

**Jennifer M. Dixon.** *Dark Pasts: Changing the State's Story in Turkey and Japan.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. 276 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-3024-5.

**Reviewed by** Khatchig Mouradian

**Published on** H-Diplo (October, 2019)

**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

It is difficult to think of a period in recent years when Turkey and Japan were not in the news for (mis)handling the skeletons in their closets. As I write this in late 2019, Tokyo is embroiled in an economic tit for tat with Seoul over Japan's patchy record of confronting its World War II crimes. Earlier this year, in the weeks leading up to the commemoration day of the Armenian genocide (April 24), Ankara launched its most recent diplomatic onslaught in an attempt to forestall recognition of the crime by more administrations and legislatures around the world.

The media may give the impression that little of substance has changed in the narratives of Turkey and Japan as they defend untenable positions. Yet in recent decades, historians, sociologists, and international relations scholars have tried to trace, chart, and catalogue every little demon in the details, in an attempt to explain how—and why—the discourse on past crimes (d)evolves over time. And while Turkey's failure and Japan's only partial success to confront their pasts have been studied in comparative perspective, mainly with the German case, Jennifer M. Dixon's *Dark Pasts: Changing the State's Story in Turkey and Japan* is the first major work that explores the two side by side.

There is plenty of sordidness to uncover in both cases. The Ottoman Empire's wartime poli-

cies of genocide and ethnic cleansing targeted Greeks and Assyrians alongside the Armenians, while the legacy of the Republic of Turkey established on the ruins of the empire includes systematic persecution of non-Muslims, a pogrom against Greeks and other Christians in Istanbul in 1955, the erasure of Christian cultural heritage sites, the Dersim massacre of Zaza Kurds in 1937-38, and the ongoing suppression of Kurdish rights. Japan's atrocities spanned the Asian mainland and affected millions, with the Nanjing massacre in 1937-38 and the tens of thousands of women the Japanese military forced into sexual slavery, euphemistically referred to as "comfort women," casting particularly long shadows.

Focusing on the Armenian genocide and the Nanjing massacre, Dixon compellingly demonstrates how international pressure and local considerations shape state narratives on Turkey's and Japan's dark pasts. Dixon arrives at the book's central argument that "international pressures increase the likelihood of change in official narratives, while domestic considerations determine the content of such change" by charting and analyzing variations in the narrative between 1950 and 2008, which run the gamut from silence and denial to acknowledgment, apology, and commemoration (p. 21). She finds that "Turkey's narrative has tended toward stretches of continuity

followed by relatively abrupt and wide-reaching moments of change, whereas Japan's narrative has tended to shift in a disaggregated fashion, primarily in response to discrete pressures and controversies" (p. 165).

While pointing to the "similarities in regime type, allies, and normative structures" between the two countries, Dixon is careful to expound on differences, such as the relatively higher "identity stakes" and the stigma of genocide that disincentivize Turkey to confront its past, coupled with the fact that Armenia is the sole "victim state" pressuring Ankara, while Japan is pressured by several such states, which have far more military and economic might than Armenia (pp. 4, 106, 163). She notes that, contrary to Turkey's case, "domestic pressures have triggered some changes in Japan's narrative, although international pressure has been a more significant trigger for change" (p. 105). Dixon explains this by observing that Turkey has for decades suppressed domestic discourse on the Armenian genocide, while a relatively open discussion of wartime atrocities has occurred in Japan since the 1950s.

Dixon examines how these factors have fostered an environment that made it possible for Japan to move from mythmaking and relativizing (1950s and 1960s) to acknowledging (1970s) to admitting responsibility (1980s) to, ultimately, apologizing for the Nanjing massacre (1994). Yet, as Dixon demonstrates, Tokyo never fully renounced the relativization of the crime, even as it moved toward acknowledgment and apology. Turkey, on the other hand, maintained silence and denial up until the early 1980s, when it began to aggressively relativize, and continued to deny, the Armenian genocide. In the 2000s, Dixon asserts, Ankara renounced denial and began offering "a limited degree of acknowledgment," while continuing to relativize (p. 4).

