

Howard Zinn Re-Evaluated

Answering the Critics on Zinn's Scholarship and Motives

Howard Zinn, like E. J. Hobsbawm, may approach the telling of history from a Marxist ideology, but the facts and the story are genuine, offering new interpretations.

By Michael Streich

Howard Zinn died on January 27th at the age of 87. The Associated Press called him “an author, teacher and political activist...” and quotes Arthur J. Schlesinger stating at one time, “He’s a polemicist, not a historian.” Therein lays the legacy of this Boston University professor whose popular book *A People’s History of the United States* found supporters and bitter denouncers.

Historians as well as the history-curious criticized his “Marxist” approach to the study of American history, his promotion of class conflict as part of the story, and his humanizing of national icons like George Washington. Evangelicals and the political conservative were particularly offended by Zinn’s ability to use historical fact in order to debunk myths steeped in patriotic ideals. Zinn chose not to ignore the often unpublished truths of the nation’s past, whether that was treatment of indigenous cultures or the “other side” of national heroes like certain Founding Fathers, Andrew Jackson, or Teddy Roosevelt.

What is Good History?

Most professors of history are obliged to publish as part of their tenure track or fully tenured positions within the proverbial ivy covered walls of academia. These books are often worthwhile and add immensely to the study of history, frequently looking at historical problems through different paradigms. Zinn’s audience, however, was the everyday person as well as the historical neophyte. His scholarship challenged existing beliefs. Students in a survey class comparing Zinn’s chapter on the American Revolution to their survey text took issue with his detailing of mutinies within the Continental forces. That could *never* have happened! This led to a research assignment that corroborated Zinn’s statements.

At a time when the study of American History is furthered weakened in the [nation’s high schools](#), histories not necessarily written as academic texts or scholarly reference material find mass appeal. Often, like Zinn’s *People’s History*, they are lucid and filled with the little known facts that, taken together, form a total picture. Barbara W. Tuchman, who never took a graduate degree but majored in History and Literature at Radcliffe, produced highly popular histories immensely popular with the general reader. These books included *The Guns of August* (The Macmillan Company, 1962), *A Distant Mirror* (1978), and others. Arthur Schlesinger, who taught at Harvard, never took a Ph.D.

This is not to say that conventional “academics” have not been able to accomplish similar goals. James McPherson’s books on the Civil War and Harvard’s Robert Darnton’s books – notably his *Great Cat Massacre* (Basic Books, 1984), are superbly written and often used in history classes as supplemental texts. Zinn’s gift, however, was to demonstrate the impact of historical events on the teeming masses, the frequently overlooked millions: the men and women trekking westward, toiling factory workers, and American army privates killing women and children in the Philippine War.

Zinn Challenged Emotional Epistemology

Conservative evangelicals are uncomfortable with the fact that some of the [Founding Fathers were Deists](#) or that Thomas Jefferson produced a New Testament devoid of any miracles including the virgin birth and resurrection. Yet these facts are corroborated by others (see Jaroslav Pelikan’s *Jesus Through the Centuries*,

chapter 15; Yale, 1985). Zinn's facts, for example, would never be found in Lynne Cheney's *When Washington Crossed the Delaware: A Wintertime Story For Young Patriots* (Simon & Schuster, 2004).

Zinn's *People's History* looks at history from the bottom up. If nothing else, this creates a source for healthy debate. Every national history contains the darker moments. The strength of a nation's ability to faithfully incorporate these less-than-admirable events is a demonstration of maturity and historical self-actualization. Germany succeeded in this in the decades after World War II. Whether Zinn was a Marxist Historian or not should never influence the veracity of his claims or their impact on a national history.

Howard Zinn's [People's History](#) is available on-line.

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