



OVERVIEW

“Leaders or offices which set themselves up as Gods mock God and the individual who stands alone before him, and must perish.” —Dietrich Bonhoeffer

John Hendrix’s graphic novel, *The Faithful Spy*, tells the true story of a German pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he struggles to navigate his duty to his faith, his family, his country, and himself during the tumultuous rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party in the early twentieth century. Meticulously researched and beautifully illustrated, *The Faithful Spy* challenges traditional notions of war, faith, morality, patriotism, and much more by providing a deeply personal, faith-based lens on the events leading up to and during World War II.

Starting in the early 1900s with Bonhoeffer’s birth, *The Faithful Spy* deftly traces the political, social, cultural, and religious events that lead to the rise of Hitler, the Nazi party, and eventually the start of WWII. Disappointed in his fellow citizens’ and the church’s complacency as Hitler and the Nazi party ascend to power, Bonhoeffer travels the globe searching for inspiration and insight into what faith should really look like “in action.” Eventually, he returns to Germany, where he forms a breakaway church that speaks out against the Nazi’s political actions and beliefs. Meanwhile, Hitler continues to close in on his ultimate goal of placing all political, social, cultural, and religious life under one central ideology, a process called “Nazification.” To Dietrich’s horror, Hitler even renames the German Christian Church and declares himself ordained by God as the savior of Germany’s glorious future.

Seeing no other choice, Dietrich Bonhoeffer chooses to become a full-fledged German double agent and help the resistance group, Abwehr Circle, to both bring down Hitler’s entire regime and establish a new government. Even as his mission grows more dangerous by the day, Dietrich remains steadfast in his belief that the church should serve a higher purpose by focusing on the needs of all people, not a particular group or government, and repeatedly sacrifices himself and his family’s safety in his quest to save his country and its church from the grip of fascism.

MAIN CHARACTERS

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER's story really happened. During Hitler and the Nazi's rise to political power in mid 1900s Germany, Dietrich struggles to reconcile his faith with the evils he sees occurring at the hands of the Nazi party. Working as a rogue pastor and a double agent for the inner German resistance, Abwehr Circle, Dietrich's struggle is both deeply personal and theologically rich. With each of his choices, he is forced to question the personal, political, moral, and religious consequences of his decisions in order to answer the essential question: What is the "greater good," and how do we achieve it? Dietrich's answers to this question provide the central conflict for the graphic novel and help readers see WWII through a new lens.

BONHOEFFER FAMILY MEMBERS play a critical role in the story and affect many of Dietrich's decisions. Dietrich's siblings are particularly influential. His older brother Walter's death during World War I causes Dietrich to become deeply philosophical about faith and reason at a young age. Later, in 1937, during Hitler's ongoing rise to power, Dietrich's brother-in-law (Hans von Dohnanyi) and his cousin General Paul von Hase make him aware of a brewing plot to overthrow Hitler.

FRANK FISHER and **JEAN LASSERRE** were Dietrich's classmates at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Fisher takes Dietrich to two very influential places: a Baptist Church in Harlem, which reinvigorates Dietrich's feelings about the power of a theologian to inspire communal worship practices; and an equality movement in Washington D.C., where Dietrich learns about the true plight of a black person in twentieth-century America and its parallels to how the German Christian Church under Nazi leadership is beginning to view the Jewish people. Lasserre's influence on Dietrich is more theologically philosophical and based in his pacifist beliefs about war and the Church's responsibility to stand apart from any state pursuing violence. The influence of Fisher and Lasserre help Dietrich solidify his beliefs that the Church can stand in opposition to any country pursuing violence or discrimination, which he calls civil courage.

GENERAL LUDWIG BECK is one of the first of Hitler's generals to break with Hitler's secret plan to take over all of Europe for Germany, thus laying the seeds for the first plot to overthrow Hitler. Over the years, Ludwig's leadership greatly influences Dietrich.

HITLER and **THE NAZIS** are the central antagonists in the story. While Dietrich decides that the Church's role is to question the state and its decisions, Hitler's Nazi party disagrees and turns the Church into a branch of Nazi Germany governmental control. Wanting to quiet Dietrich and his likeminded peers, Hitler and the Nazis set up the Reich Church in place of the German Christian Church, slowly indoctrinating their new religious arm of government. They even go so far as to endorse Hitler's "Aryan Paragraph," which openly discriminates against any person with non-Aryan or Jewish heritage from civil service.

MARIA VON WEDEMEYER is the granddaughter of the woman who helped fund Dietrich's Confessing Church in the 1930s and has known Dietrich since she was twelve. During the war, both when her father and her brother die fighting on the Eastern front, Maria calls upon Dietrich. Despite her grandmother's objection to their courtship due to Dietrich's role as a family pastor, Dietrich and Maria announce their engagement at the height of Dietrich's involvement in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler in 1943.

