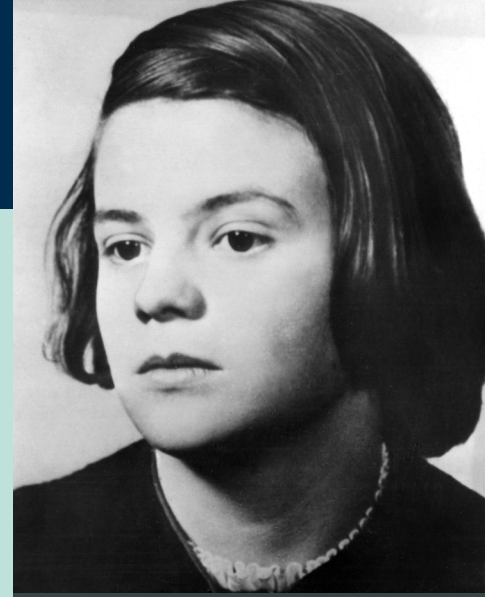


History Topic of the Month

Sophie Scholl (1921-1943) and the White Rose

May 2021 marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Sophie Scholl. In 1942, Sophie and her brother, Hans (born 1918), were students in Munich. Along with a few other close friends, they were members of a small, non-violent, anti-Nazi group called the White Rose. The White Rose printed anti-Nazi leaflets and distributed them in Munich, and other German towns and cities.



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Sophie Scholl



Contributor: ©Louise Elder / Alamy Stock Photo

It's not known why the group chose the white rose as its name and symbol. Some have argued it was inspired by a German novel or a German poem of the same name, while others argue it was chosen as a symbol of purity.

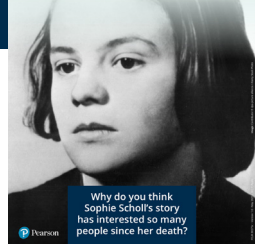
Sophie and the other White Rose members faced huge risks opposing the Nazi regime. They knew they would be executed if they were caught. Despite the danger, they felt they had to make a stand against an oppressive and evil regime. They hoped to inspire others to oppose the Nazis.

In February 1943, Sophie, Hans and their friend, Christoph Probst, were caught, tried and executed for their 'crimes'. However, the bravery of Sophie and her comrades continues to inspire people today to make a stand against evil and oppression.

Sophie's childhood and beliefs

Sophie was born 9th May 1921, in the small town of Forchtenberg in the south of Germany. She was the fourth of six children and her father, Robert, was the town mayor from 1919 to 1930. In 1932, the Scholls moved to the town of Ulm, where Sophie went to secondary school. Sophie particularly loved reading, music and nature.

Life in Germany changed with Hitler's rise to power in 1933. Robert Scholl was an outspoken critic of the Nazis and in 1942 he was even imprisoned because he publicly criticised Hitler. Despite his anti-Nazi feelings, Robert allowed his children to join the popular Nazi youth groups – but he warned them against it.



History Topic of the Month: Sophie Scholl

Sophie joined the League of German Maidens (*Bund Deutscher Mädel* – or BDM), a Nazi youth group for girls, and her brother, Hans, joined the Hitler Youth (*Hitlerjugend*), for boys. Sophie, Hans, and their siblings, were all caught up in the excitement and optimism that the new Nazi regime seemed to bring. They enjoyed the hiking, camping and other activities the youth groups organised. Sophie and Hans both became leaders in their groups, but in time they became disillusioned with Nazism.

Sophie loses faith in Nazism

Sophie's doubts began when her Jewish friends were forbidden from joining the BDM. They became stronger when she was told off for suggesting her BDM group should read poems by the Jewish author, Heinrich Heine. Sophie was told Heine's books had been banned and burnt by the Nazis. She replied: "Whoever doesn't know Heine, does not know German literature."

Sophie was very close to her father and his opposition to the Nazis had a strong effect on her. She would listen quietly while Robert and Hans argued about Hitler and his regime.

