertation, which is an analysis of the sources of change and continuity in official narratives of traumatic historical events. My dissertation analyzes the trajectories of two states' narratives – the Turkish narrative of the Armenian genocide and the Japanese narrative of the Nanjing massacre – and evaluates the impact of domestic and international factors on changes and continuities in these narratives. This project and my findings are based on in-depth qualitative research, including archival research in Turkey; interviews in Turkey, Japan and the U.S.; and a database of several thousand newspaper articles.

First, background conditions strongly frame the possibilities for and obstacles to change in official narratives. By background conditions, I refer to the distribution of power and change therein, both within the domestic sphere, as well as in the international sphere. As has been observed by others (e.g., Bloxham 2005), structural factors – meaning relations between states in the international system – constrain the possibilities for and limits on change in official narratives. With regard to domestic background conditions, three factors are important: 1) the strength of the party in power (as assessed both in its connections with other state institutions, and also in the extent to which its power is challenged, either from society and/or from competing political actors/parties); 2) the degree and extent of democratic freedoms (such as freedom of speech and an independent media); and 3) the degree of economic development in the state.

Within this structural frame, however, direct change is occasionally possible, while incremental change is more often achieved. Broadly speaking, official narratives usually change through gradual, indirect processes that evolve over time and often involve a variety of actors, including domestic activists on the left and right, academics, teachers, the media, activists in other countries, and other states. Key factors in such processes are: domestic debate and contestation over the narrative in question, which can gradually change the terms of debate and bring further scrutiny to the official narrative (Art 2006); generational shifts; and shifts in related narratives within the domestic sphere.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to emphasize, however, that domestic debate and contestation over an official narrative does not necessarily lead to change in a state's narrative of the event in question. In particular, the impact of such debate is often evident over the long term, by changing popular perceptions of the event, which, by rendering some claims implausible and/or illegitimate, can constrain the possibilities for change in the state's narrative at later points. This is particularly

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<sup>8</sup> In this regard, Thelen notes that "...changes in one institutional arena can reverberate, provoking changes in other, complementary institutions..." (1999: 396). For instance, many of the people in Turkey who are most outspoken on the issue of the Armenian genocide were originally human rights activists who worked on behalf of the ethnic Kurdish minority in Turkey. Over time and as progress was made on the issue of the 'Kurdish question', many activists came to feel that the official discourse about and policies toward the Kurds were intimately intertwined with the official narrative of the so-called 'Armenian question' (*Ermeni sorunu/meselesi*), and that overcoming the official taboos surrounding both issues were essential (and interrelated) steps toward a more robust and democratic civil society.

evident in Turkey, where activism and domestic debate (in the media, in popular publications and in academia) in relation to the Armenian genocide have emerged in the past ten years. As of yet, however, there is little evidence that this development has led to changes in the Turkish government's official narrative of the Armenian genocide. That said, a number of domestic effects of this trend can be identified, and I would argue that it is one of several factors that has limited the range of adaptive claims that the Turkish government can make about the events of the genocide.

When direct change occurs, it usually results from one of several factors: a change in domestic leadership, a change in the domestic regime,<sup>9</sup> the discovery or publication of new evidence,<sup>10</sup> or bilateral international pressure (e.g., pressure by China on Japan). The first three sources of direct change operate in a relatively uncomplicated manner. Changes in leadership or in the domestic regime can lead to *progressive* change<sup>11</sup> in a state's official narrative, especially if the new regime, leader or party in power is social democratic in ideological orientation (Nobles 2008) or from outside the existing political establishment (for example, following the electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey in 2002.) These shifts can also lead to *regressive* changes, however, as after the 1980 military coup in Turkey, or the selection of Nakasone as Japanese prime minister in 1982. In contrast, the discovery of new evidence can lead to *progressive* change in a state's official narrative.

Unlike the above three factors, however, the impact of international pressure is seemingly inconsistent, and results in different types of change. To account for variations in the effects of international pressure on official narratives, several variables need to be considered. Specifically, states' tolerance for disjunctures between official historical narratives produced for domestic

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<sup>9</sup> The vast literature on transitional justice speaks particularly to this point. See, e.g., Elster 2004; Minow 1998.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in 1983, *Kaikosha*, which is "...a [Japanese] fraternal organization for army cadet school graduates..." (Yang 1990: 22), asked members to send in personal testimonies and accounts from the Nanjing massacre. The intention was to disprove claims of atrocities by Japanese soldiers during the taking of Nanjing in 1937. To the surprise of the editors, however, they received many accounts that *confirmed* such claims. Many of these testimonies were published in *Kaikosha*'s magazine and later in a book. According to one scholar, "...by publishing primary sources that contain the facts and by admitting the Atrocity's historicity, the *Kaikosha* conclusively repudiated false claims that the event never took place or was an illusion" (Fujiwara 2007).

<sup>11</sup> I am using the terms 'progressive' and 'regressive' change for lack of better labels at this point. 'Progressive change' refers to change in the direction of greater acknowledgement of the events, and of the state's involvement in and responsibility for the events. 'Regressive change' refers to change in the direction of less acknowledgement of the events, and less admission of the state's involvement in and responsibility for the events.

audiences (on the one hand), and external claims about the validity of those narratives (on the other hand), varies based on two factors: 1) the stability of the narrative domestically, and 2) the power of the state in relation to the pressuring state or actor. When domestic debate (involving the media, academics and other elites) is challenging official perceptions of an issue, a state is unlikely to change its narrative in response to external pressure. And, when a state is less secure in its international status and position vis-à-vis the pressuring state, then it is unlikely to change its narrative in response to external pressure.

