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Export date: Mon Sep 7 12:54:46 2026 / +0000 GMT

Balkan ghosts

by GWYNNE DYER

?Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown,? says an old friend to Jack Nicholson as the mother is killed, the little girl is handed over to the bad guy and the police wash their hands of it at the end of the 1974 classic film ?Chinatown'.

The movie was about the triumph of power and the futility of hoping for justice. ?Chinatown' was just a metaphor, and any other place where justice is denied would do as well. Which is probably why today I feel like saying ?Forget it, Mehmetçik. It's the Balkans.?

Last Saturday was the 25th anniversary of the massacre of Bosnian Muslims (?Bosniaks') in Srebrenica towards the end of the 1992-95 war in Bosnia. It was the Bosnian Serbs who began the war, seeking to break up Bosnia and unite with next-door Serbia, and since Bosniaks and Serbs lived side by side in many places there was much ethnic cleansing. But this was special.

Srebrenica was then a Muslim-majority town, and when Bosnian Serb forces captured it 20,000 Muslims took refuge with the Dutch troops who were there to protect a UN-declared ?safe area'. But the Dutch soldiers handed them over to the Bosnian Serb forces.

The Dutch had a choice, of course. They could have refused. Maybe they would have had to fight against far more numerous and better armed Serbs. Maybe they would have been killed, and the people they were supposed to protect would have been massacred anyway. But they were soldiers, and that was their duty.

When soldiers talk about having signed a contract of ?unlimited liability', this is what they mean: when the circumstances demand it, you must be willing to lay down your life. In fact, this is what gives dignity to the military profession ? but the Dutch soldiers had apparently not read the contract.

Knowing what was coming, most of the Muslim men and boys fled into the woods, but about 2,000 who had taken refuge with the Dutch UN troops were handed over to the Serbs. The Serbs separated those men and boys from the women and girls, chased down most of the men who had fled into the woods, and murdered them all ? 8,000 of them.

It took ten days, even with bulldozers to scrape out the mass graves. (Later the Serbs dug up the graves and moved them to better hidden areas, but after 25 years of searching all but a thousand have been found.)

Twenty years later a special UN war crimes tribunal sentenced the Bosnian Serb leader, Radovan Karadzic, to life in prison for genocide. (His military commander, Ratko Mladic, is still appealing his conviction.) But few of the Bosniaks driven from their homes have been able to go back ? and denial reigns in both the Bosnian ?Serb Republic' and in Serbia proper.

For the Serbs it's all fake news, a ?fabricated myth? in the words of Milorad Dodik, the Serb member of Bosnia's three-person presidency. The president of Serbia, Alexander Vucic, doesn't go quite that far, but denies that there was a genocide. It's all very ?Balkan'.

From great tragedy and vile lies to mere churlishness: next week, in Istanbul, there will be Muslim prayer services in Hagia Sofia for the first time since 1934. The massive cathedral overlooking the Bosphorus, built almost 1,500 years ago, was the world's largest building for almost a thousand years.

When the Ottoman emperor Mehmet II conquered the city in 1453, he was much taken with the bulding and had it converted into a mosque. All the Christian symbols and relics were destroyed, four minarets were built at the four corners, and for the next half-millennium only Muslims prayed there.

Fair enough. Conquest was the business, and that's how business was done in those days. The Ottoman empire went on to conquer almost all of the Balkans, so nobody in the Christian world seriously dreamed of getting Hagia Sophia back. But the centuries passed, and eventually the empire collapsed.

The Turkish republic that Ataturk rescued from the wreckage was a secular state, and in 1934 he declared that this ancient Christian church should no longer be used as a mosque. It became a museum, open to all ? and remained so until Turkey's current president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, decided to turn it into a mosque again.

There's no shortage of mosques in Istanbul. Indeed, there's another one right beside Hagia Sophia, almost as big, much more beautiful, and with six minarets, not four. Erdogan is only doing this because his popularity is waning: his proxy wars aren't going well, his party has split, and the economy is on the rocks. So do something spiteful to the neighbours. It should play well at home.

It's 500 km from Bosnia to Istanbul, but we're still in the Balkans.