

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**

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but it's all true

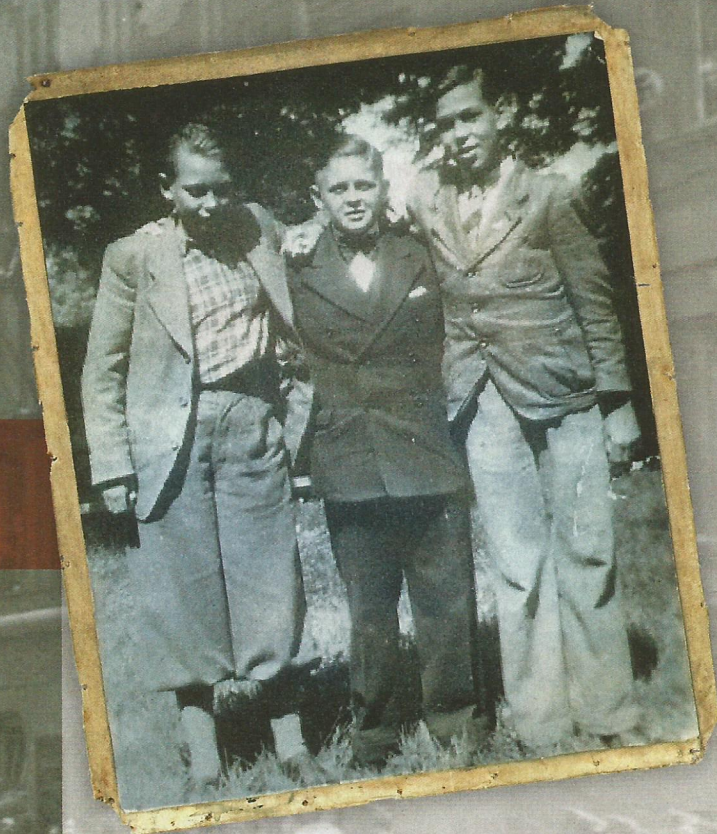
HOW THREE FRIENDS RISKED THEIR LIVES
FIGHTING AGAINST ONE OF THE MOST EVIL REGIMES
THE WORLD HAS EVER SEEN

THE BOYS WHO FOUGHT

Adolf Hitler (third from right) and Nazi officials march through the streets of Munich, Germany, 1938. **Inset:** Left to right, Rudi Wobbe, 15, Helmuth Hübener, 16, and Karl-Heinz Schnibbe, 17.

THE NAZIS

BY KRISTIN LEWIS



BETTMANN/CORBIS (BACKGROUND), ISTOCKPHOTO.COM (FRAME)



**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?



But fear of bombs was not the reason Karl was drenched in sweat, why his heart pounded louder than the *click-click* of his boots on the street, why he swallowed down the vomit that stubbornly rose into his throat again and again.

Karl was on a secret mission. If anyone caught him, he could be shot—or worse.

Total Control

It was December 1941, and life

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

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

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

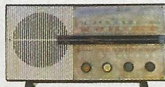
“Son, it is best you forget what you saw,” Karl remembered her saying. “That is the way our lives will be now.”

But Karl could not forget.

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.

The boys believed Hitler was destroying Germany.

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 fired real guns. They wore military uniforms, fought pretend battles, and were assigned ranks. “They are training us to be soldiers,” Helmuth angrily said to Karl one day.

He was right.

In most German cities, Hitler Youth were organized into patrols, kind of like junior police squads. One of their jobs was to find out who was disloyal and report them to the Gestapo—known for its cruelty. Occasionally kids reported their own parents.

Karl soon grew to resent the Hitler Youth. He stopped wearing his uniform and began skipping meetings. By the end of the year, Karl—to his relief—was expelled. He had escaped the Hitler Youth, but, as he would soon find out, he could not escape the Nazis.

Caught!

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



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.