



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the opening of the Franco-German  
Museum Hartmannswillerkopf  
in France  
on 10 November 2017**

This may seem like a peaceful part of the country today, but it is a place scarred by terror. Pictures of the final days of the battle in May 1916 show it as an unpeopled, apocalyptic landscape, with charred, leafless trees on a mountain peak littered with craters. The cross on the summit still stands, a reminder of a civilization that was laid to waste, choked, annihilated by machine gun fire and incessant mortar explosions, by poison gas shells.

When the fighting at Hartmannswillerkopf began in December 1914, the objective was to take the mountain.

Maximilian Ott, a soldier from Württemberg, was the first to die for Germany; Marius Magnin the first for France.

By the end, the number of dead had climbed to 30,000, French and Germans alike. The order to take the peak was not withdrawn, even when the Hartmannswillerkopf had long since lost its strategic significance, when the Great War had moved on to Verdun, to the Somme, to Artois. The front line scarcely moved at all during the protracted battle which was abandoned in 1916, and it remained where it was until the end of the War. So what did so many thousand soldiers fight and die for on these slopes?

The Hartmannswillerkopf is known as the "mangeuse d'hommes", the man-eater. The mass slaughter here by the Hartmannswillerkopf symbolises the insanity of the War. But we know without a doubt that it was not the mountain which called for this human sacrifice. It was the mistaken belief in the superiority of one nation over other nations which inspired millions of young men to go to war and which cost them their lives. It was – in the case of my country – an unbridled desire to be a great power, an exaggerated patriotism which transmuted into

nationalism, which inculcated the young generation with the idea that France was our supposed arch-enemy.

Today, we – French and Germans alike – are remembering together what happened in this very place. We are recalling something that each generation has to learn afresh for itself – to separate the concept of nation from the ideology of nationalism. We are remembering what happened, because we never again want to be led astray by nationalism – to repression at home and aggression towards others.

We need this remembrance, as a memorial, a monument, a museum – but that alone will not suffice. When we commemorate the soldiers who lie here, when we honour their memory, we do so because we must not forget their deaths. This task is not getting any easier, 100 years after the events, now that the last living witnesses have died and young people ask, “what has any of this to do with me?” But, for this very reason, it is not one iota less important. This mountain is not a man-eater – nationalism is a man-eater!

Europe, this Europe – the European Union united in peace – this is our response to the devastation of two World Wars.

This Europe, bound together by the signs and symbols of its terrible past, as described by the British historian Tony Judt, who died tragically young, is an extraordinary and far from self-evident accomplishment. This new joint memorial here by the Hartmannswillerkopf is one such symbol. And I am grateful to be here with you all today, assembled in admonitory remembrance.

But, as Tony Judt reminds us, Europe’s past not only entails a commitment to remembrance, it also means we must be committed to its future. Maximilian Ott was 28 years old when his life came to an end, Marius Magnin 26. Today there is an entire generation of their age for whom a united and peaceful Europe is a matter of course. A whole generation of their age which says: “Europe is my second home. I am French. Or German – but I am also European.”

What a tremendous European accomplishment this is – but what a responsibility! These young people, they are who is meant when we say that Europe is committed to its future.

President Macron, my dear Emmanuel, you addressed this young generation at the Sorbonne in Paris. As I read your speech, it was clear to me that every line bore witness to your strong commitment to Europe’s future. And you have my assurance, we are d’accord. I, along with the vast majority of my fellow Germans, share your conviction. Your fresh impetus from France can indeed be felt in Berlin. And I am certain we will grasp it with élan. For only if France and Germany stand shoulder to shoulder, only if we move forward together, will Europe be a success!

President Macron, just as this place teaches us to free the concept of nation from the aberration of nationalism, in your Sorbonne speech you freed the idea of sovereignty from the restraints of the nation-state. You have said that European sovereignty was not incompatible with national sovereignty – indeed, that it complements and even expands it.

A sovereign, a strong and effective Europe is essential if each of our nations – whether it be Germany or France, Poland or Spain – are to be at all capable of action in this world. The young are already growing up in this reality. That is how they experience the world. Young people cross national and language borders without giving it a second thought. For they have long understood that their future is inextricably linked in a way that transcends borders. What is more, they sense that their fate is bound together for better or for worse.

They therefore expect great things of Europe. When they speak of Europe as their “second home”, they are expressing high aspirations, their desire for protection and security. They want to feel that they belong and that they have a place in the world. In today’s world, in which rapid and radical changes are taking place due to new technologies, in which wars are raging and extremism is being preached, in which the model of Western liberal democracy is by no means unchallenged, in which one power, the United States, is drawing back from the global arena and another power, China, is propagating a strong but certainly not democratic alternative; in this world, a sovereign and self-confident Europe is not just an option but – in my opinion – an absolute necessity.

United Europe has much to defend in this world: democracy and the rule of law, as well as a unique balance between individual freedom and social justice. Its roots lie – as it says in the Preamble of the Lisbon Treaty – in our shared cultural, religious and humanist inheritance. Let me come back to your speech at the Sorbonne, Monsieur Le Président: “The strongest cement that binds the European Union together will always be culture and knowledge.”

To put it in a nutshell, united Europe is a child of the Enlightenment and – just like the Enlightenment – not an achievement but a never-ending process. We all have our part to play. The Enlightenment speaks many languages. It speaks the French of Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot. It speaks the English of John Locke and David Hume, the German of Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant. It also speaks the Dutch of Spinoza and the Polish of Jastrzębowski. It speaks all European languages. It is Europe’s project.

The fact that we have never stopped arguing about the Enlightenment shows that it has to be a European matter. The Enlightenment is inconceivable without criticism or correction. Nor is the European project conceivable without criticism or correction. Even

today, the European project needs some corrections to the European structures, some effort to overcome national prejudice – and much new thinking. However, the fact that we are standing here together today shows that we Europeans were even able to learn from the worst transgressions in our history. That is why – for heaven's sake! – forgetting the lessons of the 20th century and its world wars is not an option for Europe!

Yes, time and again there are those who play off one country against another. Those who put their own nation above others. Those who measure their own sovereignty in terms of the weakness of others. This ideology led Maximilian Ott, Marius Magnin and thirty thousand young people to this mountain of death, where their future came to an abrupt end.

Young people today grew up in a very different world: in peace and freedom, at home in Europe. Their future is at stake, here today. Will the European idea stay alive? Will we realise that the memory of our bloody past is an obligation to seek a shared future? Despite all the challenges, despite all the trials, despite all the decisions which lie ahead –

L'Union Européenne est la meilleure idée que nous ayons jamais eue.

Elle n'est pas du passé.

Elle est l'avenir que nous désirons.

Et cet avenir, nous le tenons entre nos mains.

The European Union is indeed the best idea we on this continent have ever had.

It does not belong to the past.

It is the future we want.

It is the future which is in our hands.