

LESSON: Immigration and Refugees: Debating the Wagner Rogers Bill

GRADE LEVEL: Adaptable for grades 9–12

SUBJECT: Multidisciplinary

TIME REQUIRED: Approximately 90 minutes

This is a *thematic* lesson that builds on fundamental knowledge and provides in-depth exploration of a topic

RATIONALE

Through an examination of the Wagner-Rogers Bill of 1939, students consider how Americans debated the country's role as a haven for refugees during the 1930s and 1940s. They identify economic, social, and geopolitical factors that influenced Americans' attitudes about the United States' role in the world during the critical years 1938–1941. Using primary-source documents, students identify and evaluate arguments that different Americans made for and against the acceptance of child refugees in 1939. The lesson concludes with reflection on questions that this history raises about America's role in the world today.

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

- How did Americans interpret their role when facing a catastrophic refugee crisis in 1939?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Understand there were many issues vying for Americans' attention during this time, and will be able to identify economic, social, and geopolitical factors that influenced Americans' attitudes toward the refugee crisis of 1938–1941.
- Articulate and evaluate arguments for and against the Wagner-Rogers Bill of 1939, providing facts to support their evaluation about if and how the United States could have admitted refugees.

TEACHER PREPARATION

- Familiarize yourself ahead of time with all background materials, including:
 - [Teacher Presentation, “Immigration and Refugees: A Case Study on the Wagner Rogers Bill”](#) as well as the [speaker notes](#).
 - [Wagner-Rogers Timeline \(PDF\)](#)
 - [Student Packet of Primary Sources \(PDF\)](#)
 - [Student Packet Answer Key \(PDF\)](#)
- No prior student knowledge is required; however, if students have background on events in the United States and Germany from the end of World War I through the beginning of World War II (1919–1939), that may lead to a richer discussion and deeper learning.
- Print out and display the [timeline](#) accompanying this lesson. (OPTIONAL)

LESSON: Immigration and Refugees: Debating the Wagner Rogers Bill

- A computer and projector are necessary for display of the slide deck accompanying this lesson.

LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

The lesson is intentionally flexible to allow for individual teacher modifications to achieve the educational outcomes. Technology and teaching strategies are suggested in the instructional sequence; please use other options if they support the learning needs of your students. Consider utilizing graphic organizers, note-taking strategies, reading choices, and online engagement tools.

Educators may choose to use learner variability modifications specific to this lesson:

- Teachers can provide students with choices as to how they access information throughout lessons, i.e. read print alone, read print with a partner, read along while the teacher reads aloud, etc.
- Define terms that would clarify understanding for students.
- Use online discussion or engagement tools that work best in your classroom, such as Padlet.
- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* articles are available in various languages; refer to the word “Language” and select the Globe icon available on the lefthand side of the article.
- Reference the [Glossary](#) in the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* for definitional support.
- Incorporate strategies such as think-pair-share and jigsaw to enhance student engagement.

INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

INTRODUCTION

1. In the 1930s, Americans debated how best to support and protect Jews fleeing persecution and violence in Nazi Germany, including whether to admit refugees into the United States. Americans have long debated the country’s role in world affairs. Students should consider the pressures and motivations that influence these debates during the teacher presentation that follows.
2. Using the slide deck titled [“Immigration and Refugees: A Case Study on the Wagner-Rogers Bill.”](#) provide historical context for the European refugee crisis of 1939 and the Wagner-Rogers Bill. Refer to the [speaker notes](#) as needed. Review the [timeline](#) of events, if time permits.

STUDENT ACTIVITY AND DISCUSSION

3. Divide the class into small groups and share the [student packet](#). Explain that each group will be investigating American opinion and decision making regarding the Wagner-Rogers Bill and US immigration policy.
 - a. Display the following discussion question about the Wagner-Rogers Bill for students: **Should the US Congress and President allow 20,000 German children into the United States in 1939–1940 outside of the existing immigration quota?**
 - b. Assign primary sources from the packet to students in each group. These include:

LESSON: Immigration and Refugees: Debating the Wagner Rogers Bill

1. “Our Country, Our Citizens First”—Extension of Remarks of Hon. Robert R. Reynolds submitted as Congressional Testimony on June 7, 1939 (starting on page 10)
- c. Statement of Howard A. Seitz, Brooklyn, NY, Assistant Counsel for the Nonsectarian Committee, submitted as Congressional Testimony on May 24, 1939 (startings on page 14)
Statement of Francis Kennicut, President of Allied Patriotic Societies, submitted as Congressional Testimony on May 24, 1939 (starting on page 24)
- d. Letters to the editor for and against the Wagner-Rogers Bill (starting on page 29)

Teacher Note: You may choose to assign each group only one document and share with the entire class during step three of this activity, or one student in each group may examine their own document and share within the group before reconvening as a whole class in step three.

