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MEMORY AND HISTORY IN EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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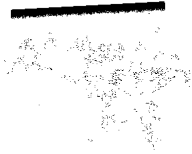
EDITED BY

GERRIT W. GONG



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CHAPTER ONE

REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

BUT WILL THE PAST FORGET ABOUT US?

Volker Stanzel

THE TITLE FOR THIS CHAPTER COMES FROM A RECENT WORK of popular culture; it is a phrase from the film *Magnolia:* "We may forget about the past—but will the past forget about us?" The film only paraphrases the well-known dictum by George Santayana: "Those who do not remember history are condemned to repeat it." Santayana obviously plays less to popular culture notions. He presupposes that repeating history is like hell, whereas the movie is less apodictic in that it asks a question without giving an answer. This is about as much as this chapter will try to achieve—ask questions. It will ask why in certain cases historical memory is employed for political ends, and why it is not in other cases. It will look at examples of the political usage of historical memory. Finally, it will try to determine what kind of connection there is between remembrance, forgiving, and forgetting. It will examine questions concerning Asia, but it will mainly draw on European experiences, because it would be preposterous to run the risk of treading carelessly in sensitive matters the author does not sufficiently understand.

The first question concerns myself. Am I not a case in point of the subject of this book? My father was born a member of the German minority in Czechoslovakia. Portions of Czechoslovakia in which Germans constituted a majority were united with Germany by Hitler after the Munich Conference of 1938. Because Germans in Czechoslovakia desired to become a part of Germany, they supported Hitler.

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After the war, the Czechs took the territory, and they took revenge. They passed laws that sentenced ethnic Germans to immediate expropriation and expulsion. Millions came to Germany without as much as a penny on them. The Czech laws are still in force today. What does my family's unjust and undeserved suffering mean to me today? Have I been deprived of something? Can I demand to be compensated—morally or materially—for the past suffering of my family? Conversely, my mother's side of the family comes from Frankfurt. My grandfather, because of his Christian beliefs, was "against Hitler," but he hardly can be said to have actively opposed him. He did not serve in the German army but continued to work in the town hall during Hitler's reign; he did not stand up when the Jewish temples burned. Ultimately, he too bears responsibility for what Hitler and the Nazis did to both Germans and non-Germans alike. What does that mean to me? Do I feel guilty? Do I feel the need to compensate Hitler's victims (morally, politically, or materially) for what was done to them?

I must admit that in neither way do I feel very much at all. Immanuel Kant said that repenting a deed is based on remembering it as a sensation of pain not dulled by the passage of time. In that sense, I do not repent the actions of my relatives. At the same time, I feel no sorrow for what happened to my family in Czechoslovakia; I bear no grudge. I grew up in a postwar West Germany that became more affluent by the year. Although they spoke often about their former home in present-day Czechoslovakia, my family never transmitted to me the feeling that we should rightly recover our lost home. They did not even pass down feelings of injustice for what had been done to them and which they had forgiven. The same is true of the tragic heritage of Hitler's Germany. During the 1950s and 1960s, the first extensive trials of concentration camp personnel were held in my hometown; such events made us acutely aware of what had happened during World War II. I understood very early on that the war was an inescapable political responsibility of a Germany of which I was a citizen. However, I never had the feeling that this had anything to do with the way I behaved to German Jews or non-German Jews with whom I had contact as a child. And I never felt the need or wish to be forgiven for the actions of my family or other Germans during the war.

Before falling victim to the temptation to pursue a lengthy self-analysis, let me shift gears. After World War II, a whole population was expelled from its homeland: Palestinians were expelled from their homes by the Israelis and found refuge in the camps of other parts of Palestine or, later, in other countries of the Middle East. After 50 years, these people still are aware of being refugees, of having their property expropriated, and of having suffered injustices for which they believe they must be compensated and that cannot be forgiven.

