Should the Nazis destroy the churches?

As you can see from Sources 1 and 2, there were conflicting views among Hitler and the Nazis on how to deal with the churches.

**Destroy them!**
The Nazis saw the churches as a threat. They wanted total control over German life, and the churches stood in the way of this.

- In 1935 nearly all Germans were Christians. Roughly one-third were Roman Catholic and two-thirds were Protestants. The Protestant Church had more members than any other organisation in Germany, including the Nazi Party.
- Religious beliefs were powerful ones. People who believed in God might be less likely to worship Hitler as the leader of Germany. The Church taught its people very clear rules of behaviour and attitude. What if they conflicted with what the Nazis wanted?
- Church meetings could be used for spreading anti-Nazi ideas.

These, the Nazis argued, were reasons for destroying the Church as they had destroyed other independent organisations.

**Use them!**
On the other hand, the Nazis needed the churches.

- Many Church members had voted for Hitler, Protestants in particular. Protestant church pastors were among the most popular and successful Nazi election speakers.
- There was also common ground on several issues, such as the importance of family life. The Church supported the Nazi emphasis on the military; in 1936 priests accompanied the troops as they re-entered the Rhineland.
- The church was often the local power base for the Nazis. If they could build on it then they would be stronger still.

Some Nazis therefore argued that, far from destroying the Church, they should try to use it.

**Agreements with the churches: 1935–55**

When he came to power in 1935 Hitler chose not to provoke a conflict with the churches until he was sure he could win. In a speech to the Reichstag on 25 March 1935 Hitler said that Christianity was 'the unshakeable foundation of the moral life of our people'.

In June 1935 the Catholic Church signed a Concordat (understanding) with Hitler. Hitler promised that the Catholics could carry on their religious work, and that Catholic schools and youth groups would be left alone. The Pope promised the Vatican would stay out of politics. Catholic Bishop Bürger said: 'The aims of the Reich [Nazi] government have long been the same as those of the Catholic Church.'

Hitler united all the Protestant churches together into one Reich church under a pro-Nazi Reich Bishop, Müller (see Source 3). They became known as the German Christians. They adopted Nazi-style uniforms, salutes and marches. Their slogan was 'The swastika on our breasts and the cross in our hearts.'

**The Faith Movement**
The German Faith Movement was the Nazis' alternative to Christianity. It involved pagan-style worship of nature centred on the sun. The movement's flag was a golden sun on a blue background, often with a Nazi swastika attached.

**Sources**

1. Sources 1 and 2 provide evidence of Hitler's view of religion. Do they contradict each other?
2. If so, how can you account for this?
Did the churches oppose the Nazis?

Many Christians sided with the Nazis. A small minority did not, as you can see from the sources below.

ACTIVITY

1. Complete this table to show what aspects of the 'Nazis' policies each person opposed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catholic/</th>
<th>Protestant/</th>
<th>What did they oppose?</th>
<th>How dealt with?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Martin Niemoller
- Paul Schneider
- Cardinal Galen
- Josef Fath
- The Jehovah's Witnesses

2. Choose one individual or group who you think posed a particular danger to the Nazis and write a paragraph to explain your choice.

Martin Niemoller

Martin Niemoller was a First World War hero - as a U-boat commander he had won Germany's highest decoration for bravery. During the 1930s he became the 'Nazis' most prominent critic among Church leaders. He disliked the 'German Christians' and the Nazis. With other Protestant ministers (including Dietrich Bonhoeffer - see page 152) he formed an alternative 'Confessional Church'; Niemoller and hundreds of other ministers were put in concentration camps.

SOURCE 8 Sermon preached by Niemoller to his Congregation, Sunday 24 March 1934. There were members of the secret police in the congregation

"We see more and more clearly how there is a spread of new heathenism which wishes to have nothing to do with the Saviour who was crucified for us, while the Church which acknowledges the Saviour as its only Lord is attacked as an enemy of the state ... we must obey God rather than men."

 Cardinal Galen

Catholic Cardinal Galen publicly attacked the Nazi policies as early as 1934. In 1941 he revealed that the Nazis were secretly killing mentally and physically handicapped people. Galen led a campaign which made Hitler call a halt to this euthanasia programme. The Nazi Party did not want to make Galen into a martyr so they took no action against him, but three Catholic priests were executed for distributing copies of Galen's sermons to soldiers. Some Nazis urged Goebbels to hang Galen, but Goebbels pointed out: 'If anything were done against the bishop, the population of Münster could be regarded as lost to the war effort, and the same could be said of the whole of Westphalia.'

