

## Driving Forces Behind Ethnic Cleansing in the Former Yugoslavia

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Illuminating Evil:  
Driving Forces behind Ethnic Cleansing in the Former Yugoslavia**Abstract**

The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was one of the most emotionally charged conflicts in recent history. After reading an excerpt on the psychology of the crisis in history class, I decided to write about it for my IB Extended Essay. This past summer, I researched the conflict and tried to analyze the effect the violence had on civilians.

The war was less of an actual fight and more a systematic slaughter of the Muslim population. Although Bosnia was historically an accepting country, the Serbian nationalist leaders drove the ethnic communities apart with the calculated use of terror. Through raping and torturing civilians, they revived deeply buried ethnic hatreds between the Muslims and the Serbs. This hatred was rooted in fear.

Rape was an especially powerful weapon. A rape victim was considered unclean, and the Serb leaders used this mentality to destroy not only the woman, but her entire family. Communities ostracized the victims, leaving the fabric of the culture shredded.

Once the violence began, the Serbian government broadcast intense propaganda messages that denied initial attacks, dehumanized the Muslims and justified Serbian assaults with processed historical evidence. This blurred the distinction between perpetrator and victim, allowing the Serbs to blame the Muslims for Serbian atrocities. Serbian civilians, driven to the wall in horror, sided with their ethnic group and accepted the propaganda because it gave them a reason for their suffering. The vicious cycle of fear and hate left the Muslim population as both the victim and the televised perpetrator. This crisis interested

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## **Introduction**

There's no painless way to dive into the emotionally charged conflict that was the war in the former Yugoslavia. The atrocities committed were so filled with primal aggression that they defy morality to the point where any sense of humanity is unrecognizable. To come into contact with a world where balance has been discarded, ethics ignored and dignity forgotten may seem impossible, but understanding such a deep-seated confrontation requires the realization that "emotions, not rationality, have the upper hand."<sup>1</sup> Facts were irrelevant compared to what the population believed, and most importantly, fear reigned supreme. As David Rieff so poetically states, "The war started in fear and only ended in genocide."<sup>2</sup>

### ***"Everyone is Guilty": The Perpetrators***

War creates many horrifying byproducts, including refugees, rape, and civilian casualties. However, when such consequences become one side's tactical objectives, their hands become forever stained with the blood of the innocent. Serbian nationalist leaders, combined with the Bosnian Serb Army (BSA), the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) and various paramilitary forces were responsible for the haunting stories of murder and mutilation that eventually drifted onto the western world's television sets. More specifically, the actions of Slobodan Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic, a professional psychologist, created the widespread paranoia that eventually led to the policies of ethnic cleansing.<sup>3</sup> "They are guilty surely as if they had primed the explosive charges,

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<sup>1</sup> "Rumor & Reality," *Time Magazine*, 24 August 1992, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,976324,00.html>.

<sup>2</sup> David Rieff, *Slaughterhouse, Bosnia and the Failure of the West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), Pg. 73.

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, *Profile: Radovan Karadzic*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/876084.stm> (June, 2005).

pulled the triggers, or driven the bulldozers over the grave sites.”<sup>4</sup> These gravesites held primarily Muslim bodies. “Two hundred thousand Bosnian Muslims died, in full view of the world’s television cameras, and more than 2 million other people were forcibly displaced.”<sup>5</sup> Although all sides took part in the violence, the actions taken by the Serb political and military forces were unparalleled in force and number. The focus on Serbian behavior,

*“arises out of the fact that Bosnian Serbs engaged in ethnic cleansing on a greater scale than the rest ... that the mass killings of the war were largely, although not exclusively, the work of Serbs ... and that the Serb nationalist leaders, along with Croat extremists, were bent on destroying the multiethnic society which, in the last analysis, was the greatest accomplishment of Bosnian history.”<sup>6</sup>*

### ***From Peace to Perversion: How the Cycle Began***

To prevent such a tragedy from ever reoccurring, we must first understand how it started. In analyzing the causes, we must look at the personal interactions of those involved. How did the leaders manipulate the masses? How did the masses fall into a cycle of such hate? How did a culture of peace and acceptance divide into warring factions labeled by religion and ethnicity? If we can answer these questions, we may truly have a chance at creating peace where there once was chaos.

Serbian aggression followed a type of warfare in which calculated atrocities were committed to upset deeply rooted emotions. Fear and hate were considered strategic aims, for they separated the multicultural population and forced non-combatants to

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<sup>4</sup> Warren Zimmermann, *Origins of a Catastrophe* (New York: Random House, Inc, 1996), Pg. 224.

