Ontological (In)security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan

Ayşe Zarakol

Abstract

This article joins the growing scholarship on the ontological security needs of states. By focusing on state denial of historical crimes, the article will address the main point of contention among scholars who study ontological security, i.e. the question of whether identity pressures on states are mostly endogenously or exogenously generated. Through a study of the Turkish state’s reluctance to apologize for the Armenian genocide, and the Japanese discomfort over the WWII atrocities, I argue that we can avoid tautology in our generalizations by introducing temporal and spatial dimensions to the argument. Inter-subjective pressures matter more at times when traditional routines defining the self are broken and are more likely to create ontological insecurity outside the West. The review of the Turkish and Japanese cases demonstrate that both social and individualistic approaches to ontological security are partly right, but also incomplete because neither takes into account the uneven expansion of international society or the effect this expansion has had on the identity of outsider states who were incorporated into the system at a later date.

Keywords: apology, identity, international society, Japan, ontological security, shame, Turkey

Introduction

Turkey and Japan share two unusual international relations problems. Both countries have struggled with geopolitical belonging: East, West, both or neither? Both countries also exhibit a costly inability to apologize for past crimes: for the Armenian genocide in the case of Turkey, and for WWII atrocities in the case of Japan. This article argues that the ontological insecurity created by the first struggle is the cause of the second puzzling behavior.

There is a growing body of literature in international relations (IR) theory advancing the argument that states care about their ontological security as much as – or perhaps even more than – they care about their physical security. Ontological security is about having a consistent sense of ‘self’, and means that states perform actions in order to underwrite their notions of ‘who they are’. In the wider IR literature a consensus has not yet emerged on whether ontological security is one of the primary motivators of state behavior, but I will treat the assumption that states care about their ontological security as unproblematic. Instead, the main theoretical puzzle this article will address is whether the sources of ontological (in)security are to be located primarily in the self-regarding commitments of states or are generated by the...
international normative commitments and role identities of the states. In other words, if the state is unable to apologize, is it because of internally generated obstacles to self-reflection, or is it because the state is insecure in its relationships with other states?

I argue that it is both, but avoid tautology by introducing temporal and spatial dimensions to the argument. Intersubjective pressures matter more at times when traditional self routines are broken and are more likely to create ontological insecurity outside the West. I will have more to say about this later, but for now let me note that anything resembling an intersubjective normative consensus in international relations often originates in the West. For Western states, therefore, there is a greater overlap between international expectations that are ‘out there’ and domestic pressures that are ‘in here’. Where there is overlap, insecurity-inducing contradictions are less likely.

The traumatic character of the incorporation of Turkey and Japan into international society has influenced national identity in such a way as to make new reflections about the state ‘self’ difficult. Both countries joined European international society in the nineteenth century as stigmatized outsiders. The insecurities created by that international environment have been built into the national identities of both states. The status-conscious trajectories of both countries in the last century can be traced back to that original insecurity, and in fact this was what ultimately drove these states toward to West after their respective defeats. However, these trajectories have also made it difficult for them to admit to past crimes that could be used to confirm historical stereotypes.

Of course, the two cases are not identical. In comparison to Turkey, Japan has gone further toward acknowledging guilt about past state crimes, and the domestic groups in Japan that suggest that the state sincerely does so are certainly much more vibrant than those in Turkey. The difference partly stems from Japan’s more secure placement vis-à-vis the West.

This article proceeds in four parts. The first section presents the case for why Turkey’s and Japan’s struggle to apologize is puzzling from a materialist perspective, and why an approach focused on state identity problems is especially suited to this question. The second section reviews highlights of the growing literature on ontological security with a focus on the aforementioned division. The third section examines the cases of Turkey and Japan. The final section discusses the implications of these two cases for our understanding of the ontological security needs of states.

The puzzling reluctance to apologize

The reluctance of both Turkey and Japan to apologize for past state crimes is puzzling, because in both cases there are significant material incentives to apologize, and high costs attached to not apologizing.

The governments of 21 countries, as well as numerous international non-governmental organizations, have recognized the events of 1915 as genocide. Many of these countries are members of the EU, and Turkey’s denial of the Armenian genocide (and the lack of an apology for it) is one of the major stumbling blocks in Turkey’s
quest for full membership. In 2006, members of the European Parliament passed a clause prompting Turkey to recognize the Armenian genocide as a condition of its EU accession. This requirement was later dropped, but it was noted nevertheless that recognition was essential for Turkey’s membership.

In the last decade, as such genocide resolutions have become frequent, Turkey has exerted considerable effort to derail them. Ambassadors have been recalled, stern warnings have been given, and threats to drastically modify alliances have been made. The genocide remains a sore spot in Turkey’s relations with the US as well, with genocide resolutions before the Congress thwarted only for utilitarian reasons. Whatever bargaining chips Turkey has in its foreign relations with the US are leveraged to this particular issue. The amount of (ultimately futile) effort spent on combating such domestic proclamations in the US and elsewhere is even more surprising given the non-binding nature of such resolutions in the international arena. While there is some justification for the Turkish worries about possible lawsuits, the viability of any potential legal case against Turkey would not hinge on parliamentary resolutions.

Japan is in a similar position of having a lot to lose from denial, and much to gain from a sincere apology. A March 2006 editorial in the Indonesian newspaper the Jakarta Post observes that ‘It is difficult for people around the world to understand why, nearly 62 years after the end of World War II, Japan still cannot honestly accept its wartime record and continues to maintain this “childish” attitude whenever it is asked to examine its past.’ Japan’s reluctance to take full responsibility for its wartime actions remains a source of tension in its relationships with both Asia and the West. In 2007, much to Japan’s consternation, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning Japan for crimes of sexual exploitation committed by the Japanese military during WWII.

