

Seminar: *America at War*
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. A. Müller-Hartmann
Student: Martina Klein
Term: WS 05/06

Teaching Unit

Peace Education by the film *The Deer Hunter*

Pädagogische Hochschule Heidelberg

Heidelberg, 13 March 2006

Table of contents

1. Introduction	2
1.1 Why is this topic relevant and should be dealt in school	2
1.2 Where do we place the unit	2
1.3 Referring to the syllabus	2
2. Information about the filmmaker	3
3. Historical Introduction	4
4. Analysis of the genre	7
5. Tasks for the classroom	8
5.1 Small summary of the film	11
5.2 The tasks and expected products	12
5.3 Comment on the tasks	21
6. Bibliography	16
6.1 Five annotated titles	25

1. Introduction

We live in a world full of threats: racism, hatred, war, weapons of mass destruction like the atomic bomb. However, we have to be aware of the fact that we ourselves are responsible for what happens in the world. Wars begin in the minds of men. So the most urgent problem of our time is to establish peace. Kennedy once said that the human race needs to stop the war; otherwise the war will bring the human race to an end. (see Roth, p.94) However, soon questions emerge: What can we do to establish peace? Where shall we start? It is clear that we have to start as early as possible. That means that we as teachers have to try to make our students aware of the consequences of wars. This process is called peace education. The aims of peace education are on the one hand to enable the students able to understand other people, and to cope with each other. The students have to learn empathy. On the other hand the aim of peace education is to make the students afraid of war. We have to wake up abhorrence and horror of war by presenting it with all its terrible and destroying consequences in its complete and uncovered truth. Many supporters of peace education agree that working with fear is allowed, in contrast to other pedagogical fields. (see Bollnow, p.63f.)

You can find several topics in the syllabus that can help to work on a realization of peace. According to the syllabus of 1994 for grade 9 the subject "Geschichte" focuses on the topic "war". The students are supposed to get to know the face of war. This unit includes "Krieg gegen die Zivilbevölkerung, Völkermord, Verfolgung von Minderheiten, Bombenkrieg, Atombombe". It is suggested to use films to work on these topics. (see Bildungsplan 1994, p.300) „Gemeinschaftskunde“ focuses on peace. The unit is called "Friedens- und Zukunftssicherung". The syllabus says:

Der Frieden ist die Grundlage des Zusammenlebens von Menschen. Den Schülerinnen und Schülern wird bewusst, dass die ständige Bedrohung des Friedens vielfältige Anstrengungen zu seiner Erhaltung und Sicherung erfordert. [...] Die Auseinandersetzung mit Ursachen von Kriegen und Krisen fördert die Erkenntnis, dass Vorurteile und Feindbilder die Bereitschaft zu Diskriminierung, Gewalt und Aggression steigern. [...]

(see Bildungsplan 1994: 302)

The topics within this unit are: "Friedensbegriff, Konfliktursachen, lokale Kriege mit Fallbeispielen, Friedenssicherung durch Zusammenarbeit und Verträge". (see Bildungsplan 1994: 303) The syllabus 1994 for „Englisch“ in grade 10 suggests to focus on „soziale Beziehungen, Konfliktbewältigung“ within cultural studies. (see Bildungsplan 1994: 383). The syllabus 2004 suggests do deal with the topic "war" in grade 10 in "Geschichte". The unit is called "Kriege – gewaltsame Austragung von Konflikten zwischen Staaten".

I decided to design some tasks for grade 10 because the film I want to show is only for students over 16. You can combine the topics mentioned above with English cultural studies easily. It is important to talk with the students about American history. The Vietnam War was America's longest and most brutal war ever. I think this war is an adequate topic to show the students how war really is or can be. I decided to show the film *The Deer Hunter* produced by Michael Cimino. It is a very cruel and emotional film that will touch the conscience of the students and make them afraid of war.

2. Information about the filmmaker

Most sources say that Michael Cimino was born on November 16, 1943 in New York. However, there have been rumors that he was actually born in 1938. Whenever he was born, he later studied architecture and dramatic arts in Yale where he earned both his Bachelor's (1961) and Master's (1963) degrees.

