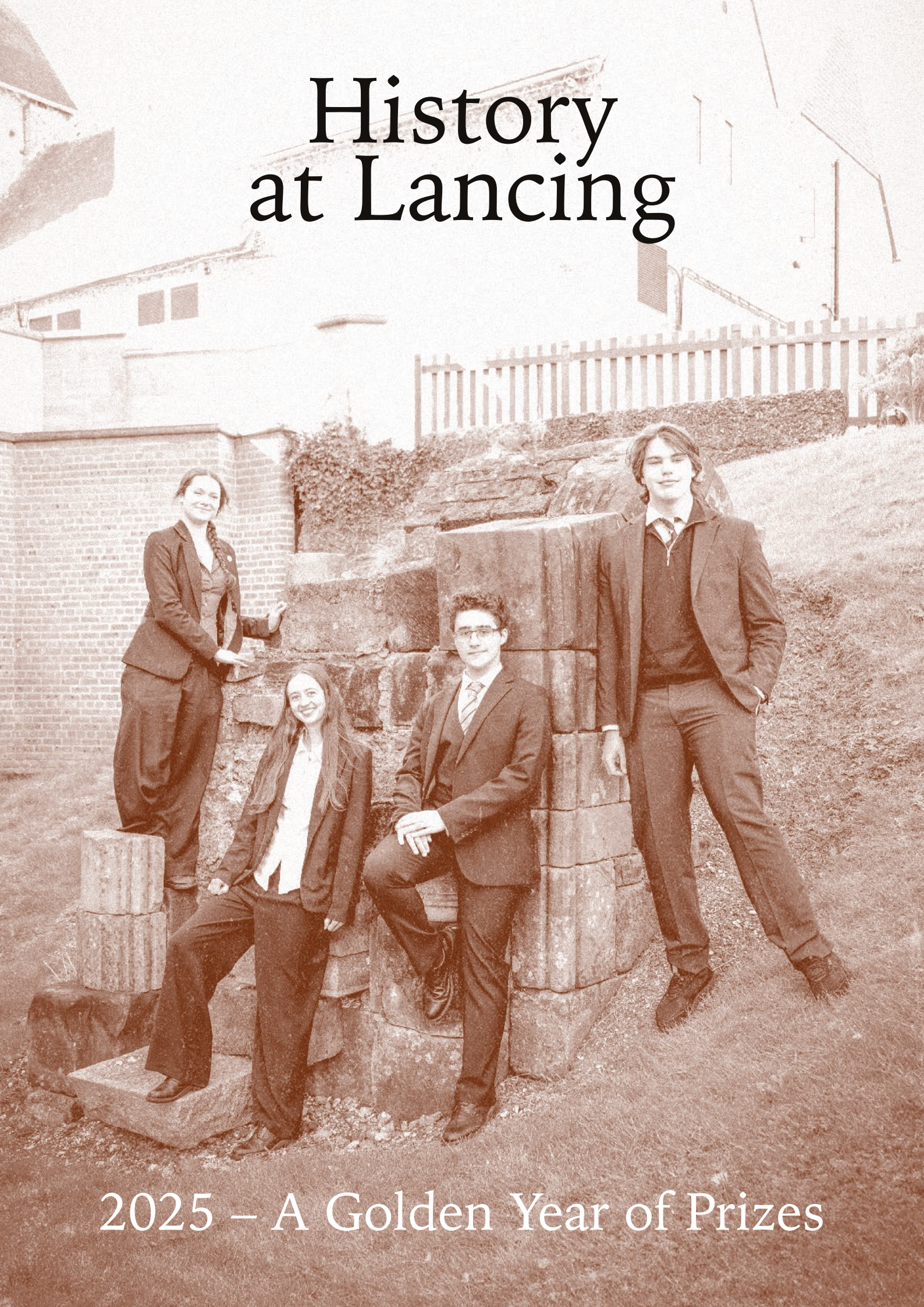


History at Lancing

A sepia-toned photograph of four students in formal attire posing on stone steps in front of a brick building. The students are arranged in two rows: two standing in the back and two sitting/standing in the front. The building in the background has a brick wall and a wooden fence. The overall tone is historical and formal.

2025 – A Golden Year of Prizes

**‘As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be:
world without end’.**

The Book of Common Prayer



‘History keeps me awake at night’.

Dr Christy Edwall

2025: A Golden Year of Lancing History Prize Success

2025 saw exceptional Lancing success in some of the most competitive national and international History prizes.

Impressively, Isaac Hussey won the year's Historical Association Young Historian GCSE Modern World Prize. This was an extraordinary achievement, and it was the third year in a row he had won one of these highly coveted and competitive awards. There cannot really have been a comparable level of outstanding national success at this level, and it was a much-deserved reward for the subtle intelligence, sophistication and high-level research of his essay: 'Was the role of music in the Nazi camps of the Holocaust a force for good or bad?' This included as evidence some of his own exquisite cello performances. It also began the EPQ research underpinning his masterly programming of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day Concert in Great School. This concert was an exceptional work of scholarship and musicianship in itself, drawing on performances by student musicians Isaac had brought together and rehearsed. Above all, it was an impressively sensitive commemoration of the music performed or composed in concentration camps, including rarely performed works by Ilse Weber, Viktor Ullmann and Gideon Klein. These drew on Isaac's own archival work in Italy and the Czech Republic, and a link to the Holocaust Memorial Day Concert on Vimeo can be found [HERE](#).

Harriet Brookfield also received the outstanding accolade of being commended for writing the Best History essay for the prestigious 2025 Libra Essay Prize. Her essay 'Was the persecution of witches anything more than an exercise in power?' argued with formidably well-researched sophistication for a multifaceted interpretation of the persecution of witches, encompassing both an institutional exercise in power and broader societal, cultural and religious influences. Her success continues an impressive run of achievement for the College in this globally competitive prize, inspired by the academic rigour of the All Souls, Oxford admissions process, with Lancing students deservedly amongst the finalists across the last three years.

Bella Barnard was also highly commended for her History essay for the 2025 John Locke Institute Global Essay Prize. This is again a hugely competitive prize, with 63,328 entrants from around the world. Bella wrote with deeply researched subtlety on the medieval philosopher Peter Abelard, arguing that he should be considered the figure in history most to have enlarged human freedom.

Zafer Beidoun was also shortlisted in History for the 2025 John Locke Institute Global Essay Prize, for his intelligently nuanced and wide-ranging response to the question: 'Should anyone be ashamed of their nation's history? Should anyone be proud of it?'

Dr Damian Kerney
Head of History and Sixth Form Enrichment

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‘Should anyone be ashamed of their nation's history? Should anyone be proud of it?’

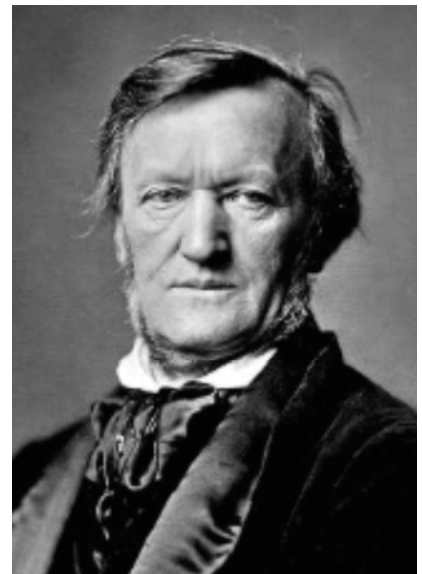
Was the role of music in the Nazi camps of the Holocaust a force for good or bad?

Isaac Hussey

*Winner of the Historical Association Young Historian
GCSE Modern World Prize 2025.*



The power that music wielded in the Third Reich was a major factor used to impose Nazi ideology and control across the regime. The promotion of music by Richard Wagner – undoubtedly Hitler’s favourite composer – was implemented into early Nazi policies to encourage German patriotism and antisemitic views. The Nazis had immense pride in their history of prominent ‘German composers’ such as Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Haydn, Schubert and Wagner, whose music, in the Nazis’ eyes, portrayed heroism, a loyalty to Germany, perfect artistic creation and was capable of inspiring people to fight for defence. On the other hand, the Nazis hated what they termed ‘degenerate’ or ‘racially decadent’ music which included jazz, blues, Jewish klezmer and experimental modernist music by the likes of Arnold Schönberg. They presented this repertoire as motivated by money, not deep in meaning, lacking in originality and foreign. For this reason, ‘German’ music was played everywhere from mass rallies to smaller youth parades and marches where it was exploited for its unique power, above any other form of art that the Nazis sought to censor, to sway the masses. Well aware of the power of music, Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, said ‘music affects the heart and emotions more than the intellect. Where then could the heart of a nation beat stronger than in the huge masses, in which the heart of a nation has found its true home?’¹



*Composer Richard Wagner
in 1871.*

Before the Nazi rule, the Jews and other ethnic minorities coexisted with the ‘Germans’ and, in fact, had a large cultural influence. However, once Führer Adolf Hitler came to power, the Jews were forbidden from owning businesses and property, their travel was restricted and they had to wear a ‘Star of David’ to distinguish them from non-Jews, which consequently alienated them from society and made them a more susceptible target of abuse. They were stripped of their citizenship after Hitler had scapegoated them for all of Germany’s economic problems and condemned them as racially inferior and dirty. Jews, alongside other minority groups of people deemed racially inferior, lost their right to vote and were not allowed to breed with Germans as decreed in the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour. More evidence for the persecution of the Jewish minority can be seen through the events of Kristallnacht where Jewish properties in Berlin were defaced on 9 November, 1938. Harsh financial and social restrictions for the Jews followed in its wake even though it was paradoxical to blame the event on the victims. As a result, many Jews were rounded up

¹ ‘Politics and Propaganda: Music in the Third Reich’ *Music and the Holocaust*. ORT (2000–2025), available at <https://holocaustmusic.ort.org/politics-and-propaganda/third-reich>

and deported to concentration camps or ghettos from across occupied Europe. Here, their power and liberties were stripped from them and their identity, along with their traditions, were ridiculed. Other groups who were equally persecuted and interned in these camps were political opponents (communists, social democrats and trade unionists), antisocials, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and Roma and Sinti people.

