

Keep It Real: “Circle in the Darkness: Memoirs of a World Watcher”. Review of Diana Johnstone’s Book

By [Rick Sterling](#)

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Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

Diana Johnstone has written a compelling and insightful book. It is mostly a review and analysis of significant events from the past 55 years. It concludes with her assessment of different trends that are being debated on the Left today including “identity politics”, Antifa and censorship. This is a book to be read, enjoyed and discussed.

“Circle in the Darkness” gives glimpses into Johnstone’s personal life. She was born in St. Paul, Minnesota and grew up there and in Washington DC. She studied and taught at the University of Minnesota before moving and living most of her life in Europe – mostly in France with stints in Germany and Italy.

Her parents divorced when she was young. She had a special love and connection with her father who, ironically, was an analyst for the Pentagon. Evidently he also had an open and critical mind, writing the memoir “From MAD to Madness: Inside Pentagon Nuclear War Planning”.

Diana had a daughter at a relatively young age and largely raised her on her own. She finished her PhD in French literature, then worked as a teacher, translator, photographer and journalist.

There are interesting observations and comparisons. As Diana and her daughter moved between Minnesota and France, she compared the different educational systems. She notes, “There is a tendency in American grade schools for the kids to gang up against whichever unfortunate schoolmate has been selected by class bullies for tormenting from my observation it is not like this in France.” She also describes the difficulties being a single mother before it was more common.

The book is full of insights based on her first hand experience living in Yugoslavia as a young exchange student, being a photographer for Associated Press, translating news reports for Agence France Presse, reporting on the end of the Cold War for “In These Times” and being press officer for the coalition of Green Parties in the newly formed European Union.

Grass Roots Activism



One theme running through the book is the need to reach out and engage with regular people. She recounts her experiences opposing the US war on Vietnam. Johnstone and her allies launched a campaign to educate and engage with regular Minnesotans, to explain what was happening in Vietnam and why the war should be opposed. She helped organize teams of students and teachers who went door to door in Minneapolis. Later, they sent a citizens delegation to Paris to meet with and hear from the Vietnamese representatives. Afterward, they reported back to communities throughout the state and country. Johnstone says these actions did not get the media attention but deepened opposition to the war in profound ways. The students and teachers going into the neighborhoods had to educate themselves in advance; they learned from the questions (and sometimes opposition) of community members; the delegation which met the Vietnamese representatives in Paris were deeply impressed and conveyed their experience on their return.

Johnstone is an unusually perceptive analyst. For example, her analysis of the Watergate scandal and Nixon resignation raises important but overlooked issues. Rather than seeing this as the hallmark of investigative journalism, she notes that it established the model of journalism relying on unidentified government sources. Looking back, the Watergate scandal effectively deflected attention from the ongoing slaughter in Southeast Asia. "Getting rid of Nixon was a brilliant coup that united generations, torn asunder by opposing attitudes toward the warWatergate washed away the national sins. It prepared America to be 'born again' first as the innocent Gerald Ford and then as the good Christian Jimmy Carter, champion of human rights." Moreover "The shenanigans around Watergate were a distraction from the most significant acts of the Nixon administration, in particular the shakeup of the world economy by the August 1971 decision to suspend (meaning to end) the convertibility of the dollar into gold. This was a direct result of the huge U.S. debt resulting from the cost of the Vietnam War."

The author has a stark assessment of what happened to the Left. "As for the American antiwar movement, half a century later, it has vanished almost without a trace as an influential political force. There are perhaps more intelligent critics of war than ever before, but they are largely confined to the virtual world of the web, without significant impact on a political system which is totally integrated into a military industrial complex that relies on endless conflicts."

Critical International Events

Through her work at Associate Press and Agence France Presse, Johnstone saw how stories are selected and prioritized depending on establishment bias. She also saw how the media can promote certain types of protest leaders. There are critical assessments of some protest leaders who became famous including Daniel Cohn Bendit. She gives a scathing critique of celebrity French philosopher Bernard Henri Levy.

Johnson has valuable insights on many events over the 1970's and 80's. A few examples are

- the assassination of Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme, who was likely behind it and how it has led to Swedish subservience to the US
- the causes and consequences of the assassination of Aldo Moro by ultra-leftists in Italy
- the murder of Palestinian moderate Dr. Issa Sartawi at a Socialist Party conference
- the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II by a Turkish militant and the propaganda campaign trying to link him to Bulgaria and Soviet Union
- the growing influence of Israel in western foreign policy

In the 1980's and early 1990's, Johnstone watched closely, interviewed key players and reported on the rise of detente between the USA and Soviet Union. She concludes, "Not enough credit is given to Mikhail Gorbachev and to the 1980s peace movement".

The book is subtitled "Memoirs of a World Watcher". Johnstone describes how radical islamists were used to undermine the socialist Afghanistan government beginning 1979. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the US had no restraints. She summarizes "Mikhail Gorbachev was a naive negotiator, outfoxed by the Americans" and "The total surrender of 'real existing' communism in the East contributed to the defeat of the Western Left".

In 1991 the US seemingly invited Saddam Hussein to go into Kuwait, then built up a huge force to expel and then massacre thousands of retreating Iraqi soldiers. With operation "Desert Storm" viewed as a military success, President Bush [declared](#) "The Vietnam syndrome is over!"

Yugoslavia and "Humanitarian Imperialism"

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, neoliberal economic policies quickly dominated the globe. The European Union was formed in 1992. Johnstone describes how the EU imposed rules and requirements that favored private banks and institutions and restricted or prevented state intervention and solutions. Yugoslavia, as the sole remaining socialist holdout, was under increasing pressure and media attack.

