

Name: _____ Class: _____

Jewish Refugees on the St. Louis

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2017

As the Nazi Party came into power and anti-Semitism rose under Adolf Hitler, many Jews sought refuge in other countries. In this informational text, Jessica McBirney discusses one specific ship, the St. Louis, and the experiences of the Jewish refugees on it who were denied entrance to multiple countries. As you read, identify why some nations chose to accept foreign refugees and why others decided to reject them.

[1] Today we often hear news about the refugee crisis happening in the Middle East. Because of wars and political unrest in the region, thousands of people have had to flee for their lives by seeking refuge in countries around the world, including the United States. Whether to accept large numbers of refugees is a controversial¹ question.

Refugees Flee for Safety

The world dealt with very similar concerns in the late 1930s, when the Nazi regime in Germany began systematically² persecuting Jews and other minority groups. The Nazis, also called the Third Reich, were led by Adolf Hitler and believed the German race was superior to all others, and that other races and religions must be killed off. To escape direct threats against their lives, thousands of Jews began fleeing the country as refugees to find new homes.



"St Louis Havana" by Ske is in the public domain.

The *MS St. Louis* was one ship that transported Jewish refugees to safer countries. Piloted by Captain Gustav Schroder, the *St. Louis* set sail from Hamburg, Germany on May 13, 1939, carrying 937 passengers. Almost all the travelers were Jews escaping from the persecution they faced under Hitler's Third Reich. The ship was bound for Cuba, and then eventually for the United States.

The journey itself was very pleasant for the passengers, with fancy meals, activities for young people and some childcare, and religious services on Friday evenings. They enjoyed the trip very much, especially after facing so much stress and hardship in Germany.

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1. **Controversial (adjective):** giving rise or likely to give rise to public disagreement
2. **Systemic (adjective):** done or acting according to a fixed plan or system

An Unpleasant Welcome

- [5] What the passengers did not know about was unstableness of the political climate in Cuba. Shortly before the ship's departure, Cuba amended its immigration policies and retroactively³ invalidated the refugees' permission to come to the country. Right-wing Cuban newspapers cautioned the government against letting in the Jews, whom they believed would take away jobs from native Cubans who had been hit by the recent economic depression. Many also hated the Jews as an ethnic group — anti-Semitism was not exclusive to Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

On May 27, the *St. Louis* weighed anchor in Havana, Cuba, where passengers were denied permission to leave the ship and officially enter Cuba. Soon 29 people were allowed to walk free, but the remaining 908 were confined to the ship, since their visas had not been finalized and the Cuban government refused to do so.

American Hesitation

No one could convince Cuba to accept the refugees, so the *St. Louis* changed course and headed for the nearby United States. Even though U.S. newspapers had diligently⁴ reported the story of these passengers to the public, very few people saw any benefit in accepting the refugees. Secretary of State Cordell Hull advised President Roosevelt not to let them land.

When some of the passengers contacted President Roosevelt directly and begged him to let them enter the country, he never responded to their plea. A telegram from the U.S. State Department told them they must “await their turns on the waiting list... for immigration visas.”

The U.S. government and citizens had varying reasons for not making any special arrangements for the ship full of immigrants cruising up the coast. Immigration policy at the time set numerical quotas for how many people could come to the U.S. from various parts of the world. By mid-1939, the quota for Germany had already been met, and the waitlist extended for several years.

- [10] Additionally, U.S. citizens shared Cubans' concerns about new immigrants. The Great Depression left many Americans jobless, and many worried immigrants would compete for the few jobs that still existed. Anti-Semitism also ran deep in the United States. Americans sympathized with the plight⁵ of refugees on the *St. Louis* and other refugee ships, but 83% of citizens favored the strict immigration rules already in place. President Roosevelt and his administration saw no motivation to change these rules, so they refused to admit the Jews from the *St. Louis*.

Eventual Relocation

Captain Schroder pressed on to find new homes for all of his passengers. Canada also declined to accept anyone from the ship. So Schroder sailed back to Europe, docking in Belgium, and worked deals with several countries on the continent. The United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands all welcomed hundreds of the refugees.

3. with effect from a date in the past

4. **Diligently (adverb):** attentive and persistent in doing something

5. **Plight (noun):** a dangerous, difficult, or otherwise unfortunate situation

Unfortunately, during the course of World War II, Nazi Germany invaded Belgium, France, and the Netherlands, so many of the previously safe refugees found themselves in danger all over again. Using survival statistics for Jews from these European countries during the war, scholars estimate that, ultimately, 709 of the passengers survived the war, and 227 did not.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. Cuba and the United States did not accept Jewish refugees because they simply did not have the economic means to support them.
 - B. The prejudices and economic fears of several countries led to the deaths of many Jewish refugees, who tried to escape Nazi Germany.
 - C. Despite not gaining entry to the United States or Cuba, the Jewish refugees found security from other countries that were wealthier.
 - D. Due to the small number of refugees on the St. Louis, relatively few people were affected by Cuba's decision to deny them entry.

2. PART B: Which of the following TWO details from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "To escape direct threats against their lives, thousands of Jews began fleeing the country as refugees to find new homes." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "The journey itself was very pleasant for the passengers, with fancy meals, activities for young people and some childcare, and religious services on Friday evenings." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "Soon 29 people were allowed to walk free, but the remaining 908 were confined to the ship, since their visas had not been finalized and the Cuban government refused to do so." (Paragraph 6)
 - D. "U.S. citizens shared Cubans' concerns about new immigrants. The Great Depression left many Americans jobless, and many worried immigrants would compete for the few jobs that still existed. Anti-Semitism also ran deep in the U.S." (Paragraph 10)
 - E. "So Schroder sailed back to Europe, docking in Belgium, and worked deals with several countries on the continent. The United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands all welcomed hundreds of the refugees." (Paragraph 11)
 - F. "Using survival statistics for Jews from these European countries during the war, scholars estimate that, ultimately, 709 of the passengers survived the war, and 227 did not." (Paragraph 12)

3. PART A: Which of the following best describe the character of Captain Schroder of the St. Louis? [RI.3]
 - A. He was relentless in his search for a safe haven for Jewish refugees.
 - B. He was naive in his expectations for how countries would respond to the refugees.
 - C. He was understanding of other countries' hesitancy to take refugees.
 - D. He was only concerned with completing the journey so he could be paid.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. "The journey itself was very pleasant for the passengers, with fancy meals, activities for young people and some childcare" (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "On May 27, the St. Louis weighed anchor in Havana, Cuba, where passengers were denied permission to leave the ship and officially enter Cuba." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "Captain Schroder pressed on to find new homes for all of his passengers." (Paragraph 11)
 - D. "scholars estimate that, ultimately, 709 of the passengers survived the war, and 227 did not." (Paragraph 12)

5. How do paragraphs 1-2 contribute to the development of ideas in the text? [RI.5]

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In the context of the text, how has America changed over time? Is the United States handling the current refugee crisis differently than during WWII and the Holocaust? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
2. In the context of the text, what can we learn from tragedy? How can the events of the Holocaust inform citizens and their countries on how they should handle today's refugee crisis? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
3. In the context of the text, how does fear drive action? How did fear contribute to the decisions of countries to turn refugees away? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. In the context of the text, what are the effects of prejudice? What role did prejudice play in some countries' immigration policies? What role does prejudice play today in immigration policies? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.