

Zinn Claims Blacks Didn't Care if the Nazi's Won WWII

This is an excerpt from [a review](#) of Zinn's book by Stanford University Education Professor [Sam Wineburg](#):

Consider the question of whether World War II was a "people's war." On one level, as Zinn has to admit, it was. Thousands suited up in uniform, and millions handed over hard-earned dollars to buy war bonds. But Zinn asks us to consider whether such support was "manufactured." Was there, in fact, widespread resentment and resistance to the war that was hidden from the masses?

Among the military, Zinn says, it is "hard to know" how much resentment soldiers felt because "no one recorded the bitterness of enlisted men." Zinn instead focuses on a community in which he can readily locate resentment: black Americans.

The claim stands to reason. Domestically, Jim Crow laws were thriving in the North and the South, and overseas in the segregated armed forces. To fight for freedom abroad when basic freedoms were denied at home was a bitter contradiction. In fact, the black press wrote about the "Double V" – victory over fascism in Europe, victory over racism at home.

But Zinn argues something else. He asserts that black Americans restricted their support to a single V: the victory over racism. As for the second V, victory on the battlefields of Europe and Asia, Zinn claims that an attitude of "*widespread* indifference, even hostility," typified African Americans' stance toward the war.¹

Zinn hangs his claim on three pieces of evidence: (1) a quote from a black journalist that "the Negro... as angry, resentful, and utterly apathetic about the war"; (2) a quote from a student at a black college who told his teacher that "the Army jim-crows us. The Navy lets us serve only as messmen. The Red Cross refuses our blood. Employers and labor unions shut us out. Lynchings continue"; and (3) a poem called the "Draftee's Prayer," published in the black press: "Dear Lord, today/I go to war:/ To fight, to die,/Tell me what for?/Dear Lord, I'll fight,/I do not fear,/Germanys or Japs;/My fears are here./American!"²

These items seethe with hostility. Many readers will likely conclude that they represented broad trends in the black community. But just as we can find instances that embody resentment, so too can we find expressions of African American patriotism and support for the war. Nor do we have to go very far. In the same journal that voiced the resentment of the black college student, one finds the words of Horace Mann Bond, president of Georgia's Fort Valley State College and the father of civil rights leader Julian Bond, who was asked by the editors to address the question, "Should the Negro care who wins the war?"³

Bond bristled at the query's implicit racism – the insinuation that blacks were apathetic to America's fate: "If a white person believes that a Negro in the United States is indifferent to the outcome of a great national struggle, that white person conceives of that Negro as divested of statehood... The

¹ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 9035. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>

² Zinn, *A People's History*, 9037.

³ Horace Mann Bond, "Should the Negro Care Who Wins the War?" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 223, no. 1 (1942): 81-84.

Negro who is indifferent to the outcome of the struggle has stripped himself of allegiance to the state of which he is a native.”⁴

To array dueling anecdotes – three for hostility, three against – is not a very sophisticated way to make claims about a community that, to quote Bond, numbered “nearly thirteen million human beings of every variety of opinion, intelligence, and sensitivity.”⁵ The three anecdotes Zinn draws on come not from digging in an archive or reading microfiche from the black press. Everything he cites was drawn from a single secondary source, Lawrence Wittner's *Rebels Against War* (1969).⁶

The evidence Zinn uses appears on two adjoining pages in Wittner's 239-page book. Also appearing on these pages is key information Zinn omits. Wittner lists the total number of registrants eligible for the war as 10,022,367 males between the ages of 18 and 37. Of these, 2,427,495, about 24 percent, were black. Wittner then lists the number of conscientious objectors enrolled by the Selective Service: 42,973. If the number of conscientious objectors were proportional for both blacks and whites, there would have been over 10,000 African American conscientious objectors – even more if there was as much hostility to the war among blacks as Zinn claims.

What we learn instead is that the total number of black conscientious objectors was a mere 400.⁷ “Even draft evasion remained low,” Wittner adds, “with Negro registrants comprising only 4.4 percent of the Justice Department cases.”⁸ He concludes: “Surprisingly few black men became C.O.'s.”⁹

The form of reasoning that Zinn relies on here is known as asking “yes-type” questions.¹⁰ According to historian Aileen S. Kraditor, yes-type questions send the historian into the past armed with a wish list. Because a hallmark of modernity is to save everything (and this was certainly the case by the mid-20th century), those who ask yes-type questions always ends getting what they want. Kraditor explains: “If one historian asks, ‘Do the sources provide evidence of militant struggles among workers and slaves?’ the sources will reply, ‘Certainly.’ And if another asks, ‘Do the sources provide evidence of widespread acquiescence in the established order among the American population throughout the past two centuries?’ the sources will reply, ‘Of course.’”¹¹

So it is here: will we find pockets of resistance and reluctance among blacks – or, for that matter, among whites, Hispanics, Italians, gays, lesbians – no matter how just the cause of *any* war? The answer is “Certainly.” To objections that it is biased to ask yes-type questions, Zinn might respond (and did, often) that *all* history is biased, that every historian choose which facts to highlight or discard.¹² Find and good, provided that a crucial condition is satisfied, a condition again specified by Kraditor: that “the data the historian omits must not be essential to the understanding of the data included.” To generalize to nearly 13 million people by citing three anecdotes, while at the same time ignoring data about 2,427,495 eligible black registrants, is a yes-type question in its purest form.

⁴ Bond, “Should the Negro Care Who Wins the War?” 81.

⁵ Bond, “Should the Negro Care Who Wins the War?” 81.

⁶ Lawrence S. Wittner, *Rebels Against War: The American Peace Movement, 1941-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969). <http://a.co/5JgYvq2>

⁷ Wittner, *Rebels Against War*, 47.

⁸ Wittner, *Rebels Against War*, 47.

⁹ Wittner, *Rebels Against War*, 46.

¹⁰ Aileen S. Kraditor, “American Radical Historians on Their Heritage,” *Past & Present* 56, no. 1 (1972): 137.

¹¹ Kraditor, “American Radical Historians.”

¹² See, for example, “Why Students Should Study History: An Interview with Howard Zinn,” in *Rethinking Schools: An Agenda for Change*, ed. David Levine, Robert Lowe, Bob Peterson, And Rita Tenorio (New York: New York Press, 1995), 97.