It is this claim of Turkey's renunciation of denial to embrace relativization, mythmaking, and acknowledgment (albeit "limited") that is the

weak link in Dixon's thesis. A chart illustrating the change in Turkey's narrative (figure 2.1 on page 41) shows that beginning in the 2000s, Turkey moved past silence and denial, and only engages in mythmaking, relativizing, and acknowledgment. While it is true that the narrative of the Turkish government has shifted from an utterly untenable position to a more sophisticated one, the suggestion that Ankara has renounced denial is difficult to support. Throughout the 2000s (and to this day), the official Turkish narrative has denied outright, and systematically, that the experience of the Armenians was a crime *at all*, let alone a genocide. Whatever linguistic acrobatics the state narrative has performed does not change this reality.[1]

This shortcoming is not due to misinterpretation but rather to inconsistency: a narrow definition of "denial" and a broad definition of "acknowledgment." Dixon files acknowledgment of "a higher death toll" under acknowledgment yet does not consider the categorical, relentless rejection of the existence of *any* crime as "denial" (p. 81). Otherwise, her reading of the official narrative in the 2000s is spot on: "At key junctures when officials have felt that international pressures were too great to ignore, and as domestic attention to the issue has increased, officials have updated the official narrative to maintain its plausibility and legitimacy, particularly for domestic audiences, but also for international audiences. And yet, as officials have updated the state's narrative ... they have continued to avoid recognizing the genocidal nature of the violence as well as official responsibility for it" (p. 43).

The book powerfully demonstrates how Japan and Turkey have walked the tightrope of maintaining "plausibility and legitimacy" (p. 43). Through interviews with diplomats and analysts and the exploration of textbooks, newspapers, and other publications, Dixon distills more than fifty years' worth of official narrative in two states five thousand miles apart into a well-argued, sys-

tematic analysis of governments' struggles with uncomfortable truths. Dixon refuses to uncritically embrace the possibility of bright futures, taking issue with historian Howard Zinn's conviction that through relentless struggle, the truth will ultimately prevail.[2] "Outing the truth is a long, uncertain, and highly political process. Rather than simply changing with the passage of time, persistence, and rightness, interactions between political factors at the domestic and international levels together influence states' narratives of dark pasts" (p. 162).

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Richard G Hovannisian, "Denial of the Armenian Genocide 100 Years Later: The New Practitioners and Their Trade," *Genocide Studies International* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 228-47; Marc A. Mamigonian, "Academic Denial of the Armenian Genocide in American Scholarship: Denialism as Manufactured Controversy," *Genocide Studies International* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 61-82; and Taner Akçam, "Review Essay: Guenter Lewy's *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey*," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 3, no. 1 (April 2008): 111-45. For an analysis of the period before the 2000s, see Doğan Gürpınar, "The Manufacturing of Denial: The Making of the Turkish 'Official Thesis' on the Armenian Genocide between 1974 and 1990," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 18, no. 3 (2016): 217-40. For a comparative approach, see Maria Karlsson, "Cultures of Denial: Comparing Holocaust and Armenian Genocide Denial" (PhD diss., Lunds Universitet, 2015).

[2]. The Zinn quote Dixon takes issue with is: "The lesson of that history is that you must not despair, that if you are right, and you persist, things will change. The government may try to deceive the people, and the newspapers and television may do the same, but the truth has a way of coming out. The truth has a power greater than a hundred lies" (p. 162, quotation from Howard Zinn, "Against Discouragement," commencement

speech delivered at Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia, May 15, 2005, <http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/2728/>).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** Khatchig Mouradian. Review of Dixon, Jennifer M. *Dark Pasts: Changing the State's Story in Turkey and Japan*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. October, 2019.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54150>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.