Hans is arrested

From about 1935, Hans drifted away from the Hitler Youth. By 1937 he had joined an anti-Nazi youth group. Later that year, Hans was arrested by the Gestapo (the Nazi secret police). The Scholl's home was raided and three of Hans's siblings, Inge, Werner and Sophie, were arrested.

Although they were soon released, Hans was detained for several weeks. Robert was appalled at the arrest of his children and vowed revenge on Hitler: "If they do anything to my children, I'll go to Berlin and shoot him!"

Eventually, Hans was accused of having a homosexual relationship (a crime in Germany at that time) when he was sixteen. Hans admitted to the relationship, but the case was dropped at court, and he was allowed to go free.



Sophie's Christian faith

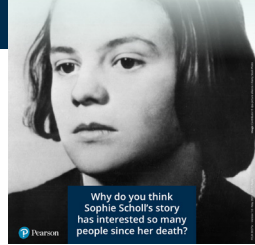
Events like these, and others – such as the arrest and imprisonment of a young teacher in Ulm – revealed to Sophie that the Nazi regime could not be tolerated. Her father had once said to his children, "All I want is for you to walk straight and free through life, even when it's hard". It was clear no such freedom existed.

Contributor: ©Hilary Morgan / Alamy Stock Photo

Saint John Henry Newman's writings about conscience had a huge impact on Sophie. Newman was a 19th century English cardinal and writer. He was made a saint in 2019.

