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Howard Zinn, Historian, Dies at 87

By HOWARD POWELL

[Howard Zinn](#), historian and shipyard worker, civil rights activist and World War II bombardier, and author of “A People’s History of the United States,” a best seller that inspired a generation of high school and college students to rethink American history, died Wednesday in Santa Monica, Calif. He was 87 and lived in Auburndale, Mass.

The cause was a heart attack, which he had while swimming, his family said.

Proudly, unabashedly radical, with a mop of white hair and bushy eyebrows and an impish smile, Mr. Zinn, who retired from the history faculty at [Boston University](#) two decades ago, delighted in debating ideological foes, not the least his own college president, and in lancing what he considered platitudes, not the least that American history was a heroic march toward democracy.

Almost an oddity at first, with a printing of just 4,000 in 1980, “A People’s History of the United States” has sold nearly two million copies. To describe it as a revisionist account is to risk understatement. A conventional historical account held no allure; he concentrated on what he saw as the genocidal depredations of [Christopher Columbus](#), the blood lust of [Theodore Roosevelt](#) and the racial failings of [Abraham Lincoln](#). He also shined an insistent light on the revolutionary struggles of impoverished farmers, feminists, laborers and resisters of slavery and war.

Such stories are more often recounted in textbooks today; they were not at the time.

“Our nation had gone through an awful lot — the Vietnam War, civil rights, Watergate — yet the textbooks offered the same fundamental nationalist glorification of country,” Mr. Zinn recalled in a recent interview with The New York Times. “I got the sense that people were hungry for a different, more honest take.”

In a book review in The Times, the historian [Eric Foner](#) wrote of the book that “historians may well view it as a step toward a coherent new version of American history.” But many historians, even those of liberal bent, took a more skeptical view.

“What Zinn did was bring history writing out of the academy, and he undid much of the frankly biased and prejudiced views that came before it,” said [Sean Wilentz](#), a professor of history at [Princeton University](#). “But he’s a popularizer, and his view of history is topsy-turvy, turning old villains into heroes, and after a while the glow gets unreal.”

That criticism barely raised a hair on Mr. Zinn’s neck. “It’s not an unbiased account; so what?” he said in the Times interview. “If you look at history from the perspective of the slaughtered and mutilated, it’s a different story.”

Few historians succeeded in passing so completely through the academic membrane into popular culture. He gained admiring mention in the movie “Good Will Hunting”; [Matt Damon](#) appeared in a History Channel documentary about him; and [Bruce Springsteen](#) said the starkest of his many albums, “Nebraska,” drew inspiration in part from Mr. Zinn’s writings.

Born Aug. 24, 1922, Howard Zinn grew up in New York City. His parents were Jewish immigrants, and his father ran candy stores during the Depression without much success.

“We moved a lot, one step ahead of the landlord,” Mr. Zinn recalled. “I lived in all of Brooklyn’s best slums.”

He graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School and became a pipe fitter in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where he met his future wife, Roslyn Shechter. Raised on [Charles Dickens](#), he later added [Karl Marx](#) to his reading, organized labor rallies and got decked by a billy-club-wielding cop.

He joined the Army Air Corps in 1943, eager to fight the fascists, and became a bombardier in a B-17. He watched his bombs rain down and, when he returned to New York, deposited his medals in an envelope and wrote, “Never Again.”

“I would not deny that war had a certain moral core, but that made it easier for Americans to treat all subsequent wars with a kind of glow,” Mr. Zinn said. “Every enemy becomes [Hitler](#).”

He and his wife lived in a rat-infested basement apartment as he dug ditches and worked in a brewery. Later they moved to public housing and he went to college on the G.I. Bill.

He earned a B.A. at [New York University](#) and master’s and doctoral degrees at [Columbia University](#). In 1956, he landed a job at Spelman College, a historically black women’s college, as chairman of the history department. Among his students were [Marian Wright Edelman](#), founder of the Children’s Defense Fund; [Alice Walker](#), the novelist; and the singer and composer Bernice Johnson Reagon.

Mr. Zinn served on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and marched for civil rights with his students, which angered Spelman’s president.

“I was fired for insubordination,” Mr. Zinn recalled. “Which happened to be true.”

Mr. Zinn moved to Boston University in 1964. He traveled with the Rev. Daniel Berrigan to Hanoi to receive prisoners released by the North Vietnamese, and produced the antiwar books “Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal” (1967) and “Disobedience and Democracy” (1968).

He waged a war of attrition with Boston University’s president at the time, John Silber, a political conservative. Mr. Zinn twice organized faculty votes to oust Mr. Silber, and Mr. Silber returned the favor, saying the professor was a sterling example of those who would “poison the well of academe.”

Mr. Zinn’s book “La Guardia in Congress” (1959) won the American Historical Association’s Albert J. Beveridge Award. “A publisher went so far as to publish my quotations, which my wife thought was ridiculous,” Mr. Zinn said. “She said, ‘What are you, the pope or [Mao Zedong](#)?’ ”

Mr. Zinn retired in 1988, concluding his last class early so he could join a picket line. He invited his students to join him.

Mr. Zinn wrote three plays: “Daughter of Venus,” “Marx in Soho” and “Emma,” about the life of the anarchist Emma Goldman. All have been produced. His last article was a rather bleak assessment of [President Obama](#) for The Nation. “I’ve been searching hard for a highlight,” he wrote.

Roslyn Zinn died in 2008. Mr. Zinn is survived by a daughter, Myla Kabat-Zinn of Lexington, Mass.; a son, Jeff Zinn, of Wellfleet, Mass.; and five grandchildren.

Mr. Zinn spoke recently of more work to come. The title of his memoir, he noted, best described his personal philosophy: “You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train.”

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