



The Holocaust featuring Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What was the role of the women's orchestra in Nazi Germany's Auschwitz camp during the Holocaust?

OVERVIEW

"The last thing that I imagined when going to Auschwitz was that I would ever have a conversation about playing the cello." - Anita Lasker-Wallfisch

In this lesson, students identify how the Nazi Party seized power in Germany during 1933 and 1934 by analyzing contemporaneous U.S. newspaper stories. They examine quotes from a memoir by Auschwitz prisoner and Holocaust survivor, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, as well as maps and a chart, to identify what the Holocaust was and how it happened. Students discover the role of live music performance at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp by exploring Lasker-Wallfisch's position as the cellist in the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz. Students then determine how Lasker-Wallfisch's experience as a member of the orchestra greatly assisted in her survival.



The gatehouse of Auschwitz II, also known as Auschwitz-Birkenau, in Oświęcim, Poland, 2007 / Credit: Logaritmo, Wikimedia Commons

Through 1933 and 1934, the National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) Party seized power in Germany. Upon Nazi leader Adolf Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, the Nazi regime moved quickly to transition the German government from a fledgling democratic republic to a totalitarian state. In less than two years, the government's legislative body was dismantled, opposition political parties were outlawed, and political adversaries as well as other marginalized groups were imprisoned in newly-built concentration camps. Furthermore, new laws began the state-sponsored persecution of the German Jewish population. By August of 1934, Hitler had ascended to the role of Supreme Leader (Führer), with the military now swearing an oath of allegiance to Germany's new dictator.

As the Nazi regime transformed German society over the next several years, new policies set in motion what would come to be known as the Holocaust. While anti-semitism had a long history in German society and throughout Europe, as early as April 1933 the German state began promoting the boycotting of Jewish businesses in Germany. In September 1935, the Nuremberg Race Laws stripped German Jewish citizens of their citizenship, no longer affording them protection under the law. The laws sought to codify what constituted "German blood", with mandates precluding certain relationships with those considered Jewish according to the Nazis.

The murder of a German official by a Jewish man at the Paris German Embassy in November 1938 sparked a brutal pogrom throughout all of Germany. The incident is now known as *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass) because of the shattered glass that littered the streets after the destruction of German Jewish businesses, homes, and synagogues. Furthermore, German Jews were arrested, imprisoned, and murdered throughout Germany during this pogrom. The following year, the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 ignited World War II as France and Great Britain responded to Nazi aggression by declaring war on Germany. The occupation of Poland, and the later invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 by Germany, led to increasingly larger Jewish populations coming under Nazi control. In response, the Nazi regime began the mass murder of Polish and Soviet Jews, and then the large-scale genocide of Jewish populations throughout Europe.

During these preceding years, Anita Lasker was a young German girl living in the small town of Breslau, Germany. She was raised in a musical family and began playing the cello at an early age. Although she later shared that her family “had been scarcely conscious of our Jewishness at home”, this did not protect them from the Nazi regime’s anti-semitic policies and actions. As the Holocaust escalated throughout the 1930s, the Lasker family endured severe hardships and later attempted to flee Germany but were unsuccessful. In April 1942, Anita’s parents were taken into custody by the Nazis and were murdered after being deported to a Jewish ghetto in eastern German-occupied Poland. Anita and her sister Renate went into hiding, attempted to flee Germany, and then were arrested by the Nazi Gestapo. Ultimately, they were sent separately to Auschwitz: a concentration, extermination, and forced-labor camp complex also in German-occupied Poland.

The Nazis opened their first concentration camp in Dachau, Germany in 1933 to incarcerate their political enemies and other German citizens not favorable to the regime. There would eventually be thousands of Nazi camps as World War II progressed, and many were located in German-occupied Poland, including Auschwitz. Auschwitz was the largest camp established by the Nazi regime, and it was organized into a complex of subcamps. “Auschwitz I” was the main area of the complex and the concentration camp. “Auschwitz II”, also known as Auschwitz-Birkenau, was an extermination camp or killing center. “Auschwitz III” was a forced-labor camp for prisoners working at facilities owned by industries allied to the Nazis.

