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Closing chapters of the past? Rhetorical strategies in political apologies for human rights violations across the world

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, an increasing number of countries have apologized for human rights violations in the recent or distant past. Although this has led to considerable debate about the value and meaning of apologies and their potential as a transformative mechanism, little is known about how countries across the world try to address and redress past wrongdoings in these statements. Relying on a database of apologies that have been offered worldwide by states or state representatives for human rights violations, we identified various rhetorical strategies that diverse countries use—to varying degrees—to (1) break from or acknowledge past wrongdoings, (2) bridge past wrongdoings with future intentions, and (3) bond with the intended recipients of the apology. In this article, we shed light on the strategies we identified in this regard. In doing so, we show how countries and their representatives use apologies not only or necessarily to address the needs of victims or their relatives, but also to portray and understand themselves, whereby there is substantial overlap in the types of rhetorical strategies and scripts that they use to accomplish this.

Should a nation apologize for the crimes of its past? Judging by the number of political apologies that have been offered by states or state representatives in the past decades, one could easily get the impression that this has become a new standard in (inter)national relations. When the *Journal of Human Rights* devoted a special issue in 2004 to "world civility," it was noted that the turn of the millennium seemed to be marked by a worldwide "fever of atonement" (Colonomos & Torpey, 2004; Soyinka, 1999). Since then, the number of apologies offered by countries across the world for recent or past injustices and human rights violations—either within their borders or in other countries—has only continued to increase (Zoodsma & Schaafsma, 2021). As it stands, there is little to suggest this trend is likely to reverse any time soon.

The numerous political apologies that have been offered in the past decades on the world stage present a remarkable change in how countries deal with their accountability and responsibility for past events (e.g., Thompson, 2012; Torpey, 2006). Instead of ignoring or denying prior human rights violations, many countries now seem to publicly acknowledge these wrongs in an attempt to come to terms with the past. This development has been ascribed to the global spread of a human rights culture and a "developing moral consensus" (Marrus, 2007, p. 86) on this topic, supported by trends in international law that lay out that past human rights violations are subject to reparations, even if only symbolically. For example, the UN International Law Commission's

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2001 Draft Articles on State Responsibility stipulates, "Satisfaction may consist in an acknowledgement of the breach, an expression of regret, a formal apology or another appropriate modality" (p. 28).

Within the human rights and transitional justice literature, it has been argued that such public acts of confession and contrition in the aftermath of human rights violations can be a positive and essential step to restore justice and promote reconciliation, which may help shed light on contested pasts and aid in the "healing processes" of victims or their relatives (e.g., Augoustinos et al., 2011; Cunningham, 2014; Gibney et al., 2008; Nobles, 2008; Páez, 2010). There is, however, also skepticism about how sincere political apologies are and what their transformative power might be, for victims and for societies at large. For example, various scholars have described them as empty gestures that do not challenge the ideologies and structures that led to the human rights violations but serve more as a strategy to restore a country's reputation or maintain the *status quo* (e.g., Bentley, 2015; Tarusarira, 2019; Trouillot, 2000). From this perspective, the wave of apologies for past wrongdoings does not necessarily reflect a new international morality or a concern with those who have been the victim of human rights violations, but is the result, instead, of more opportunistic or pragmatic calculations in a world that has become increasingly interdependent (Rosoux, 2004).

Nevertheless, despite the many discussions and attempts to understand what this "reckoning with the past" entails, our present knowledge about how countries apologize for past human rights violations is rather limited, as researchers have tended to focus on a select number of cases (e.g., Japan, Canada, the United States, and Germany) when trying to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon. These studies also paint a somewhat mixed picture of what countries may aim to accomplish in the apologies that have been offered and how they do this. For example, Edwards (2010) described how apologies offered by American President Bill Clinton (for the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment), Australian Prime Minister Kevid Rudd (to the Aboriginal "Stolen Generations"), and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper (for the Indian Residential School System) seemed to be geared toward repairing relationships with victimized communities, through an explicit acknowledgment and acceptance of responsibility for historical wrongs, and through pledges not to repeat the same mistakes again. Augoustinos et al. (2011) came to similar conclusions based on an in-depth analysis of the apology offered by Kevid Rudd, and describe it as a "rhetorical project in rehumanizing" through language that invokes a sense of the degree of the past and ongoing suffering of Australia's Indigenous population. Referring to the 2004 German apology for the Herero and Namaqua genocide in current-day Namibia, however, Bentley (2015) pointed out how state representatives may also evade responsibility through the use "legally savvy language" such as passive sentence structures. Similar observations have been made with regard to the apologies offered by Japan (e.g., Jeffery, 2011; Yamazaki, 2006).

Thus, the in-depth analysis of various apologies offered by states or state representatives gives reason for both a more optimistic and a more pessimistic account of how they are used, what they may try to convey, and what they may be able to accomplish in the aftermath of human rights violations. The case-based approach that has been used so far, however, makes it difficult to draw broader inferences about how nations worldwide try to address and redress past wrongdoing in the apologies they have offered, and what this tells us about their potential function and meaning, and about the global trend of reckoning or "coming to terms" with the past. In this article, we aim to shed more light on this and to share some of the insights we obtained about the rhetorical strategies that are used in political apologies across the world, based on a database we created.

