

Diana Johnstone's Memoir: Circle in the Darkness

A Book Review

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Theme: [History](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Diana Johnstone's memoir Circle in the Darkness is immensely absorbing. It recounts events one is familiar enough from reading the papers or watching the news, but then it takes you from what you think you know to what you need to know. Is it "radical" to expect that if "regular" people are told the truth, the natural process of democracy will set things right?

This conviction reflects the values of her childhood, when her parents worked for FDR's New Deal in Washington. Her father actually worked for Henry Wallace – who remembers him? Or maybe it's her Minnesotan roots, where her family stems from: the state had voted for the Socialist Eugene Debb way back when...

Maybe this is why she was outraged by the Vietnam War during her graduate studies at the University of Minnesota. Her organizing finds much local support. She actually puts together a delegation to participate in the peace talks in Paris, called the People's Commission of Inquiry into the Solution to the War in Vietnam.

But then again, Minnesotan "family values" prove disappointing because she is "a single mother" at the time. And earlier, when she had tried to enter the world of journalism in Washington, she had been summarily dismissed. Similarly, when she proposed getting her Ph.D. in history in Minnesota, she was told that her prospects would be dim, and French Literature was more suitable to her gender.

She writes her dissertation on the novels of Andre Malraux – but then, rather unexpectedly, she decides to leave. Her destination is Paris. Her father had studied in Paris and Shanghai, so the dream of faraway places had always been present. Besides, the real dream had not been teaching, (that's what you do because the schedule accommodates raising a child) – but writing. At the time of her failed attempt to enter the journalist profession, she had encountered and married a journalist. This took her to Rome and Bonn, where she experienced the glamorous life of embassy parties. But the marriage didn't hold, and what she took from the experience was that "mainstream" journalism is about staying within the bounds of official sources.



So now, after a stint “back home on the range” she is off to Paris under her own steam, limited resources to support herself and her daughter, but undaunted and ready to do what it takes.

In Paris she becomes part of the lively American expat scene, participates in anti-war events, and writes a book on the history of Vietnam. But genuine knowledge, she discovers, counts for naught without the contacts needed to publish the results – preferably less challenging results. The manuscript she puts away in a trunk is discovered years later, eaten by worms.

She had been observing the French version of the 60s, particularly the “Revolution” of 1968. But even though the whole country comes to a standstill as the result of a general strike there is a basic dichotomy of purpose. While the students enact primarily a cultural revolution on the Paris barricades, the labor movement, headed by the French Communist Party, is intent on improving workers’ conditions.

The realities of “making a living” catch up with her as well, and she is hired to the English desk of *Agence France Presse*. Once again, she observes the inevitable triage of information that occurs before disclosure to the public. This prompts her to write her own Newsletter, titled “The Owl” because she has chosen to work on the night shift to facilitate the exigencies of child care. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky are early subscribers to her Newsletter.

As the 70s develop, the focus shifts from the Vietnam War to human rights, and this seems to mean primarily human rights in the Soviet Union. Diana Johnstone is tasked to translate Andrei Sakharov’s statement for the Russian Helsinki Group in 1976. He is the scientist who had been responsible for the success of the Hydrogen bomb, and then had become a dissident, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975. However, none of this could have happened without Soviet cooperation: “Leonid Brezhnev was making every effort to promote “détente.” However, the Western media chose to highlighted the “plight” of the “Refuseniks” instead, i.e., the Soviet Jews presumably forbidden to emigrate. It turns out that the Soviets were concerned about the “brain drain” such emigration would create, and merely imposed a “tax” to recoup the advanced education invested in those now interested in leaving.

But such an evaluation clearly identifies Diana Johnstone as NOT a member of the Anglo-American Press Club. The French authorities are suspicious: is she “an American dissident?” Luckily, James Weinstein, the founder of *In These Times*, is interested in supporting the ideals of the American Left. In the hope of finding inspiration in Eurocommunism, he invites Diana Johnstone to become their fulltime European correspondent.