Through their legal policies, the Nazis also rapidly began eradicating the Jews from the musical life of Germany. Firstly, they eliminated them from conducting, teaching or administrative roles and, secondly, they even forbade their performing and compositional liberties, most significantly banning popular Jewish composers Mahler and Mendelssohn. Controlling what people could and couldn't listen to and restricting Jewish musicians sought to remove opposition and enforce policies.

Having spoken about the role of music in the broader Nazi regime and the context of Jewish persecution, I now wish to delve into the role it played specifically within the concentration camps. The Auschwitz camp complex (built 1941) was perhaps the most notorious concentration and extermination camp of all. Here, of the six million or more who perished in camps during the Holocaust, 1.1 million met their fates. The SS guards commissioned at least six orchestras in different sections of the Auschwitz camp including a men's, women's and Romani orchestra. Other Polish concentration camps – including Treblinka, Majdanek, Bełżec and Sobibór – had their own orchestras, too. Music was central to life at the camps and it featured as the backdrop to opening new sections of the camp, parties or marching off to manual labour, and even executions.



The view of a section of the barbed-wire fence and barracks at Auschwitz at the time of liberation (January 1945).

For people in the camps, music acted both to unite and divide. It gave prisoners hope and simultaneously was a psychological torture weapon. Furthermore, music functioned as a tool to manipulate and take away freedoms as part of the effort to outcast, restrict and dehumanise the prisoners. But it additionally became a reliable constant in a life of uncertainty and terror, and a coping mechanism. Sometimes music even provided the inmates of the camps with a sense of identity and a little boost of confidence. The Nazis believed themselves to be

a race of highly cultured supermen and used music to maintain power. This essay will take a look at the many roles music had in the camps as well as how it can be a double-edged sword of death and survival, control and freedom or terror and resistance.

I have chosen this as my subject, firstly due to the fact that I am a musician myself – playing, amongst other instruments, the cello and accordion – so I can relate to the feelings of hope and identity music created for the musicians in the camps. Researching this project has also opened my mind to the potential destructive role music can have, which was not immediately obvious to me. Additionally, on the annual date of Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January this year the world celebrated the 80th anniversary since the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. The BBC made a documentary about music in Auschwitz

to honour this event featuring survivor cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who I will talk about later in the essay, which inspired me to discover more. So there is an especial poignancy of these dark moments of history in 2025, providing the impetus to reflect upon the lives within the camps about which, beyond survivors' testimonies, very little is known.

Music's use for control, discipline and torture

As the deportees arrived at Auschwitz by train, their luggage, jewellery and personal belongings were confiscated immediately and sold. Everything was taken from the new arrivals: their hair was shaved, they were forced to strip off their clothes, any false teeth found in the camp at fake dental check-ups were removed, and they even had their name replaced with a tattooed number which was fundamental in destroying their identity right from the outset. Upon disembarking the train, the unlucky ones who were told to go left went straight to the gas chambers or, if they were directed right, they went to manual labour. All of this process was sinisterly accompanied by music in an attempt to control the prisoners by diverting their attention from uncertainty, shock and fear to a calmer and more cooperating disposition. Many Holocaust survivors are in agreement that this musical greeting seemed to dull the threatening atmosphere and add significant confusion.



Prisoners are forced to play music leading a fellow prisoner to his execution in Mauthausen concentration camp, Austria.

The camps were meticulously organised with strict roll calls, labour processions and gassings. Music during this daily routine brought order and a military atmosphere helping to instil discipline in the prisoners. It confirmed the SS's superiority and the prisoners' inferiority. Élise Petit, Holocaust writer, says 'if it was not torture in itself, this "punitive music" nevertheless aggravated the suffering inflicted: it numbed the conscience and instilled an emphatic rhythm

that enabled the automation of movements and the depersonalisation of the individuals belonging to the group', which shows that music was essential in keeping control and discipline².

The types of music allowed in camps were also controlled. Of course, there would be severe repercussions for anyone found to be playing Jewish or Polish music. Wagner's nationalistic pieces and German marches were blasted through loudspeakers in an attempt to re-educate political prisoners or drown out the sound of machine gun fire during the executions. The 'acoustic domination' further served to control and torture the prisoners as it prevented them from liaising with each other and contributed to sleep deprivation at night³.

Furthermore, forced singing – which originated in the military to maintain discipline – was used by the Nazis to enforce absolute control during marches to work or prison yard roll calls. The punishment of forcing people to sing after a long day of labour, dragging corpses

2 É. Petit, 'Music and Torture: The Concentration Camp Experience' *Encyclopédie d'Histoire Numérique de l'Europe* (22 June, 2020), available at <https://ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/wars-and-memories/violence-war/music-and-torture>

3 Ibid.

of murdered comrades into pits or simply enduring the generally appalling standard of living, was a difficult physical demand and it drained any remnants of energy. Wolfgang Szepansky, a survivor of Sachsenhausen concentration camp, talked about the disjunction between real-life emotions and the lyrics to songs. 'In spite of the cheerful text and jaunty melody, it sounded more like a dirge when from the raw throats of tired men the slow and tortuous line would issue forth: "Then let us sing and be cheerful"'⁴. Aleksander Kulisiewicz supports this observation using the term 'musical sadism' to describe how the repertoire which 'became poisoned by this tyranny' existed in stark contrast to the actual environment of the camp. As the procedure of forced singing was a method of torture, if the quality of singing wasn't up to satisfactory standards, often evening roll calls would be extended, further exacerbating the physical exhaustion with 'the purpose ... to simultaneously destroy muscles, lungs, chest, nervous system and vocal chords'. Juliane Brauer, in her article *How Can Music be Torturous?* refers to the space in which music and emotions come together (involving the inner and outer world) as a 'contact zone'. This complex meeting area explains how music forms impactful links with memory, meaning, emotions and identity⁵.

As one cannot eliminate the perception of sound in the same way one can close one's eyes to remove vision, the ears are a very vulnerable sensory instrument. The Nazis exploited this weakness and forced inmates to listen to music against their will. The persistent and involuntary exposure to the bombardment of torturous forced singing or music with horrific connotations made some inmates grow to despise music altogether and deteriorated their mental states. There are examples in history before and after the Nazis that demonstrate music being exploited as a method of torture, from the expression of power and control over slaves in the Atlantic slave trade to use in US detention centres. In the 21st century Guantánamo Bay used sound torture as a form of sensual disorientation alongside isolation, extreme conditions and light. The purpose of making these comparisons is, that whilst it may seem counterintuitive to connect music with negativity and torture (especially for me, as I derive so much joy and pleasure from music making), it can be used as an instrument of pain, exclusion and hatred. During the Holocaust, in Janoska camp in Ukraine, the piece *Todestango* (Tango of Death) with its upbeat sounding associations was commissioned by the SS and became used to accompany the most inhumane events. This not only shows the irony of joyful music being imposed in juxtaposition with horrific environments, but also how it can come to be associated with terror after being played in such contexts.



'Todestango' being performed at Janoska.

For some musicians, the demand of keeping their instruments in a working state, playing in negative temperatures and not being permitted to play a wrong note for fear they would be killed was sometimes too much to cope with. Although the SS guards couldn't remove cultural knowledge from the prisoners on entry unlike everything else, they still managed to ruin music for them by its association as an accompaniment to torture and acts of

4 J. Brauer, 'How Can Music be Torturous?: Music in Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camps' *Music & Politics* Vol. X, No. 1 (Winter, 2016), available at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0010.103>

5 Ibid.

dehumanising violence. Some might say the use of music in this manner was worse than the physical torture methods as it could mentally break a person and cause them to lose all hope, which is difficult to recover from.

A tool of humiliation, degradation and dehumanisation

SS officers would often force people to sing songs that were offensive or against their beliefs while they openly mocked them. *Horst-Wessel-Lied*, for example, weakened prisoners emotionally due to the fact they were ideologically opposed to the views of extreme Nazi patriotism in the song. *Judenlied*, which had incredibly antisemitic lyrics, was another anthem that Jews in Buchenwald were forced to sing designed to degrade them. Jews also could be made to sing psalms during beatings which stripped them of cultural identity and humiliated them. Furthermore, forced singing in environments of pain ridiculed the original cultural meaning of singing together for Jews. The anthem of the camp Treblinka demeaned the prisoners forced to sing it as it addressed themes of unquestioning obedience and discipline. If an individual didn't know the song or their singing was deemed unenthusiastic or bad (how couldn't it be in such a horrendous location?), they were subject to even more embarrassing punishments. Humiliation via these means worsened in time because, as war progressed, the demography of the camp changed with more non-German speakers amongst the prisoners who were still expected to memorise German lyrics and repertoire. Physical punishments such as naked whipping whilst counting strokes in German were also incredibly debasing. For this reason 'ein lied' ('a song') was the worst command a prisoner at roll call could hear.

