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Denying Atrocities: Comparing Policies and Pressures in Turkey and Japan*



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Denialism has long been considered an aspect of genocide, and as Stanton (1996) argues, denialism is its final stage. After a genocidal act or other widespread act of violence, perpetrators will often try to eliminate as much evidence as possible and employ revisionist tactics in order to ensure that their crimes are forgotten. This study focuses on the history of denial amongst two mass atrocity case studies. The first is the Armenian Genocide, which has long been denied by Turkey, the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, who were the perpetrators of the genocide. The second is the Nanking Massacre, where thousands of citizens in Nanjing, China were brutally slaughtered by the Japanese Imperial Army in late 1937. Although the government of Japan has officially apologized for various violent acts they committed during World War I, there is still denialism within the government particularly with individual politicians and in academia.

There are two clear objectives to this comparative-historical study. The first is to understand and compare methods of denial employed by Japan and Turkey with the aim of finding potential patterns in denialist methods and rhetoric. The second objective is to understand why Japan has seemingly made more progress in admitting to and apologizing for the atrocities they have committed than Turkey has. I hypothesize that this is due to the increased economic importance Japan has globally, especially in regard to other East Asian states (many of whom Japan victimized during World War II).

Turkey and Japan have used similar methods of denial, especially through academia. Both states also have more legalistic forms of denialism. Turkey's denial is blatant, as according to Penal Code 301 defamation of the Turkish government has been used to criminalize and prosecute those who speak about Turkey's role in carrying out the Armenian Genocide. Japan's method is subtler and occurs within the bureaucracy of the government. Japanese textbooks are not written by the state but must be approved by the Ministry of Education. Because of this, the Japanese government has faced criticism for the portrayal and outright exclusion of the Nanking Massacre and other atrocities they have committed.

Theoretically, one explanation for Japan's progress and Turkey's continued suppression in acknowledging and apologizing for the mass atrocities they have committed is the economy. Following World War II, Japan's economy became one of the biggest in the world. Some of Japan's biggest trade partners are states that they victimized during the war with China, their biggest trade partner. In order to maintain healthy trade relations, Japan has had much more pressure (and a greater incentive) to apologize for the atrocities they have committed. Turkey's economy, on the other hand, is relatively weak and much smaller than Japan's. Armenia's economy is even weaker, and they are not an important trade partner for Turkey (although, inversely, Turkey is an important trade partner for Armenia). Because of this, Turkey lacks powerful states to pressure them into apologizing, and they have also had no economic incentives to do so, either.

*This scholar and faculty mentor have requested that only an abstract be published.