One of her assignments takes her to Italy. The powerful communist movement which had fought against Mussolini's fascists is not exactly favored by Italy's American liberators. As she explains, the CIA allied itself with the remnants of the fascist elements, and supported the Christian Democrats. In response, a "revolutionary romanticism," in the guise of the Red Brigades, declares war on the "imperialist state of the multinationals." One of their "actions" is the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, Chairman of the Christian Democratic Party. The stalemate during the negotiations of his release between the Italian Government, which seems half-hearted, and his uncompromising captors results in his "execution," presumably by the Red Brigades.

These extreme events in Italy, also echoed in a different style by the German Baader-Meinhof Band, are the last gasp of the ambitious revolutionary hopes of the 60s. In Paris it is the intellectuals, as always, who set the pace. But now Paris becomes the seat of "new philosophers." Taking left sides in the Cold War or militating for third world liberation by the "old philosophers" like Jean-Paul Sartre is history.

As the 80s are ushered in, "social democracy was pretty much taken for granted on the continent... the only obstacle to universal democratic socialism was the negative image of Stalinism." Gorbachev's pledging the needed reforms (perestroika) to set that record straight is promising. But "mysterious" assassinations of the Palestinian negotiator Dr. Issa Sartawi and Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme undermine hopeful peace prospect. Diana Johnstone concludes that their assassinations are not acts of terrorism, but liquidations: by the Israeli Mossad in the case of Dr. Sartawi, and the Swedish security police in the case of Olof Palme.

But what about Willy Brandt in Germany and Francois Mitterrand in France, both confirmed socialists? Theirs proves an uphill battle in a world dominated by Maggie Thatcher's and Ronald Reagan's economic monetarist policies. Willy Brandt "Ostpolitik" is undermined and in France "Capital began to flee and nationalizations were stalled by litigation... a new policy of budgetary rigor was adopted." Later under Macron, the spontaneous resistance by the "Yellow Vests" against more austerity measures is brutally repressed by the police.

The West's "free market" policies also have a military component. NATO (The North Atlantic Treaty Organization) had been formed in 1949 "to keep the Soviets out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." When President Reagan went ahead with the plan to deploy nuclear-armed cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe in 1983, the Germans rally in opposition: the threatening East-West confrontation is likely to be fought out on their soil. General Bastian and young Petra Kelly, co-chair of the Green Party, are the "odd couple" representing the full range of the German popular movement.

The peace movement could claim victory when President Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev shake hands in Reykjavik in 1987. But Gorbachev's trading of East Germany against the promise that NATO would not "move an inch" past the new border subsequently demonstrates that he was hoodwinked. And the exhilaration of the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 turned into West Germany pretty much "annexing" East Germany into its own neoliberal system.

Still, these events reorient the goals of the Left in Europe. This also questions Diana Johnstone's usefulness to *In These Times*. Her next job is as the press secretary for the new Green Group in the European Parliament. Her six-year stint observing European politics from this front-row seat is enlightening. Since peace work is her primary interest, the fact

that the usually contentious Greens unite to oppose “Desert Storm” in Iraq is gratifying, but beside the point. This is also the case in their opposition to the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which “gave vital decision-making power on the choice of investments to private financial institutions.”

Basically, the European Parliament has more or less symbolical advisory but no legislative power. Just the same, the media love the antics of Dany Cohn-Bendit “the red” (because of his red hair, not his politics). He used to be the inspiration of the 1968 Paris rebellion, and now is elected to “represent” the Greens. This, for Diana Johnstone, is the last straw. “That evening, by a single vote, the Green Group lost its soul.” She quits.

In 1996 and 1997 Diana Johnstone sets out in her little Opel to what is now Former Yugoslavia. The contested secession of Slovenia and Croatia had already taken place in 1991, and the fighting had shifted to Bosnia. The highly publicized massacres of Srebrenica had taken place in 1995, followed by the American-sponsored Dayton Peace Agreement. But this did not really resolve the issues of the large Serb enclaves in Croatia and Bosnia. And then there was the looming issue of Kosovo and the bombing of Belgrade in 1999.