Weaponising through propaganda

Another one of the more nefarious roles music played in the camps was its employment for propaganda. A regular usage weaponising music in this way was when musicians would play for new arrivals to make life in the concentration camps not seem as bad as they had imagined. This was deceitful as it provided them with a false sense of security. The SS guards also tried to manipulate the political prisoners by blasting propaganda speeches, military marches or radio broadcasts through loudspeakers which inflicted a source of suffering and imposed Nazi racial superiority and policies. Szymon Laks, a composer and conductor who survived Auschwitz, believed 'music was simply one of the parts of camp life and that it stupefied the newcomer in the same way as did everything else he encountered in his first days in the camp to which he gradually became habituated in time'⁶. This shows music as a powerful, manipulative tool for new arrivals.

Music was actually permitted in the ghettos, exploited for the purpose of deceit and propaganda. The Jewish ghetto Theresienstadt, located just 30 miles northwest of Prague, was one of the busiest hives of Holocaust music making. It had many orchestras, choirs, chamber groups, jazz ensembles, performances of new compositions (by notable composers including Viktor Ullmann, Gideon Klein, Ilse Weber and Hans Krása) and even performances of complete operas. The conditions in this transit camp were very poor. After a tour of the ghetto was demanded by the King of Denmark in late 1943, the Nazis saw that they could make standards of living look more respectable to the Danish diplomats and Red Cross representatives by showcasing the musical activities in Theresienstadt. As part of the clean-up effort, inmates were forced to spend months making the ghetto look like a picturesque European village with music being a central part of the presentation of the

⁶ S. Laks, *Music of Another World* (Northwestern University, 1989), p. 117.



From the 'The Führer Gives a City to the Jews', a Nazi propaganda film made in Theresienstadt, in which prisoners were forced to pretend to be contented musicians and audience members.

All of these preparations made it seem like the Nazis were treating Jews well to avoid intervention, criticism and denouncement and centred around displaying music as a cultural highlight. However, the figures of 800,000 deported to their deaths in other camps and 33,000 who died due to diseases and unsanitary conditions do not support the reality of Theresienstadt which was concealed from the world⁷. After the successful tour, the Nazis decided to create a propaganda film known as *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews* featuring *Brundibár* to further influence public misconception and false sentiment. The director and majority of the cast were murdered at Auschwitz not long after. Pictures in newspapers of prisoners creating music together made it seem to the outside Western world that concentration camps were a place of political re-education instead of atrocious standards of living and centres of mass extermination. Leo Baeck, a German rabbi imprisoned in Theresienstadt, eloquently describes the damaging effect of Nazi camp propaganda on the inmates: 'they (the Red Cross visitors) appear to be completely taken in by the false front put up for their benefit ... the effect on our morale was devastating. We felt forgotten and forsaken'⁸.

As entertainment

Amongst its other functions, music was a form of entertainment for the prisoners, but even

camp in a good light. A music pavilion was even built in what was the main courtyard where executions and the most public acts of violence had occurred. At the same time, thousands of people in the ghetto were shipped off to Auschwitz (or told to stay in their bunks) to give the impression that overcrowding wasn't an issue. To further manipulate the visitors during the eight-hour tour, Karl Rahm, the brutal ghetto commander, issued chocolates to the children of the camp which many had never tasted before. Additionally, people were forced to attend a performance of the children's opera *Brundibár* by Hans Krása.



Walter Heimann's original poster for 'Brundibár'.

⁷ 'History of Terezin' *Terezin: Children of the Holocaust* (2025), available at <https://www.terezin.org/the-history-of-terezin>

⁸ D. Starr, 'Amid the Horrors of the Holocaust, Jewish Musicians Composed Songs of Survival' *Smithsonian Magazine* (September-October, 2023), available at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/horrors-holocaust-jewish-musicians-composed-songs-survival-terezin-180982704/>

more so for the guards, offering them some light relief from their atrocious murderous routines. The high-ranking SS members were well-educated in classical music so thought of themselves as cultured, sophisticated and civilised people. Therefore, they ordered music to be played during wild parties or to calm themselves around acts of horror. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch is the last remaining member of the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz and she recalls having to play Schumann's *Träumerei* to infamous experimental doctor, Josef Mengele⁹. She says that she didn't wish to think of what horrors he had just been performing. This incongruity in the character of Nazis is hard to grasp as, in one moment, they would participate in their horrendous acts of torture and, in another, be so sensitive and human when they listened to music. Josef Kramer, nicknamed the 'Beast of Belson', was a horrible and violent individual but used music as 'a moment's respite for us all', which even moved him through normal human emotions to tears¹⁰.

Musicians were required to play for high-ranking SS visitors, officer birthdays and Sunday celebrations of a week's killings which made the Nazis seem somehow morally superior and the daily violence was normalised by alcohol and music surrounding it. So, while music entertained the SS and made them feel better about themselves, it had the opposite effect of destroying the prisoners' sense of self and identity. Although prisoners were allowed to attend the Sunday concerts if they wished to stand throughout, there was a mixed response to the music. It provided some with confidence and they liked the change, whereas it bitterly reminded others of better times before the war. It is evident that the Nazis had different views on the purpose of music to inmates. Leopold Kozłowski, survivor of the Przemyslan y ghetto says 'for them shootings sounded nice – with music in the background. They did not treat music as we did – with a capital M – for them it was a game, a hideous game'¹¹.

Resistance

There was much opposition to the Nazi regime all across society from youth groups like the Edelweiss Pirates to church leaders and resistance movements in occupied countries. Resistance was less evident within the camps, but music did provide an opportunity for the musicians to show that they were sentient beings with cultural heritage, identities and traditions. Camps were places, unlike the ghettos, where culture could be shared. Around the practice of performing pieces in camps, there were many incidents of inmates cleverly smuggling in instruments or creating them from stolen wood, for example.

Szymon Laks composed his third string quartet in Auschwitz weaving in popular Polish melodies which were forbidden. This shows a spiritual act of resistance although the quartet had to be practised and performed in secret. Playing Polish music in the camp was extremely risky as discovery could lead straight to the gas chambers. An SS guard entered the room where Laks was rehearsing this and, to avoid certain death, Laks responded to an inquiry into the music's authorship by saying it was composed by a lesser-known Austrian composer; the guard believed him. Sometimes, forbidden American marching music, including that by Sousa, was also woven into works composed in the camps unbeknown to the Nazis, who thought it to be inspired by German music. *St Mary's*

9 Anita's son, Raphael Wallfisch, plays Schumann's *Träumerei* as part of BBC documentary *The Last Musician of Auschwitz* (director Toby Trackman) which includes new performances of works by camp prisoners and last interviews with remaining musician survivors, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvJkLG5RxJQ>

10 J.L. Lefleur, 'Music in the Holocaust: The Roles of Music in Nazi Concentration Camps' *CUNY Academic Works* (2022), p. 52, available at https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/962

11 Ibid., p. 35.

Call was a Polish trumpet call which the guards also couldn't distinguish from German music, and so prisoners got away with playing it. These clandestine musical activities are evidence of prisoners hanging on to their identities by expressing their culture. It was part of psychological war against the Nazis. They would never surrender. In the very recently published book about the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz, Anne Sebba concludes 'playing Mendelssohn, Chopin or Beethoven, forbidden music on the grounds that the composer was Jewish, Polish or too great for 'inferior' Jewish musicians, in secret, provided occasional moments in the darkest history of the twentieth century when a handful of women showed their defiance of the Nazi system in which they were trapped and made a determined effort to claw back something of what it meant to be human and to feel a surging desire to live'¹².

Many camp anthems were also composed with lyrics that had a resistance spirit or showed mutual opposition to the Nazi regime. The *Sachsenhausen Lied* by Karl Wloch, a German communist political prisoner, has a melody derived from *Die Bauern Wollten Freie Sein* (The Peasants Want To Be Free) and its lyrics were about longing for freedom. Originally, the Nazis blacklisted the song until they realised it could be used against the prisoners as humiliation by forcing them to sing about freedom in times of despair. *Dachau Lied* was another piece which was performed in secret. It was a response to the camps' motto 'Arbeit macht frei' ('Work will make you free') which were words that were usually displayed above camp entrances. The song helped to build resistive pride and triumph over the humiliation that was faced.



Gate to Auschwitz I with the camps' motto displayed above.



One of the original performances of Hans Krása's 'Brundibár' in Theresienstadt showing the children in costume.

The children's opera *Brundibár* is about a brother and sister raising money for their sick mother. They are chased by an evil moustachioed man resembling an oppressive Hitler. At the end, all the animals and children chase away the evil man. Michael Gruenbaum, a singer in the children's chorus and survivor, said 'I still don't understand why the Nazis even let us put on this opera in the first place ... about fighting against an evil man with a moustache'¹³. Its message of standing up to Hitler and defeating him boosted morale with its several performances.

