

Transitional Justice in Context

Seeking truth and reconciliation after historical trauma

Priority Area: 人文与社会科学领域 / Humanities and Social Sciences

Over the last few decades, various attempts have been made to recover from historical trauma resulting from war, genocide, mass violence and gross human rights violations. To that end, historical investigation commissions have been established, tasked with discovering and revealing past wrongdoing by previous political regimes, governments, public and private institutions, in the hope of resolving conflict and lingering injuries left over from the past. Commissions that deal with the investigation of the past commonly serve a strong political and social agenda. By determining historical truth, they generally aim to contribute to reconciliation and justice, to reparation and recognition and decide how these objectives should be met and whose needs should be served. Historical investigation commissions represent the wider global trend towards *new forms of transitional justice*, aiming to promote restoration rather than revenge and punishment.

Post-conflict historical investigation commissions generally seek to achieve two central goals: they are both *truth-seeking* and aim to foster *reconciliation*. 1. As bodies mandated by governments or other (semi-)official institutions, truth commissions aim to establish an 'officially sanctioned historical truth' about a particular past event. They can thus provide proof against denial and distortion (most likely by former perpetrators) of mass violence, crimes and human rights abuses in the past. Increasingly, supporters assert a 'right to the truth' that commissions such as these are well placed to carry forward. Truth commissions have quite commonly produced extensive final reports seeking to provide an authoritative narrative of past events, which sometimes challenges previously dominant versions of the past. 2. In addition, truth commissions might aim at fostering reconciliation, leaning towards restorative rather than retributive models of justice. This means they often favor efforts to reconcile divided societies in the wake of conflict over attempts to hold those accused of human rights violations accountable. Less commonly, truth commissions advocate forms of reparative justice, including efforts to repair past damage and help victims of conflict or human rights violations to heal. This can take the form of reparations to victims, whether financial or otherwise, the issuing of official apologies, new commemorative practices, or monuments dedicated to the memory of past human rights violations. In certain cases, historical investigation commissions formed crucial part of larger arrangements of political transition and peace settlements.

Since the end of the Cold War the list of historical investigation commissions has unremittingly been growing. A great variety of commissions has been established with different goals, ambitions and targets. Main distinctions between various historical investigation commissions concern for instance the question to what extent the recovery of *truth* should prevail the value of *reconciliation*. Some have been hailed as very successful, others did not meet previously held expectations. Some commissions served a broad political agenda, such as regime change or the transfer of political power, the legacy of slavery, or horrific forms of mass violence. Others operated with more targeted mandates related to the treatment of indigenous peoples, the compensation for financial or moral mistreatment, or various acts of political persecution. Some commissions have been set up by governments, others resulted from initiatives by (semi-)official bodies, such as religious institutions. A more recent trend is the widening of thematic scopes: besides issues related to political transformation, the legacies of war and mass violence, other wrongdoings and human right violations such as sexual abuse and the maltreatment of women and children have become subject of growing attention and awareness. All over the globe historical investigation commissions have been established (or all still functioning), representing a truly transnational phenomenon, while at the same time varying substantially in outcome and success depending on specific national, regional and cultural contexts.

Students with a keen interest in the intersection between history, politics and law are encouraged to apply. Applicants are invited to work either on a specific case study or to conduct a comparative linking various national cases. A variety of qualitative methods will be used to conduct the research, such as historical sources analysis, document analysis, and qualitative interviewing. Good command of relevant foreign languages is required. Detailed case studies on East / South East Asian countries (for example the Republic of Korea, Japan, Cambodia, or East Timor) will particularly complement and deepen our scholarly knowledge and understanding of this global phenomenon. Students with a MA degree in history, social and political sciences or law are invited to apply.

Coordination :

Supervisor : Prof. dr. G. Verbeeck (Georgi.Verbeeck@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

Georgi Verbeeck is Professor of German History at the University of Leuven and an Associated Professor of Modern History and Political Culture at Maastricht University. His interests and research expertise lie at the intersection of 19th and 20th century European history and the politics of history in divided societies. Georgi Verbeeck is currently Director of Studies of the Master Programs 'Politics and Society' and 'Arts, Literature and Society' at Maastricht University.

Potential co-supervisor(s), depending on the selected case study : dr. F. Laczó; dr. P. del Hierro; dr. A. Sierp; dr. C. Erlichman.

Selected publications :

Verbeeck, G. (2012), 'The South African Model of Transitional Justice. Revenge or Reconciliation?', - In: Nelen, H., Claessen, J. (Eds.), *Beyond the Death Penalty. Reflections on Punishment*. Cambridge – Antwerp – Portland: Intersentia, 203-218.

Verbeeck, G. (2016), 'The Holocaust and its Denial. A Paradigm in Our Historical Culture', - In : Moerland, R., Nelen, H., Willems, J. (Eds.), *Denialism and Human Rights* (Maastricht Series in Human Rights), Cambridge – Antwerp – Portland : Intersentia, 199 – 214.

Verbeeck, G. (2016), *Het Derde Rijk. Een geschiedenis van het nationaalsocialisme*. Den Haag – Leuven : Acco. (Textbook in Dutch on The Third Reich. A History of National Socialism)

Verbeeck, G. (2019), 'Legacies of an Imperial Past in a Small Nation. Patterns of Postcolonialism in Belgium', *European Politics and Society*, DOI:10.1080/23745118.2019.1645422

Verbeeck, G. (2020 - forthcoming), 'The Haunting Past of Colonialism in Belgium. From the Lumumba Enquiry to a Refurnished Museum of Central Africa", - In : Berger, S., Kesteloot C. e.a. (Eds), *Public and Applied History on the Battlefield of Europe. Dealing with Painful Pasts in the 20th Century*, New York - Berlin : De Gruyter.