Recently in Europe we witnessed an amazing instance of unforgiven injustice. Some 600 years ago the Kosovo Albanians defeated the Serbs in a battle for Kosovo. Ever since then, the Albanians have settled there. The loss, however, has served over the centuries as a motivating factor that has helped to unify the Serbs. It gave—and gives—the Serbs a feeling of ethnic identity. After Yugoslavia fell apart, some Serbs felt it was time to erect an ethnically pure Serbian state. Many Serbs assumed that Kosovo would become a part of a new Greater Serbia and that Kosovar Albanians would simply have to leave the new state. Here, the megalomania of Slobodan Milosevich combined tragically with the ethnic nationalism of many Serbs. Because of the strength of ethnic nationalism in Serbia, there was little resistance to Milosevich's ethnic cleansing of the Kosovar Albanians. We see a picture similar to the Palestinian predicament; the Serbians have kept a specific memory alive for many years, much longer, in fact, than the Palestinians have. Such an enduring memory became tragically important when the conditions for reprisal seemed right. Here, indeed, we might say even if the Albanians had forgotten the past, the past had not forgotten them!

We are examining a wide range of questions here. Why did the past play so little a role in the case of the Czechs and the Germans? Why did it play such a big role in the case of the Albanians and the Serbs or the Palestinians and the Israelis? Why is it that my aunt even today may break into tears when she speaks about the tragedy that befell her and other German minorities in Czechoslovakia, but would not even dream of demanding compensation for such injustices? And why, comparably, might a 70-year-old Palestinian woman pick up rocks to throw at the Israeli police, or a Kosovar Albanian woman

hurl insults at French soldiers protecting the Serbs on the other side of the street?

In a first effort to answer these questions, could it be that basic economics account for the difference? The Germans expelled to West Germany rose to an affluence they had never known before and would not have known had they remained in Communist Czechoslovakia. Palestinians, however, remain poor, and no one has made any great effort to assist them to develop economically. The Albanians were more affluent than the Serbs in Kosovo. The Serbs felt they were second-class citizens in a part of Yugoslavia in which they felt they should rightly be given precedence over the "foreigners" (the Albanians, who remained "foreigners" to the Serbs despite their control of Kosovo that extended over 600 years).

Here we come to another question: Does historical memory really still exist after 600 years, or even after only 60 years? What happens in our minds when time passes and memory turns into "history"? Can we simply assume that "remembering and forgetting" is unchanged by time, that is, with the passing of generations? In Europe, remembering the war increasingly becomes remembering how the war is remembered. We remember which words have been used before, which gestures, which arguments to remember the past. We do not remember the horrors of Verdun, but we remember the photograph of Chancellor Helmut Kohl taking the hand of President François Mitterrand at the graveyard of Verdun. We remember less and less the horrors of the last war, but we remember what an uproar it caused when President Ronald Reagan, upon the invitation of Chancellor Kohl, visited a World War II grave site in Bitburg where SS soldiers also lay buried. And those of us who have never been to war will remember vividly the scenes from *Saving Private Ryan*, or the holocaust scenes from a film like *Life is Beautiful*, which may or may not depict the truth of the atrocities committed at Auschwitz.

The generation that has experienced atrocities committed by another country passes away, but does the memory of those events die with it? If not, what strength does a memory have that has been transmitted to someone else? Is it kept awake by living circumstances? Is it a relation by hearsay, or a relation such as the passing of a torch? May

there be different memories with passing generations? How do the offspring of African-American slaves regard the "memories" that have been handed down to them, and how do the offspring of slaveholders regard their "memories"? Further, what about the memories of native Americans? How do memories change under the impact of different values that arise with the passage of time? My parents' generation was raised under Hitler and went to war convinced their cause was justified. To them, May 8 will always remain a day of defeat. Later they learned to view Hitler as a criminal, but does that affect the way they feel about their youth? No, it does not. To my generation, however, conscious at an early age of the crimes Hitler committed, May 8 will always be the day of the liberation of Germany. On the basis of what kind of memory do we pass judgment? In what ways can memories that have been passed down from long ago be used?

