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## Three-Part Series:

# A German View - Where Lies the Moral Authority?

*By Benjamin Creutzfeldt*

### Synopsis

*Abe's statement of apology disappointed audiences in neighbouring countries, but as China celebrates its 'victory' 70 years ago, the Communist Party cannot claim the moral authority of the German example.*

### Commentary

JAPANESE PRIME Minister Shinzo Abe's statement on 14 August 2015, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War, was eagerly anticipated in China in particular: movies featuring Chinese heroes fighting off evil invaders from the island empire were the daily staple of the television menu, keeping animosities alive. Neither are Koreans prone to forget the assassination of Queen Min by Japanese ronin in 1895, and the subsequent annexation of the Peninsula by Japan.

In this climate, Abe's speech neither salted old wounds nor calmed sore souls, it just disappointed: it was no more than a splash of water on smouldering embers. For a German who has imbibed fully the "original sin" of being German even if my father was barely a teenager when WWII began, it is baffling to witness the apparent inability of the Japanese to properly acknowledge and apologise for their brutal subjugation of most of East Asia during half a century.

### The role of a statesman

For sure, Abe's carefully crafted statement was punctuated by words such as grief (断腸の念) and feelings of sincere apology (心からのお詫びの気持ち). But these expressions are preceded in the rhetoric by an implicit finger-pointing to the 19th century Western colonisation of Asia and awkward references to injuries and deaths which "occurred" without specifying the perpetrator.

He reiterates the national pledge to non-aggression and opposition to war, yet subtly jabs at China when rejecting the "arbitrary intentions of any nation" (いかなる国の恣意) or denouncing economic

blocs as the seeds of conflict. Most controversially, however, Abe contends that the young and future generations of Japanese “should not be predestined to apologise”.

This is Abe the politician pandering to conservative Japan. In attempting to soften the weight of the past with lightness of a possible future, he fails to recognise that a circumscribed apology is no apology at all. States as corporate actors are the only entities in a position to apologise for past aggression, and as such their leaders are the only ones who can utter such apologies, and they must do so again and again, in the face of such grave crimes committed in their country's name. National accountability does not expire. Historical responsibility cannot be qualified over time.

But more importantly, this is not about the last major war. It is about the recognition that humans are capable of organised and state-sanctioned murder of other humans, and it is the mark of a statesman to speak to this and prevent war from recurring. Beyond the national or individual guilt, it is a valuable human ability to apologise unconditionally and recognise the darkest side of human nature: the system of the ‘comfort women’ instituted by the Japanese was horrifyingly similar to what the so-called Islamic State is doing to Yazidi women today.

### **The German example**

In Japan, minimising its war crimes in history books and discussions has been optional, whereas in Germany minimising or denying the Holocaust has been a criminal offence. The contrast with Germany's contrition has become something of a cliché, but it is nonetheless an instructive one.

Germany's position since Willy Brandt's “Kniefall” (Kneeling) before a Warsaw Holocaust memorial in 1970, has in fact been its strength: only once you recognise a human failing on a massive scale and as a national unit, and utter that recognition unequivocally and with uncompromising humility, can you reasonably question or even criticise others.

To look at the Holocaust with an unwavering eye and see one's country's role in it, requires determination and great strength of will. Holocaust remembrance and education as well as contrition for Germany's historic crimes have become central to German national identity.

### **East Asia's greatest weakness**

The demonstrators across Japan protesting Abe's security policy and his proposed legislation to allow its military to fight overseas are proof that many Japanese have understood the transcendental nature of the country's pledge to pacifism. It would seem the prime minister and his cabinet have not. But if the Japanese government thinks that heightened military activity is a legitimate catalyst for a laboured economic recovery, they are only increasing the mistrust that marks neighbouring East Asian nations.

The same admonition would go to the rulers in Beijing, who are prone to condone public Japan-bashing when domestic issues rile the Chinese middle class. But herein lies the great weakness of the Communist Party of China, which is historically guilty of many million deaths also. As long as the CPC refuses to explore self-critically the darker periods of its political history, its leadership retains a feeble moral position in the face of Japan's reluctance to fully own up to its collective responsibility for past atrocities.

This is the conundrum of East Asia today: even after decades of unparalleled economic growth and poverty reduction, and education levels matched by few other countries in the world, the leading powers of the region cannot see eye to eye. Instead of pulling together by showing true greatness in laying the past to rest with sincerity, they let the ashes of the past make their voices grow hoarse.

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