16

Did the Churches collaborate with or resist the Nazi regime?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

A Introduction (pp. 305–7)

B How did the Nazi regime treat the Churches? (pp. 308–9)

C How did the Churches react to the Nazi state? (pp. 310–12)

D How did the German people respond to the uneasy relationship between Church and state? (pp. 313)

E Review: Did the Churches collaborate with or resist the Nazi regime? (pp. 314–15)

SOURCE 16.1 Hitler in a speech to the Reichstag in March 1933

[Christianity is] the unshakeable foundation of the moral life of our people . . .

SOURCE 16.2 Hitler in a private conversation in 1933: quoted in *Hitler Speaks* by Hermann Rauschning

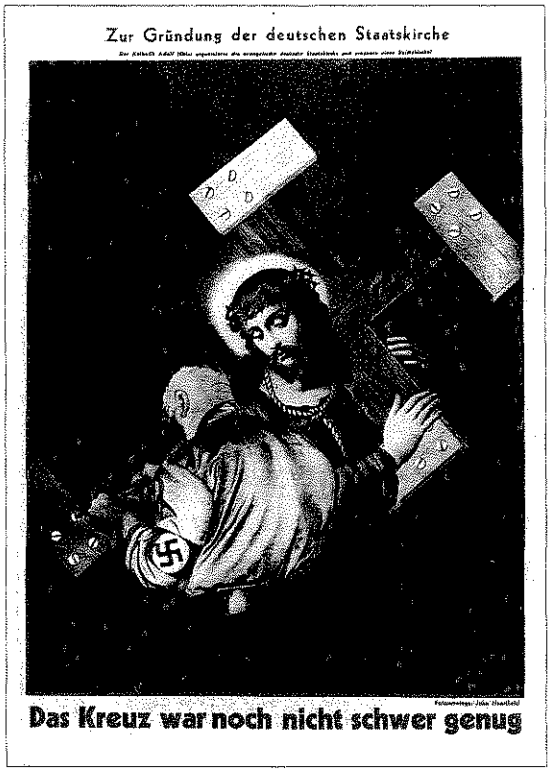
For our people it is decisive whether they acknowledge the Jewish Christ-creed with its effeminate [feeble] pity-ethics, or a strong, heroic belief in God in Nature, God in our people, in our destiny, in our blood.

[As in Italy, I will make] peace with the Church. Why not! It won't stop me eradicating Christianity from Germany root and branch. You are either Christian or a German. You can't be both.

SOURCE 16.3 Archbishop Faulhaber of Munich in 1936

The Reich Chancellor undoubtedly lives in belief in God.

SOURCE 16.4
A poster produced by the government during the 1934 plebiscite campaign, showing Hitler and the Papal Nuncio (diplomat): 'For a long time I didn't understand you. But I have been trying to. And today I do.' Beneath it says: 'And every German Catholic understands Adolf Hitler and will vote Yes! on 12 November'



SOURCE 16.5
'On the founding of the state Church': a 1933 cartoon by John Heartfield. The text beneath says: 'The cross wasn't heavy enough yet'

ACTIVITY

1 What do Sources 16.1–9 suggest about relations between the Churches and the Nazi state?
2 Make a preliminary list of reasons why you might expect the Churches to:
   a) co-operate with the Third Reich
   b) oppose it.
3 Make a similar list of reasons why the Nazi regime might seek to:
   a) co-operate with the Churches
   b) weaken them.

SOURCE 16.6 Public statement by Bishop Berning, September 1933

The German bishops have long ago said Yes to the new State, and have not only promised to recognise its authority . . . but are serving the State with burning love and all our strength.

SOURCE 16.7 1934 Declaration by the Confessional Church (a new dissenting Protestant organisation)

We repudiate the false teaching that there are areas of life in which we belong not to Jesus Christ but to another lord . . .

We repudiate the false teaching that the State can and should expand beyond its special responsibility to become the single and total order of human life.

SOURCE 16.8 1934 Nuremberg Rally Hitler Youth song. This song was adopted as a virtual national anthem

No evil priest can prevent us from feeling
that we are the children of Hitler.
We follow not Christ, but Horst Wessel.
Away with incense and holy water!
The Church can go hang for all we care,
The swastika brings salvation on earth.
I want to follow it step by step.

SOURCE 16.9 Papal ENCYCLICAL, 'With Burning Grief', a message from the Pope circulated in Germany in 1937

He who singles out race . . . [and] the bearers of state power . . . and sets them up as the highest norm above all, including religious values, and reverences them with idolatry, he distorts and falsifies the God-created, God-demanded order of things. Such a person is far from real belief in God and from a conception of life that corresponds to such a belief. Only superficial spirits can fall victim to the false doctrine of a national God, or a national religion.

FOCUS ROUTE

1 What were Hitler's aims for the Churches?
2 Explain the Nazi government's approach to:
   a) the Protestant Churches
   b) the Catholic Church.
3 What were the main reasons why many Christian leaders co-operated with the Nazis?
4 What forms did opposition from the Churches take?
5 What evidence is there to suggest the Nazis failed to replace commitment to Christianity with support for a faith more suited to their *Volksgemeinschaft*?