There is an old story that elucidates much about motives of remembering and forgetting and that also illustrates the degree to which purely economic explanations may suffice. It is a story from the so-called Warring States period in China, that is, between 400 and 221 B.C. There, the king of Yue was defeated by a neighboring king and was then treated leniently by the victor, who permitted the former king of Yue to live comfortably. Yet, the former king refused to accept the humiliation of his defeat, and he hung a gall bladder over his desk and licked it every day so as to "taste the bitterness of defeat." Indeed, he succeeded in not succumbing to comfort and affluence and eventually managed to make use of a suitable opportunity to go to war again and defeat his opponent. (It is not recounted whether he, in turn, allowed the defeated former victor to possess a gall bladder.)

With that story, and with the notion that there is more to remembering or forgetting than whether or not economic affluence diminishes the pains associated with memory, let me turn to Asia. Here, also, we know there are many instances in which memory plays a role in everyday politics. Not long ago, for example, U.S. secretary of defense William Cohen visited Vietnam. It was a visit that had been prepared for a long time. In an interview after his trip, Cohen made the point that he had been ready to visit Hanoi for a long time, but that Hanoi had not been ready to receive him. Even someone who does

not know much about U.S.-Vietnam relations will realize from Cohen's remark that there was something in the past that stands in the way of normal relations between the two countries even today. For Cohen, the Americans have now overcome that obstacle, but not the Vietnamese (so he says). Cohen, however, is not a disinterested third party; he is a representative of one side involved in and affected by the historical event. He cannot be expected to be neutral. His remark therefore is a reproach; it is a political use of memory. He accuses Vietnam of not yet having overcome the obstacle of the past, which stands between them. What is the purpose of his comment? Obviously, he turns Vietnam's historical memory against it. Granted, it is only a mild rebuke, but he clearly uses historical memory for purely political ends, and it appears unlikely that economic advantages had anything to do with Cohen's actions.

We all know what memory stands between the two countries. It is the memory of having been victimized. Extraordinarily, this is a memory both countries share, albeit in different ways. From Vietnam's point of view, in the 1960s the United States stepped into the shoes of the colonial power France and denied Vietnam its independence. From the point of view of the United States, North Vietnam acted in the tradition of Communist dictatorships in trying to rob South Vietnam of its freedom. In North Vietnam, there is the memory of the catastrophes wreaked upon the civilian population by American bombs; in the United States there is the memory of a whole generation of young people sucked into the Vietnam quagmire.

These are painful memories. Either side could easily "lick gall" and wait for an opportunity to retaliate for past humiliations. Politicians could pretend to have "licked gall" and demand compensation for damages incurred at the hands of their opponents. We indeed remember such efforts during the Cold War period, and reconciliation of these grievances has been excruciatingly slow. However, apart from the mild swipes taken by Mr. Cohen, and perhaps similar ones by his Vietnamese counterparts, today, 25 years after the war's end, both sides have refrained from explicitly using historical memories for political gain. Both countries seem to have opted to forget their grievances. Have they also opted to forgive?

The attempt to use history against a political partner (or adversary) is not rare. The last time President Jiang Zemin of the People's Republic of China paid a state visit to Japan, the trip had been carefully prepared, and Jiang had made it clear he expected a full apology for what Japan had done to China during the war. As it happened, the Japanese government refused to issue further apologies. Japanese officials argued that Japanese prime ministers had apologized in the past and that, in fact, during a previous visit to China the Japanese emperor had apologized for Japan's actions during World War II. This was more than enough from the viewpoint of the Japanese, but it clearly was insufficient from the perspective of Chinese leaders.