<sup>5</sup> Rieff, Pg. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Steven L. Burg & Paul S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention* (New York: M. E. Sharp, Inc., 1999), Pg. 12.

align themselves with an ethnic identity. As a propaganda message so blatantly stated, people had to decide whether ‘to be the carcass or the vulture.’<sup>7</sup> To successfully destroy their mental stability, the Serbian government deliberately raped and tortured civilians while simultaneously broadcasting intense propaganda that focused on denying assaults, dehumanizing Muslims, and justifying Serbian brutality with processed historical evidence. In the face of pure horror, civilians lost their sense of morality and turned to their ethnic community for support. Milosevic gave people a reason to be horrified and the Muslim culture to blame; all that was left was to watch the nation tear itself apart. Psychologically, fear resulted in righteous anger, which propaganda concentrated into hate for the Muslim identity. Soon the entire population was caught in a vicious cycle of murder, leaving the initiators forgotten in the fight to stay alive.

The key to understanding this type of conflict is to realize that, as psychotherapist Viktor Frankl stated, “An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior.”<sup>8</sup> The separation of a multiethnic community required lines to be drawn, distinctions to be made, and differences to be feared. Convincing neighbors who had shared recipes for the last twenty years to loot each other’s houses and rape each other’s daughters necessitated them to sincerely believe that what they were doing was justified; that they were fighting for their survival; that they were the victims; that whatever they did, they had been attacked first. Just as Serbian high school teacher explained the merciless bombing of Sarajevo, “If we shell the city first, it is only because the Muslims shoot at us first. Don’t we have a right to defend ourselves...if kids are

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<sup>7</sup> “The Ruin of a Cat, the Ghost of a Dog,” *Time Magazine*, 14 December 1992, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,977255,00.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), Pg. 20.

The circumstances under which the population was given propaganda were those of confusion, uncertainty and horror. Serbian brutality caused widespread chaos that was far past abnormal, and the civilian’s reactions followed suit.

### **Collateral Damage: The Effects of Systematic Violence**

The fear that the Serbian government generated during the war in the former Yugoslavia was unlike any the world had ever seen. Horror stories of rape camps, castration and beheading became normal as the violence consumed all fragments of rationality. Serbian soldiers would barge into houses, put a gun to the father’s head and tell him to rape his daughter or die.

*“The father will refuse and say, I will die before doing that. You shrug your shoulders and reply, Okay, old man, I won’t shoot you, but I will shoot your daughter...He pleads, he begs, but then you, the man with the gun, put the gun to the daughter’s head, you pull back the hammer, and you shout, Now! Do it! Or I shoot! The father starts weeping, yet slowly he unties his belt, moving like a dazed zombie, he can’t believe what he must do. You laugh and say, That’s right, old man, pull down those pants, pull up your daughter’s dress, and do it! You are the law, and you feel divine.”<sup>10</sup>*

Such was the horror that was experienced. Day after day, night after night, deliberate atrocities that targeted innocent civilians were committed methodically to create a rift between the ethnic communities. The entire population had to feel individually connected with the violence before the policy of ethnic cleansing could ever

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<sup>9</sup> Rieff, Pg. 102.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Maass, *Love Thy Neighbor: A Story of War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1996), Pg. 51.

succeed. Serbian “paramilitaries were joined by local recruits, who operated close to their own towns and villages. This made the violence up close and personal, as old scores were settled.”<sup>11</sup> The Serbian government’s most effective military functions were systematic rape and unrestrained torture. Together, they destroyed civilian’s psychological stability and stimulated the fear and anger that was the necessary support for ethnic cleansing.

***A Woman’s War: Rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina***

The act of rape is an expression of power. It is a violation beyond any measure, and mental trauma that follows augments the initial humiliation. The conflict in Bosnia marked the first time in which rape was considered a formal and independent crime against humanity.<sup>12</sup> The systematic assault on the feminine identity shattered all previous connotations of the word. Muslim women weren’t just raped, they were raped in public, in front of their families, gang raped, and simultaneously beaten with guns, knives, even broken bottles. “Some witnesses describe atrocities of a ritualistic nature where, after the rapes, women’s breasts were cut off and their stomachs slit open.”<sup>13</sup> The number of victims varies from 20,000 to 50,000, bearing the horrifying truth that sexual abuse was a military objective and used systematically to decimate a culture.<sup>14</sup> Rape camps were set up, in which “Serbian captors told women that they were trying to impregnate them. In doing so, they would create ‘Chetnik babies’ who would kill Muslims when they grew up.” However, biological genocide was only the superficial purpose of rape; sexual abuse

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<sup>11</sup> Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), Pg. 159.

