

[Open this e-mail in browser](#)**February 14, 2022**

MOSCOW. FEBRUARY 14, 2022. PIR PRESS. "I do not think there are any perfect people. I do not think there is any perfect world. But I think we all could have a lot of fun and happiness if we learn to share power, resources and responsibilities. In this imperfect world, I am part of an outgoing generation that has not done enough to make the world safe and secure. As we hand over to the next generations of activists, deciders, practitioners and scholars, I hope I can be of use as they tackle the mess we've left, particularly, climate and environmental destruction, nuclear weapons, poverty and pandemics like Covid. So, the world I want is not perfect, but it must always be filled with hope, love, courage and respect," — Dr. Rebecca Johnson, Director of the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy..

Open Collar №43 with Rebecca Johnson

EDITORIAL: *For this issue of Open Collar we have talked to Dr. Rebecca Johnson, Director of the Acronym Institute, a scholar and an activist, a prominent figure of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), a major expert in international regimes and a member of the PIR Center Advisory Board since 1994. In the 1980s, Dr. Johnson was the face of European protests against the new round of the Soviet-American arms race. In the 1990s, it was from Johnson that the world learned about the progress of the nuclear test ban negotiations. We have tried to find out a little more about Rebecca as a person: her values, feminism and disarmament, the protests outside the U.S. Air Force Base in England and being arrested, visiting Hiroshima and taking a long journey from Beijing all the way to London via Moscow in 1980s, what was it like to work on ways to ban nuclear testing and how she knew of PIR Center. However, we could not avoid talking politics on*

this issue.

My values and principles

I was raised by religious parents who joined a strict Hutterite Christian pacifist socialist community in the 1930s. So, this is what I was born into, the youngest of eight children, spending my childhood in North Dakota and then being torn away from everything I knew when the fundamentalist community clashed with reality in the 1950s and many families, ours included, got caught in the middle. Times were difficult when my parents took us younger daughters to England in 1961. I was bullied for being different and helped by kindness. I kept looking for what is loving, different and valuable within everybody. I do not now describe myself as religious or 'pacifist', but rather as a peace-building nonviolent activist. In campaigning for disarmament, I also work for security, peace and justice. For me, these are incredibly important aspirations to work on with your whole life, your personal, political and spiritual life. These are all connected. Recognising these connections brought me into feminism, and are central to my guiding principles and values.

I believe that if you want real security, peace and justice, then you must find ways to work cooperatively and nonviolently: because you have to put in place different structures of power and ways of working – shared responsibility, respect for diversity in other human beings – that means that you cannot just try to eliminate them through force and weapons. This also leads me to recognize that violence against women and children is perpetrated by people even within UN peacekeeping services, even within our own NGOs, and disarmament. It is horrifying to think this, but we know it is the case.

When I think of my values, it is central that the personal is political and that we cannot attain peace or justice or equality without the full participation of women. And we cannot attain that unless we are also together, tackling those who are harassing and oppressing women and children sexually or physically at all levels. We must work consistently. And that is why nonviolence is, perhaps, the most fundamental for me. But it is not a passive way of doing anything. While I was at Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (England), we developed (and I have written and spoken about this) what we called feminist nonviolence, which is extremely active. It is about transforming society because we have to both live in this world that we are in and transform it to be better. Those are my values, I guess.

And my principles... I am not attached to a specific religion, but I do believe that we are intertwined with our own planet, Mother Nature, and all living things in many different ways, direct and indirect. And each of us individually can

choose. For some, that is through religion; for me, that is through music, activism and nonviolent politics. I do not want to define people by their religion or by their politics but look at what they want and actually do. So, as the suffragettes, who won the vote for women, always said, it is deeds that matter most, not just words.

Personal motive in disarmament activism

My personal reasons for becoming a peace activist were twofold. One was that while I was teaching in Japan for two years from 1979 to 1981, I visited Hiroshima, and I was very moved by really seeing the impact of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But the second reason was hearing talk coming out of the Reagan administration that a nuclear war could be fought and won, limited to Europe.



After I left Japan, I went to Beijing and boarded the Trans-Siberian railway, taking the train from Beijing to Moscow. It was my first time to be in Moscow – September 1981 – and I stayed there for a few days. Then I went on and stopped in Warsaw for a few days, and then travelled by train from Warsaw, through East Berlin, and to the Hook of Holland, where I boarded a ferry to Harwich and another train took me to London. I remember that journey so vividly, going right across what was then the Soviet Union and Northern Europe.