History Topic of the Month: Sophie Scholl

Sophie Scholl
(1921-1943)
and the White Rose

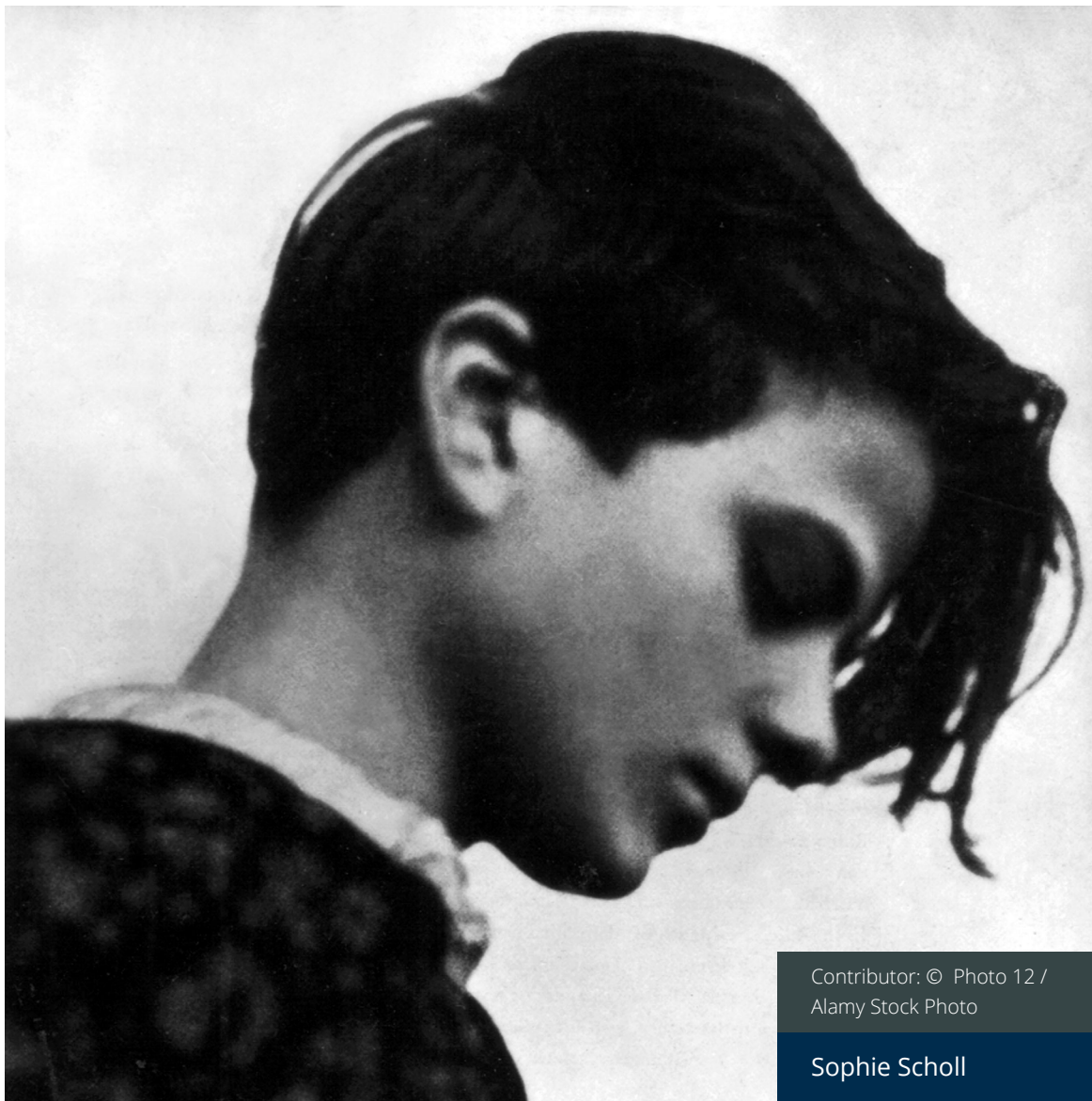


Sophie's beliefs were strongly influenced by her Christian faith and the pacifism of her parents. Sophie was raised a Christian and later in life she became fascinated by the writings of John Henry Newman (1801-1890), an English cardinal. Newman wrote about the Christian duty to obey a good conscience and his words helped give Sophie the conviction to not only oppose the Nazis, but to do so peacefully and with a clear conscience.

The White Rose

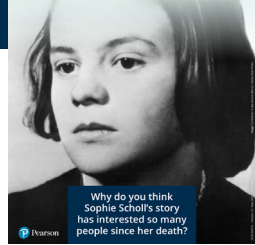
In May 1942, Sophie (now 21) studied biology and philosophy at Munich University. Hans was already studying medicine at Munich. Earlier that year, he and his friends, Willia Graf, Alexander Schmorell and Christoph Probst, had formed a group they called the White Rose. The group were thinking of ways they could oppose the Nazis.

To protect Sophie, Hans kept his actions secret from her. But she quickly found out and joined the group. Sophie's resolve was further hardened during 1942 by the arrest of her father, and by letters from her boyfriend, Fritz Hartnagel, who was serving on the Eastern Front. Fritz told her about the crimes committed by German soldiers, such as the shooting of Jews and unarmed Soviet prisoners. Sophie believed Hitler must lose the war and be removed from power.



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Sophie Scholl



History Topic of the Month: Sophie Scholl

The White Rose's campaign

The White Rose group were determined to oppose the Nazis. However, they wanted to do this peacefully. They printed anti-Nazi leaflets to share their beliefs and reasons for opposing the Nazis.

- The first leaflet shamed Germans into opposing the Nazis and posed the question: "Isn't it true that every honest German is ashamed of his government these days?"
- The second leaflet highlighted the mass murder of Jews.
- The third leaflet argued that Hitler would destroy Germany, encouraging Germans to oppose him with passive resistance.
- The fourth leaflet was inspired by Cardinal Newman's writings: "We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace!"
- The fifth leaflet argued that it was inevitable Hitler would lose the war and so it called on Germans to oppose the war effort so as not to prolong it. It also put forward ideas for a post-war Europe: "Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the protection of the individual citizen from the caprice [whim] of criminal, violent States – these are the bases of the new Europe."
- The sixth leaflet was written by Professor Kurt Huber, a supporter of the White Rose group who had taught several of its members, and it was aimed at students.

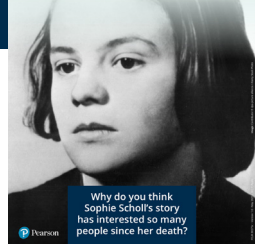
The White Rose were never able to distribute their seventh leaflet.