- e. Using the document analysis worksheet on page 2 of the [packet](#), students will answer the following question for their primary sources:
 - i. Who is the author of this opinion, and who is the author’s intended audience?
 - ii. What does the author want the target audience to think, feel, or do? Is there a specific action the author proposes?
 - iii. What hopes, fears, and grievances present in society at the time might have influenced how the target audience responded to this document? Consider political, social, and economic conditions.
4. After each group has analyzed and discussed their documents, lead the full class in a discussion of the arguments that different Americans made for and against the Wagner-Rogers Bill. An answer key for each primary source to help guide the discussion is available towards the end of this lesson plan. Help the students synthesize their findings, considering the various factors that influenced public opinion during this time. Draw broader conclusions (and surface lingering questions) about Americans and their responses to the refugee crisis between 1938 and 1941. What questions does this activity raise about America’s role in the world?

ASSESSMENTS

5. Questions for full class discussion:
 - a. How would you characterize American public opinion regarding refugees from 1938–1941?
 - b. What factors influenced American attitudes and opinions on these issues?
 - c. What were the main arguments for and against the Wagner-Rogers bill? Were there particular arguments that you found convincing? Why? Was there additional information you would need to accurately assess the validity of these arguments?
 - d. Why do you think the Wagner-Rogers Bill failed?
 - e. What is the role of informed public debate about policy decisions in a democracy?
 - f. What questions does this case study raise about America’s role in the world?

LESSON: Immigration and Refugees: Debating the Wagner Rogers Bill

EXTENSIONS

1. Independent research: Students compare and contrast US public opinion and Congressional debate surrounding the Wagner-Rogers Bill to that surrounding the Lend-Lease Act. What was similar about the two debates? What was different? Had Americans' view of their role in the world changed over time? If so, how? If not, why?
2. Media Literacy: Analyze and evaluate the language used in arguments for and against the bill. How did individuals and groups play to people's emotions to shape their interpretation of policy options? How important is emotional context in the formation of public opinion, and what role should this play in public policy decisions? What is more convincing: moral arguments, practical arguments, appeals to emotion, expediency, etc.? A common tool of propagandists is to engage the public in "us versus them" thinking. How did interest groups use this technique to influence public policy, especially in relation to immigration, national security, and war? Look for examples of this language in arguments for and against immigration and military action today.
3. Write an essay responding to the following question:
 - a. When should a leader take the risk to lead the public, and when should one follow public opinion? What should be the role of public opinion in considerations by a leader when making a policy decision?
 - i. Support your answer to this question by citing events and conditions that had an impact upon Americans' attitudes about the Nazi persecution of Jews and America's role in responding to the refugee crisis, with an emphasis on American responses to the Wagner-Rogers bill.

ANSWER KEY

"Our Country, Our Citizens First"—Extension of Remarks of Hon. Robert R. Reynolds submitted as Congressional Testimony on June 7, 1939

Robert Reynolds successfully ran for the United States Senate in 1932 as a Democrat. He supported Roosevelt's New Deal programs and was a fervent isolationist, opposing Roosevelt's international efforts so strongly that the president supported Reynolds' primary challenger in 1938. In 1939, he started an antisemitic newspaper, the *American Vindicator*, which ran until 1942. In 1944, the Democratic Party supported a different senatorial candidate, and Reynolds retired. The central argument in Senator Reynolds' testimony is an economic one—strengthen the US economy and provide full employment for American workers before allowing refugees into the country. In fact, he calls for a complete ban on all new immigration to the United States. He hammers this point home repeatedly with statements like, "Why admit thousands upon thousands annually to this country who come to usurp the jobs of American citizens? Why not take care of our own first?" and "Charity ought to begin at home." Reynolds also appeals to a variety of motivations:

- Nativism: "America should be preserved for Americans"
- Law & Order: "Let's empty our prisons of alien criminals and send them back to their native lands"

LESSON: Immigration and Refugees: Debating the Wagner Rogers Bill

- Political: “Let’s deport those alien agitators who are eternally advocating a change in our form of government”
- National security fears: “Save our country from destruction by alien-enemy forces which are boring from within”

Statement of Francis Kennicut, President of Allied Patriotic Societies, submitted as Congressional Testimony on May 24, 1939