I had two kinds of consciousness in my mind: that I am a European, and that anybody who talks about fighting a limited war in Europe is talking mass annihilation: what they mean is the total destruction of all of Europe, including most of the Soviet Union that I travelled through, the people I met on the train on the way home. That consciousness took me to Greenham, but I had been a feminist activist in the 1970s before I went to Japan. So it was these three things: visiting Hiroshima, hearing that mad military notion of a limited war being able to be fought and won somehow, combined with my real sense of the humanity of all the people in all those countries I travelled through, including the Soviet Union that Reagan was vilifying as the evil empire, where I had met human beings just like me, with the same hopes and fears, and desires for peace, and desire to keep their families safe.

Then came my visceral decision in 1982 that I just had to do something to try to stop a nuclear war from ever happening. Therefore, the first step for that seemed to be to join the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, which was set up outside the U.S. Air Force Base of Greenham Common that was designated by NATO to have the first cruise missiles, the new generation of



warfighting nuclear weapons to be brought to Western Europe. But at the same time, Greenham was very much about trying to reach out to the people in the Eastern bloc, and we also visited peaceful people in Russia. The second time I went to Russia was as part of a group of Greenham women in 1985, to have discussions and appeal to Russia to stop deploying the SS-20s on the other side. We hoped our discussions would reach the new leadership of the Soviet Union under President Gorbachev or General Secretary Gorbachev, as he was then, and that he would get together with Reagan to talk about pulling all of those weapons out of Europe and starting negotiations on broader nuclear disarmament.

Feminism and disarmament

Feminism is multilayered and complex, as is disarmament. Feminist disarmament argues that having more women around the table at all levels will make big differences in all aspects of disarmament, peacebuilding and security. But it is also an analysis that is based on asking questions and really interrogating all the notions of power and responsibility embedded in patriarchal and military-industrial views of security, which are primarily about force projection, about having large arsenals of various kinds of weapons, and, of course, nuclear weapons as the apex of that construct and mindset.



Talking about feminism and disarmament, I argue that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is fundamentally and, perhaps, the first feminist- humanitarian disarmament treaty. I say this because of how the TPNW fits into international humanitarian law, putting the onus on shared power and responsibilities to ensure human and environmental security for all peoples, wherever we live. So, instead of giving primacy to the military-industrial notion of security as weapons and the power to project force against others, the TPNW was negotiated with the recognition, and I think, it is a much stronger recognition now with COVID and climate destruction, that what real people think about security is about security for your family, for your home and country, for shared resources and land, and by extension then for the whole planet.

Weapons like nuclear weapons and, in fact, all weapons, undermine and destroy the real security that people want. The unrealistic concepts of nuclear

deterrence amount to threats to annihilate millions of people in a country led by your political or ideological opponent. Not just the cities and lands, we now know, we know from science, we know from studies of nuclear winter and the climate impacts of nuclear weapons, nuclear war would destroy planetary civilization as we know it. So, feminist humanitarian security is about putting people first, not putting the arms manufacturers and technologies of the military-industrial establishments first.

That is fundamental here, to acknowledge the impact of these weapons on human beings, and the gendered ways in which military organisations operate, and how security is enhanced for everyone when women get much more involved in leadership and decision-making. Instead of trying to exert power over others, which has characterized a lot of history and the Cold War, and the dominant political-economic systems of the 18th, 19th, 20th centuries, we look at the power *of*, the power *to do*, starting from recognising the power within ourselves to liberate or oppress, to bring about peace or war, to change the world for better... or for worse. Choosing whether to build peace and work with others to change the world for the better is the responsibility of each and every one of us.

The final point on the feminist connection with disarmament is that disarmament means both an objective and a process. I think that this is true also of equality, of justice, of security, and that recognizing these as processes as well as objectives moves us away from the notion that peace is unobtainable because all these things are actually processes that have to be worked on at all times. You can have a treaty that eliminates a class of nuclear weapons, but then if you find that new weapons are brought in – enhanced weapons, modernized weapons – you have to keep working on disarmament, and this is a process. I think that there is a tendency in some men to see history in terms of short sharp events and the future as something that they can control. But that's not reality. And that is why we need far more feminist consciousness because we need people negotiating treaties who recognize that the job established by the treaty will need to carry on being done for a lifetime, and that is true also for building and sustaining peace and security.

