

Criticism of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*

Chapter 16: A People's War

America is just as bad as Nazi Germany, according to Zinn

Zinn uses leading questions and misleading phrases to suggest to readers that the United States not only refused to condemn the Holocaust, but that the United States in the 1930s may have been responsible for even greater evil than Hitler's Germany.

First, Zinn asks whether the United States government of the 1930s was “something significantly different” from the “totalitarianism, racism, militarism and overt aggressive warfare” of Hitler's Germany.

*[WWII] was a war against an enemy of unspeakable evil. Hitler's Germany was extending totalitarianism, racism, militarism, and overt aggressive warfare beyond what an already cynical world had experienced. And yet, did the governments conducting this war—England, the United States, the Soviet Union—represent something significantly different, so that their victory would be a blow to imperialism, racism, totalitarianism, militarism, in the world?*¹

Zinn then gets more explicit, drawing a direct comparison between 1930s era Jim Crow in America and the Holocaust. Zinn asserts that African-Americans at the time “might not see their own situation in the U.S. as much different” from Germany “persecuting its Jewish minority.”

*Germany was a dictatorship persecuting its Jewish minority, imprisoning dissidents, whatever their religion, while proclaiming the supremacy of the Nordic “race.” However, blacks, looking at anti-Semitism in Germany, might not see their own situation in the U.S. as much different.*²

In Zinn's version of history, given the United States own atrocities, it is natural the U.S. government would not care to condemn Germany too roundly; some cliché about those without sin living in glass houses.

Zinn asserts that the United States refused to criticize “what the Germans were doing to the Jews.” Zinn's basis for making this statement is a supposed Senate resolution from early 1934 which the State Department played a part in preventing from ever leaving committee. Zinn's deception is in his vague word choice, “what the Germans were doing to the Jews.”

[T]he United States had done little about Hitler's policies of persecution. Indeed, it had joined England and France in appeasing Hitler throughout the thirties. Roosevelt and his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, were hesitant to criticize publicly Hitler's anti-Semitic

¹ Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 8801. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>

² Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 8828. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>

policies; when a resolution was introduced in the Senate in January 1934 asking the Senate and the President to express “surprise and pain” at what the Germans were doing to the Jews, and to ask restoration of Jewish rights, the State Department “caused this resolution to be buried in committee,” according to Arnold Offner (American Appeasement).³

What were the Germans doing to the Jews in 1934? Most high school students will of course know Nazi Germany sent millions of Jews to death camps and gas chambers. What they may not know, and will not learn from Zinn’s book, is that the Holocaust took place between 1941 and 1945, and not in 1934. Whatever else might be said of the U.S. State Department for attempting to obstruct Senate efforts to condemn Hitler in 1934, it is not the case that the State Department was attempting to prevent the Senate from condemning genocide. Yet Zinn’s word choice gives readers the impression the United States refused to condemn the Holocaust. This is a lie.

³ Howard Zinn. A People's History of the United States (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 8833. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>