



Statement by Federal President Joachim Gauck on the 75th anniversary of the attack on the Soviet Union

"Seventy-five years ago today, on 22 June 1941, the German Reich launched its attack on the Soviet Union.

What followed was an unparalleled war of annihilation that claimed the lives of more people than any other front in the Second World War. Millions of soldiers were killed on both sides. Three million soldiers died in agony in German prisoner-of-war camps. The Holocaust began with systematic massacres of the Jews. Countless communist officials, Sinti and Roma, and psychiatric patients were murdered. Millions of civilians starved to death, were shot or hanged, or died when entire villages were razed to the ground and bombed. The Soviet Union suffered more than any other country during the Second World War. Almost 27 million people lost their lives.

We remember the barbaric policies of National Socialist Germany, which were based on fanatic racism and a belief in a master race. Hitler and his henchmen, with the support of countless Germans, wanted to destroy the Soviet Union, to enslave its people and to exploit its resources. The pact between Hitler and Stalin and the subsequent division and occupation of Poland in 1939 were steps on the path to the planned subjugation of the Soviet Union.

Today, we also remember the Soviet soldiers who – along with the Western Allies – made it possible to defeat Hitler's Germany. They paid for their success with enormous losses. They died on the front or in countless numbers in the camps. Last year, I paid tribute to the tens of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war who died in Stalag 326 in Holte-Stukenbrock. The dreadful fate of Soviet prisoners of war remains largely unremembered in our country to this day.

Even if new wrongs were committed and new oppression occurred with the advance of the Red Army and later on in the Soviet occupation zone, this does not in any way change the fact that the

peoples of the Soviet Union played a large, vital and unforgettable part in the defeat of National Socialism.

Looking back at the past should also remind us how precious Europe's subsequent answer to war and destruction is. Our European community of nations is based on cooperation among equals. It resolves conflicts peacefully and thus calls on us to refrain from seeking to maintain national cohesion through self-aggrandisement and discrimination against other nations.

Today's date exhorts us to call to mind the importance of peace. Peace is not something we can take for granted. Peace, as has been our painful experience in the past years, must be safeguarded – time and again."