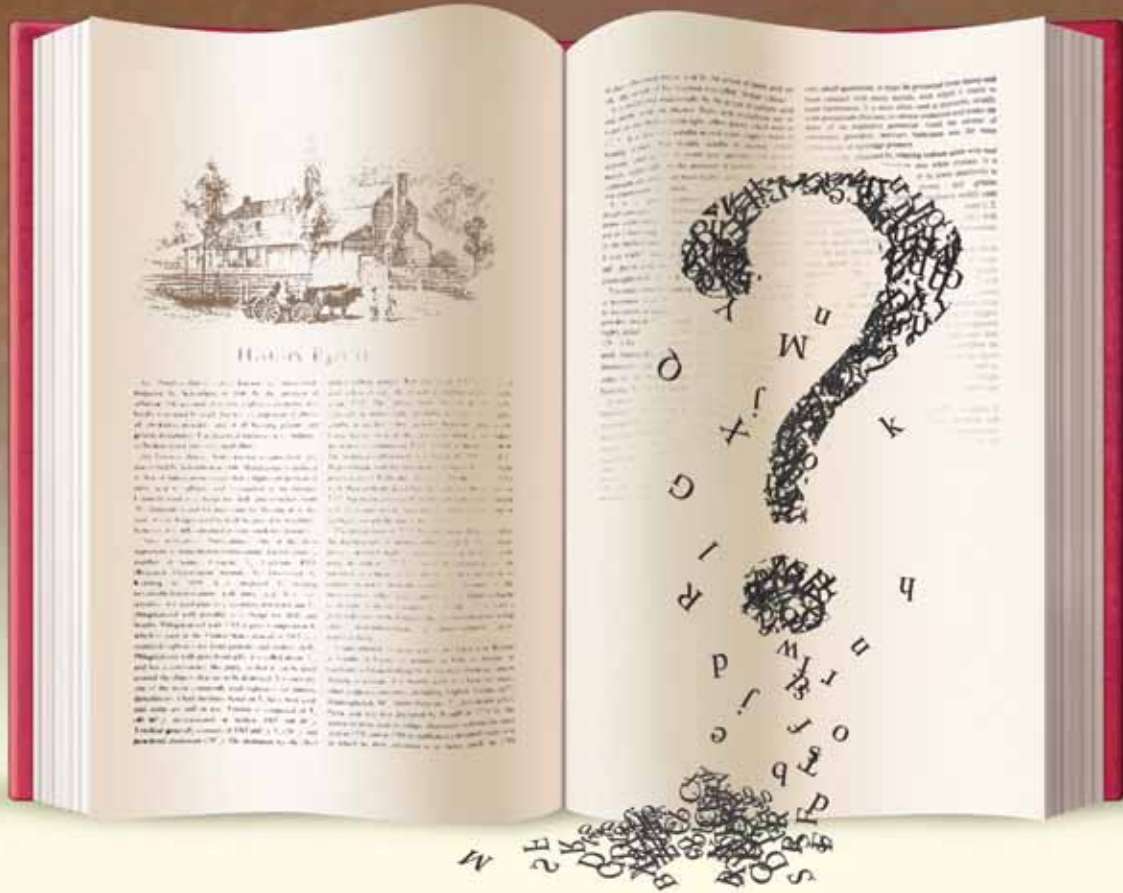


Undue Certainty

Where Howard Zinn's *A People's History* Falls Short



BY SAM WINEBURG

Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* has few peers among contemporary historical works. With more than 2 million copies in print, *A People's History* is more than a book. It is a cultural icon. "You wanna read a real history book?" Matt Damon asks his therapist in the 1997 movie *Good Will Hunting*. "Read Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States*. That book'll ... knock you on your ass."

The book's original gray cover was painted red, white, and blue for its Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition in 2003, and it is now marketed with special displays in suburban megastores. A week after Zinn's death in 2010, *A People's History* was number 7

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on Amazon's bestseller list—not too shabby for a book first published in 1980.

Once considered radical, *A People's History* has gone mainstream. By 2002, Will Hunting had been replaced by A. J. Soprano, of the HBO hit *The Sopranos*. Doing his homework at the kitchen counter, A. J. tells his parents that his history teacher compared Christopher Columbus to Slobodan Milosevic. When Tony fumes "Your teacher said *that*?" A. J. responds, "It's not just my teacher—it's the truth. It's in my history book." The camera pans to A. J. holding a copy of *A People's History*.

History, for Zinn, is looked at from "the bottom up": a view "of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves, of Andrew Jackson as seen by the Cherokees, of the Civil War as seen by the New York Irish, of the Mexican war as seen by the deserting soldiers of Scott's army."¹ Decades before we thought in such terms, Zinn provided a history for the 99 percent.