That crimes of WWII remain an issue for Japan should be surprising given the much greater lengths to which Japan has gone to face its past compared to Turkey. Japanese military leaders were brought to trial and punished after WWII, and Japan formally apologized for many of its actions, including the now controversial sex slaves issue. When controversies flare over ‘comfort women’ or visits to the Yasukuni war shrine, Japanese leaders are actually retracting apologies for actions Japan had accepted guilt for in the past. Given Japanese postwar commitment to pacifism, these retractions are especially puzzling. As in the Turkish case, materialist explanations in IR cannot account for the fact that Japan is willing to jeopardize valuable relationships and its hard-sought influence in mainland Asia over an apology.

If apologies were merely examples of ‘cheap talk’ on morals as realists claim, there should be no reason for Turkey and Japan not to go there. The fact that they cannot demonstrates that there is something much larger at stake in the act of apology than material concerns. Clearly, the behavior of both Turkey and Japan call for a more identity-focused theoretical approach, but this behavior continues to be puzzling even under a constructivist lens. As I will document below, populations in both countries care deeply about what the West thinks of them. Both Japan and Turkey have arguably compromised a great deal on their domestic systems and state
identities in the last two centuries in order achieve the elusive respect of the West: why should the comparatively simple act of apology over past state crimes (and over crimes committed by previous regimes to boot) be the straw that is about the break the camel’s back? The answer lies in the complicated demands of ontological security for countries such as Turkey and Japan whose international belonging remains an open question.

Sources of ontological security

Ontological security first and foremost entails having a consistent sense of self and having that sense affirmed by others. Introduced to the IR literature by Huysmans, and built upon by McSweeney, Manners, Kinnvall, Mitzen and Steele, among others, ontological security is a concept that has roots in both psychology and sociology. The term was first coined by the renowned psychiatrist R. D. Laing. He described the ontologically secure agent as someone who has ‘a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person’6 and noted that if ontological security is absent, ‘the ordinary circumstances of everyday life constitute a continual and deadly threat’.7 Within the discipline of sociology, the term is most closely associated with Anthony Giddens, who defined it as ‘the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action’.8 It may seem that there is no great difference between the two definitions. Giddens, however, while conceding the psychological foundations of ontological security, also drew attention to the relational aspect implied in the concept by emphasizing the degree to which the sense of ontological security feeds on basic trust and therefore implies ‘a mutuality of experience’.9 Laing, while interested in how ontologically insecure persons relate to their environment, spoke of the condition as something someone brings into his or her relationships.10

I note the two distinct disciplinary wells for the concept of ontological security because the growing scholarship on this concept within IR has come to be marked by the same tension that demarcates psychology and sociology. In other words, the budding scholarship on ontological security has run into its own version of the agent-structure problem.11 Are interactions and the international environment the main source of ontological anxiety for a state, or are the insecure interactions merely a consequence of the state’s own uncertainty about its own identity? Huysmans, who introduced the concept to IR, can be read either way. On the one hand, Huysmans argues that any given state’s legitimacy depends on its ability to provide ontological security by ‘managing the limits of reflexivity – death as the undetermined – by fixing social relations into a symbolic and institutional order’. On the other hand, Huysmans also brings forth Bauman’s point that ‘the state system (the international society of the English School) does not aim at the “elimination of enemies but at the destruction of strangers, or more generally strangehood”’ in support of his argument. Therefore, despite his emphasis on ‘the state’ he leaves an
opening for a more environmental account rooted in ‘the state system’ for the sources of ontological security.

Mitzen follows a more sociological approach. She argues that state identity is very much ‘constituted and sustained by social relationships rather than being intrinsic properties of the states themselves’ and she faults realists for attributing atomistic, subjective type identities to actors in the international system. In Mitzen’s view, state identities inevitably draw upon the intersubjective meanings upon which international society is built. They also require recognition from others in order to be sustainable.

Steele, in contrast, argues that Mitzen overstates ‘the role of others in the ontological security process’. In contrast to Mitzen, Steele is of the view that instead of being ‘dependent’ upon the social world for its identity, it is the state’s sense of ‘Self’ that helps process the ‘relevant’ elements of the environment. By prioritizing the state’s reflexive understanding of its identity as opposed to social interaction in his analysis of ontological security, Steele also shifts the methodological emphasis from the study of interaction to the study of narratives emanating from the state about the ‘Self’.

A more middle-ground approach is favored by Kinnvall, who, like Steele, argues that ontological security is essentially a quest for a stable narrative about the group self. The context is not absent from Kinnvall’s account, however: she argues that studies of ontological security must highlight ‘the intersubjective ordering of relations – that is, how individuals define themselves in relation to others according to their structural basis of power’, and adds that ‘internalized self-notions can never be separated from self/other representations and are always responsive to new interpersonal relationships’.

Ontological security and apologies

What do the previous arguments imply about state apologies about past crimes? To begin with, having to admit to past crimes against humanity would definitely require the state to reconsider its sense of self. Therefore, apologies inevitably involve a state’s self-narratives and self-regarding normative commitments. Accepting responsibility about a past atrocity is not a simple verbal act; on the contrary, it is nothing short of a reformulation of state identity from representing a group of people who are not capable of such an act, to representing a group of people who are both capable and apologetic about it. In other words, an apology requires two major transfigurations in state identity: from ‘peaceful’ or ‘peaceful when unprovoked’ to ‘one that is capable of unjustifiable violence’, and also from ‘righteous’ to ‘apologetic’. Both of these transfigurations would challenge the integrity of the narrative of state identity. The past crime, which has been already figured into the state narrative in a certain way, has to be rearticulated in another manner. The required transformations of identity pull the self in opposite directions: it has to face a dark side on the one hand and must find the strength to apologize for it on the other. A convincing case could be made,
therefore, that the decision to apologize turns on the self-regarding commitments the state has made and needs to live up to in order to maintain a continuous identity. In other words, apology may be thought of as a primarily reflexive act.

