

# Comparing International Textbooks to Develop Historical Thinking

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**Throughout my 12 years of teaching** history, my students have frequently expressed curiosity about the way past events involving the United States were viewed by other nations. For instance, my students have often wondered how World War II is presented to students in Germany, or what students in Japan learn about the dropping of the atomic bombs. I have often used the internet to find primary sources from other countries—such as wartime propaganda posters—to help students analyze events from different points of view. Secondary sources from the perspectives of other countries are also available in print or online. I have even been fortunate enough to have foreign exchange students who are willing to talk about what they were taught of the past and the teaching materials used in their nations.

During the past year, I have also used a book called *History Lessons: How Textbooks from around the World Portray U.S. History*, by Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward, to help my students look at events from a global perspective.<sup>1</sup> The book includes passages about significant events in American history translated into English from textbooks around the world and can be used to help students make comparisons with their own textbook's version of events. I taught the following lesson on the Vietnam War using excerpts from this book and from our own textbooks to compare how American and Vietnamese texts described the war.

## The Vietnam War Textbook Lesson

### Overview

Students will compare and contrast passages about the Vietnam War from excerpts of a Vietnamese textbook with passages from their own U.S. history textbook. (The author used excerpts from

*History Lessons*.)

### Suggested Time

1 - 2 class periods

NCSS Standards Addressed

II TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

IX GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

### Objectives

Students will:

1. Compare and contrast their textbook's account of the Vietnam War with a Vietnamese textbook account of the same event or period, to consider disparate historical perspectives.
2. Interpret the biases and limited perspectives present in textbook accounts.
3. Evaluate the quality of historical sources of information.

### Exercise

Students should read their own textbook's account of the Vietnam War. Since many U.S. history textbooks devote an entire

chapter to this event, this comparison activity might work best at the end of the unit, when students have almost finished reading the chapter and have also viewed other sources of information. My students use McDougal Littell's *The Americans: Reconstruction to the 21st Century*, which covers the Vietnam War in Chapter 22.<sup>2</sup> Students should also read about the Vietnam War from a Vietnamese textbook, excerpted in *History Lessons: How Textbooks from around the World Portray U.S. History* (pp. 311-315).

After students finish reading both textbook accounts, they answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper:

1. How are the accounts similar?
2. How are the accounts different?
3. What possible biases or limited perspectives exist in our textbook's account of this event?
4. What possible biases or limited perspectives exist in the Vietnamese textbook's account of this event?
5. Explain why you think, or do not think, that one of these textbook accounts is more accurate than the other.

The teacher should start the lesson by telling students that they must all offer a verbal response to these questions to receive full credit for this assignment. To make sure that all students comment on

the passages, they should each write their names on slips of paper and be allowed to place them in a small box when they have offered a substantial response for the day. The teacher will then lead students in a discussion of the questions. The similarities and differences between the Vietnamese textbook passage and the account from my students' textbook (listed in Table 1) can serve as a teacher's guide, student handout, or overhead notes after the class has discussed the first two questions. This information will vary with the textbook that the teacher uses in his or her classroom.

### Class Discussion of Vietnamese and American Textbooks

The classroom discussion with my students, after comparing the textbook accounts of the Vietnam War, was extremely insightful. Many students readily noticed major similarities between the accounts. In particular, students observed that both passages cited March 1965 as the beginning of U.S.-troop involvement and March 29, 1973, as the date when American forces left Vietnam; and both textbooks also claimed that the United States dropped about 8 million tons of bombs during the war. Students noted that both texts cited the fall of the French at Dien Bien Phu as the event that increased American involvement. According to our textbook, "In the wake of France's retreat, the United States took a more active role in halting the spread of communism in Vietnam."<sup>3</sup> The Vietnamese textbook states, "After the failure of the French Army at Dien Bien Phu ... America, under Eisenhower, 'filled the vacancy' in southern Vietnam."<sup>4</sup> At the same time, students recognized vast differences between the texts. One student pointed out that our textbook said President Kennedy "sent thousands of military advisors to help train South Vietnamese troops."<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the Vietnamese textbook described this same action by stating that Kennedy sent Special Forces to carry out a "special war." It went on to say:

"Special war" was a new form of war, carried out by a puppet army, directed by the American army,

and dependent on American artillery, equipment, technology, and transportation. The basic ploy of the "Special War" was to "use Vietnamese people to fight Vietnamese people."<sup>6</sup>

