

Introduction

This book isn't ultimately about Bosnia. It's about the way we think of the imprecise art of war making. As U.S. exploits in Iraq remind us, we repeatedly enter war without adequate intelligence, in every sense of the word. What can we learn, looking through the eyes of a diverse group of women who experienced the carnage of Bosnia? Hindsight is invaluable when trying to avert the next conflict; but more important is insight, probing the social core and moving beyond convention. Whether the crisis is Croatia, Congo, or Korea, we must bring women who have their fingers on the pulse of their communities to join the war makers around the decision-making table. This book lays out the case for their inclusion.

Raising Their Voices

Most accounts told and listened to by Westerners convey little grasp of Balkan culture. Prewar Bosnia was a poor region, behind the Western European standard, with hard-line communist political officials. On the other hand, Sarajevo was more thoroughly multicultural than most American cities. Socially, traditional rural values blended with avant-garde urban thinking. People in villages worked their fields and tended livestock. Intellectuals traveled frequently outside the country.

This cultural complexity was obscured as the barbarity of the Bosnian war was thrust on the world by international media. Many journalists oversimplified the story. The result has been many easy, but wrong, assumptions that have been salt in the wounds of women like FAHRİJA, who tells a pithy story from her time in upstate New York, as a refugee: *Since skin is my medical specialty, I decided to work as a cosmetics consultant, handling brands such as Dior, Clinique, Clarins. I would dress nicely every day for work, regardless of how I felt. That was my way of fighting back, showing I was alive and not broken. My clients, rich ladies, would ask, "Where*

are you from? Paris?” I’d answer, “No, I’m from Bosnia.” They’d say, “But there’s a civil war going on there!” I would explain that it was not a civil war but a war of aggression. The women would say, “But aren’t you fighting Muslims over there?” Then I’d say, “I’m Muslim.” They were always surprised. Most people I spoke to in America thought all Muslim women were uneducated, repressed, and covered in black cloth. I’m obviously the last person to fit that ridiculous notion.

Indeed, debunking “ridiculous notions” is one of the goals of this book. Bosnian women themselves are the most logical ones to address these errors. My role was to record their voices. In our sessions over the course of seven years, my training in psychological counseling was more useful than a degree in international relations as I taped multiple interviews with each of the twenty-six women in this book. They are advocates, politicians, farmers, journalists, students, doctors, businesswomen, engineers, mothers, and daughters. They’re from all parts of Bosnia and represent the full range of ethnic traditions and mixed heritages. Their ages spread across sixty years, and their wealth ranges from jewels to a few chickens. But for all their differences, they have this in common: Each survived the war with enough emotional strength to work toward rebuilding her country, whether in modest or grand ways. Together, their perspectives provide a complex portrait of the war, as well as possibilities for peace.

For an anthropological review of the life of Bosnian women before or after the war, historical analysis of the Balkans, or comprehensive accounts of the war, the reader can find many excellent sources listed in the bibliography. I’ve tried to include just enough information to provide a context for the stories the women tell in these pages. Generalizations are inevitably flawed, especially when encompassing twenty-six persons with such different backgrounds, experiences, concerns, and hopes. Nonetheless, I’ve found several broad themes consonant with their values and convictions.

I’ve resisted the temptation to launch into a polemic on gender differences, even though some of the women I interviewed have strong — some might say strident — views about the differences between men and women in war and peacetime. Elsewhere we can argue about whether women are more or less bellicose than men. I’ve included a few comments of the women, with virtually no discussion. Likewise, this book is not an in-depth exploration of the terrible effect of war on women. True, Bosnian women have suffered far out of proportion to any complicity in causing the conflict. It’s important that their suffering be documented and addressed; but that’s not my emphasis. These women may have been victimized, but they approach the reader grounded in strength.

In fact, I expect the women portrayed in these pages will become new friends to the reader—even as they have become important influences in my life. Here, traditionally muted members of Bosnian society speak out, for the betterment of their own lives and communities.¹ Their understanding of the causes of the war and their wisdom regarding the path toward peace are not only instructional but also inspirational for anyone dealing with conflict (which is, after all, everyone). My original intention was only to illuminate the most outstanding examples of women-led activity that has gone into rebuilding Bosnia since the recent war, embodied by women like EMSUDA, who sighed to me once, *I wish I could sit down by myself and tell my story—from beginning to end. I just haven't had time.* But over the hours as we talked, the women brought up personal material so important—and so intriguingly consistent—that I added the first section, to give context to their descriptions about their work. The result is two major parts: lessons learned from the personal experiences of the women during the war, and the basic principles by which they are working to heal their country—and themselves, in the process.

At its most leveraged use, this book may serve as a wake-up call for policy shapers about the basis of our assumptions. In these women's words are insights that could, or should, change the fundamental scope of foreign affairs. But shifts in the public policy paradigm are insidiously difficult. In the pages that follow, I'm critical of the shortcomings I perceive in many who've steered international Balkan policy through treacherous waters these past ten years. At the same time, I recognize that they made agonizingly difficult choices, often with limited information.

Many of the women in this book I met while in my diplomatic or humanitarian roles in the mid 1990s. I had no intention of writing about them. But over time I've read one account after another attempting to describe the war. Most chroniclers have focused on historical prelude and horrifying statistics: 150,000 dead; 2,300,000—more than half the prewar population—expelled from their homes.² They've described the exploits of political leaders and warriors (overwhelmingly male). Conspicuously missing is the ground-level story lived by well over half the adult population:³ women who tried to hold family and community together against overwhelming odds. This book addresses that gap in the current understanding of the war, reorienting what became a dramatically gender-skewed account of Bosnia in the last decade of the twentieth century.