Afterwards he started to film advertisements and documentaries. He also wrote scripts. His first produced script was for the science fiction drama *Silent Running*. Furthermore he was the screenwriter of the second Dirty Harry film, *Magnum Force*, with Clint Eastwood. The actor, producer and director was so impressed by Cimino's work that he gave him the opportunity to direct the thriller *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974). Four years later, in 1978, he had his biggest success with the film *The Deer Hunter*. (see filmforce.ign.com) It is about three Russian-American friends from Pennsylvania who go to war in Vietnam. It was a very controversial film, politically and emotionally. Extremely expensive on the one hand, unusually cruel on the other. However, the film received several nominations and awards: nine Academy Award nominations, including Best Actor (Robert De Niro) and Best Supporting Actress

(Meryl Streep), and five Oscars for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor (Christopher Walken), Best Director, Best Sound and Best Film Editing. (see www.filmsite.org) His next work was the film *Heaven's Gate*. The budget of this film ballooned to the record sum of \$40 million and made him lose his position as one of the top producers in Hollywood. It took him five years for a come back with the film *Year of the Dragon*. However, it was not a real success. The following film *The Sicilian* flopped. Critics and audience were unimpressed and accused him of portraying the Italian criminal Salvatore Giuliano as a hero. It was quiet about him for another three years. In 1990 he produced the film *Desperate Hours*, fortunately a success, but his last one.

Today Cimino lives in Paris, where he has published several novels and another screenplay. Furthermore there have been rumors that he is working on a screenplay for André Malraux's novel *Man's Fate*. It is said that John Malkovich and Jonny Depp are interested in starring. (see filmforce.ign.com)

Cimino himself said about his films: "I don't make movies intellectually, I don't make movies to make a point, I make movies to tell stories about people."
(see. www.imbd.com)

3. Historical introduction

The Vietnam War was America's longest and hardest war in its whole history. America had suffered 59,000 dead, over 300,000 wounded and more than 2,000 missing in action. (see Prados: 99) America's society split sharply over the morality of this war and as it became clear that fighting in Vietnam only meant losing innocent young men protest marches and demonstrations started and eventually led to the withdrawal of American troops.

The Vietnam War started as a conflict between France and the Vietnamese nationalist movement during World War II. (see Behrenbeck: 123) Indochina was one of the former French colonies. However, led by a Communist named Ho Chi Minh, it started a revolutionary movement to end colonial control. The so called Vietminh fought against the Japanese, who lost and had to leave the country. In 1945 there was a big celebration in Hanoi where the Vietminh passed their Declaration of Independence. Afterwards England occupied the southern part of Indochina and

gave it back the French. Only a short time later the northern part was turned over to them as well. In October 1946 the French started bombing Haiphong in North Vietnam, which led to the Eight Year War between France and the Vietminh over who would rule Vietnam. (see Zinn: 460-462)

At that time the Americans did not want to be involved directly, but they helped the French by giving them huge amounts of money. By the early 1950s they were underwriting about 80 percent of France's bill. (see McMahon: vii) Why did they do that? The Americans' main aim after World War II was to contain Communism. They thought: "If one country fell to Communism, the next one would do the same [...]". (see Zinn: 462) This was called the "domino theory". In 1954 the French had to withdraw from North Vietnam and an international assemblage took place in Geneva. All participants agreed that the French should withdraw to the south and that the Vietminh could stay in the north. The Vietminh promised to hold elections in a unified Vietnam in two years to choose a common government. The U.S. took advantage of this situation and set up a head of government in Saigon in the south. He was a former Vietnamese official called Ngo Dinh Diem. The promised elections were blocked by him.

However, the regime under Diem became increasingly unpopular. One reason was that he was a Catholic, but most Vietnamese people were Buddhists. Furthermore he had the position of a landlord, but most of the population were peasants. Opposition to Diem grew quickly and around 1958 guerilla activities against him started. In 1960 Diem formed the National Liberation Front in the South, but by early 1962 its opposition consisted of about 300,000 people. (see Zinn: 463f.) In 1961 John F. Kennedy took office and made first plans for military actions. He sent more and more military advisers to Vietnam. Two years later, in 1963, Diem was overwhelmed by the NLF and was executed. Three weeks after that Kennedy was assassinated and Lyndon B. Johnson took office.