12 A. Sebba, *The Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz – A Story of Survival* (London, 2025), p. 340.

13 D. Starr, 'Amid the Horrors of the Holocaust, Jewish Musicians Composed Songs of Survival', fn. 8.

Survival

The cultural importance of music in the camps provided the last remnants of hope, reminding prisoners of a time before their detainment and restricted liberties. Much of the famous repertoire that the orchestras were forced to play invoked memories of the enjoyment, socialising, expression and ambition experienced in previous performances. This enabled them to root out the faint possibility of life returning to normality and seeing their loved ones at some point in the uncertain future. Through its ability to allow the prisoners to personally express their cultural identities, music became this constant, this rock, a source of stability and comfort in tricky times and a coping mechanism in order for the musicians to make some sense of the atrocities and overwhelming daily experiences. It allowed some dignity and strength which every other aspect of the Holocaust denied them. A jazz group called The Ghetto Swingers was allowed in Theresienstadt. Although jazz was considered racially decadent negro music, the Nazis didn't mind if Jews wished to play it out of the way of society in the ghetto. Indeed, this shows that musicians had more liberty to express themselves within the camps than in occupied Europe at the time. The joint creation of music provided a sense of teamwork, unity and solidarity amid suffering. Their music gave the players the hope and mental will to survive.



The Ghetto Swingers playing in the 1944 propaganda film made at Theresienstadt.

Specialised talents, such as those possessed by medics, barbers, dentists and engineers, were regarded as useful by the Nazis. They also held the trained skillset of a musician in high esteem, so being able to play an instrument, compose or conduct would often spare a prisoner their life as well as potentially offering certain privileges compared to the standard slave labourers. This resulted in well-known musicians (such as Kurt Meyr and Otto Sattler from Theresienstadt) being actively sought by the SS on their arrival at Auschwitz to play in the orchestra and so avoid horrific treatment and murder. Jakub Segar, a Roma violinist, was given reprieve from immediate death due to his performance on the violin. He did not wish to part from his violin when property was confiscated, so he played it for the guards and was given a chance to live.

For some musicians and other inmates, music served the same role as it did for the SS guards: to entertain. In contrast to music's use as sound torture in the camps, some found it better than sounds of silence, screaming or gunshots. This is because it distracted prisoners from suffering and encouraged them to forget about their surroundings for a moment. The Sunday concerts which were open for non-musician inmates to watch were dream-like, surreal and transporting, so in fact they didn't mind standing up throughout. It was in these scenarios that musicians felt that their music could be a gift to others. When it was not playing, the orchestra's absence was certainly felt by others in the camp.

Original works were composed in the camps which gave a sense of hope in utter hopelessness and depression. Viktor Ullmann, a central composer of Theresienstadt, said

‘we in no way sat around lamenting ... our desire for culture was equal to our will to live’¹⁴. It was more difficult to censor composition than performances. Although the resources were severely limited, the musicians made the most of what they had with hope in their minds. The Theresienstadt composer Gideon Klein played on a dilapidated piano propped up by wooden blocks and still managed to write beautiful music.

The musicians received privileges that the other prisoners did not have such as warm showers, appropriate clothing, access to toilets whenever they wanted, a little better food and less overcrowding. They even had an oven in their barracks in order to keep their instruments in working condition. Additionally, those in the orchestra who were ill were given appropriate medical treatment to maintain their health. However, if anyone else in the camp succumbed to diseases such as typhus, they would be sent to the gas chambers immediately as the Nazis deemed it a waste to treat people that were not useful labourers. All these privileges enabled a better standard of living and aided survival. Anne Sebba says that more essential than these was the promise of continued life: ‘Perhaps the most important privilege which being in the orchestra gave its members was hope, hope that as long as the Nazis needed them or enjoyed their concerts they would survive’¹⁵.

Alma Rosé was the daughter of Arnold Rosé (concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic and Vienna Opera for over 50 years), notably the niece of the prolific composer Gustav Mahler, and a talented musician herself. When she was sent to the infamous experimental Block 10 at Auschwitz a prisoner nurse recognised her and told the SS of her talents. After this, she was spared her death and became the conductor of the Women’s Orchestra. Now she possessed the burdensome responsibility of selecting prisoners’ fates. She faced an upsetting moral dilemma when rejecting musicians after an audition as it would lead to their execution. There are several stories of Rosé involving pretty poor musicians in the music making, whether that be playing in the lower ranks or as copyists or administrators, in order to save them from their deaths. Unsurprisingly, there was lots of competition for seats in the orchestra that Alma had to juggle as she could not save everyone. In September 1943, 150 people claimed to play the accordion when a single place came up in the Women’s Orchestra as they saw it as a ticket to survival. The accordionist who was finally recruited, Flora Jacobs, was primarily a pianist and she described being able to somewhat play the accordion as a ‘doorway to life’¹⁶. Another tricky balancing act for Alma to consider in her recruitment process was that she did not want the Nazis in command to see the orchestra as too Jew-heavy, so she was unfortunately obliged to turn down many competent Jewish musicians. Alma worked the orchestra very hard, not just out of fear for the high SS expectations but also as she knew the consequence of a bad performance would mean they would all die. She said frequently ‘(the orchestra) survives together or dies together. There was no halfway road’¹⁷. On the other hand, her ruthless discipline and occasional methods of physical punishment to enforce good playing made her unpopular in the eyes of some of her players as they compared her to the torturous SS guards both in the extravagant standards of living she was allowed and her harsh disciplinary measures. She certainly occupied a precarious position between the prisoners and the guards. However, even these players acknowledge that Alma was essential to their survival at Auschwitz.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ A. Sebba, *The Women’s Orchestra of Auschwitz – A Story of Survival*, fn. 12, p. 328.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 156.

As Anita Lasker-Wallfisch was handing her shoes over to a prisoner and being questioned, she happened to mention that she played the cello and the reply was ‘that is fantastic ... you will be saved’. It was recommended that she auditioned for the Woman’s Orchestra and Anita reflects on meeting Alma Rosé that ‘I had no idea who she could be. Was she a guard or a prisoner? She was so well dressed that I was absolutely baffled. She introduced herself as Alma Rosé and said she was simply delighted that I was a cellist and asked me where I came from and who I had studied with and so on. The whole thing was like a dream’¹⁸. Anita has explained how Alma was delighted to have a bass line instrument in the orchestra as many of the ensembles consisted of the players that were available, that resulted in some non-traditional fusions typically with fewer string players than the normal orchestra and many accordions, mandolins and recorders. Being the ‘cellist’ gave Anita a form of personal identity and value aside from her number ‘69388’ which had a humanising effect. She comments ‘I had not melted away into the grey mass of nameless indistinguishable people’¹⁹.



Anita holding a photo of herself playing the cello from 1938.

However, there was a flip side to the hope and survival that music offered. Its connection with emotional and physical torture injured German-Jewish cultural identity causing depression instead of hope. Although the musicians had marginally better standards of living, they still lived in inhumane and squalid conditions. Also, the hurt from witnessing murders, marches and torturous behaviour was so destructive to some that they were forced to resort to suicide. The conductor of the male orchestra at Auschwitz said: ‘Apart from a few privileged persons, everyone went out to work just as before and returned in a state of extreme physical and mental exhaustion. Some managed to endure this, while others broke down completely. Some drew themselves on the wires. The size of the orchestra changed almost from day to day and in time shrank catastrophically’²⁰.

Guilt

With all the privileges and real hope for survival, the musicians were very self-conscious that they didn’t have to suffer as much as their non-musician counterparts and could maintain this shred of human dignity with all that was going on around them. From even the smallest things like being allowed to grow hair, have special clothing or returning to the camp early from manual labour in order to rehearse, other prisoners could see the obvious advantages that the musicians had which fostered much jealousy and resentment. However, they didn’t understand that often players didn’t have the choice whether or not to join the orchestras as it was another means for Nazi control. Laks had to take an orchestra to the infirmary once to play German Christmas carols and the inmates rejected the music. They associated it with torture and the impending death of selections for gas chambers. Laks wrote ‘from all

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 140.

²⁰ J. Brauer, ‘How Can Music Be Torturous?: Music in Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camps’, fn. 4.

sides spasmodic cries, ever more numerous, ever shriller ... Enough of this! Stop! Begone! Clear out! Let us croak in peace'²¹. This demonstrates the evident hatred of the musicians by other camp members. Being hated by your allies is almost as bad as being hated by your enemies, as it further alienated the musicians.

The music helped a smooth-running process in the camp by maintaining discipline and order. It was both the best and worst thing, as it was a form of hope at the same time as creating military efficiency. Therefore, the musicians felt they were participating in, or even facilitating, acts of murder. They each had to contend with the moral pains and spiritual conflicts as to whether they should be playing at all. This was accompanied by a lot of shame. Élise Petit says 'by exacerbating physical and mental suffering, the use of music in the concentration camp system took part, above all else, in the process of torture, and had psychological after-effects on the inmates, including musicians. Feeling guilty for having indirectly contributed to the degradation and destruction of human beings, or quite simply to have survived by, for instance, being shielded from transports to death camps or from arbitrary executions, some of them developed post-traumatic stress disorder, and abandoned the practice of their instrument after the war'²². Music was spoiled for many keen and talented pre-war musicians because of its association with the traumas of camps.