Following our definition of political apologies (see also Zoodsma & Schaafsma, 2021), our database contains statements that have been issued by nations or state representatives worldwide to collectives (either within or beyond their borders) for human rights violations in the recent or distant past (as defined by the UN-classification of human rights violations, whereby we added

"endangering individual and public health" as a separate category). We included all those statements that contained words such as *sorry*, *apologize*, and *forgiveness*, but we also included statements that contained expressions of regret, remorse, guilt, or shame, if this was accompanied with an acknowledgment of responsibility or wrongdoing or a recognition of the suffering and trauma among victim groups. We focused on these elements as they have often been identified as "classical" apology ingredients (e.g., Blatz et al., 2009; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Harris et al., 2006; Lazare, 2004).

As a starting point for our database, we relied on the Political Apologies and Reparations website (created by Howard-Hassmann at Wilfrid Laurier University) and the Political Apologies website (at Columbia University). To expand the database, we conducted various extensive search procedures (e.g., via Google, the WorldCat Discovery Engine, Keesing's World News Archives, and RefWorld) in multiple languages (English, Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, French, and Spanish) from 2017 until the end of 2019. On January 1, 2020, the database included 329 apologies (324 verbal, five nonverbal) offered by 74 countries. Almost half of these apologies were given for human rights violations that took place in the context of a (sometimes civil) war (and World War II, in particular). Another relatively substantial section was offered in the context of the maltreatment of minority groups, such as indigenous populations or ethnic minority groups, or for human rights violations that took place during or in the aftermath of colonial rule (for a more elaborate description of the database, see Zoodsma & Schaafsma, 2021).

We were able to find the full texts of 203 apologies from 50 countries. These texts were translated into English if needed and coded for, among other things, the presence of the classical apology elements described above, as well as promises of nonrepetition and offers for reparation. In a first set of analyses, we focused on which and how many of these elements were included in the apologies, and we examined what might explain differences in this regard (e.g., whether this can be linked to specific countries or to the nature of the human rights violations for which the apology was offered; for a more elaborate description, see Zoodsma, Schaafsma, Sagherian-Dickey, & Friedrich, 2021; we have reproduced Table 1 with the descriptives, for the reader's convenience).[1]

When conducting our analyses, however, we noticed that a focus on these specific apology components—which relies heavily on previous work on interpersonal apologies—is not sufficient to capture the nature of state apologies and the rhetorical tactics used. More specifically, we observed that governments and state representatives across the world use various rhetorical strategies to (1) break from or acknowledge past wrongdoings, (2) bridge past wrongdoings with future intentions, and (3) bond with the intended recipients of the apology. In this article, we shed light on the strategies we identified in this regard. In doing so, we will show how countries and their representatives use apologies not only or necessarily to address the needs of victims or their relatives, but also to portray and understand themselves in light of past wrongdoings, whereby there is remarkable overlap in the types of rhetorical strategies and scripts they use to accomplish this.

Breaking from or acknowledging the past: From explicit acknowledgment to implicit denial

In the aftermath of gross human rights violations that have resulted in the death, torture, abuse, or unjust treatment of large numbers of people, any apology or expression of regret or remorse may seem trivial and perhaps even cynical. How can the simple utterance of a few words—often by those who were not directly responsible—undo the harm that has been inflicted or make up for the loss and suffering of many? And yet, across the world, victims and relatives of victims of human rights violations have called for the leaders of their country or other countries to apologize for wrongdoings in the (recent) past. For them, an explicit acknowledgment of the human rights violations committed may be valuable not only because it may help bring attention to these

Table 1. Descriptives of apologies in text database.

			Medium		Recipients		
	N	*M* length	Verbal	Written	Own country	Other country	Transnational
Argentina	1	714	1	0	1	0	0
Armenia	1	767	1	0	1	0	0
Australia†	5	878.4	4	1	5	0	0
Austria*	3	1976	3	0	0	2	1
Belgium	1	945	1	0	0	0	1
Brazil	1	770	1	0	0	0	1
Canada†	15	1389.93	14	1	14	0	1
Chile	1	2601	1	0	1	0	0
Colombia	2	2844	2	0	2	0	0
Croatia†	2	1339	2	0	0	2	0
Czechia	1	1067	0	1	0	1	0
Denmark	3	1078.33	2	1	1	1	1
Ecuador	1	332	1	0	1	0	0
El Salvador	3	1612.33	3	0	3	0	0
Ethiopia†	1	4920	1	0	1	0	0
Germany*	22	1343.77	16	6	1	19	2
Finland	2	995	2	0	1	0	1
France	1	1045	1	0	0	0	1
Germ. Dem. Rep.	2	357.5	0	2	0	1	1
India†	1	1255	1	0	1	0	0
Ireland†	4	1502.75	4	0	4	0	0
Israel	1	1493	1	0	0	1	0
Jamaica†	1	785	1	0	1	0	0
Japan*	45	549.71	27	18	2	18	25
Kenya†	1	1125	1	0	1	0	0
Latvia	1	514	1	0	0	1	0
Lithuania†	1	2402	1	0	0	1	0
Luxembourg	1	233	0	1	0	0	1
Nepal	1	230	1	0	1	0	0
Netherlands**	8	742.38	6	2	2	4	2
New Zealand†	10	718.8	8	2	9	1	0
Norway*	6	1078.33	5	1	6	0	0
Pakistan†	1	1030	0	1	0	1	0
Peru	1	458	0	1	1	0	0
Poland*	2	1253.5	2	0	1	0	1
Portugal	2	1029.5	2	0	0	1	1
Rep. of Korea	4	1153.5	4	0	4	0	0
Russ. Federation	1	803	0	1	0	1	0
Serbia	1	664	0	1	0	1	0
Sierra Leone†	1	577	1	0	1	0	0
South Africa†	1	1182	1	0	0	1	0
Sri Lanka†	1	2127	1	0	1	0	0
Sweden†	1	965	1	0	0	0	1
Switzerland	3	1186	3	0	2	0	1
Taiwan	2	1390.5	2	0	2	0	0
Turkey	1	689	0	1	0	1	0
UK†	10	815	9	1	3	2	5
USA†	20	681.35	6	14	15	5	0
USSR	1	216	0	1	0	1	0
Yemen	1	412	1	0	1	0	0
Total	**203**		**146**	**57**	**90**	**66**	**47**