The next important step to trigger off America's direct involvement into the war was called "Tonkin Gulf incident". In August 1964 the U.S. told the American public that there was an attack by North Vietnamese torpedo boats on U.S. warships in the Gulf of Tonkin. Immediately American war planes began bombarding North Vietnam. It later turned out that this was only a fake. (see Prados: 98) In February of the following year another incident led to further military actions. The DESOTO patrol in the Tonkin Gulf said that if destroyers were attacked the U.S. aircraft was ordered to

bomb carefully chosen targets in North Vietnam. The code name for this operation was "Flaming Dart". (see Hodgson: 228) On the 6th of February the Vietcong mortared American Advisers' barracks at Pleiku. Nine Americans were killed and 100 wounded. President Johnson's reaction was:

"We have kept our gun over the mantel and our shells in the cupboard for a long time now. And what was the result? They are killing our men while they sleep in the night." (see Hodgson: 228)

Flaming Dart was ordered and further ground troops of the U.S. were dispatched in March 1965. By July 1965 the U.S. had sent major land, naval and air forces to Vietnam. (see Prados: 98) The U.S. sent "bombers to protect the destroyers, troops to protect bombers [...]". (see Hodson: 231)

Many areas of South Vietnam were declared "free fire zones". That meant that American soldiers were allowed to kill all people living there, including civilians, old people and even children. They all were considered enemies. No other American war can be compared to this one in its brutality. In a program called "Operation Phoenix" the CIA secretly executed at least twenty thousand civilians who were suspected to be Communists. (see Zinn: 468)

In May 1968 old people and women with infants were shot by Americans in My Lai. Pictures of this massacre went around the world and were even shown on TV. The cruelty of this war started to touch the conscience of American civilians. The Americans knew that the U.S. was unable to win the war and more than 40,000 soldiers had lost their lives in vain by that time. (see Zinn: 474) People started to make protest marches and demonstrations. Especially after the Tet offensive, an occupation of the American Embassy by the NLF that was beaten back, the anti-war movements increased. (see McMahon: 466) These protests were promoted by many print and broadcast journalists. Martin Luther King held speeches against the war as well. He particularly protested for the young black men sent to Vietnam.

"It [the war] was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinary high proportions relative to the rest of the population we were taking the young black men who had been crippled by our society and sending them 8000 miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia

and East Harlem.” (see McMahon: 470)

In the fall of 1968 Nixon was elected President and started to withdraw troops, but the bombings continued. The protests reached their climax in early 1970 when the invasion of Cambodia took place. This operation was a military failure. However, it took some more years to come to an end. In 1975 North Vietnam attacked major cities in South Vietnam. Saigon fell and was renamed into Ho Chi Minh City. Vietnam was unified as Democratic Republic of Vietnam. (see Zinn: 474-489)

As already mentioned the Vietnam War was America's longest and cruelest war ever. By the end 7 million tons of bombs had been dropped on Vietnam.

4. Analysis of the genre

Before talking about *The Deer Hunter* you have to think about the difference between a war film and an anti-war film. In both types of films the main story takes place at war. However, the war film glorifies the crime and the brutality. The anti-war film shows cruelty and brutality as well, but with the effect to make the viewer afraid of war. To achieve this effect most anti-war films show the war from the perspective of one or a couple of young innocent men who have to go abroad to fight. Furthermore, most anti-war films are divided into three parts:

1. The time before going to war
2. The time at war
3. The coming back home

Many war and anti-war films focus on the Vietnam War. In 1978, the year when *The Deer Hunter* was released, at least three other films had already been in the cinemas: Hal Ashby's *Coming Home*, Sidney Furie's *The Boys in Company C* and Ted Post's *Go Tell the Spartans*.

So how do we know that *The Deer Hunter* is an anti-war film? It is divided into three parts. The first part shows the three main characters at home in Pennsylvania living a satisfying life, working together, experiencing love and having fun together, especially with hunting deer. Shooting seems to be fun for them. The second part focuses on the guys' violent war-time experiences.

The war is shown from their point of view. It is presented in a very cruel and detailed way. You can see how the friends are caught by the Vietcong and have to play Russian roulette. Some of these Russian roulette scenes were called the harshest moments in film history. The film also presents the enemy, the Vietnamese, as absolute monsters. The scenes are very subjective and the Americans only seem to be tortured by the Vietnamese. Many critics of this film considered the interior view of the Americans to be too radical. The third part shows the consequences that the war has on the three guys. Two of them come back home, one has lost his legs and is handicapped; the other one is mentally and physically alright. The third guy stays in Vietnam. He is mentally broken and keeps on playing Russian roulette. Typical for an anti-war film is here that the life in America is not happy and satisfying anymore. Furthermore, the people left at home come into focus (see www.filmsite.org). It is obvious that this film is critical of the American involvement in the Vietnam War. There is no doubt to consider it an anti-war film showing the brutality of war to make people think and afraid of war.