We've much to learn about how to foster change in alliance with women who wield influence not only in their families but also throughout their communities.

Top-down policies should be critiqued by ground-level actors—men or women. In this account of Bosnian women's actions to heal their country are examples of work policymakers ought to be funding in every conflict area of the world. When I selected the key characters for this volume, my primary criterion was that they be actively working on rebuilding their society. I wasn't even aware of their hardship stories or their views about the reasons for the war, expressed in part I. Quite apart from what they have suffered, these are strong, capable women. Supporting their work, launched in the most discouraging conditions, should be a goal in foreign policy work around the world.

In an age of instant communication, where our *guerre du jour* is served up with breakfast bagels, the conviction that change is possible can preserve the public's capacity to care. To borrow from Justice Richard Goldstone, former chief prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague, I hope my readers will be "rescued from the numbness of our over-intellectualization and transported into a realm where human emotion—sorrow, empathy, and finally hope—are alive."⁴

Listener's Guide

A few thoughts, as my reader enters Bosnia during and immediately after the war. First, the question of fairness. When advised that this book has an anti-Serb bias, I asked two State Department officials who had spent more time than any others in Bosnia during the war if they would help me with revisions. One warned, "Don't let your critics mitigate the Balkans. The international community has always tried to do that, because they don't believe in right and wrong." The second shot back, "So you're supposed to say why you weren't on the side of the people in the hills, firing shells onto the city? Is it a virtue to be neutral in that situation? No! Don't let them neutralize you." Given that advice, I've decided not to artificially adjust my portrayal of what I heard and saw.

What I bring, then, is the most accurate portrayal I can manage of the world of twenty-six Bosnian women. The words are theirs, the framework mine. Gathering, analyzing, and editing their accounts has been a task with public purpose and personal meaning. In the public realm, their work is prototypical for policymakers on the cutting edge of war and peace. On a private basis, we were friends. I use their first names, not out of lack of respect, but because of the trust between us. In my text, they arrive in a passage in capital letters, which seems only fitting.

I've also edited the often-stiff language of the translator into casual speech truer to the tone of our interviews.

My task was complicated by the labels used by outsiders to describe the parties to the conflict, specifically ethnic-based classifications that became prominent during the war.⁵ The use in this book of "Serb," "Croat," "Bosniak," "Muslim," "Bosnian Serb," etc. is as misleading as it is clarifying. It was the strategy of nationalist war makers to accentuate divisive group identities to justify the land grab known as "ethnic cleansing."⁶ But ethnic categories belie the large number of people with mixed parentage. Using those labels also implies that people thought of themselves and others in those terms. I have been told scores of stories that indicate an obliviousness to ethnicity before the war. Thus on the one hand, using ethnic labels is consistent with the "divide and conquer" methods of the nationalists. On the other hand, the reality of the Bosnian war is that those labels did become commonplace and were written into the political structure of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the war. So I'm left with an uncomfortable inconsistency. In choosing the subjects of this book, I noted and balanced ethnic background. But using those categories to describe the women, I do them a disservice.⁷

In particular, finding the right term for Bosnians with a Muslim heritage is problematic. It's certainly logical to speak of those Bosnians as "Muslim" when referring to others as "Catholic" or "Orthodox." But using a religious term for one group, while speaking of others in nonreligious terms ("Croat" or "Serb"), reinforces the idea that the conflict was the remnant of a religious war waged by or against the Ottomans. Therefore, several women in this volume identify themselves as "Bosniak," rather than "Muslim."⁸

Others maintain an emotional distance from the question of labels. *KADA*, for example, from a small rural community, insists that she's always called herself "Muslim," and that's the term she'll continue to use. "Bosniak," to her, sounds artificial. But *MEDIHA*, a medical professor and parliamentarian, and *JELKA*, who runs a cultural center, wanted to be sure I use the word "Bosniak." Since my goal is to convey the voices of the women themselves, I'll use "Bosniak" when speaking of a people who, although they may have not thought of themselves in terms of such a distinction for decades, now must. When I use "Muslim," it's because I am focusing on religious faith, or because the speaker herself used the term.

In spite of the difficulties of language and categories, the women and I have been shaped by our relationship, and we're relatively comfortable with each other. The reader, however, has the not-so-easy task of moving through the fol-

lowing collective discussions, hearing one voice, then another, then another—no doubt daunted by not remembering who is who. Better for my readers to suppress the hankering for an easy story line. Brief profiles of the speakers, alphabetized by first name, appear after the main text as a reference, along with photographs; and there are occasional cues throughout the text. Still, it's probably a mistake to try to connect the dots in every woman's story. If the plots swirl together, that's more true to life anyway.

The endnotes provide a few more details of the complicated context underlying the women's words. But I'm uncomfortably aware of how much is missing, given the limitations of a book spreading across twenty-six lives. The reader may find inconsistencies, and those are not mistakes. For whether we live in war or peace, whether we're producing or consuming policy, whether we call home the Balkans, the States, or the world, our actions, our thoughts, our lives spill messily across the lines of simple narrative. Like the women here, and like the policy-makers who have shaped their destiny, we consistently hold inconsistent views, disregard well-founded expectations, and confound those who know us best as we adapt to and evolve with experiences that come our way. The women in this book remind us that life is not a jigsaw puzzle. The pieces don't fit.