Notes. Apologies were translated into English or we found a (official) translation online. The length of the text is based on the word count of the English version. *N* = number of texts. †Apology originally offered in English. *One apology originally offered in English. **Four apologies originally offered in English. Source: Zoodsma, Schaafsma, Sagherian-Dickey, & Friedrich, 2021.

wrongs and put them on record, but also because it may help restore the moral order and promote trust that the wrongdoings will not be repeated (e.g., Brooks, 1999; Govier & Verwoerd, 2002a, 2002b; Thompson, 2012).

From the perspective of the victims, apologies would hence need to represent a "break from the past," in which countries unequivocally admit to the human rights violations and reject the underlying ideologies and structures. For governments or state representatives, however, a detailed description and explicit admission of wrongdoing and responsibility—or a critical reflection on the ideological and structural causes of the human rights violations—may be difficult, even when they do offer an apology or express regret for what happened. In some cases, this is because the facts are contested or controversial in a country or may go against the dominant narrative that has been created about the past; thus, political leaders may fear a backlash when they publicly describe and admit to these wrongdoings. That such a backlash may occur has been found in a number of countries (e.g., Japan, Canada, and the United States), where apologies have resulted in denials and justification of past wrongdoings (e.g., Lind, 2008). In addition, political leaders may fear the legal consequences of any statement in which they explicitly acknowledge wrongdoings, and they may want to avoid opening the door to claims for compensations. As a consequence, they may carefully choose the words they include in any apology or expression of remorse (e.g., Boehme, 2020; Harris et al., 2006; Payne, 2008), and rely on various rhetorical strategies (e.g., using the passive voice, replacing the exact description of the transgression with generic names, omitting the identity of the offender or the victim) to evade responsibility (e.g., see Kampf, 2009).

It is not only out of fear for the potential social and legal consequences, however, that state representatives may carefully weigh each word in an apology. From a politeness theory perspective (Brown & Levinson, 1987), they may also be hesitant to unequivocally acknowledge wrongdoings in public because doing so can be a face-threatening act, which may have negative implications for their own reputation and the reputation of their country. It has been argued that this tendency to evade responsibility may hold particularly for countries with a strong sense of national pride, where an explicit admission of past transgressions could be seen as a sign of weakness (e.g., Chun, 2015; Lind, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991).

In the apologies in our database, we identified various rhetorical strategies countries use in this regard, ranging from more explicit acknowledgment of wrongdoing to more implicit or explicit denial. On one hand, we find that a substantial number of apologies (approximately 60 percent) contain explicit references to (part of) the human rights violations that were committed. This is the case in many of the apologies that have been made for the Holocaust, by Germany in particular, but also by other countries. Take, for example, the (albeit controversial) 2001 apology by Poland's president Aleksander Kwasniewski for the killing of nearly the entire Jewish population of the village of Jedwabne during World War II:

> This was a particularly cruel crime. It is justified by nothing. Among the victims, among the burned were women, there were children. Petrifying cry of people closed in the barn and burned alive—continues to haunt the memory of those who witnessed the crime. The victims were helpless and defenseless.[2]

Such explicit references to past human rights violations can also be found in apologies offered by representatives of postconflict or postauthoritarian countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Sri Lanka, and in some of the apologies offered for the abuse of indigenous, minority, or vulnerable groups in countries such as Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Taiwan, and the United States. Some of these apologies contain an explicit admission that the nation failed its citizens or—although this happens less often—address the more structural causes that led to or justified the human rights violations in the first place (e.g., racial prejudice, "colonial way of thinking," "moral codes"). The 2013 Irish apology by Taoiseach Enda Kenny for the abuse suffered by women in the Magdalene Laundries is a good example:

> I believe I speak for millions of Irish people all over the world when I say we put away these women because for too many years we put away our conscience. We swapped our personal scruples for a solid public apparatus that kept us in tune and in step with a sense of what was "proper behaviour" or the "appropriate view" according to a sort of moral code that was fostered at the time particularly in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. We lived with the damaging idea that what was desirable and acceptable in the eyes of the

> Church and the State was the same and interchangeable. Is it this mindset then, this moral subservience that gave us the social mores, the required and exclusive "values" of the time that welcomed the compliant, obedient and lucky "us" and banished the more problematic, spirited or unlucky "them"?

