

# The Path to Atonement

Kathrin Bachleitner

West Germany and Israel after  
the Holocaust

Atonement is the state practice through which political representatives issue official apologies and reparation payments to the victims of mass atrocities, war crimes, and human rights abuses. At first, such a pathway seems to be an ethical choice: atonement is considered the moral and right thing to do in the aftermath of wars and conflicts. Yet, at a second look, atonement can also be viewed as a political choice: politicians may give official apologies and pay reparations not because of goodwill or conviction, but because such practices promise tangible political benefits.

To describe atonement as a political strategy, this article considers a unique step in the history of international relations.<sup>1</sup> Seven years after the end of World War II, on September 10, 1952, the representatives of West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany, FRG) and Israel signed what became known as the “Luxembourg Agreement,” the Reparations Agreement between Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany. Before the signing, West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer gave an official apology for “unspeakable crimes” that called for “moral and material indemnity.”<sup>2</sup> This historical legacy then committed West Germany to pay the State of Israel DM 3 billion<sup>3</sup> over

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The author thanks the anonymous reviewers, Alexander Betts, Paul Betts, Lorena De Vita, Todd Hall, Neil MacFarlane, Maria Mälksoo, Jeffrey K. Olick, Derek Penslar, and Yaacov Yadgar for their constructive advice and valuable inputs on this article.

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1. The expression that this was a unique step in the history of international relations goes back to Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett, who declared at the reparations agreement signing ceremony in Luxembourg that this was “a unique step in the history of international relations.” See Sharett, “‘Einzigartig in der Geschichte.’ Der israelische Außenminister zum Abkommen mit Bonn” [“Unique in history.” The Israeli foreign minister comments on the agreement with Bonn], *Die Presse*, September 12, 1952.

2. Konrad Adenauer, speech at the German Bundestag, September 27, 1951, quoted in Rolf Vogel, ed., *Deutschlands Weg nach Israel: Eine Dokumentation* [Germany’s road to Israel: A documentary] (Stuttgart, Germany: Seewald, 1967), 36.

3. This amount only reflects the payments to the State of Israel, as laid out in article 1 of the agreement, and does not include the sums paid to the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany.

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fourteen years.<sup>4</sup> Combining an official apology and material compensation between two states, the Luxembourg Agreement remains unique.<sup>5</sup>

While the Luxembourg Agreement is an important event in the wake of another unique event, the Holocaust, reviewing West Germany's pathway toward atonement by way of Luxembourg is of wider relevance for the field of international relations and international security more broadly. First, it illustrates how other perpetrator states may reach atonement with their victims.<sup>6</sup> Second, it helps explicate peace talks and their outcomes more generally.<sup>7</sup> The ways in which traumatic collective experiences, such as wars and genocides, are dealt with politically affects long-term reconciliation and political stability.<sup>8</sup> Scholars find that a lack of contrition on the part of former perpetrators is a root cause of violence,<sup>9</sup> while unrecognized victimhood breeds

4. *Bundesgesetzblatt*, part 2, no. 5, March 21, 1953, 37, [https://www.bgbl.de/xaver/bgbl/start.xav?startbk=Bundesanzeiger\\_BGBl&jumpTo=bgbl253005.pdf#\\_bgbl\\_%2F%2F\\*%5B%40attr\\_id%3D%27bgbl253005.pdf%27%5D\\_\\_1658751620875](https://www.bgbl.de/xaver/bgbl/start.xav?startbk=Bundesanzeiger_BGBl&jumpTo=bgbl253005.pdf#_bgbl_%2F%2F*%5B%40attr_id%3D%27bgbl253005.pdf%27%5D__1658751620875), accessed July 25, 2022.

5. See Lily G. Feldman, "The September 1952 Reparations Agreement between West Germany and Israel: The Beginning of a Remarkable Friendship" (Baltimore: American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 2019), <https://www.aicgs.org/2019/11/the-september-1952-reparations-agreement-between-west-germany-and-israel-the-beginning-of-a-remarkable-friendship/>; Marieke Zoodsma and Juliette Schaafsma, "Examining the 'Age of Apology': Insights from the Political Apology Database," *Journal of Peace Research* 59, no. 3 (2022): 436–488, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433211024696>.

6. See Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Mischa Gabowitsch, ed., *Replicating Atonement: Foreign Models in the Commemoration of Atrocities* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Mark Gibney et al., eds., *The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Jelena Subotic, *Hijacked Justice: Dealing with the Past in the Balkans* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

7. See, for instance: Kathrin Bachleitner, *Collective Memory in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Thomas U. Berger, *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Peter J. Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security: Police and Military in Postwar Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Maria Mälksoo, "'Memory Must Be Defended': Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security," *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 3 (2015): 221–237, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614552549>; Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 341–370, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346>; Ayşe Zarakol, "Ontological (In)security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan," *International Relations* 24, no. 1 (2010): 3–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117809359040>.

8. Kathrin Bachleitner, "Legacies of War: Syrian Narratives of Conflict and Visions of Peace," *Cooperation and Conflict* 57, no. 1 (2022): 43–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367211032691>; Duncan Bell, ed., *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections of the Relationship between Past and Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Nigel Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Emma Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

9. Duncan Bell, "Introduction: Violence and Memory," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38, no. 2 (2009): 345–360, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829809347541>; James W. Booth, *Communities*

further conflict.<sup>10</sup> Signs of contrition and atonement, on the other hand, can create trust among countries and facilitate bilateral and international cooperation.<sup>11</sup> In the wake of the reparations agreement between West Germany and Israel, a sustainable and long-term reconciliation process resulted, and the two countries established lasting “special relations.”<sup>12</sup> Examining the origins of the Luxembourg Agreement allows me to theorize a potential, alternative pathway toward long-term international stability, cooperation, and peace between countries. How, then, did the atonement process begin?

Historians<sup>13</sup> and political scientists<sup>14</sup> explain the West German decision to pay reparations to Israel as a mix of strategy and moral choice. They particularly emphasize the essential role of Chancellor Adenauer, who persistently

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of Memory: *On Witness, Identity, and Justice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

10. Georgios Antoniou, Elias Dinas, and Spyros Kosmidis, “Collective Victimhood and Social Prejudice: A Post-Holocaust Theory of Anti-Semitism,” *Political Psychology* 41, no. 5 (2020): 861–886, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12654>; Daniel Bar-Tal and Eran Halperin, “The Psychology of Intractable Conflicts: Eruption, Escalation and Peacemaking,” in Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 923–956; Johanna R. Vollhardt and Rezarta Bilali, “The Role of Inclusive and Exclusive Victim Consciousness in Predicting Intergroup Attitudes: Findings from Rwanda, Burundi, and DRC,” *Political Psychology* 36, no. 5 (2015): 489–506, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12174>; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

11. Yinan He, *The Search for Reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish Relations since World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Jennifer M. Lind, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

12. Lily G. Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity* (Boston: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).

13. Dennis L. Bark and David R. Gress, *A History of West Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993); Inge Deutschkron, *Israel und die Deutschen: Das schwierige Verhältnis* [Israel and the Germans: A difficult relationship] (Cologne, Germany: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1983); Niels Hansen, “Moral als Staatsräson: Zur Politik Konrad Adenauers gegenüber Israel und den Juden” [Morality as a reason of state: On Konrad Adenauer’s policy toward Israel and the Jews], *Die Politische Meinung* 373, no. 45 (2000): 25–33; Kai Von Jena, “Versöhnung mit Israel? Die Deutsch-Israelischen Verhandlungen bis zum Wiedergutmachungsabkommen von 1952” [Reconciliation with Israel? The German-Israeli negotiations up to the Reparation Agreement of 1952], *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 34, no. 4 (1986): 457–480; Michael Wolffsohn, “Das Deutsch-Israelische Wiedergutmachungsabkommen von 1952 im internationalen Zusammenhang” [The German-Israeli Reparation Agreement of 1952 in an international context], *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 36, no. 4 (1988): 691–731.