Johnstone describes how "humanitarian imperialism" emerged at this time. With the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) needed a new mandate and reason for existing. They found this new purpose in media distortion and demonization of Serbia and Yugoslavia. NATO promoted the "Kosovo Liberation Army" and other divisive elements then bombed Serbia for 78 consecutive days. Yugoslavia was broken into pieces.

In 2002 Johnstone wrote a book about the NATO attack, western propaganda and show trial. Her book is titled "Fool's Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions". She was attacked in the media for challenging the dominant assumptions about the conflict. She [responded](#) to the attacks saying, "*I do not deny atrocities, but unlike others I give them a political context.*" Others strongly defended her. Canadian law professor Michael Mandel wrote, "*Fools Crusade is not only the definitive work on the Balkans Wars, it is also an inspiring example of how to rescue truth from the battlefield when it has become war's first casualty*".

Western media distortion and intervention in Yugoslavia went almost unopposed. The antiwar movement was widely confused and silent. This was followed by the US invasions of Afghanistan then Iraq.

Along with media distortions and comparisons to Hitler and the Holocaust, there emerged the justification for violating national sovereignty based on the "Right to Protect" (R2P). This was the pretext for overthrowing the Libyan government of Moammar Gadhafi. Johnstone discusses how R2P has been used to confuse and silence antiwar forces, even some prominent traditional antiwar analysts. Johnstone has interacted with Noam Chomsky many times over decades and is overall very positive. But she notes that "even he might get something wrong". She documents how the co-author of "Manufacturing Consent" was evidently fooled into believing media reports from Benghazi Libya. Chomsky said the western sponsored uprising was "wonderful". It is now clear that media reports and NGO accusations from Benghazi were [false](#). They were the pretense to launch the NATO campaign to overthrow the government.

Western intervention, including the sponsorship of terrorist armies in Syria, has been sold to the unwitting public using this model. Wherever the US and NATO wish to intervene, there is a "humanitarian crisis" and "responsibility to protect".

Critical Current Issues

"Circle in the Darkness" analyzes many current issues of contention and debate on the left. She argues that suppression of debate and free speech, whether by the Right or Left, is counter-productive. She also argues that violence and vandalism hurts the progressive cause even when it gives a spurt of publicity and media attention. She describes many examples over the past 50 years and how frequently the instigators were government or police agents.

Johnstone describes the spectacular growth of the "Yellow Vest" movement in France. She documents how it began, how it was supported and joined by common people and how it reached across party lines. She contrasts the broad support of the Yellow Vest movement with narrow support of the student protests of May 1968. She writes, *"Sociologically, this revolt was the opposite of May '68. Instead of privileged students, imagining a non-existent working class revolution in a time of prosperity, this was the working class itself, in hard times."*

Johnstone describes how French police then attacked the Yellow Vest protesters with many injuries and even deaths. She writes, *"Curiously, all this heavy handed repression totally failed to prevent masked 'Black Bloc' members from taking advantage of this opportunity to attack the police, set fires, break shop windows Police did nothing to prevent unidentified intruders from invading the ground floor of the Arc de Triomphe to smash up a statue of Marianne.... It is noteworthy that almost all the seriously injured were peaceful Yellow Vest protesters, whereas the Black Blocs often got away unscathed. Perhaps the Black Blocs believe they are fighting the system. Whatever their intentions, they have served as a useful auxiliary to government repression."*

Johnstone notes the massive media effort to control popular thoughts and anger. *"The mainstream media have moved farther and farther away from informing the public and nearer to instructing them in what they should think and do."* She thinks the Left is also infused with dogma. Diana Johnstone recounts the falling out with Counterpunch magazine

after they published a “barrage of attacks” on the analyst and writer Caitlin Johnstone (no relation). *“That was indeed the start of Caitlin’s rise to great prominence in anti-war circles and beginning of CounterPunch’s decline from ‘fearless muckraking’ to snide sniping at the genuine heirs to the independent spirit of the founder, Alexander Cockburn. The gist of the CounterPunch attacks on the Australian Johnstone were that she dared say she would join even with someone on the right against war. That is simple good sense, but it was picked up by the Antifa purification squad as proof of tendencies toward fascism. When I saw them coming after Caitlin, I figured they’d be coming after me, and that my association with CounterPunch was soon coming to an end.”*

Johnstone argues in favor of working for peace with all forces which agree on that issue, whether or not they agree on all issues of “identity politics”. She argues that we should not be distracted from the root causes of war and social inequality. When the Left focuses on the fringe right, the establishment is not only happy, they encourage and promote this diversion.

“The specialty of the AntiFa is to situate the threat of tyranny on the powerless margins of society – from isolated groups of costume party neo-Nazis to outspoken persons on the left accused of ‘red-brown’ tendencies. This amounts to keeping the Left herded into its sheep pen, while the wolves roam freely.”

Johnstone is hopeful and encouraged by two things: a new generation of truth seekers and the fact that life is full of surprises.

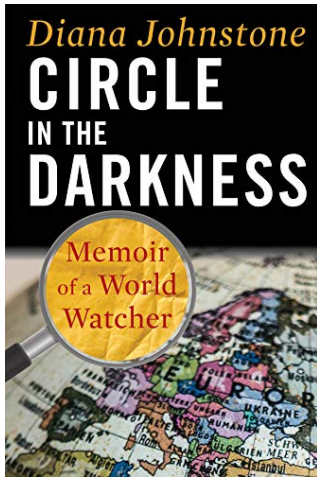
This book is full of insights and analysis about where the world is at and how we got here. It includes important ideas and thoughts about what we can do to resist the drift toward global war and catastrophe. Above all, Diana Johnstone argues for the importance of discussion, debate and keeping it real.

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