A few students also observed that their U.S. history textbook consistently maintained that American presidents involved in the war were seeking to contain communism. For example, as if to justify Eisenhower's actions in Vietnam, our textbook said, "During a news conference in 1954, Eisenhower explained the domino theory, in which he likened the countries on the brink of communism to a row of dominoes waiting to fall one after the other."<sup>7</sup> Our textbook also claimed that Johnson "spoke determinedly about containing communism" in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> Students discussed the manner in which the Vietnamese textbook offered a different motivation for U.S. involvement in

that country. It said, "Five generations of American presidents, with their legs bound together, oversaw four different American plans of imperialist attack and invasion."<sup>9</sup> Many students also noticed that the war is always referred to as "The Vietnam War" in their textbook. However, the Vietnamese textbook refers to the conflict as "The American War."<sup>10</sup>

Student recognition of the differences between the two accounts led to an interesting discussion about biases in textbooks. One student pointed out that the United States has a legacy of imperialism, and that student defended the perspective of the Vietnamese people, who believed that American troops were in their country simply to serve America's interest in expanding and maintaining power around the world. Consequently, this student, and others who agreed with him, observed that from this point of view, it made sense to view the war (as the

**Table 1. Similarities and differences between the U.S. and Vietnamese textbook accounts.**

SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES
Both texts explain that the United States dropped about 8 million tons of bombs on Vietnam, which was more tonnage than any previous war.	The textbook from the United States calls the war "The Vietnam War." The Vietnamese textbook calls the war "The American War."
Both texts explain that the last American troops left Vietnam on March 29, 1973.	The textbook from the United States defines the end of the war as South Vietnam surrendering to North Vietnam. The Vietnamese textbook defines the end of the war as the last American troops leaving Vietnam.
Both texts agree on the general course and dates of American involvement. They delineate between Americans sending advisors in 1961, significant increases in actual combat troops in 1965, and the gradual withdrawal of combat troops and "Vietnamization" of the war beginning in 1969.	The textbook from the United States says that, under President Kennedy, in 1961, military advisors were sent "to help train South Vietnamese troops." The Vietnamese textbook describes this same American effort in 1961 as an attempt to "use Vietnamese people to fight Vietnamese people."
Both texts explain that the United States' main entrance into the war occurred when the French left after their defeat at Dien Bien Phu.	The textbook from the United States indicates that America's plan in Vietnam was to halt the spread of communism. The Vietnamese textbook defines America's plan as an "imperialist attack and invasion."

Vietnamese textbook did) as America's war and as a fight against imperialism.

At the same time, a few students observed that there were some Vietnamese people who were opposed to communist rule and who welcomed U.S. assistance in fighting the formation of a unified communist nation. To these students, it seemed equally accurate for their textbook to describe the war as a Vietnamese war and as an effort to halt the spread of communism.

Students' differing perspectives of the textbook accounts created a perfect opportunity for me to help them see the complexity involved in writing and studying history. I explained to my students that even if historians come to some agreement on dates or other details, factors like the purposes or consequences of an event are often contested and debated. To emphasize this further, I pointed out that the Vietnamese textbook passage concluded by stating, "Our victory is a source of inspiration to all revolutionary

movements in the world."<sup>11</sup> However, I challenged my students to consider if the war could fully be considered "inspirational" and "victorious" for Vietnam when, as our textbook points out, "North and South Vietnamese deaths topped 2 million."<sup>12</sup> Consequently, I reiterated that it is crucial for historians and students of history to consider multiple perspectives when studying the past.

The most engaging part of the class discussion occurred when students began to debate which textbook provided a more accurate account of the event. Many students argued that their textbook's account was more valid and reliable because it, at least, recognized the internal division in the United States during this time, with a whole section of the chapter entitled "A Nation Divided," and it also highlighted U.S. misdeeds or abuses such as the My Lai Massacre.<sup>13</sup> In the students' estimation, sentences from the Vietnamese text stating, "It was a great patriotic war, a war of national liberation

to protect our nation," oversimplified the war, presenting it as a case of a unified nation fighting against a brutal oppressor.<sup>14</sup> These students suggested that the Vietnamese textbook account was likely communist propaganda censored by the government.

At the same time, other students contended that the texts were both biased since each described significant aspects of the war from its own country's perspective and ignored, or minimized, the perspective of the other nation. These students suggested that, in spite of including U.S. wrongdoings, their own textbook's focus on the "strong support for containment" of communism downplayed the perspective of many Vietnamese people that the United States was using Vietnam for its own self-interest.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, these students also said the Vietnamese textbook was biased, completely ignoring abuses committed by the communists against their people and some Vietnamese efforts to resist living under communism.

