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# THE BOSNIAN CALCULATION

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By George Kenney  
April 23, 1995



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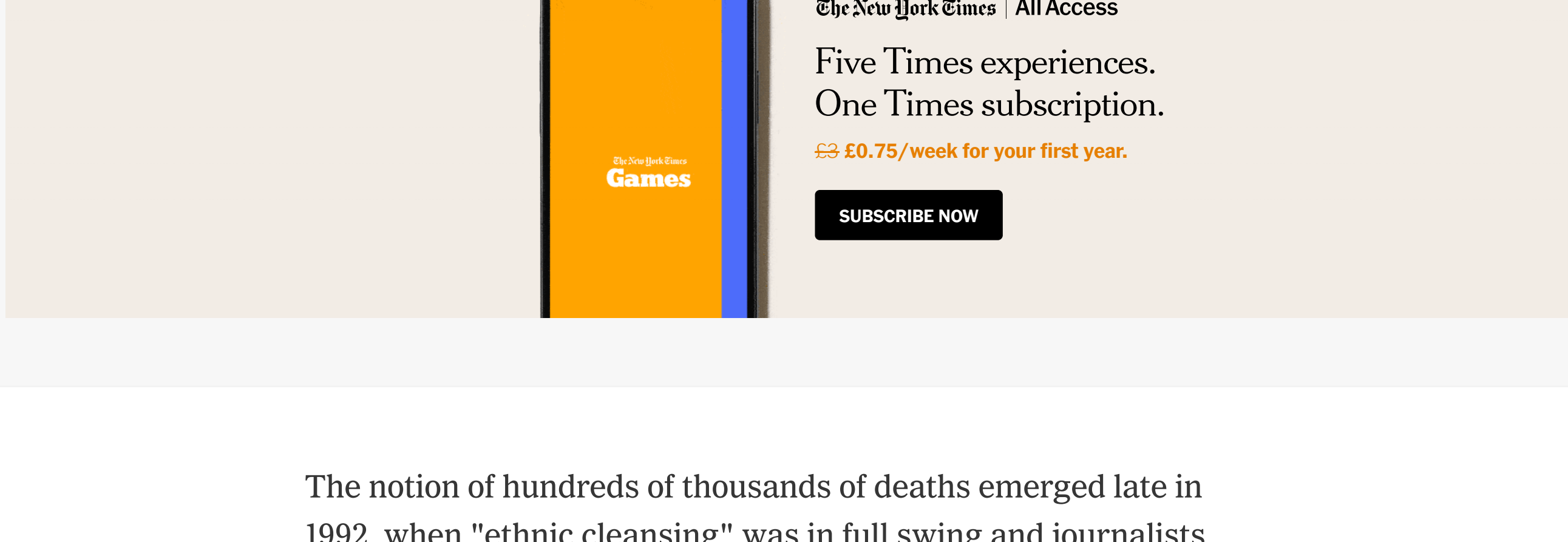
ALL TOLD, HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE DIED IN Bosnia? For news organizations and policy specialists, the easy answer is 200,000. As someone who has followed the conflict closely from the beginning in a professional capacity, I'm not convinced. Bosnia isn't the Holocaust or Rwanda; it's Lebanon.

A relatively large number of white people have been killed in gruesome fashion in the first European blowup since World War II. In response, the United Nations has set up the first international war crimes trials since Nuremberg. But that doesn't mean the Bosnian Serbs' often brutal treatment of Bosnian Muslims is a unique genocide, as the United Nations and the Bosnian Muslims have charged.

There can be no minimizing of what the Serbs have done in Bosnia. Their punishment of the Muslims far outweighs any Muslim transgression. For there to be peace in the long run there must be justice. Yet the more serious the charge, the more effort we must make to get the facts right. We should think twice before revising historical fact into a fearful epic that plants the seeds for a future war.