This analytical framework accounts for two patterns: First, different sources of international pressure produce different types of change. For instance, pressure by victim states (e.g., China vis-à-vis Japan) can lead to direct change in an official narrative, whereas pressure by non-victim states (e.g., France vis-à-vis Turkey) can lead indirectly to gradual progressive change, but also to direct, regressive change. For example, a significant source of change in the official Turkish narrative of the Armenian genocide has been external pressure by non-victim states (and other international actors) on the Turkish government. In particular, changes in the Turkish government's narrative arose in response to: 1) the extended period of Armenian terrorism against Turkish diplomats from the 1970s through the 1980s, and 2) the consideration and/or passage of legislative resolutions recognizing the Armenian genocide, especially in powerful countries that are allies of Turkey. However, in response to both of these pressures, the Turkish government did not take immediate action to shift its position on the Armenian question. Rather, changes arose only after sustained, repeated pressure was put on the Turkish government, and after international attention to this issue had been significantly heightened as a result of these pressures. Moreover, these changes have been regressive, in that the Turkish government has made organizational and rhetorical changes to strengthen and more effectively defend its narrative in response to these pressures. Nevertheless, an interesting secondary outcome of the international attention that has come with these pressures has been an unintended (on the part of the Turkish state) progressive shift in the official Turkish narrative, as the Turkish government has given up making certain claims that are no longer convincing.

The second pattern explained by this framework is that pressure by victim states can lead to different responses at different points in time. For example, pressure by China on Japan led to

change in the desired direction at several points in the 1980s, but failed to do so in the late 1990s. Three factors – all of which relate to the stability of the narrative domestically, and the relative balance of power between the two states in question – account for this differential response: a change in the structural balance of power in the international sphere (Japan was less secure than during the Cold War), a change in the relative balance of power between Japan and China (Japan endured a decade-long recession during the 1990s, while China was experiencing tremendous levels of economic growth), and a shift in domestic debate over war memories in Japan (prompted by the resurgence of a conservative revisionist movement focused on the government’s representation of ‘history issues.’)

### **The dynamics of change**

In response to some of the pressures outlined above, changes in the content of official narratives are often gradual and evolutionary. For example, in the Turkish case, external pressures and international structural changes have brought shifts in the official narrative that could be characterized as *layering* (Streeck and Thelen, eds. 2005), as opposed to radical breaks in the narrative. In other words, in response to different pressures and/or structural changes, certain elements of the existing official narrative were emphasized to a greater degree, or slightly new elements were added, but the overall gist of the official narrative remained consistent. For example, after the Turkish archives were ‘opened’ in 1989, in response to legislative resolutions that were considered in the U.S. Congress in the 1980s, Turkish officials started to more frequently argue that the Armenian question was an issue that should be left to historians, not politicians. That said, this argument was not a *new* element of the official narrative, but rather was an existing element that was given greater emphasis.

Finally, changes in official narratives often have feedback effects (Pierson 1993). By this I mean that official narratives, and especially changes in or the reinforcement of official narratives, can motivate individuals and groups to mobilize in relation to them. As Kathleen Thelen writes, “...political arrangements and policy feedbacks actively facilitate the organization and empowerment of certain groups while actively disarticulating and marginalizing others” (1999: 394). In time, the actions and preferences of these groups can influence and constrain the official

narrative. As a result, these groups or constituencies can play a large role in bringing about change and/or enforcing continuity in an official narrative.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, feedback effects are not only evident in the responses of conservative groups to states' progressive changes in official narratives, but can also be found in the mobilization of progressive groups that push for more change in official narratives and resist calls for regressive changes.<sup>13</sup> This dynamic is important to note, because many changes are incremental ones that do not break fundamentally with the existing official narrative, but rather shift the official position slightly in a new direction, and influence the creation of groups that later exert pressure on the official narrative, both in the form of *constraints on* further change and also as *pressure for* change.

## Conclusion

In sum, I have argued that understanding the sources of change in states' official narratives of traumatic historical events necessitates the systematic study of the effects of various domestic and international pressures on states' narratives, which has not previously been undertaken. In this essay, I have outlined the factors that influence changes in official narratives, highlighting both the type and nature of change that most frequently results from these pressures. In my broader dissertation project, I am working to flesh out these claims, and substantiate them with in-depth analyses of the trajectories of and sources of change in two states' official narratives of traumatic pasts, from which I have drawn selectively in this essay.

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<sup>12</sup> For recent theorizing on the role of temporality in institutional and political change, see: Pierson 2004; Streeck and Thelen, ed. 2005; and Thelen 1999.

<sup>13</sup> With this point, I am arguing against Lind's (2008) claim that apologies and even foreign pressure for apologies risk a backlash from domestic conservatives, and pointing instead to the multidirectional nature of the feedback effects that frequently arise from shifts in official narratives. This is consistent with evidence over time in Germany's official narrative of the Holocaust (Olick 2007; Art 2006), the Turkish government's official narrative of the Armenian genocide, and the Japanese government's official narrative of the Nanjing massacre and of WWII more generally. For example, in Japan, changes in the official narrative of the Second World War, which were prompted by the 1982 textbook controversy, led to the formation of several new groups, and motivated other, preexisting groups to focus their efforts on textbook and/or history issues. These groups were on both the left and the right of the political spectrum (Yoshida 2006; Rose 1998).

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