Such an excuse might have sufficed had not the Japanese prime minister in the same year used stronger words of regret to Korea than had previously been used in the case of China. Therefore, according to some observers, the Chinese leadership felt they deserved the same degree of apology as Korea. Conversely, the issue of Japanese apologies has always tended to weaken Japan's bargaining position relative to China in any bilateral dealings between the two states. Therefore, Jiang, like Cohen, may have wanted to use historical memory as a political instrument with which he could gain concessions from his Japanese partners. Economics do not appear to have been involved in Jiang's decision.

It is worthwhile to look at another instance of political usage of memory. In the 1950s, a delegation of the Socialist Party of Japan visited Mao Zedong. Mao in the course of the conversation said: "Forget what has happened between us. It was war. It is past now." Similarly, Chiang Kai-shek, the president of the Republic of China, formally decided not to press Japan for compensation or reparations of any kind after the war. Economics did not play a role in either case; China might well have received considerable material compensation from Japan. However, only much later, today, when China's economic situation has improved dramatically, does the past play a role it did not play before. Why? In the case of Vietnam and the United States or China and Japan, have leaders been licking gall bladders for many years?

The Sino-Japanese conflict (and similarly the Japanese-Korean and Japanese-Southeast Asian conflicts) over the role of remember-

ing the Pacific war is enormously complicated, both because they are not bilateral affairs and because the memory of victimization can be exploited in contradicting ways. If *kako no kokufuku* (dealing with the responsibilities of the past) is such a torturous matter in Japan, the reason may be twofold. For one thing, although the Japanese victimized others, there are Japanese who feel that they themselves were victimized much more horrendously by the American atomic bomb attacks. (Also, these attacks took place in Japan, while Japanese atrocities took place in faraway countries, something that probably makes a psychological difference.) In contrast, from the Japanese perspective, the Pacific war must be seen within the framework of the evolving Japan-U.S. conflict of the 1920s and 1930s for regional hegemony over the Asia-Pacific region. What America achieved by economic means, Japan tried to achieve by the same military means employed by the European colonial powers. From this perspective, when East Asian countries demand apologies from Japan, they misunderstand what Japanese atrocities were really about, and in a way—the hyperbole may be forgiven—even side with those who dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When President Jiang last visited the United States, he made a commemorative stopover in Pearl Harbor and may have confirmed Japanese suspicions that Chinese leaders manipulate historical events for political gain. Thus, the philosopher Nishio has said that accepting the fact there had been comfort women is tantamount to accepting Japan's "terminal defeat." Needless to say, the non-Japanese East Asian perspective is entirely different. It is humiliating to be relegated to being a mere object of the American-Japanese rivalry because supposedly it is ever so more relevant. The tripartite complexity of the issue may explain why, after more than 50 years, the past in East Asia not only is something that politicians may easily turn into opportunist politics, but also is still something that can spur riotous demonstrations in China or Korea. Here, indeed, the past has not forgotten "us."

Sometimes, it so happens that memories from the distant past may lie dormant and then reappear. Let me look at a German example once more. Under Hitler, so-called enemies of the regime were forced to labor in factories: political opponents, German and non-German

Jews (many drawn from the concentration camps), Sinti and Roma, prisoners of war. After the war, West Germany compensated victims of Nazi persecution, including forced laborers. In the countries of the former Eastern bloc, these reparations were paid to governments rather than to individuals who had no chance to press their charges. In the West, forced laborers who did not receive compensation for other kinds of persecution constituted a small minority. Only after the end of the Cold War did it become possible for individuals in former Communist countries to press their charges. This set off a series of demands for compensation in the West as well. After years of negotiations involving claimants, companies formerly profiting from forced labor, and governments, the case of forced labor in Nazi Germany has only now been settled. A total of 10 billion DM, that is, U.S. $5 billion will be distributed according to a complicated system, such as 22.51 percent to the Jewish Claims Conference, 21.29 percent to Ukrainian victims, and so forth. Here, it is clear that victims who had been neglected kept their memories alive until there was a time when they had the possibility to demand compensation, and, moreover, in the meantime they had not experienced an economic windfall that might have induced them to forget their terrible memories. Their rightful claims, however, had been forgotten by Germans (companies, the government, and the people alike) because general compensations had been paid.[1] It seems to make a difference whether atrocities in the past are remembered by the leaders of a country or by the people concerned. In the case of China-Japan and the United States-Vietnam, it was a matter of politicians remembering and turning their "memories" into politics. In the case of the forced labor victims, it was the people themselves who remembered. At the same time, the perpetrators had been neither governments nor identifiable individuals. Therefore, it was relatively easy to solve the problem without turning it into a matter of contention between the governments or the peoples concerned.