Many teachers view *A People's History* as an anti-textbook, a corrective to the narratives of progress dispensed by the state. This is undoubtedly true on a topical level. When learning about the Spanish-American War, students don't read about Teddy Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill. Instead, they follow the

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NENAD JAKESEVIC

plight of foot soldiers sweltering in the Cuban tropics, clutching their stomachs not from Spanish bullets but from food poisoning caused by rancid meat sold to the army by Armour and Company. Such stories acquaint students with a history too often hidden and too quickly brushed aside by traditional textbooks.

But in other ways—ways that strike at the very heart of what it means to learn history as a discipline—*A People's History* is closer to students' state-approved texts than its advocates are wont to admit. Like traditional textbooks, *A People's History* relies almost entirely on secondary sources, with no archival research to thicken its narrative. Like traditional textbooks, the book is naked of footnotes, thwarting inquisitive readers who seek to retrace the author's interpretative steps. And, like students' textbooks, when *A People's History* draws on primary sources, these documents serve to prop up the main text, but never provide an alternative view or open up a new field of vision.

What does *A People's History* teach young people about what it means to think historically?

Initially, *A People's History* drew little scholarly attention (neither of the two premier historical journals, the *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of American History*, reviewed the book). Among historians who did take notice, the verdict was mixed. Some, like Harvard's Oscar Handlin and Cornell's Michael Kammen, panned the book; others, like Columbia's Eric Foner, were more favorable.² But in the last 30 years, during which *A People's History* has arguably had a greater influence on how Americans understand their past than any other single book, normally voluble scholars have gone silent. When Michael Kazin, a coeditor of *Dissent* and a scholar with impeccable leftist credentials, reviewed the 2003 edition (concluding that the book was “unworthy of such fame and influence”), it was the first time that *A People's History* had captured a historian's gaze in nearly 20 years.³

The original assessments, and Kazin's retrospective, have largely focused on the substance of Zinn's book, pointing out blind spots and suggesting alternatives. My own view is that Howard Zinn has the same right as any author to choose one interpretation over another, to select which topics to include or ignore. I find myself agreeing with *A People's History* in some places (such as Indian Removal, and the duplicity and racism of the Wilson administration) and shaking my head in disbelief at others (e.g., Zinn's conflation of the Party of Lincoln with the Democratic Party of Jefferson Davis). Yet, where my proclivities align with or depart from Zinn's is beside the point.

I am less concerned here with what Zinn says than his warrant for saying it, less interested in the words that meet the eye than with the book's interpretive circuitry that doesn't. Largely invisible to the casual reader are the moves and strategies Zinn uses to tie

evidence to conclusion, to convince readers that his interpretations are right. More is at stake in naming and making explicit these moves than an exercise in rhetoric. For when students encounter Zinn's *A People's History*, they undoubtedly take away more than new facts about the Homestead Strike or Eugene V. Debs. They are exposed to and absorb an entire way of asking questions about the past and a way of using evidence to advance historical argument. For many students, *A People's History* will be the first full-length history book they read, and for some, it will be the only one. Beyond what they learn about Shays' Rebellion or the loopholes in the Sherman Antitrust Act, what does *A People's History* teach these young people about what it means to *think historically*?

A People's History stretches across 729 pages and embraces 500 years of human history. To examine in detail the book's moves and strategies, what I refer to as its *interpretive circuitry*, I train my sights on a key chapter, one of the most pivotal and controversial in the book. Chapter 16, “A People's War?,” covers the period from the mid-1930s to the beginning of the Cold War. Unlike chapters in which Zinn introduces readers to hidden aspects of American history—such as the Flour Riot of 1837—the stakes here are much higher. This is not the first time we've heard about Pearl Harbor or the Holocaust or the decision to drop the atomic bomb. But Zinn's goal is to turn everything we know—or think we do—on its head.

Anecdotes as Evidence

Consider the question of whether World War II was “a people's war.” On one level, as Zinn has to admit, it was. Thousands suited up in uniform, and millions handed over hard-earned dollars to buy war bonds. But Zinn asks us to consider whether such support was “manufactured.” Was there, in fact, widespread resentment and resistance to the war that was hidden from the masses?

Among the military, Zinn says, it is “hard to know” how much resentment soldiers felt because “no one recorded the bitterness of enlisted men.” Zinn instead focuses on a community in which he can readily locate resentment: black Americans.

