



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2002 Volume III: War and Peace in the Twentieth Century

Introduction

This was a very lively and active seminar in which we looked at the experience of major international conflicts in the past century. It was in part a historical overview, but not in the sense of history as just one damned thing after another. We tried to be analytical, asking why the conflicts occurred, and in what ways they shaped later events. The purpose was to use knowledge of the past to deepen our understanding of current and future conflicts in international relations, and enable us to share that understanding with our students. It was therefore a forward-looking enterprise. Some of the fundamental questions we wanted to cover included:

How did use of the atomic bomb against Japan, and then reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence, affect all international relations?

What purposes can justify decisions to go to war, and what restraints on the use of violence in war may be possible or necessary?

What contributes to the rise of international terrorism, and how can it be dealt with?

What are the times and areas of the world where peace has been maintained for example between prosperous democracies and why?

This general orientation led to a variety of individual class sessions. Some were devoted to specific events, and others to more general issues of why wars happen and how they are fought, using several events as illustrations. Topics were, in order:

Is international politics different from politics within countries?

World War II: Why did it happen, and how did it end?

The Cold War begins: How and why?

Nuclear deterrence and the rise of limited wars: Korea and Vietnam

The shockingly peaceful end of the Cold War

Gulf War: In defense of oil and sovereignty

The ethics and morality of war and deterrence

Civil Wars: Enemies inside and out

Terrorism and how to fight it

The United Nations: What is it good for?

A hope for peace: Some countries don't fight each other

What can fellows take from our seminar back to their own teaching conditions?

The fellows' own projects, to compile teaching units for their classes and perhaps for adoption in whole or part by other teachers, reflect this mix of focus on single events and more general phenomena. Most of the units are intended for use as subunits of more general courses for students in grades 9-12, though the last two units clearly are intended for younger children. I am impressed by the ingenuity that most of the unit writers employed in finding films, videos, websites, simulations, and other non-traditional educational matters to supplement readings and discussions.

John Buell's unit, "Just War Theory and the Wars of the 20th Century", opens the collection. While addressing the origins and development of just war theory in general, he recognizes that its interest to students will depend on its plausibility as non-sectarian principles and on concrete applications to particular wars about which students may initially know little. So he contrasts the just war principles with a purportedly "realistic" morality in which countries' military and political leaders must and will do whatever it takes to win, and encourages students to take positions in this age-old debate. He then asks students to apply their principles to three historic events in United States history: the decision to use atomic bombs to end the war with Japan; the decision to enter the Korean War and to fight it as a limited war; and the difficult and still-contested decisions about how to fight the war in Vietnam against an enemy where the distinction between soldiers and civilians was often very hard to make.

Russell Sirman's unit, "Questions of War and Peace: Using Case Studies to Teach American Foreign Policy", also reflects this desire to stimulate vigorous discussion among students by asking them to debate and argue the merits of difficult choices. Sirman also uses President Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb in 1945 as a case; explores the Kennedy-Johnson decisions to escalate its military involvement in Vietnam at the early stages of that war; and finally considers the choices faced by the Bush and Clinton administrations in using American troops to support humanitarian relief efforts in Somalia. His emphasis is on the information and uncertainties faced by decision-makers at the time.

In "Investigating Conflict Resolution Through the United Nations", Ralph Russo follows a more topical than event-oriented approach, though he certainly gives attention to a variety of concrete examples. Basically he is concerned with giving students a broad picture of what the UN can do to help resolve violent conflicts, and the limits to its abilities. He introduces them to a variety of concepts and agencies, with some focus on UN peacekeeping efforts. One of the strengths of this unit is its attention to role-playing and simulation, especially through materials available from the very popular Model UN exercises.

David DeNaples, "Ethnicity and Conflict in the Early 20th Century", gives students of European and world history a valuable background to the ethnic wars that have plagued much of the world in subsequent decades. He focuses on the British, Russian, and Ottoman empires in the years preceding World War I. His discussion of nationalism in the Balkans proves enlightening, as do events during World War I, such as the Armenian genocide in Turkey and the bitter experience of Lawrence of Arabia in encouraging Arab leaders to seek independence from the Ottomans, only to find themselves subjugated again by British and French imperial ambitions in the Middle East.

These first units were designed by history teachers largely for courses in American, European, or world history, or in social studies classes. By contrast, the next two were devised by teachers of primarily for use in their own courses on French language and culture. They nevertheless have a lot of potential for use in wider history courses. Elisha Danford, “Debating the Future of Indochina in 1945: Making Your Case”, is, like the other others, concerned with sharpening students’ analytical and expository skills, but does this in the context of decisions by the Vietnamese leaders, pursuing their own interests against those of involved great powers (China, France, the United States) at the end of World War II. At that time, Japanese occupying troops were just being withdrawn, and other powers were moving into a situation resembling a power vacuum. She provides a variety of resources for students to play the roles of these leaders, forcing them to justify the policy positions they adopt. This unit may prove especially attractive to teachers whose classes include many students from families originating in Indochina.

Kristi Shanahan’s unit, “Expression under Suppression: The Artistic Response to the Occupation of France during World War II”, reflects her special interest in art history, as well as in French language and culture. She combines a history of French art (including that of refugees to France, such as Jews from Nazi occupation in Central Europe and Picasso from war-torn Spain) preceding and during the years of the Vichy regime) with methods of teaching students how to interpret a painting and to understand the intent of the artist. The paintings she uses for illustration, along with her text, give a vivid picture of the artistic as well as political struggles between artists who identified themselves with the resistance and those who followed a more collaborationist line.

In his unit, “African-Americans and the Military”, Burton Saxon confronts two conflicting perspectives on African-Americans’ experience of racial discrimination in the U.S. military, and in American society as a whole. In a critical review of several writings, Saxon traces the history of discrimination, from the days of sharpest segregation to the contemporary degree of equality, asking the degree whether the military followed or led the wider society. On the whole, he concludes that the military largely preceded other institutions in lowering racial barriers, and that consequently the military now offers relatively strong prospects of advancement to African-Americans. On the other hand, a high degree equality of opportunity in the military also means exposing African-Americans disproportionately to the risks of becoming wartime casualties. Saxon’s attempt to confront this problem in teaching and advising his own students provides material that should interest many others.

The two final units are addressed to younger students. Pedro Mendia-Landa offers a unit, “History and War: What About the Children?” for possible use in elementary classes. In it he addresses the effect of war on children, using as a springboard three Dr. Seuss stories, and a focus on the experience of his own ethnic group, the Basques, in their struggle for greater independence from French and especially Spanish control. It is a sensitive effort to address children in a way that will engage but not disturb them.

Finally, Joyce Bryant, “How War Changed the Role of Women in the United States”, focuses on societal changes wrought by the need for female labor in the factories during World War I and again during World War II, and how women’s employment outside the home helped to empower them. It also addresses opportunities opened up for women in the military services, and how that changed the military, women, and the whole society.

I hope readers and users of these units will enjoy them as much as I enjoyed leading this seminar and helping to shape the units.

Bruce Russett

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