Both a scholar and an activist

I think it is incredibly important that we have analytical activists and active analysts. The roles intertwine in different kinds of ways. Remember, my further education and training were in science, and I also worked as a teacher in Japan. My master's degree at SOAS [London University School of Oriental and African Studies] came after that amazing return journey from Tokyo to Beijing and then all the way to London on the Trans-Siberian via Moscow. My MA was



on the political relations in the Far East for the 20th century. After doing my exams I started living at Greenham, where I finished my thesis on U.S.-Soviet rivalry over the reconstruction of Japan from 1945 to 1951. That was a piece of scholarly research, but it also fed into my ability to be a more effective activist. While at Greenham I chose to be an activist, but I also learnt that I could communicate well with the public, politicians and diplomats,

leaders, and engage with other women, indigenous and grassroots people about why this matters to all of us and why each and every one of us is important. Each and every one of us has the power to contribute to the overall change that has to be made. I think that is very important for all analysts and scholars, diplomats, and activists.

When I left Greenham, I needed to earn my living. I had used up my savings and borrowed money from friends during the five years from 1982 to when the INF Treaty enabled me to leave in 1987. At first, it was difficult because during my years at Greenham I was arrested and imprisoned for disrupting the base, dancing on top of the nuclear silos with 44 other women, occupying the air traffic control tower, stopping the convoys of cruise missile launchers that took nuclear weapons into the countryside. I thought I couldn't get a job in academia as I'd once hoped, so I had to find a different way to earn a living.

I was lucky to quickly get a job covering someone's maternity leave for six months as an 'emergency planning' officer for a London Council. Responsible for civil defense, I opened the nuclear bunkers to the public and raised awareness about nuclear waste trains going



through Lambeth very close to schools, hospitals and densely packed housing estates. When that job finished, I worked with doctors who wanted to ban nuclear testing. I was excited about doing this because I had learned so much from women from Japan, the Marshall Islands, Aboriginal and indigenous communities in Australia and the Pacific. Their testimonies convinced me that it wasn't enough to ban just one type of nuclear weapons as the INF Treaty did. We needed a fully Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty as the next step. I was happy to be offered the job of coordinating Greenpeace's nuclear test ban campaign in 1988, which included going to the Semipalatinsk and Novaya Zemlya test sites as well as Nevada and France's Moruroa test site in the Pacific. Then in 1994, I got some Quaker funding to be in Geneva and report on the CTBT negotiations when they got started. At that point, everything came together for me, because I could combine my science training with analysis and

activism. I became quite good friends with some of the diplomats and scientists working on the CTBT, from the P5 to the non-aligned states who had a stake in the outcome of the nuclear test ban negotiations. Working on the CTBT also meant working on the NPT, which was facing its important 1995 review conference and extension decision. So that is how those two came together, and I became convinced that paying attention to facts and information is key to effective diplomatic and activist strategies that can bring about positive change in the world.

At the same time, I recognise it is a problem for scholars who feel under pressure from governments and try to argue that they are disconnected completely from politics and outcomes. In all the nuclear states we see national and transnational networks of military, industrial, bureaucratic and academic establishments – what I call the 'MIBAs' – that maintain nuclear proliferation and competing military doctrines of force. We keep constructing systems that lead to wars and nuclear threats, but we are also human beings, so we need to be more open and honest about those pressures and not try to pretend that scholars are somehow objective and that activists are totally subjective; it is not like that. Both emotional and rational, subjective and objective – bringing those different elements together can make us most effective.

Control vs. elimination



Disarmament is sometimes framed as being all or nothing. We hear from NATO diplomats that working for the complete prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons is contrary to or even undermines the NPT and incremental processes and steps. This is absolutely wrong. You must have key goals as well as steps, and

you will never eliminate nuclear weapons unless you also bring into play the legal treaties that prohibit them. The INF Treaty was a step. It was, by the way, a prohibition and elimination treaty, but it only banned and eliminated one class of weapons from, in particular, the European region. But it was a very important step.

Similarly, by the time we were negotiating the CTBT, it was clear that it was not going to be the major disarmament step that had been hoped for when it was first argued for in the 1950s. However, I still felt for many reasons that it was worth my time and really worth getting that step of the CTBT into international law. First, it would cap the ability of both proliferators and the existing nuclear-weapon states to keep doing explosive testing for new warhead designs. I was sorry we lost the argument to prohibit also in-lab warhead tests like subcritical,

hydronuclear tests, but a key line was drawn by the CTBT.