5. Tasks for the classroom

The teacher opens the unit by hanging lots of pictures on the classroom's walls like in an exhibition. The pictures show scenes from the Vietnam War: American soldiers, Vietnamese soldiers, battle scenes, civilian victims... The students are supposed to walk around and have a look at the pictures. While doing that they can listen to the song "Eve of Destruction" by Barry McGuire in the background. The song was released in 1965 and is about the brutality and senselessness of war:

Eve of destruction

the eastern world, it is explodin'.
violence flarin', bullets loadin'
you're old enough to kill, but not for votin'
you don't believe in war, but what's that gun you're totin'
and even the jordan river has bodies floatin'

but you tell me
over and over and over again, my friend
ah, you don't believe

we're on the eve
of destruction.

don't you understand what i'm tryin' to say
can't you feel the fears i'm feelin' today?
if the button is pushed, there's no runnin' away
there'll be no one to save, with the world in a grave
take a look around you boy
it's bound to scare you boy

and you tell me
over and over and over again, my friend
ah, you don't believe
we're on the eve
of destruction.

yeah, my blood's so mad feels like coagulin'
i'm sitting here just contemplatin'
you can't twist the truth, it knows no regulation.
handful of senators don't pass legislation
and marches alone can't bring integration
when human respect is disintegratin'
this whole crazy world is just too frustratin'

and you tell me
over and over and over again, my friend
ah, you don't believe
we're on the eve
of destruction.

think of all the hate there is in red china
then take a look around to selma, alabama
you may leave here for 4 days in space
but when you return, it's the same old place
the poundin' of the drum, the pride and disgrace
you can bury your dead, but don't leave a trace
hate your next-door neighbor, but don't forget to say grace
and... tell me over and over and over and over again, my friend
you don't believe
we're on the eve
of destruction
mm, no no, you don't believe
we're on the eve
of destruction.

This opening is supposed to wake up a first aversion to war.

Task 1:

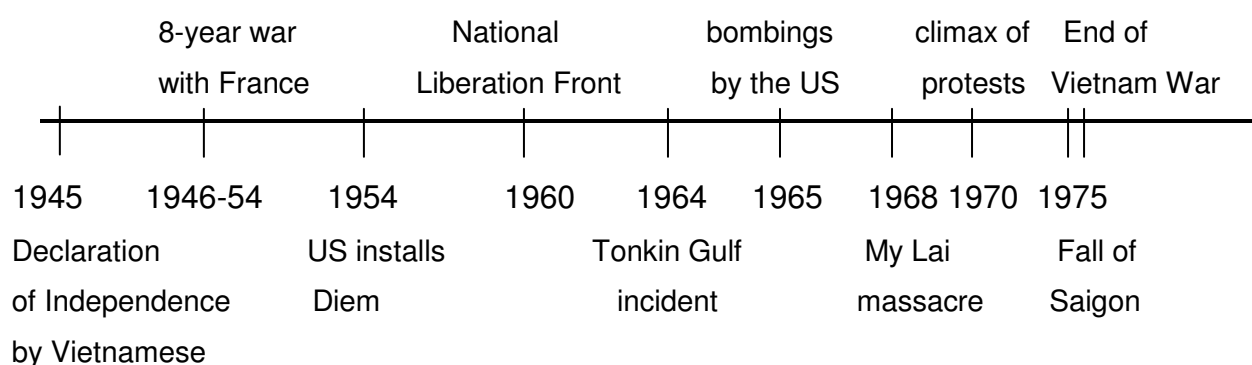
Purpose:

The students are supposed to get to know the main facts about the Vietnam War. It is important for them to have at least a minimal background of the history. Without this knowledge further tasks on this topic would be senseless.

Product:

The students should write a timeline with about ten important dates during the Vietnam War.

e.g.:



Process:

pre-listening task:

Before listening to this historical introduction the students are supposed to make a mind-map to the question "What comes to your mind when you think of war?". It is possible to make this mind-map together in class, but in my opinion this topic is very emotional. So the students should get the opportunity to make it on their own without reading it out loud.

while-listening task:

The students are supposed to listen to the teacher's introduction and take notes. The teacher can choose if he wants to tell the students everything or if he waits until the class has seen all the scenes from the film to tell them how the war ended and that peace marches and demonstrations have led to the withdrawal of American troops..

post-listening task:

The teacher distributes the text “The Vietnam War (1945-1975)” and gives the following task: “Based on your notes and the text, please design a timeline with ten dates you think to be important for the Vietnam War” (see appendix A for the text).