However, apologies about past state crimes also involve international norms and expectations. One could argue that the pressures to apologize for state crimes would not exist at all were it not for the direction international law has taken within the wider context of the normative evolution of international society. The idea that there are certain shameful acts that a state should apologize for is rooted in the normative demands of international society. Furthermore, especially in those cases where the victimized population (or their descendants) are located outside the borders of the state charged with the crime, the pressure to apologize is generated mostly exogenously. To some degree, the success of the apology would also depend on how it was received by these other actors. Finally, the pressures to apologize often stem from Western states, whose own self-narratives and ontological security direct them to take up leading roles in condemning past and present transgressions against human rights. That the pressures to apologize have Western roots is especially important for the cases under investigation here, because, as I noted above, Turkey and Japan have historically been very sensitive about their international status in general and their standing vis-à-vis ‘the West’ in particular. Considering all these factors, a plausible case could also be made that the ontological security dynamics surrounding the issue of state apologies for past crimes are to be located mostly in the systemic-level interactions of these states.

The puzzling reluctance of Turkey and Japan to apologize for past state crimes therefore cuts to the heart of the debate about the sources of ontological security, and I think neither a fully intersubjective approach nor one that focuses solely on the reflexive construction of self-identity captures the full picture in either case.

On the one hand, while a purely social explanation would lead us to predict that the anxieties created by Western condemnation and the resulting loss of status should act as a powerful incentive for Turkey and Japan to face their past crimes, that does not seem to be the case. Neither Turkey nor Japan seems particularly responsive to the present-day demands from international society that they apologize. In these cases, the state’s own narrative of self is trumping the demands from the international community, ultimately undercutting the kind of respectful treatment the state desires to obtain from its partners.

On the other hand, arguing that Turkey and Japan are free of intersubjective ontological security pressures, or that their state identities are not intimately linked to (and shaped by) systemic dynamics, would also be misleading. As noted, if the scholars who study Turkey and Japan agree on one thing, it is that both of these countries are especially concerned about their international standing and hypersensitive to criticism by the West. It is not an exaggeration to say that domestic debates in either country, on any issue, are intrinsically linked to their preoccupation with status in the international system.

Both Turkey and Japan have self-identities which are very much shaped by systemic dynamics of the time and surrounding the manner of their entry into
international society. Current systemic and intersubjective pressures are interpreted through this particular lens. Especially in conflicts which concern historical acts, old anxieties resurface, bringing to the fore certain responses which were invented to deal with the original ontological insecurity. The responses of Turkey and Japan to the current intersubjective demands to apologize are driven by their self-narratives, but these narratives themselves were defined by historical threats to their ontological security located in past intersubjective pressures.

The intersubjective roots of Turkish and Japanese ontological insecurity

Turkey and Japan, along with a handful of other political entities that survived from the ‘premodern’ era – entities usually lumped together under the category of premodern/agrarian/gunpowder empires – experienced a different transition to modernity than the Westphalian states that were the locomotives of that transition. They had a different experience because they had to recreate themselves as ‘modern’ states against the backdrop of an emerging society of European states that had already made the transition organically.

The material advance of these early comers was backed by a culture spouting universalizing claims about enlightenment, progress, rationality and self-interest. As a result, perhaps for the first time in world history, (autonomous) emulation of competitors took on a deeper meaning: in embracing the Western European state models, these agrarian empires were also enveloped in a new worldview – one is that is specific to the essence of modernity. By emulating the Westphalian state model and trying to join the European society of states, people in these empires also came to accept the modern continuous worldview in which there are no exceptions, with a marked emphasis on progress, rationality and science, which inevitably generates a universal social hierarchy predicated upon comparisons and measurements. Once the peoples of the old empires started accepting this worldview, it was inevitable that they too would embrace its judgment: they found themselves falling short, not just materially but socially and culturally. ‘Objective’ measures of ‘progress’ could not be ignored.

The growing social inequalities and hierarchy of the nineteenth-century international system can be seen as a natural consequence of the increasing dominance of the ‘modern’ worldview. Two aspects of modernity made such developments possible. First is the idea that the scientific method can be applied to everything. The scientific method is very much about ‘objective’ measurements and comparisons, which are then used to develop more efficient solutions to problems, leading ultimately to ‘progress’. Applied to international politics, the dominance of such a worldview implied that distinctions between states and cultures could only be judged on a universal scale of ‘scientifically’ measured accomplishments. Cultural difference came to be interpreted as undeniable evidence of inferiority. This conclusion seemed to have empirical verification in the obvious material progress of the (North)-West in the nineteenth century. Second is the rise of nationalism, which, on the one hand,
helped to integrate increasingly atomized individuals and bolster the modern state, yet, on the other, gave rise to a marked differentiation between insiders and outsiders, with morality being aligned with the interests, desires and needs of the former.30

While the ‘Rise of the West’ is an undeniable fact of history, the subsequent hierarchical arrangement of the international system was hardly an unadulterated reflection of the distribution of capabilities. Non-Western states were denied basic rights such as contractual guarantees. Furthermore, they were stigmatized as being inferior, backward, barbaric, effeminate, childish, despotic and in need of enlightenment.31 The fact that non-European states had inferior material capabilities was used as evidence of the scientific validity of these prejudices. This theory was then used to further exclude such states from the sovereign protection accorded by society, opening them up to further European exploitation, which led to more relative backwardness, and gave more ‘objective’ credence to discrimination.

This particular manifestation of the nineteenth-century principles of European states can be parsed as a common sociological phenomenon – one that often accompanies societal formations. The hierarchical structure of the international system in the nineteenth century resembles very much what Weber called a socially stratified society. According to Weber, in societies where market rules are not in full operation, and are controlled by convention, culture and rules of conduct, the result is rigid social stratification and monopolistic appropriation (which is an apt description of nineteenth-century imperialism). Socially stratified societies are marked by hierarchies of power, whereby certain high-ranking status groups monopolize economic and political advantages.32