A Introduction

In most respects, the Christian and Nazi approaches to life seem poles apart. The former advocated love and co-operation, the latter, hate and struggle. However, both organisations shared some common outlooks, most notably in respect for traditional cultural values, such as the importance of family life, and in their hostility to communism. There was also, particularly in Lutheran Protestantism, a tradition of respect for the state and nationalism. Anti-semitism, too, was not totally alien to the Christian tradition.

Hitler had been brought up a Catholic. However, although at times for political reasons he associated Nazism with Christianity, his real beliefs were clearly hostile to that faith. He wanted to replace Christianity, a religion reflecting the values of an inferior race, with a new, assertive Aryan faith. Furthermore, the Churches were a potential obstacle to his reordering of the German people into committed followers of his totalitarian regime.

However, Hitler was a skilled politician as well as a fanatic, and he realised he was not in a position to embark immediately on the implementation of his full vision. For tactical reasons, he talked of the need for a 'positive Christianity'. His initial main concern was to gain some control of, and support from, the Church hierarchies, and then gradually to reduce their influence.

ACTIVITY

Read the chronological list of events relating to the Churches in the Third Reich in Chart 16A. (To help understand it, you might also want to refer to the **Learning trouble spot** opposite.)

1 First, examine how the Nazi regime treated the Churches, by finding evidence of:
   a) a conciliatory approach by the regime
   b) a hostile approach by the regime.
2 Then examine how the Churches responded to the Nazi state, by finding evidence of:
   a) co-operation with the Nazi regime
   b) opposition to the regime.
   (Different groups of students could look for evidence of one particular feature.) Support each answer with evidence from the chronology. Also note down any changes over time in the above areas.
3 Is there any evidence of Hitler modifying his approach in the light of public reactions?
4 Can you draw any initial overall conclusion about relations between the Churches and the Nazi state?

16A Nazism and the Churches: some key events

1933 July	The SA are ordered to attend church ceremonies The Catholic Church and the new government sign a Concordat (agreement) respecting each other's role The government supports the creation of a Reich Church to co-ordinate all Protestant Churches
Nov	A new Nazi-supported Protestant group, the German Christians, calls for the cleansing of the gospels of un-German elements
1934	A protest Confessional Church breaks away from the state-supported Reich Church The Catholic Bishops Conference issues a pastoral letter: 'Religion cannot be based on blood, race or other dogmas of human creation, but only on divine revelation'
Autumn	Two Protestant bishops are arrested, but released after an outcry
1935	700 Prussian Protestant pastors (ministers) are arrested for condemning Nazi neo-paganism (a new form of the 'old religion' based on Nordic mythology)
1936	Galen, Bishop of Münster, thanks the Führer for remilitarising the Rhineland, and asks God to bless his endeavours The National Socialist Teachers' League (NSLB) encourages members not to teach religion; religious education downplayed in school reports and lessons reduced
June	Confessional pastors circulate a message criticising Nazi ideology and policies. Hundreds of Confessional pastors are sent to concentration camps; their church funds are confiscated
1937	200 priests are put on trial on currency trafficking offences An order banning crucifixes from classrooms is withdrawn after public protest. The Pope criticises racism and the Führer worship of Nazism
1939 Nov	Cardinal Faulhaber orders a special service to celebrate Hitler's survival of an assassination attempt
1941 Dec	The Churches welcome the German attack on the USSR Bishop Galen publicly protests against euthanasia. No action is taken against him, but in Lübeck three priests who had circulated his text to soldiers are executed
1943	A SYNOD of the Prussian Confessional Church criticises those involved in the extermination of people on health and racial grounds: 'We cannot permit superiors to relieve us of our responsibility before God'

16B Religious organisations in Nazi Germany

	Christian				**Pagan**
	Catholic	**Protestant**			
	Catholic Church	**1** Reich Church	Confessional Church	**2** German Christians	**3** Faith Movement
Key individuals	Bishop Galen Pope Pius XII	Bishop Ludwig Müller	Pastor Niemöller Pastor Bonhöffer	Ludwig Müller	Alfred Rosenberg

Note: The numerals 1, 2, 3 show the progressive religious aims of the regime. The Confessional Church was a reaction by some Christians to the first stage of Nazi policies.

■ **Learning trouble spot**

The Churches in Germany

This topic is complicated because of the large number of different church groupings, and the Nazi regime's gradual approach to replacing traditional Christianity.