Task 2:

Afterwards the teacher gives a short introduction to *The Deer Hunter* and what has happened before the first scene they watch. He tells the students that there are three Russian American guys called Michael, Nick and Steven. They are supposed to go to Vietnam. However, the first part of the film shows the life at home. Steven marries his girlfriend and the wedding party is the guys’ farewell party as well. The common hobby of the three friends is going on deer hunts. Before going to Vietnam they enjoy their last day in America hunting deers. The students are supposed to watch this “hunting” scene and the following piano play.

Purpose:

The students are supposed to watch this scene carefully. They will see another “hunting” scene later and their task then will be to find out the differences. Both scenes are useful to show the students how war influences even the mentally strongest people.

Product:

The students take notes on what happens in this scene.

Process:

pre-watching task:

Here the students are only supposed to listen to the teacher’s introduction.

while-watching task:

They should take notes on what happens in the “deer hunting” scene.

post-watching task:

The scene is supposed to be compared with another “hunting” scene. However, that can only be done later.

It depends on the language skills of the class if they can watch the scenes with or without English subtitles.

Task 3:

Purpose:

The aim of watching the following “battlefield” scene is to show the students how cruel war really is. In this scene you can see how civilians, especially women and children, are killed.

Product:

The students are supposed to write a short newspaper article about what happens in this scene.

e.g.:

Washington, 1966. According to the latest information a further hundred people were killed by American soldiers in Vietnam yesterday. The American attack took place in the afternoon and was crueler than any attack before. This time the victims were innocent women and children. They could not escape quickly enough and tried to find shelter in the underground, but they were found by the Americans who dropped bombs into their hiding-places.

Process:

pre-watching task:

The students are supposed to write down as many war-words as possible that come to their minds. If necessary the teacher can explain further words like: hiding-place, battlefield, victim, attack, bombs, to drop....

while-watching task:

Watch the scene carefully. What can you see? Who is killed by whom?

post-watching task:

Write a short newspaper article and report what happened.

The “battlefield” scene follows the “hunting” and “piano” scene immediately.

Task 4:

Purpose:

The students are supposed to compare the first “hunting” scene with another one that takes place when Michael is back home. He seems to be the only one of the guys who is mentally and physically alright. However, in the second “hunting” scene you can see that the war has changed him as well. The students shall see that war even changes the mentally strongest people.

Product:

The students can choose if they want to compare the two scenes in a table or by making notes.

e.g.:

first “hunting” scene	second “hunting” scene
- friends are together (Nick, Michael, Steven and others)	- only Michael (and other friends)
- Michael shoots the deer	- Michael is unable to shoot the deer
- Michael is proud of the killed deer → friends celebrate together	- Michael sits alone next to a waterfall and screams

Process:

pre-watching task:

Look at your notes on the very first scene again. Remember what happened there.

After this little task the teacher has to tell the students what happens in the scenes after the Russian roulette and the escape. He has to tell them that Michael and Steven come back home. Steven is handicapped because of losing his legs at war and lives in an home for handicapped people. Michael is alright. Nick stays in

Vietnam. He is mentally broken and keeps on playing Russian roulette to earn money. Back home Michael goes hunting with some other American friends.

while-watching task:

What is different in this second “hunting” scene? Take notes.

