



**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the ceremony commemorating
the centenary of the First World War
Monday, 4 August 2014
in Liège**

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to you, Your Majesty, for this kind invitation. I would also like to thank all Belgians who extended the hand of reconciliation very shortly after the Second World War, after their country had been invaded twice by German troops, after the atrocities, after all the suffering and after all the despair of the two wars. After everything that happened, the fact that I – a German president – am standing here and speaking to you today can by no means be taken for granted, so I stand here filled with gratitude and joy. I also thank you on behalf of all my fellow Germans. We are here today to commemorate the terrible “Great War”, which became the first of the two world wars. This war began in western Europe with Germany’s completely unjustifiable invasion of neutral Belgium. The invasion only followed military logic, and it thus became apparent on the very first day of the conflict how quickly treaties became worthless and how quickly the standards of civilisation were rendered null and void.

Outside Germany, people were horrified by the conduct of the German troops, particularly by their treatment of civilians and their attacks on cultural heritage. The destruction of the world-famous library in Leuven became a symbol that spread fear, shock and rage far and wide. But in Germany itself, intellectuals and artists wrote a text that remains disgraceful to this day, a text in which they declared that crimes against a country and its people, including even attacks on culture, were justified and indeed necessary. What had become of the community of scholars and artists? What had happened to the civilisation called Europe?

Nationalism had blinded almost everyone's hearts and minds. Neither the standards of culture and civilisation, nor religious faith, nor reason were strong enough to sway people's consciences in another direction. On the contrary, people actually believed that they were morally and religiously in the right. In the clash of cultures, feelings of superiority and extreme national egoism triumphed over empathy.

The utter failure of diplomacy; the ill-fated Schlieffen Plan;

the longing for what was supposed to be an invigorating cleansing of an epoch tired of civilisation through immersion in the ferruginous waters of war;

the erroneous belief in a short military campaign to resolve international disputes;

and finally, propaganda that knew no bounds and demonised the enemy in a way hitherto unknown –

all of this led Europe into a fratricidal war, which ultimately spread far across the world.

With the invasion of Belgium by German troops at the latest, and as in Greek mythology, Pandora's box had been opened, bringing misfortune, misery, crippling injuries and death to millions of people.

Along with representatives from all over the world, we commemorate those killed in action, the wounded, and those left physically and emotionally mutilated by the war. We will always remember and honour them. We are grateful to have been able to live together in peace for so long here in Europe. We know that this is not something to be taken for granted. Belgium, the home of Europe's institutions, is a particularly appropriate place to praise European unity. Europe is now governed by the strength of the law rather than by the law of the strong. The fact that small and large member states of the European Union now strive to find joint solutions and agree on joint policies in a peaceful manner in Brussels is an achievement of civilisation that cannot be overstated.

We know all this from our own terrible history. But we are also aware of it when we look at the current state of the world. We see war, terrorist brutality and civil war in so many places. Millions of people are afflicted by violence and terror; millions have fled their homes. Political, ethnic and religious beliefs are still being exploited to justify violence and murder. Extremism and fanaticism continue to spread fear and terror. And once again, international law is being violated in a region, while in other parts of the world martial law or excessive violence is used in conflicts.

We are therefore not only united here today in commemoration as representatives of so many countries, but also as witnesses to the greatest political, cultural and moral success of the old Europe, to the

fact that peace and reconciliation are possible. A continent marked by perpetual animosity and the repeated outbreak of war has become a continent of peace. However, what we have witnessed should also remind us that we share responsibility for the world. We cannot remain indifferent when human rights are violated or when violence is threatened or used. We must actively champion freedom, the rule of law, awareness, tolerance, justice and humanity.

Ladies and gentlemen, the two great wars taught us terrible and bitter lessons. Let us show not merely through words of remembrance and commemoration, but also through our actions in the present and future, that we truly learned our lesson.