The American Coalition of Patriotic Societies, one of a plethora of patriotic and fraternal organizations in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, was an umbrella organization including the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution, the American Legion Auxiliary, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The organization’s stated purpose was to “keep America American”; to “advocate restriction upon immigration . . . registration of aliens, [and] deportation of undesirables”; and to “resist efforts of unassimilated or hyphenated groups to use the Government of the United States for the furtherance of the policy of foreign governments, states, peoples, or organizations.” The group specifically opposed Jewish immigrants, who were seen as racially undesirable and potential communists. The central argument of Mr. Kennicut’s testimony is that maintaining a certain level of racial and ethnic homogeneity is essential to the stability of American political and social institutions. Implied in his argument is that German Jewish children would present a threat to the alleged “racial and ethnic” makeup of the United States population, because they would serve as a wedge to allow in more undesirable refugees, starting with their parents and family members. Additional arguments presented by Kennicut include:

- Humanitarian—Children should not be separated from their parents
- Economic—Within a short amount of time the children would be grown and would compete with their American peers for jobs
- Economic—The bill does not adequately ensure that the children will not become public charges
- Fairness—The bill undermines the national quota apportionments laid out in existing law

Statement of Howard A. Seitz, Brooklyn, NY, Assistant Counsel for the Nonsectarian Committee, submitted as Congressional Testimony on May 24, 1939

In the wake of news coverage in the United States of the Kristallnacht (“Night of Broken Glass”) attacks, child psychologist Marion Kenworthy asked Clarence Pickett—the director of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker relief agency, and a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt—to lead an interfaith, non-sectarian effort to support legislation to allow the immigration of refugee children from Europe. The Non-Sectarian Committee for German Refugee Children, which was officially formed in March 1939, stressed the interfaith aspect of their organization in an effort to avoid raising the ire of xenophobic and antisemitic opponents of any immigration proposal. The co-chairmen of the committee included George Cardinal Mundelein, the Archbishop of Chicago, New York Governor Herbert Lehman, and Frank Graham, the president of the University of North Carolina.

Mr. Seitz’s testimony appeals to American values and symbolism: “We are still a great democracy, the leading exponent of tolerance and liberty.” Beyond that, he focuses primarily on factually refuting arguments presented by opponents of the bill, emphasizing that the children in question are special emergency cases as threatened refugees that deserve consideration outside of ordinary immigration quotas.

- Fairness—Would not alter basic immigration policy

LESSON: Immigration and Refugees: Debating the Wagner Rogers Bill

- Economic—Children would not enter the workforce for several years, and as consumers they would boost the economy in the meantime (organized labor supports this bill)
- Nativism—Rather than choosing foreign children over American children, leading child-welfare workers support this bill and believe that sympathy aroused by German children will open new channels of support for work being done to help American children
- Humanitarian—German government policies are breaking up families, not the bill; the bill seeks to save children from families which have already been devastated and who are eager to send their children in order to save them
- Law and Order—This bill would not bring undesirable elements into the United States; the children would be carefully selected and would have to meet all immigration requirements

Letters to the editor for and against the Wagner-Rogers Bill

The American public overwhelmingly condemned Nazi persecution of Jews. However, Americans did not agree in 1939 about how best to aid Jews fleeing Nazi brutality. While there was broad support for the Wagner-Rogers Bill, particularly from a diversity of religious organizations, labor unions, children’s welfare organizations, and leaders in politics and the entertainment industry, the majority of Americans were opposed to allowing additional immigrants into the country, including children fleeing Nazi persecution. The editorial boards of most newspapers in the United States supported passage of the Wagner-Rogers Bill. Letters to the editor, on the other hand, revealed a populace that was deeply divided about America’s responsibility to aid refugees from Europe.

PRO

- Economic—Children would not enter the workforce for several years; they will not compete with American workers; organized labor supports this bill
- Political—This bill would not bring undesirable elements into the US; to the contrary, these children would likely be so thankful to the country that saved them that they would become extremely patriotic Americans
- Social—Only children who had a sponsoring family or institution that could vouch for their financial support and well being would be allowed into the US; they would not become a social nuisance
- Fairness and Traditional Values—Other countries are taking in refugees; America should honor its historical traditions and values— “dating back to the Pilgrim Fathers”—as a country that opened its doors to “refugees for political and religious freedom”

CON

- Nativism—There are millions of unemployed and hundreds of thousands of hungry children in the United States; we should take care of our own first before helping foreign children
- Nativism—“We have too many aliens in this country today.”
- Economic—“The people who are sponsoring this bill should should furnish the money to take care of these refugees—not the United States taxpayers.” (in fact, the bill did not place any burden on taxpayers; the child refugees would only be admitted to the United States if individual sponsors provided affidavits of support demonstrating that the child would not become a public charge)