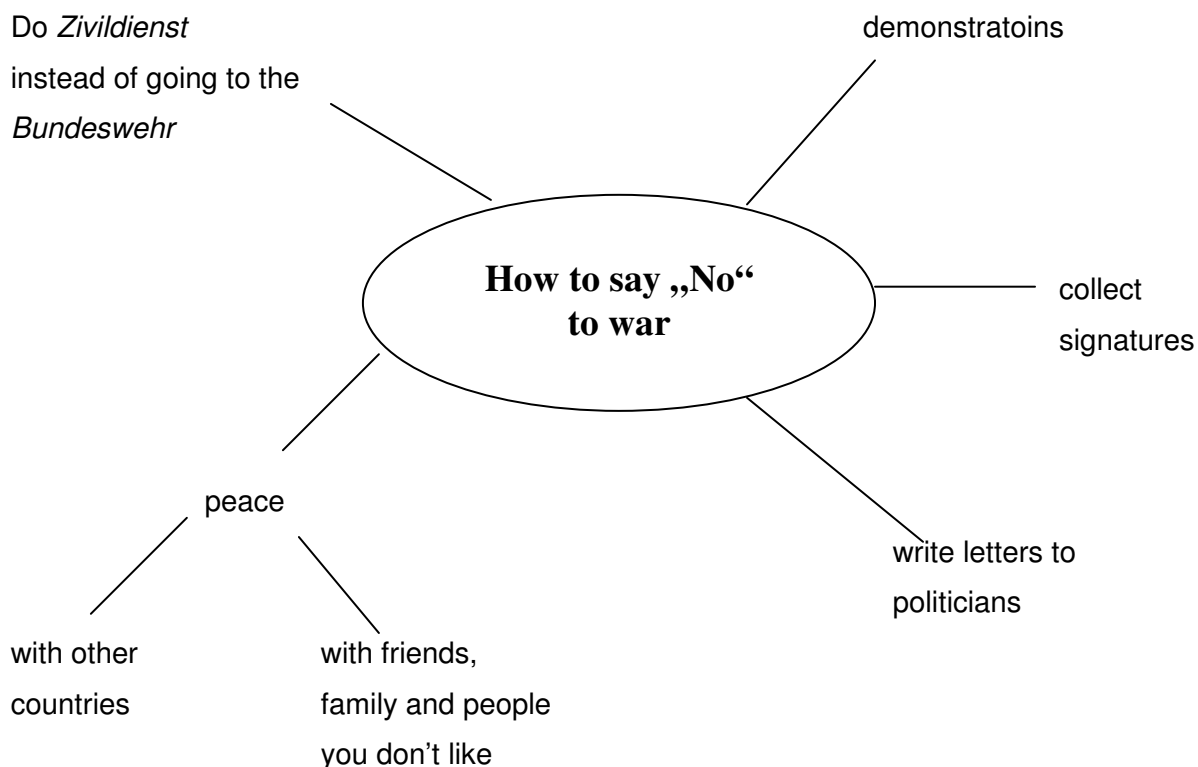
post-watching task:

Compare the two scenes. You can make a table if you want.

After this task you have to give the students a lot of time. There might be a need to talk about the film and the students’ impressions. It is a very emotional topic. So you cannot hurry up. The students also might ask how the film ends or they might talk about other war topics.

If their need is appeased you can try to move from the film to war in general and ask the students if they have any ideas of how to prevent war, what they can do to show that they are against war. You can collect the answers in a mind-map.

e.g.:



If the teacher decides to tell something about peace marches and demonstrations during the Vietnam War that led to the withdrawal of American troops at the end of the teaching unit, he can do it now.

This teaching unit takes a lot of time. Watching the scenes takes at least half an hour and working on them a lot more. The students need time to talk about everything and talking about war is the most important task of all. You can split this unit into several lessons. Some schools offer project weeks. This could be a good chance to deal with this topic.

6. Bibliography

- Behrenbeck, S. (2003). "Versailles and Vietnam: Coming to Terms with War." In: Daum, A./ Gardner, L./ Mausbach, W. (eds.). *America, the Vietnam War, and the World – Comparative and International Perspectives*. Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute.
- Bollnow, O.F. (1991). "Sicherheit und Frieden als Aufgabe der Erziehung (1964)." In: Heck, G./ Schurig, M. *Friedenspädagogik. Theorien, Ansätze und bildungspolitische Vorgaben einer Erziehung zum Frieden (1945-1985)*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Hodgson, G. (1976). *America in our Time: From World War II To Nixon – What Happened And Why*. New York: Vintage Books.
- McMahon, R.J. (ed., 1995): *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War. Documents and Essays*. Lexington/Massachusetts, Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company.
- Ministerium für Kultus und Sport Baden- Württemberg (1994). *Bildungsplan für die Realschule. Kultus und Unterricht*. Villingen-Schwenningen: Neckar-Verlag GmbH.
- Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden- Württemberg (2003). *Bildungsplan 2004 Realschule*. Stuttgart: Landesinstitut für Erziehung und Unterricht.
- Prados, J.(2003). "Peripheral War: A Recipe for Disaster? The United States in Vietnam and Japan in China." In: Daum, A./ Gardner, L./ Mausbach, W. (eds.): *America, the Vietnam War, and the World – Comparative and International Perspectives*. Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute.
- Roth, K.F. (1991). "Warum Friedenserziehung? – Probleme des Bildungsinhaltes (1967)." In: Heck, G./ Schurig, M.: *Friedenspädagogik. Theorien, Ansätze und bildungspolitische Vorgaben einer Erziehung zum Frieden (1945-1985)*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- "The Vietnam War (1945-1975)". Last access June 6th, 2006.
<http://www.sparknotes.com/history/american/vietnamwar/summary.html>
- Zinn, H. (2005). *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. p 460-492.
- filmforce.ign.com/articles/368/368173p1.html (5.3.06)
 - www.filmsite.org/deer.html (3.3.06)

