

The Wagner Rogers Bill:  
How a failed debate impacted diplomatic actions during the Holocaust

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Group Website

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When we first met as NHD partners, we wanted to cover a topic with significance such as race, immigration, or equal rights that would fit the 2022 NHD theme of Debate and Diplomacy. Initially, we researched the Vietnam War but found this topic too broad. Our teacher encouraged us to look into the *St. Louis*, a ship boarding almost a thousand Jewish immigrants that several nations turned away, which led us to WWII German immigration as it covered immigration, race, and equal rights for German immigrants. Following WW1, the US implemented immigration quotas to quell economic and social fears. Anti-Semitism grew in proportion to the impact of the Depression. The Wagner-Rogers Congressional Bill of 1939 proposed admitting 20,000 additional German children into the US. Lack of diplomatic action and productive debate resulted in Congress' failure to support the bill, resulting in a 1944 Cabinet report shaming the US into forming the War Refugee Board.

Early in our process, we interviewed a retired CIA Senior Intelligence Officer. We learned how United States diplomatic relations work and the role of government leaders and other share-holders. This information helped us better understand the different perspectives in diplomacy and plan our research strategy. We found primary sources, especially news articles and political cartoons, through Chronicling America. The resources of the USHMM were extremely valuable as well. The text of speeches during the debate and the actual bill wording was available in various forms in newspapers and congressional records. By dividing the research between economic, political, social, and moral aspects of this Congressional action we found multiple perspectives of the different share-holders to better analyze the debate and diplomatic negotiations. We did find our research hindered by the ongoing issues of Covid and were limited to remote access sources.

We decided a website would work best given in-person limitations. This category would allow us to work virtually and showcase the visual evidence to support our thesis. We divided the workload to best match our strengths and found the judges' comments valuable in broadening our analysis.. Learning the WebCentral software presented a challenge but with time we felt more confident. The depth of analysis when using media sources such as newspapers challenged us to analyze the audience and bigger political context of the historical period.

National History Day allows students to engage in topics that are often controversial, which was the case when we explored the delicate diplomatic issues, the historical context of immigration, and the anti-semitic feelings of Americans during World War II. Lack of diplomatic action and productive debate resulted in Congress' failure to support the bill leaving German citizens to suffer. President Theodore Roosevelt is credited with saying: "In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing." The implications of this diplomatic failure is a shameful spot in American history.