14. Berger, *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II*; Lorena De Vita, *Israelpolitik: German-Israeli Relations, 1949–69* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2020); Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation*; Kai Oppermann and Mischa Hansel, “The Ontological Security of Special Relationships: The Case of Germany’s Relations with Israel,” *European Journal of International Security* 4, no. 1 (2019): 79–100, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2018.18>; Markus A. Weingardt, *Deutsche Israel- und Nahostpolitik: Die Geschichte einer Gratwanderung seit 1949* [Germany’s policy toward Israel and the Middle East: The history of a balancing act since 1949] (Frankfurt on the Main: Campus, 2002).

held out against a reluctant West German public and widespread political opposition from within his party.<sup>15</sup> Scholars also emphasize the role of the United States in pushing West Germany into reparations.<sup>16</sup> The conventional historical wisdom, therefore, is that atonement grew out of domestic politics, backed up by pressure from U.S. occupation forces. These are all valid contributions, and I do not contest any of them. Yet, I argue that they are incomplete because they overlook the wider international incentive structures and the agency of the affected states: West Germany and Israel.

To offer new insights into this well-studied case, I look at archival documents that contain a series of secret diplomatic back-channel negotiations between West German and Israeli representatives in 1951 and 1952. Through archives, secondary sources, and quotes from involved state representatives, I reconstruct the incentive structures of the post–World War II era. I show that atonement did not grow out of West German domestic politics and U.S. pressure alone; rather, it stemmed from wider international incentives and a resulting dynamic between the former perpetrator and its victim. To highlight my findings, I test them on two “non-atonement” perpetrators of World War II: Austria and Japan. While Austria and Japan featured similar domestic politics under U.S. occupation in the postwar decade, the international incentive structure and constellations with their former victims, Israel and the People’s Republic of China (PRC),<sup>17</sup> unfolded differently from the West German–Israeli case in the early 1950s.

15. See Adenauer’s memoirs: Konrad Adenauer, *Erinnerungen, 1876–1967* [Memories, 1876–1967] (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966); Konrad Adenauer, *Erinnerungen, 1953–1955* [Memories, 1953–1955] (Frankfurt on the Main: Fischer Bücherei, 1968).

16. Lily G. Feldman, *The Special Relationship between West Germany and Israel* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984); Kurt R. Grossman, *Die Ehrengeld: Kurzgeschichte der Wiedergutmachung* [The debt of honor: A short story of redemption] (Frankfurt on the Main and Berlin: Ullstein, 1967); Walter Schwartz, ed., *Die Wiedergutmachung nationalsozialistischen Unrechts durch die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* [The Federal Republic of Germany and its restitution for National Socialism], 6 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1974).

17. While my illustration concentrates on the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and its policies toward Japan in the early 1950s, there were other victims of Japan’s imperialist policies during World War II, including Korea. During the timeframe of this study (1950 to 1952), however, Korea was immersed in the Korean War. South Korea’s bilateral policies with Japan thus began only in 1965, when President Park Chung-hee, despite widespread anti-Japanese sentiments, negotiated the 1965 Basic Relations Treaty. This treaty normalized diplomatic relations with Tokyo to accelerate economic development instead of implementing reparations or any form of atonement from Japan. Since then, South Korean activists have sought to revise the language of the treaty to address Japanese crimes against humanity, and they continue to demand a sincere apology and compensation from Japan. See Joe Phillips, Wondong Lee, and Joseph Yi, “Future of South Korea–Japan Relations: Decoupling or Liberal Discourse,” *Political Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (April–June 2020): 448–456, quote at 449, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12786>.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, I review the origins of atonement and its related moral considerations and political incentives, and I present my theory that atonement is an instrumental strategy that emerges in a two-level game<sup>18</sup> between domestic and international politics. The second section features my qualitative analysis of the FRG's initial decision to pay reparations to Israel in 1952. To single out the international incentives and constellations that pushed West Germany onto the path of atonement between 1950 and 1952, in the third section I contrast the findings with Austria and Japan, two U.S.-occupied yet non-atonement former perpetrators of World War II in that same period.<sup>19</sup> In the conclusion, I derive insights beyond the specificities of the post-World War II context and explicate the international aspects that may lead countries toward atonement.

### *Atonement—A Moral or Political Choice?*

Atonement is one of many possibilities that a perpetrator state may adopt regarding its historical legacy. As a state practice, atonement requires an official, verbal acknowledgement of past wrongdoings with an accompanying public expression of remorse through a political apology.<sup>20</sup> Atonement, however, also comprises the offer of restitutive actions to former victims in the form of financial reparations.<sup>21</sup> Reparations are a tool to achieve both accountability for and acknowledgment of the past.<sup>22</sup> Atonement, defined as “an apology *plus*

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18. Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 427–460, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706785>.

19. My argument concentrates on the early 1950s because of the period's specific postwar international context. At that time, Austria and Japan did not adopt atonement, but they each approached atonement later by issuing official apologies to Israel in 1993 and to China in 1972, respectively, yet without paying state-to-state reparations. For more on the Austrian-Israeli case, see Avi Beker, “Building Up a Memory: Austria, Switzerland, and Europe Face the Holocaust,” in Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain, eds., *Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 97–119; Heidemarie Uhl, “Recovering Austrian Memory: Stratifying Restitution Debates,” in Dan Diner and Gotthard Wunberg, eds., *Restitution and Memory: Material Restoration in Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 233–254. For more on the Japanese-Chinese case, see Karl Gustafsson and Todd H. Hall, “The Politics of Emotions in International Relations: Who Gets to Feel What, Whose Emotions Matter, and the ‘History Problem’ in Sino-Japanese Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2021): 973–984, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab071>.

20. Melissa Nobles, *The Politics of Official Apologies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 140–141.

21. John Torpey, *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: On Reparations Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 43.

22. Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation*, 17.

reparations [italics in original],”<sup>23</sup> therefore requires politicians to address a country’s shameful past, embrace guilt, and take responsibility for historical wrongs.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the perpetrator state views atonement, first and foremost, as a morally necessary choice that is politically inconvenient, uncomfortable, and costly.

Considering these disincentives, governments of former perpetrator states usually choose other options to approach their historical legacy. These practices include silence or denial about past crimes, or mythmaking about the past, usually by fabricating a story of victimhood or innocence.<sup>25</sup> As opposites to atonement, these practices embrace political convenience over ethical concerns. Why do some perpetrator states select atonement over other, easier options? Two interdisciplinary bodies of work provide two possible answers. The first focuses on the moral demands of the past: politicians ought to choose atonement because of ethical concerns.<sup>26</sup> The second body of work suggests that politicians select atonement because of political gains.<sup>27</sup> I consider each of them in turn.

Scholarship falling within the first, moral realm posits that governments have the “duty to remember” because “facing the past” brings “justice for victims.”<sup>28</sup> A whole new practice and discipline called “transitional justice” emerged around this credo and brought to the fore legal mechanisms for governments to deal with past human rights abuses.<sup>29</sup> Scholars and practitioners of transitional justice try to convince the leaders of former perpetrator states to

23. Roy L. Brooks, *Atonement and Forgiveness: A New Model for Black Reparations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 143.

24. Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations*.

25. Jennifer M. Dixon, *Dark Pasts: Changing the State’s Story in Turkey and Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 14–17. Jay Winter, “Thinking about Silence,” in Efrat Ben-Ze’ev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay Winter, eds., *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3–31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511676178.002>.

26. See, for instance, Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

27. See, for instance, Kathrin Bachleitner, “Diplomacy with Memory: How the Past Is Employed for Future Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15, no. 4 (2019): 492–508, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/ory013>; Berthold Molden, “Resistant Pasts versus Mnemonic Hegemony: On the Power Relations of Collective Memory,” *Memory Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016): 125–142, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015596014>.

28. For a critical view, see Lea David, *The Past Can’t Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), quotes at 1.

29. See, for instance, Jon Elster, *Closing the Books: Transitional Justice in Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Gabowitsch, *Replicating Atonement*; Linda Radzik, *Making Amends: Atonement in Morality, Law and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Subotic, *Hijacked Justice*.

adopt atonement by seeking their moral alignment with it as the just option for their victims and the most sustainable pathway toward long-term peace and stability.<sup>30</sup> Atonement, following this credo, is simply the *right* thing to do. The politicians who select atonement are ethically aligned with the moral demands posed by their country's past. Unfortunately, however, this congruence is rare.