In the case of forced labor, the public in Germany conceded relatively quickly that there was a need for belated compensation. Remembering had a different effect only two years earlier. In 1998 an exhibition traveled around Germany. It was an exhibition of Nazi

atrocities in which the German army took part and that had not concerned actual war activities. The exhibition was followed by outrage: the German armed forces had always said that wartime criminal acts had been perpetrated by the Gestapo, the SS, and the SA, while the armed forces had remained "clean." Obviously, that had not been true. This discovery, however, was not accepted by many former soldiers (my father among them). Very often, the way we in Germany deal with our past is compared with the way the Japanese deal with their recent past. The above example shows that this comparison may be unfair. In the case of Germany, ordinary citizens and even soldiers were able to use Hitler and the Nazis as scapegoats: the Nazis were evil; the SS did the horrible things. The SA did—not me, not ordinary people, not ordinary soldiers. In the case of Japan there were no Nazis to blame. Atrocities like the Nanjing massacre were committed by ordinary soldiers. Remembering meant remembering one's own deeds or the deeds of people to whom one was close. The reaction of many Germans to the exhibition of army atrocities seems to prove that Germans also might have had a much harder time in coming to terms with their past had we not had the Nazis to blame.

The way former members of the German armed forces reacted to the exhibition (and again that may be true as well to the way some Japanese react to books about Japanese wartime atrocities) confirms a well-known saying by Nietzsche: "'I did that,' my Memory says. ' I could not have done that,' my Pride says, and does not relent. Finally, my Memory gives in." We easily understand Nietzsche's point, because all of us probably have experienced our memory giving in to our pride. No one wants to suffocate from painful, embarrassing memories. We want to forget in order to start afresh. It is the fear of suffocating that induces the perpetrator of atrocities to push them out of his memory.

May we conclude from these observations that peoples (not people) live without memory, except if that memory is kept alive by certain factors? One's mind-set is determined by the conditions in which one lives. The victims of atrocities may forget—if not forgive—their experiences, if they become economically well off. The perpetrators of these atrocities have an interest in not suffocating

from their memories but to live on. They want to forget. In the case of international relations, however, as we have seen in the Japanese and Vietnamese examples, there is another factor that plays a role besides the feelings of the people directly involved. The memory of past suffering may be an instrument in the hands of politicians who prefer not to forget, but who want to keep memories alive as long as possible for political ends. Thus, they have a stick ready for any time it might come in handy to use against the perpetrator of atrocities. This is important. The nearer people are to the time of a painful memory, the more likely they are to request revenge, compensation, or an apology. The further away from that time they are, and if they are aided in forgetting by affluence and comfort, the less past hardships affect their decisionmaking. Not so in politics. It is too tempting, even if much time has passed, to make use of past guilt as an instrument with which to achieve a specific goal. At least as long as people may be mobilized, this "political" memory does not dim with the passage of time.

