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Rise Like Lions: The Role Of Artists In A Time Of War

An Interview With Howard Zinn

BY DAVID BARSAMIAN • JULY 2004

Howard Zinn is 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.

After WWII ended, Zinn went to Columbia University to become a Doctor in History. Then one day he heard a Woody Guthrie song about the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, one of the bloodiest factory battles in U.S. history. Twenty men, women, and children were killed when the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company used 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. (...) *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. I was reading Karl Marx and all sorts of revolutionary matter, but it was people in the arts who had the greatest emotional effect 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. The force, 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. 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 do not know well the industrial workplace, people who have not worked in factories or mills, think that working people are not interested in literature. 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 read to one another the great voices of literature for inspiration. (…)

Barsamian: A novel you recommend is *Johnny Got His Gun*, whose author, Dalton Trumbo, was persecuted in the McCarthy era. He was blacklisted, went to jail, and couldn't find work under his own name for years. You say that your students respond positively to this novel.

Zinn: I use this book because I could give ten lectures about war, filling them with my own passionate feelings, and they would not have the impact of one evening spent reading *Johnny Got His Gun*. Trumbo wrote about a soldier who is found on the battlefield barely alive, without arms or legs, blind and deaf — really just a heart beating and a brain, but alive. This is a story for our time. Our government wants us to forget about the GIs who come back from war blind or with missing legs and arms. There are plenty of casualties* who represent what this soldier represents: the horrors of war.

The government, however, does not want people to be conscious of the thousands of wounded veterans in the wars. Their existence is hidden from the public. A novel like *Johnny Got His Gun* can awaken readers both to the reality of war and to how the government seeks to hide that reality.

Synonyms/definitions :
Trade-union = syndicates for workers
a strike = workers refusing to work to protest against working conditions
Casualties = people who are badly hurt, wounded or killed