

## Zacharias not Zeppelin: Germany to scrap Nazi-era phonetic table

**Level:** Intermediate

### 1 Warmer

- a. Choosing a word for each letter makes it easier to spell things out. Choose a word for each letter below. For example, *A is for apple*.

A is for \_\_\_\_\_.

B is for \_\_\_\_\_.

C is for \_\_\_\_\_.

D is for \_\_\_\_\_.

- b. Now compare your sentences.

### 2 Key words

- a. Match the words in the box to the definitions below. Then find the words in the article to check your answers and read the words in context. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

abolish      aid      antisemitism      Aryan      equivalent      habitually  
ideology      impact      ombudsman      originate      regulate      scrap

1. decide not to continue with something; get rid of something \_\_\_\_\_ (para 1)
2. officially get rid of \_\_\_\_\_ (para 1)
3. make it easier for someone to do something \_\_\_\_\_ (para 2)
4. begin to exist or appear for the first time \_\_\_\_\_ (para 2)
5. something that has the same size, value, importance or meaning as something else \_\_\_\_\_ (para 4)
6. control an activity, process or industry officially by using rules \_\_\_\_\_ (para 4)
7. someone whose job is to deal with complaints that people make about an organization or particular type of business \_\_\_\_\_ (para 5)
8. hatred or prejudice towards Jewish people \_\_\_\_\_ (para 5)
9. a system of ideas and principles on which a political theory is based \_\_\_\_\_ (para 6)
10. used for describing people from northern Europe, especially tall people with blonde hair and blue eyes. This word is connected with Nazi theories of race. \_\_\_\_\_ (para 6)
11. usually or often \_\_\_\_\_ (para 11)
12. an effect or influence \_\_\_\_\_ (para 11)

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b. Use some of the key words from task a. to complete these sentences.

1. Eight kilometres is the \_\_\_\_\_ of five miles.
2. Andy is \_\_\_\_\_ late for class.
3. Video conferencing has had a huge \_\_\_\_\_ on our work lives.
4. Where did the virus \_\_\_\_\_?
5. Some people do yoga and meditation to \_\_\_\_\_ relaxation.
6. The announcement caused many students to contact the university's \_\_\_\_\_.

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**Kate Connolly**

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- Germany is going to scrap its phonetic spelling table introduced by the Nazis in 1934 and temporarily replace it with the version they abolished because it was “too Jewish”.
- The table has code words for each letter of the alphabet to aid communication and avoid confusion, particularly on the radio and telephone. It originated in the late 19th century, but in 1934, it was adapted by the Nazis who removed all its Jewish names.
- “Samuel” was replaced by “Siegfried” to represent the letter S, “Zacharias” became “Zeppelin” for Z, and “David” was changed to “Dora”. The Nazis changed Jewish names to Nordic ones, and where no suitable ones could be found, such as N (originally “Nathan”), an object or place name, such as “Nordpol” (North Pole), was chosen instead.
- The international equivalent is the NATO phonetic alphabet, which uses the words Alfa, Bravo, Charlie etc to help make spelling out words easier. The German equivalent uses Anton, Berta, Cäsar. The list is officially registered with the German Institute for Standardization (DIN), which regulates everything from the size of chairs to paperclips.
- Michael Blume is the ombudsman for antisemitism in the state of Baden-Württemberg. He has been leading a campaign to get rid of the Nazi version of the system.
- “Just in that one name change, Nathan to Nordpol, which we still use today, you can see how deeply this Nazi idea has made its way into our language and our thinking,” he said. In the Nazi’s ideology, the North Pole was seen as the original home of the Aryans.
- Some words were officially changed back in the late 1940s – Siegfried was changed back to Samuel, for example. But the Nazi era version has remained the one that most people use.
- Blume recommends changing back to the pre-1934 version, the Weimar table. It will probably be used until autumn 2022. After that, an updated version will be registered with DIN that will probably use city names.
- “We shouldn’t just continue to automatically use the version introduced by the Nazis, which erased the Jewish names. The change back is an important symbolic gesture,” Blume said.
- The president of the Central Council of Jews, Josef Schuster, said he welcomed Blume’s idea. He said it was “high time we freed ourselves from the language of the Nazis.”
- Clemens Schwender, a professor of media who has studied spelling tables that were listed in telephone books from 1881 onwards, said that people still habitually using words such as Siegfried “shows that the 12 years of the Nazi era still have their impact.”
- As news of the change spread on social media, many people said they had not been aware of the Nazi origin of the code words. They are known and commonly used in daily life by people in Germany as a practical method to spell out words over the telephone.

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### 3 Comprehension check

Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Germany has decided to scrap its phonetic alphabet and replace it with the official NATO phonetic alphabet.
2. The Weimar table was developed by the Nazis in 1934.
3. Many German speakers have been using the phonetic alphabet without knowing about its Nazi connections.
4. The president of the Central Council of Jews is pleased with Michael Blume's changes to Germany's phonetic alphabet.
5. This is the first time there have been any changes made to the German phonetic alphabet since the end of the Second World War.
6. Germany hopes to have an official updated phonetic alphabet by late 2022. Until that time, the pre-1934 version will be used.

### 4 Using key language

a. Match the words to make word pairs from the article. Then find them in the article to check your answers.

- |              |              |
|--------------|--------------|
| 1. avoid     | a. time      |
| 2. updated   | b. out       |
| 3. telephone | c. gesture   |
| 4. symbolic  | d. confusion |
| 5. high      | e. version   |
| 6. spell     | f. book      |

b. Use the word pairs to write a short summary of the article.

### 5 Discussion

- In your country, do you have standard words that you use to spell things out? For example, *A for Alfa*. Or does everyone use different words?
- What other words and phrases could be controversial?\* Should people still use them, do you think?
- Can you think of words or phrases that were used by most people years ago but are now offensive?\*

\*Please be sensitive to the feelings of people in your class as you mention these controversial or offensive words and phrases. Different people will have different reactions.

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### 6 In your own words

- a. What words are used in the NATO phonetic alphabet? Alfa, Bravo, ...
- b. To check your answers and to find out more about the NATO phonetic alphabet, codes and signals, search online for *NATO phonetic alphabet, codes and signals*. What extra help does the NATO chart give?
- c. Create a new phonetic alphabet using the names of towns, cities, lakes, rivers and places of interest in your country or area. Read out your new alphabet and say why you chose each word. For example, *We chose ... for the letter ... because it is the biggest lake in our state.*