

8-27-1999

## What Will Self-Admissions of Atrocities Beget? The Case of the Serbian Nation

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### Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (1999) "What Will Self-Admissions of Atrocities Beget? The Case of the Serbian Nation," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 8 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol7/iss8/3>

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Author: Editor

Volume: 7

Issue: 8

Date: 1999-08-27

Keywords: Atrocities, Blame, Guilt, Shame

Abstract. This article examines the possible consequences of admitting national guilt in the perpetration of atrocities.

Many policy analysts are supporting the position that Serbia--the government and its people--not receive many kinds of humanitarian and developmental aid. The support stems from the observation that neither the Serbian government nor most of the Serbian people have "owned up" to the Serbian perpetration of atrocities. The analysts assert that the Serbian government is engaging in the partially contradictory nexus of denying that the atrocities occurred except as socially constructed by Kosovar Albanian and Western propaganda and biased mind-sets, terming the atrocities as understandable and proportional reactions to Kosovar Albanian atrocities, attributing the atrocities not to formal governmental policy but to the dysfunctional behaviors of uncontrollable rogue elements, or blaming the atrocities on Kosovar Albanians masquerading as Serbs. The analysts assert that the Serbian people are engaging in all the above, plus asserting that it was the government's fault not the people's and/or that it wasn't the Serbian army who was responsible but police, paramilitary, and common criminals engaged in uncommon--if systematic and planned--behavior.

So, policy analysts maintain that "owning up" to atrocities is the key to Serbian aid. But why? In other parts of the world, admitting to the commission of atrocities has been the intermediate goal of Truth Commissions towards the terminal goal of healing a nation and marching forward to the construction of a new world--as in South Africa. The assumption of these Truth Commissions is that the level and intensity of violence has been so severe and so widespread that bringing all perpetrators to justice through legal adjudication would be prohibitive and would too greatly impede the New World sought by citizens looking out and living in a New Time. Yet some sort of justice to victims and their survivors is needed. Thus the Truth Commission.

Yet--even in the case of the Truth Commission--admitting to atrocities is less than necessarily optimal to and for a better future. In other cases--such as Chile--a better future has occurred subsequent to pardoning the perpetrators of atrocities without any "owning up" at all. In still other cases there may be no attempt at forcing an account--not even the vaguely implicit accounting suggested by pardoning--or there may be some symbolic trials of top-level political leaders and/or lower-level perpetrators. The results of these policies are mixed. For example, in the cases of Nazi Germany and the Japan of Tojo, an extremely successful future followed no serious attempt to force an admission of guilt upon a nation, only a regime. In the case of the Kaiser's Germany, a regime's admission of guilt merely for war as opposed to war atrocities led to a further war in which atrocities occurred.

Forcing a nation to admit guilt seems close to stereotyping an entire "them." One then asserts that the entire nation springs from, or is characterized by, bad seed or some mark or taint. There is little from the historical and social sciences to suggest such can be the case. Moreover, if this were the case, why would admission of guilt change future behavior--even if there would there be experienced guilt, shame, blame?

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One is left with the realization that policy analysts' demands for public expiation, contrition, and confession of a nation are based less on hopes for a better future but on revenge for the past, projection of one's own malignant tendencies, and a figurative sacrifice of one's other--as is often the case when admissions of guilt are demanded from individual perpetrators of evil. In these ways, policy analysts are little different from those they attack. (See Bergler, E. (1952). *The superego: Unconscious conscience*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press. Inc.; Ferguson, T.J., et al. (1999). Guilt, shame, and symptoms in children. *Developmental Psychology*, 35, 347-357; Ferguson, T.J., et al. (1997). Temporal dynamics of guilt: Changes in the role of interpersonal and intrapsychic factors. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 27, 659-673; Stolorow, R.D. (1985). Toward a pure psychology of inner conflict. In A. Goldberg et al. (Ed.). *Progress in self psychology* Vol. 1. (pp. 193-201). NY: Guilford Press; Sullivan, S. (August 21, 1999). Milosevic is one problem. National denial is the other. *The New York Times*, p. A23.) (Keywords: Atrocities, Blame, Guilt, Shame.)