



**Debunking Howard Zinn: Exposing the Fake History That Turned a Generation against America**, Mary Grabar, Regnery History, 327 pp., \$29.99 hardcover.

## Howard Zinn: The Debunker Debunked

**Lauren Weiner**

Published online: 12 May 2020

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2020

Prominent historians are speaking out against the 1619 Project, the latest untruth to be fast-tracked to America's K-12 students. Letting politically correct interpretations of history sink in is unwise. The ill-effects are amply demonstrated by forty years of young Americans reading a highly accessible book called *A People's History of the United States* (1980) and coming away with little faith in their country's founding or its institutions. Howard Zinn (1922-2010) wrote the book in the shadow of the Vietnam and Watergate disillusionments. It has

since become standard, having outlasted the loss of reputation suffered by Marxist ideas when, a decade after the book's publication, Soviet communism fell.

Zinn's ship sailed merrily on. By the turn of the millennium, *A People's History* had become a series of books under his editorship. There's now a Zinn Education Project, and democratic socialists hold a Howard Zinn Book Fair every year. Columnists at *Jacobin* magazine consider Zinn a role model. As Mary Grabar writes, *A People's History* isn't just the book touted by Matt Damon in the movie *Good Will Hunting* (1997) and by a hip young radical in the movie *Lady Bird* two decades later; it is often the first full-length history book that students encounter, and is invoked by college editorialists and Bernie Sanders campaigners across the land. Indeed one can scarcely imagine Senator Sanders as even the temporary front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination without the BernieBros and SanderSistas having been primed by Howard Zinn.

Grabar, a resident fellow at the Alexander Hamilton Institute for the Study of Western Civilization, is not the first scholar to critique *A People's History* but may well be the most thorough. *Debunking Howard Zinn: Exposing the Fake History That*

---

**Lauren Weiner** has written for a number of prominent outlets, including *Commentary*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Law & Liberty*, *National Review*, and the *Washington Times*; lweiner6@gmail.com. From 2007 to 2010, Weiner served as a speechwriter for U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

*Turned a Generation against America* is 327 pages worth of relentless examination of Zinn's chapters on the early history of the Americas, the American Revolution, slavery and the Civil War, the Second World War, the Civil Rights movement, and the Cold War. Zinnian assertions that Grabar's research knocks down include these: that in Native American cultures, the status of women was higher and their treatment far better than in the societies formed by newcomers from England; that during the Second World War, the U.S. government kept the internment of Japanese Americans a secret from the American people; and that Ho Chi Minh was a Jeffersonian democrat.

Zinn was "a brilliant, mesmerizing political activist," writes Grabar, able to draw the young to him with his speeches. It would be hard to overstate the energy or influence of this most *engagé* of historians. He was one of the founders of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a co-editor of the *Pentagon Papers*, and a professor who counted Alice Walker and Marian Wright Edelman among his students. There were no exams in his classes, and he never gave failing grades—the priority was herding his charges onto a bus or van to take them to a civil rights march or antiwar demonstration.

The "agit-prof"—a moniker bestowed by the *New Republic* some years back, in an article subtitled

"Howard Zinn's Influential Mutilations of American History"—almost never attended professional meetings of historians or presented his work at panels. What this suggests is a scholar trying to avoid the accountability that his peers might bring to bear. When his employers (Spelman College, and later Boston University) got after him for poor academic performance, it seemed only to burnish his reputation as an anti-Establishment figure. Later, when educators and officeholders in Indiana and Arkansas tried to sideline the biased and falsehood-ridden *A People's History*, it made him a poster boy for the unfair suppression of left-wing views.

Zinn's aversion to facing the strongest arguments that could be made against his own arguments is telling. He seems not so much a Socrates as, say, a less neurotic and less sex offender-ish version of J.D. Salinger, to whom Grabar compares him. She quotes historian Sam Wineburg's observation that Zinn's book "speaks directly to our inner Holden Caulfield." The pandering, adolescent-friendly cynicism of *The Catcher in the Rye* is not identical to the cynicism on display in *A People's History*. But these popular books both make a promise: to sweep away the phony impositions of the adults. It's an attitude that disarms the young, who strain to find their footing in the world and to figure out what they ought to think of their elders.

Make no mistake, the Socratic method—the raising of penetrating questions that challenge one’s inherited assumptions—is not Zinn’s method. As Grabar points out, the questions with which he lards his text are rhetorical questions that pull the reader toward his conclusions without his having to provide much solid evidence. For example, his chapter on American slavery ends with W.E.B. Du Bois: “Was Du Bois right—that in that growth of American capitalism, before and after the Civil War, whites as well as blacks were in some sense becoming slaves?” Often the leading questions come in batches, as in the following, concerning the Second World War: “Did the behavior of the United States show that her war aims were humanitarian, or centered on power and profit? 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?”