<sup>12</sup> David J. Scheffer, *Rape as a War Crime*, <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/arape.htm> (October, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Catherine N. Niarchos, “Women, War, and Rape: Challenges Facing the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia,” *Women’s Rights: A Human Rights Quarterly Reader*, ed. Bert B. Lockwood (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006), Pg. 278.

<sup>14</sup> Vesna Peric Zimonjic, *Bosnian Rape Victims Forgotten*, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=32406> (December, 2006).

also surrounded the woman with social shame that enveloped the entire family and acted as a blow to the male guardian's masculinity.

The Serbian use of rape was an attempt to socially undermine the Muslim people and force them to stop fighting and leave. The process started with the women. Along with the psychological trauma of the act itself came the shame that followed.

*“A woman’s purity in Islam and Muslim patriarchal culture is not only held sacred, but is seen as an essential element to insure the stability of the society and culture... When a rape does occur, society generally concludes that, since the woman was unaccompanied by a male guardian (husband, father, brother), she was “on the make” and perhaps looking for a sexual encounter; in such a case, sexual intercourse, even if violent, could be warranted given the woman’s violation of religious customs.”*<sup>15</sup>

Since the rape was the woman’s fault, the woman faced rejection from her family and her husband. Women who became pregnant from rape were usually marked as dirty and undeserving of reproduction. Milosevic used these concepts to destroy the Muslim society as a whole.

Rape also affected the Muslim males. In a society where men are supposedly responsible for their women, when she is violated and raped “it is often very difficult for him to accept the humiliation of such an event. He has failed to live up to his masculine duty and obligation to defend “his woman.””<sup>16</sup> Also related is the idea that a baby’s ethnicity is determined by the male.

*“In the Balkans, a patriarchal society, the family name pass on the through the*

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<sup>15</sup> Todd A. Salzman, “Rape Camps as a Means of Ethnic Cleansing: Religious, Cultural, and Ethical Responses to Rape Victims in the Former Yugoslavia,” *Women’s Rights: A Human Rights Quarterly Reader*, ed. Bert B. Lockwood (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006), Pg. 330.

<sup>16</sup> Salzman, Pg. 334.

*male, regardless of religion or ethnicity. Even though biologically the child shares an equal amount of genetic material from the male and female, this fact does not overcome the sense that a child born from rape by a Serb will always be considered Serbian.”<sup>17</sup>*

The male responsible for the victim has not only lost his masculine identity as protector, but also must live with a woman who is carrying a Serbian baby in her womb. The Serbian government recognized the power beneath these social rules.

*“The DELO reports that the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) Psychological Operations department in Belgrade developed a plan to drive Muslims out of Bosnia Based on an analysis of Muslim behavior which “showed that their morale, desire for battle, and will could be crushed more easily by raping women, especially minors and even children.”<sup>18</sup>*

Their tactics turned out to be effective.

### ***Beautiful Brutality: Torture***

Along with the horror that rape spread, torture universalized the chaos, pushing the country over the edge into un-policed insanity. A New York Times article of the time reported that “In its final global human rights report, the Bush Administration said today that Serbian forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina were conducting a campaign of “cruelty, brutality and killing” unrivaled since Nazi times.”<sup>19</sup> Peter Mass also compares the actions of the Nazis and those of the Serbs, saying

*“The Nazis were interested in killing as many Jews as possible, and doing it as quickly as possible. The Serbs, however, wanted to interrogate their Bosnian prisoners,*

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<sup>17</sup> Salzman, Pg. 327.

<sup>18</sup> Salzman, Pg. 319.

<sup>19</sup> “Abuses by Serbs the Worst Since Nazi Era, Report Says,” *New York Times*, 20 January 1993, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F0CE0DF123FF933A15752C0A965958260>.

