

4.6.2 - Resettlement of Southeast Asian Refugees in Washington State (Secondary)

The Asian American Education Project

Grade Levels	7-12
Lesson Overview	Having played a major role in the Vietnam War (1955-1975), the United States government coordinated several operations to evacuate Southeast Asian allies. Nearly 130,000 Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong refugees were resettled in the United States. Then-governor of Washington Dan Evans invited refugees arriving in California to resettle in Washington. In this lesson, students will learn about the Vietnam War and factors that led to the mass evacuation of refugees escaping persecution and the devastation of war. Students will examine the resettlement experiences of refugees in Washington state by analyzing primary and secondary sources. They will also analyze the enduring issue of resistance to the resettlement of refugees, and look for continuities and changes across refugee resettlements in different time periods in United States history.
Lesson Objectives	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explain why large numbers of refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were resettled in the United States after the Vietnam War. ● Describe the resettlement experiences of Southeast Asian refugees in Washington state. ● Analyze the enduring issue of resistance to resettlement of refugees, and identify continuities and changes between the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees and Afghan refugees.
Standards	<p>Washington Social Studies Learning Standard: Middle School Standards</p> <p>SSS1: Uses critical reasoning skills to analyze and evaluate claims.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● SSS1.6-8.1 Analyze positions and evidence supporting an issue or an event. <p>H3: Understands that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● H3.6-8.1 Analyze and interpret historical materials from a variety of perspectives in world history <p>Washington Social Studies Learning Standard: High School Standards</p> <p>SSS1: Uses critical reasoning skills to analyze and evaluate claims.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● SSS1.9-12.4 Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection. <p>H3: Understands that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● H3.11-12.1 Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives. ● H3.11-12.5 Evaluate how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives.



[College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#)

- D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives.
- D2.His.6.9-12. Analyze the ways in which the perspectives of those writing history shaped the history that they produced.
- D2.His.10.9-12. Detect possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations.
- D2.His.11.9-12. Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

[Common Core State Standards: Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6–12](#)

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6 Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9 Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9 Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Resettlement of Southeast Asian Refugees in Washington State Essay

Much of Southeast Asia was **colonized** by the French in the 1850s. The Indochinese Union (French Indochina) consisted of what we know today as Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. This ended in 1954 when the Geneva Conference established Vietnam as an independent country but divided into North Vietnam and South Vietnam. North Vietnam was controlled by **communists**, and South Vietnam was supported by the United States and other western nations. The Geneva Conference also established the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Kingdom of Laos as independent states.

North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam with the goal of uniting the two countries as a communist nation. The United States became actively involved in support of South Vietnam with the goal of stopping the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. In the United States, the war became known as “The Vietnam War.” But in Vietnam, many call it “The Resistance War Against the United States” or “The American War.” During this time, conflict also raged in other parts of Southeast Asia.

The Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975 when North Vietnam captured Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam (now Ho Chi Minh City). Having played a major role in the war, the U.S. government coordinated several operations to **evacuate** Southeast Asian allies. U.S. bombing raids devastated Vietnam, Laos, and



Cambodia. Many people were wounded, traumatized, and displaced. About 130,000 Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong **refugees** fled to the United States right after the war. From 1975-2010, about 1.2 million Southeast Asian refugees came to the United States.

In the coming years after the war, the U.S. government passed several laws to facilitate the **resettlement** of Southeast Asian refugees. Resettlement centers (also called refugee camps) were quickly set up. Camp Pendleton in San Diego, California was the first camp to open. Over 50,000 refugees came through Camp Pendleton, leading to overcrowding and harsh conditions. The Governor of California, Jerry Brown (born 1938), was vocal about being opposed to resettlement in California, fearing economic burdens which reflected a common sentiment at the time. Upon hearing this, Dan Evans (born 1925), the Governor of Washington, sent his special assistant Ralph Munro to Camp Pendleton. According to Munro, Evans urged him to “remind Governor Brown of what it says on the base of the Statue of Liberty.” Munro invited some of the refugees to go to Washington. Washington officials turned Camp Murray, a military base, into a resettlement camp. Camp Murray thus became a temporary home for 500-600 Vietnamese refugees for 133 days from May to October of 1975.

Governor Evans hired Vietnamese refugees to work for the state government. He urged state agencies, churches, and other organizations in Washington to support the refugees by offering jobs and matching refugees with **sponsors**. For example, the Washington Army National Guard Aviators worked with former Vietnamese air force pilots to help them pass their aviation exams to become federally licensed pilots. State agencies hired young Vietnamese women as interpreters to process paperwork. The State of Washington also helped to fund a newspaper called “Dat Moi” (“new land”), the first Vietnamese language newspaper in the United States. “Dat Moi” helped Vietnamese refugees across the country access important information and also provided a sense of belonging.