Elias also argued that the social cohesion of the established groups, exercised together with the stigmatization of outsiders, leads to power differentials that exclude the outsiders. Elias drew the lesson from social dynamics in Leicester (the ‘Winston Parva Study’). This urban settlement was organized into three districts. The inhabitants of Zone 1 were white-collar, whereas Zones 2 and 3 were both working-class. The entire community believed Zone 1 to be the best area to live. Zone 2 (the ‘old village’) inhabitants, while poor, considered their area respectable and looked down upon Zone 3 dwellers, whom they inaccurately characterized as dirty and quarrelsome. The most puzzling part of the study was the fact that Zone 3 inhabitants ‘seemed to accept, with a kind of puzzled resignation, that they belonged to a group of less virtue and respectability’.33 They resented the verdict of the other zones, but were also ashamed of it. Elias attributes this curious dynamic to the fact that the ‘old village’ of Zone 2 was indeed older than other zones, and as a result had a network of ‘old families’ who took it upon themselves to protect the respectability of the entire neighborhood. This cohesiveness made it possible for the ‘old villagers’ to stigmatize Zone 3 individuals, barring them from participation in public life. Zone 3 individuals could not retaliate because they lacked the necessary cohesion and also because they felt inferior: ‘to some extent, their own conscience was on the side of the detractors. They themselves agreed with the “village” people that it was bad … to get drunk and noisy and violent.’34 Even if such criticisms did not describe them personally, they felt shame because they lived in the same zone as people who did act in that way.
Elias believed that the dynamic exhibited by the subjects of the Winston Parva study was duplicated in most power relations:

In all these cases the more powerful group look upon themselves as the better people, as endowed with a kind of group charisma, with a specific virtue shared by all its members and lacked by others. What is more, in all these cases the ‘superior’ people may make the less powerful people themselves feel … that they are inferior in human terms.35

I would argue that a similar process influenced the thinking of many decision-makers, elites and intelligentsia outside the European society of states of the nineteenth century. They felt shame because they lived in ‘semi-civilized’ or ‘barbaric’ states. It stands to reason that people judging foreigners and enemies is a phenomenon as old as human interaction. Yet what was new in the nineteenth-century system was that, for perhaps the first time, independent states had started sharing the same modern worldview, which allowed for those who were labeled as inferior to feel the burn of stigmatization. As Goffman says: ‘One assumes that embarrassment is a normal part of normal social life, the individual becoming uneasy not because he is personally maladjusted but rather because he is not.’36 While shame can result from failing to live up to one’s own standards,37 another kind of shame may result from finding oneself associated with an inferior status. This collective psychology is at the root of elite efforts, witnessed all over the semi-periphery in the nineteenth century, to ‘pass’ as Europeans by adopting European fashions, speaking European languages among themselves, and learning European arts. All such behavior could be seen as part of an effort to distance oneself from one’s ‘neighborhood’. What is more, such behavior was not only exhibited by the so-called ‘Westernizers’ but also by reactionary forces who often recycled traditional symbols in very modern ways.

In this way, for many, the words ‘reform’, ‘modernization’ and ‘Westernization’ became synonymous. Moreover, the people who were in the best position to effect change were the ones most exposed to the ideas of a global social hierarchy: the intelligentsia, the military and the ruling elite. All of the key institutions of the modern nation-state, such as nationalism, mass schooling and modern bureaucracy took their initial forms in the nineteenth century; they were dutifully emulated outside Europe not long afterwards by those states that still had the capability to shape their own domestic policies.38 The emulation of these key institutions, even in their incomplete forms, at precisely the moment when the elites in the ‘backward’ countries had internalized the judgment of history, was instrumental in cementing the ontological insecurity created by such backwardness in (proto)-national psyches. Even those elites who rejected or resented Europe did not reject this dichotomy of backwardness and modernity. They believed, along with their European contemporaries, that there really was a developmental difference between civilizations. The problem of relative strength was no longer seen simply as difference in material capability but had become a moral, social and cultural – in other words, existential – issue.

Elites in the Ottoman Empire and Japan entered the twentieth century with the same internalized lesson: their countries were ‘behind’ the West in every aspect and
something radical had to be done to change this status quo. That motivation is what gave rise to revisionist governments across the board during the first 30 years of the century. However, the reactionary ideologies of these revisionist governments were themselves very much products of modernity. At the very least, they exhibited the same faith in the power of the ‘modern’ state, a rational response after the second Industrial Revolution. These regimes also exhibited a feverish commitment to do whatever was ‘necessary’, including the sacrifice of millions of lives, to catch up with ‘the West’.

In the Ottoman Empire, the revisionist regime came to power right before the defeat of the empire: the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), originally a secret society within the ranks of the Young Turk movement, took de facto control of the empire with a coup in 1912. Between 1912 and 1918 the CUP followed an aggressively revisionist agenda intended to recapture the Ottoman Empire’s glory days, and, as a proto-fascist movement, oversaw some of the most brutal actions committed in the name of the empire, including the mass killing of the Armenian population in 1914–15. In Japan, a similar dynamic of revisionist militarism was repeated in the 1930s, with the armed forces establishing complete control over the government and pursuing an aggressively expansionist foreign policy in Asia, with bleak results for the population there. Both revisionist regimes were defeated and replaced by regimes which later proved to be both quite amenable to cooperating with the West and very adept at emulating the favored cultural, economic and political institutions of the time.