A CHURCHES BEFORE 1933

Catholic

- Members: 22 million (32 per cent of population); concentrated in west and south (see map on page 120)
- Powerful institution with range of bodies: e.g. youth organisations (1.5 million members), schools, charities
- The Catholic Z and BVP parties together regularly received about one-fifth of the votes in Weimar elections

Protestants

- Members: over 40 million (58 per cent of population)
- Mainly Lutheran (EVANGELICAL) and CALVINIST
- Organised separately in 28 state-based Churches
- Youth organisations had 0.7 million members

B KEY RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS DURING THE THIRD REICH

The Reich Church

The Reich Church was a new umbrella organisation of the Protestant Churches, set up as a means of co-ordinating religion. Within it, the German Christians developed as a powerful movement. Hitler hoped they would dominate the Reich Church. However, the attempt to create a unified, state-controlled Church caused a reaction and the Confessional Church broke away.

German Christians

German Christians wanted to restructure the whole of Protestantism into a new, racially based brand of Christianity. They described themselves as the 'SA of the Church', of a new people's Church. They adopted Nazi-style uniforms and salutes; they had a slogan: 'The swastika on our breasts and the cross in our hearts.' In November 1933 they called for the cleansing of the gospels of un-German elements, especially 'the scapegoat and inferiority theology of Rabbi Paul'.

Confessional Church

In 1934 the Confessional Church broke away from the Reich Church. It was not based on opposition to Nazism as such, but it was concerned to defend the Protestant Church against state interference and the false theology of the German Christians. It had about 5,000 clergy.

German Faith Movement

Whereas the German Christians wanted to nazify Christianity, the Faith Movement went further and wanted to replace Christianity with a new pagan Nazi faith. It encouraged Germans to leave Christianity and adopt pagan rituals: for example the SS held marriages in RUNIC carved rooms. It remained a small sect, but illustrates what the Nazis might have done if they had won the Second World War.

SOURCE 16.11 From the journal of the Faith Movement, 1937

Jesus was a cowardly Jewish lout who had certain adventures during his years of indiscretion. He uprooted his disciples from blood and soil . . . At the very end he insulted the majesty of death in an obscene manner.

SOURCE 16.10 Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller, leader of the German Christians, making a speech in September 1934

Key words

Confession: often used to describe a particular type of church
Diocese: church administrative unit centred on a bishopric
Encyclical: formal policy statement issued by the Pope and circulated throughout the Catholic Church
Pastor: Protestant minister
Synod: an assembly of Protestant pastors and laity (ordinary church members)

ACTIVITY

Find evidence to support the descriptions of the three stages in Chart 16C and use it to complete your own copy of the table below.

Stage	Evidence of the policy
1 Control	
2 Weaken	
3 Replace	

B How did the Nazi regime treat the Churches?

16C Key features of Nazi policy towards the Churches

POLICY	EFFECT
Stage 1: Control – gain as much control as possible over existing Churches	
a) Creation of a unified Protestant Reich Church	Failed since Confessional Church broke away
b) Concordat agreement with Pope	Initial harmony; later criticism of state infringement of the Concordat
Stage 2: Weaken – weaken hold of traditional Christianity	
a) Make Protestantism more Nazi via German Christians	Provoked reaction and increased support for Confessional Church
b) Undermine and reduce influence of Catholic Church	Public hostility
Stage 3: Replace – replace Christianity with a true Nazi religion	
Replace Christianity with German Faith Movement	Only sporadic attempts to achieve this; postponed until after war

Hitler's overall approach to the Churches of Germany was firstly to seek to control them, then to reduce their influence, and finally to replace them with a faith reflecting Nazi values. It would be easier to gain greater control of the divided Protestant Churches than the international Catholic Church. The Protestant Churches were traditionally nationalist and had supported conservative parties during the Weimar Republic.

The government gave support to a growing movement among Protestants, the German Christians (Deutsche Christen). They wanted to imbue Christianity with the spirit of Nazism. In August 1933 two-thirds of those attending the Prussian synod showed their leanings by wearing Nazi uniforms. They helped establish a new Reich Church, hoping to combine all Protestants within one structure. Hitler hoped the German Christians could be used to co-ordinate the Protestant Churches. Ludwig Müller, Hitler's adviser on Protestant church affairs, was elected to the new post of Reich Bishop in July 1933.

However, this clear attempt to control and nazify Protestantism aroused much opposition. In September 1933 over one hundred pastors created a breakaway movement, which in October 1934 was organised into the Confessional Church (Bekennende Kirche). It was not explicitly anti-Nazi, but wanted to preserve Protestantism from political control and indoctrination.

Some of the German Christians' actions, such as requiring pastors to take an oath of loyalty to Hitler, and the arrest of two Protestant bishops increased the public outcry. Hitler, who could be pragmatic when required, now distanced himself from Reich Bishop Müller. The attempt to create a more nazified, unified Protestant Church had failed. Instead there were now three groups within Protestantism: the official Reich Church, the German Christians trying to control it, and the opposition Confessional Church (see Chart 16B).