Another reason that was so important was that it established a very effective verification system. We're hoping now that we can draw on the CTBT and IAEA and also the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) experiences when we build up and establish the legal, institutional and verification requirements for the new TPNW. The text sets out the framework and some of the principles and basic elements of that in Articles 2 to 5 of the Treaty, but we will need to go into detail in the meetings of states parties. However, we already have lots of knowledge and information provided by the treaties that have gone before.

Nuclear weapons are an existential threat holding the whole of humanity hostage. So, we are right to be arguing for the total elimination of those particular weapons, as were those who had argued for the prohibition and elimination of chemical and biological weapons for similarly humanitarian reasons. At the same time, we are right to argue for all nuclear-armed states to take nuclear disarmament steps, which can be unilateral, bilateral, plurilateral, and need also to carry on being multilateral. This was recognized twenty years ago, at the NPT Review Conference of 2000, when the nuclear-weapon states agreed to what is known as the 13 steps, pushed for by the New Agenda Coalition and adopted by the whole NPT conference. Many of those became the core group of states who worked with ICAN [the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons] on the TPNW.

Our work shows that both comprehensive approaches and incremental steps are mutually necessary and mutually reinforcing to achieve disarmament. But we have to recognize these are not linear. You do not have to get one step completed before you



can get to the next step. On the contrary, several different approaches and steps can be worked on at the same time and with rivals and adversaries as well as allies. At the end of the Cold War, many nuclear-armed states undertook significant unilateral disarmament: the UK did, as did Russia, the US and France. These unilateral reductions cut the nuclear weapons deployed by NATO and Russia. Bilateral agreements, such as the SALT, START and SORT treaties are useful, as were the PNI, the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, which were overseeing the withdrawal and elimination of many tactical weapons. But some steps being pursued are for managing not eliminating nuclear weapons, which is not going to be effective or compatible with our overall security objectives. Those are steps that allow the military-industrial establishments of states with nuclear weapons to carry on enhancing and developing new types

of weapons even as they are patting themselves on the backs for engaging in negotiations and treaties that are supposed to reduce the numbers. That kind of thing is just like spinning wheels. It's not going to bring security for anyone, just profits for arms makers and their MIBA enablers. So, our job is to sound a warning and expose what is wrong with that.

Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy

Because of my Greenham record of being imprisoned for my peace activism, I could not go for UN or academic jobs even after I got my Ph.D. (on the CTBT and multilateral arms control, 2004, LSE/London University). If I was invited to apply for such jobs I would look around and encourage women that I knew had the commitment and skills (but no prison record), and I'd be delighted when they would get those jobs.

After some years the project that we set up in Geneva in 1994 became the Acronym Institute and publisher of an important international journal called Disarmament Diplomacy, which was first edited by Dr. Sean Howard. I kept being encouraged by funders to turn Acronym into a more formally established academic body and train international students. I loved teaching, but I also loved the nitty-gritty work at the coalface of disarmament diplomacy, combining direct nonviolent activism with strategic thinking and analysis. My worry was that I could end up doing an awful lot of organizational administration rather than the direct work that I loved, so we kept Acronym small, lean and focused. I have to do some admin, but most of my time goes on learning, strategising, educating and mobilising.



I did do a six-month stint for the University of British Columbia after going through the process of explaining my prison record and peace activism for the Canadian work visa and they decided that enough time had elapsed and it was all for nonviolent actions for peace or against racism, against apartheid, and so they welcomed me. But I found that the constraints of being in a professorial job in that kind of situation were not right for me. It was the time of the Bush-Blair wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and I felt I had to go back to London and try to stop these military travesties. I re-established Acronym and Disarmament Diplomacy with the help of Sean and the Board. I also worked with Dr [Hans] Blix as senior advisor on the International WMD Commission for a couple of years, and when that finished in 2006, I moved to Scotland.

The UK was planning to renew its Trident nuclear weapon systems, and I joined

the coordinating group for Faslane 365, which brought thousands of people to block the gates of the UK's nuclear submarine base at Faslane for a whole year. I managed to keep Acronym going and wrote for Disarmament Diplomacy on UN, NPT and CTBTO meetings, as well as writing reports on Trident replacement and giving evidence to parliamentary inquiries, while living in a flat in Rhu on the Clyde. I could watch from my living room as the nuclear submarines went in and out of Faslane. I could not have done that if I had worked in a more established job.