America is all about “power and profit”; “nice phrases about representative government” only mask the reality of “class divisions and conflict.” Such verbiage is frequent in *A People’s History*, which cites authorities such as Herbert Aptheker and William Z. Foster. It doesn’t take immersion in Zinn’s FBI file (though Grabar quotes from it) to know whence this outlook comes. Zinn always denied membership in the Communist

Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), but the posthumously released file makes his membership clear.<sup>1</sup> He apparently left the Party by the early 1960s, though. One could call him a “cafeteria” communist, for Grabar’s portrait shows that this New Yorker born in 1922 was a kind of bridge between the Old Left and the New Left. That might explain the incoherence of his political philosophy—part stern Leninism, part let-it-all-hang-out Sixties anarchism. His biographer, Martin Duberman, put it this way: “Howard found the Marxian idea of redistributing society’s wealth according to need a congenial one, but he also felt considerable attraction to the anarchists’ anti-authoritarian stance.”

Zinn’s lively book is even more lively for toggling between these—for being the product of an aging radical eager to partner with the spirited activists of the Forever Young generation. The Yippies and Hippies of the New Left had no use for Josef Stalin; but neither did they have any use for—in fact they reviled—domestic anti-communists. *A People’s History* is shaped to thread that needle: Zinn lionizes Third World revolutionaries in the book, arguing strenuously (and inaccurately) that their movements were independent, not sponsored by

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI Records-The Vault, <https://vault.fbi.gov/Howard%20Zinn%20>

the Soviet Union. He does not, however, defend Soviet society itself as good, the way an Old Leftist would be expected to. In fact he alludes to things that a down-the-line Stalinist would be loath to acknowledge: the existence of Soviet labor camps and the Kremlin's squelching of the Hungarian anti-Soviet uprising of 1956.

The heroes of *A People's History* are militants such as the International Workers of the World (the Wobblies), the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice, and the Black Panthers. The villains are the Republicans, the Democrats, the NAACP. What the villains all have in common is that they're bourgeois. Wars were caused by bourgeois capitalism. Slavery, and even sexism, were caused by bourgeois capitalism. Liberals such as FDR, JFK, or LBJ might try to bring reform but always, according to *A People's History*, make enervating compromises that hinder the struggle of the oppressed against their capitalist oppressors. It doesn't matter what a Hubert Humphrey or an A. Phillip Randolph might have done to vindicate the rights of black Americans. These men were bourgeois accommodationists—anti-communists, too, doubling their demerits—so they're found wanting. (Randolph's Fair Employment Practices Committee "had no enforcement powers and changed little," sniffs Zinn.)

Grabar pokes hole after hole in the Zinnian mantra that black Americans preferred radical standard-bearers to those who pushed for change from within the system, even as they recognized how flawed that system was. In *A People's History*, it is no surprise that Malcolm X comes out looking better than Martin Luther King, Jr. But Zinn goes further. He praises the violence-prone H. "Rap" Brown of SNCC and Huey Newton of the Black Panthers while downgrading NAACP officials Charles Houston, Roy Wilkins, and Walter White. He tries to leverage the actions of CPUSA members Hosea Hudson and Angelo Herndon into broad statements about "the black militant mood," and about how "black Communists in the South had earned the admiration of blacks by their organizing work against enormous obstacles." No polling data or other evidence is adduced to back up this claim of admiration. Grabar counters that black Americans "quite forcefully put out the unwelcome mat for black militants," and corroborates with polling data, along with lacerating criticisms of the CPUSA penned at the time by reporters and editors of African American newspapers around the country.

Its section on the Scottsboro Boys case alone makes *Debunking Howard Zinn* worth the purchase price. In the 1931 case, several black youths in

Alabama were accused of raping two white women; despite exculpatory evidence, they were hastily found guilty and given death sentences. The CPUSA publicized the miscarriage of justice while trying to monopolize the effort to overturn it. Walter White, the NAACP's executive secretary, fought with CPUSA lawyers over who should legally represent the defendants. Communists picketed the NAACP's meetings and heckled its representatives. The *Afro-American* reported that CPUSA members denounced the NAACP as "traitors of the Negro masses." The NAACP "was eventually instrumental in freeing the Scottsboro defendants," writes Grabar, "but only after many wasted years behind bars thanks to the Communists' bungling of the case." *Pace* Zinn, the CPUSA "exploited those who needed

help most"—with Party members contradictorily fund-raising to meet the Scottsboro Boys' court costs, and line Party coffers, even as they loudly declared there was no justice to be had under capitalism's judicial system.

In pulling together the writings of other historians on these episodes in American history, and hunting down contemporaneous accounts, Mary Grabar has done a great service. Her takedown of the "agit-prof" does not obscure or explain away the mistakes and defects of the American government and people; it just refuses to exaggerate them. Alas, there isn't a whole lot of reason to hope the BernieBros and SanderSistas out there will listen. But at least now there is a text out there with which tomorrow's high schoolers could confront the Zinnian myths.