The claim stands to reason. Domestically, Jim Crow laws were thriving in the North and the South, and overseas in the segregated armed forces. To fight for freedom abroad when basic freedoms were denied at home was a bitter contradiction. In fact, the black press wrote about the “Double V”—victory over fascism in Europe, victory over racism at home.

But Zinn argues something else. He asserts that black Americans restricted their support to a single V: the victory over racism. As for the second V, victory on the battlefields of Europe and Asia, Zinn claims that an attitude of “widespread indifference, even hostility,” typified African Americans' stance toward the war.⁴

Zinn hangs his claim on three pieces of evidence: (1) a quote from a black journalist that “the Negro ... is angry, resentful, and utterly apathetic about the war”; (2) a quote from a student at a black college who told his teacher that “the Army jim-crows us. The Navy lets us serve only as messmen. The Red Cross refuses our blood. Employers and labor unions shut us out. Lynchings continue”; and (3) a poem called the “Draftee's Prayer,” published in the black press: “Dear Lord, today / I go to war: / To fight, to die, / Tell me what for? / Dear Lord, I'll fight, / I do not fear, / Germans or Japs; / My fears are here. / America!”⁵

These items seethe with hostility. Many readers will likely con-

clude that they represented broad trends in the black community. But just as we can find instances that embody resentment, so too can we find expressions of African American patriotism and support for the war. Nor do we have to go very far. In the same journal that voiced the resentment of the black college student, one finds the words of Horace Mann Bond, president of Georgia's Fort Valley State College and the father of civil rights leader Julian Bond, who was asked by the editors to address the question, "Should the Negro care who wins the war?"⁶

Bond bristled at the query's implicit racism—the insinuation that blacks were apathetic to America's fate: "If a white person believes that a Negro in the United States is indifferent to the outcome of a great national struggle, that white person conceives of that Negro as divested of statehood... The Negro who is indifferent to the outcome of the struggle has stripped himself of allegiance



to the state of which he is a native."⁷

To array dueling anecdotes—three for hostility, three against—is not a very sophisticated way to make claims about a community that, to quote Bond, numbered "nearly thirteen million human beings of every variety of opinion, intelligence, and sensitivity."⁸ The three anecdotes Zinn draws on come not from digging in an archive or reading microfiche from the black press. Everything he cites was drawn from a single secondary source, Lawrence Wittner's *Rebels Against War* (1969).⁹

The evidence Zinn uses appears on two adjoining pages in Wittner's 239-page book. Also appearing on these pages is key information Zinn omits. Wittner lists the total number of registrants eligible for the war as 10,022,367 males between the ages of 18 and 37. Of these, 2,427,495, about 24 percent, were black. Wittner then lists the number of conscientious objectors enrolled by the Selective Service: 42,973. If the number of conscientious objectors were proportional for both blacks and whites, there would have been over 10,000 African American conscientious objectors—even more if there was as much hostility to the war among blacks as Zinn claims.

What we learn instead is that the total number of black conscientious objectors was a mere 400.¹⁰ "Even draft evasion remained low," Wittner adds, "with Negro registrants comprising only 4.4 per cent of the Justice Department cases."¹¹ He concludes: "Sur-

prisingly few black men became C.O.'s."¹²

The form of reasoning that Zinn relies on here is known as asking "yes-type" questions.¹³ According to historian Aileen S. Kraditor, yes-type questions send the historian into the past armed with a wish list. Because a hallmark of modernity is to save everything (and this was certainly the case by the mid-20th century), those who ask yes-type questions always end up getting what they want. Kraditor explains: "If one historian asks, 'Do the sources provide evidence of militant struggles among workers and slaves?' the sources will reply, 'Certainly.' And if another asks, 'Do the sources provide evidence of widespread acquiescence in the established order among the American population throughout the past two centuries?' the sources will reply, 'Of course.'"¹⁴

So it is here: will we find pockets of resistance and reluctance among blacks—or, for that matter, among whites, Hispanics, Italians, gays, and lesbians—no matter how just the cause of *any* war? The answer is "Certainly." To objections that it is biased to ask yes-type questions, Zinn might respond (and did, often) that *all* history is biased, that every historian chooses which facts to highlight or discard.¹⁵ Fine and good, provided that a crucial condition is satisfied, a condition again specified by Kraditor: that "the data the historian omits must not be essential to the understanding of the data included." To generalize to nearly 13 million people by citing three anecdotes, while at the same time ignoring data about 2,427,495 eligible black registrants, is a yes-type question in its purest form.

Questions Answered, Then Asked

Questions are what distinguish the history encountered in college seminars from the sanitized versions often taught in lower grades. At their best, questions signal the unfinished nature of historical knowledge, the way its fragments can never be wholly put together.