- <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001047/> (3.3.06)

Film: Cimino, M (1978). *The Deer Hunter*. Culver City: Columbia Tristar.

annotated literature

1. Heck, G./ Schurig, M. (1991). *Friedenspädagogik. Theorien, Ansätze und bildungspolitische Vorgaben einer Erziehung zum Frieden (1945-1985)*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

This book is very interesting. It deals with the topic “peace education”. It is a collection of statements of former historically important people. It focuses on questions like “Why do we need peace education?”

2. Daum, A./ Gardner, L./ Mausbach, W. (eds., 2003). *America, the Vietnam War, and the World – Comparative and International Perspectives*. Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute.

Most books about the Vietnam War are written and released by Americans. Not this one. It was released by the German Historical Institute. It gives you a very objective introduction to that war. Furthermore it also explains what happened in countries around Vietnam.

3. McMahon, R.J. (ed., 1995): *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War. Documents and Essays*. Lexington/Massachusetts, Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company.

This book contains a mixture of documents and essays. Documents are, for example, the Vietnamese *Declaration of Independence* or parts of Martin Luther King’s speeches against the Vietnam war. The essays focus on historical facts.

4. Hodgson, G. (1976). *America in our Time: From World War II To Nixon – What Happened And Why*. New York: Vintage Books.

There are two books that belong together and focus on the whole history of America. The book I used deals with the period from World War II to Nixon.

In my opinion this book does not give you a complete introduction to the war. I only excerpted certain additional facts.

5. Zinn, H. (2005). *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

You can find the pages focusing on the Vietnam War in the “America at War”-reader. In my opinion it was the most useful help for writing a summary of the Vietnam War. It was the shortest, but nevertheless the best introduction to this topic. It contains all important dates and facts of the war.

Appendix A

The Vietnam War (1945-1975)

Summary of Events

Imperialism and Colonialism

The Vietnam War has roots in Vietnam's centuries of domination by imperial and colonial powers—first China, which ruled ancient Vietnam, and then France, which took control of Vietnam in the late 1800s and established French Indochina. In the early 1900s, nationalist movements emerged in Vietnam, demanding more self-governance and less French influence. The most prominent of these was led by Communist leader Ho Chi Minh, who founded a militant nationalist organization called the Viet Minh.

The First Indochina War

During World War II, when France was occupied by Nazi Germany, it lost its foothold in Vietnam, and Japan took control of the country. The Viet Minh resisted these Japanese oppressors and extended its power base throughout Vietnam. When Japan surrendered at the end of World War II in 1945, Ho Chi Minh's forces took the capital of Hanoi and declared Vietnam to be an independent country, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

France refused to recognize Ho's declaration and returned to Vietnam, driving Ho's Communist forces into northern Vietnam. Ho appealed for aid from the United States, but because the United States was embroiled in the escalating Cold War with the Communist USSR, it distrusted Ho's Communist leanings and aided the French instead. Fighting between Ho's forces and the French continued in this First Indochina War until 1954, when a humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu prompted France to seek a peace settlement.

Divided Vietnam

The Geneva Accords of 1954 declared a cease-fire and divided Vietnam officially into North Vietnam (under Ho and his Communist forces) and South Vietnam (under a French-backed emperor). The dividing line was set at the 17th parallel and was surrounded by a demilitarized zone, or DMZ. The Geneva Accords stipulated that the divide was temporary and that Vietnam was to be reunified under free elections to be held in 1956.

