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The Wages of Denial

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TEN years ago this week, Serbian forces slaughtered more than 7,000 Muslim men in the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica. Despite the efforts of a dedicated few in Serbia, and despite the war crimes prosecutions at The Hague, Serbia is no closer today than it was a decade ago to reckoning with its war guilt.

For years Belgrade has denied involvement by its citizens in Srebrenica and other massacres of the 1990s. The recent broadcast of a graphic video that showed Serbian paramilitary police executing six young men from Srebrenica should have made it very hard to sustain that revisionism. Amazing as it seems, however, the video was not enough to shatter what Serbian human rights activist Sonja Biserko has described as the country's "state of collective denial."

Fewer than half of Serbs polled last spring believed the Srebrenica massacre took place. And while much has been made of the video's effects on a shocked Serbian public, it remains to be seen where that public will stand once the furor recedes. The Radical Party, which won 27 percent of the popular vote in the last national elections, making it the largest party in Parliament, has already criticized what it sees as the anti-Serb hysteria that "wishes at all costs to put the burden of all crimes on Serbia." Graffiti has appeared in several cities praising the "liberation" of Srebrenica. Rumors circulate that the video was doctored, or that the men committing the crimes were acting independently.

Instead of coming to terms with its past, Serbia has circumvented the issue with the narrative skills befitting a psychopath. For example, a debate on Srebrenica at the Belgrade Law Faculty earlier this year was initially titled "10 Years After the Liberation of Srebrenica." In response to the video, Serbia's president, Boris Tadic, said, "Serbia is deeply shocked" that "the killers had walked freely among us." But Mr. Tadic's government surely knows that the killers in the video are but a small fraction of the number who continue to walk the streets of Serbia and Montenegro as free men.

A fairy tale has passed for public memory until now in Serbia and Montenegro and it is conspicuous in its omission of Serb atrocities in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, which left hundreds of thousands dead. The Serbian version of that history denies the fact that President Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia and those like him enjoyed overwhelming popular support in Serbia during the war, despite the evictions, rapes and unchecked slaughter by Yugoslav troops and irregulars. It suggests that Belgrade today has nothing to do with Belgrade as it was 10 years ago. It aims at an absurd relativism, placing Serbian atrocities within the

context of crimes committed by other ethnicities (in fact, the C.I.A. has reported that Serbs were responsible for 90 percent of all atrocities committed in Bosnia). Mr. Tadic was quoted as saying, "Crimes are always individual." All of this is fiction.

At the end of the Second World War, Allied troops forced German citizens to walk through Nazi death camps. They were confronted by crimes committed in their name, in order to ensure that those crimes could not be denied or minimized later. The people of Serbia and Montenegro, by contrast, have never been forced to acknowledge the crimes committed in their name.

There are those who refuse to whitewash Serbia's recent past. The Helsinki Human Rights Committee in Serbia and the independent broadcaster Radio B92 are admirable examples. People like Natasa Kandic, chairwoman of the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade, have spent years fighting for the truth, often at great personal risk. Extremists threatened to lynch Ms. Kandic at the law school debate on Srebrenica, and one of them spat in her face.

Eight of Serbia's human rights groups have drafted a declaration on Srebrenica that would obligate the country's government to confess to the massacre and to "expose and punish any ideological justification of crime." But the daily newspaper Blic reported that the majority of parties in Serbia's Parliament refused not only to endorse the declaration but also to debate it.

Serbia must relinquish the fairy tale that its own wartime suffering was equivalent to the devastation it visited on others. Adopting an honest declaration on Srebrenica would have been an important first step, and the Serbian Parliament should have taken it. For as long as Serbia's people deny complicity in war crimes, they undercut any hope for justice and cheat their country out of any decent future. The Western aid money that has poured into Serbia may help rebuild the country's infrastructure, but it will do nothing to cut out the cancer that riddles the country's heart.

Western governments are anxious for reconciliation in the Balkans, which would ensure future stability in the region. They are pushing hard for the arrests of people like Radovan Karadzic, the architect of the genocide, and Ratko Mladic, who carried it out, and they lauded the speed with which the Serbian government detained those suspected of being the killers shown on the video. But those arrests will not be nearly enough.

Such men were not exceptions, nor were they acting independently, and Serbia must acknowledge this truth, rather than denying or minimizing it. That means surrendering all war crimes suspects to The Hague and paying reparations to the victims of war. The West should ask for no less than this when it considers Serbian requests for aid.

Courtney Angela Brkic is the author of "Stillness: And Other Stories" and "The Stone Fields," an account of her work excavating mass graves outside Srebrenica.