A People's History parts company with other historical inquiries by being as radical in its rhetoric as in its politics. For Zinn, questions are not shoulder-shrugging admissions of the historian's epistemological quandary so much as devices that shock readers into considering the past anew.

Twenty-nine questions give shape to chapter 16, a question on nearly every page. Big, in-your-face questions with no postmodern shilly-shallying:

- Would America's behavior during the Second World War "be in keeping with a 'people's war'?"
- Would the Allies' victory deliver a "blow to imperialism, racism, totalitarianism, [and] militarism," and "represent something significantly different" from their Axis foes?
- Would America's wartime policies "respect the rights of ordinary people everywhere to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?"
- "Would postwar America, in its policies at home and overseas, exemplify the values for which the war was supposed to have been fought?"¹⁶

No, no, no, and no. When questions aren't rattled off as yes-no binaries, they're delivered in a stark either-or, a rhetorical turn almost never encountered in professional historical writing:

- "Did the behavior of the United States show that her war aims

were humanitarian, *or* centered on power and profit?”¹⁷

- “Was she fighting the war to end the control by some nations over others *or* to make sure the controlling nations were friends of the United States?”¹⁸
- With the defeat of the Axis, were fascism’s “essential elements—militarism, racism, imperialism—now gone? *Or* were they absorbed into the already poisoned bones of the victors?”¹⁹

Facing the abyss of indeterminacy and multiple causality, most historians would flee the narrow straits of “either-or” for the calmer port of “both-and.” Not Zinn. Whether phrased as yes-no or either-or, his questions always have a single right answer.

A Slippery Timeline

In his lead-up to a discussion of the atomic bomb, Zinn makes this claim: “At the start of World War II German planes dropped bombs on Rotterdam in Holland, Coventry in England, and elsewhere. Roosevelt had described these as ‘inhuman barbarism that has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity.’”²⁰ Zinn then adds: “These German bombings [of Rotterdam and Coventry] were very small compared with the British and American bombings of German cities.”²¹ He then lists the names of some of the most devastating Allied bombing campaigns, including the most notorious, the firebombing of Dresden.

In a technical sense, Zinn is on solid ground. In the bombing of Rotterdam on May 14, 1940, there was an estimated loss of a thousand lives, and in the bombing of Coventry on November 14, 1940, there were approximately 550 deaths.²² In Dresden, by comparison, somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 people lost their lives.²³ Zinn’s point is clear: before we wag an accusing finger at the Nazis, we should take a long hard look in the mirror.

But in order to make this point, Zinn plays fast and loose with historical context. He achieves his desired effect in two stages. First, he begins his claim with the phrase “at the start of World War II,” but the Dresden raid occurred five years later, in February 1945, when all bets were off and long-standing distinctions between military targets (“strategic bombing”) and civilian targets (“saturation bombing”) had been rendered irrelevant. If the start of the war is the point of comparison, we should focus on the activities of the Royal Air Force (the United States did not declare war on Germany until December 11, 1941, four days after Pearl Harbor). During the early months of the war, the RAF Bomber Command was restricted to dropping propaganda leaflets over Germany and trying, ineffectually, to disable the German fleet docked at Wilhelmshaven, off Germany’s northern coast.²⁴ In other words, despite the phrase “at the start of World War II,” Zinn’s point only derives its force by violating chronology and sequence.

A closer look at the claim shows a second mechanism at work, one even more slippery than this chronological bait and switch. The claim ultimately derives its power from a single source: the expected ignorance of the reader. People familiar with the chronology of World War II immediately sense a disjuncture between the phrase “at the start of World War II” and the date of the Coventry raid.

By the time the Luftwaffe’s Stukas dive-bombed Coventry, Nazi

pilots were seasoned veterans with hundreds of sorties under their belts. That’s because the war had begun over a year earlier, on September 1, 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland.

Eight months before striking Rotterdam and fourteen months before bombing Coventry, the Nazis unleashed Operation *Weserkante*, the decimation of Warsaw. Never before in the history of warfare had such a massive force taken to the skies, an assault that made Rotterdam look like a walk in the park. In a single day, September 25, 1939 (“Black Monday”), the Luftwaffe flew 1,150 sorties over Warsaw, dropping 560 tons of high explosives and 72 tons of incendiary bombs with the singular goal of turning the city into an inferno. They succeeded. Smoke billowed 10,000 feet into the sky, and fires could be seen from as far as 70 miles away. When

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doomed Polish troops surrendered on September 27, more than half of Warsaw’s buildings had been damaged or destroyed, a small number compared with the toll in human life. Forty thousand Poles perished in the attack.²⁵