There was a great psychological strain of having to accompany and witness the same acts of violence or prisoner breakdowns time after time. Esther Bejarano remembers the guilt she felt as a musician accompanying the return marches in the evenings: 'you saw these people, many of whom had to be propped up, held because they could hardly walk on their own. That was terrible for us. We stood there with tears in our eyes. We cried and told ourselves again and again: my God, if we were not doing this, we would be going to the gas. Yes, it was an order directly from the SS – we had to play'²³. Additionally, a double bass player from Greece in the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz would break down when seeing new arrivals and an SS guard would tell her that crying was forbidden and if she continued she would also be sent to her death. This shows that torture, despair, emotions and remorse were feelings that the musicians experienced.

Anne Sebba explains how the musicians coped with accusations of privileges: 'As Anita recognised, "all we could hope for was to live until tomorrow". Holding such a precarious hope helps explain how they lived with accusations that they were privileged, which they knew they were. They shared the same fear as other inmates and pretty much the same hunger. Unquestionably they worked hard, crucially not outside, and with a bed, blanket and access to a toilet at night'²⁴.

Memory and legacy

Walking around the Holocaust galleries at the Imperial War Museum, I was struck by how they were laid out. Instead of being solely about the Nazis' crimes against humanity, they introduced the backstories of the victims presenting their jobs, hobbies and families. The six million who died in the camps were more than just numbers – each was an individual with a unique personality and talent. The musicians especially, many of whom also perished, had worked hard on their instrumental technique before the war enabling music to become part of their personality and identity.

21 S. Laks, *Music of Another World*, fn. 6, p. 99.

22 É. Petit, 'Music and Torture: The Concentration Camp Experience', fn. 2.

23 J.L. Lefleur, 'Music in the Holocaust: The Roles of Music in Nazi Concentration Camps', fn. 10, p. 63.

24 A. Sebba, *The Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz – A Story of Survival*, fn. 12, p. 328.

An important factor in honouring those who perished through the atrocities of the Holocaust and avoiding a repeat of this tragic episode in history is our memory. Anne Sebba titles her epilogue 'if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices'. One of the factors encouraging the will to survive for the prisoners was that they could bear witness and inform the world about the Holocaust. As there are not many historical sources documenting the horrors, due to the majority of evidence having been destroyed by the SS guards, survivors' testimonies and fragments of musical scores act as the only legacy and source of information. Survivor accounts do differ factually and not all can be accepted as truth. However, regardless of their accuracy, each source was written by a person who viewed the event they were recalling as significant in their life and who wanted to immortalise their feelings, and therefore cannot be totally dismissed.



Leo Geyer conducting his orchestra in the documentary 'The Lost Music of Auschwitz'.

Leo Geyer, a musician and doctoral candidate at Oxford University, has recently completed extensive research into music at Auschwitz-Birkenau. He discovered 210 fragments of compositions and, with the help of historians, musicologists and Holocaust survivor testimonies, he pieced these manuscripts – some of which were faint or damaged – into a documentary commemorating 80 years since the liberation of the camps called *The Lost Music of Auschwitz*.

There is a mixture of moving interviews and performances of the newly-discovered repertoire, played by Constella Music for the first time since the Holocaust ended. Geyer describes one of the compositions recovered as 'racked with grief and sorrow and clearly written to express the world which surrounded him (deputy conductor of Auschwitz I Orchestra)'²⁵.

In an interview with Sky News, Geyer said 'I'm not Jewish, I'm not Polish, I'm not Romani, I am not descended from any person who perished in Auschwitz, but I am human, and the Holocaust was the greatest tragedy that humanity unleashed upon itself. And if there's anything that I can do to prevent evil like that returning, then I'll do it. And that was our ambition'.

Although music in the camps can be a symbol of survival and resistance, Gideon Klein's sister warns us 'don't romanticise it. They were musicians and composers. This is what they knew, this is what they did. If they were bricklayers, they would have laid bricks'²⁶. It was simply a sign of human life continuing within the confines of the camp.

The legacy of the Holocaust also manifests itself in the memory of the survivors. In 1994, Flora Jacobs, the girl who was chosen as accordionist for the Women's Orchestra, speaks of how sometimes the traumas of her Auschwitz experience return unexpectedly to mind. She also explains certain obsessive behaviours as well as routines to make her feel at ease

²⁵ C. Pepinster, 'Written at Auschwitz, Music Provides a Haunting Score to Holocaust Remembrance' *Religious News Service* (27 January, 2025), available at. <https://religionnews.com/2025/01/27/written-at-auschwitz-music-provides-a-haunting-score-to-holocaust-remembrance/>

²⁶ D. Starr, 'Amid the Horrors of the Holocaust, Jewish Musicians Composed Songs of Survival', fn. 8.

after the horrors of the camps. For example, she describes how walking in the dark makes her feel uncomfortable and how, when her grandchildren say they are hungry, she tells them they are not since they do not have to survive off two slices of bread for a whole week. Jacobs said 'I don't suffer from concentration camp syndrome, but I am not liberated. I have tried to suppress it for forty years'²⁷.

As music is a way to express emotions which words cannot give justice to, many pieces have been written in memory of the atrocities. The piece *Zog nit keyn mol* with lyrics written by Hirsh Glick in Vilna ghetto was set to the music of a pre-war Soviet song by the Pokrass brothers and is an anthem showing resistance to Nazis. Since 1945, it has been sung at many memorial services.

Finally, remembrance is not just intended for the people that were murdered during the Holocaust or even for the survivors, but it is for the rest of humanity to save them from a repeat of the evil atrocities. Music has an important role in continuing the legacy of the camps and aiding memory.

Conclusion

Overall, most survivor accounts refer to music in some way as it was an essential part of everyday life – from the moment arrivals stepped off the train, to accompanying labour marches and executions – and an essential factor in providing hope. There were very different individual responses to music in the camps. Some hated the music for its power to enable Nazi control and slick operations, its association with the most horrific scenarios of degradation and humiliation, and the unjust privileges it offered to the musicians. Whereas others saw music as a symbol of hope, a reminder of their pre-war lives, an avenue for resistance or maintaining identities, and a chance of survival.



The Auschwitz Men's Orchestra was forced to perform in the concentration camp.

Whether music was inextricably bound to its associations with death and terror or whether prisoners' minds enabled them to see it separately as a happy contrast is tricky to answer as there are many confused and conflicting emotions involved. The artform of music for some was irrevocably ruined, causing musicians to abandon the practice of their instrument, and the hope that music provided was destructive, with negative consequences. Tadeusz Borowski had the opinion that any optimism was pointless: 'It is that very hope that makes people go without a

murmur to the gas chambers, keeps them from risking a revolt, paralyses them into numb inactivity'²⁸. However, many Holocaust musicians went on to survive and live illustrious careers in music. Adam Kopyciński, conductor of the Auschwitz male orchestra, became

²⁷ A. Sebba, *The Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz – A Story of Survival*, fn. 12, p. 334 (from interview in 1994 with Mirjam Verheijen).

²⁸ Ibid., p. 333.

founder-conductor of Wroclaw Philharmonic Orchestra in Poland. Anita came to London becoming a founding member of the English Chamber Orchestra and marrying Peter Wallfisch, a concert pianist.

I must conclude that music was a force of both good and bad in the Nazi camps. However, in a scenario without music, I believe there would have still been torture, murder, propaganda and guilt in the camps, but it is less likely that there would have been the chance of hope, survival and resistance. Although the Nazis used music as a tool to facilitate their violent crimes against humanity, a camp lacking music would not be a better alternative and the hope that music did bring to those who it benefitted was a force of life-affirming good.

... A Musical Coda

Ilse Weber ran an infirmary for children in Theresienstadt and she composed lullabies for them to maintain their happiness. She cared for all the children so deeply as she missed her oldest son Hanuš, who she had to send away at the beginning of the war. It is suspected that Hanuš came to the UK as part of Nicholas Winton's 'Kindertransport'. When Ilse was sent to the gas chambers at Auschwitz, it was reported that she sang her lullaby *Wiegala* on the recommendation of an SS guard to alleviate pain from the children and calm them. The horror and sadness of the Holocaust is well-demonstrated in this poignant melody which I am performing in this video in an arrangement for four cellos.

VIDEO LINK: <https://vimeo.com/1100913931?share=copy>



Ilse Weber with her lute, 1928.



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Was the persecution of witches anything more than an exercise in power?

Harriet Brookfield

*Libra Essay Prize 2025:
Best in the History category*



In 1484 Pope Innocent VIII issued the papal bull *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus* authorising the Holy Inquisition to punish witchcraft with full force²⁹. This led to the torture and oppression of men and women for centuries to come. During the Great Witch Hunt (1560-1630) an estimated 40,000 suspected witches were killed³⁰. This brutal campaign was perhaps used as a control mechanism and was, as Monter notes, driven by 'Protestant and Catholic governments'³¹. Religious institutions used fear of witchcraft to enforce their particular orthodoxies. Moreover, the persecution of witches was fuelled by an increase in state authority from the 1500s, aiming to assert state power. Levack takes this further, revealing witch hunts were driven by decentralised authorities (local elites), as in Scotland's witch trials³². Women such as Joan of Arc, who challenged male dominance, were often targeted, reflecting the abuse of witch hunts to control minorities. However, to claim the persecution of witches as *solely* an exercise in power risks underestimating the many interweaving factors behind this hysteria. Perhaps hard to quantify today, there was genuine widespread fear of the Devil, invigorated by supposed witchcraft sabbaths, in which the Devil communicated with his 'followers'³³. Additionally, witch hunts were driven not *only* by fear of women's power, but also by broader misogynistic attitudes embedded in society. Witch hunts were further fuelled by fears of heretical behaviour and the unknown.

