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**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**

THE BOYS WHO FOUGHT HITLER



The true story of three childhood friends who risked their lives trying to stop the Nazis during World War II

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HOW THREE FRIENDS RISKED THEIR LIVES FIGHTING AGAINST ONE OF THE MOST EVIL REGIMES THE WORLD HAS EVER SEEN

THE BOYS WHO FOUGHT THE NAZIS

BY KRISTIN LEWIS



Adolf Hitler (third from right) and other Nazi officials march through the streets of Munich, Germany, in 1933. Inset: Left to right, Rudolf Heß, 16, Helmuth Hübener, 17, and Karl-Heinz Schnibbe, 17.

AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT: What role do truth and information play in this story?

It was a dark and terrifying night in Hamburg, Germany, and 17-year-old Karl-Heinz Schnibbe ran through the empty streets. Germany was at war, and there were rumors that British bombers were prowling the sky looking for targets to destroy. Karl should have been at home with his parents, safe in the bomb shelter.

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Above: The Hitler Youth march in a Nazi rally in Nuremberg, Germany, 1933. At the beginning of 1933, the Hitler Youth had 50,000 members. By 1936, membership had increased to 5.4 million. **Left:** This map shows Europe in 1942. What can you conclude about Nazi Germany?



in Germany was dangerous. The country was under the control of Adolf Hitler and his

Nazi Party. In all of human history, few **regimes** have been more profoundly evil than Hitler's Nazi Germany.

Hitler had come to power after a period of great difficulty. Unemployment was high. Many Germans felt bitter and humiliated by their defeat in World War I. Hitler gave the German people someone to blame for their problems: Jewish people.

Prejudice against Jewish

people—known as anti-Semitism—had existed in Europe for centuries. European Jews were resented and mistrusted for being different, and for having different customs and different beliefs. Many times over the years, leaders had turned the Jews into **scapegoats**, blaming them for problems ranging from the plague to World War I.

Of course these claims were **outlandish**. But embers of these old beliefs smoldered in German culture. Hitler easily fanned the flames. He singled out other groups as well: Catholics, the disabled, Gypsies, gay people. But the Jews were his primary target. In

speech after speech, he called them “vermin” and said they were to blame for all of Germany’s woes.

Many Germans embrace Hitler and the Nazi Party and all it stood for. Those who did not learned to keep quiet. Resisters were marked as traitors and killed. Even Karl’s parents, who often expressed their hatred for Hitler in private, dared not interfere. One day as Karl was coming home, he saw army officers spitting on a group of German Jews. Upset, Karl ran and told his mother.

“Son, it is best you forget what you saw,” Karl remembered saying. “That is the way our world will be now.”

But Karl could not forget.

He and his two best friends, Helmut Hübener, 16, and Wobbe, 15, hated what Hitler was doing. Hitler promised to restore German pride and glory. For many, the three boys believed Hitler’s real interest was in his own power. Hitler gave himself the title of *führer*, or supreme leader, and began invading Germany’s neighbors, igniting World War II.

The boys believed Hitler was destroying Germany.

But what could they do against Hitler?

Total Control

It was December 1941, and life

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He and his two best friends, Helmuth Hübener, 16, and Rudi Wobbe, 15, hated what Hitler stood for. Hitler promised to restore German pride and glory. But like many, the three boys believed that Hitler’s real interest was in his own power. Hitler gave himself the title of *führer*, or supreme leader, and began invading Germany’s neighbors, igniting World War II.

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But what could three teenagers do against Hitler?



Short-wave radios like this one could pick up secret broadcasts.

Three Friends, One Plan

In July 1941, Helmuth invited Karl over to his apartment to show him something special: a short-wave radio. The sight of the radio shocked and thrilled Karl. He knew that it could pick up British broadcasts. Listening to foreign radio stations was forbidden, and the penalties were severe. In Nazi Germany, freedom of speech did

not exist, as it does in the United States. Newspapers and radio stations were expected to praise Hitler and the war, or they would be shut down.

At 10 p.m., Helmuth turned on the radio. A voice crackled to life.

“The BBC London presents the news in German.”

What followed would change the course of Karl’s life, as well as the lives of his friends. The report talked about what



On November 9, 1938—the Night of Broken Glass—violence erupted against German Jews. Synagogues, like the one shown here, were burned; Jewish hospitals, schools, stores, and homes were looted; dozens of people were murdered. The police did nothing. The next day, many Nazis openly celebrated what they had done.

was happening in Russia, which Hitler had recently invaded. The report confirmed the boys' suspicions that the Nazis were lying to the German people, that the war was wrong, and that Hitler was sending Germans into battles they couldn't win.

For the next few months, Karl and his friend Rudi would go to Helmuth's to listen to that radio as often as they could. Soon, though, listening wasn't enough—particularly for Helmuth. He wanted to do something. He wanted all Germans to know the truth.

So he hatched a bold plan: He began typing up leaflets that criticized Hitler, the Nazis, and the war. "Hitler the Murderer!" read one pamphlet. "Do You Know You Are Being Lied To?!" read another. Rudi, Karl, and Helmuth would drop these leaflets in public places around Hamburg.

It was this mission that had brought Karl onto the blacked-out streets of Hamburg that night in 1941. His job was to distribute those leaflets throughout the city, to stuff them into mailboxes and leave them on park benches. He expected the Gestapo—the terrifying Nazi police—to jump out from the shadows at any moment.