*have sadistic fun by torturing them in the cruelest of ways and then kill them with whatever implement was most convenient, perhaps a gun, perhaps a knife or scissors, perhaps a pair of strong hands wrapped around an emaciated neck.”<sup>20</sup>*

This report isn’t romanticized. Evidence comes from the long list of victim declarations in the Helsinki Watch/Human Rights Watch report, War Crimes in Bosnia-Hercegovina. One account states,

*“They cursed me and threw me on the floor. They found a knife and a hammer in the house. They made me lie on my stomach with my arms expanded and hammered on my fingers. They smashed my fingers with a hammer and destroyed a knuckle on my right-hand middle finger. They used a kitchen knife to carve my face. They cut the muscle on my right calf and my chest. They hit me six times with a crowbar over the head.”<sup>21</sup>*

The widespread torture had a significant psychological affect. It pushed rational people to do anything to keep themselves and their families alive. Victor Frankl records his observations of people during immense fear, saying “they were prepared to use every means, honest and otherwise, even brutal force, theft, and betrayal of their friends in order to save themselves.”<sup>22</sup> In Bosnia, the Serbian government destroyed the original cross-cultural acceptance by manipulating the population’s human desire to survive.

Torture also had an important effect on the Serbs who were on Milosevic’s side. By enveloping the entire country in fear, everyone felt it, and everyone had a connection to a victim. Surrounded by it, immersed in it, Serbs who would have otherwise spoken out against the atrocities grew apathetic. “Apathy, the blunting of the emotions and

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<sup>20</sup> Maass, Pg. 45.

<sup>21</sup> *War Crimes in Bosnia-Hercegovina: U.N. Cease-Fire Won't Help Banja Luka*, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1994/bosnia2/> (June, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> Frankl, Pg. 5.

the feeling that one could not care any more... was a necessary mechanism of self-defense.”<sup>23</sup> Since everyone was trying to protect themselves, the real victims, the ones who were tortured with scissors and hammers, were left in the dark to die.

### **Media Manipulation: The Horrors of Serbian Propaganda**

The war in the former Yugoslavia was completely centered on the civilian population. As a 1992 Times News article reported, “civilians are prime targets, and every method to terrorize, displace or, if need be, kill them is part of the arsenals on all sides.”<sup>24</sup> Government officials pounded the people with nationalist propaganda messages to create the fear and confusion that would eventually cause the ethnic diversity present in Bosnia to collapse into a war of cultural identity. “The most amazing thing about the role of television was that it not only had the power to form people’s opinions, but it could change those opinions overnight.”<sup>25</sup> During his war crimes trial, Milosevic himself was charged with utilizing,

*“Serbian state-run media to spread exaggerated and false messages of ethnically based attacks by Bosnian Muslims and Croats against Serbs intended to create an atmosphere of fear and hatred among Serbs living in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina which contributed to the forcible removal of the majority of non-Serbs.”<sup>26</sup>*

To convince the population that multiethnic existence was impossible, and that Serbian assaults were completely necessary to prevent a Muslim takeover of the

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<sup>23</sup> Frankl, Pg. 23-28.

<sup>24</sup> “Atrocity and Outrage,” *Time Magazine*, 17 August 1992, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,976238,00.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Maass, Pg. 227.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations, *Milosevic Case Information Sheet (IT-02-54) "Bosnia and Herzegovina,"* <http://www.un.org/icty/glance/milosevic.htm> (April, 2005).

Yugoslavian “democracy”, Serb nationalist leaders focused propaganda on three points: dehumanizing the enemy, using historical evidence to justify attacks, and denial. These messages, broadcasted incessantly, brainwashed the Serb population to fear and hate their Muslim neighbors.

***“The Enemy Isn’t Human”***

The idea of convincing a culturally accepting nation that their neighbors were less than human seems impossible. However, Serbian nationalist leaders were able to accomplish this perverse feat. With complete control of the media, Milosevic, “a well-trained Communist who understood the power and importance of propaganda”, decided what to say, when to say it, and exactly how loud it would sound.<sup>27</sup> It must not be forgotten that by the time the policies of ethnic cleansing had began, Milosevic had “moved from being a second-rate politician to almost a god”, whose “ruthlessness [had] always been paired with competence and superficial charm.”<sup>28</sup> The Serbian government used their media monopoly and Milosevic’s popularity to broadcast constant messages that the Muslim population lacked humanity, that however normal they may have seemed, they were a virus that needed a vaccine.

While these statements seem completely unreasonable, whatever the propaganda lacked in rationality, it made up in repetition.

*“If you keep repeating on television and radio and in every address to your troops, as the Serbs have done, that the enemy is not human; that you may have grown up with the man, and you may think you know him, but in reality you don’t; in short, that you are*

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<sup>27</sup> Maass, Pg. 227.

<sup>28</sup> “The Butcher of the Balkans,” *Time Magazine*, 8 June 199, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,975723-4,00.html>.

