

# Why didn't the Nazis destroy the churches?

**SOURCE 1** In 1933 Hitler told a colleague:

“ Neither Catholic nor Protestant has any future left. At least not for the Germans ... Nothing will stop me stamping out Christianity in Germany, root and branch. One is either a Christian or a German. You can't be both ... Do you really believe the masses will ever be Christian again? Nonsense. Never again. No one will listen to it again. But we can hasten matters. The clergy will be made to dig their own graves. They will betray their God to us. They will betray anything for the sake of their miserable little jobs and incomes. ”

**SOURCE 2** Helmut Thielicke, a Christian who later opposed Hitler, described Hitler's attitude to religion in 1933

“ Hitler used Christian vocabulary. He talked about the blessing of the Almighty and how the Christian beliefs would become pillars of the new state. He handed out deeply religious stories to the press, especially the Church papers. It was reported, for example, that he showed his tattered Bible to some deaconesses and declared that he drew the strength for his great work from the Word of God. ”

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?

## 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 1933 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 all 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: 1933–35

When he came to power in 1933 Hitler chose not to provoke a conflict with the churches until he was sure he could win. In a speech to the Reichstag on 23 March 1933 Hitler said that Christianity was 'the unshakeable foundation of the moral life of our people'.

In June 1933 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'.

**SOURCE 3** Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller, leader of the German Christians, making a speech in September 1934. You can see their flag – a cross with a swastika imposed on it – at the top of the steps



## 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.



**SOURCE 5** A pagan-style Nazi festival, 1934

**SOURCE 4** The ending of a speech at a meeting of the Faith Movement. The Faith Movement saw the Catholic and Protestant churches as the enemy

“ Our faith is in blood and earth, we want to be pure heathen, not contaminated with Christianity. We don't talk about Christians or heathens, but only about Germans. Adolf Hitler! [This was followed by cries of 'To the gallows with the Bishop', 'Shoot him', 'Throw them out of the churches', 'Away with the monasteries', 'Shoot the priests', 'String up the nuns', 'We don't need Christianity', 'Away with Christ'.] ”

**SOURCE 6** A newspaper account of a Nazi marriage ceremony

“ The central point was the wedding table which was decorated with two figures. On the table lay a yellow sun disc made of flowers on a blue background; to the left and right stood torch-bearers and behind the table a bowl, containing fire, and the pulpit. German songs and music were played. Then the bridal pair were offered bread (representing the germinating force of earth) and salt (the symbol of purity) on silver vessels. ”

Many of the SS especially were anti-Christian. New marriage, 'baptism' and burial services were devised. Sources 6 and 7 show what these services were like.



**SOURCE 7** A Nazi altar

3. Do Sources 4, 5 and 6 support Source 1 or Source 2?
4. Study Source 7. How does this altar differ from a Christian altar?
5. In not more than 50 words explain how the Faith Movement would help the Nazis control the churches.

## 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:

	Catholic/ Protestant/ Other	What did they oppose?	How dealt with?
Martin Niemöller			
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 Niemöller

Martin Niemöller 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'. Niemöller and hundreds of other ministers were put in concentration camps.

**SOURCE 8** Sermon preached by Niemöller 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. ”*

### Paul Schneider

Schneider was a pastor in a small town. He criticised the Nazis, especially Josef Goebbels. In 1934 he was arrested and warned not to make speeches hostile to the Nazis. He ignored this warning.

Finally in 1937 he was sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. He smuggled out letters warning that the Church must not compromise with the Nazis. He refused to take off his cap when the Nazi swastika flag was hoisted so he was stretched on a rack and whipped. He was tortured and strung up by the arms for hours at a time. Soon he was little more than a bruised skeleton, dressed in rags and crawling with lice. Still he refused to sign a promise not to preach. Then he was put in a cell which looked out, at ground-level, on the camp parade ground. He prayed aloud for the other prisoners, and when he saw SS guards shoot prisoners he would cry out, 'I have seen this! And I will accuse you of murder before God's judgement-seat!' He was kept in the camp for two years.



