

Example of comparative book essay essay

[Religion](#), [Bible](#)



1. Introduction

This essay explores the differences in the views of / treatment by different authors with regard to the subject of slavery as one aspect of American history, as discussed in their respective books, which are:

Paul Johnson: A History of the American People

Howard Zinn: A People's History of the United States

George B. Tindall & David E. Shi: America: A Narrative History (7th Edition, Vol. II)

This writer studied the three specified books before writing this essay, and found that in general terms the Johnson and Zinn books covered much of the same ground, although Johnson tended towards the perhaps “drier” official historical versions of events, yet with anecdotal material included where appropriate. In contrast, Zinn's book appeared to be written much more from the viewpoint of the ordinary man. The Tindall & Shi book could only be included in the comparison with regard to events from 1865 onwards, as that is where it (Volume II) started.

2. The Three Histories Compared

As an overview, first a brief mention of each of the three books: Paul Johnson's book is one that he himself describes in the opening line of the Preface as “a labor of love”. What makes this book particularly noteworthy is that Paul Johnson is British and had never studied American history while at Oxford University, coming to the subject only later in life. On the subject of slavery – the topic for comparison in this essay – there are numerous references with considerable detail. Howard Zinn's book approaches American history more from a different perspective, generally documenting

events as seen by the underprivileged in society, (e. g. the blacks, the poor whites, the Native American Indians and the women). Again, there are numerous references to slavery, the main topic of this essay. The third book, by Tindall & Shi, is rather different to the other two. Principally because we are using Volume II of the book for our comparison, and that begins (at Chapter 18) in 1865 with the Reconstruction following the end of the Civil War, so does not include the history and events of earlier years covered in the other two books. With regard to slavery, that is covered, though only those events occurring from 1865 on.

Of the three books, only Zinn's includes (Chapter 1)¹ an account of Columbus capturing and enslaving the Arawak people in 1492; the Johnson and Tindall & Shi accounts begin later.

Johnson's first mention of slavery (pp. 14-15) describes how the Portuguese monopolized the Atlantic slave trade in the 16th century, and recounts how by 1600 almost 300, 000 African slaves had been shipped to places including Madeira and Europe. He goes on to report that by that same year, four out of every five African slaves were on their way to the " New World", then later (pp. 55-56) describes how Carolina was the first of the colonial states to be properly called a " slave state". Both Johnson (p. 33) and Zinn (in Chapter 2), describe how around 1619 the Virginian settlers were desperate to get and use the slave labor, simply to grow enough food to stay alive. As Zinn recounts in some detail, in the disastrous winter of 1609-10, a majority of the settlers had starved to death, the survivors having lived on nuts, berries, and even the corpses of some of their former fellow settlers. By then corn was grown for food, and tobacco was becoming a valuable export crop, so labor

was desperately needed, and slaves were the answer.

In his description of slavery at that time, Zinn also focuses – unlike Johnson – on the differences between the African’s homeland culture and that which the African slave faced on arrival in America. According to Zinn it was “lifelong, morally crippling, destructive of family ties, without hope of any future”. He went on to say that what made American slavery “the most cruel form of slavery in history” was “the frenzy for limitless profit that comes from capitalistic agriculture; the reduction of the slave to less than human status by the use of racial hatred, with that relentless clarity based on color, where white was master, black was slave.”

Zinn also – and again unlike Johnson – covers in some detail the subject of the capture of the black slaves from the African interior and their transportation to America. He recounts how they were torn from their families, marched in shackles as far as 1,000 miles to the coast, on a journey that claimed the lives of some 40% of them. Once on board ship they were kept chained together below decks, where they were “packed into the holds like fish.”

Both Johnson (pp. 55-56) and Zinn (Chapter 2) refer to the growing numbers of slaves in the American colonies in the latter part of the 18th century. The figures are not directly comparable though, as they: a) refer to different specific dates, and b) Johnson refers to totals in the “English colonies”, while Zinn addresses the numbers in Virginia.

Johnson (p. 66) notes that because of the settlers’ dependence on slaves for their prosperity although slavery was banned for a time, the law was repealed due to pressures of “economic interest and personal greed”.

However, Johnson's account does not mention the strong tide of black unrest around this time, whereas Zinn (Chapter 4) refers to " six black rebellions, from South Carolina to New York".