The second body of work is concerned with the political opportunities stemming from the past. A vast interdisciplinary scholarship on the "politics of memory" describes the political struggle that involves the commemoration of a historical legacy for political gain.<sup>31</sup> The approach that wins out and is adopted on the official level is the one that best serves political interests. In domestic politics, these interests are closely entangled with electoral considerations, national unity, and political legitimacy. According to the assumptions put forward by the politics of memory literature, states adopt atonement when political interests align with it.

Thus, the existing literature suggests that atonement is likely to emerge either when politicians are morally aligned with the idea of atonement or when it is in their political interests to pursue atonement. Political leaders either want to atone, or they use atonement strategically for political gain. The first of these options is wishful thinking; the second seems more realistic. This literature posits that atonement always originates from domestic politics, and its enactment depends on a country's incumbent politicians and its political incentive structures and processes.

#### ATONEMENT AS THE RESULT OF DOMESTIC POLITICS

According to the conventional wisdom, atonement is likely to be a political strategy aiming toward realistic accomplishments in domestic politics. But the specificities of atonement raise questions about its political expediency in domestic contexts. With its combination of official apologies and the offer of costly reparation payments, atonement is a hard sell to domestic constituents. As a state practice, it comes with an implicit admission of guilt and shame on behalf of the collective. Unsurprisingly, the unpatriotic notion of collective

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30. Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations*; Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation*, 11–19; Gibney et al., *The Age of Apology*.

31. See, for instance, Bachleitner, "Diplomacy with Memory"; John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile, 2010); Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

guilt<sup>32</sup> hinders national unity and a positive image of the country.<sup>33</sup> As scholars of nationalism point out, heroic victories or tragic defeats that lead to a shared suffering can unite a nation,<sup>34</sup> thus rendering victim narratives the politically expedient option for policymakers. Highlighting a community's guilt and shame, on the other hand, may heighten division and exclusion rather than integration and inclusion.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, politicians usually do not push for a national attitude of atonement. Thus, atonement as a political strategy seems unlikely to be generated solely by domestic political struggles.

For West Germany, atonement was not a winning political strategy for the newly formed country. Historians describe the postwar West German memory landscape as characterized by silence, avoidance, and the repression of the memory of the Nazi crimes. Furthermore, the post-World War II society was "psychologically numbed" or "muted,"<sup>36</sup> with ordinary people aiming at "functionality in the present" rather than at a "confrontation with the past."<sup>37</sup> The few embryonic memories that had begun to emerge did not consider the Jewish Holocaust nor any notion of atonement for it. Instead, the memory landscape hinged on German suffering. It included the worship of the fallen soldier, memories of Allied bombings, the expulsion of millions of Germans from the East, and the repression experienced in the Soviet Zone. If anything, the part of the past not forgotten or silenced was one based on Germans' own

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32. Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage: Von der politischen Haftung Deutschlands* [The question of guilt: Of Germany's political liability] (Munich: Piper, 1965).

33. Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Aleida Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma. Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

34. See, for instance, Ernest Renan's famous lecture "What Is a Nation?" (1882), published in Ernest Renan, *What Is a Nation? And Other Political Writings*, ed. M. F. N. Giglioli (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 247–263.

35. In her work on "sorry states," Jennifer Lind points to the unpopularity of official apologies. Political apologies confronted the population with the unattractive notion of collective guilt and were prone to public backlash and electoral defeat in democracies like Australia, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the United States. See Lind, *Sorry States*, 181–185.

36. Jan-Werner Müller, "Introduction: The Power of Memory, the Memory of Power and the Power over Memory," in Jan-Werner Müller, ed., *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

37. Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage*, 17.



victimization.<sup>38</sup> There was certainly no public appetite for atonement in the West German memory landscape of the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>39</sup>

The first free elections held in 1949 confirm this. The two main candidates from the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Kurt Schumacher and Konrad Adenauer, stood for very different approaches toward West Germany's atrocious legacy. Schumacher's version of democracy featured a commitment to memory and bringing former Nazi perpetrators to justice, whereas Adenauer stood for a democracy that disregarded justice and that promoted a concomitant forgetting of the recent past. Many historians attribute Adenauer's landslide electoral victory in 1949 to precisely this strategy.<sup>40</sup> That victory sheds immediate doubts on the idea that the West German atonement approach may have originated in domestic politics. When considering Adenauer's electoral strategy, his cabinet that included fifty-three former National Socialist German Workers' Party members,<sup>41</sup> and the disincentives that Adenauer faced from a broadly silent West German public, none of these factors indicate that this chancellor would soon put the country on the road toward atonement.

Although the existing politics of memory literature suggests that atonement should emerge where it is of political use, its concomitant and unpopular notion of collective guilt is unlikely to be in politicians' interest. The example of the FRG further illustrates this point: atonement was an extremely unpopular option in the 1950s, with zero domestic political incentives for it. It is therefore important to look beyond domestic political interests in order to explain why the FRG nevertheless selected the pathway of atonement.

#### ATONEMENT BETWEEN DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS?

With no domestic incentives in place for politicians to adopt atonement, I suggest expanding the research focus beyond a country's national borders and into the international sphere. To lay out the broader international context in which atonement may originate, I first theorize atonement as a purposive foreign policy option.<sup>42</sup> Notably, according to my theory, atonement remains a

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38. Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 276; Jeffrey Herf, "The Emergence and Legacies of Divided Memory: Germany and the Holocaust after 1945," in Müller, *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe*, 184–187.

39. Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation*, 33–34.

40. Herf, *Divided Memory*, 6–11; Bark and Gress, *A History of West Germany*, 250–257.

41. Deutschkron, *Israel und die Deutschen*, 28.

42. Walter Carlsnaes, "The Agency-Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis," *International*

strategic and political choice, not a moral one. Moreover, like all foreign policy strategies, atonement is an example of what Robert Putnam calls a “two-level game”:<sup>43</sup> it involves a trade-off and delicate balancing act between foreign and domestic political goals.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, while atonement by definition is a reparative strategy on the part of the perpetrator state, it is not the sole responsibility of the perpetrator to come forward with an appropriate apology and offer of material compensation.<sup>45</sup> Instead, the receiving state must also engage in discussions about atonement for it to materialize as a possibility between them.<sup>46</sup> This reciprocity makes atonement a bilateral strategy between a former perpetrator state and its victim.

On the international level, two factors are likely to influence stepping onto the path of atonement: international incentive structures and interests that make atonement available and expedient, and the reciprocal strategic interaction between a former perpetrator and its victim. For atonement to become a viable pathway toward reconciliation, it must be in both of their interests. Yet, while atonement emerges from international incentives and interactions, it re-

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*Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1992): 245–270, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600772>; Walter Carlsnaes, “Foreign Policy,” in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons, eds, *Handbook of International Relations*, second edition (London: SAGE, 2013), 298–325, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446247587>.

43. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics.”

44. The idea that there is relationality between the domestic and international dimensions of how countries approach their past is not new in international relations. I have previously argued that diplomatic relations shape how states officially approach their pasts, and Jennifer Dixon shows that changes to these stances are the result of external pressure. See Bachleitner, “Diplomacy with Memory”; Bachleitner, *Collective Memory in International Relations*; Dixon, *Dark Pasts*. Equally, scholars working within the field of ontological security highlight the processes through which countries guard their historical legacies against outside contestation, usually by fending off pressure for atonement following external requests. See Kathrin Bachleitner, “Ontological Security as Temporal Security? The Role of ‘Significant Historical Others’ in World Politics,” *International Relations* (digital version), 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004711782111045624>; Mälksoo, “‘Memory Must Be Defended.’” But international relations scholarship has not theorized in detail about why political representatives may be induced toward atonement in their international relations irrespective of external demands.

45. Brooks, *Atonement and Forgiveness*, 156; Dixon, *Dark Pasts*, 16; Feldman, *Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation*, 11.