Nevertheless, we also identified a number of ways (some of which overlap with those identified by Kampf, 2009, in his analysis of apologies by public figures in Israel) in which countries avoid such explicit references to or reflections on the human rights violations that were committed, particularly when the apology challenges or threatens national self-image or sheds a different light on the past, whereby the country is no longer portrayed as a victim or hero but is recast as a perpetrator instead. In those cases, the wrongdoing is more likely to be reframed, for example, by describing the human rights violations in generic and seemingly neutral terms such as "difficulties," "actions," "incidents," "events," or by using indirect terms that conceal the nature of the atrocities that were committed.

A classic example is the use of "comfort women" by consecutive Japanese governments to describe the women and girls who were forced into sexual slavery during World War II, but other countries have used euphemisms as well. For example, in the 1991 apology by US President H. W. George Bush for the forced relocation and incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, the actions were broadly described as "serious injustices." In 1994, Austrian chancellor Franz Vranitzky delivered a landmark apology in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) for the active participation of its country in the Holocaust (after many years in which the country portrayed itself as a victim of German Nazism), to which he referred as "our bad deeds." In 2005, Dutch Foreign Minister Ben Bot expressed regret for the "large-scale deployment of military forces" in Indonesia in 1947, saying, "A large number of your people are estimated to have died as a result of the action taken by the Netherlands." And in the 2010 apology by Serbia for the massacre in Srebrenica, the atrocity was not described as a genocide but as a "crime committed against the Bosniak population in Srebrenica."

Countries may also conceal the nature of human rights violations by using terms that do evoke a sense of the scale of the suffering that has been inflicted (e.g., tragedy, catastrophe, horror, disaster), without explicitly mentioning any of the atrocities that were committed or their role in them. For example, in the 1990 apology by the Soviet Union for the massacre of Polish military officers and intelligentsia during World War II, the statement read, "The Soviet side expresses deep regret over the Katyn tragedy and declares it one of the grave crimes of Stalinism." Similarly, in the 1995 apology by Taiwan for the violent suppression of an antigovernment uprising in 1947—which resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians—this is not only referred to as "this unfortunate incident" but also as "the historical tragedy," without shedding further light on the nature of the violence. Although such words are meant to describe the destructive effects of the harm that was done, they also blur the atrocities and tend to draw attention away from the state as a causal agent.

There are other rhetorical tactics that minimize or conceal a country's role in human rights violations. This is the case when terms are used that focus more on the impact of the wrongdoing (e.g., harm, damage, suffering) than on their responsibility for or role in the wrongdoing. But this is also the case when words are used such as *mistakes*, *errors*, *wrongful doings*, or *failures*, which not only tend to minimize the transgressions but also do not do justice to the structural or ideological causes and intentions behind the human rights violations that were committed, or to their impact on the victims. Such terms can often be found in apologies offered by Japan.

One of the most commonly used rhetorical strategies, however, is the implicit denial of state agency through the use of the passive voice when describing these wrongdoings. Thus, for example, mention is made of victims who "were sacrificed," who "lost their lives," whose "lives were cut short," who "were exposed to both psychological and bodily trauma," who "perished," or who "experienced suffering" in apologies from countries as diverse as the Republic of Korea, the Netherlands, Croatia, Ethiopia, and the United States. It is also not uncommon that no

reference is made at all to the actors behind the human rights violations (or, for that matter, to the victims). Although not yet part of the database when we conducted our review of the apologies, a good example is the recent letter by Belgium's King Philippe to the Democratic Republic of Congo, in which he expressed his deepest regrets for the atrocities committed by Belgium under Leopold II, stating:

> During the Congo Free State, acts of violence and atrocities were committed that continue to weigh on our collective memory. During the ensuing colonial period, suffering was caused and humiliations have been inflicted as well.

But even when countries or their representatives are more explicit about the human rights violations than in this example, and even when they do explicitly refer to the victims, they may still refrain from referring to the perpetrators. For example, when British Prime Minister Theresa May apologized for the Amritsar massacre, she did not implicate the United Kingdom:

> But 2019 also marks the centenary of an appalling event—the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar. No one who has heard the accounts of what happened that day can fail to be deeply moved. No one can truly imagine what the visitors to those gardens went through that day one hundred years ago.

In a few cases, we find that countries will point at very specific perpetrators in the apologies, hint at the good intentions of others ("even if the intentions of individual Dutch people may not always have been bad," The Netherlands, 2005); or provide a justification for the wrongdoing, for example, by referring to the difficult circumstances that led to the human rights violations. They may also shift (part of) the blame or point out that the other party was responsible as well (e.g., "We are sorry about the serious suffering that the Middle East conflict inflicted not only on us but also on all the Arab nations that fought against us, including the Palestinian people," Israel, 1999), although this is relatively rare and seems to happen primarily in situations of protracted conflict or competitive victimhood.