State identity of the Republic of Turkey and the matter of the Armenian genocide

The revisionism of the CUP regime was a direct consequence of the internalization of the international standards of the nineteenth century by the Ottoman elite. The first ‘declinist’ analyses of Ottoman history were produced in the eighteenth century by the non-Muslim minorities whose exposure to Western developments was greater. However, by the nineteenth century, all elites had come to be preoccupied by the problem of Ottoman ‘backwardness’. This was intensified by the fact that Western powers were intervening in domestic affairs on behalf of minorities, using the justification that the Ottoman Empire was an absolutist regime. The initial response, therefore, was to implement reforms designed to assuage Western concerns. At this point, the Ottoman elites believed that meeting civilized standards would leave them free to address the problems of the economy and the military without interference. The constitutional guarantees of the Tanzimat (1839) and Islahat (1859) declarations satisfied no one, however, and made a bad situation worse. The reforms increased the speed of nationalization among the Christian groups – who were also the main beneficiaries of increased European commerce – and created resentment among Muslims, who were deprived of any benefits this new European-style administrative system was to provide.
By the end of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had lost almost all its territories in Europe. This created a backlash against the liberalization reforms and strengthened reactionary ideological currents among the Muslim elite. As the breakup of the empire continued, the Ottoman intelligentsia, who might otherwise have tempered the excesses of the Sultan, became radicalized themselves: ‘Concluding that their liberal experiment had been a failure, the [CUP] leaders turned to Pan-Turkism, a xenophobic and chauvinistic brand of nationalism that sought to create a new empire based on Islam and Turkish ethnicity.’ This ideology, which was a last-ditch effort to overcome the general insecurity caused by the unraveling of the empire, would turn out to be a disaster for the remaining non-Muslim millets. I would submit, however, that what essentially distinguished the Turkish nationalists was not an inherent cruelty but rather their access to the state structure of an empire. In any case, the CUP revisionism resulted in the humiliating defeat of the empire in WWI. During the subsequent occupation of Constantinople (1919–22), the Ottoman Sultan had agreed to British demands that CUP leaders be held responsible for their wartime conduct and for the massacre of the Armenians. The Sultan used the Constantinople trials to eliminate and discredit his political enemies among the CUP leadership. The three leading figures of the CUP, Talat, Celal and Enver, were tried in absentia and sentenced to death.

The new Turkish state was created by Atatürk, the commander of Turkish forces during the War of Independence (1919–22). During the military struggle, the Anatolian forces were centered in Ankara, where a new parliament had been convened in 1920, after the occupation forces dissolved the parliament in Istanbul. The Ankara government did not recognize the Sevres Treaty, signed by the Istanbul government in 1922, because it claimed that the latter was no longer sovereign. A clause about bringing guilty parties to justice had been included in Sevres, and several high-profile offenders were transferred to Malta in preparation for an international tribunal. After a string of military victories against the Greeks, the Ankara government was able to negotiate the Lausanne Treaty (1923), which defined the new Republic of Turkey. The matter of the trials was soon dropped. In fact, even though the republican regime distanced itself from its imperial predecessor, no effort was made to acknowledge what had happened to the Armenians. The issue was simply swept under the carpet. In order to understand why, a brief review of how the new Turkish state came to define itself is necessary.

When modern Turkey was created, the standard that divided the world into three spheres of civilized, semi-civilized and savage humanity had enough legitimacy to be uttered on a regular basis by European diplomats. This was the world in which Atatürk and his men were operating. Therefore they pushed the idea that Turkey was inherently civilized and it was only a matter of appearance that separated Turkey from Europe. Turkish leaders insisted on the moral and intrinsic equality of the Turkish nation with the West, and presented the situation Turkey found itself in as resulting from a combination of factors, such as historical happenstance, the fault of the West and the exaggerated influence of religion in Ottoman affairs. They were able to reframe the identity debate in these terms. The Kemalist regime linked the
successful resolution of the ontological insecurity problem created by Turkey’s past stigmatization directly to Turkey’s ‘immanent’ and ‘inevitable’ admittance to the club of civilized nations.

By 1923, the year the Republic of Turkey was created, the idea that all laws and rules should follow the Western model had gained weight not only among the government ranks but also among the leaders of influential groups such as the Türk Ocakları organization. The principle that this was the only way a state could survive in the international system became the centerpiece of Turkish policy. As the Minister of Justice said in 1924: ‘The Turkish nation, which is committed to following the path to joining modern civilization, cannot modify modern civilization according to its own needs; it has to adapt to the demands of this civilization whatever the cost.’

Modern civilization, according to Westernizers, was based on principles of rationality and enlightenment. Any Ottoman institution that did not embody these two principles had to be left behind. The Sultanate had to go, because it was against the popular will. The Caliphate could only exist in a theocratic system, and religion clearly was not rational, so the Caliphate also had to be abolished. Religion had to be forced into the private realm, as in Europe. Religious clothes were banned in public, and religious schools were closed. Everything from the alphabet to the education system, from the civil code to clothing had to change and become ‘rational’, ‘practical’ and ‘modern’, just as it was in Europe.

The noteworthy aspect of the rationalizations for these reforms is how they were simultaneously grounded in nationalist rhetoric. The founder of the nationalist Türk Ocakları organization explains this duality: ‘We only became aware of our Turkishness when we approached Europeanness, and we will be Turks as long as we feel European.’ Atatürk resorted to similar themes to justify the reforms. In The Speech, he argued: ‘However rich and strong a nation may be, if it is not fully independent, it will be viewed as a servant by the civilized people.’ According to Atatürk, the Ottoman Empire had lost all dignity and was viewed as a subjugate for this reason. Furthermore, he argued that foreign policy had to be compatible with domestic form and vice versa. Atatürk and the Westernizing camp in the early Republican period were convinced that no problem could be solved without making a clear choice about which civilization Turkey belonged to. According to them, Turkey deserved to be independent, autonomous and well respected, but first it had to prove to the world that it was civilized.

These developments also shaped the new regime’s handling of the Armenian genocide issue. Demands for the punishment of those responsible for the events of 1915 were interpreted as an extension of Western bias that had so doomed the Ottoman Empire. Here is one example of Atatürk’s views on Europe’s past treatment of Turkey:

Suppose you have two men before you; one of them is rich and has all kinds of vehicles at his disposal; the other is poor and has nothing ... Apart from this material difference, the latter is no different ... in moral spirit. This is the situation of Turkey against Europe. Apart from defining us as a tribe that is doomed to backwardness,
the West has done everything to hasten our ruin. When West and East appear to clash, it is best to look toward Europe to find the source of conflict.\textsuperscript{54}

That Atatürk’s regime chose not to confront the crimes of 1915 at this juncture is hardly surprising: admitting guilt would have undermined the project of constructing a modern, proud, European Turkish nation, and it would have also perpetuated the hierarchical relationship with the West the new regime was trying to avoid.

