The Korean War: It wasn’t really a “War” and it wasn’t just the USA and Korea

(Lesson by Sarah Thornburg, Columbus Alternative High School, IB History HL Course)

Abstract: Students will get the chance to see how other UN member states participated in the “Korean War” and begin to analyze why the contributed what they did, and how they were impacted by the decisions they made. By researching 5 countries (UK, Australia, Canada, Colombia, and South Africa), students will become “experts” on their country’s motives and be able to relay their information to other country experts to determine why the helped in this “Forgotten War.”

Teacher Background:
History textbooks may make you believe that the Korean War was an actually declared war and that it was fought between the United States and Korea. It was actually a military engagement sparked by a Security Council United Nations Resolution. There were actually 16 countries (UN member states) who contributed troops and/or supplies to the Security Council mission. Although the United States, by far, contributed the most troops (140,000), the other nations included: Great Britain, Canada, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Colombia, Ethiopia, South Africa, New Zealand, Turkey, Greece, Thailand, Philippines and Luxembourg (sent fighting units) and Norway, Sweden, Denmark, India, Italy (contributed field ambulances).

Ideally, the students will have background knowledge on how the UN works, what the Security Council does, and who are permanent members with veto power. Students should also have knowledge Truman’s Containment policy and how the actions in Korea were seen as an extension of the Truman Doctrine and his policy on the Containment of communism.

Execution of the Lesson:
Divide the class up into 5 groups, with each group being assigned one of the 5 highlighted countries. Students can received these assignments (and the assigned readings) the night before, or they can be asked to begin this research in class together.

As students go through the provided links, have them record their comments and inferences on the Student Handout. As they dig through the material, be sure to have the entire country group touch base and see if they came to the same conclusions concerning the information. It’s ok if there is some debate within the country group.

When it appears all the groups are ready, bring the groups together as a full class and have them share out. Explain to them that they are now part of a World History textbook committee and you have been asked to rewrite the section on the Korean War to include a more global perspective of the event. Their job is to convey to the group what should be included in this new textbook about their assigned country. Remember, textbooks are edited and condensed versions of much larger and complex events. The following questions should ultimately be addressed by each country: (1) What was their reason for entering? (2) To what extent did they participate (3) Did they experience any notable success or loses? (4) How do folks in their home countries perceive their country’s role in the Korean War?
Conclusion:

Have students record all the information the whole group comes up with. After all information has been shared, send the class home to address a prompt that ties all the differing points of view together. Have students address the chosen prompt by using prior knowledge about the Korean War and what they learned in today’s lesson. Citations should be made from the differing points of view when that support makes sense.

Possible Prompts: (1) To what extent was the Korean War an extension of the Cold War? (2) In what ways was the Korean War solely an American war? (3) To what degree could the Korean War be viewed as a United Nations military success?
Standards:
Modern World History—Topic: Historical Thinking and Skills
  2. The use of primary and secondary sources of information includes an examination of the credibility of each source
  4. Historians analyze cause, effect, sequence, and correlation in historical events, including multiple causation and long- and short-term causal relations

  18. The United States and Soviet Union became superpowers and competed for global influence.
  19. Treaties and agreements at the end of WWII changed national boundaries and created multinational organizations