Refugees faced discrimination and **xenophobia**. Throughout the country, there were anti-refugee sentiments. Many Americans saw the refugees as an economic threat at a time when unemployment was already high. Some saw them as outsiders who could not assimilate or speak English. Others made unfounded assumptions that the refugees would spread disease and communist ideas.

Nonetheless, as Southeast Asian refugees began to settle in Washington, they worked to support each other and build community. They established their own “mutual assistance associations” to provide services and support with jobs, health, housing, and counseling. In 1985, a group of resettled refugee women founded the South East Asian Women’s Alliance (SEAWA) to support refugee and immigrant women and mothers. (The organization is now called the Refugee Women’s Alliance, or ReWA.)

As they began to settle, Southeast Asian refugees formed **ethnic enclaves** in Washington. For example, many Vietnamese residents settled in Seattle’s Chinatown. Over time they opened shops, grocery stores, and restaurants. This area eventually became Little Saigon, one of three neighborhoods in Seattle’s Chinatown-International District. In 1981, a Vietnamese refugee named Duc Tran opened Little Saigon’s first grocery store, Viet-Wah Supermarket, which soon became a community institution. Viet-Wah closed in 2022, reflecting the larger challenges faced by Little Saigon, including vacant storefronts, lack of housing options, and crime. Nonetheless, Little Saigon remains a cultural hub for the Vietnamese community. Community members and groups like Friends of Little Sài Gòn have been actively working to revitalize the area.

Another Vietnamese community in Washington is the Lincoln Business District in Tacoma, which is home to many Vietnamese shops, businesses, and community centers. Every year they host a Lunar New Year Festival in which many Vietnamese businesses, cultural groups, and residents participate.

Cambodian Americans have formed a community in the White Center area near West Seattle, an ethnically diverse area with a large immigrant community. White Center has held a Cambodian New Year Festival since 2003.

As of 2020, Washington is home to the third largest population of Cambodian Americans and the fourth largest populations of Vietnamese and Laotian Americans in the country. These include refugees from the Vietnam War, their descendants, and others who came later to join their family and the growing Southeast Asian community in Washington. The growth rates of the Southeast Asian American populations in Washington are higher than the state average of 14%, with the Hmong growth rate at 62%, Vietnamese 50%, Cambodian 38%, and Laotian 23%.

Migrating to the United States as refugees has led to a distinct experience compared to other Asian American immigrants. Refugees face many barriers including language and culture, post-war trauma, poverty, anti-Asian discrimination, mental health issues, and more. Like in other parts of the country, Southeast Asian Americans in Washington face disparities in educational attainment, health care, and income. At the same time, many refugees have shared that the strong support system in Washington has been instrumental in navigating the resettlement process. With the support of families, religious and community organizations, and more, Southeast Asian immigrants have made a home in Washington.

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Vocabulary:¹

- **Colonize:** to take control of a people or area, especially as an extension of state power
- **Communism:** a system in which goods are owned in common and are available to all as needed
- **Ethnic enclave:** a distinct geographic area with a large population of a particular ethnic group
- **Evacuate:** to leave or remove; to withdraw from a place in an organized way especially for protection
- **Refugees:** a person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution
- **Resettle:** to move to a new place to live after a disturbance or upheaval
- **Retaliation:** return like for like, especially to get revenge
- **Sponsor:** one who assumes responsibility for some other person or thing
- **Xenophobia:** fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that is strange or foreign

¹ Definition adapted from Merriam-Webster

Discussion Questions:

1. What role did the Geneva Conference play in setting the stage for the Vietnam War?
2. What countries were involved in the Vietnam War?
3. What is a refugee? How is a refugee different from an immigrant or migrant?
4. Why did large numbers of refugees flee Southeast Asia?
5. Why did the United States help coordinate the evacuation of Southeast Asians fleeing Vietnam?



6. How did the United States help facilitate the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees?
7. How did Southeast Asian refugees come to resettle in Washington?
8. What support was available to refugees in Washington?
9. What challenges did refugees in Washington face?
10. How did refugees support each other?

Activity 1: Learning About Refugees

- A. Have students write a Quickwrite in response to the following prompt: “What do you know about how your family came to live in the state you currently live in? How do you know what you know? If you wanted to find out more, where might you look?”
- B. Have students look at a [Google Map of Southeast Asia](#).
 1. Tell students that Mainland Southeast Asia refers to the countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia. This lesson will focus on Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. These three countries were significantly impacted by the American military in the 1950s-1970s, and before that, by French colonization. Have students locate Cambodian, Laos, and Vietnam on the map.
- C. Have students watch the video entitled, “[What's the Difference Between a Migrant and a Refugee? Migration Explained](#).”
 1. Explain that a refugee is a person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution. Provide the definition given by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)): “The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as a person who ‘owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country.’”
 2. Have students do a Quickwrite or pair-share about the unique challenges refugees might face, especially compared to voluntary migrants.
 3. Option: Have students complete a triple Venn diagram comparing refugees and immigrants and migrants.

