



Summer 2005 Newsletter

Sometimes a book can change the way you look at things – one reason why this issue of the Newsletter keeps coming back to books. I've recently been very moved by reading Swanee Hunt's book *This Was Not Our War*, based on interviews with 26 Bosnian women, old and young, from all walks of life and all sides of the conflict.

Swanee's own story is interesting – as US Ambassador to Vienna during the '90s, she had no formal role in relation to former Yugoslavia, and was, predictably, instructed not to get involved. (She did get involved, with Clinton's backing, in hosting key international negotiations from which women were conspicuously absent.) Her empathy for women, her belief in their power to change things and her natural entrepreneurialism led her to convene a series of meetings in Austria and Bosnia that brought together women who were trying to stand up for human rights and civic values in the course of the conflict. This book is one of the fruits of that work.

I took away three things in particular from the book. The first was the sense of shock at the suddenness with which normal life was swept away. 'In the centre of Sarajevo normal life was continuing. It could just as well have been sunny California. Nobody knew that on the edge of town, this craziness was happening.'

The second was the sophisticated use of propaganda. Yugoslav society was peaceful, multicultural and relatively well educated. How did those 'crazy politicians' gain such influence? asks Swanee. 'The campaign was composed of small bits. We didn't recognise the whole picture, because it came in tiny invisible pieces.' Unfortunately many in the West, rather than providing a more objective analysis, went along with the propaganda line that ethnic conflict in the Balkans was inevitable, since it provided an excuse for inaction.

The third, replicated in many current conflicts, was the folly of leaving the peace process almost entirely in the hands of the men who were responsible for the war. Women's energies have gone into reconstructing civil society through a host of NGOs – but how much more impact might they have had if they had been able to participate fully and equally in all the political institutions?

This Was Not Our War – Bosnian Women Reclaiming the Peace by Swanee Hunt © 2004
Duke University Press