Anita Lasker was deported to Auschwitz in “late 1943”. While being processed as a prisoner upon arrival, Lasker casually shared with a fellow prisoner that she played the cello. Much to her surprise, this was potentially life-saving information and she was soon introduced to Alma Rosé, another prisoner who led the Women’s Orchestra of Auschwitz. Lasker soon joined the orchestra as its cellist and while her living conditions improved marginally, she also faced intense disdain from fellow prisoners who felt the orchestra’s members were choosing to serve their Nazi occupiers by performing music at various camp functions as a means of subjugation.

The Women’s Orchestra of Auschwitz (WOA) was founded by the Nazi German Schutzstaffel or “Protection Squad” (commonly known as the “SS”) in April 1943. It was composed primarily of young Jewish and Slavic female prisoners. In German, it was called the Mädchenorchester von Auschwitz or “Girls’ Orchestra of Auschwitz”. Housed near the killing center at Auschwitz II, the WOA’s main function was to perform music daily as camp prisoners went to and from their

forced-labor locations. However, the WOA also played private concerts for the SS, as well as providing musical accompaniment for other functions at Auschwitz. While the WOA is the only known women's orchestra within the Nazi camp system, orchestras were somewhat common in camps throughout Nazi-occupied Europe as a tool of prisoner oppression and compliance.

As Nazi Germany began to lose World War II, camp prisoners were evacuated to other camps farther westward to escape advancing Soviet troops from the east, and to leave as little evidence of their mass genocide behind. For Anita Lasker, this meant being forced to leave Auschwitz for the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in late 1944. With dwindling resources, thousands of camp prisoners died in the waning days of the war. The Nazis eventually abandoned Bergen-Belsen and British forces liberated the camp on April 15, 1945. Lasker survived the Holocaust and soon emigrated to Great Britain. In the years to come, she became a British citizen, led a successful career as a musician, got married (now Anita Lasker-Wallfisch), raised a family, and would not return to Germany for nearly 50 years. In 2018, she was invited to address the German Bundestag (German legislature) at a commemoration marking the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. As a guest of the Bundestag, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch delivered a speech to the same legislative body, and within in the same building, that had aided Adolf Hitler's rise to Führer 85 years earlier.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- What the Holocaust was and how it happened
- Who Anita Lasker-Wallfisch is and her role as a musician in the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz
- How being a member of the orchestra greatly assisted in Lasker-Wallfisch and others surviving the Holocaust
- The role of music performed at the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp
- How the Nazi Party seized power in Germany in 1933 and 1934

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to explain the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany, identify what the Holocaust was and how it happened, and describe the role of music performed at the Auschwitz camp during the Holocaust by examining quotes from an Auschwitz prisoner and Holocaust survivor, analyzing images, viewing videos, defining terms, and listening to music.

ACTIVITIES

DISCLAIMER

This lesson contains primary source documents and other materials that may include terms and images reflecting the attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs of different times that today are considered offensive and demeaning. Teachrock.org does not endorse the views expressed in these documents, but recognizes the value such materials provide for historical inquiry. For guidance on introducing controversial historical materials into the classroom, we suggest reviewing this document from The Library of Congress: <https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2011/11/dealing-with-difficult-subjects-in-primary-sources>.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- An internet accessible device for each student

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Distribute **Handout - Holocaust Vocabulary** and **Handout - Holocaust Graphic Organizer** and review the directions on the handouts.
2. Explain to students that they are going to view a video interview with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, a German Jewish woman who survived World War II. Instruct students to write notes in Segment 1 of their graphic organizer about what stands out to them while viewing the video. (*Optional: Distribute **Handout - "German-British cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch recalls the horrors of Auschwitz" video** and review the questions with students. Explain to students that they will be answering the questions as they view the video.*) Then play the YouTube video, "German-British cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch recalls the horrors of Auschwitz" (https://youtu.be/w8d2m_lcacl?feature=shared). Afterwards, ask students:
 - According to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, how was she uniquely able to survive the "Auschwitz concentration and death camp"? (*She was able to survive because she "could play the cello" and "joined the girls' orchestra" of the camp.*)
 - What was the Holocaust of which Lasker-Wallfisch was a "survivor"?
3. Ask students to find the definition of "Holocaust" in **Handout - Holocaust Vocabulary**, and ask a student to volunteer to read the definition aloud. Then ask students:
 - What was the Holocaust? (*"The genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany"*)
 - When did the Holocaust take place? (*During World War II*)
4. Instruct students to write a definition of the Holocaust in their own words in Segment 2 of their graphic organizer.