46. Notably, outside of Christian theology, where atonement as an idea originated, the victim’s engagement does not imply forgiveness. See Donald W. Shriver Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Radzik, *Making Amends*. For moral philosophers, social psychologists, legal scholars of transitional justice, and political scientists alike, atonement simply implies that the victim engages with the perpetrators. See Feldman, *Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation*, 11. Forgiveness, if it occurs at all, can come only at the endpoint of their interaction. But in the beginning, atonement by its nature arises in a situation where forgiving is impossible. The victim’s forgiveness thus is not a prerequisite for atonement.

mains a two-level game. Therefore, in a second step, it still must be implemented domestically; politicians must sell this approach to a critical public. But atonement's international expediency can offset its lack of domestic support, thus rendering atonement in politicians' best interest.

As my outline of atonement as an option that forms in a two-level game between international and domestic politics suggests, my arguments focus on the constitution<sup>47</sup> of atonement as a particular bilateral strategy rather than on causation. Atonement emerges most visibly in the deliberative logics of politicians leading former perpetrator states. Atonement can thus be observed in what key actors say and do regarding their country's past, both domestically and internationally, and particularly, how they communicate and behave toward their former victims. Notably, I make no claims about the motives or personal convictions of politicians regarding atonement; instead, my argument concerns the constitution of this specific type of political strategy.<sup>48</sup> Thus, instead of answering what drives actors to seek atonement, I identify which international factors are at play when atonement becomes a politically expedient option for politicians, irrespective of their moral alignment with the idea of atonement itself.

### *The Case Study: The Origins of West German Atonement with Israel*

To evaluate these theoretical considerations, this section examines the genesis of the West German atonement approach. I delve deeper into the political decision-making process vis-à-vis reparations and illuminate how international structures and agency shaped this crucial step at the beginning of the 1950s.

Empirically, I concentrate primarily on official, historical documents from the published Foreign Ministry sources (Documents on the Foreign Policy of the Federal Republic of Germany, or AAPD) in the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History archives in Munich.<sup>49</sup> The selected classified documents contain the negotiations between West German and Israeli officials and

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47. Alexander Wendt, "On Constitution and Causation in International Relations," *Review of International Studies* 24, no. 5 (1998): 101–117, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097563>.

48. Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

49. See Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland [Documents on the Foreign Policy of the Federal Republic of Germany, AAPD], <https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/en/news/topics/foreign-policy-documentation-aapd>, accessed April 10, 2021.

the Allied Powers (Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States), which took place in diplomatic back channels from 1951 to the conclusion of the reparations agreement in 1952. I concede that mine is by nature an interpretive endeavor and open to contestation. I anchor my interpretations in explicit references to what central actors (political leaders, foreign policy officials, diplomats, and negotiators) were saying and, when possible, engage existing accounts and alternative readings. Furthermore, I employ process-tracing of the original archival documents to examine how international factors influenced the choice of atonement in diplomatic correspondence, public speeches, and private letters.<sup>50</sup>

After determining the role of international structures and agency in the West German–Israeli case, I also study the interplay of these factors in two other perpetrator states of World War II: Austria and Japan. These two countries were equally under U.S. occupation and influence, yet neither of them selected a pathway of atonement. For the less-researched Austrian case, I rely on original historical documents from the Austrian State Archives in Vienna, in addition to secondary literature. The Japanese case is based on existing works of historians, political scientists, and international relations scholars who discuss different theoretical aspects of Japan’s history problem. For each case, I confine my research to the early 1950s, thus leaving undiscussed the later changes regarding their respective historical legacies. Instead, the focus of this comparison is to detect whether my theorized international factors that led to West Germany’s atonement were present or absent in these case studies. Finally, this comparison also showcases the article’s contribution by deriving more generalized conclusions about which international factors are likely to bring about atonement in other scenarios and contexts.

#### FINDING THE PATH TO ATONEMENT AFTER WORLD WAR II

While there were no domestic incentives for the FRG to adopt atonement, this section reviews the international incentive structures and environment after 1945. Unsurprisingly, Germany was *the* pariah on the postwar international stage at this time. In particular, Israel, the Jewish state that came into being in 1948 as a direct result of the Holocaust, worked against Germany’s restoration in the international community. Naturally, in the immediate aftermath of

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50. Derek Beach and Rasmus Pedersen, *Analyzing Foreign Policy*, second edition (London: Red Globe Press, 2020).

World War II, Israeli diplomats fiercely opposed Germany participating in any international organizations or meetings.<sup>51</sup> Of course, there were no bilateral contacts between Germany and Israel. Trade, travel, the German language, and all cultural goods were forbidden, and once the FRG was formally established as a separate and independent nation in 1949, all necessary diplomatic exchanges between the FRG and Israel were conducted solely through the occupying powers.<sup>52</sup> In the postwar years, the Israelis made it abundantly clear that they wanted nothing to do with Germany.

At the same time, the Allied Powers began to reconstitute their relationship to one another, which also entailed forming a new image for the FRG as the successor state to the Third Reich. To that end, the Western allies (Britain, France, and particularly the United States) prioritized developing West Germany's democratic character. In the words of John McCloy, the U.S. high commissioner for Germany: "The way the Germans will behave toward the Jews will constitute the crucial test for German democracy."<sup>53</sup> Importantly, McCloy referred to neither Israel nor the option of atonement. Instead, he focused on the domestic divisions and their potential to test the nascent democracy internally, following the logic of the politics of memory literature. Suppose McCloy's statement could be rephrased in international relations' conceptual terms: the highest status actor in the Western international community, the United States, had expressed that a place for the FRG in the Western world depended on its democratic character, and that character was contingent on its behavior toward the Jews, and therefore eventually also toward Israel. But the United States neither mentioned such behavior nor stated that it required atonement on the part of the FRG.

A look into the exchanges happening in diplomatic back channels solidifies this point. By 1951, the Allies had twice explicitly rejected Israeli appeals to pressure the FRG into reparation payments on its behalf. While the Soviet Union had yet to respond to the Israeli appeal for reparations, the United States emphasized that neither the State of Israel nor the FRG existed when the

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51. Vogel, *Deutschlands Weg nach Israel*, 19.

52. Tom Segev, *Die Siebte Million: Der Holocaust und Israels Politik der Erinnerung* [The seventh million: The Israelis and the Holocaust] (Reinbeck, Germany: Rowohlt, 1995), 257–260; Yotam Hotam, "Historische Erinnerung und 'normale' Zukunft: Israels Reaktion auf die österreichische De-facto-Anerkennung" [Historical memory and a "normal" future: Israel's reaction to Austria's de facto recognition], in Sabine Falch and Moshe Zimmermann, eds., *Israel-Österreich* [Israel-Austria] (Innsbruck, Austria: Studienverlag, 2005), 155.

53. John McCloy, quoted in Deutschkron, *Israel und die Deutschen*, 27.

crimes were committed, and therefore the international legal basis for such a move was lacking.<sup>54</sup> When pressed further by Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett, his U.S. counterpart Dean Acheson revealed that the United States' refusal to pressure the FRG to make reparation payments to Israel was in part motivated by financial concerns. Given that the FRG was dependent on U.S. aid, the United States feared that it would end up paying reparations on Germany's behalf.<sup>55</sup> But as Acheson wrote to Sharett in November 1951, the United States would not oppose any reparations that Germany would pay itself.<sup>56</sup> The British and French made similar provisions: the Israelis might work directly with Germany to find a solution, but only without their involvement.<sup>57</sup>

With these stances, the Western allies were at best sympathetic to atonement from a moral point of view, but uncooperative, if not opposed, based on real political interests. For the United States, Cold War exigencies made the FRG's rearmament and its position in the Western community a priority. To that end, the financial and moral hardship of reparations was not regarded as helpful. Following this logic, Acheson had already recommended in 1950 that Israeli diplomats establish "normal diplomatic relations with the *Bundesrepublik*," with no preconditions attached.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the Allied Powers cannot be credited with instigating the German road toward atonement. Instead, the historical documents reveal that early scholars of German *Wiedergutmachtung* (restitution) overestimated the United States' role in this matter.<sup>59</sup> The conventional wisdom until the 1980s was that the United States had pushed the FRG toward atonement.<sup>60</sup> But the Allies neither explicitly requested reparations nor made the FRG's reintegration into the Western community conditional upon them. Thus, the international incentive structures of the postwar years were at best fruitful for atonement, but neither the United States nor any other Allied Power made atonement a necessity for the FRG.

