



**Speech by
Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the event commemorating
the 70th anniversary of the destruction of Dresden
13 February 2015
in Dresden**

Tuesday, 13 February 1945: this date is seared into the memory of every citizen of Dresden who survived that night. It was dark early on that dull winter's day, Tuesday during Carnival. Children were wearing brightly-coloured hats and red clown noses. Many citizens of Dresden were trying to steep themselves in normality, to escape the greyness of this unending war, to forget the suffering of the refugees in the city and the reports of the approaching front line.

For five years the Allied bombers had largely ignored the city. But that evening, as Romance language professor Victor Klemperer wrote, "the catastrophe overtook Dresden: the bombs fell, the houses crumbled, [...] the burning timbers fell on Aryan and non Aryan heads alike, and one and the same firestorm drove Jews and Christians to their death; for any of the seventy or so remaining bearers of the star who survived this night, however, it meant salvation, because they were able to evade the Gestapo in the general chaos" – like the author himself, who, as the husband of a so called Aryan, had not yet been deported. Klemperer survived the bombing raids with slight injuries and escaped arrest by fleeing the city.

But the Baroque glories of "Florence on the Elbe" lay in ruins and thousands of lives were lost. The bombs and fires claimed them indiscriminately: guilty and innocent, party members and young children, war criminals and nuns, camp guards and forced labourers, active soldiers and refugees who, hoping to save themselves, had left their homes and thought they had found safety in the city.

Erich Kästner, a famous son of this city, found himself back among the piles of rubble two years later: "That which we previously understood to be Dresden no longer exists. One walks through the ruins, as though one were walking in a dream through Sodom and

Gomorrah. [...] Fifteen square kilometres of city now mown down and blown away.”

Even now, 70 years on, we can still feel the effects of the nightmare. Eyewitnesses who experienced the inferno still carry within them memories of places and people they were never to see again. In many of them the destruction caused long-term distress. Sometimes this was passed on to their children and grandchildren. For the city, the night of the bombing became a defining moment, the point of reference for a struggle for identity and the city's self-perception. That is why we have gathered here today, on this anniversary. We grieve with all those who have borne suffering since then. And we remember all those who lost their lives at the time as victims of war and violence, not only in Dresden, but everywhere else as well.

So many cities were targeted by terrible bombing raids during the war. Cities attacked by the Germans: Wieluń in Poland, Rotterdam, Belgrade, London, Leningrad or Coventry. And cities on which Allied pilots dropped their bombs: Kassel, Darmstadt, Essen, Lübeck, Berlin, Würzburg, Swinemünde or Pforzheim. But – owing to the number of victims and the horrific conflagrations – it is Hamburg and above all Dresden which have become symbolic of the German civilian population's suffering as a result of the bombing campaigns.

Incendiary bombs following on the tails of high explosives unleashed firestorms which turned city centres and cellars into deathtraps. The bombing of purely residential areas on such a scale and with such destructive force was unprecedented. The question of whether this form of warfare was militarily useful, permissible under international law and morally acceptable was the subject of intensive and controversial debate even while the war raged – and even in Britain and among the Allies. To this day, there is an ongoing legal and moral debate as to whether illegitimate means may ever be used at all to remove injustice.

Another thing that makes Dresden special is this: nowhere was suffering so greatly instrumentalised for political ends as here. The falsification of history began even before the end of the National Socialist tyranny, continued under the GDR and is continued even now by a few incorrigible individuals.

A few years ago, an independent commission of historians, having undertaken careful research, put the number of people killed in the night of 13/14 February 1945 at up to 25,000. Nevertheless, some people continue to assert that the true figure was higher, in order to put the Allied attacks on a par with National Socialist crimes against humanity – in order to relativise German guilt, in other words. And on the other side there are those who, despite the untold human suffering, justify the area bombing as a fitting punishment, who assume a collective guilt and thus entirely ignore German suffering.

I know very well that ever since we in Germany have been fully aware – thanks to those who worked to this end over the past decades – of the extent of Germany's guilt, many people have found it hard to acknowledge that German victims suffered too. However, I also know that a country which stands for an atrocity like genocide could not expect to emerge unpunished and undamaged from a war which it itself unleashed.

Today I wish to recall with gratitude the success of the citizens of Dresden in resisting at least twice all attempts to instrumentalise remembrance. In the 1980s, small groups of courageous people, candles in their hands, resisted attempts by the state to turn remembrance into anti-Western demonstrations. And today, tens of thousands of people in Dresden, taking the white rose as their symbol, are resisting a form of remembrance which mainly the extreme right but sometimes also the extreme left are trying to abuse in the spirit of excessive or negative nationalism.

The white rose not only recalls the Munich anti-Nazi resistance group; it was also white roses that were painted on two porcelain plates which survived the bombing of 13 February intact. The Dresden woman who found the plates after the conflagration presented one of them to survivors of Guernica, the Spanish town destroyed by the Luftwaffe in 1937. And her plea for forgiveness, her expression of solidarity in suffering, her desire for reconciliation, was understood and accepted.