Activity 2: Resettlement of Southeast Asian Refugees in Washington

- A. Have students read the essay. Consider the following options:
 1. OPTION 1: Have students read the essay independently either for homework or during class time.
 2. OPTION 2: Read aloud the essay and model annotating.
 3. OPTION 3: Have students read aloud in pairs or small groups.
- B. Facilitate a class discussion by asking students the Discussion Questions.
- C. Distribute the worksheet entitled, “[Source Analysis](#).” Divide students into four groups, and assign each group one of the following sources. Have students complete the Source Analysis worksheet by responding to the prompts about sourcing, contextualizing, and close reading on page 1. On page 2, have students more deeply analyze the source for information on the author’s perspective, purpose, bias, and audience. Students may work independently or collaborate with others in their group.
 1. Group 1: [Invitation letter to Camp Pendleton](#)
 2. Group 2: [Sponsorship Information for Vietnamese Assistance Program](#)
 3. Group 3: [COMMENTARY: Journey to Freedom — Revisiting the long journey from Vietnam to Camp Murray by Trang Vu](#)
 4. Group 4: [Close ties of Vietnamese, Seattle Asians paved way for 40-year journey by Ron Chew](#)

5. (Note to Teacher: If needed, remind students that primary sources are firsthand accounts of a topic from people who experienced the event. Secondary sources are one-step removed and often reference, quote, or interpret primary sources.)
- D. Have each group choose a leader to share a brief summary of their source, using their Source Analysis worksheet as a guide. Encourage students to take notes as each group presents their findings.
- E. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following question, citing evidence from the documents:
1. What narrative do these sources tell together?
 2. How are these narratives similar?
 3. How are these narratives different? What might account for the differences?
 4. Are there any contradictions between different sources? What might account for these contradictions?
 5. How do these documents build upon the lesson essay? What points do they agree on? What points do they disagree on?
 6. When was each document written? How does the date each document was written shape the history that is being shared? What is the purpose of reading sources written at different time periods that account for the same historical events?

Activity 3: Opposition to Resettlement

- A. Distribute the worksheet entitled, “[Continuity and Change for an Enduring Issue](#).” Tell students that an enduring issue is an issue that persists over time. Explain that resistance to the resettlement of refugees is an enduring issue because while the conflicts and countries of origin that drive refugees to the United States have changed over time, there has always been anti-immigrant or anti-refugee sentiments.
- B. Tell students that across the country, there was resistance and reluctance to accepting refugees after the Vietnam War. Have students read the article entitled, “[Wide Hostility Found To Vietnamese Influx](#).”
- C. Have students complete the first two columns in Part 1 of the worksheet as they read. (An example has been provided on the top row.)
1. List general reasons Americans opposed the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the “Characteristics of Enduring Issue” column. (ie. “Refugees seen as outsiders”)
 2. List evidence or examples specific to the resettlement of Vietnamese and Southeast Asian refugees in the “Southeast Asian Refugees” column. (ie. “Vietnamese refugees seen as a communist threat”)
- D. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
1. What were some of the reasons many Americans opposed the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees?
 2. How were the perspectives shared in the article shaped by the historical context at the time?
 3. What date was this article published? How does this fit into the context of the primary/secondary source documents you read?
 4. How do the perspectives shared in this article relate to the primary/secondary sources you read? What are the similarities? What are the differences? What might explain the differences?
 5. How are arguments in the article similar and/or different from arguments made today regarding refugees and immigrants?
 6. Tell students the following: “The article notes that the Seattle City Council turned down a resolution to welcome South Vietnamese. [Resolution 24900](#) was introduced on April 28, 1975 and was not adopted; however, [Resolution 24913](#) was introduced and adopted on May 12, 1975.”

- a. Ask students: Why do you think the Seattle City council initially turned down the resolution to welcome South Vietnamese? What might have prompted them to pass a similar resolution later?
- E. Have students consider a “Big Question” by asking: “What responsibility does a nation have to accept and support refugees?” Allow students to share ideas and use the following prompts for further discussion:
1. What factors should be considered?
 2. If refugees are admitted, what responsibilities does the government have to provide support to them?
 3. What responsibilities might individuals, community organizations, schools, and other groups have?
 4. (Note to Teacher: Big Questions do not necessarily have answers. They serve as a springboard for ideas and opinions. They spark further learning and research. As a classroom tool, they are useful for building anticipation about what will be taught in a lesson.)