This 1945 photo shows children at Auschwitz, one of six death camps the Nazis built. Between 1933 and 1945, the Nazis murdered more than 6 million European Jews. Many were murdered in camps like this one. Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gypsies, gay people, and other groups the Nazis considered "inferior" were also murdered. This mass killing would later be called the Holocaust.

But he made it home safely. Karl's mission had been a success.

Swept Up

Karl hadn't always despised the Nazis. In fact, he used to be one of them. Like many Germans, he had been swept up in the excitement when the Nazis first came to power in 1933. He loved going to the concerts given by the military and police bands. The grand Nazi speeches impressed him.

Against his parents' wishes, Karl joined the Nazi club for boys called *Jungvolk*, or "Young Folk," in 1936.

He was 12 years old. His friends Helmuth and Rudi also joined.

At first, Karl liked it. He got to take fun weekend trips to the countryside to hike and camp. On weeknights, he and the other children memorized facts about Hitler as well as the racist ideas of Nazism. Across Germany, millions of children like Karl were being taught to hate.

The Games Ended

To Karl, the *Jungvolk* was mostly fun and games. In 1938, when he turned 14, he graduated into the Hitler Youth, the Nazi group that

every “racially pure” teenage boy in Germany was expected to join. Then the games ended.

The Hitler Youth, as well as the *Jungvolk* and the League of German Girls, were tools the Nazis used to shape the beliefs, thoughts, and actions of German youth. Boys in the Hitler Youth



This 1930s Nazi poster reads “The German student fights for the Führer and the people.” What message does this poster send?

than 40 different pamphlets. They pasted flyers on bulletin boards and even dropped them into the coat pockets of high-ranking Nazi officials. Meanwhile, the Gestapo was desperately searching for those responsible.

The boys took precautions. They stopped sitting

together at their church and made sure they were rarely seen together in public. They also made a pact: If one of them was caught, he would assume full responsibility for the entire scheme, no matter what.

The Nazi authorities soon closed in, and on February 5, 1942, Helmuth Hübener was arrested.

The Gestapo tortured Helmuth for two days. They refused to believe that he had acted alone. Finally, he broke down and mentioned Karl and Rudi. On the morning of February 10, the boys were arrested.

The first night in prison, Karl cried himself to sleep. What had Helmuth told the Nazis? Would Rudi confess? What would happen to their families?

For several weeks, Karl and Rudi were held in separate cells, **interrogated**, and brutally beaten. At one point, as Karl was taken for yet another interrogation, he caught a glimpse of Helmuth, his face swollen and bruised. “As I passed him, he grinned a little, winked his eyes a bit,” Karl remembered. In that moment, Karl knew in his heart that Helmuth had kept the pact.

Indeed, Helmuth had assumed all the blame. He



In the Hitler Youth, boys received military training and fought mock battles. They were being trained as future Nazi leaders.

Caught!

In the final months of 1941, the boys stepped up their resistance. They became more confident and more daring, churning out more

told the Gestapo that Rudi and Karl knew about the leaflets but that was all. He said nothing about their nighttime missions.

Helmuth had saved their lives.

The Verdict

In August 1942, the boys stood before a judge to hear their punishment. Karl's father, heartbroken, was the only family member at the trial.

Karl and Rudi were sentenced to hard labor in a prison camp. Helmuth was sentenced to death.

After the sentences were read, Helmuth stood and faced the judges, his face calm. "Now I must die, even though I have committed no crime," he said. "So now it's my turn, but your turn will come."

Two months later, Helmuth was beheaded.

He was 17 years old.

After the trial, Karl was shipped off to a prison work camp. Life was brutal. He rarely had enough to eat, and he was often beaten. He longed for his family.

After It All

In the final days of World War II, Hitler committed suicide to avoid



Helmuth Hübener at age 17

**"Now I must die,
even though I
have committed
no crime."**

—Helmuth Hübener

capture. By the time the war ended, 53 million people had been killed. Many Nazi leaders were put on trial and executed for their crimes. Yet the end of the war was not the end of Karl's ordeal. Karl was taken prisoner by the Russians, one of Germany's wartime enemies. They did not believe that he had been a resister.

It would be four more years before he was finally released. Sick and **haggard**, his years in the prison camps had robbed him of his youth. Karl's parents were overjoyed to be reunited with their son, but they could not deny that he had changed. Though his physical wounds eventually healed, it would be many years before his emotional scars began to fade.

Karl eventually discovered a way to live again and even found happiness. He and Rudi moved to America and spent the rest of their lives in Salt

Lake City, Utah. They both got married and raised families. They grew old together as dear friends.

And they never forgot Helmuth, their brave friend who believed so deeply in the truth. Both Rudi and Karl wrote books about him.

In 1985, four decades after being branded as traitors, Karl and Rudi were invited to Hamburg to attend a memorial for Helmuth. They were given medals of honor. "I am not a hero. Helmuth Hübener is my hero," Karl told author Susan Campbell Bartoletti, before his death in 2010. "I do not regret one thing. If we had to, I'd do it again." ●

CONTEST

The Power of Information Consider the role of information in Nazi Germany. How and why did the Nazis control information? How and why did Karl, Helmuth, and Rudi use information to fight the Nazis? Answer both questions in two to three well-organized paragraphs. Use text evidence. Send your response to **RESISTANCE CONTEST**. Five winners will each receive Susan Campbell Bartoletti's incredible book *The Boy Who Dared*, a novel based on the life of Helmuth Hübener. See page 2 for details.

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