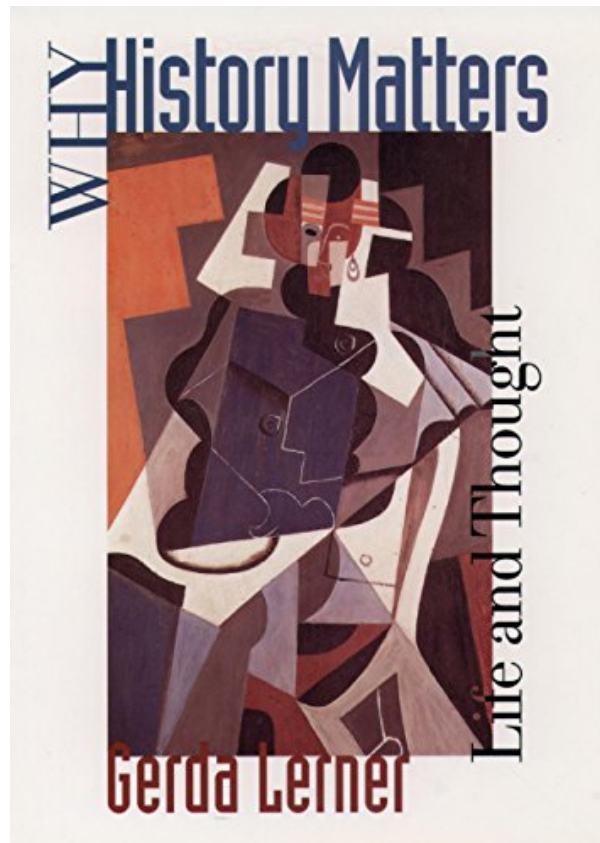
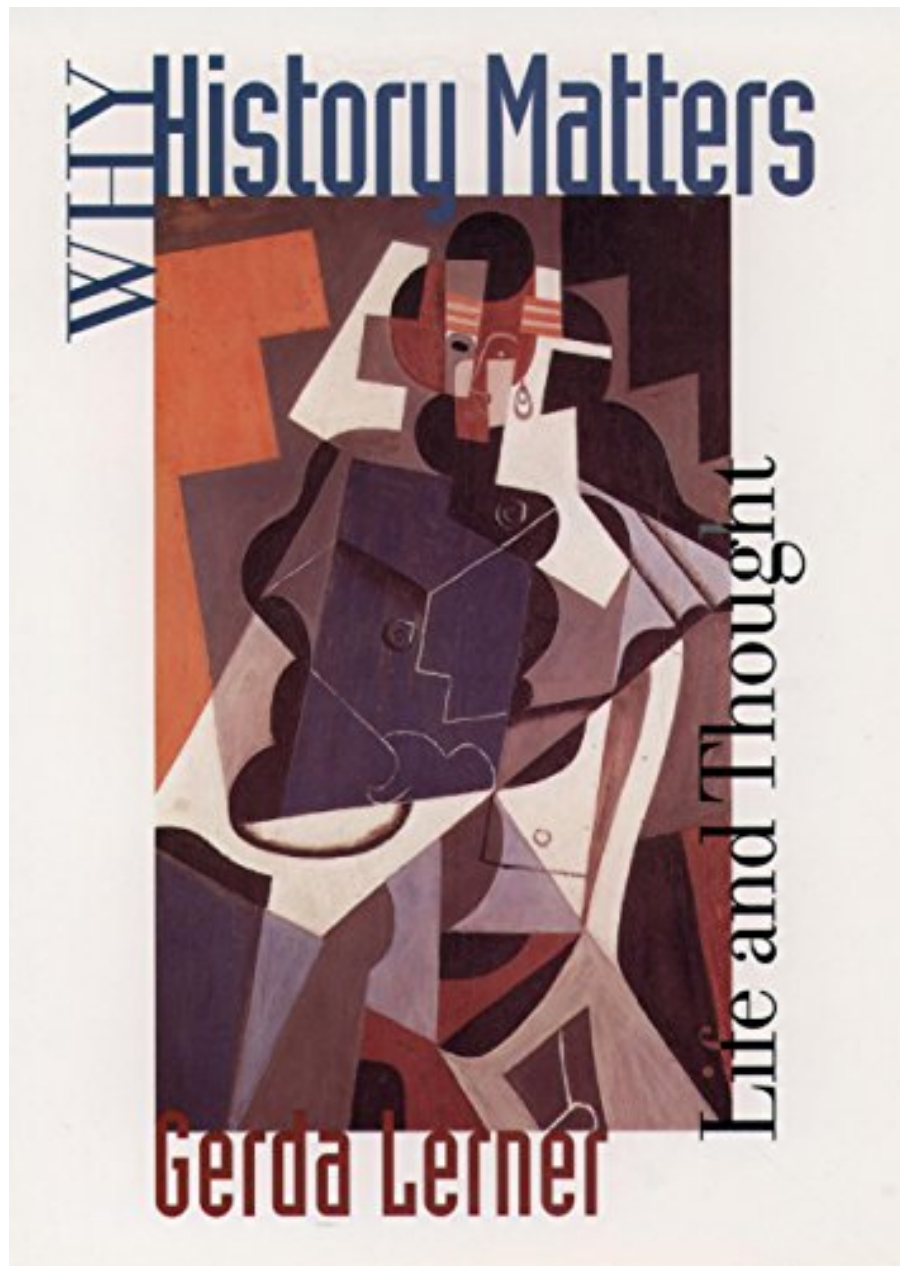