*confronting a devil, then the results are all but foreordained.”<sup>29</sup>*

Every form of information was centered on pushing the Serbian policy of ethnic cleansing; there was no possibility of receiving outside information, coming into contact with the truth, or seeing the numerous atrocities that took place behind the curtain. It was a twisted psychological trap set on the Bosnian civilians. Frightened and angered by the violence and looking for mental security, they had no choice but to believe the televised lies.

People also believed the messages because they wanted too. The declaration that the Muslim population wasn’t human gave people a reason for their fear and insecurity. Psychologically, people want to believe what is least painful. “Under the pressure of reality, we become credulous.”<sup>30</sup> Ethnic cleansing was an extremely painful reality, and the idea that one side was to blame became increasingly appealing as the suffering increased.

Additionally, the belief that the Muslims lacked humanity acted as an invitation to release all the anger that haunted the population. From a scientific standpoint, “many psychologists have remarked that anger has more overtones; almost all anger is righteous anger. Furious people feel they are aggrieved and must redress an injustice.”<sup>31</sup> In context, the civilian majority felt that their suffering was unjust, and when the Serbian government gave them a population to hate and a reason why, the people took it willingly. As Warren Zimmerman writes, when a government “uses its power of the mass media to exhort people to hate – then many citizens look to the press not for information

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<sup>29</sup> Rieff, Pg. 107.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1997), Pg 5.

<sup>31</sup> Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, Inc., 1997), Pg 404.

but for emotional reassurance. They can take righteous satisfaction in discharging their anger at their neighbors.”<sup>32</sup> Although the idea that the Muslim people were not human may seem completely unreasonable, incessant broadcasting combined with the basic desire for an explanation made such an idea plausible.

### ***1389: Historical Justification of Serbian Atrocities***

History has not been kind to the Serbs. From the 1459 collapse of the Serbian empire onward, Turkish domination brought slavery, famine and plague, leaving the culture completely devastated. “The Serbian rebellions of 1689 and in the 1730’s led to mass exoduses as the Serbian patriarchs, after twice encouraging their people to rise, were forced to lead them into exile.”<sup>33</sup> The stories of oppression passed through generations have created an undercurrent of agitation that surfaced during the war in the former Yugoslavia. Milosevic used propaganda to push this undercurrent to the surface. Just as Lara Marlowe described in an interview with a Serb militiaman, “like so many former Yugoslavs, Zamaklaar learned hatred – not compassion – from the past.”<sup>34</sup>

The propaganda that used historical justification was so convincing because it tapped into strong psychological influences bound by tradition and culture. Serbian history is full with religious conflict, and nationalist leaders used the importance of religious identity to separate the Christian Serbs from the Islamic Muslims. The popularization of the Serbian drama *The Mountain Wreath* serves as a perfect example. Written by Petar II Petrovic and published in 1847, it “portrays and glorifies the

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<sup>32</sup> Zimmermann, Pg. 121.

<sup>33</sup> Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth & the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), Pg. 10.

<sup>34</sup> “‘‘Cleansed’’ Wound,” *Time Magazine*, 14 September 1992, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,976445,00.html>.

Christmas Eve extermination of Slavic Muslims at the hands of Serb warriors.”<sup>35</sup> The Serbian government used such accounts to trap the Muslim population in a vicious trap. From a linguistic standpoint, Muslims were labeled Serbs. However, according to the much-broadcasted standards of *The Mountain Wreath*, “all Serbs had to be Christian, and any conversion to Islam was a betrayal of Serb blood.”<sup>36</sup> The Muslim population was made out to be traitors of their own people, and this idea of betrayal was eaten up by the civilian population.

Serbian nationalists also broadcast epic poetry about the Battle of Kosovo that commemorated the honor of the Serbian Prince Lazar and pushed the idea that Serbs are and always have been noble victims. Milosevic was able to draw a million Serbs to show up at a mass rally on June 28, 1989 to celebrate the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, at which he proclaimed “Serbs in their history have never conquered or exploited others. Through two world wars, they have liberated themselves and, when they could, they also helped others to liberate themselves.”<sup>37</sup> By suggesting that Serbs have been the historical victims and backing the statement with religious support, Milosevic spurred a wave of self-pity that drove civilians to look for their oppressors. In the same propaganda messages, Milosevic provided the answer. However coincidentally, the Muslim population happened to be the traitors that stabbed the Serbs in the back. As a Serb fighter stated, completely convinced, “before this summer ends we will have driven the Turkish army out of [Sarajevo], just as they drove us from the field of Kosovo in 1389. That was the beginning of Turkish domination of our lands. This will be the end

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<sup>35</sup> Michael A. Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), Pg. 41.