PROCEDURE

Part 1: The Nazis Seize Power

1. Inform students that in this lesson they will be exploring the Holocaust primarily through the written experiences of Anita Lasker-Wallfisch. Display **Image 1, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch Quote #1**. Then, ask students:
 - Why might Lasker-Wallfisch have thought something was “amiss”?
 - What might have been happening in Germany in 1933?
2. Explain to students that the class will be collectively analyzing U.S. news stories from 1933 and 1934 that are reporting on events in Germany during this time in order to identify what may have led to the Holocaust.
3. Distribute **Handout - German Nazi Regime in U.S. Newspapers**. As a class, in groups, or individually, ask students to go through each article in the handout, and summarize each article in Segment 3 of their graphic organizer.
4. Display **Image 2, German Nazi Regime in U.S. Newspapers Timeline**. Ask students to compare the timeline with the notes they took in Segment 3 of their graphic organizer. Then instruct students to answer the question in Segment 4 of their graphic organizer (*How might the Nazi Party's seizing of power have led to the Holocaust?*) and be prepared to share it with the class.
5. Explain to students that they are going to watch a video detailing the events that happened in Germany in the years prior to 1933. Instruct students that as they view the video, to consider the question in Segment 5 of their graphic organizer and be prepared to discuss their answer when the video concludes. Play the PBS video, “Rick Steves’ Europe: Germany’s Fascist Story” [2:01-8:52].
6. Display **Image 3, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch Quote #2** and request students to read the quote silently. Then, ask students:
 - What is anti-semitism? (*Encourage students to review Handout - The Holocaust Vocabulary sheet if they need help defining the term.*)
 - How does Lasker-Wallfisch experience anti-semitism?
 - How might anti-semitism in Germany have led to the Holocaust?
7. Instruct students to document their response to the above question in Segment 6 of their graphic organizer.

Part 2: The Holocaust

1. Direct students to form groups of five for a jigsaw activity. Explain to students that they will “jigsaw” five “pieces” of history together to identify how the Holocaust happened by reading Anita Lasker-Wallfisch quotes that are paired with images and text detailing historical events.
2. Distribute **Handout - Phases of the Holocaust Jigsaw Activity**. Explain to student groups that each group member will choose one phase or “piece” to become the “expert” on, then review the directions on the handout.
3. After students have answered the questions for their “piece”, direct them to form “expert” groups with students who completed the same piece from other

student groups. Display **Image 5, Expert Group Discussion** and instruct expert groups to have a discussion using the bullet points as guidance.

4. After students are finished in their expert groups, direct them to rejoin their original groups. Instruct students to take turns presenting their “piece” to the group, allowing all students to write a summary of all the “pieces” in segments 7 - 11 of their graphic organizer.

Part 3: The Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz

1. Display **Image 6, Map of Auschwitz Camp Complex - Summer 1944**. Point out the “Auschwitz II (Birkenau)” camp on the map (the large yellow shape on the upper left side of the map) and explain to students that Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz was located at that camp within the complex. Request student volunteers to read the text aloud, and direct students to write notes in Segment 12 of their graphic organizer. Then, ask students:

- Considering the descriptive text for this map, what was the purpose of the various camps at Auschwitz? (*Auschwitz I was the concentration camp and the main area of the complex, Auschwitz II was the extermination camp or killing center, and Auschwitz III was the forced-labor camp.*)
- How does that information inform your understanding of the Holocaust?

