

Not a Just War, Just a War

by Erwin Knoll

I was born in Austria, and at the age of six I watched jackbooted Nazi troops march into Vienna. Millions of Austrians cheered. I was fortunate enough to escape with my life, but many members of my family weren't that lucky; they died in the camps. The Holocaust is, I suppose, the formative experience of my life.

As a teenager, even as a young adult, I loved to go to old World War II films so that I could watch the Germans die. It gave me special pleasure to see the violent end inevitably allotted to officers of the Waffen SS who invariably wore monocles, permanent sneers, and black uniforms adorned with swastikas and death's-head insignia. I assumed, somehow, that all the German soldiers who froze to death in the siege of Stalingrad and all the German civilians cremated in the firestorm bombing of Dresden were officers of the Waffen SS who wore monocles, black uniforms, and permanent sneers. It took me an embarrassingly long time to figure out that wasn't the case. Apparently, some people still haven't figured it out.

But wasn't it necessary, after all, to stop Hitler? Sure it was; it was necessary, in fact, not to let him get started. But of all the ways to stop Hitler or to keep him from getting started, war was the worst—the way that inflicted the most pain, the most suffering, the most damage on everyone—especially Hitler's victims. A few months ago, when I read and reviewed Howard Zinn's latest book, *Declarations of Independence*, I was deeply moved by the account of his moral and intellectual journey from World War II bombardier to pacifist. Zinn offers persuasive evidence that the war magnified rather than diminished Nazi atrocities. And he writes, "History is full of instances of successful resistance (although we are not informed very much about this) without violence and against tyranny, by people using strikes, boycotts, propaganda, and a dozen ingenious forms of struggle."

I believe in ingenious, nonviolent struggle for justice and against oppression. So I won't support our troops—not in the Persian Gulf or anywhere else. And I won't support anyone else's troops

54th Massachusetts

when they go about their murderous business. And I'll say, regretfully, to the fallen black soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts, and the guys dead on the beaches of Normandy, and the young people who threw stones at Brezhnev's tanks in the streets of Czechoslovakia, that they died in vain perpetuating a cycle of human violence that must be stopped, because there is no such thing as a just war. Never was. Never will be.

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Erwin Knoll was Editor of The Progressive, 1973-1994.