SETTINGS

GERMANY takes center stage in this story. The home of Hitler and the Nazis is also home to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his family and friends, who are among the first in Europe to cry foul at Hitler and his policies. As a result, Germany is a place of complex moral, political, economic, and social controversy, where the lines between good and evil are often muddled and unclear throughout *The Faithful Spy*.

NEW YORK CITY serves as a refuge for a young Dietrich during the Nazis' rise to power in Germany during the 1930s. Dietrich returns to New York City in 1939 to escape being drafted into the German military and plans to teach German refugees at Union Theological Seminary for a year. Instead, shortly after his second arrival in the city, Dietrich realizes that fleeing to America is a personal mistake for him, and so he departs New York City on one of the last trans-Atlantic boats to make the voyage before the start of World War II. He returns to his homeland eager to help the resistance and prepare Germany for a future without Hitler.

EUROPE during the 1920s and 1930s offers another refuge for Dietrich away from Hitler's warmongering and violence. As WWII approaches, Europe is also the place where Hitler's desire for power and conquest is focused, and by the early 1940s much of the continent is transformed into a battlefield populated by death and atrocity.

GERMANY'S BALTIC COAST is the site of Dietrich's rebel seminary and a sort of headquarters inside Germany for members of the Confessing Church (CC), a place where Dietrich openly teaches about a dozen young men to preach without Nazi censorship.

CELL BLOCK 92 and **TEGEL PRISON** is where Dietrich is imprisoned after being arrested in connection with the Abwehr.

THEMES

While **NATIONALISM** is represented by the Nazi rise to power and German feelings of superiority over others (sometimes referred to as "Nazification" during this time period), **PATRIOTISM** is represented by people like Dietrich who love their native Germany and are horrified at what Hitler is doing to its own people and international reputation.

LEADERSHIP and its role in government and religion becomes a central theme in Dietrich's story when he takes to the radio only two days after Hitler becomes Germany's chancellor. In his initial public radio address, Dietrich begins to articulate the differences between leaders who serve the people and those who serve themselves, alluding to Hitler's growing role and power over the German nation and its religious institutions. However, Dietrich's public outcry falls on deaf ears. From that moment on in the story, Dietrich must become a leader and decide just how far he is willing to go to save himself, his family, his country, and his faith.

Dietrich's greatest struggle in the story comes from the conflicts between seemingly contradictory themes: **FAITH** vs. **REASON**, and **INDIVIDUAL** vs. **COMMUNITY**. Dietrich continually struggles to navigate these elements of his personal and political identity, often knowing that his decisions will have grave consequences that go far beyond his reach or understanding. Ultimately, he is forced to decide what he believes is the "greater good" for himself, his family, and his country.

PRE-READING IDEAS

1. Create a Self-Portrait

Create an illustrated self-portrait. Using Dietrich Bonhoeffer's portrait on page nine of *The Faithful Spy* as a model, students will complete four steps:

- draw a full-body image of themselves, including appropriate clothing;
- select and illustrate six items/symbols that are most important to them;
- separately or included in the image, write a five to twenty word explanation of why they chose each item/symbol and its significance to them; and
- add their name, birthday, and other important biographical information to the self-portrait.

After reading *The Faithful Spy*, have students look back at this self-portrait and ask themselves: Would I have chosen different images, symbols, clothing, or other details to represent myself? If so, why?

2. Key Terms & Themes

Define and discuss key terms from *The Faithful Spy*. Individually, in groups, or as a class, have students write down and/or illustrate their personal definitions of some or all of the following terms and themes:

- | | | |
|-----------------|------------------------|------------|
| • war | • good and evil | • fascism |
| • conviction | • community patriotism | • pacifism |
| • civil courage | • loyalty | • power |
| • faith | • glory | • duty |

After reading *The Faithful Spy*, have students look back at their personal definitions and/or illustrations of these terms and ask themselves: Would I change any now? If so, to what and why?

If time permits, have students look back through *The Faithful Spy* to identify where these terms are most apparent in the text and/or the art of the story. Students should identify points in the novel where they felt their personal definitions and images were reinforced or challenged.