But the Nazis’ aims went far beyond forcing a Polish surrender. Their explicit goal was to terrorize—a policy known as *Schrecklichkeit* (“frightfulness”). They outfitted their dive-bombers with screechers, swooping down with ear-piercing ferocity and strafing dazed refugees as they fled the blazing city. On the eve of the Polish assault, Hitler explained that war on Poland did not fit traditional categories such as reaching a certain destination or establishing a fixed line. The goal was the “elimination of living forces,” and Hitler told his commanders to wage war with “the greatest brutality and without mercy.”²⁶ As General Max von Schenckendorff put it, “Germans are the masters and Poles are slaves.”²⁷

Zinn is silent about Poland. Instead, he approvingly cites Simone Weil, the French philosopher and social activist. At a time when the *Einsatzgruppen* were herding Polish Jews into the forest and mowing them down before open pits, Weil compared the difference between Nazi fascism and the democratic principles of England and the United States to a mask hiding the true character of both. Once we see through this mask, Weil argued, we will understand that the enemy is not “the one facing us across the frontier or the battlelines, which is not so much our enemy as our brothers’ enemy,” but the “Apparatus,” the one “that calls itself our protector and makes us its slaves.” Zinn adds that the real struggle of World War II was not between nations, but rather that the “real war was inside each nation.”²⁸ Given his stance, it’s no wonder that Zinn chooses to begin the war not in 1939, but a full year later.

Undue Certainty

The story that Zinn tells about the atomic bomb is familiar to anyone who has paid attention to the debates surrounding this event during the past 50 years. His goal is to demolish the narrative learned in high school: that faced with the prospect of the entire Japanese nation hunkered down in underground bunkers and holed up in caves, the United States dropped the bomb with profound remorse and only then as a last resort. Without the bomb, so the story goes, the war would have dragged on for months, if not years, and the United States would have suffered incalculable losses.

Zinn will have none of it. For him, the bomb was more about the hydraulics of capitalism than the saving of lives, more about cowing the Soviets than subduing the Japanese. The reader again encounters a couplet of rhetorical questions: Was “too much money and effort ... invested in the atomic bomb not to drop it?” Or was it because “the United States was anxious to drop the bomb before the Russians entered the war against Japan?”²⁹

To make his argument, Zinn draws on the two defining texts of the revisionist school, Gar Alperovitz’s *Atomic Diplomacy* (1967) and Martin Sherwin’s *A World Destroyed* (1975).³⁰ Their narrative goes something like this: in a conflict distinguished by war crimes, the atomic bomb tops the list, as the slaughter and destruction it inflicted was wholly unnecessary in bringing the war to an end. With Allied victories at Saipan, Luzon, and Iwo Jima, and the establishment of a beachhead at Okinawa, and following the relentless saturation bombing of Tokyo by conventional B-29s during May of 1945, the Japanese were already on their knees. The real reason for the bomb had little to do with Japanese capitulation and everything to do with the flexing of American muscle. Accordingly, the atomic bomb did not so much end World War II as initiate the first round in yet another conflict: the Cold War.

The linchpin of Zinn’s case is an intercepted cable sent by the Japanese Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo to his ambassador in Moscow on July 13, 1945. The cable ostensibly shows the Japanese desire to capitulate to the Americans. Zinn writes: “It was known the Japanese had instructed their ambassador in Moscow to work on peace negotiations with the Allies.... Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo wired his ambassador in Moscow: ‘Unconditional surrender is the only obstacle to peace.’” The only condition—a minor one for Zinn—called for allowing Emperor Hirohito to remain as a figurehead.³¹

A smoking gun? Not necessarily. Sending a cable is only half the story. What happened when the cable was received at the other end? On this point Zinn is mum.

The Japanese had been courting the still-neutral Soviets for months, with airy proposals containing scant details about surrender terms. In fact, as late as June 1945, their backs to the wall and all hope seemingly lost, the Japanese were still trying to barter with the Soviets, going so far as to offer Manchuria and southern Karafuto in exchange for the oil needed to stave off an American invasion.³² The Japanese dilly-dallying had worn the Soviets’ patience thin. After receiving his foreign minister’s cable, Naotake Sato, Japan’s ambassador in Moscow, wired back to his superiors that the latest proposal would mean little to the Soviets, limited as it was to “an enumeration of previous abstractions, lacking in concreteness.”³³ The Soviet deputy foreign minister, Solomon A.