While facilitating the year of nonviolent protests at the Faslane naval base in 2006-07, I was struck by the resurgence of humanitarian arguments for nuclear disarmament that were made by doctors, teachers, students, artists and wide swathes of civil society from all over Scotland and Europe, and as far away as Hiroshima, Nagasaki and New York. I realised that the next step after the CTBT needed to be a comprehensive ban on nuclear weapons. I began to strategise, write and argue for this from 2008 onwards. When Acronym could no longer fund our journal Disarmament Diplomacy, I did more speaking and organising for ICAN, developing strategies and helping to build capacity for the nuclear ban treaty. That's the role that Acronym and I provided early on for what became the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. And that has given me fulfillment and peace of mind. I'm not ambitious for glory, I never have been. As long as I can earn enough to live, I haven't ever wanted to become a well-known or highly paid figure. I just wanted to contribute in the world to disarmament, peace, and justice. And so, having both activism and analysis in my DNA, this has been the best way to do it.

PIR Center, NPT, and a nephew

I think I first met Vladimir Orlov probably in 1994 or 1995, when he came to Geneva for an NPT meeting... it was around that time. I liked his enthusiasm and intelligence and knew that he and Monterey worked closely on the NPT review conference and brought scholars from Russia and East Europe into disarmament and diplomacy. I also met Roland Timerbaev in 1995; he was such an amazing diplomat, so knowledgeable but also warm and open, and he became a very dear friend. I was glad to support PIR Center and the hopes of NGOs in Russia and beyond. I thought it was great that there was a center for policy studies in Moscow, and I support whatever PIR Center can do to highlight ways to build peace, disarmament, mutual respect and coexistence.



Later there came an even more personal connection, which was that one of my

nephews, Daniel, was studying Russian and French at Cambridge University, and asked if I knew of any placement he could get where he could use his Russian but also work on an issue that was important and interesting, that mattered. I immediately thought of PIR Center. Fortunately, PIR said yes, so for several months Dan worked with PIR in Moscow as an intern. In the end, he did not go into this area of policy, but he is now the father of two wonderful children, and the headteacher of a school in Derbyshire. He clearly was drawn to teaching as well as music, which, of course, he loved. He even put a number of Chekhov's poems to music with a friend and did a public performance of this in Cambridge, with his proud family in the audience. He learnt a lot in his time with PIR, so this also made the relationship even closer.

Hobbies and leisure



I do not know whether they can be called hobbies, but I relax with music, swimming and walking. I play the guitar but not very well; I do sing, and I write songs. I especially love blues, listening to blues, folk and jazz. I go swimming in the sea throughout the year. It is one of the reasons why three years ago I moved down to

Sussex. I can actually see the sea from my flat. Swimming is incredibly important to me. I used to love cycling around London. Arthritis makes that more difficult now, though I can use cycle lanes to get from my home to Brighton. However, I still love walking, and as long as I have my walking poles, I can do quite a lot of hiking on the South Downs with my partner. And when Covid lockdowns lift, we're looking forward to going to other places to walk in the countryside and swim.

A perfect imperfect world

My vision of a perfect world is one that is extremely imperfect, full of weird and wonderfully diverse people of all kinds, with different abilities and capabilities, a world where everybody has a place and is loved, where they are respected and have the help and support to develop, to have fulfilling opportunities, to develop the best that they can be and give of their best to others, and that they can receive from the societies they live in what they need to become as happy and fulfilled as possible. I do not think there are any perfect people. I do not think there is any perfect world. But I think we all could have a lot of fun and happiness if we learn to share power, resources and responsibilities. In this imperfect world, I am part of an outgoing generation that has not done enough to make the world safe and secure. As we hand over to the next generations of activists, deciders, practitioners and scholars, I hope I can be of use as they

tackle the mess we've left, particularly, climate and environmental destruction, nuclear weapons, poverty and pandemics like Covid. So, the world I want is not perfect, but it must always be filled with hope, love, courage and respect.

Interviewer: Artem **Kvartalnov**

Editors: Nikita **Degtyarev**, Egor **Chobanyan**



Our e-mail: inform@pircenter.org

You can update subscription preferences or unsubscribe from the newsletters.

This email was sent to <<Email>>

[why did I get this?](#) [unsubscribe from this list](#) [update subscription preferences](#)

PIR Center · PO Box 147 · Moscow 119019 · Russia