GUIDED READING IDEAS

1. Much of Dietrich's life is about sacrifice. Have students create a list of things they would be "willing to risk it all for," as Dietrich does for his family, faith, and country at various times throughout the graphic novel. Create a list on the board of these or have students share them in groups.
2. Dietrich's worldview is fundamentally changed on page 13. Have you ever had something happen in your life that changed your whole perspective on yourself or the world around you? How and why?
3. Can you remember the first time you felt a sense of patriotism to a particular state, country, and/or political party? What about this experience made you feel that way?
4. On pages 14–18, the artist portrays war as a giant crack opening in the earth. Why does the artist choose to represent the war this way? How would you represent war as an image?
5. Throughout pages 14-25, the artist uses various images to symbolize the feelings, thoughts, and mental states of the characters, as well as the German country as a whole, during a time of great political and social upheaval. Examples include symbolic images of wartime, Hitler in a spotlight, Dietrich as a zookeeper, music flowing from cathedrals, and cracks and rats in foundations. Why does the artist choose these images specifically? What effect(s) do you feel they are intended to have on the reader? Later in the book, students can relate these images back to the symbolic images that the Nazis use to consolidate their power and sway the German public.
6. What do you think Dietrich means when he says, "Faith was lived out in the community with others" on page 23?
7. Do you believe there can be such a thing as a "good war," as Frank and Dietrich discuss on pages 36–37?
8. "Nazification" of Germany (page 41) became a key strategy in Hitler's ascent to power. Why do you think he worked so hard to bring all parts of Germany under a central ideology? How can blurring these lines between politics, religion, and culture become problematic?
9. Martin Niemöller's famous words are featured on page 69. What do these words mean to you, and why have they become so well known throughout history? Do they still feel relevant today? If so, why?
10. What do you believe makes a "true leader" as discussed on page 74? Try to list as many qualities as you can.
11. On page 156, Dietrich chooses to sacrifice himself instead of his family and friends. Was this the right choice? Why or why not?
12. On pages 158–159, Dietrich says that "the only fight which is lost is that which we give up" and that he believed it his duty to "suffer faithfully." Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
13. How does Dietrich's faith evolve as the graphic novel goes on? What key events can you identify that change his faith from a theoretical concept to a collective experience, to a tool for change, and finally to a weapon against evil?

CLASSROOM EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

HISTORICAL TIMELINE: To help students follow along with the plot, have them create a timeline of significant events from the story—including Dietrich’s life, the events leading up to the start of WWII, and so on. Students should add to this timeline as they read.

PROS & CONS: Have students create a list of pros and cons of the difficult choices Dietrich is forced to make throughout the novel. To add complexity, have students create categories of Individual, Family, Faith, and Country in order to analyze how each of Dietrich’s decisions affected these areas of his life—intentionally or unintentionally. If given the choice, would students have made different choices than Dietrich? Why?

NEWSPAPER SCAVENGER HUNT: Have students read local and/or national newspapers from a wide variety of sources alongside *The Faithful Spy*. As they read, they should create a portfolio featuring articles they feel are related to issues, themes, and events from the novel. After completing the book, ask students to write or discuss why they selected these contemporary articles and what crossovers they have with *The Faithful Spy*.

CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT COMIC: On pages 30–31, readers see Dietrich going on a powerful cultural experience that would forever change him during his time in the United States. Using this as a model, have students select a culturally and/or politically significant story from childhood and create a six to twelve panel comic that depicts this experience.

DECODING WAR: To understand the difficulty of communication and maintaining secrecy during war, have students work in groups or pairs to develop a cypher like Dietrich and Hans on pages 128–130. Students can then develop messages to pass between one another to see if the cypher works, and even pass their decoded messages to other groups to see if they can crack each other’s codes.

CREATE A GOVERNMENT: Working in groups, have students build their own governmental system from scratch— similar to how Germany was rebuilt after WWI. As time permits, students can even develop their own brief constitution, laws, symbols, and other elements of a functioning government. Provide limitations as needed.

SUGGESTED FILMS & READINGS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Ken Burns’s *The War* (TV Series)

Stephen Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (Film)

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* (Novel)

Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* (Autobiography)

Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (Autobiography)

Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (Graphic Novel)

Star Wars, Episodes IV-VI (Films)

Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Novel)

Stephen Hopkins’s *Race* (Film)

Emmanuel Guibert’s *Alan’s War: The Memories of G.I. Alan Cope* (Graphic Novel)

Interview with Writer and Artist John Hendrix

Why did you choose to tell Dietrich Bonhoeffer's story?

I've known Dietrich Bonhoeffer for a long time. As lifelong Christian, I read his theology for the first time in college, but it wasn't until recent years that I began to see how his story could have some resonance with a larger audience. After I wrote my first book for children on the abolitionist John Brown, I began to think that Dietrich's story is very similar in some ways, and might make a great story for young people.

In the backmatter, you state that the book is a work of art. With that in mind, what do you feel are the most important nuances between fiction and nonfiction in the story?