This photograph shows Pastor Niemöller with an American GI immediately after his release from Dachau in 1945

While awaiting trial in a Nazi prison he was visited by the prison chaplain who asked him, 'But brother! Why are you in prison?' Niemöller replied, 'And, brother, why are you not in prison?'

In 1938 he was sent to a concentration camp and although Hitler ordered his death shortly before the end of the war, he survived.

### 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!'



Cardinal Galen

### 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

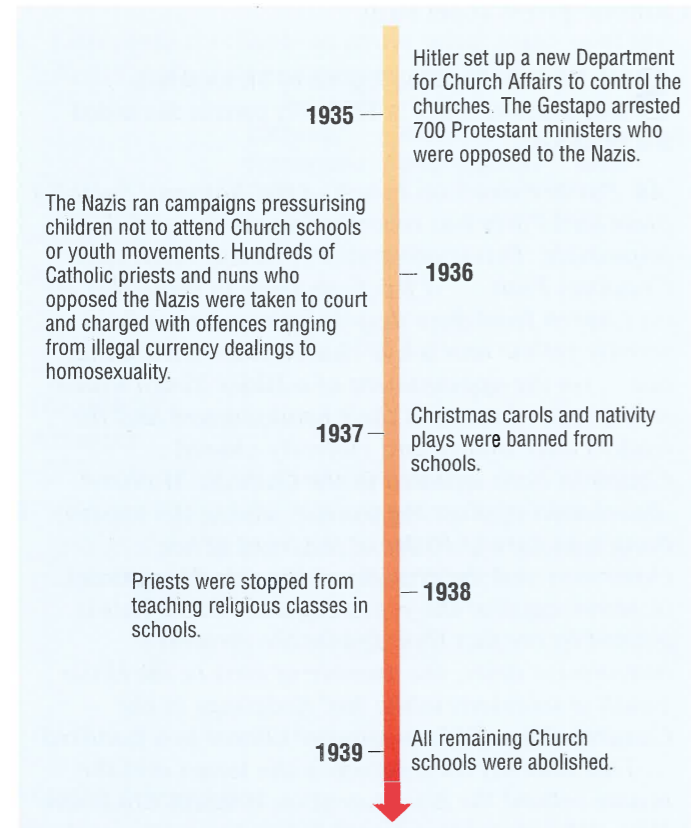
*“ Positive work on behalf of the National Socialist State and Party has recently become completely impossible. This is attributed to hostile local cleric Chaplain Fath ... A few facts serve to show this ... on Church feast days despite express ban, some seventy yellow and white church flags were hung 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' fledglings 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 1935, once they felt more secure in their overall control of Germany, the Nazis became bolder in their attempts to control the churches.



However, even in this period policy was chaotic. The Nazis improvised, changed their minds, and bowed to public pressure. At the local level it was local leaders who set policy. Some local Nazi leaders sent their SA men to beat up and murder priests; others went to church every Sunday and sang in the choir. It is no surprise therefore that the Nazis' success varied very much from place to place.

In the 1939 census of the Greater German Reich, when people had to state their religious-faith, the results were:

Roman Catholic	1,944,000
Protestant	42,636,000
Jewish	308,000
Without belief	1,208,000
Neo-pagan	2,746,000

Even the majority of the three million Nazi Party members still paid Church taxes and registered as Christians.

