Anna Arendt writes that during the 1962 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1962 one of the most damning facts used against the senior SS officer was an order he gave to Fritz Rademacher, then the regent of Nazi-occupied Serbia, to murder a specific number of Jews and Gypsies for every German soldier killed by partisans. The reprisal killings weren’t carried out because the Jews (some 75,000 in Yugoslavia) or the Roma were seen as rebels, but simply because they were already “available” and massed in concentration camps. Between April and November of 1941, some 5,000 men were slaughtered. On Dec. 8, the remaining Jews in Belgrade, most women and children, were herded into an area that had been reserved of international fairs before the war. Starting that month, 5,000 elderly women and Jewish children and about 1,500 Roma were interned under appalling conditions in the fairgrounds, until Eichmann pressed ahead with the so-called Final Solution a-greed upon at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. In Belgrade, trucks became mobile gas chambers and beginning in March 1942, the Nazis started killing 100 inmates daily, most of the prisoners arrested by local Serbian police. Yugoslavia thus became the first Judenfrei, Jew Free, nation, with Final Solution tactics completed before it had even been started in other Nazi-occupied nations.

The long-gone event is distant only in years. Balkan time does flow in linear fashion. Here it shrivels up and folds onto itself, creating layers. Pick up a newspaper these days and you’ll find details about the discovery of the remains of Draza Mihajilovic, the Yugoslav Serbian head of the so-called “Chetniks,” or partisans and anti-monarchists, who charged with treason and executed by Tito after he beat back the Nazis.

Mihajilovic was a stalwart nationalist whose rhetoric helped add fuel to the fire of the 1990s. He remains a controversial figure. The fact that he lived, spoke and operated more than half-a-century ago is meaningless. Everything that concerns him is written about as if it happened yesterday. “No matter how paradoxical it may seem,” says a Belgrade activist, “we still haven’t overcome the trauma of the battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389,” in which Serbian troops fought the Ottoman Turks to a bloody draw. In other words, those who want to discuss the Yugoslav civil war have to talk about not only World War II, but also the 1914 assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, and reach back further still, to Ottoman invasion of 1400. It’s no wonder that the recent capture of Ratko Mladic, the most wanted war criminal in Europe, brings back the flavor of Arendt’s words.

According to Arendt, Final Solution mastermind Eichmann was by all accounts a fairly “normal” man who according to psychiatrists was fully capable of “normal” emotional relationships and sat atop an ordered family. The German writer portrays him as gray, superficially insignificant figure. Similarly, the first images of Mladic, who thanks to Serbian government assistance was captured on May 26 after 16 years on the run, portrayed an aging man with a baseball cap and a look of amazement. He has motor function problems, probably because of a stroke (maybe more than one), has survived a heart attack, and has a good relationships with his family, including his wife and son, who are both at his side. His grandchildren visited him in his Belgrade jail cell.

In this respect both Eichmann and Mladic are perfect embodiments of Arendt’s famous “banality of evil” phrase. This old man is the monster that the International Criminal Court in The Hague waited 16 long years to face down. He is blamed for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes and for the ethnic cleansing of non-Serb population in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995. He’s also said to have masterminded the Serbrenica massacre.

This man with the amazed, bewildered face is the same one who on July 11, 1995 announced the “liberation of
Serbian Srebrenica.” This is also the same man who handed out candy to children and reassured women before sending fathers and husbands to slaughterhouses while carrying out the most heinous crime committed in Europe since World War II, the murder of about 8,000 children and elderly Muslim men who tried to escape from Srebrenica, at the time a UN-protected enclave.

Today, the “Executioner of the Balkans” or “the butcher of Srebrenica,” take your pick, awaits trial in a Dutch prison cell in The Hague. At his first hearing, he played the sick patient card. He was too old and ailing, he told to court, to understand the accusations against him. But toward the end of the session his mood changed. The old arrogance leapt to the forefront. “I am the General Ratko Mladic,” he told the court angrily. “Everyone knows who I am. I defended the people of Serbia and today I’m defending myself. Neither journalists nor the public scare me.” The comments reassured journalists who remembered the old man in his prime. “There!” they sighed, almost collectively, “that’s the man we remember from the bloody hills of Sarajevo.”

When Eichmann was arrested and tried in Israel, the impact was felt most in then-West Germany. Konrad Adenauer federal republic stepped up its efforts to track down ranking members of the Nazi regime, many of them living a public life without bothering to change their names. Some even worked in the West German bureaucracy. The past came suddenly came back to haunt Germans, at least legally. But the debate as to how enlightened and civilized Germany could encourage and entertain Nazism came later, beginning in 1968.

To some extent, the pattern is repeating itself in the Balkans, with several important differences. The Balkan civil war was a regional conflict. Each time an alleged war criminal is arrested, deported, convicted or released, Serbian, Croatian or Muslims nationalists jump into the debate. Outrage flourishes at the expense of soul-searching debate. The fact that untold war crimes were committed in ex-Yugoslavia during a decade of war, between 1991 and 2001, is a footnote to the emotionalism produced by partisan views toward figures involved in the fighting.