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54. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951*, vol. 7: *The Near East and Africa* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 750, 948.

55. Wolffsohn, "Das Deutsch-Israelische Wiedergutmachtungsabkommen," 696–697.

56. Sharett to Horowitz and Shinnar, November 21, 1951, National Archives (NA), Washington, DC.

57. Gifford (U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom) to Acheson, April 4, 1952, NA, Washington, DC, DC/R, 662A.84A/4-452.

58. Acheson to McCloy, December 28, 1950, NA, Washington, DC, Diplomatic Division, State Department Files, NND 832865, RG 84, box 2.

59. Feldman, *The Special Relationship between West Germany and Israel*; Grossman, *Die Ehre schuld*; Schwartz, *Die Wiedergutmachtung nationalsozialistischen Unrechts*.

60. Wolffsohn, "Das Deutsch-Israelische Wiedergutmachtungsabkommen," 691.

EVOLVING NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE FRG AND ISRAEL

If the United States did not push the FRG toward reparations, who did? Atonement is a reparative strategy on the part of the perpetrator state, yet the state on the receiving end must also be ready to engage in this practice. In the case of West Germany, the recipient state was Israel, formed in no small part because of the Holocaust. To investigate the bilateral dynamic between the FRG and Israel, this section examines the secret diplomatic negotiations that started in Paris in April 1951 and concluded with the successful signing of the Luxembourg Agreement on September 10, 1952.

In the FRG, when the first freely elected chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, took office on September 15, 1949, he faced a predicament. Domestically, he had won the election by promoting democracy and westernization, at the expense of silencing the Nazi past. But internationally, and particularly through the actions of Israeli diplomats, the FRG was ostracized as a pariah because of its legacy. At the same time, within Israel, conflicting moral and pragmatic considerations had begun to emerge regarding Germany. While the Israeli public remained fiercely opposed to any contacts with the Germans,<sup>61</sup> the Israeli elites, first and foremost President David Ben Gurion, felt that the economic necessities of being a new state in a hostile environment required them to hint that they were open to an eventual rapprochement through reparation payments.<sup>62</sup> The president of the Jewish World Congress, Nahum Goldmann, played a crucial role: In his view, pursuing reparations in addition to individual claims would constitute an essential contribution to resettling the large numbers of displaced people in Israel.<sup>63</sup> Following these pragmatic considerations among the elites, the stance of totally rejecting Germany was weakened by 1950, with Sharett floating the idea of establishing contact with West Germany as being conditional on a form of restitution.<sup>64</sup>

By opening this possibility, Israeli political leaders signaled that their country was willing to take up its painful victim status internationally because it promised to lead to strategic gains. But the tenor that remained throughout the reparation negotiations was that no money in the world could ever wipe out the German guilt. It was in this international context—and shortly before a trip to New York—that Adenauer made his first public statement that hinted at atonement: “Insofar as it is possible in the aftermath of the annihilation of mil-

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61. Hanna Yablonka, *The State of Israel vs. Adolf Eichmann* (New York: Schocken, 2004).

62. Tom Segev, *A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion* (London: Apollo Library, 2019).

63. Von Jena, “Versöhnung mit Israel?,” 464–465.

64. Meeting notes concerning Israel and its relations to the FRG, January 8, 1951, AAPD, online.

lions of people beyond retrieval, the German people are willing to make good the injustice committed against the Jews in the German name by a criminal regime. We consider restitution [*Wiedergutmachung*] as our duty. The Federal Government is committed to initiating appropriate action."<sup>65</sup> Adenauer signalled that the FRG was willing to participate in the political project that is atonement, and his country would take on the role of a guilty—yet atoning—perpetrator, at least internationally. "Germany could not become a respected and equal member of the family of nations until it had recognized and proven the will to make amends," confirmed Adenauer in his memoirs.<sup>66</sup> The chancellor had grasped that atonement was a requirement for seeking international status and rehabilitation within the Western community, despite his awareness that the Nazi crimes could never be redeemed in a moral sense.

Once both sides had conceived of atonement as a pragmatic political solution in a situation where absolution was impossible, this thinking was translated into concrete steps. In 1951, the FRG offered DM 10 million in reparations to Israel. While this initial amount was negligible, the voluntary nature of this offer was essential: it began to frame the FRG's step toward atonement by underlining its will to acknowledge itself as a guilty perpetrator. The international community sympathized with this German move. But the Israeli response would be crucial. Whereas Israeli officials initially reacted reluctantly to the German offer, most of the Israeli public was outraged and opposed taking "blood money" from the Germans.<sup>67</sup> In addition, they believed that the offer came at the price of rehabilitating Germany's international status. Despite persistent major reservations, the more pragmatic Israeli diplomats went ahead and began to negotiate with the West Germans.

With the Israelis reciprocating Adenauer's offer, the first step toward atonement became a possibility for the FRG. On April 19, 1951, Israeli officials David Horowitz and Maurice Fischer met with Adenauer in Paris. From the very start, they made clear that their cooperation would be contingent on a public condemnation of the Nazi crimes by the German chancellor.<sup>68</sup> They requested an official apology from Adenauer that would portray his country as a "guilty perpetrator" and his decision for reparations as "atonement,"

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65. Interview with Konrad Adenauer, *Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland*, November 11, 1949.

66. Adenauer, *Erinnerungen, 1953–1955*, 145.

67. Segev, *Die Siebte Million*, 264–277; *Deutschkron, Israel und die Deutschen*, 42–44.

68. *Deutschkron, Israel und die Deutschen*, 21.



that is, as “guilt payments.”<sup>69</sup> Adenauer conceded with the simple words: “It will happen.”<sup>70</sup>

The roles and the relationship between them were now clear and settled. Without the Israeli insistence that reparations were guilt payments rather than a mere business transaction, this path would not have opened at all. While the negotiators framed this encounter in moral terms between perpetrator and victim, each side was strategically motivated to pave this shared path toward atonement.

#### SEALING THE DEAL OF ATONEMENT: A TWO-LEVEL GAME, AFTER ALL

While atonement as a useful strategy began to take shape internationally, it nevertheless had to be implemented through domestic political processes. The difficulties posed by rendering atonement politically expedient within the FRG once more reflect the importance of the international environment in sparking the political interest in atonement in the first place. While Adenauer had understood in his meetings with the Israelis that a public condemnation of the Nazi crimes was necessary, such a statement ran counter to his domestic strategy regarding the Nazi past. The crucial test for the German democracy that McCloy had hinted at thus came when Adenauer brought the issue of reparations before the German Bundestag on September 27, 1951. During his speech, Adenauer publicly offered the remorse and penitence that Israel had long desired when he professed “the overwhelming suffering that the time of National Socialism has inflicted upon the Jews in Germany and the occupied countries.”<sup>71</sup> But to make his view acceptable to the broader German public, Adenauer used the passive voice when referring to the sufferings of the Jewish people. He cautiously underlined that even if many Germans did not personally participate in the crimes against the Jews, “unspeakable atrocities were nevertheless committed in the German name.” That alone, Adenauer continued, entitled Jews to moral and material compensation.

Adenauer’s 1951 speech represents a tightrope walk between two different audiences. To the international community, he delivered a remarkable, early apology that acknowledged German wrongdoings and expressed guilt, remorse, shame, and the will for restitution (*Wiedergutmachung*) based on the

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69. Todd H. Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 126–127.

70. Adenauer, quoted in Segev, *Die Siebte Million*, 271.

71. Adenauer, speech in German Bundestag, September 27, 1951.

country's "spirit of true humanity."<sup>72</sup> With this latter phrasing, he signalled not only a clear-cut break with the inhuman crimes of the past but also implicitly acknowledged the nascent human rights discourse. Adenauer's public condemnation of the Nazi crimes spoke to all the FRG's strategic interests in an early Cold War context: westernization, democratization, and rehabilitation of its international status. Yet, inside the FRG, there was no incentive structure for atonement. Domestically, atonement stood the test of democracy only because Adenauer's troubling circumlocutions exculpated most Germans from the Nazi crimes.