Surely venturing into this literal and political minefield, taking the time to interview people on the ground, and doing diligent research qualified Diana Johnstone as a foremost “expert” on the issues of Yugoslavia? Yet when she writes two long articles on her findings, her former journal *In These Times* refuses to publish them, as does the reputedly “left” magazine, *The Nation*. Evidently, the “liberal” leaders Bill Clinton and Tony Blair had the power to set in stone the “humanitarian intervention” version of the narrative. And for that they needed the atrocities of the convenient “villain” Milosevic: but then was he not also the last Socialist holdout in the region?

Diana Johnstone’s expertise is beside the point, because the job of the “media,” as has been eloquently demonstrated by her friends Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, is “manufacturing consent.” After all, as Walter Lippman had argued earlier, are they not properly called upon to support our leaders whose onerous task it is to run the world? NATO, an organization in search of a mission since the dismantling of the Soviet Union needs salvaging. And if I may add a question of my own, what about all those newly acquired “Stans” in Central Asia, which are reeking with oil and gas? Where should the pipes conveying the golden liquid be laid? Should the American base Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo not oversee the job?

From the perspective of this “big picture,” who cares about the locals who happen to be in the way, whether in Afghanistan or Yugoslavia? As to the “common” people Diana Johnstone counts on to exercise their democratic judgment, do they even know where Kandahar or Srebrenica are? The “mainstream news” will happily take on the job of entertaining them with stories of “saving women” in Afghanistan or, alternatively, “mass rape of women” in Yugoslavia. So, when her book, *Fools’ Crusade*, is published in 2002, is it any surprise that she is taken to task for being a “genocide denier” regarding the “well established facts” of Srebrenica?

As she puts it, writing her kind of “truths” is “more like sending a message across the sea in a bottle.” This is also true of her *Memoir*. But are we prepared to read the message in the bottle which spells out the increasingly alarming “truth” of our own ignorance? For example, on the occasion of attending a session of the International Criminal Court in Tripoli in 2007, she writes positively about Muammar Ghaddafi. She states that he created “a functioning

state out of a tribal society,” that he is generous in distributing the country’s oil revenues, that he is working on the task of creating an African Union – and perish the thought – its own currency? This even questions the position of her erstwhile supporter Noam Chomsky.

And when the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon proclaims “the responsibility to protect” (R2P) in 2012, her reaction is unambiguous. The various interventions in the name of democracy and human rights against the likes of Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Muammar Ghaddafi of Libya, Bashar al Assad of Syria, Viktor Yanukovich of Ukraine is but an exercise of “the West against the world.”

From her beginnings in the tradition of FDR and her father’s example of ethical commitment Diana Johnstone has been a “world watcher” from the independent perches she had managed to find for herself. Rather than the beneficiary of “revelations” emanating from the likes of “Deep Throat” made famous during the Watergate scandal, she has stuck to “open sources and thoughtful analysis of known facts.” And as she witnesses the relentless advance of what she calls “the age of destruction,” the heading of her next to last chapter “It Can’t Go on Like This” is an urgent appeal for sanity.

But then her life-long commitment to contesting the “will to war” may “get her into bed” with some libertarian anti-war folks, and likely open to *fatwas* from doctrinaire Antifa purists. This happened to her Aussie namesake and fellow anti-war stalwart Caitlin Johnstone. But here’s the rub. Caitlin Johnstone also offers a very hard “truth” to take: do we get it that if peace broke out, our lives in the West, based as they are on the proceeds of imperial plunder, would be in the toilet?

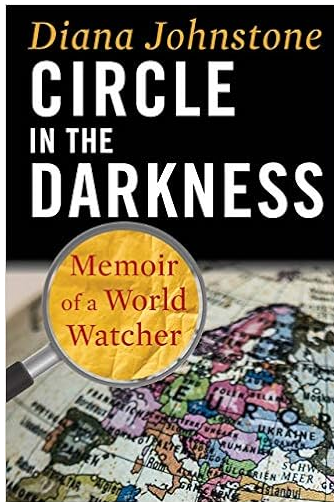
Is it the case then that we can’t have our cake and eat it too? Still, Diana Johnstone, having devoted her life to “telling the truth in an age of deceit,” as John Pilger salutes her, ends on a positive note: at least she has shown the way to the next generation of truth tellers.

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