<sup>36</sup> Sells, Pg. 43.

<sup>37</sup> Naimark, Pg. 152.

of it, after all these cruel centuries.”<sup>38</sup> Milosevic realized that psychologically, people would rather be the victim. Historical evidence was an ingenious and perverse way of suggesting such an idea.

### ***A Violent Victim: Denial as a Propaganda Tool***

The use of denial in Serbian propaganda was not complicated. The Serbian government was simply trying to pose as the victimized culture while simultaneously committing enough violence to overload the population with fear. Playing two parts in such a drama required Milosevic to mask one side. Logically he chose the side that was initiating the attacks on innocent civilians and provoking Muslims to retaliate.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, Milosevic wanted the Muslim community to attack and mutilate Serbian civilians. Muslim retaliation created a cycle of murder that made the original Serbian perpetrators indistinguishable and the idea of ethnic coexistence infeasible. Consequently, denial only served to screen the initial and most horrifying Serbian assaults, for once the Muslims fought back, they could be blamed for everything. As reporter Tom Gjelten wrote,

*“The Serb nationalists who attacked the city may have been deliberately prompting the Muslims and Croats of Sarajevo to hate the Serbs in return. Such was the conclusion when Serb military commanders, in a body exchange with Sarajevo authorities, delivered the remains of three Muslim soldiers who had been decapitated, apparently while still alive, and of a Muslim woman whose throat had been slit and whose body showed signs of sexual abuse. Such actions made Serb-Muslim coexistence*

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<sup>38</sup> Rieff, Pg. 103.

*all the more unimaginable.”<sup>39</sup>*

Such atrocities were committed to provoke the Muslim population to fight back; however once they did, Serb nationalists immediately labeled them as the perpetrators and used their retaliatory actions to justify even more brutality. The idea that “there are, as Milosevic insists, ‘no innocent sides’” in such a conflict is exactly what the Serbian government wanted the world to see.<sup>40</sup> The statement, “No one’s hands are clean in this dreadful war... All have done horrible things” is denial in the sense that people don’t want to believe that humans have the capacity to commit conscious atrocities on such a large scale.<sup>41</sup> The Serb aggressors tapped into the human temptation to diffuse blame to the point where the original perpetrator is unrecognizable; or even more important, to push it onto an identity unrelated to your own. Belgrade University psychology professor Zarko Korac described the most common excuses for the crimes committed. “Either people will say ‘we did not know’ or they will justify everything by saying ‘we only did to them what they did to us’.”<sup>42</sup> In any case, the attempt to push the responsibility away from oneself became extremely prevalent in the Bosnian conflict. Serb nationalists manipulated this desire and denied their initial assaults to blur the idea of a single perpetrator, giving the Serb population a chance to rid themselves of responsibility. Once the Muslims were drawn into the fray by the basic instincts of survival, Serbian propaganda dropped the yoke of liability onto their shoulders, leaving themselves free to

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<sup>39</sup> Tome Gjelten, *Sarajevo Daily: A City and Its Newspaper Under Siege* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), Pg 141.

<sup>40</sup> “The Butcher of the Balkans,” *Time Magazine*, 8 June 199, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,975723-4,00.html>.

<sup>41</sup> “Rumor & Reality,” *Time Magazine*, 24 August 1992, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,976324,00.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Judah, Pg 238

carry on the vicious policy of ethnic cleansing.

### **From Confusion to Conciliation: What Must Be Done**

The war in the Former Yugoslavia was filled with emotion. Fear and hate dictated the acts of civilians and soldiers alike, driving the country down a road of chaos. The Serbian government set the stage for these emotions, bringing them to the forefront of people's mentalities. The use of rape and torture surrounded the population in horror, leading them to take sides for their own protection. In turn, Serbian population further destroyed the cross-cultural connections, literally brainwashing Serbian civilians into believing that capturing, raping, beating, killing, and torturing Muslim people was completely necessary.

To prevent this crisis from ever repeating, we must study, investigate, and understand it. We must set our biases aside in an attempt to enter the minds of both sides, discovering why Serbian people believed Milosevic, why they were so apt to follow him. Until we have truly exposed all the factors of such a war, the risk of it reoccurring is imminent. We see it today, in Rwanda; in Liberia; in Darfur... the potential of the human race to destroy itself is limitless. But so is its potential to understand, and we must use that potential to create peace in places so full of fear.

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