## ACTIVITIES

### Extended Teaching and Assessment Activities

The following activities could also be used by teachers for further discussion, enrichment, and assessment:

1. The teacher may want to simply check students' written answers to the five, previously mentioned, discussion questions and assess their thoughts and analysis. It might be helpful to give students an opportunity to revise their answers after the discussion.
2. *History Lessons* also includes a Canadian and French textbook account of the Vietnam War. Students could read either or both of these passages and answer the same five discussion questions. Then students should be divided into four different groups and assigned either the Vietnamese, American, French, or Canadian passage. Students could engage in a classroom debate over the passages' biases and accuracy and should be prepared to defend their positions.
3. Students could write a textbook account about the Vietnam War from the perspective of a different country they have studied during this time period (a country for which they do not have a textbook excerpt available). Students might be graded on their ability to include details related to that nation's possible perspective and interpretation of this event during this time. For instance, my students spend a significant amount of time studying Russia and China during the Cold War and would write a textbook passage about the Vietnam War from the perspective of one of these countries.
4. Students could do research outside of the textbook on individuals or groups involved in the Vietnam War. For instance, students could gather information about people and groups like Ho Chi Minh, Ngo Dinh Diem, the Vietcong, Lyndon Johnson, William Westmoreland, the Green Berets, anti-war protestors, etc. After students complete their research, they could write a position paper discussing how these people or groups felt about the different textbook accounts of the Vietnam War. They could then represent or role-play these individuals or groups in a classroom panel discussion about their views on the different textbook passages. Students should pay particular attention to differing perspectives of the textbook accounts and the support provided by individuals in the panel discussion to defend their positions.

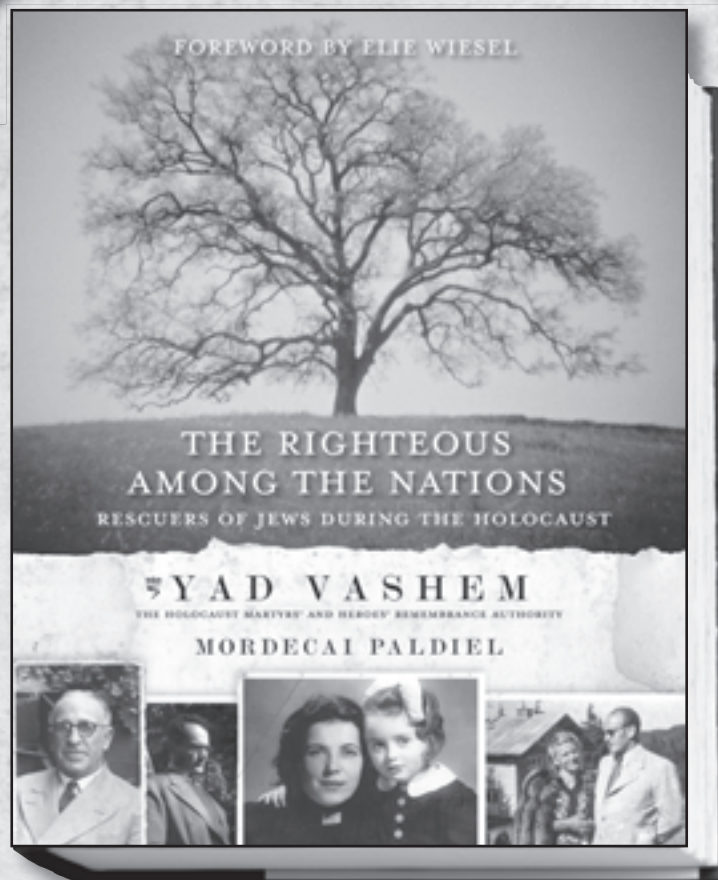
I concluded the discussion by highlighting that it is impossible to avoid some degree of bias when writing about the past.<sup>16</sup> However, the quality of all historical accounts is not necessarily the same. Skilled historians examine as many points of view as possible when studying an event. In the process of reading and writing about history, they also attempt to determine the consistency of the evidence presented and examine the limited perspectives in the viewpoints that they study. Therefore, I told my class, students who study history must work equally hard to examine how well accounts about the past include multiple, and even opposing, perspectives and cite significant evidence to maintain accuracy. 📖

#### Notes

1. Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward, *History Lessons: How Textbooks from around the World Portray U.S. History* (New York: The New Press, 2004).
2. Gerald A. Danzer, J. Jorge Klor de Alva, Larry S. Krieger, Louis E. Wilson, and Nancy Woloch, *The Americans: Reconstruction to the 21st Century* (Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 2005).
3. Danzer, Klor de Alva, Krieger, Wilson, and Woloch, 732.
4. Lindaman and Ward, 312.
5. Danzer, Klor de Alva, Krieger, Wilson, and Woloch, 732.
6. Lindaman and Ward, 313.
7. Danzer, Klor de Alva, Krieger, Wilson, and Woloch, 731.
8. *Ibid.*, 737.
9. Lindaman and Ward, 315.
10. *Ibid.*, 313.
11. *Ibid.*, 315.
12. Danzer, Klor de Alva, Krieger, Wilson, and Woloch, 759.
13. *Ibid.*, 742.
14. Lindaman and Ward, 314.
15. Danzer, Klor de Alva, Krieger, Wilson, and Woloch, 737.
16. See Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

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