Human rights activists have long been aware that arrests and courtroom appearances won’t suffice to rein in the deep-seated nationalism and biases professed by their fellow countrymen even two decades after the outbreak of hostilities.

“The war crimes trials are crucial, because they put facts on display. But by themselves they’re simply not enough,” says Natasha Kandic, a longtime activist who has been president of the Humanitarian Law Centre in Belgrade, since 1991. The group has spent decades collecting evidence on 1990s war crimes. “We badly in need a debate on the past so that it can have a real and lasting impact on Balkan society.”

For Kandis, the detention of MiÅ¡ic represents “the most important historical event since the war.” At the same time, she cautions against excessive triumphalism. “The Serbian leadership has proved, particularly by going through this act [the arrest of Mladic], that it wants to get into Europe. But out fear in domestic terms is that politicians will say they did their duty for international justice, and wait for the European Union to give them some sort of reward. That means that once again no one is asking the fundamental questions: ‘Why is MiÅ¡ic in trouble? What did he do? What are his crimes?’”

So that the questions don’t go unanswered, some 1,700 Srebrenica was the site of major wartime massacres.
NGOs whose focus is on human and media rights, as well as church associations and groups tied to war veterans and victims, yielded REKOM, the Regional Commission for Truth and Justice, which began its efforts two years ago. REKOM, a regional commission, tasked with establishing the facts about the victims of the wars in the former Yugoslavia has been using meeting and discussion groups with various groups promote obtain salient details about the war while also working to promote greater reconciliation. The aim is to create the first inter-state Commission for Truth and Justice. The campaign works from bottom-up, collecting millions signatures from citizens eager to know the truth behind the events of the war. But to survive, it requires political support, economic assistance, and willingness by regional governments to provide war data. REKOM says its commission, once functional, will number some 20 personalities from across the region whose independence and reliability is approved by all the states involved. REKOM is following the models of similar truth and justice commissions that have cropped up over the years in many parts of the world where human rights were systematically violated, including Argentina to South Africa. The idea is to give the commission full responsibility to use all existing sources of information to establish the truth of what happened between 1991 and 2001 in the former Yugoslavia. The aim is to give victims an identity as well agreeing on the single most heinous mass murder since World War II. They use the victims as witnesses.

The Potocari Genocide Memorial and Muslim cemetery located in Srebrenica. In July 1995, 8,372 Muslim men were slaughtered in what is considered the single most heinous mass murder since World War II.

“The citizens of the Balkans,” says Lazar Stojanovic, the communications for the REKOM Coalition, “haven’t forgotten the tragedies caused by the conflict. The war crimes tribunal is designed solely to punish the guilty. They use the victims as witnesses.

REKOM wants to give victims a public voice. It wants to let everyone who suffered, and not just those who endured crimes, to be able to step forward and be heard. It wants to give a platform to refugees as well as those who fled abroad to avoid conscription.”

Another festering issue is the missing and presumed dead. “As of today,” says Stojanovic, “there are some 16,000 people whose deaths lack an explanation, people who are gone but lack a story.” REKOM intends to seek out those facts and give flesh to the people and their stories. Efforts along the lines of REKOM are not new. Soon after the ouster of Slobodan Milosevic, in 2001, the Commission for Reconciliation was created by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It reflected the enthusiasm that accompanied the end of the Milosevic era.

But the commission disappeared two years without a trace, having accomplished nothing noteworthy. “When we started working with REKOM, an interstate commission with governments support, in a region such as ours, well, frankly, many us thought it wouldn’t make any headway,” says Darko Puhovski, a philosophy professor in Zagreb and the former head of Croatia’s Helsinki Committee. He was a dissident under Tito regime. He asked himself what the point was of getting involved. He soon changed his mind.

“What we need in this region,” Puhovski says, “is something called ‘face the past,’ which hasn’t been done in a single country: Not in Serbia, not in Croatia, not in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We now have a chance to make that possible. Not necessarily effective, but possible, which is a start. The strength of the commission is its interest in collecting facts and personal stories, to chronicle the history of those who died during the war, not just response to war crimes.”

He continues: “What we can’t let happen again is that which occurred after World War II, when no one knew exactly how many people had died. The numbers were manipulated and incorporated into propaganda mechanisms. That was an extremely unpleasant time in Yugoslav history, and led to the debates and disagreements that opened into civil war. As a result, we want our figures to be as accurate as they can be. It’s not a matter of saying that 2,054 died or 2,055, but giving the names and information and identifying the civilians and military who died as a result of the war.”

It won’t be easy talking about in Croatia, which is expected to become the 28th member of the European Union in July 2013. “The Croatian is analogous to West Germany in the early 1960,” says Puhovski. “There was an economic boom everyone was eager to forget World War II. Then came the 1968 generation, which forced Germany to confront the past. For social, moral and psychological reasons, they asked the fathers and mothers what they’d done during the war. While you might lie to police, judges and reporters, it’s tough to deceive your son or daughter. REKOM’s real work will be to pave the way for a generation that in five, six years will begin to ask: ‘Where were you in the 1990s?”