

A Debate Over Rescue: North Carolina and the Holocaust

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During the 1930s and 1940s, many Americans debated whether or not the United States should take steps to assist European Jews who were being persecuted by the Nazis. Two of North Carolina's most prominent citizens spoke out forcefully—on opposite sides of the issue.

After Hitler rose to power in Germany in 1933, German Jews were stripped of their civil rights, excluded from public life, and periodically targeted by government-encouraged violence. Many German Jews hoped to immigrate to the United States, but ten years earlier, Congress had reversed America's traditional "open doors" policy and imposed strict quotas to limit immigration. No more than 25,957 German citizens could enter the United States each year—a tiny number compared to the hundreds of thousands who wanted to escape Hitler.

The "Tar Heel Fuhrer"

Among the most vociferous opponents of immigration was Robert R. Reynolds (1884-1963), an attorney from Asheville who represented North Carolina in the United States Senate from 1932 to 1945. A passionate nativist, Reynolds believed that foreigners would take away jobs from Americans and corrupt American culture. He published an extremist magazine, *The American Vindicator*, and associated with prominent bigots such as the Rev. Charles Coughlin, the notorious preacher known as the father of "hate radio." Reports that Reynolds had praised Hitler led critics to dub him "the Tar Heel Fuhrer."

When legislation was introduced in 1939 to permit the admission of 20,000 German refugee children, Reynolds led the opposition, claiming the children might grow up to be spies against America. He objected to a plan to let Jewish refugees settle in Alaska, calling it an attempt to bring in, "through the back door," hordes of foreigners who would "deprive the American citizens of their daily bread." Reynolds even introduced a bill

of his own to suspend all immigration to the U.S. for ten years.

In one Senate speech, Reynolds declared: "With every 25 or 50 refugees who come there are agents of Hitler and Stalin." There was no factual basis for that claim, but Reynolds used it to help whip up public sentiment against immigration.

In late 1942, the U.S. government publicly confirmed that the Nazis were engaged in the systematic mass murder of Europe's Jews, and had already slaughtered at least two million. This news did not alter Senator Reynolds's position. When the Roosevelt administration reluctantly agreed to permit the admission of one token group of 982 Jewish refugees in the summer of 1944, Reynolds strongly protested.



Robert R. Reynolds

Sen. Reynolds's relentless agitation against immigration helped harden the American public's heart and intimidated other Members of Congress who might have considered supporting legislation to shelter at least some refugees.

A Different Voice from North Carolina

Other Americans felt differently. They believed that America should remain true to its noble tradition of providing a haven for the oppressed. They recognized the value of the diverse cultural contributions that immigrants have made to American society. They

pointed out that immigrants would be consumers as well as job-holders and therefore would add to the economy. Some immigrants brought with them businesses and business skills from Europe, which in turn would generate increased employment of Americans.

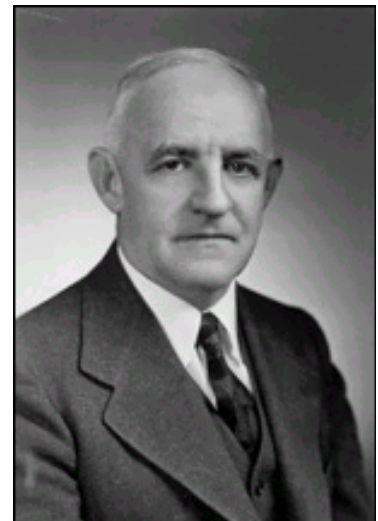
Dr. Frank Porter Graham (1886-1972), a professor of history who served as president of the University of North Carolina from 1930 until 1949, was, like Senator Reynolds, a man of strong convictions. Also like Senator Reynolds, Dr. Graham was a Democrat and a strong supporter of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies. But when it came to sympathy for the downtrodden, Graham and Reynolds were as different as night and day.

Dr. Graham was active in the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German Scholars. The committee arranged American college faculty positions for German refugee scholars, most of whom had been expelled from their jobs in Germany because they were Jews. Several of them were given positions on the faculty of the University of North Carolina.

Dr. Graham spoke out frequently against racism and anti-Semitism in the United States. He also ordered the UNC Medical School, in 1934, to abolish its quota on Jewish students. Neither the resignation of the school's dean nor the widespread criticism from physicians around the state could deter Dr. Graham from standing up for fairness.

He was the lead witness to testify on behalf of the 1939 legislation to admit 20,000 German refugee children to the United States. He publicly criticized the British government for restricting the admission of Jewish refugees to Palestine. When President Roosevelt, under strong pressure from Congress,

belatedly agreed in 1944 to establish a War Refugee Board to aid Hitler's Jewish victims, Dr. Graham was one of the first choices for the position of executive director of the board. (He turned down the offer because of his commitments as president of the University of North Carolina.)



Frank P. Graham

Dr. Graham also supported a Jewish political action committee known as the Bergson Group, which used unorthodox tactics, such as full-page newspaper advertisements, public rallies, and Capitol Hill lobbying, to press for U.S. rescue of Jews from Hitler. Dr. Graham's name appeared on some of their newspaper ads, and he served as co-chair of their 1944 Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe.

Like the rest of the country, North Carolina was divided over how America should respond to the Nazi genocide. Some were not interested in helping Hitler's Jewish victims. Others were sympathetic to the plight of the Jews, but accepted the argument that little or nothing could be done to aid them. But there were those, like Dr. Frank Graham, who saw that America could, and should, take urgent measures to rescue refugees from Hitler.

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