The West German chancellor played the two-level game well by making two other moves. First, he surrounded himself with the few allies in his party who supported the moral idea of atonement and sent them to the international stage to credibly represent atonement to the outside world. Second, for everyone else, particularly his domestic opponents, Adenauer secured broader support for his policy domestically by packaging reparations in non-moral, strategic terms.

To find moral allies for the international means of atonement, Adenauer handpicked people who were also sympathetic to atonement. One such sympathizer was Franz Böhm, who became his chief negotiator with the Israelis.<sup>73</sup> Böhm was one of the few members of the CDU who firmly believed that the country had inherited a historical debt.<sup>74</sup> In handpicking Böhm, Adenauer thus sent a German representative to the world stage who held an attitude compatible with international, not German, expectations. This move credibly portrayed to other international actors the FRG's sincerity in pursuing the means of atonement; however, it was not sufficient.

While finding moral allies helped the FRG signal its commitment to atonement to the outside world, Adenauer's deliberate co-optation of moral non-allies within his party into strategic allies is what sealed the deal with the Israelis. For instance, Adenauer urged Finance Minister Fritz Schäffer to put "aside concerns that in any other case would apply," and instead view reparations only "in the moral and political weight that these unique obligations carry for us."<sup>75</sup> To turn his opponents into strategic allies, Adenauer interwove

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72. Ibid.

73. Deutschkron, *Israel und die Deutschen*, 48.

74. Hans Günter Hockerts, "Wiedergutmachung in Germany: Balancing Historical Accounts 1945–2000," in Diner and Wunberg, *Restitution and Memory*, 323–382.

75. Letter exchange between Adenauer and Schäffer, Bonn, February 29, 1952, quoted in Vogel, *Deutschlands Weg nach Israel*, 41.

the ethical atonement approach with the strategic goals of the FRG.<sup>76</sup> In persuading his cabinet not to turn against reparations, Adenauer began to frame the highly moral issue of reparations in political terms: reparation payments were nothing less than the price to pay for reentry into the Western alliance. At the same time, they would create a strategic distance from the Eastern bloc. Furthermore, they were portrayed as simple economic transactions that would enable Germany to receive foreign credits.<sup>77</sup>

With this instrumental framing in place, Adenauer managed to link reparations to the Federal Republic's *raison d'état*—that is, its goal of multilateralism within the Western alliance (*Westbindung*).<sup>78</sup> Once he had merged the moral and political significance of reparations, he gained support from the opposition party SPD as well as within his own party to secure passage through the Bundestag.<sup>79</sup> Only by walking this tightrope at home did Adenauer achieve the green light to sign the Luxembourg Agreement with the Israelis on September 10, 1952.

### *The Path away from Atonement: The Cases of Austria and Japan*

I describe atonement as a two-level game, whose origins are the result of two factors: the international incentive structures and power constellations, and the bilateral dynamics between former perpetrators and their victims. In the West German case study, both worked in tandem to shape the pathway toward atonement. But I find that the international incentive structures, and particularly the influence of the occupying U.S. forces, provided at most an indirect push. Instead, the evolving negotiation between the West Germans and the Israelis and their mutual yet strategic acknowledgment of each other in their respective perpetrator and victim roles were the crucial elements in this process. To examine the validity of this claim, I look beyond the West German–Israeli case to two other perpetrators of World War II: Austria and Japan. Like the FRG, both these countries were occupied by the United States after World War II, yet they did not follow the West German atonement approach. While the United States seems to have pressured neither of these countries into atonement, the international push for atonement that did exist for the FRG seems not to have been in place for Austria and Japan. I consider each case in turn.

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76. See letter between Schäffer and Adenauer, June 18, 1952, AAPD, online.

77. Weingardt, *Deutsche Israel- und Nahostpolitik*, 82–89.

78. Bark and Gress, *A History of West Germany*, 257; Herf, *Divided Memory*, 284–286.

79. Feldman, “The September 1952 Reparations Agreement between West Germany and Israel.”

## AUSTRIA

In the Austrian case, the mutual acknowledgment of Austria and Israel as the perpetrator and its victim did not happen. Postwar Israeli efforts to ostracize Germany globally were never extended to Austria.<sup>80</sup> Bilateral relations between Austria and Israel thus started as early as 1950 and, despite a heated Knesset debate, accompanied by domestic protests, Israel never called Austria an “enemy state.”<sup>81</sup> Israeli diplomats instead opted for “normalisation” with Austria: “I have become convinced that we have to make a decision . . . either, we continue with the current contacts, i.e., a bit of recognition, a bit of anger, and then we exploit our particular position to—as we did with Germany—claim reparation payments etc., from Austria. Or, . . . we promote a full normalisation of the relationship in our own interest.”<sup>82</sup>

This Israeli advice reveals the agency and choice of the victim to press for atonement—or not. While the official Israeli strategy in 1951 rested somewhere between restitution and normalization, the decision soon tilted toward normalization. Consequently, Israel negotiated a bilateral credit agreement with Austria at the same time that it negotiated reparations with the FRG. While such a credit was per se a business agreement, Israeli diplomats nevertheless initially wanted to use it to pressure Austria into an accompanying friendship declaration. The agreement should acknowledge the Nazi crimes against the Austrian Jews, that is, it should include an official apology. Yet, in the Austrian case, Israeli diplomats recommended rather than insisted on such a statement. Moreover, once the Austrians failed to cooperate with taking up the role of a “guilty perpetrator,” insisting that “they had nothing to do with the crimes of Nazi Germany,” the statement completely disappeared from the final draft of the agreement.<sup>83</sup> Instead, the credit agreement contained a neutral formulation customary in normal business agreements between two friendly countries.

Notably, by accepting the credit agreement as a “normal business agree-

80. Helga Embacher and Margit Reiter, *Gratwanderungen: Die Beziehungen zwischen Österreich und Israel im Schatten der Vergangenheit* [Walking a tightrope: Relations between Austria and Israel in the shadow of the past] (Vienna: Picus, 1998), 65. Ronald W. Zweig, “Jewish Issues in Israeli Foreign Policy: Israeli-Austrian Relations in the 1950s,” *Israel Studies* 15, no. 3 (2010): 47–60, <https://doi.org/10.2979/isr.2010.15.3.47>.

81. Knesset protocols of Sarah Wahrhaftig’s and Zwi Pinkas’s speeches, July 26, 1950, Austrian State Archives, Vienna, ÖStA/AdR, BKA/AA, Israel 49, Gz. 126 722\_pol 1950.

82. Arie Eshel, quoted in Hotam, “Historische Erinnerung und ‘normale’ Zukunft,” 160.

83. Response from the Foreign Ministry to Hartl, June 17, 1952, Austrian State Archives, Vienna, ÖStA/AdR, BKA/AA, Israel 2, Gz. 146 350\_pol 1952.

ment," Israel acknowledged Austria as a victim rather than as a perpetrator, and the two countries began mutually beneficial economic relations while Israel sought guilt payments from the FRG. On his way to signing the Luxembourg Agreement with Germany, Sharett once more explicitly underlined the difference between Germany and Austria and announced: "Israel will not demand reparations from Austria. . . . Israel accepts the supposition that Germany is responsible for acts committed against Austrian Jews since they took place only after the *Anschluss* [annexation]." <sup>84</sup> With this, however, Israel also closed the pathway to atonement for Austria, at least in the immediate postwar period.

Retrospectively, the question naturally arises as to why Israel did so, and historians still try to understand Sharett's decisiveness in this matter. <sup>85</sup> As was the case for the FRG, the international environment's power constellations and available strategic options played an indirect role in this alternative pathway. As early as 1943, in the Moscow Declaration, the Allied Powers had designated Austria as "the first victim of Nazi Germany"—a wartime calculation that in the postwar context was picked up by Austria's anti-Nazi elites who began to form the Second Republic. At the time, a story of victimhood under Nazi Germany had immense political expediency for Austria, not least because it opened the possibility for a swift departure of the occupying powers and the country's independence. The national victim narrative was also very popular internally because it bore the potential to absorb Austrians' diverse war experiences: everyone felt victimized by World War II, be it by the losses suffered through war and displacement, by the Nazi regime's atrocities, by the Allied bombings, by the expulsions from Eastern and Central European countries, or by the occupation and Soviet repression. Most importantly, such a national story helped to distract from the shameful and guilty aspects of the past and to highlight Austria's differentiation from Germany, thus boosting patriotic attachment while smoothing the country's way toward a functioning welfare state. <sup>86</sup>

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84. Sharett quoted in Rolf Steininger, *Österreichs Diplomaten in Palästina und Israel 1927–1976* [Austria's diplomats in Palestine and Israel 1927–1976] (Innsbruck, Austria: Innsbruck University Press, 2012), 62.

