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Japan may have to bend its knee - Opinion

Timothy W. Ryback APRIL 26, 2005

SALZBURG — On Friday, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan expressed "deep remorse" and "heartfelt apology" for the Japanese atrocities committed during World War II. It was not unlike the "deep remorse" and "heartfelt apology" that his predecessor, Tomiichi Murayama, expressed in August 1995, or similar "remorse" expressed that same year by Hisashi Owada, then a senior foreign office official and now a judge on the International Court of Justice in The Hague, when he attended the Beijing Women's Conference to apologize for Japan's exploitation of 200,000 "comfort women" as sex slaves for its soldiers.

The Japanese have been apologizing and remorseing for decades, but no one seems to be listening, or, at least, willing to believe them. For many Japanese, the international community's unwillingness to recognize their efforts seems both frustrating and unfair.

Like the Germans, the Japanese saw their wartime leadership tried and executed for their crimes against humanity. Like the Germans, the Japanese paid vast sums of money in compensation. And like the Germans, the Japanese have been unsparing in their history books, so much so that today Japanese speak wearily of *jigyaku shikan* - "masochistic historiography." Nevertheless, six decades after the war, while Germany is embraced in a union of European nations, Japan is barely on speaking terms with its Asian neighbors. And still apologizing.

As the Japanese enter this new round of apologia and remorse, they may want to draw some lessons from the German experience. Few nations in history have perpetrated such heinous crimes. Fewer still have practiced public contrition and national introspection so convincingly and effectively. Germany has entered what may be described as the post-post-Holocaust era, in which German troops can return to territories once occupied by their Nazi predecessors and the German people can engage in public discussion of the "victims" of allied bombings without accusations of historical relativism.

But the path to public absolution has been long, slow and often arduous. Initially, most Germans were content to leave their guilt hanging on the gallows with the "main war criminals" in Nuremberg, but subsequent generations have confronted the past with an accelerating sense of moral responsibility.

In 1970, Willy Brandt made an historic visit to Poland where he fell to his knees before a monument to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. His "knee fall" appeared to be as spontaneous and heartfelt as it was, the most powerful man in Germany pulled to the ground by the weight of German guilt. The image seared

itself into public memory: a single picture worth a single word. With Brandt's gesture, a new symbolic word entered the German political vocabulary, Kniefall.

A decade and a half later, President Richard von Weizsäcker recognized the notion of "collective responsibility." In the last two decades, the Germans have met this responsibility collectively and successfully. German governments, Social Democratic and Christian Democratic alike, have played central roles in rebuilding the societies of the former Soviet bloc. German industry has paid hundreds of million of dollars in compensation to former slave laborers. The Berliners have blotted out prime commercial real estate for a sprawling memorial to the Holocaust. When it comes to the wages of guilt - and compensation - the Germans have set the gold standard.

The Japanese have hobbled far behind their former axis allies. Their efforts have been sporadic, awkward and generally unnoticed by the international community. The difficulties are as much cultural as political or economic. Willy Brandt's Kniefall was so memorable because it was so unexpected, but what was surprising for a German, may be unthinkable for a Japanese. As a former Japanese diplomat told me recently, such a gesture by a Japanese would not only seem disingenuous to the international community, it could appear absurd even embarrassing to the Japanese.

Another obstacle may be the Japanese attitude toward forgiveness. They can mourn the victims of Hiroshima while harboring little or no resentment toward those who dropped the bomb. He told me the Japanese are a "forgiving" people. But he admits that while it may be noble to forgive the victimizer when you are the victim, it is a bit more awkward to expect same sentiment when you are the victimizer.

With Friday's apology, Koizumi has opened a new opportunity for the Japanese to confront their past and seek reconciliation with their Asian neighbors. They should be thoughtful, ideally introspective, as they move forward. Before Brandt, it was difficult to imagine any German leader falling to his knees in remorse. Brandt's Kniefall helped redefine the Germans' image not only to the world, but also to themselves. The Japanese may require a similarly transformative moment. Before they can overcome their past, it could well be that they will have to overcome themselves.

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