



BUNDESPRÄSIDENTIALAMT

The speech on the
internet:
www.bundespraesident.de

Page 1 of 3

**Welcome by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the event „1914 – 2014: a European century“
on 27 June 2014,
in Schloss Bellevue**

This is the third and final event in a day intended both to look back and to look forward in a European perspective, a day devoted to commemorating the First World War and the European century which followed.

This morning we heard about the various European narratives and saw how differently the First World War is viewed in Europe – and we wondered how we might possibly arrive at a common European narrative after all.

In the afternoon we asked what political and historical lessons Europe has and has not learnt from the war, and what lessons it could and should draw today, not least in view of current developments.

These questions often refer to abstract and collective subjects – to nations, ethnic groups and states – and are about areas, structures, processes, borders, alliances, markets and systems.

What is at the root of the historical process, however, is people, individuals. Individuals who suffer or rejoice, who are scared to death or buoyant with relief, who love or hate, who feel sympathy or attack mercilessly, who are injured or inflict injury, who are gassed or throw gas shells, who shoot or are shot. Who die or survive. At the front, behind the lines or at home.

We cannot bring this day of commemoration, remembrance and outlook to an end without thinking about what this war did to millions of individual people. It is true to say that, in Europe at least, the First World War left virtually no lives unscathed, and brought millions of lives to a sudden, terrible end.

No previous war in Europe had left so many injured, maimed or dead. In no other war had dying and killing seemed to be such a mass-scale, industrial process, largely anonymous. And yet: every single

VERANTWORTLICH	Ferdos Forudastan
ANSCHRIFT	Bundespräsidialamt 11010 Berlin
TEL / FAX	030 2000-2021/-1926
E-MAIL	presse@bpra.bund.de
INTERNET	www.bundespraesident.de

soldier, every single civilian, every child, every mother, every brother, every son, every sweetheart had a name, a biography. Never are the horrors and terrors of war more immediately accessible than when we see them reflected in the lives of the individuals they injure, humiliate, enslave, exploit or destroy.

It is art that preserves the experience of the individual. It is art that can show us what the great events of history – in this case the Great War – do to little lives. It is art that reminds us what the word “existential” means in times of war: the fight for naked survival in the face of an all-encompassing, deadly danger.

In the eyes of the people of the age in particular, the First World War was a war waged against culture and civilisation in its entirety. Again and again the propaganda accused the other side above all of attacking cultural values. Right at the start of the war, all civilised observers were shocked by Germany's destructive attack on Leuven's venerable library – and even more so by the fact that German artists and intellectuals sought to justify this barbaric act.

One of the most incomprehensible phenomena of both the First and Second World Wars is the fact that the culture and civilisation which had undoubtedly shaped Germany and its neighbours in Europe – that heritage of education, philosophy and religion which societies knew or believed themselves to be profoundly guided by – were entirely unable to prevent this disaster and the inroads of barbarism. Even worse: recourse was often taken to culture and religion to justify this carnage.

Perhaps what we have learnt as a result is that there can be no culture if the individual has no voice and no identity. As diverse, rich and wasteful in its diversity as culture may be, it will not, if it is itself to remain human, follow ideological directives, but rather will always listen to the still, small voice of the suffering individual. Then it will unflinchingly rise up and clamour whenever the individual is under threat, from whatever power.

The drama of human existence, in all its many forms, has been played out in the theatre ever since the birth of the Western world.

And so I am very happy that we are going to experience an extraordinary and in every respect apt theatre event here in front of Schloss Bellevue this evening. I am delighted that the Hamburg-based Thalia Theater is going to present excerpts from its production “Front”, conceived and produced in cooperation with Theater Gent. Without wishing to reveal too much about what we are going to be seeing together, I would just like to say that I find it highly symbolic that the partner theatre comes from Ghent, from Flanders, that corner of the world where the war raged so dreadfully and which is immortalised in one of the most famous poems written in memory of all the individual

lives lost. Canadian Lieutenant John McCrae wrote these lines the day after his friend was killed:

“We are the Dead. Short days ago. We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, loved, and were loved, and now we lie in Flanders fields.”

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.