The new regime took it upon itself to fashion a domestic strategy that would allow the state to feel ontologically more secure in its relations with the West. The goal was to change the hierarchical, stigmatizing relationship between Turkey and Europe, and join the circle of the ‘civilized’ states, but the republican regime constructed their strategy around a worldview that was based on the normative structure of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Turkish nationalist state identity was a deliberate construction in direct response to the lessons of this period, and not at all an exclusively endogenous manifestation of domestic dynamics. These were formative years for modern Turkey, and the aspirations as well as the psychoses of that period continue to shape the Turkish mindset. While the fall from grace as a great empire and the humiliating years of foreign intervention that the Ottoman Empire had to endure as a member of so-called ‘semi-civilized’ humanity are a thing of the past, the wounds they have inflicted are still open. The Armenian genocide resolutions are so threatening to the Turkish state because Turks cannot but see them through the nineteenth century worldview that gave birth to modern Turkey.

There are two elements in this worldview that make it nearly impossible for the Turkish state to acknowledge the ‘Armenian’ genocide. The first element has to do with Turkey’s relationship with the West. Despite the intervening years, the impression that when Western powers are speaking up for Ottoman minorities they are doing so in order to undermine Turkish sovereignty has persisted. The founding period of the republic is emphasized over everything else in the education system, and students raised in this system continue to view relations with the West in the framework of 1920s. The impression based on the events of that period, i.e. Western powers using a lofty rhetoric of justice while simultaneously pursuing an agenda contrary to Turkish interests, gives rise to many irrational fears such as the recent nationalist furor over present-day missionary activities in Turkey, and various baseless conspiracy theories about foreigners buying land in Anatolia. This worldview makes it impossible for the Turkish state to view the demands for the recognition of Armenian genocide as a justice claim.

The other element has to do with Turkey’s obsession with ‘civilization’, again based on the dynamics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even in its most isolationist periods, citizens and leaders of the Republic of Turkey have never stopped playing to an imaginary audience that is constantly assessing how modern Turkey is. Turks resent this intrusive gaze, but crave its approval, and suspect the approval when it is dispensed, yet sense discrimination when it is not. While secular, urbanized Turks feel the effects of this gaze most strongly; even the most reactionary Turks are not immune to its penetration. Because the identity of the Republic
of Turkey was shaped around its quest to prove its degree of ‘civilization’ and ‘modernity’ in order to get equal treatment, the Turkish state has difficulty admitting to a barbaric crime committed by the Ottoman Empire. To Turks, admitting to the Armenian genocide would be tantamount to accepting the nineteenth-century arguments made by the likes of Lord Cecil who claimed that Turks are a barbarous nation and will never amount to anything.55

State identity in postwar Japan and the issue of WWII atrocities in Asia

Despite the fact that Japan’s defeat in WWII and its subsequent occupation by the United States provided the opening needed for Japan to face its past crimes, the belief that only Japan had to apologize for these types of crimes has tainted the apology, at least in some Japanese minds. This is because Japanese state identity suffers from the same kind of insecurities vis-à-vis the West that Turkey does.

Japan, like Turkey, was a victim of the prejudicial civilization standards of the nineteenth century. The initial response, just as it was in the Ottoman Empire, was to reform: hence the period known as the Meiji Restoration. And, just as in the Ottoman Empire, the reform period eventually gave way to a revisionist government. There were three principal mechanisms behind this development. First, revisionism itself was part of the emulation process: the example of the West had convinced the Meiji-period thinkers that trade and expansion were aspects of a healthy state. Meiji writers such as Fukuzawa Yukichi were convinced that it was important for Japan to signal to the West that it was not a ‘backward’ state like Korea. Foreign Minister Inoue recommended that Japan set up a Western-style empire in Asia, before Western encroachment was complete.56

Second, during the Meiji period, Japanese attitudes to Asia underwent a significant shift, which in itself was a consequence of Japan’s efforts to redefine itself in the new world which seemed to have Europe at both its center and its pinnacle. Early twentieth-century Japanese scholars, ‘having accepted a progressive and scientific conception of knowledge … increasingly faced the problematic of “de-objectifying” Japan – and Asia – from a unilinear concept of progress that confirmed Japan’s place as … Europe’s past and without history’.57 The ‘sweeping views of world development introduced from Europe’ were accepted; it was Japan’s place in those views that were problematic. The scientific method had produced the desired material results through the Meiji Restoration: Japan had been able to industrialize, to renegotiate unequal treaties and even defeat a major ‘European’ power in the Russo-Japanese War. Yet Japan still did not have actual equality with European states, because of its placement in Asia. Hence the third mechanism: the fact that reforms failed to produce the desired results internationally, i.e. to garner equal treatment from the West, eventually created an anti-Western backlash much in the same way as in the Ottoman Empire. In order for Japan to gain equal respect, the idea that Japan’s placement in Asia made it ‘backward’ would have to be challenged. There was an inherent paradox in these efforts: ‘in the process of adaptation and regeneration, these historians were
seeking to prove that they were not “Oriental,” as defined by the West, by using the same epistemology of the West. Thus, having accepted the modernist epistemology, the Japanese went on to apply it to their relations with Asia.

Having sat out WWI, Japan carried this mindset into the period before WWII, when it made a grab for colonies much in the same way European powers had done at the end of nineteenth century. When faced with an international society that protected the sovereign rights of the ‘civilized’ states but found it acceptable to subject those deemed to be ‘barbarous’ to imperialism,

the Japanese elite concluded that to become a full ‘civilized’ member of the Society, in addition to observing meticulously the ‘standard of civilization’, they would have to construct a strong, imperialistic state and take on the identity of a powerful ‘civilized’ state.

The success of the Meiji Restoration, especially in the economic realm, meant that Japan ‘objectively’ ranked higher on the historical development plane than the rest of Asia, which remained trapped in history. As Japan’s profile continued to rise, Japanese leaders came increasingly to view their country as the ‘civilized’ Asian state that would liberate uncivilized parts of Asia from European imperialism:

The Japanese way of life was ineffably superior to that of the West, based on individualism, and that of China, based on familism. Other Asian races looked upon the Europeans and Americans as somehow superior, but it was now up to Nippon to show how wrong they were.