Hitler realised it would be even harder to exercise control over the Catholic Church, so instead he looked for an agreement to gain its support. Both sides were initially conciliatory. The Papacy agreed to the dissolution of the Centre Party (Z). In July 1933 the Vatican signed a Concordat with the government. The Vatican recognised the new regime and promised that the Church would

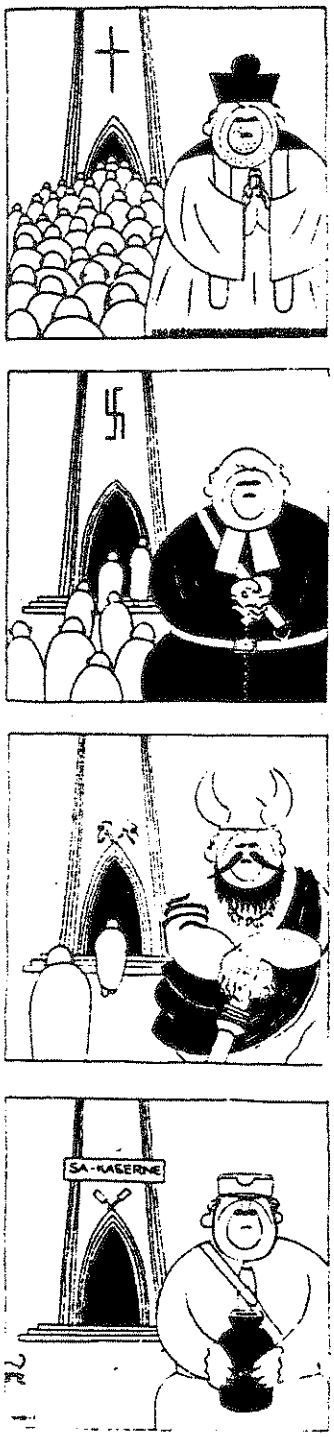
ACTIVITY

What insights do Sources 16.12–14 reveal about Nazi policy towards Christianity?

SOURCE 16.12 Security police measures against 'agitator priests' in 1941

1 *Warning*
2 *Fine*
3 *Forbidden to preach* (Redeverbot)
4 *Forbidden to remain in the parish*
5 *Forbidden all activities as a priest*
6 *Short-term arrest*
7 *Protective custody*

SOURCE 16.13 An anti-Nazi cartoon on the evolution of Nazi policy for the Protestant (Lutheran) Church



not interfere in politics. In return, the state would not interfere in the Catholic Church which could keep control of its educational, youth and other communal institutions. Catholic leaders generally remained concerned not to provoke the government. However, the Nazis were less conciliatory and did not accept the Concordat limitations on their power for long.

Hitler now tried to reduce the influence of the Churches, partly by attacking what he saw as church interference in politics and partly by discrediting them rather than tackling them head on. Within this broad picture, relations were complicated. This was partly due to the disorganised nature of the Nazi state. Hitler did not impose a clear strategy on all Nazi authorities. Several local *Gauleiter* indulged in radical anti-Church activities that then had to be abandoned due to popular opposition. For example, in Bavaria people continued to use the traditional greeting '*Gruss Gott*' (God greet you) rather than the officially approved 'Heil Hitler', and Bavarian blue-and-white flags rather than swastikas were flown on feast days.

The Nazis particularly targeted the young in their attempts to reduce the influence of the Churches. Young people were encouraged to join the Hitler Youth, not Catholic groups. In 1936 church groups were disbanded and the Hitler Youth made compulsory. Less and less stress was put on religious education in state schools; and Nazi Party officials tried to remove crucifixes from schools. Parents were pressurised to send their children to local state schools, not denominational (mainly Catholic) ones. Whereas 65 per cent of children attended church schools in 1935, only 5 per cent did by 1937, and these schools had virtually disappeared by 1939.

In a more direct attack on the Catholic Church's influence, over 200 priests were accused of sexual and financial misbehaviour in what amounted to SHOW TRIALS, and numerous monasteries were closed down.

In the mid 1930s the Nazi Party launched a 'Church Secession Campaign' to encourage Germans to abandon their Churches. This had some success with government employees. In 1937 over 100,000 Christians left the Church, and in 1939 3.5 million Germans were members of the *Gottgläubig* (God-believing) neo-pagan movement; they had thus rejected what was described as 'Germany's religious Versailles'. However, many of these wanted their names kept secret for fear of ostracism (being rejected by their society), and during the war the tide away from Christianity was reversed.

In the early successful years of the Second World War, there were more aggressive moves against the Churches, particularly against critical priests (see Source 16.12). However, the government pulled back as it became wary of provoking opposition. When the war was won, however, it intended to replace Christianity with a new German Faith Movement.

SOURCE 16.14 Cartoon from the SS magazine *Das Schwarze Korps* (The Black Corps), 1937. The labels on the pigs surrounding the priestly chief 'shepherd' read: 'Rape, sadistic orgies in monasteries', 'Unnatural acts in places of worship' and 'Abuse of children and mental defectives'. The caption running from top to bottom reads: 'Go forth and watch over my – lambs!'

C How did the Churches react to the Nazi state?

Once again, a complex picture emerges. This is hardly surprising, given the existence of different religious groups, changes over time, and local and individual variations. The overwhelming majority of Germans were Christians and at the same time supported the regime, especially Hitler. Many disliked particular measures the government took against the Churches, and sometimes expressed dissatisfaction that led the government to modify its approach. Christians often blamed anti-Church measures on radicals around Hitler, not on their great leader himself.

