

## **Societal Apology (vs. Official Apology) in the Context of Collective Political Violence**

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**Abstract:** How can we address the destructive psychological repertoire formed in the wake of dictatorships, colonialism, genocide and conflicts? To that end, **societal** apology (SA) is suggested, meaning, an apology offered by society members of the involved parties, in contrast to an **official** apology (OA), one that is offered by the formal leaders of the parties (leaders, many of whom are still reluctant to apologize). SA could have many important positive impacts, such as transmitting a peace oriented message to the **recipient-SA-party**; among the apologizing party members, the SA campaign could lead to a more critical examination of the past; expressing SA could ameliorate the image of the **apologizing-party** internationally; and promote the expression of OA by the initially SA **apologizing-party**. These positive impacts could partially heal the above repertoire and consequently promote peace, reconciliation and wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Apology, peace, reconciliation, transitional justice, sustainable peace, building peace, conflicts.

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### **Main Text**

This short article proposes the use of **societal** apology (SA, in contrast to an **official** apology - OA), as one of the main methods to promote peace and to establish sustainable peace and wellbeing, important goals that we all yearn for. Let me elaborate.

Collective political violence (CPV) has been prevalent worldwide in the contexts of dictatorships, colonialism, genocide, intractable conflicts (for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and more. Typically, CPV causes **destructive psychological repertoire** among the involved parties, a repertoire that is extremely antagonistic towards the rival party and includes distrust, rage, hate, fear, wish for revenge, negative stereotypes, de-humanization, and more[1].

**It is important to properly address and promote healing this hostile psychological repertoire** for three main reasons [1, 2]: a) to promote the **signing of a peace agreement** in the context of conflicts;b) in the context of conflicts (**after** a peace agreement is signed) or in the contexts of dictatorships (after the CPV ends), to promote the **establishment of sustainable peace**, so that CPV will not reappear (for example, as occurred in the former Yugoslavia); and c) in all the above types of CPV, to **promote the wellbeing** of the parties.

**One of the main methods to encourage the healing of this psychological repertoire is via CA** (collective apology) [3, 4]. CA is largely defined as an act in which a political entity (typically a country) approaches another political entity (country or ethnic group) with regard to the wrongdoings that were conducted in the context of CPV by the former against the latter. This CA approach should include all (or at least most) of the following main components: admitting the conduct of certain wrongdoings (taking responsibility), expressing regret, requesting the latter party's forgiveness, expressing the wish for a better future for the parties' relations, and paying reparations [3, 5].

The awareness of the above triple importance of addressing that psychological repertoire, and the central role of CA in addressing it, has led to terming recent decades as the "**Age of Apology**", as many dozens, if not several hundreds of CAs have been offered [4]. To name only three well-known examples, reference can be made to the 1993 Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono's statement (apologizing for the use of Korean women as "comfort women" during World War II), the 2008 Australian Prime Minister Rudd's apology (for the mistreatment of Aboriginal people, including sending them to boarding schools in order to make them less "primitive"), and the 2010 apology by British Prime Minister Cameron (for the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre of Catholics in Northern Ireland).

Largely, all of the CAs that have been expressed during the Age of Apology have been OAs [4], meaning that they were expressed by the **formal** representatives of the apologizing country (for example, a minister, a prime minister or a president).

The problem: In many instances of CPV, the formal representatives of political entities are still **reluctant** to express OA, thereby preventing the promotion of peace, sustainable peace and wellbeing. Focusing **only** on instances of CPV when there **is** a factual basis for such an apology, as is usually the case, the formal representatives are reluctant to express OA due to the impact of various **inhibiting factors**, such as the wish to keep a positive image of their country (internally – among their citizens, and externally – among the international community), the wish to stay in office and not lose their voter support, a political constellation that

does not provide enough support for OA expression, or the personal aggressive and non-peaceful characteristics of the leaders [1, 6].

To bypass this problem, **SA should be conducted in such instances of official reluctance**. SA means that the definition of CA remains intact, although the apology is offered not by the **formal** representatives of the apologizing party, but by its **society members**. Specifically, society members, with the possible advocacy and promotion of various non-governmental organizations, initiate a public campaign among society members to sign a petition that will include the above components of CA, or some of them. After reaching a certain meaningful threshold number of signatures, the petition can be submitted to the people of the rival party (via regular or social media) and/or to its formal representatives.

Regarding the **applicability of SA**, two main thoughts come to mind. **First**, due to the current wide use of the Internet and social media, it is fairly simple to launch a SA campaign [7]. **Second**, at times, SA seems to be more feasible than OA, because society members might not, or might less, be influenced by the abovementioned inhibiting factors [8].

**The positive impact of SA:** Expressing SA can have various positive impacts, all of which are supported by analogous research on CA that has been conducted in the field of peace and conflict studies and in the disciplines of political science, international relations and social psychology. Naming only some of these major impacts, **first**, SA can transmit to the recipient-SA-party's formal leaders and society members a message that many members of the offering-SA-party do acknowledge their party's wrongdoing and wish to promote peace. This, in turn, could lead to a partial healing of the psychological repertoire of some of the leaders and members of the recipient-SA-party [9]. As an analogous example, the abovementioned 2008 Australian Prime Minister apology promoted a positive change of attitude among the Aboriginal people towards the white population in Australia and reconciliation between the two groups [10]. Such SA can also promote a reciprocal expression of SA, or even an OA, offered this time by the initial recipient-SA-party to the initial offering-SA-party. As an analogous example, a process of reciprocal peace-oriented act took place in the 1990s Northern Ireland peace process and contributed to its eventual success [11]. **Second**, among the offering-SA-party members, the SA campaign could lead to a deeper and more open and critical examination of the past regarding the given CPV. The topic will be central in the public sphere; various opinions and facts will be presented about it, and this will promote a more solid basis for the historical narratives of the given CPV that are prevalent in that party [8]. **Third**, expressing SA when OA is refused to be expressed could ameliorate the image of the offering-SA-party in the international community. A reverse example for such a case is the refusal of the government of Turkey to admit and apologize for the genocide of some 1.5 million Armenians in 1915 by Turkey. This refusal has resulted in the extensive condemnation of Turkey by various countries [12]. **Fourth**, an initial expression of SA by a given party could promote the following expression of an OA by that same given party. This, because the initial expression of SA makes the formal leaders of that party more aware of the wide adoption by their society members of the historical narrative that supports the expression of SA (meaning, the narrative that admits that wrongdoings have indeed been conducted by their party). An analogous example is the transformation that has been taking place since the late 1990s of part of the Israeli **official** memory regarding the causes of the 1948 Palestinian exodus which led to the creation of the well-known Palestinian refugee problem; a transformation that adopted the critical narrative about these causes (some Palestinians left willingly while some were indeed expelled). This transformation was a result of a similar Israeli-Jewish **societal** memory transformation that started earlier, in the late 1970s [8].

All these positive impacts could partially heal the above repertoire and in turn promote peace, sustainable peace and wellbeing. The influence of these impacts of SA will increase as there will be more signatures on the SA petition.

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### Author Profile

**Dr. Rafi Nets** is an Israeli scholar who was a pre-doctoral fellow at Yale and Columbia Universities (at the latter, later also a visiting scholar), has published extensively on conflict studies and was the director of a conflict resolution program at Bar-Ilan University, Israel. He has also been awarded numerous fellowships, grants and prizes and has lectured at various prestigious institutions such as Harvard University and the Israeli Prime Minister's Office. For more details, see [www.collective-memory.info](http://www.collective-memory.info) or email [rafi.nets@gmail.com](mailto:rafi.nets@gmail.com).