Paths to Historical Reconciliation: Choices for Europe and Asia

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Special Issue Introduction: Comparing Historical Reconciliation in Europe and Asia

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This special issue of JNAH emerges from a November 2024 forum in Seoul hosted by the Northeast Asia History Foundation. Like the forum's participants, we try here to understand how states respond to the difficult legacies of the past.

For better and often for worse, history helps shape the present. We often move in ways that scholars call "path-dependent"-pursuing strategies and patterns that are well-worn, familiar. But we are not slaves to the past; we sometimes are able to break free and chart new directions.

The 2024 NAHF forum examined the prospects for interstate reconciliation in both Europe and Asia. Here we feature three manuscripts, each evaluated by reviewers, that expand on that theme.

Walter Hatch, professor emeritus of government at Colby College in the U.S., explains why Germany has been far more successful than Japan in reconciling with neighbors each country brutalized in the past. While other observers point to words of contrition, he instead credits deeds of cooperation.

The article, which draws on his 2023 book, *Ghosts in the Neighborhood*, compares Germany's relations with France and Poland to Japan's relations with South Korea and China. He finds that Germany did not apologize more for its past misdeeds; rather, it engaged more actively in regional institutions-including the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-that allowed it to show it had become a trustworthy partner. By contrast, Japan participated weakly, if at all, in regional institutions in Asia, and thus failed to demonstrate a credible commitment to cooperation. This was not entirely Japan's fault. It was, Hatch claims, constrained by its bilateral security alliance with the United States.

Falk Pingel, former deputy director of the George Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research and Education in Germany, narrows the lens to the Balkans, where ethnic conflicts and wars of independence erupted with the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. He uses his own experience as head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, plus various case studies, to track progress toward reconciliation in places like Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Without the backing of

public institutions and civil society groups, Pingel concludes, programs to achieve rapprochement will ultimately fall short.

For example, the article documents painstaking efforts by outsiders, especially Pingel's own institute, to promote the writing and distribution of history textbooks that avoid nationalist grievances and sensitively treat other parties to regional conflict. In the end, though, multiculturalism and self-reflection remain thin.

In a final case, Pingel moves beyond the Balkans to examine Cyprus, the Mediterranean island divided along ethno-nationalist lines with a Turkish-led north and a Greek-led south. The European Union, which accepted Cyprus as a member in 2004, has tried to promote cultural harmony and national unity–but to no avail. Each side continues to view the other with suspicion if not outright contempt.

Nguyen Cong Tung, assistant professor of political science and international relations at Tongji University in China, delivers a manuscript that appears, at first glance, to be an outlier. It focuses on a single regional organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), not explicitly on the project of interstate reconciliation. But Nguyen's piece actually fits nicely in the overall puzzle as it examines how the colonial past in Southeast Asia has shaped the trajectory of this vital organization.

ASEAN, he writes, is a "security community of colonized states," with the sole exception of Thailand. This mostly shared history means the organization can be characterized by three traits: lingering distrust of any moves that might undermine the national sovereignty and autonomy of member-states; inherent flexibility in organization and policy; and a group in the making, meaning that it is gradually acquiring a sense of solidarity and collective identity.

Nguyen applies his analysis of ASEAN to two related cases: the organization's response to maritime disputes in the South China Sea, and its response to the superpower rivalry between the United States and China. On the former, he notes that ASEAN members are divided on how to resolve competing claims over areas like the Paracel or the Spratly islands. They tend to distrust outside powers like China, which asserts

ownership over most of the South China Sea, but also other member states; they issue sometimes vague joint statements that reflect flexibility; at the same time, though, they have begun to make moves (endorsing, for example, a declaration of conduct and a code of conduct in the South China Sea) that demonstrate its emerging collective identity. On the latter, Nguyen notes that ASEAN members have kept some distance from both the U.S. and China, declining to align solidly with either power, while issuing joint statements that show the organization, as a regional body, increasingly strives to assert a collective vision.

In his conclusion, Nguyen suggests that the European Union is a "security community of the colonizer states," which might explain why it is, unlike ASEAN, built on the pooling of sovereignty, quasi-supranational institutions, and an established identity. This is posited but not fully articulated-perhaps a subject for future research.

Each of the articles in this special issue uses history as a causal variable to explain a localized outcome-whether it be levels of reconciliation (Hatch, comparing Northeast Asia and Europe; and Pingel, examining southeastern Europe) or characteristics of regionalism (Nguyen). None of these articles attempts to tell an "objective" or "truthful" story about the past. We acknowledge that history is contested, even fraught with competing "lessons," but that confronting it openly and deeply can help all of us-scholars and non-academics alike-better understand our contemporary moment.