

Contextual information

By 1968 America had become entrenched in a war in Vietnam which was being fought very differently from wars before it. The guerrilla tactics of the Viet Cong proved difficult to combat. As a result civilian casualties were high. One example of civilian life loss has been remembered particularly vividly in America, Vietnam and internationally – this is how BBC news describes the event:

‘The My Lai massacre, which took place on the morning of March 16, 1968, was a watershed in the history of modern American combat, and a turning point in the public perception of the Vietnam War.

In the course of three hours more than 500 Vietnamese civilians were killed in cold blood at the hands of US troops. The soldiers had been on a "search and destroy" mission to root out communist fighters in what was fertile Viet Cong territory.

Yet there had been no firefight with the enemy – not a single shot was fired at the soldiers of Charlie Company, a unit of the American Division's 11th Infantry Brigade.

The 48th Viet Cong Battalion – the intended target of the mission – was nowhere to be seen.

When the story of My Lai was exposed, more than a year later, it tarnished the name of the US army. Most Americans did not want to believe that their revered GI Joe could be a wanton murderer. ‘

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/64344.stm>

You can find out more about the event at:

http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/my_lai_massacre.htm

Task 1 – working with a partner to understand the text

- a) Underline any words/phrases in the text above which you don't understand. Look the words up in a dictionary or ask your teacher what they mean.
- b) Discuss what you think is meant by the phrase ‘a watershed in the history of modern American combat, and a turning point in the public perception of the Vietnam War.’



Task 2 – testing significance in History

What do you think makes an event *significant* in History? Can you think of any criteria (tests/rules) that might help historians decide whether an event is significant? One example has been completed for you. Make a note here:

- It changed the course of future events.
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Many historians have tried to come up with their own criteria for what makes an event significant. Have a look at these:

Christine Counsell's five 'R's

Remarkable: the event or person was remarkable. They were remarked on at the time and by people since. They were considered to be important by their contemporaries and by following generations.

Remembered: the person or event has been remembered by groups who consider it an important part of the nation's past.

Results: the event or person resulted in change; there were important consequences for the future.

Resonant: people can link their experiences, beliefs or situations in the present to this person or event.

Revealing: it tells us something about the lives of ordinary people normally hidden from our view.

Task 3 – exploring the significance of My Lai

- a) Decide which of the five 'R's each of the statements below describes (it could be more than one).
- b) Give each a mark out of four for how well it explains the significance of the event:
 1 = strongly agree 2 = agree 3 = disagree 4 = strongly disagree
- c) Add any of your own significance statements to the list.

Significance statement	Which 'R'?	Agree? (1-4)
The events of My Lai remind us that human beings are capable of committing atrocities against one another in the harsh circumstances of war.		
My Lai is important because it caused outrage around the world at the time.		
It is important that we remember the event because it shocked the American public, and began a large political protest movement.		
My Lai tells us something about how far people will go to cover up injustice. At first it was claimed that 128 members of the Vietcong had been killed, it was later revealed that only three or four had anything to do with the Communist forces.		
The My Lai massacre reveals the futility of the American involvement in war in Vietnam. It highlights how inappropriate US tactics were for dealing with a guerrilla war.		
The event clearly shows us that US soldiers weren't trained adequately, and that the unconditional obedience they were expected to show was problematic.		
We should study My Lai because it is a good example of the impact that media attention can have on how a war is fought.		
The photographic evidence which exists of the My Lai massacre is worth studying because it documents the brutality of war in general, not just the Vietnam War.		

Task 4 – commemorating the My Lai Massacre

Imagine you have been asked to write an information board to accompany this memorial to the massacre which currently stands in Vietnam. What would you write to explain how, and why, we should remember the event?



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We should remember the My Lai Massacre because ...