16D Religion and Nazism: how seven people responded to the regime

Ludwig Müller

Individuals respond to difficult situations in different ways. The biographies of these seven people illustrate the complex relationship between the state and the Churches in Nazi Germany.

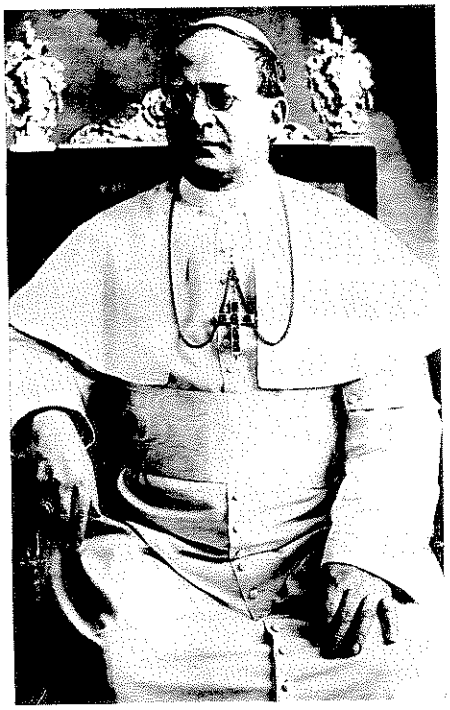
Ludwig Müller, 1883–1946

Müller was the leader of the German Christians. He was a strongly nationalist and anti-semitic Protestant army chaplain. Elected Reich Bishop in July 1933 at the National Synod, he was pushed into the background after the Confessional Church broke away. He committed suicide in 1946.

Alfred Rosenberg, 1893–1946

Rosenberg was an anti-semitic, anti-Christian Nazi ideologue. He promoted the German Faith Movement as a new pagan cult. Within the party he fought hard against Christianity. In 1941 he was made Minister for Occupied Territories. Rosenberg was hanged in 1946.

Alfred Rosenberg



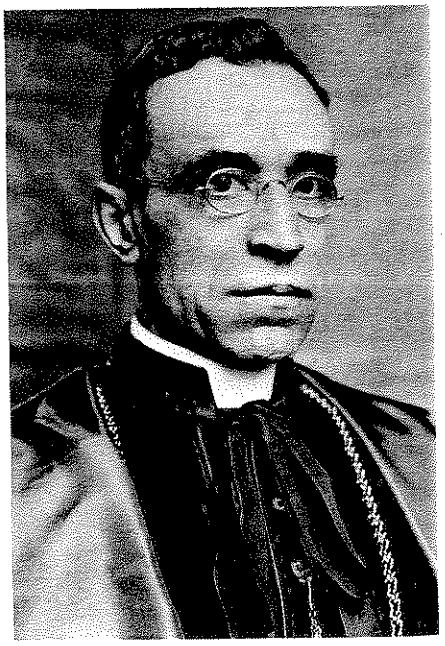
Pope Pius XI

Pope Pius XI, 1857–1939

Pius XI, having allowed the dissolution of the Centre Party and agreed to the Concordat, became disillusioned by the Nazis' failure to keep its part of the agreement. In 1937 he issued the encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With Burning Grief), which was an outspoken attack on Nazi beliefs and methods. He was preparing an encyclical against anti-semitism when he died.

Pope Pius XII, 1876–1958

As a papal nuncio (diplomat) in Germany, the future Pius XII played a major part in negotiating the Concordat in 1933. In March 1939 he was elected Pope, but did not openly condemn Nazism, only communism. He was silent on anti-semitism, and he refused to excommunicate Catholics participating in GENOCIDE. He was criticised for failing to take a stand against Nazism, but defended his approach on tactical grounds as the best way of maintaining the Church's role.



Pope Pius XII

ACTIVITY

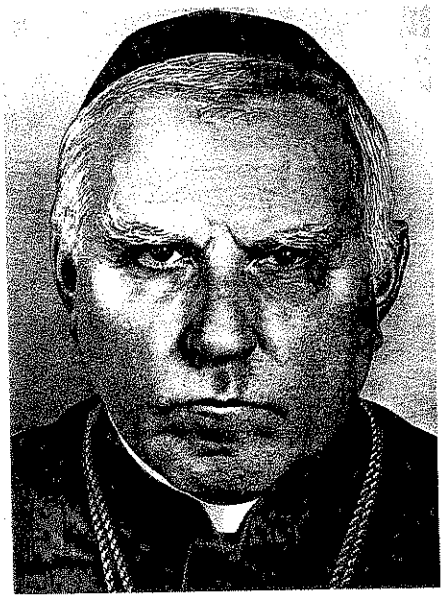
Read the biographies, then match up each of the following views of the best approach to the Nazi regime to the right individual.

i) The survival of Christianity is more important than criticising the government.
ii) My personal prejudices match the regime's so I can work with it.
iii) My initial co-operation was a mistake, for I now realise that Hitler does not keep his word. I should have realised that Nazism and Christianity are incompatible.
iv) I hate traditional religion. Here is an opportunity to start something new that suits our beliefs.
v) This regime is so evil I will do what I can to overthrow it.
vi) I will use my public position to criticise the regime when it acts against the basic teachings of Christ.
vii) I have reluctantly come to realise that my Christian faith cannot accept this regime and what it has done to the Church. I will support the founding of another, true Christian Church.