Sophie's arrest

On 18th February 1943, Sophie and Hans were spotted trying to distribute the sixth leaflet. They were reported to the Gestapo by a Munich University caretaker called Jakob Schmid. Sophie and Hans were arrested, and copies of their leaflet seized. Hans also had a draft of the seventh leaflet on him when he was arrested and the handwriting was matched to Christoph Probst, who was also arrested. Christoph had a wife and two young children.

Sophie and Hans were interrogated for days. Sophie knew there was no hope for her and Hans, but to protect the other members of the group she confessed her own activities and tried to claim full responsibility. She never gave evidence about any of the other White Rose members. She also demanded to meet the same fate as her brother if he was sentenced to death.

On 21st February, Sophie, Hans and Christoph were brought before an angry judge who branded them traitors. They were not allowed any defence. Sophie was recorded as saying: "Somebody, after all, had to make a start. What we wrote and said is also believed by many others. They just don't dare express themselves as we did."



History Topic of the Month: Sophie Scholl

Sophie's parents tried to get into the court to defend them but were dragged away by guards. Thankfully, Sophie and Hans were able to briefly see their parents and they were able to tell them that they were proud that they had betrayed no one and taken full responsibility. Meanwhile, in his last hours, Christoph asked to see a priest and converted to Catholicism.

Sophie, Hans and Christoph were sentenced to death on 22nd February. They were ordered to be guillotined. Sophie went to her death defiant to the end: "Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go... What does my death matter, if through us, thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?"

Sophie's legacy

Sophie, Hans and the other White Rose members knew the danger they faced when they decided to stand up to evil. It took great bravery to take the action that they did, but they felt they had to play their part to oppose the Nazi regime and inspire others to follow them. In July 1943, the Allies got their hands on a copy of the sixth leaflet and distributed millions of copies of it by air over German cities. This helped many more Germans become aware of their message.

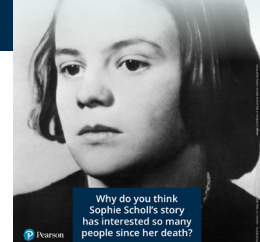


Contributor: © Alamy ID: C473C7

We will never fully know how much the White Rose inspired resistance to the Nazis. Hitler clung to power until his eventual defeat in May 1945, surviving an attempt by some German officers and politicians to assassinate him in July 1944.

Although the White Rose failed to directly inspire an uprising against Hitler, their actions still inspire people today. Sophie's story has captured the imagination of people across the world, and she and her brother have been the subject of several books, films and articles. Sophie's thoughtful, determined defiance, and her heroism, remind us that even amongst great fear and horror there can be hope.

A bronze memorial to Sophie Scholl



History Topic of the Month: Sophie Scholl

Discussion points

- Why do you think Sophie Scholl's story has interested so many people since her death?
- The White Rose printed and distributed leaflets criticising Hitler and the Nazis. Can you think of other non-violent tactics that people can use to oppose a government or an organisation?
- Can you think of any other people, either now or in the past, who have used methods of non-violent protest?
- Sophie Scholl was very close to her family. How important do you think her family was in influencing Sophie to take the action that she did?
- Sophie Scholl was determined to have a clear conscience. Why do you think this was important to her?

About the author

David Broadbent is a Product Manager at Pearson and has a degree in ancient, medieval and modern history.

Reading List

Books

Sophie Scholl and the White Rose – Annette Dumbach & Jud Newborn

At the Heart of the White Rose: Letters and Diaries of Hans and Sophie Scholl – Edited by Inge Jens

A Noble Treason: The Story of Sophie Scholl and the White Rose Revolt Against Hitler – Richard Hanser

Films

Sophie Scholl: The Final Days (2005)

Take a look at [Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History](#) webpages for more great content.

Articles

[Spartacus Educational: Sophie Scholl](#)

[Spartacus Educational: Hans Scholl](#)

[History Learning Site: Sophie Scholl](#)

[History Learning Site: Hans Scholl](#)

[Sophie Scholl biography](#)

[Sky History: Hans Scholl – The boy who stood up to the Nazis](#)

[Catholic Herald: Resisting the Nazis with Newman](#)

[Learning from the White Rose](#)

[The text of the White Rose leaflets](#)