Lozovsky, was more blunt. The Japanese offer rang hollow with “mere generalities and no concrete proposal.”³⁴ The Soviets snubbed the emperor’s request to send his special emissary, Fumimaro Konoe, to Moscow because Tokyo’s surrender conditions remained too “opaque.”³⁵ Readers of Zinn’s account learn nothing of this broader context.

Anyone who raises the possibility of a negotiated peace versus an unconditional surrender is playing the game that historians call the counterfactual, a thought experiment about how the past might have turned out had things not happened as they did. Its game pieces are *if*, *may*, and *might*. Consider this gambit by John Dower, one of the deans of Japanese studies and the author of the



Pulitzer Prize-winning *Embracing Defeat*: “Perhaps an American guarantee of the imperial system might have prodded the Japanese militarists to capitulate before the bombs were dropped. We will never know.” Or this by Japan’s Sadao Asada, professor of history at Kyoto’s Doshisha University: “Perhaps no account of Japan’s surrender decision is complete without counterfactuals, however risky they may be.... Without the use of the atomic bomb, but *with Soviet entry* and with continued strategic bombing and naval blockade, would Japan have surrendered before November 1—the day scheduled for the U.S. invasion of Kyushu? Available Japanese data do not provide a conclusive answer.” Or this formulation by Stanford University’s Barton J. Bernstein: “These alternatives—promising to retain the Japanese monarchy, awaiting the Soviets’ entry, and even more conventional bombing—very probably could have ended the war before the dreaded invasion. Still, the evidence—to borrow a phrase from F.D.R.—is somewhat ‘iffy,’ and no one who looks at the intransigence of the Japanese militarists should have full confidence in those other strategies.”³⁶

The counterfactuals’ qualifiers and second-guesses convey the modesty one is obliged to adopt when conjuring up a past that did not occur. But when Zinn plies the counterfactual, he seems to know something no one else knows—including historians who’ve given their professional lives to the topic: “If only the Americans had not insisted on unconditional surrender—that is, if they were willing to accept one condition to the surrender, that the Emperor,

a holy figure to the Japanese, remain in place—the Japanese would have agreed to stop the war.”³⁷ Not *might have*, not *may have*, not *could have*. But “*would have* agreed to stop the war.” Not only is Zinn certain about the history that’s happened. He’s certain about the history that didn’t.

From where might Zinn have derived such certainty? It seems that once he made up his mind, nothing—not new evidence, not new scholarship, not the discovery of previously unknown documents, not the revelations of historical actors on their deathbeds—could shake it. In the 20-plus years between the book’s original publication and the 2003 Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition, Zinn’s narrative remained virtually untouched by decades of prodigious scholarship.

For example, in the wake of Hirohito’s death in 1989, a veil of silence lifted, and Japan experienced an outpouring of memoirs,

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diaries, and tell-all exposés about the war years, some by the emperor’s inner coterie.³⁸ These works, as well as previously untranslated Japanese documents, have transformed historians’ understanding of the war’s last days. Yet not a single new reference to these works finds its way into Zinn’s narrative. Despite a 2003 copyright, chapter 16, “A People’s War?” remains the same, word-for-word, as the original 1980 edition, save for one new reference (to a book published in 1981) and two new sentences, one about the Haitian Revolution and the other about the War Resisters League.³⁹

Nor is chapter 16 an exception. The 20 original chapters in the book constitute 575 of its 729 pages. From 1980 to 2003, *A People’s History* went through four editions, each time adding new material on contemporary history, right up through the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As for the original 20 chapters, spanning a half millennium of human history, only four new references spruce up its original 1980 bibliography—with three of the four by the same author, Blanche Wiesen Cook.

On occasions when Zinn was asked if a quarter century of new historical scholarship had shed light on his original formulations, he seemed mostly unfazed. Consider his response to questions about the espionage trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. *A People’s History* devotes nearly two and a half pages to the case, casting doubt on the legitimacy of the Rosenbergs’ convictions as well as that of their accomplice, Morton Sobell. Sobell escaped the electric chair but served 19 years in Alcatraz and other federal prisons, maintaining innocence the entire time. However, in September 2008, Sobell, age 91, admitted to a *New York Times* reporter that he had indeed been a Russian spy, implicating his fellow defen-

dant Julius Rosenberg as well. Three days later, in the wake of Sobell’s admission, the Rosenbergs’ two sons also concluded with regret that their father had been a spy.⁴⁰ Yet, when the same *New York Times* reporter contacted Zinn for a reaction, he was only “mildly surprised,” adding, “To me it didn’t matter whether they were guilty or not. The most important thing was they did not get a fair trial in the atmosphere of cold war hysteria.”⁴¹