The Churches were more concerned with protecting their own institutions and beliefs than in speaking out about the nature of the regime. There were, however, several critical statements from clerics, and in 1937 the Pope issued the encyclical 'With Burning Grief'. It complained about the government's breaking of the Concordat, the harassment of priests and Nazi idolatry (worship) of the state and race. The text was smuggled into Germany and read out from pulpits on Palm Sunday in March 1937. The most famous, and possibly most effective, criticism came from Bishop Galen against euthanasia in 1941 (see below and page 338). This caused great consternation (dismay) within the government and vigorous debate about what action to take. In the end Galen remained unpunished.

Bishop Clemens von Galen, 1878–1946

As Catholic Bishop of Münster, he initially welcomed Hitler's nationalism, but was critical of racism. From 1934 he preached several sermons criticising Nazi policies. In 1941 he criticised euthanasia, but he was seen as too popular to be punished. Known as the 'Lion of Münster', Galen has been described as the only effective protester in the Third Reich. He was arrested after the July 1944 Bomb Plot, but released in 1945.



Bishop Clemens von Galen

Martin Niemöller, 1892–1984

A former U-boat commander and nationalist, Niemöller initially supported Hitler, but was later one of the founders of the Confessional Church. He was arrested in 1937; he remained imprisoned until his release from Dachau by the Allies in 1945.

Martin Niemöller

Dietrich Bonhöffer, 1906–45

Bonhöffer joined the Confessional Church in 1935. In February 1933 he had broadcast a critique of the *Führerprinzip* which he openly regarded as hostile to Christianity. His broadcast was cut off. He taught trainee pastors and encouraged them to resist Nazism; he also tried to get the Confessional Church to condemn the Nuremberg Laws. In 1940 his college was closed and he was banned from preaching and publishing. He worked with the underground and in 1942 met Bishop Bell, a British intermediary, in Sweden. He wanted the Allies to recognise the existence of the opposition, and work with a new government for peace. In April 1943 he was arrested after being named by an ABWEHR agent, and was executed in Flossenbürg concentration camp on 5 April 1945.

Dietrich Bonhöffer

During the Third Reich an estimated 800 of 17,000 Protestant pastors were arrested, but only 50 received major prison sentences for opposition. Between one-third and one-half of the Catholic clergy are estimated to have been harassed in some way, but only one Catholic bishop was expelled and one imprisoned for a long period.

Many Christians later felt the Churches had failed in their duty during the regime. Although the Churches had institutional structures separate from the government and a set of beliefs to inspire opposition, they were concerned to try to hold on to their members, and not to provoke a crushing retaliation from a government that clearly contained elements hostile to Christianity. Both the Catholic and Protestant Churches were concerned to demonstrate their patriotism and supported the war effort, especially that in the east against the USSR. However, relations between the Catholic Church and the Nazi regime have been described as a state of simmering tension within a war of attrition.

In 1998 the Vatican officially apologised for its lack of opposition to the Holocaust. Is it important for governments to apologise for the actions of their predecessors in the past?

Overall, Church–state relations seem to reflect the fears each side felt towards the other. Despite the regime's totalitarian pretensions (claims), government documents illustrate the fear that undue pressure on the Churches, particularly in Catholic areas, would turn the people against the regime. Ironically, many clerics were afraid that they were losing the battle with Nazism between 1933 and 1939.

Source 16.15 illustrates the complexity of the relationship between the Churches and the Nazi state.

SOURCE 16.15 Extract from the Bavarian Catholic bishops' pastoral letter in December 1936

After the deplorable fight carried on by Marxists, Communists, Free Thinkers and FREEMASONS *against Christianity and the Church we welcomed with gratitude the National Socialist profession of positive Christianity. We are convinced that many hundreds of thousands are still loyal to this profession of faith and, indeed, we observe with sorrow how others tend to remove themselves from Christian belief and from the programme of the Führer, and by this means put the Third Reich on a new basis, a* Weltanschauung *standing in open contradiction to the commandments of Christianity. This formation of National Socialism into a* Weltanschauung *which cuts it away from any foundation in religion is developing more and more into a full-scale attack on the Christian faith and the Catholic Church. All this bodes ill for the future of our people and our Fatherland. Our Führer and Chancellor in a most impressive demonstration acknowledged the importance of the two Christian confessions to state and society, and promised the two confessions his protection. Unfortunately, men with considerable influence and power are operating in direct opposition to those promises and both confessions are being systematically attacked. Certain of those who lead the attack on the Churches wish to promote a united church in which the confession of faith will become meaningless. Most especially they seek to rid Germany of the Catholic Church and declare it to be a body foreign to our country and its people. These folk lack all real understanding of our holy faith and of the Christian religion in any form . . .*

