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Howard Zinn dies at 87; author of best-selling 'People's History of the United States'

Activist collapsed in Santa Monica, where he was scheduled to deliver a lecture.

January 28, 2010|By Robert J. Lopez

Howard Zinn, a professor, author and social activist who inspired a generation on the American left and whose book "A People's History of the United States" sold more than 1 million copies and redefined the historical role of working-class people as agents of political change, died Wednesday. He was 87.

Zinn apparently had a heart attack in **Santa Monica**, where he was visiting friends and scheduled to speak, said his daughter, Myla Kabat-Zinn. He lived in Auburndale, Mass.

FOR THE RECORD:

Zinn obituary: The obituary of professor, author and social activist **Howard** Zinn in Thursday's Section A said that Spelman College in the 1950s and '60s was then an all-black women's school. The college's current student population remains all female and is predominately black —91% of those enrolled are African American, according to the most recent statistics.

Zinn's political views were shaped, in part, by his experiences as a bombardier for the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II.

"My father cared about so many important issues," Kabat-Zinn said in a telephone interview Wednesday. "I think the one he was really most eloquent about is that he thought there was no such thing as a just war."

Indeed, in a 2001 opinion piece published in The Times, **Zinn** wrote about being horrified by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and equally horrified by the response of U.S. political leaders, who called for retaliation.

"They have learned nothing, absolutely nothing, from the history of the 20th century, from a hundred years of retaliation, vengeance, war, a hundred years of terrorism and counter-terrorism, of violence met with violence in an unending cycle of stupidity," he wrote.

"A People's History" was published in 1980 and had an initial printing of 5,000 copies. But largely through word of mouth, the book attracted a major following and reached 1 million sales in 2003.

The work, which hails ordinary Americans such as farmers and union activists as heroes, accused Christopher Columbus of genocide and criticized early U.S.

leaders as proponents of the status quo. "A People's History" has been taught in high schools and colleges across the nation.

The book was the basis for a History Channel documentary called "The People Speak" that aired in the fall.

The executive producer was actor Matt Damon, who was raised in Boston near Zinn.

"From the moment we had any influence in this town, we've been trying to get this project off the ground," Damon told reporters in July. "It demonstrates how everyday citizens have changed the course of history."

Zinn was born in 1922 to a working-class family in Brooklyn, N.Y. He was one of four sons whose father worked as a waiter, window cleaner and pushcart peddler.

In his 1994 memoir, "You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train," **Zinn** recalled that his parents used discount coupons to buy the complete works of Charles Dickens. The novelist "aroused in me tumultuous emotions" about wealth, class and poverty, Zinn wrote.

Zinn received his doctorate from Columbia University.

He was a professor emeritus at Boston University, where he was a familiar speaker at Vietnam War protests. He also taught at a number of institutions, including Brooklyn College, the University of Paris and Spelman College in Atlanta in the late 1950s and early '60s as the civil rights movement was taking hold in the South.

Former California state Sen. Tom Hayden recalled meeting Zinn while he was at Spelman, then an all-black women's school.

"He was basically integrating himself into the world of black students," Hayden said Wednesday.

Hayden said Zinn became actively involved in the movement as an advisor and leader. The two later protested the war in Vietnam and worked on other social justice issues, Hayden said.

"He had a profound influence on raising the significance of social movements as the real forces of social change in our country," Hayden said. "He gave us our heritage and he gave us a pride in that heritage."

Zinn was scheduled to speak Feb. 4 at the **Santa Monica** Museum of Art for an event titled "A Collection of Ideas . . . the People Speak."

On its web page, the museum said that it was "deeply saddened" by Zinn's death and that the event would go on as a tribute to Zinn's life as a social activist.

Paramedics responded to a 911 call about 12:30 p.m. Wednesday and took Zinn to **Santa Monica** UCLA Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead, said Santa Monica Police Sgt. Jay Trisler.

Zinn was in a hotel when rescuers arrived, according to his daughter.

In addition to his daughter, Zinn is survived by his son, Jeff Zinn, and five grandchildren, according to his family. His wife Roslyn died in 2008.

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The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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