This propaganda was carried into the war years, as the Japanese needed something besides brute force to solidify their grasp on Asia. This was the context of Japan’s WWII war crimes.

While several military leaders were tried for these crimes during the subsequent occupation years and Japan ostensibly adopted a position of remorse regarding the actions the wartime regime, some aspects of the prewar Japanese narrative of its standing and mission in Asia did survive the war. Yoshida, for instance, argued that ‘Japan is more Western than Asian … whereas many of the other countries of Asia and Africa are still underdeveloped … In short, they are what we are forced to recognize as backward nations.’ He went on to suggest that Japan was particularly well suited to take an active role in leading Asia and Africa. Dulles had also observed that ‘the Japanese were particularly sensitive to the assumption that they were “backward” or “undeveloped” because Japanese felt that their own advancement was beyond the general levels of civilization in Asia’, and that ‘historically the Japanese wanted to be counted among the members of the Western world’. In other words, while the defeat itself was traumatic, it did not end Japan’s quest for status; it merely transformed it. Almost every scholar who writes about Japan mentions that the Japanese care deeply about their ranking among nations. The postwar literature emphasizes how disillusioned the Japanese were until their GNP carried them to the top rank; how the
1964 Tokyo Olympics marked a definite shift in the mood of the country; and how important the membership of international organizations was for Japan.67

This preoccupation has persisted to this day. Those who have difficulty apologizing for the past are comparing Japan to other (Western) countries with colonial pasts and finding a double standard, which plays into old insecurities about Japan’s exclusion. For instance, the 1995 Diet Resolution commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War states:

Solemnly reflecting upon many instances of colonial rule and acts of aggression in the modern history of the world, and recognizing that Japan carried out those acts in the past, inflicting pain and suffering upon the peoples of other countries, especially in Asia, the Members of this House express a sense of deep remorse.68

There are two remarkable features here: the attempt to generalize from Japan’s behavior to wartime actions ‘all over the world’ and the specific emphasis put on the ‘many instances of colonial rule and acts of aggression’ in modern history. Japan’s wartime actions are thereby framed as part of the ugly colonial history of the international system, a history in which Japan was only one of the many perpetrators (and perhaps also a victim).

Japanese nationalists who cling to a whitewashed version of Japanese history might not represent the majority, but controversies over Japan’s wartime behavior would not be flaring up with such frequency if their complaints did not resonate with Japanese national identity. An interesting point of contrast is Germany. Oppositional groups in Japan who push for a more critical examination of the state’s past often draw upon the German example: ‘Japan, it was held, had not sufficiently “mastered the past” and should look to [Germany] as a model … Even the term for “mastering the past” (kako no kokufuku) was invented in 1992 to translate the German Vergangenheitsbewältigung.’69 Despite arguably being the less malevolent of the pair during the war, a present-day comparison ends with the conclusion that Japan has not dealt with its wartime actions as well as Germany. Germany’s efforts at reconciliation, however, have to be contextualized against Germany’s reintegration into Europe.70 Whereas Japan’s exact placement between the East and West still remains open to question, the postwar trajectory of Germany has been securely anchored in Europe. Whatever difficulties Germany has had reconstructing its national identity have been tempered by the affirmation provided by the German European identity. There is an obvious irony here in the fact that even in such a context-specific historical matter, the established-outsider dynamic and the pattern of evaluating oneself (and falling short) according to Western standards is perpetuated.

Unlike Germany, Japan, despite its economic stature, is securely anchored neither in Asia nor among the great powers of the international system.71 Japan stands apart from colonized Asia as a former colonizer. At the same time, Japan is not completely comfortable among Western powers either. As Suzuki notes, Japan is a ‘frustrated great power’.72 Frustrated great powers believe that they are not given the social equality and the privileges they deserve.73 Japan remains a frustrated great power
mainly because of its WWII legacy and subsequent commitment to pacifism. Pacifism, which has gone a long way toward obscuring the past stigma of Japanese military aggressiveness, has come at a price: it has kept Japan out of decision-making processes in matters of international security.\textsuperscript{74}

The Japanese right considers the anti-militarism of Japanese society to be a consequence of the ‘brainwashing’ of the occupation years.\textsuperscript{75} They believe that Japan was robbed of its sense of national pride and emasculated by a hypocritical West which would not apologize for its own actions. This is why they want to revise Japan’s apologies and reconstruct a nation proud of its own history. In their view, only such a nation can once again create a strong military and reassert Japan’s significance on the world stage. However, just as in the Turkish case, it is precisely these efforts to recapture Japan’s pride that are driving Japan away from a position of influence in Asia and, by extension, the international system. Such is the irony of ontological insecurity: it is a snake which feeds on its own tail.

Lessons about ontological security

In this section, I turn again to the debate about the sources of ontological security in light of the observations from the Turkish and Japanese cases. The fact that two countries who had very similar introductions to the European society of states should turn out to be the two most pressured to apologize for past crimes today gives us an interesting opportunity to understand ontological security dynamics.

As I noted earlier, the main point of contention among ontological security scholars is whether identity pressures on states are mostly endogenous or exogenous. Mitzen, for instance, argues that state identity is driven and sustained by social interactions, and this argument is in line with most constructivist scholarship. However, this line of reasoning has come under attack, especially by Steele, who recently produced some excellent work on ontological security. Steele argues that mainstream constructivism puts too much emphasis on intersubjectively held understandings of how states act (or should act) and instead points us toward the reflexive self-understandings of states.