Bridging the past and the future: Metaphors, promises, and narratives

"Can there be too much memory?" This question, raised and answered in the affirmative by historian Charles Maier in the 1980s (Maier, 1988: p. 161), reflects a concern that has been echoed over the past decades by other researchers (e.g., Torpey, 2001, 2006) when noticing an increasing concern with the wrongs of the past. They have attributed this focus on "making whole what has been smashed" to the collapse of future-oriented collective projects—in particular, socialism and the nation-state—that used to provide a perspective for a better and more equal future and energized large constituencies until the end of the Cold War. In the absence of such visions, so the argument goes, acknowledging and redressing past injustices has become one of the main avenues to a better future for all (e.g., Barkan, 2000; Maier, 1993; Torpey, 2006).

Political apologies for human rights violations seem to exemplify this, not only because, by definition, they concern events that happened in the (recent) past, but also because they seem to provide a key platform for public soul searching. We also observe, however, that apologies are used—to varying degrees—to reorient the recipients and the broader audience to the future, and that this is done through the use of different rhetorical tools, such as metaphors about the past and future, promises and resolutions, and narratives about the nation.

Metaphors—and, particularly, the framing of the past as a book—seem to play an important role in this regard. For example, we find many apologies in our database—from countries as diverse as Australia, Canada, Ethiopia, Germany, Jamaica, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Switzerland, the United States (and others)—in which the past is described as a chapter, page, passage, or an episode in the nation's history (or "story"), often accompanied by adjectives such as *dark*, *sad*, *painful*, *shameful*, *grim*, *blemished*, *unpleasant*, *ugly*, *difficult*, *unfortunate*, *tragic*, *somber*, *inhuman*, *important*, or *forgotten*. It is possible that state

representatives use such metaphors to lend gravity to their statement and describe a history that is painful and often contested in a way that is memorable and leaves ample room for interpretation. But the use of these particular metaphors may also be attractive because it allows them to mark a transition from the past to the future, as pages can be turned, chapters and books can be read and closed, and new pages, chapters, and books can be opened or written. As such, the metaphor of the book conveys the problem and solution at the same time.

In numerous cases, the apology is also explicitly presented as a pivotal moment or as a *condicio sine qua non* for the country to "turn the page," "turn a new page," write or open a "new chapter" or "next chapter," or "write a new book" in which the future is unified and reconciled and "wounds have been healed." This happens, in particular, in apologies that have been offered to indigenous or minority populations (e.g., Australia, Canada), and those that have been given in the aftermath of (ethnic) tensions or armed conflict in a country (e.g., Colombia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Kenya, and Sri Lanka). Take, for example, this excerpt from the 2010 apology by El Salvador President Mauricio Funes for the years of state violence and terror during the Salvadoran civil war:

> This is my intention this morning. To read an important page of our recent past to move forward into the future with healed wounds, with the past resolved and with the peace required to allow the spirit to leave behind such a painful and tragic era.

That apologies are used to reorient the audience from the past to the future is also evident from other metaphors they employ. For example, in many of the apologies in our database the future is presented as a destination that is—in contrast to the dark past—better and brighter, with the apology as an essential vehicle to reach that destination and "move forward," and the past as the main source from which to draw direction (e.g., "It will … help us all to heal and come into the light from the darkness of that past," Ireland, 2018). Although it is often recognized that apologies cannot undo the harm that has been done or are "only a first step," it is not uncommon, either, to see that they are also assigned almost magical properties (e.g., "From today on, the memories of historical sorrow and suffering are no longer a haze that torments the hearts of our people but rather a motivation to inspire us to create a brighter future," Taiwan, 1995).

We also find that the language to reorient the audience from the past to the future is remarkably similar, with state representatives from a broad range of countries stressing the importance of "facing" or "confronting" their history (which is sometimes presented as an act of courage), and "learning from past mistakes" to be able to "face the future." This quote from the 2016 apology of Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen for the mistreatment and discrimination of the indigenous population is a good example:

> Unless we deny that we are a country of justice, we must face up to this history. We must tell the truth. And then, most importantly, the government must genuinely reflect on this past. This is why I stand here today.

In some of the apologies that have been offered after a period of (protracted) conflict, in which the (recent) past may still be a source of division rather than unity (e.g., Armenia, Ethiopia, Serbia, and Sri Lanka), state representatives may urge the audience to leave the past behind, as did Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018: "I call on us all to forgive each other from our hearts, to close the chapters from yesterday, and to forge ahead to a next bright future through national consensus."A similar message was expressed in 2011 by Serbia's President Boris Tadić, when he apologized for the crimes committed by Serb forces in Vukovar, Croatia, in 1991:

> This is why I think that everything that happened between the Serbs and the Croats in 20th century must be put in a book of the past, and this act is an act of creating and writing a new book of future.

In many other instances, however, the need to remember past wrongdoings is presented as an imperative to be able to move forward, often accompanied by promises or resolutions to not

make the same mistakes again, to take the lessons from the past to heart, and to build a better future. This can be illustrated with a quote from the 1997 apology from US President Bill Clinton to the victims of the Tuskegee experiments:

> So let us resolve to hold forever in our hearts and minds the memory of a time not long ago in Macon County, Alabama, so that we can always see how adrift we can become when the rights of any citizens are neglected, ignored and betrayed. And let us resolve here and now to move forward together.