WHY HISTORY MATTERS: LIFE AND THOUGHT BY GERDA LERNER



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The position of women and other oppressed groups is of paramount interest to Lerner, and the longest essay in this collection deals with her theories of patriarchy as the father of all discriminatory systems. Class and race are other issues that concern Lerner, and they crop up again here in her discussion of the differences between black and white women's views of feminism. Sex, class, and race--all the hot-flash points at work in today's society--are accounted for in *Why History Matter*. There are connections, Lerner argues, between the violence, poverty, racism, and sexism we see all around us and the attitudes and events of the past. She has spent her life tracing these causes and effects, encouraged by her belief that understanding the past ensures a better future. And that, Gerda Lerner insists, is why history matters.

From Library Journal

This collection of essays provides a succinct introduction to the life and thought of Lerner (history, emerita, Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison; *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, LJ 4/15/93), one of the founders and foremost scholars of women's history. In these 12 essays, some new and some reworked from earlier speeches, Lerner offers what is essentially her intellectual autobiography. Each essay is enriched by keen insight, clarity, meticulous scholarship, and Lerner's personal experience as a Jewish woman who emigrated from Austria to the United States at the beginning of the Holocaust. Her themes include emigration and acculturation, nonviolent resistance, American values, and the historian's approaches to gender, race, and class. Representing the mature thought of a premier scholar, this work will be an important addition to reading lists in social history. It should also be of interest to social policy practitioners and general readers. ?Linda V. Carlisle, Southern Illinois Univ., Edwardsville

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From Booklist

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"All human beings are practicing historians," writes Gerda Lerner. "We live our lives; we tell our stories. It is as natural as breathing." It is as important as breathing, too. History shapes our self-definition and our relationship to community; it locates us in time and place and helps to give meaning to our lives. History can be the vital thread that holds a nation together, as demonstrated most strikingly in the case of Jewish history. Conversely, for women, who have lived in a world in which they apparently had no history, its absence can be devastating. In *Why History Matters*, Lerner brings together her thinking and research of the last sixteen years, combining personal reminiscences with innovative theory that illuminate the importance of history and the vital role women have played in it.

