



BUNDESPRÄSIDENTIALAMT

The speech online:
www.bundespraesident.de

page 1 to 6

**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the main ceremony to mark
the Day of National Mourning
on 15 November 2015
in Berlin**

This day, which for decades has been set apart for mourning, is this year a day of acute sorrow. Today our pain is forging a particular bond with our French friends. Our thoughts and our condolences are with the victims of the despicable attacks in Paris, we feel for the families, the police officers and emergency workers, and the French nation as a whole. In the face of devastation and death, at this time of need and grief, our hearts go out to our neighbours across the Rhine.

This attack targeted France, but it was also directed at our open society, the way of life of those living in freedom and equality in Europe and throughout the world. Those who perpetrate or condone such acts should know that the community of democrats is stronger than the International of hate. We bow our heads in honour of the dead, but we will never bow to terrorism.

We live in times in which we are seeing victims of a new kind of war. They are victims of devious groups of murderers. These are terrorists who, in the name of Islamist fundamentalism, are calling their followers to take up arms against democracies, against universal values and even against Muslims who do not support their barbaric ideology.

For years we have been aware that armed conflict is encroaching on us. We live in times in which German soldiers, too, are involved in international missions where they can become victims of this sort of warfare.

It is almost exactly one year ago to the day since the Grove of Remembrance was inaugurated just outside Potsdam. It is dedicated to the 105 men and 1 woman who have lost their lives in Bundeswehr missions abroad. In Afghanistan alone 57 soldiers have died and more than 300 have been injured: in suicide bombings, missile and bomb

ADDRESS	Bundespräsidialamt 11010 Berlin
TEL / FAX	+49 30 2000-2021/-1926
E-MAIL	presse@bpra.bund.de
INTERNET	www.bundespraesident.de

attacks, through shelling and improvised explosive devices, also as a result of accidents or illness – and indeed due to suicide.

I offer my condolences to the families gathered here for this memorial service today. I know very well that a separate, protected place of remembrance for your son, your daughter, your husband, your father or your brother can only be a small consolation for you. But I do hope that it is a consolation, this place of quietness and sorrow, of remembrance and warning. A place that many of you desired. I am grateful that I had the privilege of attending the inauguration exactly one year ago.

Remembering those who did not return from difficult missions on behalf of our Republic should have a central place in our society. We remember the members of the armed forces, but also the police officers and the development aid workers who died during missions abroad.

It took some time before it was possible to commemorate the dead in this way in the Federal Republic. There were times in Germany when soldiers died in wars started by princes to further their own interests. On rare occasions, in the early 19th century, for example, young men in Germany also died fighting for the liberation of their fatherland. Then, in the First World War, soldiers died for the Kaiser – their fatherland was ruled by politicians who regarded war as an acceptable political tool. In the wake of the Second World War, after the loss of millions of lives, including those of many civilians, and after an act of genocide against the Jews as well as the Sinti and Roma, the idea of a dignified public act of remembrance for people who had lost their lives in military service was anathema to many Germans. Too often in the past, all too many war memorials had served as the backdrops for a kind of heroicism, all too often the ceremonies had been dominated by thoughts of revenge and the thirst for retribution instead of grief and the desire for peace.

More than 100 years have passed since the outbreak of the First World War, and 70 years since the end of the Second World War. Commemorative events and publications have recently confronted us once again with the seminal catastrophe of the 20th century and its consequences, with the enormous destructive power of industrial warfare. With the blindness, hate and violence generated by national hubris and perverted ideology. With the thirst for revenge. With mass murders. With the deaths of millions of prisoners of war as a result of inhumane treatment, hunger and epidemics. With the mass rape of women. With the driving out of entire population groups from their homes and with the demarcation of new borders.

Yet we also witnessed how the tragedy of the European continent spawned the desire for unity among European nations. How, with the rejection of totalitarian ideologies, the desire to build

democratic societies won the day. And how in postwar Germany first the West and then the East had the chance of a new start in freedom and democracy. Protected by a Bundeswehr which was able to gain acceptance by breaking with a guilt-ridden military tradition. Four days ago the Bundeswehr celebrated the anniversary of its founding on 12 November 1955 with a military tattoo here outside this building.

After its foundation it would be another ten years before the Bundeswehr, with the help of the instruction on "The Bundeswehr and Tradition" explicitly declared its commitment to the traditional principles of the Prussian reformers led by Gerhard von Scharnhorst and – even more importantly – the resistance fighters of 20 July 1944. For a long time it was difficult for the Bundeswehr to come to terms with its own past, yet this was crucial for the Bundeswehr to be able to develop in a positive direction – away from all nationalistic, imperialistic and racist ideologies, also away from all glorification of war, away from all heroification of the soldier as victim. Today the Bundeswehr, with its concept of the soldier as a citizen in uniform, the mature, rational and responsible soldier, is firmly anchored in the democratic tradition. Every soldier is therefore accountable to the principle of justice, the law and ultimately their conscience.

Allow me at this point to take the opportunity to express my thanks to the President of the German Bundestag for his speech at the ceremony marking the 60th anniversary of the Bundeswehr. He reminded us that as a parliamentary army, our army is closely connected with this House, with our constitution, our democratic society. It is good to know that this country has an army that deserves the acceptance and respect of peace loving and responsible citizens.