Another fitting example is the apology by Norway's Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg in 2012, for the country's complicity in the deportation and deaths of Jews during the Nazi occupation:

> But learning is just as important as apologizing. And it is even more important for us to commit ourselves to combating attitudes and actions that rob us of our decency and humanity. I regret to say that the ideas that led to the Holocaust are still very much alive today, 70 years later. All over the world we see that individuals and groups are spreading intolerance and fear. They are cultivating violent ideologies that could lead to anti-Semitism and hatred of minorities. Norwegian Jews also tell that they are living in fear. In the newspaper *Vårt Land*, we read that some of our Jews are afraid to be visible as Jews. We cannot accept this in Norway.

Across a wide range of apologies and countries, liberal values such as equality, justice, democracy, tolerance, and respect for individual rights are presented as the path to the future or to change, with some countries also laying out measures for redress or more structural changes as part of the lessons learned.

Where countries do differ, however, is in whether and the extent to which they also try to reorient the audience from the past to the future by placing the wrongdoings in a larger narrative about the nation. For example, countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States have used apologies not only as platforms to acknowledge past human rights violations (particularly against indigenous or immigrant populations) but also to communicate a story about the nation's identity and affirm its core (liberal) values—thereby sometimes also turning a message of humility and shame into a message of national identity and pride. This is done, for example, by presenting the wrongdoings as the nation's failure to live up to its key obligations, ideals, and values ("Our government did not live up to its ideals," United States, 2012), with the apology as an expression of its true character ("In … offering a sincere apology, your fellow Americans have, in a very real sense, renewed their traditional commitment to the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice," United States, 1991), and its commitment and potential to do better in the future as its unique strength. See, for example, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's 2016 apology for the Komagata Maru incident in 1914, in which hundreds of Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu passengers were denied entry to Canada:

> Just as we apologize for past wrongs, so too must we commit ourselves to positive action, to learning from the mistakes of the past, and to making sure that we never repeat them. That is the unique promise and potential of Canada. We believe that everyone deserves a real chance to succeed, regardless of who they are or where they are from. Canada's South Asian community is a daily example of this success and of our success. We believe and we know that diversity is a strength, that we are strong, not in spite of our differences, but because of them. We believe in the values enshrined in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, including multiculturalism. […] Canada is a country unlike any other. We are all blessed to call it home. Let us always endeavour to do better and to be better.

It is possible that these settler states (or certain leaders, in particular) combine a sense of national shame with a sense of national awareness and pride to appeal to a broader audience (including those with a strong national identification) or to reconcile the story of the liberal nation state with a history of exploitation and abuse. But some other countries also refer to the "foundations" or the "character" of the nation to offer a message of unity, as can be seen in the apology by Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta for the postelection violence in 2007 and 2008:

> Drawing on our history and recognizing the dangers of disunity, our Constitution in Article 10 spells out the value of national unity, inclusiveness and cohesion as fundamental to our national character. As heirs to a great freedom-fighting tradition, bearing the sacred trust of past, present and future generations, we are called to observe and realise these values.

Other countries may be less likely to include such a narrative because it does not match with the national self-image or political culture, or because they cannot—as a result of the scale of the suffering they have inflicted—afford to incorporate a strong sense of national pride in the apologies, and hence need to rely on a different narrative. For example, many of the apologies that have been offered by Germany for the Holocaust stress the weight of the past and how this defines the nation, with a historic and moral responsibility that has to be carried by current and future generations ("But the consequences of a guilt that shook the very foundations of human morality must be borne by the generations to come," Germany, 2000). Japan consistently emphasizes in apologies that it has become a peaceful and pacifist country, although it has—more recently—also expressed "silent pride" in the direction it has taken ("While taking silent pride in the path we have walked as a peace-loving nation for as long as seventy years, we remain determined never to deviate from this steadfast course," Japan, 2015). Postconflict and postauthoritarian countries also tend to stress or express pride in what they have *become*, whereby they place considerable emphasis on how they have embraced democracy, individual rights, and freedom. For example, during a visit to Israel in 2015 Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic expressed her deepest regrets about the victims of the Nazi-allied Ustaše regime in Croatia in World War II, stressing:

> Today, Croatia is a proud member of the European Union and NATO—a country that is based on the common values that we share with Israel and with the community of nations who value democracy, freedom and the right and respect for every individual regardless of their ethnic, religious or any other background.

Countries that have been reluctant to recognize or apologize for past transgressions may even go as far as to present themselves as exemplary in this regard, as did Austrian chancellor Franz Vranitzky in his 1994 apology in the Knesset:

> Austria has long since become a republic featuring a stable democracy and pluralist society, displaying a strong economy and a high measure of social justice. For millions of refugees from Eastern Europe, and hundreds of thousands of Jews from the former Soviet Union, this new Austria stood out as a haven of freedom and as a champion of humanity and human rights.

Bonding with recipients: Rehumanization, reinclusion, and rehabilitation

When states publicly acknowledge and apologize for human rights violations that have impacted the lives of many within or beyond their borders, this often seems to be done to mark an end to a period of discord and suffering or to convey a transformation in which abuse, violence, and injustice have allegedly been replaced by respect, harmony, and equality, and in which healing and reconciliation have become central. Although countries may try to do so by acknowledging and rejecting wrongs from the past and by creating a vision for a better tomorrow, this in and of itself may not suffice to address the specific needs of the victims or their relatives, who have not only suffered the (direct) consequences of large-scale abuse and injustice, but whose plight may also have been met with a long period of silence and denial.