The review of the Turkish and Japanese cases demonstrates that both approaches are partly right, but they are also incomplete because neither takes into account the uneven expansion of international society or the effect this expansion had on the identity of outsider states who were incorporated into the system at a later date. Both commit the same sin of omission, but in a different manner. The perspective of the outsiders (and their narratives) is for instance notably absent from Mitzen’s 2006 article about Europe’s civilizing identity, which presents an optimistic assessment of the EU’s prospects as a civilizing power. I say optimistic because Mitzen sees the resolution of European–Other dynamics in the fact that Europe is now articulating security practices ‘without Othering the non-European’.\textsuperscript{76} How this development is perceived (or fails to be perceived) by Others given the historical baggage of European foreign policy is left mostly unproblematized. Steele, on the other hand, rightly draws our attention away from social pressures to the self-narratives of states,
and convincingly demonstrates in the cases he looks at how ideas about the ‘possible self’ may be shaping state action. However, all his examples (e.g. the United States, Belgium) are Western states, which may be leading him to overgeneralize how such narratives about the ‘possible self’ are autonomously and endogenously generated. Since the nineteenth century, the ‘possible selves’ of many states around the world have been bracketed by comparisons to the West and fears about relative backwardness, and this preoccupation makes it very difficult to articulate aspirations about the state ‘self’ in a non-reactive manner.

Take the concept of ‘shame’ as an example. Steele argues that ‘shame occurs when actors feel anxiety about the ability of their narrative to reflect how they see themselves’ and that ‘it is therefore a radical disruption of the Self’. Yet, in all of his examples, shame is produced by past actions or non-actions of states: e.g. American failure to act in Rwanda, German shame over the Holocaust. As I noted earlier, there is another kind of shame, not excluded by Steele’s definition, even if it is in his case selection – and that is the shame produced by having a particular (inferior) status: the kind of shame felt by the inhabitants of Zone 3 of Winston Parva. In fact, I would submit that this is a much more ontologically threatening kind of shame, because it is not tied to any particular action which may be dealt with by an apology but about a state of being which one cannot necessarily help.

It is this kind of shame and the ontological insecurity associated with it that is at the root of the national identities of countries such as Japan and Turkey. The pressures to apologize for past crimes, instead of inducing shame about the acts in question, recall this earlier, greater shame associated with being ‘Eastern’, ‘Asian’, ‘barbaric’ and ‘uncivilized’. Japan has been able to deal with its past in a healthier manner than Turkey because it has put more distance between this ‘shameful’ past given its economic success and relative power vis-à-vis the West. Turkey, on the other hand, given its EU membership application, has found itself on a course that continuously recalls these earlier routines.

Notes

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2008 MPSA annual conference in Chicago and Washington and Lee University’s research colloquium. I would like to thank Catherine Warrick for her comments as a discussant on the Midwest version, and the participants at both panels for their helpful questions. I would also like to thank Brent Steele, Travis Nelson, Michael Barnett and Jelena Subotic for their comments on earlier drafts. I am also grateful to Shogo Suzuki and Ross Carroll for sharing with me their insights on Japan and state apologies, respectively. Finally, I wish to thank the editor of International Relations, Ken Booth, and two anonymous reviewers for their many suggestions on how to improve the article.

1 I am not qualified to provide a definitive pronouncement on whether the events of 1915 qualify as genocide. There are three separate issues here: whether the atrocities themselves can be considered genocide when we assess the consequences for the Armenian population; whether there was genocidal intent behind the atrocities; and whether the label of genocide, which did not exist as a legal category at the time, could be applied retroactively. My personal opinion on these questions respectively is: yes, no, and it depends. I could qualify these answers further, but that would take another article. Because this article does not deal with the historical accuracy of the label but rather the tension between international society’s understanding of the past and the official Turkish account, I am
deferring to the common international usage without further discussion, and will not be qualifying the term genocide with quotation marks throughout the article.


For non-Turkish accounts sympathetic to the official Turkish perspective, see e.g. Bernard Lewis, The Emergence of Modern Turkey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); Justin McCarthy, Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of the Empire (New York: New York University Press, 1983); Standford Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, Reform, Revolution and Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808–1975 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). There are also a few Turkish scholars who recognize the genocide claim. See e.g. Taner Akçam, A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006). Other prominent Turkish scholars who accept the genocide claim are Murat Belge, Selim Deringil, Baskın Oran and Cengiz Aktar. The latter two started an internet campaign in December 2008 (along with the journalist Ali Bayramoğlu) to enable individual citizens to apologize to the Armenian community. The text of that apology is the following: ‘My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them.’ They collected about 30,000 signatures. The campaign website can be accessed at www.ozurdiliyoruz.com (accessed 9 December 2009).

2 The term ‘WWII atrocities’ is not very precise, because some of the atrocities in question happened before WWII, during the period of Japan’s aggressive expansion into mainland Asia. Throughout the article, whenever I use this term, the reader should take it to refer to the atrocities committed by Japan leading up to and during WWII, roughly between 1937 and 1945.


7 Laing, Divided, p. 40.


9 Giddens, Consequences, p. 95.

10 Laing, Divided, p. 44.


18 Lang also emphasizes narratives in *Agency and Ethics*.


22 See Anthony F. Lang, Jr., ‘Crime and Punishment: Holding States Accountable’, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 21(2), 2007, pp. 239–57, for both a review of the evolution of international law in this direction and also for an argument for taking it even further.


24 See Steele, ‘Making Words’ and ‘Ideals’.

25 Carroll makes this argument.


40 Arnold J. Toynbee, *Turkey* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1927), p. 34.


44 Türk Ocakları was a neighborhood organization for youth with a clear purpose of nation-building. Füsun Üstel, *Türk Ocakları (1912–1931)* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2004).

45 Berkes, *Türkiye’de*, p. 469.

46 Berkes, *Türkiye’de*, p. 470. All English translations are mine.


53 ‘A Speech delivered by Atatürk on the Second Anniversary of the Victory Day’ (30/8/1924).

54 Atatürk’s briefing of the Neue Freie Presse, Reporter (22/9/1923).


58 Tanaka, Japan’s Orient, p. 17.

59 For an extended discussion, see Tanaka’s book in its entirety, but especially, pp. 45–9.


67 Jansen, Emergence; Buruma, Inventing Japan.


70 Konrad, ‘Entangled’, p. 98.


73 Suzuki, ‘Seeking’, p. 49.

74 Suzuki, ‘Seeking’, p. 52.


78 Steele, Ontological Security, pp. 52–5.