

Australia: John Pilger: once an inspiring truth-teller

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John Pilger, who died on 30 December 2023, was once a brave and principled journalist who spoke truth to power.

Many of us of a Certain Age can remember being moved and inspired in the 1970s by his exposures of war crimes, racism, injustice and human rights abuses. He was a war correspondent in Vietnam, Cambodia, Bangladesh and Biafra and probably (in Britain at least) did more than any other journalist to bring the horrors of those conflicts to public attention. He twice won the UK Journalist of the Year Award: in 1967 and 1979. His eponymous TV series on ITV was required viewing as far as I was concerned. His 1979 *Daily Mirror* reports and the subsequent documentary *Year Zero: the Silent Death of Cambodia*, exposing the genocide committed by Pol Pot's monstrous regime in Cambodia following the Vietnam war, were examples of political journalism at its very finest.

But something happened to Pilger in the 1990s. It seems to have been triggered by events following the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Serbia — under Slobodan Milošević — set out to ethnically cleanse Bosnian territory by systematically removing all Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks). Many Bosniaks were driven into concentration camps, where women and girls were systematically gang-raped and other civilians were tortured, starved and murdered.

In July 1995, Serbs committed the largest massacre in Europe since World War Two, in Srebrenica. An estimated 23,000 women, children and elderly people were put on buses and driven to Muslim-controlled territory, while 8,000 “battle-age” men were detained and slaughtered.

When Serbia refused international demands to remove its troops from Kosovo, grant autonomy to Kosovars, and allow armed peacekeepers in Rambouillet in 1999, the US-NATO aerial intervention started.

Perhaps under the influence of Noam Chomsky, Pilger (in the *New Statesman*) [called](#) the bombardment a “cowards’ war” and down-played Milošević’s attacks on Kosovar Albanians.

In December 2004, he wrote a [column](#) calling Kosova “a genocide that never was,” despite the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia charging Milošević with genocide (along with 65 other counts) in 2002.

Like Chomsky, Pilger [endorsed](#) Diana Johnstone’s book *Fool’s Crusade*, a revisionist history of the Yugoslav wars that denies the Srebrenica genocide and questions the authenticity of events like the 1999 Račak Massacre of Kosovars. He also [endorsed](#) Herman and Peterson’s dreadful book *The Politics of Genocide*, which cast doubt on (in fact, more or less dismissed) both the Srebrenica massacre and the genocide of Tutsis by Hutu militias in Rwanda.

In 2004, he was asked (by *Green Left Weekly*) whether he thought “the anti-war movement should be supporting Iraq’s anti-occupation resistance?” Pilger [replied](#): “Yes, I do. We cannot afford to be choosy.” The fact that this so-called “resistance” was murderously opposed to Iraqi trade unionists, women, communists and democrats, was apparently of no consequence as far as Pilger was concerned. By now his political creed was becoming “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”, leading him to support dictators, clerical fascists, misogynists and mass murderers — just so long as they opposed “the West”.

He excused Assad’s murderous regime in Syria and became a regular on the Putin’s TV channel RT (formerly Russia Today), where he denied Assad’s use of chemical weapons in Douma and elsewhere, [telling](#) viewers: “There’s no real evidence of a chemical attack”.

Again on RT, he [described](#) the heroic White Helmets in Syria as “a complete propaganda construct”, a phrase seized on and repeated by every Putin/Assad apologist.

On Ukraine, Pilger [parroted](#) Putin’s propaganda: “The invasion clearly was provoked. Indeed, if it was a breach of international law, so too was the provocation”: he didn’t explain what the “provocation” was. He endorsed the Kremlin’s claim that Ukraine as “a regime infested with Nazis” and straightforwardly lied when he [said](#) “NATO now completely surrounds Russia in the west”.

Small wonder that the [British Stalinist newspaper] Morning Star has been in mourning, publishing a gushing obituary, followed up by no less than six (at the last count) further eulogies, hailing Pilger as a great and heroic “anti-imperialist”.

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