. . . Nothing could be further from our intentions than to adopt a hostile attitude toward, or a renunciation of, the present form taken by our Government. For us, respect for authority, love of Fatherland, and the fulfilment of our duty to the State are matters not only of conscience but of divine ordinance. This command we will always require our faithful to follow. But we will never regard as an infringement of this duty our defence of God's laws and of His Church, or of ourselves against attacks on the Faith and the Church. The Führer can be certain that we Bishops are prepared to give all moral support to his historic struggle against Bolshevism. We will not criticise things which are purely political. What we do ask is that our holy Church be permitted to enjoy her God-given rights and her freedom.

ACTIVITY

Study Source 16.15.

1. Explain the reference to:
   a) *Weltanschauung* (line 7)
   b) 'united church' (line 17).
2. Identify reasons why the bishops support the government.
3. How do they view Hitler and his aims? What do they criticise?
4. What can be deduced from this letter as to the bishops' view of the Concordat of 1933?
5. What support does this source give for
   a) criticism of the Catholic Church for being solely concerned with its own position
   b) recent historians' interpretations of the nature of the Nazi state and the 'Hitler myth'?

ACTIVITY

One group of students read Sources 16.16, 16.17 and 16.19; another group should read Source 16.18. Then compare your answers to the following questions:

1. What appears to be happening to belief and involvement in Christianity?
2. What value does each of these sources have as evidence about the experience of Christianity during the Nazi period?

SOURCE 16.17 Bavarian district police report, June 1939

The uncertainty of the diplomatic situation, the harsh taxation, certain economic difficulties, and in particular the pressure against the Church are at the moment producing increasing apathy among the rural population as far as nationalist issues are concerned. The Catholic Church is reaping the profit from these burdens. The more attempts are made to keep a watch on the Church or such attempts are even suspected, the more the peasantry support their priests. Catholic churchgoing, participation in various events such as processions, the blessing of the fields, pilgrimages, attendance at services during weekdays, and confession remain strong. For the time being the Party's propaganda is helpless in trying to resist this development. The mood is directed less against the State and much more against the Party.

SOURCE 16.19 Gauleiter reports, June 1943

The war, with all its sorrow and anguish, has driven some families back into the arms of priests and the church . . .

The districts unanimously report that the church of both confessional orientations is engaging in exceptionally heavy activity. In comparison to the party, the church today still has much manpower at its disposal . . .

In their weekly reports, the party regional organisations have repeatedly emphasised that the churches of both confessions – but especially the Catholic Church – are in today's fateful struggle one of the main pillars of negative influence upon public morale.

D How did the German people respond to the uneasy relationship between Church and state?

Finally, let us look at some evidence to help us assess how far the Nazis succeeded in reducing the hold of Christianity.

SOURCE 16.16 Police report in Cologne, March 1934

Politically, it is noteworthy and illuminating that the Catholic population of Cologne . . . in recent times have banded together strongly. They are taking part in church celebrations and events in numbers of such a size that have hardly been seen in previous years . . . The reason is that people who disapprove of the measures taken against Catholic organisations want to make a show in public that they are loyal to the Catholic Church.

SOURCE 16.18 A 1939 report by the Protestant Church on visits to Bavaria 1937–8

The year 1938 seems to have brought a series of difficulties which have a negative impact on the general attitude of the parish. A dean [commented in spring 1939]: 'The general impression was heavily determined by the catastrophic changes in the school sphere and in that of religious instruction' . . . The work of the pastors has become much more difficult than before . . .

The problem of the German Christians is already a matter of history as far as the general situation is concerned. A few German Christian clergy have returned to the Confession. Others must at least restrain themselves in their own parishes especially to maintain their position at all . . .

The last few years are much more characterised by the fact that after the defensive victory against the German Christians, they find themselves confronted by a new enemy, who is difficult to get to grips with and yet is clearly fighting everywhere against Christianity . . .

The danger which threatens our parishes is of being ground down, of becoming dispirited, atrophied [paralysed]. The vast majority of the parishes will not be voluntarily unfaithful to their Christian beliefs, but they continue to believe that 'one cannot do anything' against the new forces, and give up . . . The school question has had a particularly deep impact in many parishes: they have felt the danger instinctively but believe they are faced with an 'inevitable' development . . .

The trend [is] towards a slight reduction in Church-going and participation in Communion, the prevention of young people, and often the men too, from taking part in parish life because of other events, the putting of obstacles in the way of religious instruction, anti-Christian influence and clandestine [secret] pressure on certain groups to keep a low profile vis-à-vis [with respect to] the Church.