Witch persecutions fundamentally served as a tool for political power. As state control became more prominent in the late 15th century, the penalty for witchcraft was increased to death by Charles V in the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina* in 1532³⁴. Indeed, as Federici argues, witch hunts were driven by political motives, with most prosecutions taking place in secular courts. Moreover, in places where the Holy Inquisition dominated, such as Italy and Spain, there were relatively few trials³⁵. Much like Stalin's show trials in the late 1930s, which served publicly to eliminate his political adversaries (Bolsheviks and Trotskyists), witch trials provided a public spectacle in which execution affirmed the accuser's power³⁶. Indeed, in times of political turbulence, such as the English Civil War or movements for African

29 E.P. Currie, 'Crimes Without Criminals: Witchcraft and its Control in Renaissance Europe' *Law & Society Review* 3(1) (1968), p. 10.

30 'Witch Trials (c. 1500–1700)' in *Climate in Global Cultures and Histories: Promoting Climate Literacy Across Disciplines* (2023), available at <https://www.science.smith.edu/climatelit/witch-trials/#:~:text=Between%201560%20and%201630%2C%20there%20was%20a%20surge,and%2C%20of%20them%2C%2040%2C000%20were%20killed%20as%20punishment>

31 E.W. Monter, 'The Sociology of Jura Witchcraft' in D. Oldridge (ed.), *The Witchcraft Reader* (Abingdon, 2008), p. 199.

32 B. Levack, 'State-Building and Witch Hunting in Early Modern Europe' in D. Oldridge (ed.), *The Witchcraft Reader*, pp. 185-6.

33 D. Oldridge, 'Witch-Hunts Past and Present' *University of Worcester*, available at <https://www.worc.ac.uk/about/news/academic-blog/humanities-blogs/witch-hunts-past-and-present.aspx>

34 D. Oldridge (ed.), *The Witchcraft Reader*, p. 174.

35 S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Williamsburg, 2004), p. 181.

36 P. Leeson & J. Russ, 'Witch Trials' *The Economic Journal* (August, 2018), p. 2068.

independence, there was an increase in witch prosecutions³⁷. For example, according to Livy, in 2BC around 5,000 Romans were charged with *veneficum*, intricately linked with *maleficarum*. Later in 33BC the Roman Senate banned all ‘sorcerers and necromancers’ for the state’s protection. These were two distinct events in their own right, but both were encouraged by Roman leaders’ fear of *superstitio*, which had begun to undermine the emperor’s late imperial supremacy³⁸. Furthermore, Levack argues witch hunts were stimulated by ‘subordinate authorities’. In Scotland, for example, the Witchcraft Acts of 1563 were only adopted by parliament following oppressive action by decentralised authorities, including the clergy. From 1590–97, as the frequency of witch hunts increased, King James VI was to an extent involved through personally interrogating the North Berwick witches; and later the privy council issued commissions allowing local authorities to persecute witchcraft. However, the increase was predominately promoted by local municipalities. Indeed, in Scotland witchcraft was prosecuted in three ways: the first two in central courts and the third with warrants granted by parliament to local elites. Conviction rates by the third method were 95 per cent compared to 57 per cent in central courts, illustrating the desire of local authorities to gain more power³⁹. Germany provided a potential catalyst for local elites taking command in witch hunts: the location for over half of witchcraft executions⁴⁰. Even with the infamous *Carolina* law code in place, imperial power was insufficient to prevent local authorities from asserting control⁴¹.

As with secular power, church authorities played an influential role in the persecution of witches. Before the scientific revolution, people would look to the church to explain mysteries. It was not sufficient to continue blaming the Devil, as this was not a physical form people could curse⁴². As such, Pope Innocent VIII’s papal bull (1484) deployed pollution language, describing witches as the ‘foulest abominations’⁴³. Additionally, it was through the papacy that the standard handbook on witchcraft, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, was authorised, which condemned witchcraft as heretical⁴⁴. Witch hunts then became more prominent after the Reformation and the publication of Luther’s *Ninety-five Theses*, with 60 per cent of witches prosecuted between 1560 and 1630⁴⁵. Catholicism and Protestantism were now in competition for money and audience, and condemning witches was a great way to weaken one’s opponent and ‘advertise’ success in destroying the Devil. For example, many Catholics argued the reason witches became prominent was due to the sin of the Reformation⁴⁶. Furthermore, during the Reformation, witch hunts created fear, allowing peasants to be abused as pawns for power control, with famine and disease easily blamed on witchcraft⁴⁷. Joan of Arc was put on trial for violating canon law, suggesting her hearing divine voices threatened church authority. She was labelled a ‘member of Satan’ and

37 M. Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2010), p. 13.

38 M. Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 14.

39 B. Levack, ‘State-Building and Witch Hunting in Early Modern Europe’ in D. Oldridge (ed.), *The Witchcraft Reader*, pp. 188-89.

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44 ‘Malleus maleficarum’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (31 December, 2024), available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Malleus-maleficarum>

45 P. Leeson & J. Russ, ‘Witch Trials’, pp. 2067-70.

46 L. Thompson, ‘Hunting Witches: a Social Constructivist Perspective’ *The University of Alabama* (18 August, 2022), available at <https://religion.ua.edu/blog/2022/08/18/hunting-witches-a-social-constructivist-perspective/>

47 D. Oldridge (ed.), *The Witchcraft Reader*, pp. 177-178.

burnt at the stake on May 30, 1431⁴⁸. As such, the church used witches as a scapegoat to gain more power. Other theories for witchcraft trials are persuasive, including their dependency on extreme weather or negative income shocks⁴⁹. However, the consistencies of confessional battles, irrespective of such fluctuations, underscore how power motives were the primary catalyst for witch trials⁵⁰. However, witch hunts cannot be solely attributed to such power play. Different factors intersected with each other creating the perfect conditions for witch hunts to be conducted.

While the persecution of witchcraft was undoubtedly used to assert authority, it was also deeply rooted in misogyny and a pervasive fear of women who challenged traditional gender roles. Indeed, 90 per cent of the accused in England were women⁵¹. This overwhelming statistic underscores the role misogyny played in shaping witchcraft persecutions. Women who exhibited 'male' characteristics, such as independence or aggression, were frequently targeted⁵². As illustrated by *The Crucible*, during the Salem trials, any violation of hierarchical structure was ruthlessly punished⁵³. Indeed 14 of the 19 witches hanged during the trials were women said to have breached societal norms. Sarah Osborne was prosecuted as a witch after taking over her late husband's estates. Rebecca Nurse too, aged 70 and living alone, resided outside the tight-knit Puritan community, rarely attending social events, so arousing superstition around what she did with her free time. Puritan society also enforced a meticulous dress code and women like Bridget Bishop, who often wore revealing clothing, were deemed as violating the strict ideas of Puritan womanhood, bewitching men with their 'love potions'⁵⁴.

Women who held superior knowledge to men were also seen as intimidating. In the Nupe religion, for instance, women moneylenders were often targeted for witchcraft, as many men were in debt to them⁵⁵. Traditional gender roles had been reversed, leading to women's persecutions. Even in antiquity, powerful, intelligent women such as Medea, Erichtho and Canidia were all identified as witches, echoing the longstanding misogynistic bias. For example, Erichtho studied the dead, striving to understand the human anatomy, which felt threatening to males dominating the field of science. These women were all depicted as violating their role as mothers and making love potions to manipulate men⁵⁶. Thus, even in ancient society, misogynistic views led to females being branded as witches. Trial records show most women persecuted were over 40 and deprived⁵⁷. Indeed, the peak in witch hunts occurred when capitalism was becoming more prominent, leading to higher classes fearing the lower⁵⁸. Older women also often had superior knowledge of

48 'Joan of Arc Is Burned at the Stake' *History* (2025), available at <https://www.history.co.uk/this-day-in-history/30-may/joan-of-arc-is-burned-at-the-stake>

49 P. Leeson & J. Russ, 'Witch Trials', p. 2088.

50 P. Leeson & J. Russ, 'Witch Trials', pp. 2089-2090.

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52 D. Oldridge (ed.), *The Witchcraft Reader*, p. 175.

53 D. Taufiq, 'What Does The Crucible Symbolize: Decoding the Hidden Meanings' *Edenbengals* (2023).

54 'Salem Episode 8: Wilful, Weak-Minded Women?'.

55 D. Oldridge (ed.), *The Witchcraft Reader*, p. 176.

56 K. Stratton, 'Witches and the History of Powerful Women' *The National Interest* (31 October, 2020), available at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/witches-and-history-powerful-women-171735>

57 S. Aiello, 'Misogyny: The Driving Force of the Great European Witch-Hunts from the Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries' *Retrospect Journal* (24 October, 2021).