Why History Matters contains some of the most significant thinking and writing on history that Lerner has done in her entire career--a summation of her life and work. The chapters are divided into three sections, each widely different from the others, each revelatory of Lerner as a woman and a feminist. We read first of Lerner's coming to consciousness as a Jewish woman. There are moving accounts of her early life as a refugee in America, her return to Austria fifty years after fleeing the Nazis (to discover a nation remarkable both for the absence of Jews and for the anti-Semitism just below the surface), her slow assimilation into American life, and her decision to be a historian. If the first section is personal, the second focuses on more professional concerns. Included here is a fascinating essay on nonviolent resistance, tracing the idea from the Quakers (such as Mary Dyer), to abolitionists such as Theodore Dwight Weld (the "most mobbed man" in America), to Thoreau's essay *Civil Disobedience*, then across the sea to Tolstoy and Gandhi, before finally returning to America during the civil rights movement of the 1950s. There are insightful essays on "American Values" and on the tremendous advances women have made in the twentieth century, as well as Lerner's presidential address to the Organization of American Historians, which outlines the contributions of women to the field of history and the growing importance of women as a subject of history. The highlight of the final section of the book is Lerner's bold and innovative look at the issues of class and race as they relate to women, an essay that distills her thinking on these difficult subjects and offers a coherent conceptual framework that will prove of lasting interest to historians and intellectuals.

A major figure in women's studies and long-term activist for women's issues, a founding member of NOW and a past president of the Organization of American Historians, Gerda Lerner is a pioneer in the field of Women's History and one of its leading practitioners. *Why History Matters* is the summation of the work and thinking of this distinguished historian.

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11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

History Does Matter

By A Customer

I used Lerner's book to conclude my graduate seminar in U.S. Women's History in part because it makes such a compelling case for why, in this postmodern moment, history does matter. Lerner does not pull punches; her memories of the holocaust and her return to Austria years later remind us of the burden of history. At the same time she makes a compelling case for a writing of history that is scholarly and rigerous yet personal and political. I use parts of her book in both graduate and undergraduate courses to articulate to students why history still matters and why we are not free from the burden of history. The book provokes fascinating discussion and, in the end, reminds many of us as to why we studied history in the first place. In the end it inspires as well as challenges.

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

A Book That Matters!

By Edith Y. Broida

I am quite astonished that no one has commented on the importance of Dr. Lerner's book. I propose that it be read in tandem with any other book that shows the treatment of women. Books ranging from "The Red Tent" by Anita Diamant, which takes place in the Biblical era all the way to Anna Quindlan's "Black and Blue," which relates to an abused wife today, begin to have even more significance when one becomes familiar with Lerner's thesis: women have suffered from a patriarchal society since time began, and by understanding our history, we should begin to realize the power and influence that HALF the population of the world could wield. Lerner's book is surely academic, but it is worth reading. Imagine if ALL women really determined we should strive for peace, equality, freedom, etc. Lerner is a cautious optimist about the future, sensing that the women's movement does suggest a new paradigm for the future. I read Lerner's book two years ago and I find it relates to nearly every book I have read, fiction and non-fiction, since.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Becoming an American

By Kim Burdick

This book is a powerful collection of essays by the intriguing Austrian-American historian Gerda Lerner. I plan to use some of these essays in my various college-level history and sociology courses.

There are several key themes in this book, including the importance of passive resistance in modern times, a movement she credits to American women, who in turn influenced Thoreau, Tolstoy, Gandhi and Martin Luther King; and a thoughtful look at both past and present American values.

To my mind, the most important, fascinating and significant part of this book is Lerner's recounting of her own experiences as a Jew in Hitler's Austria.

Through her description of her acculturation to American society, she has done something very important towards helping us understand both the tragedy of Nazism, universality of the immigrant experience, and the draw of America.

Through Lerner's eyes, we begin to understand the pain of never being able to really "go home" again, what it is like to live in a land where even your own children cannot pronounce your name properly, the invisible barriers between two sisters who no longer speak the same language, and the driving ambition that leads a brilliant scholar to acclimate to a new world.

Lerner's shock at visiting Germany fifty years after the Holocaust is gut-rending. She writes:

"I have read all there is to read about it; my memories and nightmares are unrelenting. I was among the lucky survivors; the list of my personal dead is not as long as that of others. I did not think that at my age there was anything I could learn about these events. What I discovered in Germany on this trip really should not have surprised me. Still it chokes off my breath and makes my head feel curiously empty and light. They have succeeded. Germany is judenrein. They have succeeded in annihilating my people. ... I knew it, of course. I've known it for fifty years, but I've never felt it before."

This book belongs on the shelf next to "Constantine's Sword" and "In the Garden of the Beasts." "Why History Matters" is a truly important work.

Kim Burdick
Stanton, Delaware

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