Josef Fath

In many rural areas the local priests clashed with Nazi schoolteachers and leaders of the Hitler Youth movements who were trying to lure young people away from Catholic beliefs. The village of Leidersbach was looked after by the young Catholic priest Josef Fath.

SOURCE 9 An account given by the local Nazi schoolteacher when, in 1937, fifty parents demanded she be sacked

"Positive work on behalf of the National Socialist State and Party has recently become completely impossible. This is attributed to hostile local cleric Chaplain Fath ... A few facts serve to show this ... on church feast days despite express ban, some seventy yellow and white church flags were hung out ... on the appointment of a Hitler Youth leader stones were thrown at their headquarters and the leaders were loudly and violently abused ... Chaplain Fath agitated in the Catholic Mothers' Association against the teacher; saying the teacher hung a picture of Hitler at the front of her classroom and the crucifix at the side. He agitates, in secret, against the youth organisations. This is proved by the fact that despite the greatest recruitment drive, the number of girls in the Hitler Youth is seventeen while 'his' flegglings in the Congregation of Mary number almost two hundred ... This time my own person is the target and the brains behind the demonstration is again Chaplain Fath, who up to now has succeeded in getting rid of everything in his path."

The Jehovah's Witnesses

Germany's 30,000 Jehovah's Witnesses believed they should live according to their religious beliefs and not by what the government said they should do. Most Jehovah's Witnesses ended up in concentration camps and one-third of them died.
Did the Nazis succeed in controlling the churches?

After 1933, once they felt more secure in their overall control of Germany, the Nazis became bolder in their attempts to control the churches.

**TASK**

**Case study: Bavaria**
Sources 10–15 are evidence about Bavaria. Bavaria had been the birthplace of the Nazi Party, but in the elections of 1933 the Nazis had done well there. It was a mainly Catholic area.

Work in pairs. One of you is going to argue that the Nazis succeeded in controlling the Church in Bavaria, the other is to argue that they did not. Do this by first selecting what you think are the four best sources or points to support your argument. You have one minute each to present your argument. Then you have a further two minutes in which you should argue with each other. At the end you should decide on who put forward the better argument.

**SOURCE 10**
In 1934, when the Nazis tried to control the Protestant churches in Bavaria, they met with strong opposition from the bishops and the people. A church newsletter reported:

"We witnessed a miracle here in Nuremberg. There was enormous commotion going on in the town. We only gave out hand notices at twelve o’clock and in the evening sixteen churches were full to bursting. Everywhere, often at the most inconvenient times, churches were full."**

**SOURCE 11**
By 1937 the Protestant Church in Bavaria noted:  
"The danger which threatens our parish is of being ground down, of becoming dispirited. The vast majority of our parishes believe ‘one cannot do anything’ against the new forces and give up ... Above all, youth is losing the habit of going to church regularly."**

**SOURCE 12**
Comments from police reports in Bavaria in 1937 and 1938:

a) ... the influence of the Church on the population is so strong that the National Socialist spirit cannot penetrate.

b) ... the local population is as ever under the strong influence of the clergy and behaves indifferently towards the National Socialist government and its measures.

c) These people much prefer to believe what the priest says from the pulpit than the words of the best speakers.

**SOURCE 15**
In two cities in Bavaria the Nazi held an annual vote of parents to decide if they wanted a church school or a non-church ‘community school’. These were the results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Munich</th>
<th>Nuremberg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE 14**
In 1941 the Nazis tried to remove crucifixes from Catholic schools in Bavaria, they met with fierce opposition. This was often led by women who organised school strikes and got soldiers on leave to forcibly return the crosses to schools. The government compiled this table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Crosses removed</th>
<th>Crosses returned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mühldorf district</td>
<td>all from 43 schools</td>
<td>all except one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebersberg district</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Bavaria as a whole</td>
<td>389 from 977 schools</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Many of the soldiers referred to in Source 14 had shown little or no interest in the Church before the war. Why do you think they helped return the crosses to schools?

**TASK**

Using all you have found out about the Nazi policy towards the churches write an essay with the title: Did the Nazis succeed in controlling the churches? You should cover:

- why Nazis were divided on this issue
- the different measures they used to control the churches
- whether in your opinion the Nazis were successful.