Having said this as a general rule, I have to admit that the degree of pain naturally plays a great role. Let us look at what happened in Austria with the appearance of Joerg Haider, the nationalist leader who managed to win almost 30 percent of the vote in the national elections and whose party thus achieved participation in a coalition government. The European Union's decision to impose sanctions on bilateral contacts with Austria came more than 50 years after the end of the Nazi rule, and it resulted not simply from the use of historical memory by European politicians, but rather was derived from Austria's neighbors' memory of the past. In Europe we have tried, I think it may be fair to say, to do what Nietzsche asked: "In forgiving and forgetting, things that have happened can become undone." If there is now a chance that, yes, the past may forget about us, it is only because we continue to manage to intertwine forgetting and forgiving.

I recall a statement the former ambassador of the Netherlands to Germany, later ambassador to the UN, has repeatedly made. He said that while for German children the lesson from the past is that Germany should never again initiate war, the lesson for the children of Germany's neighbors is that the best defense is a good offense. It was

an extremely slow process, but we have managed to draw the two positions closer to each other. When we discussed whether Serbian atrocities in Kosovo necessitated armed intervention, in Germany, like in our neighbors' countries, the arguments were influenced by the experiences of Auschwitz, which for Germans illustrate the need for zero tolerance of ethnic wars and the importance of immediate intervention. Remembering, forgiving, and forgetting of our own actions have become so intertwined that we now share a common purpose with our neighbors. Here we find what may be achieved once people begin to grasp fully what their history actually means, and that only once history is fully understood does it become a kind of productive remembrance. Active remembrance is what helps us overcome the dichotomy of fighting former conflicts over and over again in our memories or politics. Active remembrance may be a result of conscious political efforts, but mostly it is the result of the way a society deals with its memory. In Japan, for instance, witness the surprising fact that since the war, literature has become the major medium of remembrance.

Thus, we remember and relive our past through our memories; we turn memory into an element of international relations, and if we are successful it may be harmless or even—like in Europe—it may be the basis for more productive relations between peoples, or it may still do harm. After 600 years, Genghis Khan's atrocities do not induce a demand for revenge among the descendants of his former victims; however, the Albanian victory is still painful to bear for Serbian descendants after the same amount of time. Napoleon is not remembered as a villain in the countries that once suffered under him, but the British are still considered villains in present-day Ulster.

You might imagine the memory of the past as something you hang on your wall like a painting that conveys a warning to consider every time you look at it. It might be something with which to decorate your mind-set, it might evoke nostalgic longings—or it may taste as bitter as a gall bladder. Remembrance should, if used constructively, not be an object. It should be an action or a state of mind. It should also be the unrest gripping you when you see old ghosts from the past reappear—when, in Germany, we see young neo-Nazis beating up a foreigner, or when in Japan a government official states that Koreans

should have been grateful for the Japanese occupation, or when the mother of a boy killed in Tiananmen Square goes to a Beijing court, or when black churches are burned in the American South.

That inner unrest is not confined to one generation. It is the result of reflected memory, of active remembrance, of history understood. To recognize what went wrong in the past you do not have to have lived through it. It is a "lesson learned." It will result in the ability to recognize dangers to civil, democratic societies, and in the resolution to stand up for their defense. In Europe we may call ourselves fortunate in having turned the old ghosts of past pain caused or suffered into friendly spirits guiding us to overcome the causes of past conflicts between our peoples. That is not something we could expect. When German soldiers in World War II marched into a small French town, the grandfather of a French friend of mine stood at the window and died from a heart attack on the spot. Hate was what we were used to between our peoples. As is well known, we have not always been fortunate (or skillful?) in dealing with our past. It is the hope of the author that the lesson we learned last century will last us for some time into the new one. I wish that we not forget about the past, in order that the past may forget about us.

The views expressed in this chapter are solely those of the author.

Note

1. A somewhat different story is the one of the Greek villagers, who, after observing the forced-labor debate, recently went to a Greek court and demanded that Germany be sentenced to pay compensation for damage done to their village during the war. Of course, they may have drawn their conclusions from the discussion over the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which was damaged by U.S. rockets during the Kosovo war and for which the U.S. government paid $28 million in compensation.