58 S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, pp. 186-188.

their communities than younger men, which felt ‘threatening’ for the latter⁵⁹. Women in healthcare professions, such as midwifery, were often targeted⁶⁰. The *Malleus Maleficarum* even includes a whole chapter on midwifery. This is because men felt powerless being excluded from the delivery room, and the midwife’s superior knowledge of the female reproductive system was deemed threatening. Moreover, in the era of the Great Witch Hunts, there was a vast fear of infanticide, and a woodcut made during the trial of Agnes Sampson in 1591 shows how the blame for these deaths often fell on midwives⁶¹.

Beyond misogynistic influence, witch hunts were driven by fear of the Devil’s ability to contact humans through witches⁶². For Oldridge many current views on witch hunting show the accused as innocent and the hunters malicious. This reflects our contemporary understanding of the persecution of witches as a vindictive imposition of power. Indeed, a survey in the UK in 2016 revealed only 10 per cent of people believed in the Devil, making it easy for us to associate witch hunts with a cynical exercise in power. Yet, witch hunts rarely targeted whole communities, and mainly only in German-speaking countries⁶³. However, the fear of the Devil was a very prominent factor in the persecution of witchcraft, driven by fear of the Devil communicating with witches and using them to harm others with *maleficarum*. One of the most influential reasons why women were more likely persecuted, was the fear that women could fuse more easily with the Devil. Many believed Satan would attack the soul and, as women’s bodies were weaker, they would be more vulnerable to demonic infection⁶⁴. Common belief was that Satan would assault his victims, first entering through teats in the body⁶⁵. As illustrated in the *National Archives*, witches were often described as having several marks on their body where the Devil had ‘sucked them’⁶⁶. Genuine fear of the Devil created ideal cultural conditions for the persecution of witches.

It is also important to recognise that often those who exhibited heretical behaviour were persecuted. In the *Malleus Maleficarum* hysteria and epilepsy were prescribed as identifications of witchcraft⁶⁷. Moreover, those who exhibited antisocial behaviour were often convicted for witchcraft, such as in Ursula Kemp’s trial in 1532. Kemp was 57 and her antisocial behaviour made her unpopular within her local community, leading to her execution⁶⁸. Therefore, the extent of misogynistic views and the cultural fear of demonic possession reveal that witch hunts cannot be solely attributed to power motives.

In conclusion, the persecution of witchcraft is undoubtedly an exercise in power by religious and political institutions. Both authorities used witchcraft to legitimise their authority, using trials and executions to enforce fear in the populace. The increase in witch hunts during the

59 S. Aiello, ‘Misogyny: The Driving Force of the Great European Witch-Hunts from the Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries’.

60 ‘Witch Trials and Witchcraft’.

61 S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, pp. 200-201.

62 E. Schelpe, ‘Can Fear of the Devil Explain the Witch Trials of the Late Medieval and Early Modern Age?’ *A Little Insight* (6 April, 2021), available at <https://a-little-insight.com/2021/04/06/can-fear-of-the-devil-explain-the-witch-trials-of-the-late-medieval-and-early-modern-age/>

63 D. Oldridge, ‘Witch-hunts Past and Present’.

64 D. Oldridge (ed.), *The Witchcraft Reader*, p. 261.

65 D. Oldridge (ed.), *The Witchcraft Reader*, p. 263.

66 ‘Fear of Witches’ *National Archives* (2025), available at <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/early-modern-witch-trials/fear-of-witches/>

67 B. Quintanilla, ‘Witchcraft or Mental Illness?’ *Psychiatric Times* (21 June, 2010), available at <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/witchcraft-or-mental-illness>

68 K. Howe (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Witches* (New York, 2014), p. 7.

Reformation showed how witch hunts were strategically used to oppress and dominate⁶⁹. As Levack notes, the widespread demand by local authorities to prosecute witchcraft, such as in Catalonia in 1618, demonstrates that the desire for control extended beyond centralised governments⁷⁰. However, to say witch persecutions were *solely* an exercise in power ignores the multifaceted factors. Societal prejudices and religious fears, for instance, created the perfect cultural conditions. As Bridget Bishop or Joan of Arc's social defiance show, many trials were influenced by the desire to control the unknown or 'threatening'⁷¹. Indeed, the vast anxieties around the Devil and heretical behaviour allowed power institutes to exploit societal fears. Therefore, whilst power did indeed provide the framework for witch persecutions, it was fear of the unknown and hatred of the heretical that truly set the desire for hunts ablaze.

69 L. Thompson, 'Hunting Witches: a Social Constructivist Perspective'.

70 D. Oldridge (ed.), *The Witchcraft Reader*, p. 195.

71 'Salem Episode 8: Wilful, Weak-Minded Women?'; & 'Joan of Arc Is Burned at the Stake'.

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Which figure in history did most to enlarge human freedom?

Bella Barnard

*High Commendation in History for the
John Locke Institute Global Essay Prize 2025.*



The concept of human freedom is a multi-faceted one, observable across an array of differing forms, including moral, theological and intellectual. The latter concerns the right to seek, be recipient to, and to disseminate ideas and information from a diverse range of sources – wholly without restriction. This is critical to the protection of diversity of thought, and the subsequent development and progression of ideas. Often provoking debate, intellectual freedom facilitates the democratic development of not just individuals but whole communities of people, whilst simultaneously encouraging the formation of well-informed autonomous beliefs. In the 12th century, French philosopher, poet, theologian and logician Peter Abelard established himself as arguably one of the most critical and influential thinkers of the medieval world. His pioneering use of reason and logic within a contemporary society deeply rooted in scriptural theological assertions elicited considerable controversy, to the extent of eventual accusations of heresy. This is supported by Abelard's seminal work *Sic et Non* which in its dialectical structure encouraged critical thinking, whilst his contributions to the foundations of university education helped to institutionalise logical reasoning within theological education. Moreover, Abelard's famed relationship with Heloise d'Argenteuil (niece and ward of Canon Fulbert of Notre Dame in Paris), significantly altered the trajectory of his philosophical and theological work, potentially contributing to the development in Abelard's later writings of a more introspective and contrite quality. This relationship crucially promoted the freedom of female tutelage and scholarship, and laid the foundations for renowned literary partnerships to come, such as the Shelleys. However, Abelard encountered much conflict with authority and so faced the repercussions of advocating such freedoms, with notable clashes with Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Champeaux ultimately culminating in his damning trial at the Council of Sens in 1141. Yet despite his condemnation during his own lifetime, the lasting impacts of Abelard's attempts to integrate logical reasoning into canonical teaching as an attempt to foster intellectual and therefore subsequent broader human freedom are evident in modern society. This presents him as an absolutely pre-eminent figure for these progressions.

Arguably, the most critical element of intellectual freedom concerns its unrestrained approach to differing views. Between the 4th and 15th centuries, the majority of written history can be observed within a linear chronological framework procured from the Christian understanding of Scripture. In medieval Europe, almost the entirety of canonical doctrine was derived from the work of Anselm of Laon, who brought about the creation of a systematic gloss, the *Glossa Ordinaria*, on the whole of the Bible. Reliance upon Scripture was also to be found with the canons of the church of St Victor on the left bank of the Seine from 1108 under William of Champeaux. However, Abelard's approach consisted of an elucidation which made use of the human sciences and progression of reason and logic. His dialectical *Sic et Non* comprises 158 contradictory theological assertions integrating Aristotelian logic into Christian theology, promoting freedom against the constraints of Scripture. (Abelard has been coined Aristotle's first great Latin commentator, also drawing

inspiration from the treatises of Porphyry and Boethius). This marks a shift from passive reception to active interpretation, a fundamental example of Abelard's attempts to enlarge freedom within an educational context. *Sic et Non* provided the scaffolding which later supported the *Summa* of theological teaching produced by Peter Lombard in the 1150s and then that magisterially developed by Thomas Aquinas in c. 1270: demonstrative of Abelard's perpetual enlargement of freedom of thought within an ecclesiastical context. Moreover, Abelard's involvement in the establishment of educational institutions such as universities was paramount to their growth into loci which fostered the development of intellect and the expansion of shared ideas. He was foundational in the curriculum of the nascent university of Paris, which became a corporate institution roughly half a century after his death in April 1142, upon the site of the school he established in 1108 at Mont Sainte-Geneviève. Furthermore in 1115 he became master of the cathedral school of Notre Dame, whilst his works inspired John of Salisbury and Arnold of Brescia, who helped to institutionalise critical reasoning within theological education.

Furthermore, Abelard sought to inaugurate moral freedom into medieval society through a variety of means. His focus on *intentio* in his *Ethics* from the mid to late 1130s has become a rudimentary concept in the discipline of moral philosophy, entailing the view that the moral value of an action should be determined not simply by the act itself or indeed by its consequences, but primarily through the intention behind it. Abelard examined notions of sin and vice, concluding that sin consists not in an immoral action, but in the consent to do what one knows to be an immoral action. Furthermore, God-granted forgiveness can be obtained at the moment when a fault is acknowledged, rather than that at which priestly absolution is acquired. Abelard also unconventionally re-examined the dynamics of the Trinity, perhaps influenced by his early education in logic by Roscelin at Loches in Anjou, who propounded the view that language is limited to mere words fashioned by ourselves, which cannot become confused with the transcendent phenomena that they attempt to describe. Contemporary rule considered Abelard to have attenuated Catholic doctrine by regarding the three persons of the Trinity as no more than names, with his preference for expressing the Trinity in terms of divine attributes not closely associated with particular persons. Moreover, in 1122 Abelard was formally released from his obligation to reside at the abbey of St Denis by the new abbot Suger, and thus he settled in a rural retreat in the parish of Quincey, where he erected or obtained a dwelling amid fields and constructed an oratory (the Paraclete). This is reminiscent of a substantial history of monks or preachers who embraced the ideal of the hermit, dedicated to an isolated and simplistic lifestyle. This apparent freedom from the constraints of society and ability to live in a liminal manner later engendered the admiration of notable figures such as Petrarch, and procured for Abelard a number of contemporary 'disciples', suggesting he encouraged a disdain for what was perceived to be socially conventional.