Undue Popularity

In the 32 years since its original publication, *A People’s History* has gone from a book that buzzed about the ear of the dominant narrative to its current status where, in many circles, it has *become* the dominant narrative. The book appears on university reading lists in economics, political science, anthropology, cultural studies, women’s studies, ethnic studies, Chicano studies, and African American studies, in addition to history. *A People’s History* remains a perennial favorite in courses for future teachers, and in some, it is the only history book on the syllabus.⁴²

In 2008, the National Council for the Social Studies invited Zinn to address its annual conference—the largest gathering of social studies teachers in the country. Zinn’s speech met with raucous applause, after which copies of *A People’s History* were given out to attendees courtesy of HarperCollins. Writing in the organization’s newsletter, its president Syd Golston hailed Zinn as “an inspiration to many of us.”⁴³ Back in 1980, who could have predicted that a book that cast the Founding Fathers as a shadowy cabal who foisted on the American people “the most effective system of national control devised in modern times” would one day be featured on the National History Education Clearinghouse’s website, an initiative funded by the US Department of Education?⁴⁴

In many ways, *A People’s History* and traditional textbooks are mirror images that relegate students to similar roles as absorbers—not analysts—of information, except from different points on the political spectrum. In a study examining features of historical writing, linguist Avon Crismore found that historians frequently used qualifying language to signal the soft underbelly of historical certainty. But when Crismore looked at the writing historians do in textbooks, these linguistic markers disappeared.⁴⁵ A search in *A People’s History* for qualifiers mostly comes up empty. Instead, the seams of history are concealed by the presence of an author who speaks with thunderous certainty.

To be sure, *A People’s History* brings together material from movements that rocked the discipline during the 1960s and 1970s—working-class history, feminist history, black history, and various ethnic histories. Together, these perspectives blew apart the consensus school of the 1950s by showing the validity of interpretations that arose from varied “positionalities” toward historical events. However, while *A People’s History* draws liberally from this work, the book resolutely preserves that old-time, objectivist epistemology. It substitutes one monolithic reading of the past for another, albeit one that claims to be morally superior and promises to better position students to take action in the present.

There is, however, one way that *A People’s History* differs from traditional history textbooks. It is written by a skilled stylist. Zinn’s muscular presence makes for brisk reading compared with the turgid prose of the textbook.

It’s no surprise then that, for many readers, *A People’s History* becomes not a way to view the past but *the* way. Such is the

impression one gets from scanning reviews of the book on Amazon. To some readers, *A People's History* takes on, as Michael Kazin puts it, “the force and authority of revelation.”⁴⁶ Reader gmt903 recommends the book to “any history teacher or anyone just interested in American history” because “TRUTH is the core of this book.” Malcolm from New York writes, “This book tells the truth, whether it tells the ‘patriotic’ truth or not.” For Knowitall from Santa Monica, *A People's History* simply provides “the plain, unvarnished truth.”⁴⁷ Zinn’s charisma as a speaker apparently evoked similar reactions. In *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, a documentary film that loosely follows Zinn’s autobiography of the same name, an aspiring teacher, sporting a shock of red hair and a three-day scruff, explains why he came to hear Zinn lecture: “I want to teach the truth to my students someday so that’s why I am here.”⁴⁸



A History with No Hands

Howard Zinn lived an admirable life, never veering from the things he believed in. But the man himself is not the issue when a teacher conducts a lesson on the atomic bomb using an account based on two secondary works written more than 40 years ago; or conflates the Nazi bombing campaign with the Allies, ignoring Hitler’s assault on Poland; or places Jim Crow and the Holocaust on the same footing, without explaining that as color barriers were being dismantled in the United States, the bricks were being laid for the crematoria at Auschwitz.

It is here that Zinn’s undeniable charisma becomes educationally dangerous, especially when we become attached to his passionate concern for the underdog. The danger mounts when we are talking about how we educate the young, those who do not yet get the interpretive game, who are just learning that claims must be judged not for their alignment with current issues of social justice, but for the data they present and their ability to account for the unruly fibers of evidence that stubbornly jut out from any interpretive frame. It is here that Zinn’s power of persuasion extinguishes students’ ability to think and speaks directly to their hearts.

Many reasons account for *A People's History's* preternatural shelf life. Historians may have known about Columbus’s atrocities since 1552, when Bartolomé de las Casas laid them out in grisly detail. But for Americans raised on textbooks with names like *The American Pageant* or *Triumph of the American Nation*, such descriptions came as shocking revelations. Zinn shrewdly recog-

nized that what might have been common knowledge among subscribers to the *Radical History Review* was largely invisible to the broader reading public.

