

# “Only Then Did I Begin to Think”



Howard Zinn

Howard Zinn (1922-2010) was the author of *A People's History of the United States*. He was a bomber pilot in Europe during World War II. He told this story – about the last few weeks of the war in Europe – in a 2005 “Democracy Now!” interview.

**PRE-READING:** Read the following and share with each other what you know.

**NAPALM:** a mixture of gasoline and gels that is used in bombs. When the bomb explodes the burning gel flows and sticks to its target.

**HIROSHIMA:** The U.S. dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in Japan on August 6, 1945 (and a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945). These are the only times in history that nuclear weapons have been used in war. Many thousands died in the blasts and in the following months and years due to radiation sickness and cancer.

We thought bombing missions were over. The war was about to come to an end. This was in April of 1945, and the war ended in early May 1945. This was a few weeks before the war was going to be over, and everybody knew it was going to be over, and our armies were past France into Germany, but there was a little pocket of German soldiers hanging around this little town of Royan on the Atlantic coast of France, and the Air Force decided to bomb them. Twelve hundred heavy bombers, and I was in one of them. We flew over this little town of Royan and dropped napalm. It was the first use of napalm in the European theater.

And we don't know how many people were killed or how many people were terribly burned

**Source:** from a 2005 “Democracy Now!” interview <[www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org)>. Adapted by Cynthia Peters. Look for Zinn's book and related curriculum at <[www.peopleshistory.us/teachers](http://www.peopleshistory.us/teachers)>.

as a result of what we did. But I did it like most soldiers do, unthinkingly, mechanically, thinking we're on the right side, they're on the wrong side, and therefore we can do whatever we want, and it's OK.

And only afterward, after the war when I was reading about Hiroshima and reading the stories of the survivors

of Hiroshima and what they went through, only then did I begin to think about the human effects of bombing. Only then did I begin to think about what it meant to human beings on the ground when bombs were dropped on them, because as a bombardier, I was flying at 30,000 feet, six miles high. I couldn't hear screams, couldn't see blood.



Howard Zinn, bombardier, 1945.

**POST-READING:** What strikes you most about this article? What are the advantages and disadvantages of soldiers looking back on their war experiences and sharing their thoughts about what happened?