By my count, the number of fatalities in Bosnia's war isn't 200,000 but 25,000 to 60,000 -- total, from all sides. What surprises me is not that the popular figure is so inflated -- informed people can and will argue about it for some time to come -- but that it has been so widely and uncritically accepted.

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The notion of hundreds of thousands of deaths emerged late in 1992, when "ethnic cleansing" was in full swing and journalists suspected the State Department of concealing its knowledge of a Bosnian killing field. It didn't. Its real failure was knowing nothing and not wanting to know.

In August 1992, shortly before I resigned as acting head of the State Department's Yugoslav desk, I wrote a memo suggesting that we send teams to investigate, and was rebuffed. At that time my most dire concern was a C.I.A. report predicting up to 150,000 deaths through the winter if the West did nothing. Leaked in September, the report seemed tame next to a prediction of 400,000 deaths, made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Special Envoy, Jose-Maria Mendiluce, a man, one senior United Nations official says, "gifted with theatrical flair." As it turned out, the winter was exceptionally mild. Few died.

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Nevertheless, revelations of ethnic cleansing, combined with the C.I.A. and United Nations predictions, created expectations. Images of a killing field lingered, personified in grim photographs of skeletal Muslim men in Serbian concentration camps. That backdrop made it easy for Haris Silajdzic, then Bosnia's Foreign Minister, to give the first big boost in the number of deaths. In December 1992, he told journalists that there were 128,444 dead on the Bosnian side (including Croats and Serbs loyal to the Bosnian Government). He evidently got the figure by adding together the 17,466 confirmed dead and the 111,000 that the Bosnian Institute of Public Health had estimated to be missing. An able politician, Silajdzic understood the benefit of apparent slaughter: In the West, it meant political support; in the Islamic world, much-needed donations to lubricate the Bosnian war machine.

At first, such high numbers didn't take. But on June 28, 1993 -- as near as I can pin it down -- the Bosnian Deputy Minister of Information, Senada Kreso, told journalists that 200,000 had died. Knowing her from her service as my translator and guide around Sarajevo, I believe that this was an outburst of naive zeal. Nevertheless, the major newspapers and wire services quickly began using these numbers, unsourced and unsupported. (Mea culpa: I used the figure of 200,000 dead in articles and speeches for a while in 1993.) An inert press simply never bothered to learn the origins of the numbers it reported.

Today, Silajdzic, now the Prime Minister, routinely talks about genocide and the "Bosnian holocaust" with nary an eyebrow raised in his audience. But there was no holocaust. For Bosnia, an area slightly larger than Tennessee, to have suffered more than 200,000 deaths would have meant roughly 200 deaths per day, every day, for the three-plus years of war. But the fighting rarely, if ever, reached that level. After the Serbs carved out the areas they wanted in 1992, fighting declined steadily, reaching a virtual stalemate by autumn 1993. Now on the front lines, combatants often shoot past each other, tactically understanding that in a low-intensity war nobody wants to get hurt.

Outright warfare, therefore, has probably resulted in deaths measured in the tens of thousands, including civilians. If there were huge numbers of other dead, they could be accounted for only by systematic killing in concentration camps or the complete, as-yet-undiscovered extermination of entire villages.

Neither the International Committee of the Red Cross nor Western governments have found evidence of systematic killing. Nobody, moreover, has found former detainees of concentration camps who witnessed systematic killing. Random killing took place in the camps, but not enough to account for tens of thousands of dead. And, apart from the few well-known massacres, nobody sees signs of missing villages, either.

The Red Cross has confirmed well under 20,000 fatalities on all sides. Extrapolating from that and from the observations of experienced investigators in Bosnia, its analysts estimate total fatalities at 20,000 to 30,000, with a small chance that they may exceed 35,000.

Analysts at the C.I.A. and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research put fatalities in the tens of thousands but hesitate to give a more precise range until the war is over. European military intelligence officers with extensive experience in Bosnia estimate fatalities in the mid tens of thousands. From these and other estimates by generally reliable relief workers, and given the arguments about the physical impossibility of high numbers, I arrived at the range of 25,000 to 60,000 fatalities.