Activity 4: Other Refugees in Washington

A. Have students read the article entitled, “[Beyond Afghans and Ukrainians, who are WA refugees?](#)”

Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:

1. From which countries have refugees in Washington arrived?
2. What are some of the reasons refugees end up in Washington?
3. In which areas of Washington have refugees settled? What makes an area suitable for resettlement?
4. How has the history of resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam War impacted resettlement of refugees in Washington today?
5. What are the costs and benefits to resettling refugees in a community?

B. Have students watch the video entitled, “[How Seattle’s Vietnamese community is helping Afghan refugees.](#)” Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:

1. What motivates Viets4Afghan to support newly arrived Afghan refugees?
2. What lessons can we learn about solidarity from this video?

C. Have students return to the worksheet from Activity 3 entitled, “[Continuity and Change for an Enduring Issue.](#)” Have them complete the “Resettlement of Afghan Refugees” column using information from the article and video. Allow them to conduct additional internet research for more information.

D. Have students identify continuities and changes in the fourth column:

1. Tell students that continuities are things that stay the same over time and changes are things that are not the same over time.
2. Have students compare their notes in the middle two columns and decide if there is more evidence for continuity or change. Summarize the continuity and/or change in the fourth column.

E. Have students complete Part 2 of the worksheet by answering the following question:

1. What is one example of a continuity for this enduring issue?
2. What is one example of a change for this enduring issue?
3. Was there greater continuity or change for this issue over the course of these events? Explain.

F. Facilitate a class discussion about student responses to the worksheet.

Activity 5: Resettlement Experiences in Washington

Teachers can choose one or more of the following options to assess student learning:

- A. **Option 1: Explanatory Essay.** Have students write an informative/explanatory essay on the resettlement experiences of Southeast Asian refugees in Washington. Have students address the following:
1. Explain how the Vietnam War led to a surge in refugees to the United States.
 2. Describe and provide examples of challenges faced by refugees in Washington.
 3. Describe and provide examples of support available to refugees in Washington.
 4. Connect past events to the present day to discuss current experiences of Southeast Asian Americans in Washington.
- B. **Option 2: Argumentative Essay.** Have students reread the [Invitation letter to Camp Pendleton](#) in Activity 2. Have students write an argumentative essay in response to the following prompt: “Assess the extent to which the state of Washington lived up to the promises made in its invitation letter to refugees at Camp Pendleton.” Be sure students support their claims with textual evidence from primary and secondary sources.
- C. **Option 3: Argumentative Essay.** Have students write an argumentative essay in response to the following prompt: “Given the history of the resettlement of Southeast Asians in Washington after the Vietnam War, to what extent does the state of Washington have a responsibility to support refugees today?”

Extension Activities

- A. **Oral History.** Have students listen to the audio of PhuongChi Nguyen, the daughter of Vietnamese refugees, interviewing her parents, Hung Phi Nguyen and Phuong Lucy Pham, from the story “[I heard on the loudspeaker that they call us refugees](#)” from the PBS First Days Story Project. (Note: the edited interview is 3:26; the unedited interview is 40:45. Listen to the edited interview or select parts of the unedited interview based on the needs of your students. A transcript is also provided.)
1. Have students complete an [Oral History Analysis](#).
 2. Have students pair-share: How did listening to this story help you understand the refugee experience?
 3. Ask students, “What is the impact of having this multi-generation oral history interview within a family? How would it be different if the interviewer was not part of their family?”
- B. **Field Trip.** Host a field trip to a Washington-based site with APIDA history like the Wing Luke Museum in the Seattle Chinatown-International District.
1. Have students research current exhibitions online before visiting.
 2. Have students make a list of questions they have or things they would like to see at the museum before visiting.
 3. Facilitate an after-event discussion by asking students about what they learned and the connections they made to the lesson.

Further Information

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Resettlement of Southeast Asian Refugees in Washington State (Elementary)”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/sea-refugees-washington-elem.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Southeast Asian Refugees”:
<https://asianamericanedu.org/southeast-asian-refugees.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees in Southern California”:
<https://asianamericanedu.org/vietnamese-refugees-in-socal.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Cambodian Refugees in the United States”:
<https://asianamericanedu.org/cambodian-refugees.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Asian Americans Serving and Fighting in the Vietnam War”:
<https://asianamericanedu.org/asian-americans-serving-and-fighting-in-vietnam-war.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Asian American Veterans and the Anti-War Movement”:
<https://asianamericanedu.org/asian-american-veterans-and-anti-war-movement.html>

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