Historical Justice in International Perspective: How Societies Are Trying to Right the Wrongs of the Past

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Australia's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, on 13 February 2008, gave an unprecedented apology in Parliament to Indigenous people, especially for the mistreatment of the stolen generations. He acknowledged the pain, he said, in order to help all Australians ("First Australians, First Fleeters, and those who first took the oath of allegiance just a few weeks ago") move forward, in the spirit of reconciliation and a fair go for all. The Prime Minister presented the need for serious action to close the gap in health, education and employment, and called for bipartisan attention to constitutional recognition of the first Australians.

It is significant in global perspective that this apology of the 19th year is part of the trend and politics of recognition that also includes education, restitution and revitalizing cultural identity. This is what this volume addresses, with case studies from around the world.

The first chapter that I turned to was Menahem Yaari's discussion of how adjusting histories in Australia has been a primary step in reconciliation. This is part of the context of "sorry day". Yaari discusses the use of history and memory in understanding native title and the stolen generations. He critiques the assumption that "stolen history" necessarily precedes reconciliation, and argues for "sharing histories" and recognizing the values and weaknesses of traditional academic history as well as oral forms of aboriginal histories and memory.

The main value of the book, whether for Australian or other contexts grappling with issues of historical justice, is its in-depth analysis in case studies internationally.

The first cases concern reparations and restitution. Wilkins discusses compensation for descendants of African-American slaves in America in the name of total justice (they were promised and then denied "forty acres and a mule" after the Civil War), and German novelist F. W. M. von Hügel's novel about the American Civil War. The chapter continues with reparations for those who suffered during the Nazi regime. The chapter's thinking about human suffering is clear and persuasive, and the new context for antisemitism remains unspoken.

Another case concerns memory and recognition. Russia has worked out to test foreign prisoners. There was political and judicial consent in prosecuting those responsible for the Kimlerova's mass murders in Cambodia. President Chirac's 1995 apology for Vichy's anti-Semitism has prompted other French organizations to recognize their complicity. Finally, the book ends with a discussion of the political impact of memory and justice in Europe and America, with Germany's Stasi files and shooting of escaping civilians.

These are not the only cases of historical justice. I would have been interested in reading more about Canada and South America, but it is comprehensive for one volume. By the end of the book, it covers nine countries and five continents in some depth, and shows some of the diversity of challenges and progress in addressing past wrongs.

Historical justice brings with it legal, moral, historical, theological and financial dilemmas. There are questions of how a group gets justice, whether compensation in individual or collective, how groups compete, who is ignored, international justice standards, and how to manage the resentment of a country's majority and other minority groups.

It is significant that discussions about justice and "reparation politics" can focus more on the rights of those affected than on lifting a vision for the future, as John Torpey points out in the section on the politics of restitution. "Entrepreneurs of memory", and politicians following Kevin Rudd, need to consider how much to focus on the past and how much to pragmatically deal with policy implications for the future and towards the affected nation from internal social reform.

The editors and their contributors reflect the growing field of activism and research in historical justice. This book is co-edited by Manfred Berg, a historian specializing in the African-American civil rights movement and teaching at University of Heidelberg, and Bernd Schaeffer, a senior scholar with the Cold War International History Project. Both were researchers behind the German historical Institute in Washington, D.C., when it hosted a conference in March 2003, some of the papers of which form this volume. The result is a useful reference book for all those interested and acting on historical justice.