



**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the "Ecumenical service at the Berliner Dom to
commemorate the genocide suffered by the Armenians,
Aramaeans and Pontian Greeks"
on 23 April 2015
in Berlin**

I would like to begin by expressing my thanks to you, Excellencies, for organising this service at the heart of the city of Berlin on behalf of your churches and for inviting us to be here tonight. My presence here is proof of the fact that the German state and its political leaders always feel a strong sense of commitment to coming to terms with the past in an honest, appropriate and self critical manner.

At this service, ladies and gentlemen, we are commemorating the hundreds of thousands of Armenians who fell victim to planned and systematic murder a century ago.

Men, women, children and the aged were deported, sent on death marches, abandoned in the steppe and desert without any shelter or food, burned alive, hunted down and beaten to death, and shot dead indiscriminately.

This planned and calculated criminal act was meted out against the Armenians for one reason, and one reason only: because they were Armenians. A similar fate befell their fellow sufferers – Assyrians, Aramaeans and Pontian Greeks.

With our present day knowledge, and against the backdrop of the political and humanitarian horrors of recent decades, it is clear to us today that the fate of the Armenians exemplifies the history of mass annihilations, ethnic cleansing, deportations, even genocides, that marred the 20th century in such a terrible way.

These crimes were committed in the shadows of wars. War also served to legitimise these barbaric acts. This is what happened to the Armenians in the First World War. This is what also happened elsewhere over the course of the last century. And this is what

sometimes continues to happen to many other religious and national minorities today. They were branded as spies, as the henchmen of foreign powers, as troublemakers threatening national unity, as enemies of the people or enemies by race, or as pathogens infecting the body politic.

We remember the victims so that they and their fate are not forgotten. We remember them for their own sake. Above all, in doing so we call to mind the inalienable dignity of every human being. While this dignity cannot be destroyed, there is unlimited potential for running roughshod over it by violating and crushing it underfoot.

We remember the victims so that they are once again given a voice, so that their story is told – a story that was supposed to vanish without a trace.

Yes, and we remember the victims also for our own sake. We can only preserve our humanity by ensuring that it is not only the victors and the memory of the living that determine history, but that those who were beaten, the missing, the betrayed and the annihilated, also have a voice.

Commemorating the victims would only be half of the act of remembrance if we failed to talk about perpetrators. There are no victims without perpetrators. The perpetrators, the then rulers of the Ottoman Empire and their henchmen – as essentially all perpetrators of racially, ethnically or religiously motivated mass murder – were convinced, to the point of fanaticism, that what they were doing was right.

The Young Turkish ideology saw in the concept of an ethnically homogeneous nation state with a uniform religion an alternative to the lost tradition of the coexistence of different peoples and religions in the collapsing Ottoman Empire. Division along ethnic lines, ethnic cleansing and expulsions often formed the darker side of the emergence of nation states at the beginning of the 20th century. However, ideologies preaching unity and purity often lead to exclusion and expulsion and, ultimately, to murderous acts. In the Ottoman Empire, this developed a genocidal dynamic to which the Armenian people fell victim.

We are currently right in the middle of a debate on which term most appropriately describes the events that took place one hundred years ago. But let us ensure that this debate is not boiled down to differences in terminology. What matters above all is – even after one hundred years – to recognise, deplore and mourn the systematic annihilation of a people in all of its terrible reality. If we fail to do this, we will lose sight of the compass that guides our actions – and also lose respect for ourselves.

If we achieve understanding in our assessment of history, if we call injustice by its name even if our people were guilty of such injustice, if we are united in our commitment to respecting rights and human rights in our daily lives, then we will manage to preserve the dignity of the victims and create a shared humane basis for coexistence at home and beyond borders.

We are not putting anyone alive today into the dock by remembering this. The perpetrators of this crime committed long ago are no longer with us, and their children and their children's children cannot be found guilty. However, what the descendants of the victims are rightfully entitled to expect is that historical facts, and thus historical guilt, are recognised. It is part of the responsibility of those living today to feel a sense of commitment to respecting and protecting the right to life and human rights of each and every individual, and also of each and every minority.

In the case of the Armenians, we therefore follow no other principle than our deep rooted human experience, which teaches us that we can free ourselves from guilt by admitting it and that we cannot free ourselves from guilt by denying, suppressing or trivialising it. We in Germany have painstakingly, and often after shameful procrastination, learned to remember the crimes committed in the National Socialist period – above all the persecution and annihilation of Europe's Jews. And, in so doing, we have also learned to differentiate between the guilt of the perpetrators, which must be recognised and identified unconditionally, and the responsibility of their descendants to engage in appropriate acts of commemoration.

It is utterly important and clearly justified to remember, also here in Germany, the murder of the Armenian people. Descendants of Armenians and Turks live here, and each have their own story to tell. It is important, however, for the sake of peaceful coexistence, for us all to follow the same objective principles when coming to terms with the past.

In this case, we Germans as a whole must also take part in this process insofar as we share responsibility, perhaps even guilt, in the genocide committed against the Armenians.

German military officers were involved in planning, and to an extent in carrying out, the deportations. Advice from German observers and diplomats, who had plainly recognised the destructive intent behind the actions taken against the Armenians, was overlooked and ignored. At the end of the day, what the German Reich wanted least was to damage relations with their Ottoman ally. Reich Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, who was informed about the persecution of the Armenians in painstaking detail by a special envoy, remarked dryly in December 1915 that: "Our sole objective is to keep Turkey on our side until the end of the war, irrespective of whether Armenians are killed in

the process or not." It pains us to hear this, but at the same time we recall that Germans too, most notably the highly dedicated Johannes Lepsius, made the suffering of the Armenian people known around the world with their publishing activities

It was the medic Armin Theophil Wegner who captured the fate of the Armenians on camera and brought their plight to a German audience at his slide shows in Germany after the war. And it was the Austrian Franz Werfel who erected an artistic monument to the resistance of the Armenians against their planned destruction with his novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. This book was quickly banned in Germany following its publication in 1933. But it was read in the Jewish ghettos of Białystok and Vilnius – as an omen of what was soon to happen to the Jews. Both the censors of the Third Reich and the Jews therefore understood the book and the story it recounted entirely correctly.

When Adolf Hitler ordered the German army groups to attack Poland and explained his plans to his military commanders in his operation order of 22 August 1939, which urged them to "kill without pity or mercy, all men, women, and children of Polish descent or language", he expected the reaction to be one of collective disinterest, which is why he concluded with the rhetorical question: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

We are speaking about them! We are! Even today, one hundred years later, we are still talking about this – about this and other crimes against humanity and human dignity. We do this so that Hitler is not proved right. And we do this so that no dictator, no tyrant and no one who considers ethnic cleansing to be legitimate can expect their crimes to be ignored or forgotten.

Yes, we are still talking about uncomfortable facts of history, about a denial of responsibility and about past guilt. We do not do this in order to shackle ourselves to the bleakness of the past, but rather in order to be watchful and to react in time when individuals and people are threatened by annihilation and terror.

It is good when we do this together, not separately according to denominations and religions or languages, and not according to ethnic and state borders. Today, we are thankful for each and every sign of remembrance and reconciliation from around the world. And I am especially thankful for each and every encouraging sign of understanding and rapprochement between Turks and Armenians.

No one must be afraid of the truth. There can be no reconciliation without the truth. Only together can we overcome what divided and continues to divide us. Only together will we be able to enjoy a bright future in this One World entrusted to us all.