



RISE LIKE LIONS

IN an era when many academics seek safety and comfort by avoiding politics, Howard Zinn stands out as a model of the engaged activist-scholar. His unconventional perspective on U.S. history has made him one of the most beloved figures of the progressive movement.

Zinn grew up in a poor Jewish immigrant family in Brooklyn, New York. He remembers moving a lot when he was a child. "We were always one step ahead of the landlord," he says. There were no books or magazines in Zinn's childhood home; the first book he read outside of school was a damaged copy of Tarzan



the civil-rights movement and was an advisor to members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; he was fired in 1963 for “insubordination” when he supported students in their protests. He went on to teach at Boston University, where he was a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War. He still teaches at BU and has been a fellow at Harvard University and a visiting professor at both the University of Paris and the University of Bologna.

Zinn is a history excavator. He digs for and recovers valuable and neglected aspects of the past, then uses them to help us understand the present. Zinn takes a bottom-up approach to history, giving voice to the stories of ordinary people, especially Native Americans, slaves, women, and blacks. He counters the academy’s top-down perspective with wry humor and devastating fact.

THE ROLE OF ARTISTS IN A TIME OF WAR

An Interview With Howard Zinn

DAVID BARSAMIAN

and the Jewels of Opar, which he found in the street. Despite this inauspicious beginning, he was soon a voracious reader. His parents, seeing his interest, clipped coupons from a newspaper offer and ordered him the complete works of Charles Dickens, one book at a time. When he was thirteen, they got him a used Underwood typewriter.

After graduating from high school, Zinn worked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard for several years. When the U.S. entered World War II, he joined the U.S. Air Force. His experience as a bombardier, destroying entire towns to get at small pockets of enemy troops, later provided material for his essays about the “stupidity of modern warfare.”

After the war ended, Zinn went to Columbia University on the GI Bill and earned his PhD in history. Then one day he heard a Woody Guthrie song about the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, one of the bloodiest labor battles in U.S. history. Twenty men, women, and children were killed when the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company used hired guns and militiamen to bring a violent end to a coal miners’ strike. Zinn had learned nothing about this important event from his professors or history books. Hearing that song was a defining moment for him. It inspired him to go beyond conventional academic sources in his history research.

Zinn taught at Spelman College, a historically black women’s college in Atlanta, Georgia, where he became involved in

Today Zinn writes articles for Z magazine and a column for the Progressive titled “It Seems to Me.” His book A People’s History of the United States (HarperCollins) has sold more than a million copies, and each year sales exceed the previous year’s. He is the author of numerous other titles, including Failure to Quit (South End Press) and the autobiography You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train (Beacon Press). His most recent book, Artists in Times of War (Seven Stories Press), reflects his keen interest in the arts. Zinn himself is a playwright who has written two plays: Marx in Soho and Emma, on the life of anarchist activist Emma Goldman.

Zinn lives with his wife, Roslyn, in Auburndale, Massachusetts. I talked with him in February 2004, after he had addressed an audience of trade-union leaders at Harvard.

Barsamian: You have called attention to the role of artists in a time of war. What attracts you to artists?

Zinn: Artists play a special role in social change. I first noticed this when I was a teenager and becoming politically aware for the first time. It was people in the arts who had the greatest emotional effect on me. I’m thinking primarily of singers: Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Paul Robeson. I was reading Karl Marx and all sorts of subversive matter, but there was something special about the effect artists had on me — not only singers and musicians but poets, novelists, and people in the theater. It seemed to me that artists had a special power when they commented, either in their own work or outside their work, on what was happening in the world. There was a kind of force they brought into the discussion that mere prose could not match. The passion and emotion of poetry, music,

and drama are rarely equaled in prose, even beautiful prose. I was struck by that at an early age.

Later, I came to think about the power of those in charge of society and the relative powerlessness of most other people, who become the victims of the decision makers. I thought about what tools people might have to resist those who have a monopoly on political and military power. Art, I saw, gave them a special motivation that couldn't be calculated. Social movements all through history have used art to enhance what they do, to inspire people, to give them a vision, to bring them together and make them feel that they are part of a vibrant movement.

Very often, people who are not acquainted with the industrial workplace, people who have not worked in factories or mills, think that working people are not interested in lit-

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erature. But working people have always had a life outside the workplace, and in that life many of them do read and become self-educated. Sometimes, at work, early-twentieth-century laborers would take whatever opportunity they had to talk to one another, to read to one another, to draw upon the great voices of literature for inspiration. In *A People's History of the United States*, I quote from the memoir of a garment worker, who tells how she and her co-workers would read Percy Bysshe Shelley and quote these remarkable lines from his poem "The Mask of Anarchy":

"Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number —
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you —
Ye are many — they are few."

What a remarkable affirmation of the power of the seemingly powerless: "Ye are many — they are few."

Barsamian: Shelley wrote that poem on the occasion of a massacre in Manchester, England, in 1819, when eleven peaceful demonstrators were shot and killed and hundreds more wounded while protesting against deplorable economic conditions. Shelley also wrote a famous poem about the arrogance and hubris of great emperors and titled it "Ozymandias," which is Greek for "Ramses," the ancient Pharaoh of Egypt:

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Zinn: I remember reading that poem in school, but much of its significance was lost on me. I don't think the teacher drew out the full meaning of that poem, the trenchant critique of power. Power is temporary; it comes into being, and it goes out. Great monuments that look as if they will stand forever decay and fall. Shelley was certainly a politically aware poet, with connections to the anarchists of the time. He had some sympathy for the anarchist idea, which is based on, for one thing, the ephemeral nature of power and the fact that if enough people pool their meager resources, then they can overcome the most powerful force.

Barsamian: You also like to cite the poet Langston Hughes, who addresses the United States in a poem titled "Columbia." What do you see in this particular poem?

Zinn: Langston Hughes is one of my favorite poets; he wrote poetry that got him in trouble with the Establishment. I see his poem "Columbia" as a forerunner, decades earlier, of Martin Luther King Jr.'s opposition to the Vietnam War.

Here, Hughes speaks out against the hubris of the United States as a new imperial power. He's very skeptical of this country's claims to innocence in its forays in the world. Addressing the U.S., he writes:

Columbia,
My dear girl,
You really haven't been a virgin for so long.
It's ludicrous to keep up the pretext.
You're terribly involved in world assignments
And everybody knows it.
You've slept with all the big powers
In military uniforms,
And you've taken the sweet life
Of all the little brown fellows
In loincloths and cotton trousers.
When they've resisted,
You've yelled, "Rape,"
.....
Being one of the world's big vampires,
Why don't you come on out and say so
Like Japan, and England, and France,
And all the other nymphomaniacs of power
Who've long since dropped their
Smoke screens of innocence
To sit frankly on a bed of bombs?

It has always been a special fascination to me that black people, who you might assume would be most concerned, and maybe solely concerned, with the very serious issues of slavery and racism, should also be conscious of what the United States is doing to people — often people of color — in other parts of the world.

(end of excerpt)