Broadly speaking, we identify three different types of rhetorical strategies that are used in apologies to address the victims or their relatives: rehumanization, reinclusion, and rehabilitation. Rehumanization refers to statements that reflect an awareness of or concern with the suffering of the victims (see also Augoustinos et al., 2011). Although references to the victims' suffering, hurt, or trauma can be found in a considerable part (almost 75 percent) of the texts in our database, there is substantial variation in how this is done. For example, relatively many apologies—including a fairly large number that have been offered by Japan—only include a short acknowledgment

of the suffering that has been inflicted, without providing many details about the nature or the degree of this suffering or how this has impacted victims' lives. The following apology by Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yōhei Kōno in 1993 is an example:

> The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.

In such statements, which are not uncommon in written apologies and may sometimes also reflect their controversial nature, victims still tend to be displayed as relatively abstract categories. Apologies that have been offered during public speeches or commemorations (particularly after national inquiries), however, are more likely to demonstrate empathy and compassion, and to shed light on the personal consequences of the human rights violations (particularly when victims are present). This is sometimes accomplished by including personal stories or by directly addressing individual victims, as did Angela Merkel in 2013 during a visit to the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau:

> Thank you very much for your invitation to visit the Dachau Concentration Camp. We all associate with these buildings a terrible precedent and inhuman chapter of German history. But you, dear Mr. Mannheimer, and the other survivors among us that have had to experience the horror yourself. For you deprivation and persecution, hunger and disease, violence and terror, even arbitrary killing was once your everyday bitter life. For me it is a very moving moment to meet with you and other witnesses and families of victims in this place. I would like to thank all of you that you have come. I know that it takes a lot of strength every time, go back to where you or your loved ones have suffered so much. Such a deep pain resonates for a lifetime.

Statements in which countries recognize the pain, hurt, or trauma that has been inflicted may send an important signal to victims that they are reincluded in the moral community. But apologies may also include more explicit attempts to (re)include victim groups as equal members of society or to (re)connect with other countries. For example, in apologies to indigenous populations we often find that countries stress their friendship or the "bond that unites them," or express a desire or commitment to work together in the building of a better, more successful or more united country (e.g., "to strengthen the bonds that unite us, to respect and appreciate our differences, and to build a fair and prosperous future in which we can all share. Together, we can guarantee a better future for generations to come," Australia, 1999). The apologies that have been offered to other countries often contain references to friendship as well. For example, Japan stresses in many of its apologies how it is committed to friendly relations, whereas Germany has expressed how grateful it is for friendship with receiving countries. Other countries have done the same, whereby they may (particularly during diplomatic visits) also emphasize how important it is to maintain or develop bilateral (trading) relations with the receiving country and to cooperate on the international scene.

Whereas the previous two rhetorical strategies signal a desire for or commitment to equal or beneficial relationships (which may serve not only as a way to "bond" with the apology recipients but also as a bridge between past enmity and future amity), there are also a number of rhetorical strategies used in apologies to rehabilitate and elevate the victims (particularly in within-country apologies). For example, some apologies stress the innocence of victims (e.g., "Many innocent Jeju civilians were sacrificed," Republic of Korea, 2003), which may be particularly significant in those situations in which victims—for a long time—have been portrayed as guilty of violent actions. Some also praise the courage of victims, for example, in rebuilding their future or in coming forward to speak publicly about their ordeal ("It has taken extraordinary courage for the thousands of survivors that have come forward to speak publicly about the abuse they suffered," Canada, 2008). Victims are sometimes presented as a source of inspiration as well (e.g., "Against the backdrop of these historical legacies, it is a remarkable tribute to the strength and endurance of Aboriginal people that they have maintained their historic diversity and identity," Canada, 1998). Finally, they may receive praise for their moral or cultural values or their (economic) contribution to society

(e.g., "Today's New Zealand Government both recognizes and values the importance of the Chinese community in New Zealand. The community is making a huge economic and social contribution to our country," New Zealand, 2002). All of these efforts seem to be geared to—at least rhetorically—shift roles between state and victims, in which the victims are recast as innocent, heroic, indispensable, and as the ones deserving of the moral high ground. This symbolic reversal is sometimes also accomplished through the inclusion of displays or expressions of humbleness and humility (e.g., "While we can't be so vain to pretend to [have] answers, we must be so humble to fall before those who were forsaken and beg to them our apology," Australia, 2018).

Conclusion

The burden of the past weighs on many countries, which some may choose to deny but which an increasing number of countries have started to acknowledge in recent years through the offering of an apology. Although apologies are often seen, within the human rights and transitional justice literature, as one of the key mechanisms to redress past injustices and human rights violations, this global trend of reckoning or coming to terms with the past has raised questions as well. What is it, that countries convey or try to accomplish in these apologies, and for the benefit of whom? And what does this tell us, about the potential function and meaning of such gestures in today's "world civility"?