Let us state it quite clearly once again: we know who started that murderous war. We know. And that is why we will never forget the victims of German warfare. We will never forget, even as we today remember the German victims.

Remembrance not only connects us with the dead, it also creates a connection among those who remember. After all, we want to look to the past in order to find answers to questions here in the present and in the future. What happened must not remain without consequences. And so we look to the past for orientation, for lessons, for role models, perhaps even for ways to be able to deliberately advance all that is good and deliberately prevent all that is evil. And so we decide which events in the past we want to focus special attention on and which aspects we will pay special heed to.

In doing so, we realise that people vary greatly in how they remember, and remembering by no means automatically leads to good and correct behaviour. Remembrance can be a source of productive energy for a society. But in many parts of the world we are today once again seeing how a selective and, as it were, biased remembrance serves to further destructive, revanchist or nationalistic goals. Here in our own country, too, we will continually have to talk, and sometimes argue, about what we want to remember, and how.

And so the fact that we are gathered here in the Frauenkirche today with representatives of our former enemies, is by no means to be taken for granted. From history we know that there can be very different responses to destruction, to territorial losses, to defeat. We remember how the Germans felt after the First World War. They, or at least the majority of them, felt humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles. And they sought revenge – which is also a type of remembrance. Various states have responded in a similar vein since then, as we have seen recently in the Balkans, for instance. We note this, and it should be a warning to us. Enmities cannot heal if the wounds are kept open. Cultivating resentment stirs a desire for revenge and retaliation. A remembrance which focuses exclusively on the other side's guilt sets nations against each other rather than bringing them closer in peaceful dialogue. Recently we have seen frightening tendencies towards the manipulation and instrumentalisation of remembrance.

It is not long since politicians and military experts in Germany believed: "Right or wrong – my country!" Unconditional loyalty to the Fatherland was more important than the question of whether that same Fatherland's actions were good or reprehensible. The resistance fighters of 20 July had to learn a bitter lesson: the planned tyrannicide was regarded by most as treason against the Fatherland. I, however, am in agreement with Carl Schurz, the son of a schoolteacher from the Rhineland town of Liblar, a man of the 19th century, a freedom fighter who earned profound respect – not in Germany, however, but as an independent politician in America. Schurz said: "My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right."

For many years now, our remembrance has no longer been oriented to a standard where the priority is to defend the honour of our country. We are no longer prepared to deny or defend transgressions and crimes committed in our country's name. Most of us have also cast off that image of ourselves as victims, an image cherished by many in the post war years as they wallowed in self-pity and refused to acknowledge the suffering of German victims. For now we know this: those who are prepared to cease dwelling on their own fate will set themselves free. They will learn to see themselves anew in a wider historical context and they will become more sensitive to the fate of others.

It is true that we still sometimes see what might be termed competition between different groups of victims. But increasingly it is becoming possible to focus our remembrance on the human, on preserving and defending everything which makes humans human: their dignity and their ability to empathise.

One fruit of this way of thinking is an understanding which transcends national borders. And so we are delighted to welcome guests from the United Kingdom, Poland, Russia and many different

countries of the world here to the Frauenkirche today. We are profoundly grateful and very happy that you are here. Thank you all for coming. You should know that there is no lasting wrath in our hearts, just as there is none in yours. We feel ourselves united in remembrance, remembrance which focuses on the victims and our recognition of their suffering. Remembrance which also expresses a profound empathy which enables us to share in what happened to people as a consequence of war – be it in London or Warsaw, Leningrad, Dresden or Wrocław. We do not forget. And together we join in concentrating our thoughts and feelings on the fate of all victims.

Once the ruins of the Frauenkirche served to remind us of the horrors of war. I well remember coming here from Rostock, seeing that grey-black pile of stones, a memorial. Today the rebuilt church is a symbol of peace and reconciliation.

Twenty-five years ago, Dresden appealed for support for the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche, and, admirably, the war time enemies were among those to respond. Twenty years ago, the Duke of Kent, representing the British crown, pledged a new tower cross for Dresden. Ten years ago, delegates from Coventry presented the Frauenkirche congregation with a Cross of Nails, made of three large carpentry nails found in the beams of Coventry Cathedral after its destruction by German bombs. The Cross thus truly became a symbol of reconciliation.

Today the Frauenkirche is a place in which to learn about peace. The money for its reconstruction was collected from far and wide: two thirds of the total came from private donors in all corners of the world, but especially the United Kingdom and the United States of America. What a magnificent sign of solidarity spanning the nations! What a success for those words of the Bible repeated in the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation, which says: "Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

Yes, it is a lesson we have learnt and experienced: despite manifold failures, despite the potential for destructive actions, humans are creatures who can soar from sincere and respectful remembrance to great things – humanity, understanding and peace.