THE QUESTION OF HOW MANY fatalities there have been in Bosnia is far from academic. Many wars, maybe all -- but this war especially -- are fought for prestige and honor, not rational reasons. Many atrocities in the former Yugoslavia have been justified as revenge for killings during World War II. Yet the number of fatalities in Yugoslavia during World War II was also never documented. In fact, interpreting those numbers today defines your brand of ethnic nationalism. Thus, people in the Balkans think the number of fatalities makes a difference -- and since they do, so should we. The difference could be between getting a settlement in our lifetime and waiting generations. Not to break the cycle is a gratuitous, even immoral error.

Red Cross officials, normally secretive, surprised me by warmly embracing a public airing of the question. Their worry is that obsessive attention to Bosnia will come at the expense of the world's ability to allocate humanitarian resources among similar or more serious wars. Of perhaps greater long-term concern to them is that wild inflation of Bosnian fatalities will discredit reports of subsequent atrocities.

There is always a tension between moral outrage at particular horrors and the effort to put them into perspective. Michael Berenbaum, director of the Holocaust Research Institute at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, deftly explains: "The Holocaust has raised our tolerance for ordinary evil. This forces people to make their own plight more Holocaust-like." Bosnia was an ideal candidate for such an image make-over, since in the early confusion of ethnic cleansing and concentration camps American uncertainty about what was happening made our worst fears seem quite real.

Those who sounded the early alarm profoundly believe that "Never again" means "Never again." Preventive concern, however, evolved perversely into a distorted picture. My sense is that the chorus warning of genocide gradually got taken over by those who sought to stampede the United States into unilaterally lifting the arms embargo against the Muslims. The activists half-succeeded. Though there has been no unilateral lifting, recent polls suggest that a large majority of Americans believe that the Serbs committed genocide. It may already be too late to change that perception.

Magnitude matters. As Berenbaum notes, genocide with a small "g" (in which we might lump Bosnia with East Timor, Liberia, Guatemala, Sudan and Chechnya, among a score of others) is quite different from Genocide with a big "G" (the Holocaust -- and, perhaps, Cambodia or Rwanda). To their discredit, some advocates of lifting the embargo played down the difference. The emotional resonance of Genocide obscured the dismal possibility that arming the Muslims could inflame the war, killing far more than had already been killed: after a supposed 200,000 deaths, it didn't matter if additional tens of thousands died so long as we did what was "right." Like the cruel Balkan leaders themselves, advocates of arming the Muslims became strikingly callous.

In 1995, lacking the bodies, the charge of Genocide has worn thin. It seems to have almost become sensationalism for its own sake. Apart from one question of the number of fatalities, journalists have begun a hot little debate about how "objective" coverage of Bosnia has been, about whether it has tended to favor the Muslims. Several journalists with whom I spoke expressed the uneasy feeling that something was obviously wrong. In the words of the writer David Rieff, "Bosnia became our Spain," though not for political reasons, which is what he meant, but rather because too many journalists dreamed self-aggrandizing dreams of becoming Hemingway.

Who could do a reliable count? Probably not the State Department. Unfortunately, Secretary of State Warren Christopher folded under pressure from the interventionists and began -- however furtively -- charging the Serbs with Genocide. Having thus taken sides, the State Department can hardly be expected to investigate reliably.

THE UNITED NATIONS IS WELL PLACED, but its officials have every incentive to duck controversy. Western governments have repeatedly shrugged off any responsibility for an authoritative count. The news media can report figures only from others; it does not have the access needed to compile its own numbers. And the Balkan people can't be trusted.

The only other possible sources are nongovernmental organizations like the Red Cross, and their counting criteria vary greatly. But a neutral source is important. As long as the world tosses around words like "genocide" so loosely, the present tragedy will revolve endlessly. Counts count.