I worked hard to make sure that the emotional heart of the story was grounded in knowable reality, in both the facts and the framing of Dietrich's life. That said, all biographies are in a way speculative! Especially when we try to see beyond the physical records and remnants of their life and infer motives and imagine choices that didn't happen. Much of Dietrich's prayer life and spiritual doubts are recorded from the great letters and poems collected in the book *Letters and Papers from Prison*, but that said, I'm am stepping into the unknown by putting readers in the mind of Bonhoeffer as he's wrestling with doubt and conviction. I used a clear system of marking all quotes that are sourced with an asterisk, and all other conversations are imagined, to help the reader know what they are reading.

Why was it important to tell a story about German resistance during WWII?

I mention this in the introduction, but I think it is very easy to see World War II in terms of very black and white forces. In some ways, the appeal of the narrative comes from how evil the Nazi Party was, and how clear a mandate the world had to defeat them. But, sadly, we paint the entire country with the same stark brush, and the truth is much more gray.

There are a few passages in the book that speak to the understanding in German society in the 1930s that the army (the Wehrmacht) was seen as separate from politics or party (the Nazis). So in their minds, Germans could serve Germany in the army, while not serving all Nazi goals. Now, as we look back in the totality of the war, it is unreasonable to draw these distinctions. But if we try to inhabit Dietrich or the hearts and minds of Germans as the events were unfolding, suddenly we are able to see the gray and it can illuminate how we might experience something similar in our lives.

*What do you hope young adult readers take away from their experience reading *The Faithful Spy*?*

Well, there is much that I would hope for in terms of takeaways from the book. I'd love for young people to be able to construct a logical thumbnail account in their mind of how Hitler came to power and manipulated the German people. I'd love for readers to understand that religion as a motivating force is not always divisive. I'd love for readers to want to explore more from Dietrich, specifically some of his writings on community and Jesus. But, most of all, I think the main message is that of being able to see "the other" around us, and thinking about what sacrifice really means in our world today, through the lens of what Bonhoeffer did in his life.

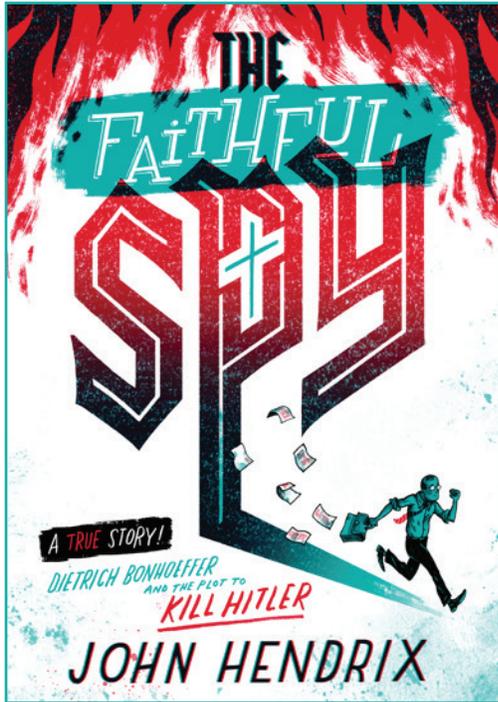
What do you personally like most about Dietrich Bonhoeffer?

There is much to love about him, but in his letters from prison, he shows both such honest doubt and lament, as well as equal parts thanksgiving and hopefulness in God and his fellow conspirators. That, and he was an excellent Ping-Pong player, much like myself.

THE FAITHFUL SPY

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AND THE PLOT TO KILL HITLER

by John Hendrix



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Ages 10 to 14

PRAISE

- ★ “A poignant, compellingly presented, and timely account of a brave individual who lived his life with true conviction.” —Booklist
- ★ “Audacious. . . . Hendrix crafts a portrait of a man of faith grappling with the question of what it means to be an ethical and moral person.” —Kirkus
- ★ “The bold visuals will attract graphic novel fans. An excellent introduction to a great man and his fight for justice.” —School Library Journal
- ★ “This book’s inclusion of detailed illustrations, ample use of quotes, and the engaging narrative all contribute to a rich telling of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life.” —School Library Connection

“[A] downright master-piece. Kids, you ain’t never read anything like this puppy before. And I’ll warrant you won’t ever again.”

—Betsy Bird, School Library Journal’s Fuse #8 Blog

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Hendrix is the author and/or illustrator of several critically acclaimed books. These include *Miracle Man: The Story of Jesus* and *Shooting at the Stars: The Christmas Truce of 1914*—both of which he wrote and illustrated—as well as *Nurse, Soldier, Spy: The Story of Sarah Edmonds, a Civil War Hero* by Marissa Moss and *McToad Mows Tiny Island* by Tom Angleberger. John also created *Drawing Is Magic: Discovering Yourself in a Sketchbook*. He lives in Saint Louis, Missouri, with his wife and children.

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