2. Distribute **Slideshow - Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz** to students and inform them that they are going to explore Anita Lasker-Wallfisch's experience as both a prisoner at Auschwitz and a performing musician in the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz. Instruct students to write notes in segments 13 - 18 of their graphic organizer as they analyze the slides. (*Optional: Play this recording of “The Blue Danube” by Johann Strauss as students proceed through the slideshow: <https://www.loc.gov/item/jukebox-761956>.*) Explain to students that this was one of the music selections performed by the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz as part of their daily duties as prisoners.) After completing the activity, ask students:

- How does Lasker-Wallfisch's experience as a German Nazi camp prisoner who performed music in a camp orchestra organized by the Nazis inform your understanding of the Holocaust?

3. Display **Image 6, A Holocaust Survivor**. Instruct students to read the quote silently and then write notes in Segment 19 of their graphic organizer about what stands out to them. Then, ask students:

- How does Lasker-Wallfisch's experience as a Holocaust survivor inform your understanding of the Holocaust?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 7, Summary Activity**. Review the directions with students and guide students in their project selection. (*This activity can be assigned as homework.*)
2. Once completed, ask students to share their projects with the class.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Read Anita Lasker-Wallfisch's memoir, *Inherit the Truth: A Memoir of Survival and the Holocaust*: <https://www.publishersweekly.com/9780312208974>
2. Listen to an oral history interview with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn510858>
3. Read the nonfiction book, *The Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz: A Story of Survival* by Anne Sebba: <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250287595/thewomensorchestraofauschwitz/>
4. View musical instruments connected to the Holocaust at the Violins of Hope website: <https://www.violins-of-hope.com/new-page>
5. View more artwork by prisoners at Auschwitz at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum website: <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/gallery/art-of-camp-and-postcamp-period/>
6. Explore Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center website: <https://www.yadvashem.org/>

STANDARDS

COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE (C3) SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

History

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

D2.His.11.9-12. Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

D2.His.14.9-12. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

CALIFORNIA HISTORY—SOCIAL SCIENCE CONTENT STANDARDS

10.8 Students analyze the causes and consequences of World War II.

5. Analyze the Nazi policy of pursuing racial purity, especially against the European Jews; its transformation into the Final Solution; and the Holocaust that resulted in the murder of six million Jewish civilians.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

US2.44 Evaluate the reasons for the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe and the scapegoating and genocide of historically marginalized peoples (including Jewish, Romani, Slavic, disabled and LGBTQ+ peoples) by Hitler, Mussolini and Franco.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE FRAMEWORK STANDARDS

Topic 3: Defending Democracy: Responses to fascism and communism HSS.USII.T3.07

2. Explain the rise of fascism and the forms it took in Germany and Italy, including ideas and policies that led to the Holocaust.)

CONNECTICUT ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

MW-5. Global Conflicts and Decolonization

MW.His.1.f. Investigate the ways in which antisemitic beliefs and other discriminatory policies in Europe led to the persecution and murder of millions of Jews as well as Roma, disabled people, LGBTQ+ individuals, and political prisoners during the Holocaust (e.g., Nuremberg Race Laws, Final Solution, Aktion T4).

MW.His.9.a. Synthesize sources from the Holocaust to develop questions and explore the experiences of survivors, victims, resisters, collaborators, bystanders, and rescuers (e.g., survivor testimony, memoirs, government documents, museums exhibits, historical fiction, and film).

NEW JERSEY STUDENT LEARNING STANDARDS - SOCIAL STUDIES

Topic 3: Defending Democracy: Responses to fascism and communism HSS.USII.T3.07

6.1.12.HistoryUP.11.b: Compare the varying perspectives of victims, survivors, bystanders, rescuers, and perpetrators during the Holocaust.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority and Governance

Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society

Theme 9: Global Connections

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Information Text Standards for Grades 11-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze

the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.7 Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.5 Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.8 Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.



CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

LEARNING FOR JUSTICE SOCIAL JUSTICE STANDARDS

JU.9-12.15 I can identify figures, groups, events and a variety of strategies and philosophies relevant to the history of social justice around the world.



RESOURCES

HANDOUTS

- Handout - Holocaust Vocabulary
- Handout - The Holocaust Graphic Organizer
- Handout - “German-British cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch recalls the horrors of Auschwitz” video
- Handout – German Nazi Regime Newspapers
- Handout - Phases of the Holocaust Jigsaw Activity
- Slideshow - The Women’s Orchestra of Auschwitz