Both Johnson and Zinn deal with the post-American Revolution period and how the black slaves were affected, through from different perspectives. Johnson (pp. 116-118) discusses how in the interests of unity, the Thirteen States were obliged to minimize differences and – for now at least – to overlook the issue of slavery. In the South, the numbers of slaves had actually increased despite many having fled to join the British army and ultimately to gain their freedom as a result. In order to restore their former prosperity, many slave owners pushed westwards and took their slaves with them, moving into Kentucky, Tennessee, South Carolina and Georgia. In addition, Johnson reports that a further 100, 000 slaves were imported directly from Africa between 1783 and 1807. Johnson then continues to expand on how those on authority in the North began to move towards at least restricting slavery. Zinn deals with the post-American Revolution topic differently. He focuses on how slaves could now campaign for freedom, independence, and generally for the rights given to others. He cites specific examples, including Benjamin Banneker, a black man, " who taught himself mathematics and astronomy, predicted accurately a solar eclipse, and was appointed to plan the new city of Washington" who wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson, encouraging him to stop the practice of viewing the blacks as an inferior, ignorant species of humanity.

As far as Thomas Jefferson is concerned, Johnson (pp. 163-165) discusses him in some detail, much of it critical. In contrast, Zinn (Chapter5) discusses

him briefly and refers to him as “ an enlightened, thoughtful individual”, although he does concede that partly due to Jefferson’s “ own weaknesses” he always kept slaves himself.

One interesting area of comparison between the Johnson and the Zinn books is that Johnson does not (specifically) cover the topic of slave women as a distinctly, separate issue. Zinn, on the other hand, devotes Chapter 7: The Intimately Oppressed, to the slave women. He reports that the women – often as much as a third of the cargo of slaves on board ship, were treated savagely – even compelled to give birth while still chained to their neighbours.

Both Johnson and Zinn give extensive coverage to Abraham Lincoln and his attitudes towards the slavery issue, which were generally in favour of abolition, though Zinn suggests he was in part at least motivated by political expediency, which Lincoln felt should be separate to his personal views on the subject.

It is around this time – the end of the Civil War (1865) – that we are able to include the Tindall & Shi book (Volume II) in these comparisons, for that is where it begins, at Chapter 18 Reconstruction North and South. In this area all three books report on the gradual improvement in the area of giving rights to Negroes, although according to Johnson (p. 334), in the new South “ whites were first class citizens and blacks citizens in name only.” It is at this point that Johnson concludes his historical account. Zinn reports that in the late 1860s and early 1870s various beneficial laws were passed, culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1875. He also recounts that President Johnson – who had vetoed various Bills – was impeached in 1868 and replaced by Ulysses

Grant. Zinn also reports on the rise in white opposition to the new laws, manifested by the Klu Klux Klan, which terrorized, killed and raped many and burned black churches. He further recounts that economic interests eventually eroded the new-found rights of negroes, who remained very much an underclass. Most of the “slavery” content in the Tindall & Shi book is in Chapter 18. It includes comment that following the Civil War many who stayed in the South “found old social roles reversed”, citing the example of a man returning to his family’s plantation to be welcomed by their former slaves but was politely told “We own this land now. Put it out of your head that it will ever be yours again.” The chapter also includes much about the subsequent growth of black communities in the South, including their aspirations in education and politics and their establishment of independent churches.

3. Conclusion

Having reviewed and compared the three specified books, I found that my early impressions were validated; i. e. that Johnson’s account, while probably the most informative in an educational sense, was somehow drier in general content than the Zinn book, which contained more human interest material, which I feel gave me better insight into the feelings and lives of the peoples involved, especially in regard to the issues of slavery – the focus of this comparison exercise. The third book, by Tindall & Shi could be compared only in a limited way with the other two, because it (Volume II) started much later than them. Indeed, the events it described started in 1865, which was virtually where the Johnson account ended. However, what content there was in respect of slavery was interesting in that it was the only one of the

three books that gave considerable coverage to the aspirations of the freed blacks after 1865.

Works Cited

Johnson, Paul. A History of the American People. Web. 30 May 2012.

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Zinn, Howard. A People's History of the United States. Web. 30 May 2012.