In 1922 the Day of National Mourning was commemorated for the first time here in the Reichstag building at the instigation of the German War Graves Commission to remember the two million German soldiers who had fallen in the First World War. The Nazi regime usurped and perverted this act of remembrance with its barbaric ideology. In 1950, five years after liberation from National Socialism, the first central event organised by the War Graves Commission took place in the young Federal Republic in commemoration of millions of victims of war, civilians and soldiers, who had lost their lives at the front and in their homeland.

The War Graves Commission deserves recognition for its great achievement in labouring hard over many years to ensure that as far as possible every single fallen soldier received a worthy final resting place – initially in the military cemeteries in Western Europe, and since the beginning of the 1990s also in military cemeteries in Central and Eastern Europe. It is almost a miracle, at least for the older ones among us, that it even became possible to establish communal cemeteries like this in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Poland. Decades

on, the families can now travel to their loved ones' graves to lay flowers and ensure that the dead are not forgotten. Together with many other people in Germany, I am grateful for this development. And at this point I would also like to say the following: I wish to thank all the helpers and stakeholders in the War Graves Commission who have resolutely persisted with this work, even when at times it was considered to be of little value. Thank you all.

For 70 years many millions of Europeans have lived in peace. 70 years in which sons and daughters of the fallen have been able to gain some distance from the past and the grandchildren and great grandchildren have been able to grow up without war. And with the growing number of schoolchildren from immigrant families, there is seldom a family connection with the Second World War. Our perspective has broadened over the years. Grief and remembrance of the fallen have been joined by remembrance of the historical circumstances. Yet this process does not always unfold without conflict.

The dead should be left to rest in peace. As long as his mother was still alive, the author Uwe Timm respected this statement. Only after her death did he feel at liberty to investigate the taboo story of his brother, sixteen years his senior, which lay behind the ritualised family version. These tales spoke of the courageous boy who was decent, brave and honest and whose idealism had been exploited by the war.

Probably much of this was true. But not everything. Uwe Timm's brother volunteered to join the Waffen SS and fought on the eastern front. Even if he did not participate in acts of murder, he must – as his younger brother writes – “have seen the civilian victims, the starving and the homeless, people exiled, frozen, killed in the course of the war”. His soldier brother must have known, but did not speak of them. And his parents must also have known, but did not speak of them. The suffering of the others was not mentioned within the family. They only ever spoke of “a blow dealt by fate”, which robbed the parents of their boy and their home and made them victims – victims “of a collective and inexplicable fate”.

Uwe Timm's memoir will no doubt strike a chord with many postwar children. For a long time Germans wanted to see themselves only as victims and were not prepared to accept their culpability in a criminal war. Now this hardened position of self pity has long been overcome. It is history.

Today, Germany is well aware of its responsibility, particularly for the destructive war of the National Socialist regime. The memorial ceremony here afterwards, during which I will pay tribute to the dead, encompasses all victims of war and violence, including those whose fates were left out of the focus of our culture of remembrance. Today we can remember those German's who died because we also

remember those who died at the hands of Germans. And because we do not disregard the historical context, we can also show understanding for the grief of German family members. But we are also always painfully aware that among the fallen Germans, over whom once their loved ones grieved and shed tears, there were many who first killed others before they were killed themselves.

Particularly at a time when we have commemorated anniversaries of the First and Second World Wars in close succession, we want to remember the price of war. War destroys everything. It does not just destroy roads, cities, ports. War destroys people. It turns the living into the lifeless and leaves behind it a trail of countless dead souls in those who survive. Anyone who commits violent acts or is a victim of violence undergoes a change in their being. They become a different person.

Willy Peter Reese, who was sent to the eastern front at the age of 20 during the Second World War, vividly described this. He writes that he became "a stranger to myself." He bluntly records how he becomes hard and bitter, how he loses all sense of compassion, how he seeks consolation in alcohol. "We were the victors. War excused our thefts, encouraged cruelty, and the need to survive didn't go around getting permission from conscience [...]. I would give up God and my own humanity for a piece of bread."

Reese fell in June 1944. In his diary, only published in 2003, we encounter a writer who lurches between euphoria and despair, between cynicism and depression. And the power of his writing makes us shudder when we read what others had to endure and live through.

History does not repeat itself. Yet human behaviour does – both good and bad. Even postwar generations are moved by the documentation of individual suffering, individual guilt and individual tragedy. In the behaviour of the past they recognise and sense what people today are still capable of, regardless of their ethnic group, nationality or religion. This is also illustrated by the many encounters that the War Graves Commission arranges with schoolchildren and young people from German, French, Polish, Turkish and Algerian families. Here we have seen how young people join a community founded on shared responsibility that is not based on shared experience. But they find common ground in a joint desire to come together.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is the hope for us all, that the memory of the suffering of the war does not trigger revenge but compels more and more people and countries to seek a solution in the peaceful coexistence of nations. Just as we succeeded in making European unity the major peace project of our continent. And so we hope that the dignity and integrity of the individual will shape our thinking and action, not the cult of terror, not the ideology of an

infallible world view or religion or a victorious and heroic nation. That soldiers' graves, as Albert Schweitzer once said, eventually can be the greatest preachers of peace. Then, as we have experienced, reconciliation will be possible beyond the graves. Then peace can become an enduring reality. For this we bear a joint responsibility.