85. Zweig, "Jewish Issues in Israeli Foreign Policy," 56.

86. Anton Pelinka, "Von der Funktionalität von Tabus: Zu den 'Lebenslügen' der Zweiten Republik" [The functionality of taboos: On the "life lies" of the Second Republic], in Wolfgang Kos and Georg Rigele, eds., *Inventur 45/55: Österreich im ersten Jahrzehnt der Zweiten Republik* [Inventory 45/55: Austria in the first decade of the Second Republic] (Vienna: Sonderzahl Verlagsgesellschaft, 1996), 23–31; Ruth Wodak et al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, second ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 52–55.

Conveniently for Austria, against the backdrop of the initial stages of the Cold War competition, the Allies had a vested interest in absolving Austria from its past. Their aim was to place the country as a neutral buffer between East and West rather than dividing Austria as they did with guilty Germany. To secure Austria from the looming Soviet claims, the United States was more than willing to play along with the country's fabricated innocence.<sup>87</sup> International status recognition for Austria and its independence in 1955 hence became a possibility through its victimhood rather than by admitting its guilt. The international community, particularly the United States and Israel, allowed Austria to build its national image of innocence and victimhood, and thus let Austria evade the road of atonement.

#### JAPAN

Japan is still scrutinized for not having followed the German atonement model. Yet, when international incentives and constellations induced the pariah FRG to adopt atonement, this same path was not an option for Japan. From the late 1940s to the early 1950s, the United States and China—both of which could have pushed for Japan's atonement—sought their own status and recognition in the Asia-Pacific region. As a result, neither the United States, which at the time occupied Japan, nor China, the main victim of Japanese aggression in the infamous Nanjing massacre in 1937, nudged Japan toward atonement.

Regarding the victim's reciprocity, China—like Israel with Austria—did not deliberately take up its victim status vis-à-vis Japan. In the aftermath of World War II, the newly proclaimed PRC was focused on its own realpolitik. To that end, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) never reciprocated early unofficial Japanese attempts to negotiate eventual reparation payments and instead preferred to forgo war reparations from Japan in return for its political recognition. At the time, the PRC was internationally and regionally isolated, and its main enemies were the Chinese Nationalists, and by extension, the United States, rather than Japan. Detaching Japan from the United States' embrace by achieving Japanese recognition, therefore, was regarded as a major prize by China's leadership.<sup>88</sup> From the Chinese perspective, achieving normalization

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87. R. G. Knight, "Contours of Memory in Post-Nazi Austria," *Patterns of Prejudice* 34, no. 4 (2000): 5–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/003132200128810955>; Oliver Rathkolb, *Die paradoxe Republik: Österreich 1945–2005* [The paradoxical republic: Austria 1945–2005] (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay, 2005).

88. Rana Mitter, "Old Ghosts, New Memories: China's Changing War History in the Era of Post-

and the beginning of economic relations with Japan was strategically beneficial. On the one hand, these would help industrialization; on the other hand, they would challenge a U.S.-led regional and economic order in East Asia.<sup>89</sup>

To achieve the desired cooperation from Japan, it was simply not in the PRC's strategic interest to press Japan to acknowledge its war crimes. The communists instead added the Japanese militarists to a long list of opponents. First and foremost on this list was China's class-enemy number one—personified in Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and the so-called new imperialists—the Americans. Additionally, in the aftermath of the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the CCP began to portray the Japanese people as fellow victims of U.S. imperialism.<sup>90</sup> Japan, after all, was a defeated enemy, whereas the Chinese Nationalists and the United States posed an ongoing threat. At the beginning of the Cold War, class struggle and national liberation shaped the PRC's new image as a revolutionary state. The idea of China as a victim was not politically expedient in that period.<sup>91</sup> Over the subsequent postwar decades, moreover, China began trade relations with Japan, which also paid China large amounts of development assistance. Scholars retrospectively attributed Japan's development assistance to China to Japan's legacy of World War II and imperialism.<sup>92</sup> Yet, on both sides this motivation remained tacitly implied, and what could have been framed as reparation payments took the form of foreign aid or normal business relations.

While the PRC did not take up its victim role in the early 1950s, Japan's official narrative of World War II in the postwar decade was characterized by silencing, mythmaking, relativizing, and focusing on its own victimhood.<sup>93</sup> According to the Ministry of Education in its textbook screening during the 1950s: "Do not write bad things about Japan in [describing] the Pacific War. Even though they are facts, represent them in romantic [language]."<sup>94</sup> As a result, Japan's role as a perpetrator was obscured, its victims across East Asia were marginalized, and responsibility for Japanese crimes was attributed to

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Mao Politics," *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 1 (2003): 117–131, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3180700>.

89. He, *The Search for Reconciliation*, 47–49; Rana Mitter, *China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

90. Amy King, *China-Japan Relations after World War II: Empire, Industry and War, 1949–1971* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 75–85.

91. Mitter, "Old Ghosts, New Memories," 119–121.

92. Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy*, 178.

93. Dixon, *Dark Pasts*, 107.

94. *Ibid.*

faceless militarists. The Japanese people, according to the emerging official and popular tenor, had also suffered under these militarists, the war, and, of course, the atomic bombs, which became the single most powerful symbol of Japan's defeat and victimhood. Their imagery, like nothing else, underscored the innocence of Japanese civilians and further entrenched the victim narrative in popular postwar culture and a political landscape dominated by conservatism and pacifism.<sup>95</sup> The official internal tenor in the postwar decades was that Japan was a victim of World War II.

The United States had also supported this popular domestic story of victimhood in the immediate postwar context. The U.S. occupation aimed to nurture a stable Cold War ally, with the side effect of discouraging Japan's path away from confronting its historical legacy.<sup>96</sup> Against the looming Cold War exigencies, with the perceived threats posed by the Soviet Union, China, the Korean War, and the issue of Taiwan, the United States sought to restore Japan's place and status in East Asia rather than ostracize Japan as the East Asian pariah by highlighting its war crimes.<sup>97</sup> Equally, the United States' own historiography further deemphasized Japan's wartime activities in China and Korea: in the U.S. narrative, World War II in Asia was a "Pacific War" centering around Pearl Harbor, with the United States as its victim, not a "Greater East Asian War."<sup>98</sup> The U.S. occupation of Japan also did not link Japan's independence or regional integration to atonement. As with West Germany and Austria, the U.S. occupation authorities encouraged the themes of democracy and patriotism primarily in support of Cold War interests. Consequently, the reconstruction of these countries under the new banner of liberal democracy relied heavily on turning a blind eye to integrating former high-ranking officers and officials into society.<sup>99</sup> For the United States, the emergent Cold War left little choice but to focus on the present threats posed by the Soviet Union and the PRC. Thus, the popular internal narrative of Japan as a victim—like the Austrian case—became internationally accepted in the postwar years.

To sum up, the dominating actor within the postwar international order,

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95. Naoko Shimazu, "Popular Representations of the Past: The Case of Postwar Japan," *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 1 (2003): 101–116, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3180699>.

96. James J. Orr, *The Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

97. Stephanie Lawson and Seiko Tannaka, "War Memories and Japan's 'Normalisation' as an International Actor: A Critical Analysis," *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 3 (2010): 405–428, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066110365972>.

98. *Ibid.*, 413–414.

