



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck  
at the memorial ceremony  
in Schloß Holte-Stukenbrock on 6 May  
on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World  
War**

The day after tomorrow, it will be 70 years since the end of the Second World War in Europe – that murderous horror unleashed by Germany.

At long last, this was the end of the war

that devastated our continent,

in which the Jews of Europe were murdered

and millions of soldiers and civilians died,

the end of the war that caused millions of people in many countries to be driven from their homes

and led to Europe, with Germany in the middle, being divided for 50 years.

This war only ended once the Western Allies and the Soviet Union had forced Germany to surrender, thus also liberating us Germans from the Nazi dictatorship. We of the later generations in Germany have every reason to be grateful for this self-sacrificing battle by our former opponents in the East and West. Their struggle made it possible for us to live in peace and dignity in Germany today. Who would not be grateful for this?

We have gathered here today in Schloß Holte-Stukenbrock to recall one of the worst crimes of the war – the deaths of millions of Red Army soldiers in German prisoner-of-war camps. They died in agony without medical care, starved to death or were murdered. Millions of prisoners of war for whose care the German Wehrmacht was responsible under the law of war and international agreements.

These prisoners were forced on long marches, transported in open goods wagons and sent to so-called reception or assembly camps that provided almost nothing at the start – no shelter, not enough

food, no sanitary facilities, no medical care. Nothing. They had to dig holes in the ground and build makeshift huts for shelter – they tried desperately to survive somehow. Huge numbers of these prisoners were then forced to do hard labour which, in their weakened and starving condition, they often did manage to not survive.

Prisoner-of-war camp Stalag 326 Senne was located a few hundred metres from here. Over 310,000 prisoners of war were here. A great many of them died, and tens of thousands are buried here.

What do numbers say? Not much – and yet they provide information. They give us at least an idea of the horror and merciless treatment suffered by Soviet soldiers in German prisoner-of-war camps. We must now assume that far more than half of the total number of over 5.3 million Soviet prisoners of war did not survive. Millions of fates, millions of names, millions of biographies. Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Kyrgyz, Georgians, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Turkmen – soldiers from all the ethnic groups that were part of the Soviet Union at the time.

When we look at what happened to Western Allied prisoners of war, of whom around three per cent perished during imprisonment, we see the enormous difference. Unlike in the West, the war in the East was planned as a war of ideology, annihilation and extermination from the beginning by the National Socialist regime. And as a rule, that was also how it was waged, as shown for example by the terrible years-long siege of Leningrad aimed at starving a city with a population of millions into surrender and by the brutality towards the civilian population in all of the occupied countries, but particularly in the Soviet Union. This policy was undertaken consciously and intentionally at the express command of Adolf Hitler. The Wehrmacht carried out these orders willingly. In May 1941, Chief of the General Staff Halder wrote: "We need to move away from the idea of camaraderie among soldiers. Communists were not our comrades in the past, and they will not be our comrades in the future." Prisoners were to be treated accordingly, and this is still stamped indelibly on the memories of the peoples of the former Soviet Union.

Shortly after the war broke out, the Soviet Union declared its willingness to sign an agreement with the German Reich via the Red Cross on the treatment of prisoners of war. Hitler brusquely rejected this offer – and he made sure that his soldiers were also informed of this decision via millions of pamphlets. His aim was clear: no German soldier was to think he could possibly survive a Soviet prisoner-of-war camp. All German soldiers were supposed to fight to their dying breath. Under no circumstances were they to surrender. The supreme commander, Adolf Hitler, was completely indifferent to the fate of his soldiers who were taken prisoner.

Let us now look at the other side. For his part, Stalin decreed that if a Soviet soldier was taken prisoner, he had not fought to the end and could therefore only be a deserter, a traitor of some sort. This meant that when the war ended, very many Soviet prisoners of war faced re-imprisonment, and often even death, upon their return home. We can merely imagine how many mothers, wives, brides and children waited in vain after the end of the war and also how hard it was for them to honour the memory of their dead at that time.

However, as Germans, we first ask ourselves about German guilt and responsibility. And we must remember that the millions of deaths of those who died under the German Wehrmacht constituted "one of the greatest German crimes of the Second World War". For a long time after the war, many people were unwilling to accept this. But we certainly know today that the Wehrmacht was also guilty of serious – the worst – crimes.

For various reasons, people in Germany have never become fully aware of the horrific fate of Soviet prisoners of war. To this day, these soldiers' fates have been overshadowed by other memories. One reason for this may be that in the first years after the war, Germans mainly thought about their own family members who had been killed, were missing in action or had been captured by the Soviet Union, where some remained imprisoned until as late as 1955.

Another reason may well be that the terrible images of the conquest of Germany's eastern territories by the Red Army blinded many Germans to their own guilt. Those who looked away and did not want to remember also subsequently felt that their position had been vindicated by the Soviet Union's policy of occupation and expansion and by the establishment of a communist dictatorship complete with subjugation, oppression and the absence of the rule of law in Germany's Soviet-occupied zone. On the one hand, utmost importance was attached in the GDR to remembering the heroic Soviet fraternal people, but on the other hand, the heroic myth imposed from above did not leave much room for empathy with those who, as prisoners of war in Germany, were not glorious victors, but rather victims, disenfranchised and vanquished individuals.

