

# SHAMELESSNESS OF DENIAL

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We would be deprived if the goal of for war crime trials were merely to carry out punishment for perpetrators and orderers, without our reaching the realisation about co-responsibility we all have to a greater or smaller extent.

Even though humanitarian law defines what a crime is in a war, it fails to recognise war itself as a crime. Still, all around us, even ten years later, there are many traces of the war, starting with hatred, to the exiled, families of missing persons, destroyed lives of people deprived of their rights, having suffered injustice that no court could set straight. War is a crime in itself, even when it is 'only' soldiers killing each other. In spite of that, or for that very reason, all of us, even those who have come out of the war fairly unharmed, have a duty of recognising our own responsibility, both for what we have done and supported and for what we haven't done and could have.

Even today, it is with incredible energy and hatred that many publicly storm at citizens' associations that struggle for human rights or contribute to shedding light on crimes, and many ordinary people view them as traitors. They are being accused of being mercenary or profiteer. And in turn, these same people recognise the ones who, during the bombing of Serbia, got apartments as a reward for their political merits as protectors, their hopes for the future are inspired by the ones who shamelessly enriched themselves during the greatest poverty and robbery organised and sponsored by the state. There is no hatred against such, and in fact there shouldn't be any, for hatred is an illness a person carries, genuine contempt for such individuals would be much more appropriate.

An average person living in Serbia today, in the year 2005, on the tenth anniversary of cessation of military actions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, will tell you they condemn all crimes and that the ones responsible should be punished, at the same time opposing extradition of 'our guys' to some foreign court, and that the traitors are the ones from our side who expose evidence of crimes committed on their behalf. The crime on our behalf is confessed and condemned with abhorrence providing there is footage of the killing, and the fact that, say, the remains of hundreds and thousands of executed civilians lie in a warehouse near Tuzla hasn't been enough for the realisation of the committed crime to be accepted. It is no better in the case of our neighbours we have lead the war against, but this average citizen is prepared to compete in shamelessness of denying with the

neighbours instead of taking a painful step of facing and confessing, a step that is painful because it entails starting from one's own self. Where have I been, what have I been doing, whom was I supporting, whom was I admiring, trusting, cheering to? The whole life bursting like a soap bubble.

And then, what follows is a tainted myth of innocence and righteousness of one's own people, the myth that should be got rid of and the fact accepted that people cannot be viewed in terms of honest-dishonest, good-bad. Not much remains for this average person to hold on to, and that's why it is hard, because, on the bases of black and white categories, they cannot place themselves where they would like to. And it is not that hard, because a person is what a person does, and their actions can be altered in accordance with their sense and sense of justice.

#### *Condemnation and sentence*

The realisation that not all are the same seems like a good start. There are many Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Albanians who don't identify themselves with crimes committed on behalf of their people, but instead condemn these publicly, and, let's call things their proper names, they are not traitors, but conscience of their own people.

The first prerequisite for reconciliation and building mutual trust between people who were on opposing sides during the war is not to sanction war crimes, but for them to be condemned by the ones on behalf of whom they had been committed. Sanctioning is a logical step that follows, not for the sake of revenge or setting straight the injustice that cannot be set straight, but as an act of a responsible society that removes the blur of collective guilt and reduces it to what it is, individual guilt. The punishment for a crime is not satisfaction to the families of the victims, but an acknowledgement of their suffering, injustice done to them, establishing the truth about the fate of the victims is what brings certainty and ends a longtime process of struggle for truth and justice. This act merely opens the possibility of the wounds people carry for years healing.

Things would be easier and more simple if the same criteria would be applied to 'ours' and 'others', then we would only measure with our own sense of justice and basic humanity, with no interference of the national as an element influencing the value system, transforming the suffering of our compatriots into something larger and more important than that of the other side.

Responsibility is linked with the power we have

to influence things, us, citizens of Serbia, carry this responsibility in this country of ours first of all, that's where we can influence and contribute to building a more just and more humane society, in favor of the huge majority, including these maddened, confused and scared ordinary citizens of ours. We also carry the responsibility for allowing the opportunity to change, to not label people and allow them to abandon the bonds of stances they had been slaves to ten years ago. If we succumb to the attraction of superior entrenchment and moralising, from the position of those whose 'hands are clean', as opposed to people with 'dirty hands', we will do injustice to the tricked ones, the ones who haven't known, haven't been able to, have been afraid, have lied to themselves, and even to the ones who have repented. The road of reconciliation also starts with ourselves, in relation to and against society that supports change instead of cementing the current condition and expanding the trenches between 'us, the good' and 'them, the evil'.

#### *Former warriors for peace*

The one time warriors and peace activists are two seemingly irreconcilable categories of people. Some would call them patriots and traitors respectively. It has been four years now since former warriors from Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have worked together at what they have recognised as a shared value, peacebuilding in the region. It had been hard to initiate such a thing, but much easier than would have been expected. Contrary to the prevailing opinion about irreconcilable opposition, a great number of people from all the one time warring sides, perceive the senselessness of violence they have taken part in and feel the need and responsibility to, learning from their gruesome experience, become engaged in building peace and cooperation between people, to advocate the rights of all, and particularly the ones they used to experience as enemies.

It is not just the superficial and fake story of 'whoever lead us to fight each other', it is not even the one of 'the politicians are to blame, if it had been up to people the war would never have taken place'. Things are more profound than that. The people had indeed been asked, and when they had been asked, believing they'd win, the majority had been in favor of the war, which should also be faced. Expectations had not been met, and their hearts filled with sorrow, rage, hatred and fear.

One should oppose 'one's own', the ones in their own environments who keep spreading hatred, who keep the hopes of revenge warm,

who allow themselves to speak on our behalf, who flaunt the numbers of the masses behind them as they speak and deny the ones who think differently the right to say or do anything. The choice is before the people yet again, the choice between fake security of misconception trying to justify injustice done to others, and honesty in relation to 'their own' and 'others'. I know dozens of warriors from all three one time warring sides who now have the courage to fight for peace and justice, for a fair society they live in, and many of them say it was easier to carry a gun than fight myths of immaculacy of their own people. I have also seen thousands of people who have visited panel discussions where the former warriors from all three sides spoke and who generally saluted these brave people. And the greatest number of visitors were former warriors and refugees, the ones that were

severely affected by the war. Such voices are not rare, but are rarely heard from all the noise makers and bullies from all three sides, that's why it is important to react, that's why it is important to voice it, to make it clear that it is not on our behalf.

If we lived in a country in which all structures of state and society had a consensus about this honest attitude, that every person must have their own right, regardless of their name, there would be less need for citizens to come together to protect themselves or to express their solidarity in protecting others. Unfortunately, more often than not people realize this only when they feel injustice on their own skin and see that the others don't care because they fear for themselves, and in fact merely hope they are not the next in line.

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