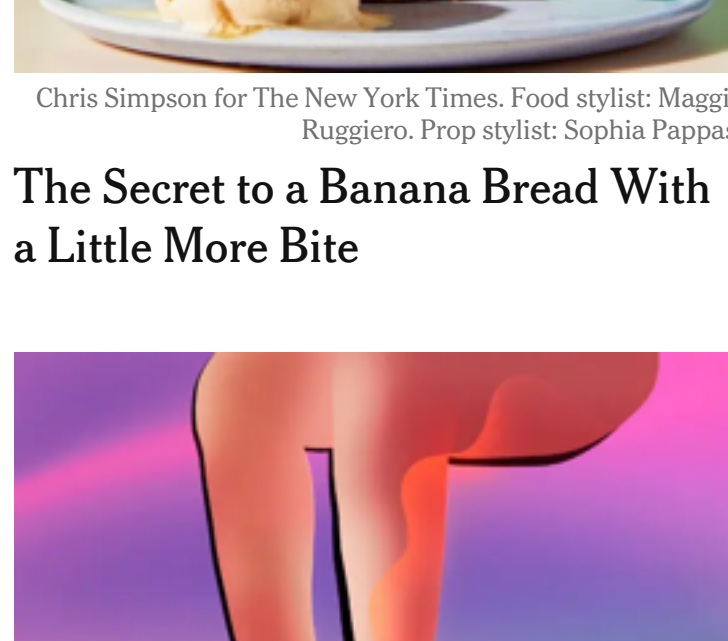
A version of this article appears in print on April 23, 1995, Section 6, Page 42 of the National edition with the headline: THE BOSNIAN CALCULATION. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