In the apologies offered for human rights violations across the world, we find remarkable similarities in the types of rhetorical strategies used to confront past wrongdoings, connect the past with the future, and address the victims. Differences were found mainly in the extent to which and how they are used. For example, we see that politically and culturally diverse countries rely on the language and ideas that have become standard in current human rights memorialization practices—particularly when trying to connect the past and the future. In such cases they stress the need to "face the past" and the "duty to remember" and learn from the past as an imperative for healing, reconciliation, and sustainable peace. This may reflect a process of what has been labeled "isomorphism" (McNeely, 2012; but see also David, 2020), whereby countries (also as a result of the institutionalization of human rights) comply with and imitate existing human rights models, norms, and scripts to be perceived as legitimate actors in the world polity.

Variation in the extent to which and how these scripts are used seems to be linked to the contentiousness of an apology (e.g., as a result of conflicting interpretations of past events) and the precariousness of the situation. For example, in some postconflict settings where tensions may easily flare up, the focus is less on the need to remember the past than on an imperative for a better future. Nevertheless, imitation and standardization are also visible in the language used to describe the past and the future, in which diverse countries rely on similar metaphors and scripts, and present the apology as an essential step to not repeat previous mistakes and to "move forward" on the road to a better or peaceful future—one in which equality, democracy, prosperity, and respect for individual rights and freedom are key.

As such, countries also tend to present a teleological and idealized view of what the apology can or will accomplish. Obviously, there are numerous examples in which little or insufficient progress has been made in terms of the promises that were made, in particular to groups within the country (e.g., Canada), or where the human rights situation has not improved or even deteriorated (e.g., Armenia, El Salvador, and Ethiopia). Thus, despite apologies often being presented as a "turning point," they do not necessarily lead to structural changes—no matter how eloquent the statement or how convincing the performance—if only because the (broader) political landscape may change before substantial steps have been made. In that sense, apologies are what they are: "just words." For that matter, one could argue (as has been done by various critics; see, for example, Bentley, 2020; Thaler, 2011; Trouillot, 2000) that apologies are mere window dressings,

which—under internal or external pressures—are offered to prevent political losses (which may be visible in the euphemisms or various distancing strategies that are used in addressing the wrongdoings from the past) or for political or economic gains (whereby countries may be more forthcoming in acknowledging the past). As such, apologies may also be a particularly attractive rhetorical device for (new) political leaders who want to break from their predecessors or who want to be seen as transformational or as "doing the right thing."

Nevertheless, many of the apologies that we have analyzed do explicitly address and reject past human rights violations (and those that are deemed insufficient in this regard are often rejected). Although this, in and of itself, will not radically shift societal structures and collective norms and identities and may even stir controversy as well, in doing so publicly these apologies do have a signaling function as they help (re)classify past events (e.g., Dudai, 2018). Herein lies their key potential and meaning: By breaking up old or existing narratives and communicating a different normative commitment, apologies confirm or open up the possibility for a new or different orientation to the future in which there is no place or legitimate support for the wrongs that were committed in the past (see also Celermajer, 2015).

It is this signaling function that may also (at least temporarily) be important for victims or their relatives, and many of the apologies in our database do recognize their suffering—be it that some countries do so much more extensively and more empathically than others, also depending on how much governments or state leaders are willing and able to break from the past. This compassionate consideration of the suffering of victims or their relatives communicates that they matter and are worthy of dignity and respect, and may also promote trust and help allay any fears of historical oblivion (e.g., Govier & Verwoerd, 2002a, 2002b; Marrus, 2007). It is here, however, that also lies the apology's potential weakness, when the need to move forward—present in so many of them—takes precedence over the expectations that they may raise, particularly when victims are not ready to turn the page or close the book of the past, or when they see the apology only as a first step (e.g., Bombay et al., 2013).

Various scholars (e.g., Maier, 1988; Torpey, 2003) have attributed the growing concern with redressing the wrongs from the past to the absence of ideologies that provide a vision for a better tomorrow. This is also evident in the content of apologies across the world, in which the past is often presented as a source from which to draw direction toward a better and "healed future." The standardization that is evident in many apologies speaks to the power of the normative framework from which countries (specifically, liberal democracies or those transitioning toward liberal democracies) seem to operate in this regard, or to which they are willing to submit. This same standardization, however, may also increase the risk that apologies lose meaning, particularly when countries copy the same rhetorical devices to reorient the audience from the past to the future and include them as a magical formula or imperative, without questioning when, why, and how this transformation should work in the given situation and what is actually needed to accomplish this. Political apologies will never have magical powers, but for them to play a significant role in any process of transformation or reconciliation, it is crucial to address such questions as well.

Notes

1. A substantial part of the apologies in our database have been offered by Japan. Although this could lead to bias in the identification of the rhetorical strategies that are used in the apologies, a tentative analysis in which these apologies were excluded did not yield a different outcome in terms of the types of rhetorical strategies that can be distinguished.
2. The apologies quoted in this article can be found in the Political Apologies Database, which is available on our website (www.politicalapologies.com) and also from the authors. Apologies that were not available in English were translated. As there is a risk that some of the delicacies in the original language get lost in

the translation process, we instructed our translators to leave comments or discuss alternative translations whenever they deemed necessary.

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Data accessibility statement

The Political Apologies database, with all the original and translated texts, is available online at www.politicalapologies.com.

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