99. Shimazu, "Popular Representations of the Past," 105–106.



the United States, did not create the option for Austria or Japan to reattain their international status through atonement. Instead, the United States sought to preserve a strategic place for the two countries as allies because of pragmatic interests sparked by Cold War exigencies rather than by moral concerns over their historical legacies. The United States, therefore, as with West Germany, did not insist on reparation payments by Austria or Japan to their former victims. Yet, in the West German case, this U.S. reluctance pushed both Israelis and West Germans to interact directly with each other. These interactions sparked a reciprocal strategic interest in taking up the roles of perpetrator and victim in the relationship. Notably, this dynamic was absent between the Austrians and the Israelis and between the Japanese and the Chinese in the postwar decade.

Israel and the PRC, each for its own reason, did not take up their agency as victims vis-à-vis Austria and Japan (respectively) in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Instead, Israel and the PRC sought to normalize their relationships with the perpetrators by establishing a credit agreement or receiving developmental aid rather than framing these payments as reparations. These relationships resembled normal business relations rather than special partnerships based on a shared historical legacy. Despite later attempts by the victims to change these dynamics, the fact that the victims did not pursue atonement early thus closed the road of atonement in the postwar decade. This historical legacy continually resurfaces and still burdens the bilateral relations between Austria and Israel<sup>100</sup> and between Japan and China.<sup>101</sup>

### Conclusion

In the aftermath of war crimes, human rights abuses, atrocities, and genocide, atonement is widely regarded as the morally right choice for a former perpetrator state to make. Yet as of 2023, this official mix of “apology plus reparations” has manifested only once between two states: in the 1952 Luxembourg Agreement between the FRG and Israel. This article has shown how countries can choose atonement, regardless of politicians’ moral acceptance of the idea itself. The historical documents in my analysis include classified documents that contain the negotiations between West German and Israeli officials and

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100. See, for instance, Embacher and Reiter, *Gratwanderungen*.

101. For the “history problem” in Sino-Japanese relations, see, for instance, Gustafsson and Hall, “The Politics of Emotions in International Relations.”

the Allied Powers that took place in diplomatic back channels between 1951 and the conclusion of the reparations agreement in 1952. Looking back to these historical documents, I demonstrated that the ethical atonement pathway became a realistic strategy that distinctively unfolded within international relations. Yet, the option of atonement is only available within a socially constructed world that recognizes historical loss.<sup>102</sup>

To describe the origins of atonement as a political strategy within international relations, I have theorized atonement as a politically expedient option that the perpetrator state selects. I have argued that two factors affect this choice—international incentive structures, and the perpetrator’s relationship with the victim—and have shown that these factors influenced the West German decision to pay reparations to Israel in 1952. West Germany’s atonement approach toward its atrocious Nazi legacy originated in international rather than domestic incentives. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that atonement grew out of West German politics, backed up by pressure from U.S. occupation forces, I have found that the international environment, including its powerful actors, provided at most an indirect push toward atonement. The Allies, especially the United States, did not deliberately pressure the FRG into reparations; in fact, they twice refused Israel’s requests for reparations. Yet, these refusals forced the Israeli and West German representatives to directly negotiate with each other, a step that essentially paved the way toward atonement. Notably, whether the FRG and Israel were moral allies regarding the idea of atonement—their domestic struggles with it suggest that they were not—had little weight in the discussion about reparations. What mattered was that both sides accepted the unpopular roles of perpetrator and victim because these roles led toward strategic international ends. Atonement is a political project, albeit one that is couched in moral language. Hence, even when atonement does not appear morally right to a country’s politicians and public, it can internationally still be the best strategic option.

It follows that atonement must not be limited to the West German case. Within a persuasive international environment and through the agency of perpetrators and victims, atonement can become a reality in other cases: sexual slavery during World War II (Japan and South Korea);<sup>103</sup> the Armenian geno-

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102. I thank Neil MacFarlane for this phrasing and his advice.

103. Japan continues to use the 1965 Basic Relations Treaty to support its argument that “comfort women” have no claim under international law, especially since Japan provided developmental aid and settled property issues at the state-to-state level. While this bilateral debate is ongoing, as noted previously, the 1965 treaty prioritized “normal business relations” rather than paying com-

cide during World War I (Turkey and Armenia); and the Srebrenica massacre during the Bosnian War (Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina). Moreover, atonement can be a strategy to approach the legacies of colonialism and slavery.

The case studies of the two other perpetrators of World War II and their lack of atonement further confirm the roles played by international incentives and the evolving relations between victims and perpetrators. While Austria and Japan inhabited the same postwar international environment as West Germany, the incentives for them to adopt atonement were different. The United States' Cold War interests supported each case's national story of victimhood, and the victim states—Israel and the PRC—did not engage in discussions about atonement. As a result, atonement did not materialize as a possibility between the victim and the perpetrator. Notably, my analysis does not rule out the possibility of subsequent opportunities for a country to adopt atonement. In fact, Austria and Japan issued official apologies several decades later.<sup>104</sup> But my findings suggest that the initial spark for atonement stems from a mutual strategic pact between a former perpetrator and its victim within a conducive global environment.

While the German example may teach other countries how to atone, this article's contribution is to explain why West Germany did so in 1952 (and Austria and Japan did not). Future international relations scholarship should explore how the international incentives have changed since World War II, and with what effects. In the transformed international environment of the twenty-first century, atonement has become a desirable international norm and requirement.<sup>105</sup> Today's global incentive structures are likely to provide a

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pensation for war crimes or crimes against humanity. Therefore, it left the issue of "comfort women" untouched. See Marie Seong-Hak Kim, "History Is Not Destiny: Colonial Compensation Litigation and South Korea–Japan Relations," *Journal of Asian Studies* 81, no. 3 (2022): 475–491, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911821002333>.

104. In 1991, Austria admitted co-responsibility for the Holocaust, and its chancellor, Franz Vranitzky, officially apologized to Israel in 1993. See Vranitzky's speech before the Austrian Parliament, July 8, 1991, in Nationalrat, 24.GP, Stenographisches Protokoll, 40., Sitzung, 91, [http://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXIV/NRSITZ/NRSITZ\\_00040/SEITE\\_0091.html](http://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXIV/NRSITZ/NRSITZ_00040/SEITE_0091.html). For the full text of the official apology, see Vranitzky's speech in Jerusalem, printed in *Der Standard*, June 11, 1993. Japan and the PRC, in a joint statement following their normalization agreement of 1972, declared: "The Japanese side is keenly conscious of the responsibility for the serious damage that Japan caused in the past to the Chinese people through war, and deeply reproaches itself." Cited in Gustafsson and Hall, "The Politics of Emotions in International Relations," 979.

105. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002): 87–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431002005001002>; Jelena Subotic, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

much stronger push toward atonement than they did in the postwar era.<sup>106</sup> Equally, foreign policy is no longer the sole responsibility of elites, and diplomacy has become increasingly public, making room for wider participation in the atonement process.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, because of the transformed zeitgeist, societal memories nowadays are likely to be more sympathetic to atonement, altering the equations on both sides of the two-level game. Many more states may pursue atonement pathways, including using different and novel strategies to do so.<sup>108</sup>

With future scholarship well advised to consider these international and domestic transformations, this article has emphasized that the international should not be dismissed as marginal to the construction of atonement. Scholars and practitioners of transitional justice should focus on encouraging the international community to promote the strategy of atonement to the states involved. This insight is helpful for international relations because the pathway of atonement shifts relations between two states into specific perpetrator and victim roles, which leads to new forms of reconciliation and special relationships. To security studies, this article offers a longer-term view on international stability that goes beyond the formal settlement of a conflict and points to a potential avenue toward durable peace. To the toolkit of post-conflict reconciliation practices revolving around trials and truth commissions, this article adds state atonement as a third way to bring together a former perpetrator with its victim to create a fruitful and lasting connection between them. Finally, to all those who view atonement as merely an ethical policy choice, this article serves as a reminder to bring a realist perspective back into the equation: atonement between two states, after all, is a political strategy. Importantly, atonement can emerge regardless of whether it is morally desired.

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106. Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations*; Gibney et al., *The Age of Apology*.

107. Tom Fletcher, *The Naked Diplomat: Understanding Power and Politics in the Digital Age* (London: William Collins, 2017); Jan Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

108. Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch, "Ideational Change and the Emergence of the International Norm of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions," *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 3 (2014): 810–833, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066113484344>.