In many areas the events put on by the State youth organisation take less and less account of the Parish Church services and what would have been inconceivable in 1935 has become the norm in some places in 1939. Above all, youth is losing the habit of going to Church regularly. One need not fear that the village youth will be influenced by the German Faith Movement but rather will lose the habit of going to Church through being intentionally kept from Church services which will be followed by an inner estrangement . . .

As far as the younger ones are concerned, school is the central problem. While at the time of the visitation in 1936 the confessional school was still in existence, the questionnaire for 1939 reports on the community school, the reduction in religious instruction, the obstruction of such instruction for technical college pupils, the giving up of religious instruction on the part of most teachers. The removal of religious instruction from the core curriculum . . .

Church-going is normally satisfactory. Of the 200 reports two-thirds describe churchgoing as good, two-ninths as moderate, and one-ninth as poor and unsatisfactory. However, in contrast to this subjective assessment, it must be said that in comparison with the situation in 1932 a moderate reduction in church-going is the general rule even in village and small town parishes . . .

ACTIVITY

1 a) Why, according to Noakes, were the Churches able to limit the Nazis' control of German life?
   b) What reasons do Geary and Wilt give why the Churches did not resist the Nazis more?
   c) How far do Wright and Housden agree on the nature of Church opposition?
   d) Explain which historian you consider to be most critical and which least critical of the Churches' response to National Socialism.
   e) Why do such differences occur?
2 Summarise in your own words how the Churches responded to Nazism. Would you be prepared to use either of the words *resist* or *collaborate*?
3 'The Nazis were more hostile to the Church than the Church was to them.' Do you agree?

E Review: Did the Churches collaborate with or resist the Nazi regime?

It is now time to return to the question in the chapter title about collaboration and resistance. We need to discuss whether either of these words is an accurate representation of how the Christian Churches responded to the Nazis. You may feel that either of these descriptions would be too simplistic to sum up the response of different Christian institutions and many millions of individuals. Read the following accounts by historians to help you finalise your assessment of the Christian response to Nazism.

SOURCE 16.20 J. Noakes, G. Pridham, *Nazism: A History in Documents*, 1984, p. 582

The churches were the only institutions which both had an alternative 'ideology' to that of the regime and were permitted to retain their own organisational autonomy. This made them a major obstacle to the Nazi attempt to establish total control over German life.

SOURCE 16.21 R. Geary, *Hitler and Nazism*, 1993, p. 55

A similar [to the army] mixture of institutional self-interest, agreement with certain aspects of Nazi policy and yet also principled opposition was to be found in the German churches ... In general the church hierarchy sought to avoid conflict with the regime without endorsing all aspects of its policies.

SOURCE 16.22 A. Wilt, *Nazi Germany*, 1994, p. 81

It is difficult to account for the meagre resistance of most clergy, though the overwhelming acceptance of Nazism by their respective congregations and parishes, their distrust of leftist thinking, their own conservatism, their belief in the separation of political affairs from one's spiritual life, and their tradition of subservience [obedience] to the state, as practised in particular by Lutheranism, all played a part. Whatever the reason, the churches' overall response to National Socialism was timid and half-hearted, and helped erode their influence on German life.

SOURCE 16.23 J. R. C. Wright, 1970s article 'Hitler and the Churches'

Both Christian Churches showed they were not prepared to tolerate Nazi aggression against them passively. In this they compared favourably with other institutions ... However, the purpose of the Church opposition was self-defence, not a wider political opposition; the Churches ... frequently affirmed their loyalty to the state and the Führer.

SOURCE 16.24 M. Housden, *Resistance and Conformity in the Third Reich*, 1996, p. 64

The churches' opposition was 'issue driven' (that is to say involving piecemeal reactions to individual, concrete actions such as the withdrawal of crucifixes from schools, the appointment of a German Christian as Reich bishop, or euthanasia) rather than rooted in a coherent, politically active anti-Nazi morality. The churches and their followers generally were more interested in defending their religious 'space' and surviving attack than in becoming society's moral guardians. They wanted to write themselves into the overall trajectory [course] of the Third Reich rather than alter its direction per se.

ETHICS CORNER

Is it right to compromise with a government you profoundly disagree with to protect the position of your own institution?

KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 16: Did the Churches collaborate with or resist the Nazi regime?

1. Hitler publicly acknowledged the role of Christianity but because of its opposing values privately vowed to eliminate it.
2. Many Christians supported Nazism because of its anti-communism and respect for traditional cultural values.
3. The Nazi approach was initially to try to control the Churches, then weaken them and finally replace them.
4. A Reich Church was created to control Protestantism, but the breakaway Confessional Church rejected government interference.
5. The Catholic Church signed an agreement with Hitler but became increasingly concerned with the government's actions.
6. Some priests were arrested and some Church organisations were threatened, but the Christian faith remained strong, and increased again during the Second World War.
7. The Nazis' efforts to introduce the German Faith Movement failed.
8. The Churches were more concerned to defend their institutions from Nazi attack than to challenge the government on a broader front.
9. There was more criticism of and opposition to the regime from individual Christians than from the Churches as institutions.
10. The Churches could be said to have broadly compromised in order to survive.