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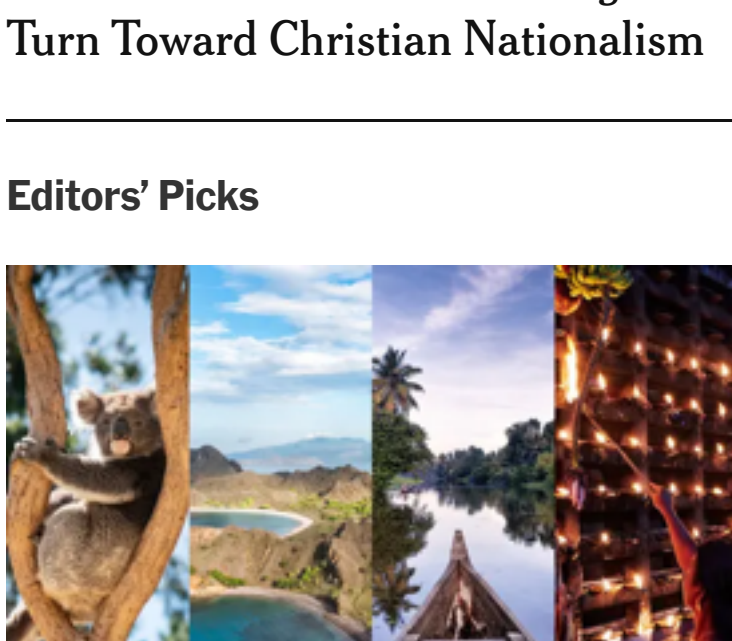
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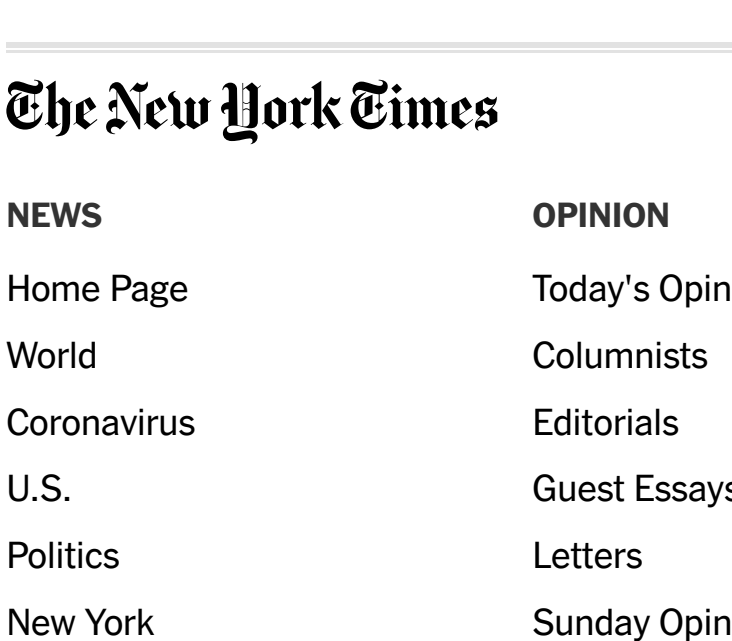
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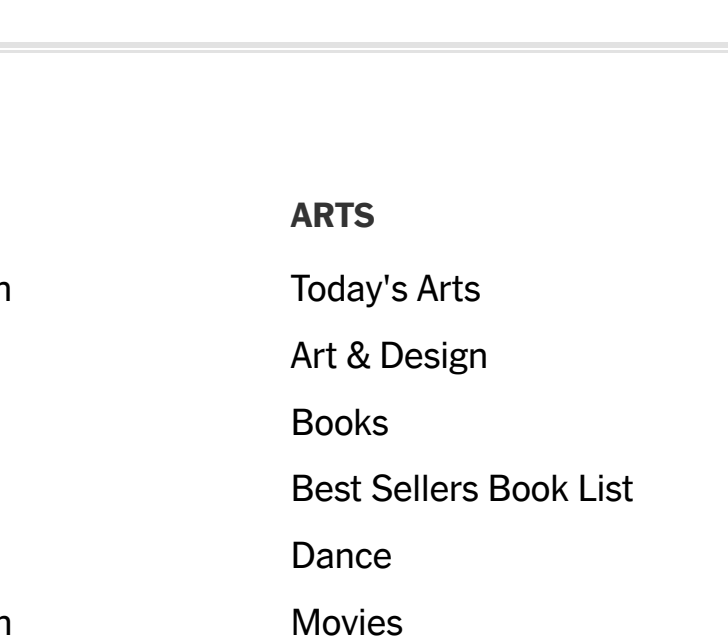
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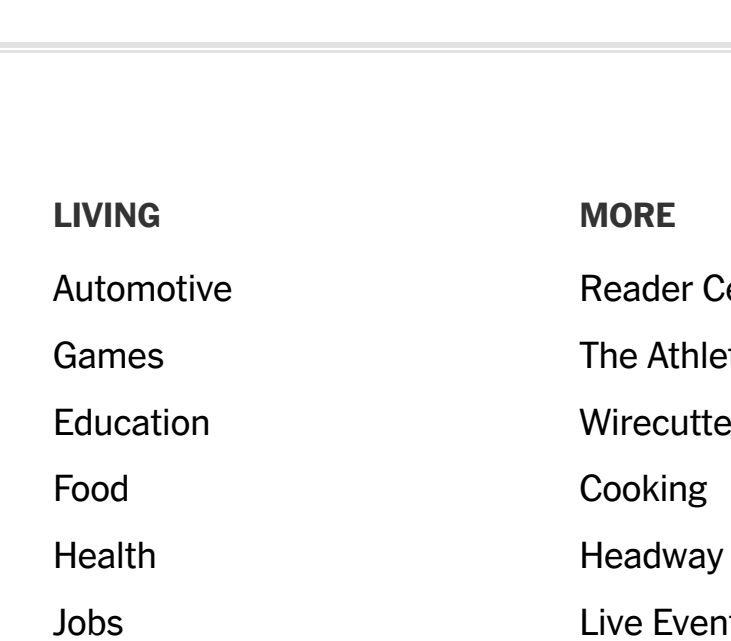
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