

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.

TALKING POINT

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.