Abelard's name has become closely associated with that of Heloise, due to their famed relationship and the subsequent progression of female scholarship in the medieval period. Their affair has been coined 'a love story, an epistolary narrative of happiness achieved'. Early in Abelard's teaching career Canon Fulbert arranged for him to privately tutor his niece and ward. Abelard and Heloise ostensibly fell in love, conceived a son Astrolabe (for whom Abelard later composed a philosophical *Carmen*) and married. However, Heloise was initially opposed to Abelard's decision to marry her, preferring instead to remain his concubine rather than his wife. This may have been due to a combination of factors, including the limitations placed upon the wedded clergy's advancement in the church, and critically the writings of St Jerome. In his *Book against Jovinian*, St Jerome defended

chastity and virginity as paramount ideals, and these influences merely solidified Heloise's own personal predisposition to oppose marriage. However, in the hopes of placating Fulbert the union did take place. Yet the secrecy with which it occurred led to Abelard's subsequent castration at the hands of two thugs hired by Fulbert, who 'cut off those parts of (his) body with which (he) had done that which was the cause of their sorrow'. Despite the somewhat forced nature of Abelard's insistence on marriage to Heloise, through the seven surviving letters documenting their correspondence the strength of their relationship is indisputable, as Abelard supported Heloise and the progress of female intellect and simultaneously depended upon both. Modern scholars agree that Heloise did much to influence Abelard's own philosophies and in some areas surpassed his own efforts (particularly within the Paraclete). He himself stated that 'in looks (Heloise) does not rank lowest, while in the extent of her learning she stood supreme'. Moreover, Abelard's *Planctus*, or lament, on the death of Samson gave the event a novel interpretation, contrasting the traditional understanding of the evil influence that women such as Delilah might exercise over men.

Much of the information currently held about Peter Abelard originates from his autobiographical work *Historia Calamitatum Mearum* (The History of My Troubles) containing numerous stories concerning both his quarrels with leading contemporary figures and his love affair with Heloise (further details of which can also be gleaned from the seven letters allegedly communicated between them). Although a valuable insight into Abelard's thoughts and actions, the limitations of the written and epistolary form of records must also be considered. Regarding the letters, questions of authenticity and reliability have been raised by numerous scholars; and, even if genuine, they are inherently subject to personal and emotional rhetoric. Therefore, it could be argued that whilst Abelard desired complete intellectual emancipation, our understanding of this is somewhat undermined by the surviving documentation's lack of concrete legitimacy.

Despite clear evidence indicating Abelard's considerable achievement in propagating the freedom of intellect to all members of society, his own personal conflict with authority is suggestive of the cost of such liberties. Abelard's former master Roscelin was condemned at Soissons in 1092 due to his alleged misrepresentation of the Trinity, reflected in Abelard's own trial in the same place in 1121 before the papal legate. Allegedly his principal accusers included friends of Anselm of Laon, who asserted Abelard's undermining of Catholic doctrine in a similar way. He was sentenced to enforced confinement in the nearby monastery of St Medard. Later on in 1141, Abelard was subject to further accusations by William of St Thierry and Bernard of Clairvaux. They among others brought 19 charges before a council held at Pentecost in the cathedral city of Sens. This resulted in the stipulation that all of Abelard's erroneous books should be burned, and that he should be confined to a religious place, a physical expression of a lack of freedom particularly poignant when viewed alongside his enforced existence as a eunuch for the latter part of his life. Abelard was even reviled as a heretic, indicative of the oppressive power of pejorative labelling to influence conventional opinion, and as a tool to cast aspersions on and publicly alienate those refusing to conform. However, what Abelard did for the enlargement of human freedom through his advocacy of intellectual, and so moral and material, liberation are testament to the significance of his works. Notably, he influenced Peter the Venerable, who arranged for him to be personally reconciled with Bernard of Clairvaux in the last days of his life (c. 1142–44), and had his body posthumously delivered to be absolved of all sins at the Paraclete.

To conclude, all human freedom could be said to stem from that of intellectual liberty. This provides the foundations from which people can educate themselves in an unprejudiced manner, and subsequently formulate their own individual opinions and beliefs. This is a fundamental step towards moral and ethical freedom as experienced in the world. Abelard was a pioneering example of the propagation of these opportunities in a number of different ways. His use of reason and logic as integrated into canonical Christian theology marked an intellectual shift from passive reception to active interpretation, whilst his ethical theory of *intentio* further cultivated moral self-determination. Moreover, Abelard's relationship with Heloise provides an example not just of Abelard supporting the progress of female intellectual exploits, but simultaneously the value of a symbiotically progressive relationship such as theirs, which contributed decisively to Abelard's own philosophical development. Abelard also serves as a poignant figure of conflict with authority, showing the expense of such liberties, most famously through his clashes with Bernard of Clairvaux and the canons of St Victor. However, his lasting influence is testament to the strength of his arguments and the influential reform they incurred, particularly within an ecclesiastical context. Therefore, through his efforts to encourage liberty of thought and intellect, Abelard not only fulfilled but surpassed his intentions, through the sheer breadth of freedoms which ensued for humanity.

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Should anyone be ashamed of their nation's history? Should anyone be proud of it?

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History is complicated, even messy. It's filled with good things and bad things, things to be proud of and things to regret. No nation's history is straightforward or ideal. Germany, as well as the Arab world, provide a good picture of how pride and shame usually exist side by side in a nation's history.

The Holocaust and the Second World War are typically the first things that come to mind when you think about Germany. In one of the worst genocides in history, the Nazis murdered six million Jews between 1939 and 1945. Even now, the country and its people are still haunted by this. But what really stands out to me is that Germany hasn't made an effort to hide or ignore its dark past period. Germans have publicly acknowledged responsibility, built memorials, and included the Holocaust in school curricula. That degree of honesty is very important. It acts as a warning to others about the dangers of hatred and is a promise never to allow such an incident to happen again.

But Germany's story does not conclude with that shame and regret. Following the war, particularly from the 1950s, the nation made a great effort to reconstruct itself. It became a democracy and concentrated on peace and human rights. Germany today is one of the most influential and prominent countries in Europe with a powerful economy and a voice for cooperation and unity. It's an example of how a country can learn from its darkest hour and strive to make a better future. That combination of remembering painful history while constructing something new shows resilience and hope.

The Arab world has a proud past as well, but in a different sense. In the days of the Umayyad Caliphate, from 661 to 750, Arab civilisation stretched over enormous areas from Spain to India. This was not just a matter of conquest; it was one of learning and culture. Muslim scientists made amazing discoveries in science, mathematics and medicine. Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, for example, developed algebra. Without his efforts, most of modern mathematics and modern coding and algorithms would not even exist. Then there was Ibn Sina, or Avicenna, as he was called in the West. He was a philosopher and physician whose textbook *Canon of Medicine* was studied for centuries both in the Islamic world and in Europe. These are achievements to be proud of, as they remind us how the Arab world used to be the leader of the world in knowledge and innovation.

Yet, currently, there is a lot of frustration felt by many in the Arab world. The fact that there are political divisions and rivalries between countries has made it difficult for Arabs to come together as nations. Even wealthy countries like Saudi Arabia have been criticised for not doing enough to assist the Palestinians. The Palestinians have suffered for decades undergoing violence, displacement and what many consider a slow genocide. This is heartbreaking to witness, as often such atrocities are ignored or disregarded internationally. Moreover, some Arab leaders fail to speak out forcefully enough on their behalf, leading to a widespread feeling of shame and disappointment.

This negatively juxtaposes with the past. Notably, Salah ad-Din (Saladin) in 1187 brought Arab forces together and recaptured Jerusalem before the Third Crusade. This was a time of genuine strength and unity in the Arab world. Nowadays, however, the divisions run so deep that this moment seems like a memory from a long way off. So much so, some even argue the Arab world has been so proud of its past that it has forgotten about its future. It leaves many wondering whether the Arab world will ever reunite to contend with its challenges.

Should anyone be ashamed of their nation's history? Should anyone be proud of it? Well, to be straightforward, it's not a yes or no. Germany demonstrates that confronting ugly realities head on can enable a nation to heal and move forward. The Arab world demonstrates that a rich and glorious heritage can be a cause for pride but only if the issues of today are addressed honestly and bravely. History is not merely the past it's what we do with it today. To feel pride and shame together is not a failing, it is human. It means we are invested. And only if we embrace the entire story - the good and most importantly the bad - can we aspire toward a greater tomorrow for ourselves and for those who follow us.

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