

Book Manuscript:
Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics
By Jennifer Lind

ABSTRACT

This book speaks to a growing conventional wisdom about the beneficial effects of contrition in international relations. Journalists and scholars praise Germany's extensive efforts to atone for its World War II crimes; they argue that Germany's formal apologies, monuments to Nazi victims, and candid history textbooks were vital to build trust and promote reconciliation in Europe. By contrast, observers of East Asia argue that Tokyo's failure to apologize for its past aggression and atrocities heightens suspicions of Japan throughout the region. Although the conventional view appears consistent with the evidence from Europe and East Asia, no one has systematically tested the relationship between apologies—or more broadly, remembrance—and threat perception. To test the effects of remembrance on threat perception, my book creates a theory of apologies and threat perception, defines its key variables, identifies causal mechanisms, and makes testable predictions aimed at validating or falsifying the theory.

“Apology theory” posits that the way a state remembers its past shapes how others perceive its intentions. States that glorify and deny past violence appear to have hostile intentions, and thus appear more threatening; states that admit and atone for past violence appear benign. I evaluate the theory in two prominent cases: South Korean relations with Japan, and French relations with Germany, both since World War II. I also draw upon data from several other cases: Australian and Chinese perceptions of Japan, and British- and Polish-German relations. To assess perceptions of Germany and Japan, I rely upon interviews, scholarly writings, archival documents, memoirs, polls, and media coverage in observer countries.

My book makes three key arguments. First, the conventional wisdom about remembrance is only half right; a country's remembrance significantly affects its relations with former adversaries. Specifically, denials and glorification of past violence do damage relations and inhibit reconciliation. Second, although such nationalistic remembrance harms relations, its pernicious consequences have been exaggerated. Even when observers bitterly resent a former enemy for refusing to atone for past atrocities, their emotions do not prevent clear threat assessments. Third, and most surprisingly, contrition is potentially dangerous. Apologies can be counterproductive because they frequently trigger domestic backlash, inciting denials and glorification. Because of this dilemma, countries should seek a safer middle ground between backlash-inducing contrition and denial. The cases of Franco- and Polish-German reconciliation offer examples of non-accusatory commemoration that provide models for states seeking to reconcile.

Findings from this project have theoretical as well as policy implications; the book supports theories of threat perception that incorporate perceptions of a country's intentions as well as material capabilities. In particular, my findings support constructivist theories that posit a link between ideas, discourse and threat perception,

and provide support for the importance of remembrance in international relations. Furthermore, the book offers a puzzle for an emerging literature on emotions and international politics; evidence from the Japan-Korea case suggests that at least in this case, even heated emotional reactions among Koreans do not cloud their clear strategic judgment about future threats.