The Cold War and the Domino Theory

At this point, the United States' Cold War foreign policy began to play a major part in Vietnam. U.S. policy at the time was dominated by the domino theory, which believed that the “fall” of North Vietnam to Communism might trigger all of Southeast Asia to fall, setting off a sort of Communist chain reaction. Within a year of the Geneva Accords, the United States therefore began to offer support to the anti-Communist politician Ngo Dinh Diem. With U.S. assistance, Diem took control of the South Vietnamese government in 1955, declared the Republic of Vietnam, and promptly canceled the elections that had been scheduled for 1956.

The Diem Regime

Diem's regime proved corrupt, oppressive, and extremely unpopular. Nonetheless, the United States continued to prop it up, fearful of the increasing Communist resistance activity it noted in South Vietnam. This resistance against Diem's regime was organized by the Ho Chi Minh-backed National Liberation Front, which became more commonly known as the Viet Cong.

In 1962, U.S. president John F. Kennedy sent American "military advisors" to Vietnam to help train the South Vietnamese army, the ARVN, but quickly realized that the Diem regime was unsalvageable. Therefore, in 1963, the United States backed a coup that overthrew Diem and installed a new leader. The new U.S.-backed leaders proved just as corrupt and ineffective.

Johnson and U.S. Escalation

Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, pledged to honor Kennedy's commitments but hoped to keep U.S. involvement in Vietnam to a minimum. After North Vietnamese forces allegedly attacked U.S. Navy ships in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, however, Johnson was given carte blanche in the form of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and began to send U.S. troops to Vietnam. Bombing campaigns such as 1965's Operation Rolling Thunder ensued, and the conflict escalated. Johnson's "Americanization" of the war led to a presence of nearly 400,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam by the end of 1966.

Quagmire and Attrition

As the United States became increasingly mired in Vietnam, it pursued a strategy of attrition, attempting to bury the Vietnamese Communist forces under an avalanche of casualties. However, the Viet Cong's guerrilla tactics frustrated and demoralized U.S. troops, while its dispersed, largely rural presence left American bomber planes with few targets. The United States therefore used unconventional weapons such as napalm and the herbicide defoliant Agent Orange but still managed to make little headway.

The Tet Offensive

In 1968, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong launched a massive campaign called the Tet Offensive, attacking nearly thirty U.S. targets and dozens of other cities in South Vietnam at once. Although the United States pushed back the offensive and won a tactical victory, American media coverage characterized the conflict as a defeat, and U.S. public support for the war plummeted. Morale among U.S. troops also hit an all-time low, manifesting itself tragically in the 1968 My Lai Massacre, in which frustrated U.S. soldiers killed hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians in a small village.

The Antiwar Movement

Meanwhile, the antiwar movement within the United States gained momentum as student protesters, countercultural hippies, and even many mainstream Americans denounced the war. Protests against the war and the military draft grew increasingly violent, resulting in police brutality outside the Democratic National Convention in 1968 and the deaths of four students at Kent State University in 1970 when Ohio National Guardsmen fired on a crowd. Despite the protests, Johnson's successor, President Richard M. Nixon, declared that a "silent majority" of Americans still supported the war.

Vietnamization and U.S. Withdrawal

Nonetheless, Nixon promoted a policy of Vietnamization of the war, promising to withdraw U.S. troops gradually and hand over management of the war effort to the South Vietnamese. Although Nixon made good on his promise, he also illegally expanded the geographic scope of the war by authorizing the bombing of Viet Cong sites in the neutral nations of Cambodia and Laos, all without the knowledge or consent of the U.S. Congress. The revelation of these illegal actions, along with the publication of the secret Pentagon Papers in U.S. newspapers in 1971, caused an enormous scandal in the United States and forced Nixon to push for a peace settlement.

The Cease-fire and the Fall of Saigon

After secret negotiations between U.S. emissary Henry A. Kissinger and North Vietnamese representative Le Duc Tho in 1972, Nixon engaged in diplomatic maneuvering with China and the USSR—and stepped up bombing of North Vietnam—to pressure the North Vietnamese into a settlement. This cease-fire was finally signed in January 1973, and the last U.S. military personnel left Vietnam in March 1973.

The U.S. government continued to fund the South Vietnamese army, but this funding quickly dwindled. Meanwhile, as President Nixon became embroiled in the Watergate scandal that led to his resignation in August 1974, North Vietnamese forces stepped up their attacks on the South and finally launched an all-out offensive in the spring of 1975. On April 30, 1975, the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, who reunited the country under Communist rule as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, ending the Vietnam War.

(<http://www.sparknotes.com/history/american/vietnamwar/summary.html>)