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## **SILENT WITNESS: DOCUMENTING WARTIME SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND RESISTING THE CULTURE OF DENIAL**

**(Cornelia Suhan, *Silent Witness*, GOST books, London, 2024)**

Cornelia Suhan's *Silent Witness*, awarded the German Photo Book Award 2024 (Silver, Documentary Category), is a significant work that addresses the atrocities of sexual violence, particularly rape, one of the most brutal strategies employed during the war against Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on the indictments and verdicts of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, these crimes have been classified as crimes against humanity, war crimes, an underlying act of persecution and genocide, and severe violations of the Geneva Conventions. Estimates from international reports and scholarly studies suggest that between 20,000 and 50,000 individuals were subjected to sexual violence. Women and men of all nationalities were among the victims, with Bosniak women and girls forming the largest group, subjected to systematic rapes predominantly committed by Bosnian Serb forces, involving perpetrators both young and old. These instances of sexual violence were not isolated events but rather widespread, systematic, and institutionalized crimes committed along ethnic lines as a means of warfare, serving policies of division, persecution, and extermination of entire communities. Essentially, the victims – citizens – were excluded from the community of human beings and selected as legitimate targets of violence based on ideological criteria related to their actual or perceived affiliation with a specific collective.

Since the commission of these crimes, survivors and families of victims, as well as international and domestic judicial investigators, activists, civil initiatives, profes-

sional journalists, and members of the academic community, have waged a continuous struggle to uncover the truth, document evidence, secure justice for victims, and preserve the memory of these atrocities.

Cornelia Suhan's book stands as an essential part and a significant contribution to this ongoing struggle. The book connects three crucial elements: survivors' testimonies about their traumatic experiences of rape, photographs of the locations where these crimes were committed, and the geographical data of these sites. This deliberate linking of words, photographic images, and spatial markers provides readers with a dual perspective on the geography of the crimes. Through this approach, the author not only documents the effects of the crimes in the past but also highlights the normalization of their consequences in the present. Seen through this lens, the worlds of past and present, both marked by violence, can never be fully separated, as perpetrators had hoped.

Responding to *Silent Witness's* invitation to confront the enduring legacy of wartime sexual violence, I reflect on a dual perspective of the past and present of a place of crime that I know personally. On page 157, *Silent Witness* presents a photograph of a building from my hometown, Doboj – the former Army House. Situated in the heart of the city, this building was, before the war, more than just a military facility. Inside, it housed a restaurant that served as a popular gathering place for meeting, socializing, and dancing. In my parents' recollections, it was described as a lively and welcoming place. During the war, however, the building became a site of crime, including rape, as documented in the testimony of a survivor included alongside the photograph – a girl who was 15 years old at the time the crime was committed. After the war, for a time, the building once again housed a restaurant, hosting weddings and other celebrations. Today, however, the building no longer exists. Although it was originally military property, it was privatized, demolished, and replaced with two new residential buildings, various shops, and social spaces. To the best of my knowledge, no memorial acknowledges the horrific crime that took place there. This personal example reflects one of many attempts to establish a regime of silence, silencing survivors' voices and making sites of crime invisible.

Suhan's book firmly challenges attempts to normalize the consequences of violence, opposing what scholarship identifies as cultures of denial. She refuses to allow the voices of victims to be silenced or the sites of atrocities to remain invisible, forgotten, or erased. Rather, she documents how perpetrators and loyal bystanders transformed people's living spaces – private homes, schools, cultural centers, factories – into logistical infrastructures for systematic rape. Furthermore, she highlights the

post-crime communities' persistent refusal to confront the suffering of innocent victims, a reality that cannot, in any moral sense, be justified.

In the epilogue, Suhan reminds readers that „a war is not over when the weapons are silent.“ After the cessation of armed conflict, what remains is the undeniable reality of collective crimes committed against innocent people. As long as a post-crime community refuses to acknowledge, confront, and condemn its criminal legacy it remains trapped in lies, hatred, and prejudice. Such a community does not live in peace but in a state of frozen conflict and profound moral confusion.

Through this book, Suhan confronts the values that sustain apathy, indifference, and moral insensitivity toward the crimes of sexual violence. She urges readers to face — no matter how painful — the traumatic experiences of survivors and to commit to preserving the memory of these atrocities.

Suhan is acutely aware that the crimes of sexual violence cause profound trauma not only for survivors but also for their families and the broader community. These experiences are subject to processes of social stigmatization and taboo, making them difficult and slow to enter public discourse. In order to resist stigma and taboo, Suhan has found a way to convey the survivors' stories, to make them visible within a global context, while simultaneously protecting them from retraumatization and renewed public exposure.

*Silent Witness* does not merely document the horror of sexual violence; it also reveals the strength and resilience of women. We must not forget that we know about these atrocities thanks to the extraordinary courage of the survivors who chose to speak about the crimes committed against them. Their bravery deserves our deepest respect. In this context, the book stands as both a documentation of suffering and a testament to women's enduring strength.

*Silent Witness* is not truly silent. It speaks — through images, through words, through what has been documented, and through what can no longer be silenced. It is up to us to hear these voices, recognize their message, and carry it forward.

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