



# The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices

By Elazar Barkan

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**The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices** By Elazar Barkan

**Exploring the global politics of restitution from 1945 Germany to present-day Bosnia.**

How do nations and aggrieved parties, in the wake of heinous crimes and horrible injustices, make amends in a way that acknowledges wrongdoing and redefines future interactions? How does the growing practice of negotiating restitution restore a sense of morality and enhance prospects for world peace? Where has restitution worked and where has it not? *The Guilt of Nations* explores this increasingly important dynamic in world politics today. Beyond its moral implications, restitution reflects a critical shift in political and economic bargaining. While preserving individual rights, restitution also enables victimized groups to receive growing recognition *as groups*. Elazar Barkan traces instances of historical crimes, such as the incarceration of Japanese Americans in the United States during World War II, the sexual abuse of "comfort women" by Japanese soldiers, and the recent controversy over the financial dealings between Swiss banks and Nazi Germany. He argues that, as countries including the United States, Australia, and New Zealand come to recognize past injustices toward indigenous peoples within their borders, both governments and minority groups are compelled to redress the history of colonialism and redefine national identity. While restitution is not a panacea, this ever-spreading trend represents a new moral order in world politics.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The negotiations over Holocaust restitution that have made headlines during the past few years make this philosophical inquiry into the issue a timely monograph. As the author writes, "world morality--not to say, human nature--changed in March 1997," when the Swiss announced they were creating a humanitarian fund for victims of the Holocaust because of profits made from Nazi-looted gold. Indeed, questions of reparations for victims of atrocities erupted all over the globe in the past decade--and Barkan, who teaches history and cultural studies at Claremont Graduate University, takes a chapter-by chapter tour of these questions, covering such topics as Japanese restitution for enslaving Korean "comfort women" during WWII, Australian compensation for Aborigines, even the possibility of U.S. reparations for slavery. This work yields comparative nuggets--e.g., that the Japanese, unlike the Germans, do not feel a strong sense of collective guilt--and any reader who wades through this dense work will become educated about the weights and balances involved in restitution issues. The author also shows how restitution can bring two peoples together. In the case of the Germans and the Jews, restitution enabled "mourning to serve as a way to deal with melancholy, victimization, national repression and self-hate." Although Barkan favors restitution, because "alternative potential resolutions are too often frustrating and less effective," he covers these topics thoroughly and dispassionately. But the author's strength is also a weakness. His mild stance makes this book feel like a fruit that is difficult to open and, once opened, not as sweet as one would like. (May)

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From Library Journal

Beneath a layer of academic jargon, this is a novel and thought-provoking work. Barkan (historical and cultural studies, Claremont Graduate Univ.) explores the increasingly widespread practice by which nation-states, impelled by "liberal guilt," strive to make restitution for past injustices. Tragic episodes, such as the Holocaust and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, fuel this guilt, and Barkan attributes the impulse to atone for historical wrongs to an emerging "neo-Enlightenment morality" that augments the classical liberal conception of individual rights with a vaguely defined set of group rights. To redress historical wrongs, the perpetrators (or their descendants) negotiate terms of restitution with aggrieved minorities. Restitution may include an apology, reparations, or the return of cultural treasures. The author suggests that by negotiating an agreed interpretation of history, the parties can transcend festering animosities and ultimately attain true conflict resolution. Recommended for libraries specializing in public policy.

*James R. Holmes, Ph.D. candidate, Fletcher Sch. of Law & Diplomacy, Belmont, MA*

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From [Booklist](#)

How should nations deal with gross inhumanity? Since World War II, individual nations and international groups have been struggling with that issue. Barkan, a historian and chair of Claremont Graduate University's Cultural Studies Department, examines a wide range of historical injustices within and between nations over the past 50 years, urging that we move toward a theory of restitution that allows victims and perpetrators to negotiate their understandings of history and identity and to establish a basis for a common future. Most of Barkan's book is devoted to analysis of specifics: the Holocaust; U.S. internment of Japanese Americans; Nazi art in Russian museums and Nazi gold in Swiss banks; Japanese abuse of "comfort women"; Eastern Europe after decades of Communism; treatment of indigenous groups on the U.S. mainland, in Hawaii, in Australia, and in New Zealand; and the issue of restitution for slavery in the U.S. His

final chapter draws lessons from these case studies, working "Toward a Theory of Restitution." A demanding but valuable study. *Mary Carroll*

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#### **Michael Velez:**

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