In later years, remembrance of the genocide of the Jewish people and nascent shame about this simply took precedence over coming to terms with guilt for other crimes in West Germany and the reunited Germany.

And yet the crimes of National Socialism are profoundly interlinked. They all have the same root. They come from the idea that only the law of the strong applies among human beings, and that the strong have the right to decide about other people's right to life, about the value or lack of value of their lives. As a result, Jews, like Sinti and Roma, were selected, humiliated and murdered. Disabled people and

homosexuals subsequently met the same fate. The peoples in the East were thus also vilified as "inferior". This meant they could be treated without regard for their humanity and human rights, without regard for the rules of international law and the law of war.

In a report on a visit to a prisoner-of-war camp by Propaganda Minister Goebbels, a government official wrote:

"The aim of the visit was [...] to present the sub-humans shown in the newsreels live [...] [...]"

The visit failed to achieve the desired result, as almost all of the prisoners were Belarusians and thus generally had a recognisably human appearance. [...]"

They receive extraordinarily small rations and are exposed to the elements day and night. It is my view that these prisoners will die behind their wire fence in any case." [...]"

Hubris, megalomania, a master race attitude, and cynicism are the characteristics of National Socialist ideology and its criminal practices.

It is still shocking to see how perfectly normal men and women could become accomplices to this practice of oppression and in some case even turn into merciless slave drivers and murderers within a short space of time after being poisoned with this ideology.

We stand here and remember this barbaric injustice and the violation of all rules of civilisation. We remember in the name of humanity and in the name of the equality and dignity to which everyone, without exception, is entitled as a human being. We stand here in the name of the human rights that oblige, bind and unite us, and whose enforcement we advocate.

We are gathered at a site that at first glance scarcely even hints at the dimension of what happened and the reason why we are here. Memorial stones mark rows of graves that have long since become overgrown with grass. It seems as if the time gone by has extinguished almost every visible and palpable memory of what human beings once did here to other human beings.

Here in Schloß Holte-Stukenbrock, we have to exert our powers of recollection and historic memory in order to perceive a place of horror experienced by hundreds of thousands of people on this patch of grass. And the same applies to remembrance of past suffering in general. We recall what was supposed to fade away without a trace. At least in our minds we try to get a sense of the dreadful reality of this place. We try to visualise what the photographs, statistics, index cards, accounts and eye-witness reports irrefutably and undeniably say, that this happened here in the middle of Germany. And it certainly didn't just "happen" somehow. It was "made to happen"; it was

“perpetrated” according to plan, with evil intent and on a forever incomprehensible scale by people with whom we share a language, origin and nationality; by people whose crimes are now part of our history.

We have to exert our will in order to bear the truth, so we do not instinctively think that none of this – what human beings made happen in Stalag 326 and hundreds of other places spread across Germany, what actually did happen here – can possibly be true.

However, we do not only need to exert our powers of reasoning, to activate our imagination and to expand our historical knowledge. First and last of all, we also need to open our hearts and souls to what we scarcely want to believe. This involves genuine empathy, a truly moving process of remembering that moves our minds, hearts and souls.

I would like to expressly thank all those today who, over the past years and decades, have endeavoured to bring about this new type of awareness and empathy. Dedicated volunteers found the traces and have kept memories of the past alive.

The Flowers for Stukenbrock initiative was set up so that memories do not fade away. For the same reason, and thanks to tireless and largely voluntary endeavours, there is now a documentation centre here, as well as a highly dedicated and exemplary friends’ association, insightful guided tours and exhibitions. The relatives of victims, who come from far away looking for traces of memories of their father or grandfather, are lovingly looked after and supported.

A man who was imprisoned here himself, Leo Frankfurt, is here today and will speak to us shortly. Your presence here moves me deeply, Mr Frankfurt. It is like a gracious gift to us. It makes us both ashamed and happy. Thank you!

Members of the Basanov family are also here with us today. Their father, father-in-law and great-uncle Basan Erdniev was a prisoner here and is buried in the cemetery. We just paused for a moment at the site where you remember your father. I would also like to thank you, the Basanov family, for coming here today. I am very happy that you are accompanying me today and that you are here with us.

The history club at Schloß Holte-Stukenbrock Grammar School is also one of the initiatives that speaks to the valuable commitment found here. This includes the Anne Frank project and a theatre project involving several schools. All of these young people have taken on the task of carrying on remembrance of the past. The same is true of the police cadets who are trained here and who are highly aware of what the history of this place means. We are also joined today by young

Bundeswehr soldiers, for whom historical awareness is a matter of course.

Thanks to the voluntary initiatives here and in other similar places all over our country, we have seen, and continue to see, a determined, day-to-day resistance against forgetting the past. That is good, and it is part of our culture. Representatives of Action Reconciliation – Service for Peace, Gegen Vergessen – Für Demokratie, and the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst are also here with us today. I would particularly like to thank you and the many other people who work so selflessly on behalf of remembrance and commemoration in our country. You help with a task that also remains vital 70 years after the end of the war, that of shedding light on the fate of Soviet prisoners of war.

Not far from where we are standing is the site that brought death and destruction, on which the cries, sighs and groans of abused bodies and souls remain invisibly ingrained.

This is one of the places where we painfully and intensely feel that the living have a duty to the dead. Today, 70 years after the end of the war, let us take on this duty. Let us promise one another to do everything in our power to enable and protect a life in dignity and peace for everyone.