### 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 not 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:

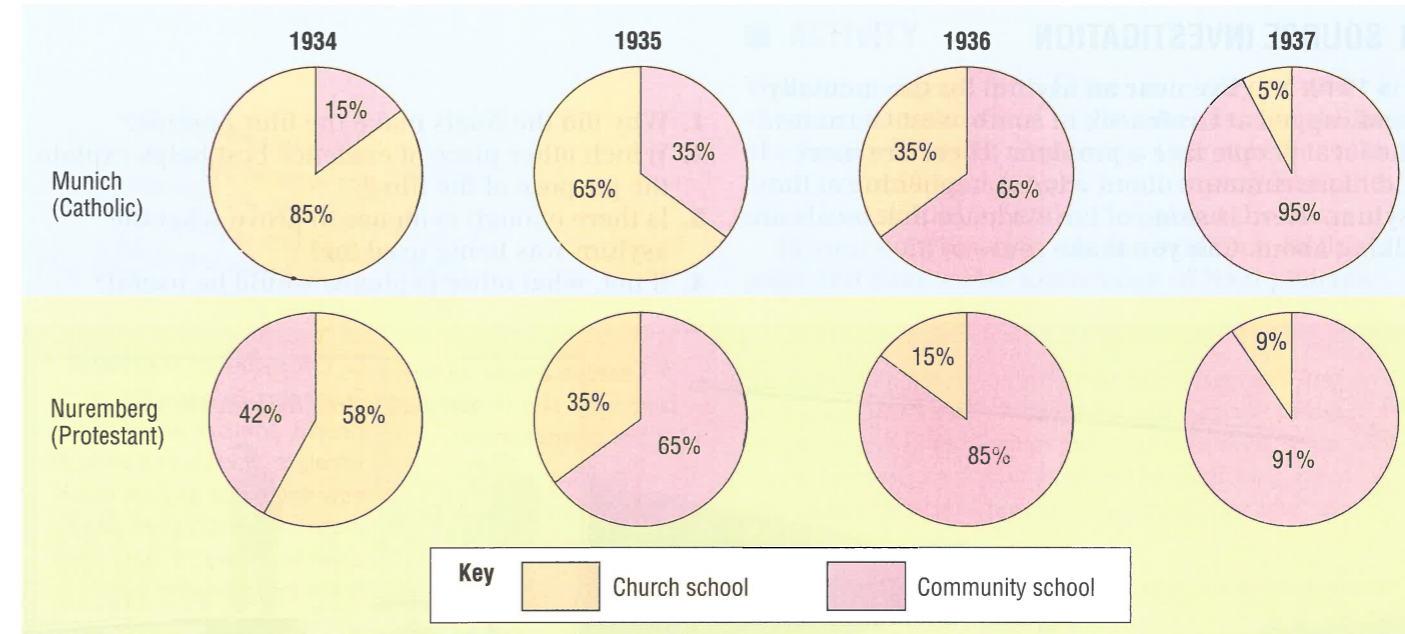
“ We witnessed a miracle here in Nuremberg. There was enormous commotion going on in the town. We only gave out hand notices at twelve o'clock and in the evening sixteen churches were full to bursting. Everywhere, often at the most inconvenient times, churches were full. ”

**SOURCE 11** By 1937 the Protestant Church in Bavaria noted:

“ The danger which threatens our parishes is of being ground down, of becoming dispirited. The vast majority of our parishes believe that ‘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 Nazis held an annual vote of parents to decide if they wanted a church school or a non-church ‘community school’. These were the results

**SOURCE 14** When 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

	Crosses removed	Crosses returned
Mühdorf district	all from 43 schools	all except one
Ebersberg district	none	–
Upper Bavaria as a whole	389 from 977 schools	282

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?

**SOURCE 15** The role of the clergy in Catholic Bavaria is explained by Ian Kershaw in his book *Popular Opinion and Public Dissent in the Third Reich – Bavaria* (1983)

“ In the Catholic clergy, Goebbels met his propaganda match. Clergy took the lead in many outward signs of opposition – use of the ‘Grüß Gott’ greeting and avoidance of ‘Heil Hitler’, omitting to put out the swastika flag on official celebrations or continuing to show the banned Church flags ... The reports of the Nazi authorities are littered with cases of priests being arrested and punished in one form or another for such behaviour. ”

### 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.