Americans like their narratives clean. It took Zinn’s brilliance to draw a direct line from the rapier Columbus used to hack off the hands of the Arawaks, to the rifles aimed by Andrew Jackson to give the Creek Nation no quarter, and to the 9,000-pound “Little Boy” that Paul Tibbets fatefully released over Hiroshima in August 1945. For many, seeing these disparate events as part of a single unbroken narrative had a transformative effect. Sportswriter Dave Zirin recalled encountering *A People's History* as a teenager: “I thought history was about learning that the Magna Carta was signed in 1215. I couldn’t tell you what the Magna Carta was, but I knew it was signed in 1215. Howard took this history of great men ... and turned it on its pompous head ... speaking to a desire so many share: to actually make history instead of being history’s victim.”⁴⁹

In his 2004 *Dissent* review, Michael Kazin suggested that the major reason behind Zinn’s success was the timeliness of his narrative: “Zinn fills a need shaped by our recent past. The years since 1980 have not been good ones for the American left.... *A People's History* offers a certain consolation.”⁵⁰

Kazin often hits the mark, but on this score he’s way off. Zinn remains popular not because he is timely but precisely because he’s not. *A People's History* speaks directly to our inner Holden Caulfield. Our heroes are shameless frauds, our parents and teachers conniving liars, our textbooks propagandistic slop. Long before we could Google accounts of a politician’s latest indiscretion, Zinn offered a national “gotcha.” *They’re all phonies* is a message that never goes out of style.

It was only a matter of time before *A People's History* spawned no-qualification narratives from the other side of the political aisle, their pages full of swagger and, like their inspiration, best-sellers. Some commentators are not terribly bothered by these feisty one-sided blockbusters. At the height of the 2010 Texas curriculum controversy, Jonathan Zimmerman, a tireless editorialist and a historian of education at New York University, suggested that teachers pair *A People's History* with one of its conservative counterparts and teach both. Students would then learn “that Americans disagree—vehemently—about the making and the meaning of their nation. And it would require the kids to sort out the differences on their own.”⁵¹

I shudder to think about the implications of Zimmerman’s recipe for intellectual alchemy. Pitting two monolithic narratives, each strident, immodest, and unyielding in its position, against one another turns history into a European soccer match where fans set fires in the stands and taunt the opposition with scurrilous epithets. Instead of encouraging us to think, such a history teaches us how to jeer.

In criticizing Harvard history professor Oscar Handlin, who reviewed *A People's History* when it first came out, Zinn said, “He hated my book.... Whether historians liked or disliked my book depended really on their point of view.”⁵²

Admittedly, this happens frequently. Too often, whether or not we like someone’s politics determines whether or not we like their history. Many of us find ourselves reading the present onto the past, especially with issues we care about deeply. I know I do it, and I don’t consider it a source of pride. Instead of entering the past with a wish list, shouldn’t our goal instead be open-

mindfulness? Shouldn't we welcome—at least sometimes—new facts or interpretations that lead to surprise, disquiet, doubt, or even a wholesale change of mind?

When history, in the words of British historian John Saville, is expected to “do its duty,” we sap it of autonomy and drain it of vitality.⁵³ Everything fits. The question mark falls victim to the exclamation point.

A history of unalloyed certainties is dangerous because it invites a slide into intellectual fascism. History as truth, issued from the left or from the right, abhors shades of gray. It seeks to stamp out the democratic insight that people of good will can see the same thing and come to different conclusions. It imputes the basest of motives to those who view the world from a different perch. It detests equivocation and extinguisches *perhaps, maybe, might*, and the most execrable of them all, *on the other hand*. For the truth has no hands.

Such a history atrophies our tolerance for complexity. It makes us allergic to exceptions to the rule. Worst of all, it depletes the moral courage we need to revise our beliefs in the face of new evidence. It ensures, ultimately, that tomorrow we will think exactly as we thought yesterday—and the day before, and the day before that.

Is that what we want for our students? □

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- Sam Roberts, “Podcast: Rosenberg Case Open and Shut?” *New York Times*, September 18, 2008. Zinn's attitude toward new scholarship seems to have characterized his talks to teachers as well. The chief historian of the JFK Library, Sheldon Stern, invited Zinn to speak several times at summer institutes for local teachers, where Zinn was “always a big hit.” Stern, however, recalls being struck by the fact that Zinn “invariably placed a folder of handwritten, yellowed, dog-eared, and clearly decades-old notes on the podium before he spoke. Not surprisingly, he never referred to recent studies, interpretations, or evidence.” Sheldon M. Stern, “Howard Zinn Briefly Recalled,” *History News Network*, February 9, 2010.
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