



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the memorial ceremony of the German Bundestag  
in Berlin on 9 November 2018**

“Long live the German Republic!”

What a tremendous transformation Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed to the people on the streets of Berlin on 9 November 1918, here at this spot, from a window of the Reichstag: the collapse of the German Empire, the end of a centuries-old monarchical order, and the dawn of a democratic future for Germany.

What a proclamation in the dying days of the Great War. What a message for tired, emaciated men and women, for a war-torn country, for the cities, barracks and companies where mutinies and mass strikes spread like wildfire, in this explosive atmosphere of protest, hunger and uncertainty.

Peace at last, political self-determination at last, and social justice – that was the promise of these words. A ray of hope on a gloomy November day.

The revolution, as unplanned and improvised as it was, stands for a profound caesura in German history, for the beginning of the modern age.

Many of its accomplishments continue to shape our country today, even if we are not aware of this in our daily lives. The revolution brought all German parliaments the same, universal right of suffrage – including, at long last, for women for the very first time. It paved the way to the Weimar National Assembly, to a republican constitution, to parliamentary democracy – the first in the history of our country. This revolution also laid the foundation stones of the modern welfare state, with the eight-hour day, collective bargaining, co-determination with works councils – all of this stands for social progress, which began back then amidst the post-war turmoil.

However, in spite of all this, the revolution barely even features in our nation’s consciousness to this day. While 9 November 1918 is

listed on the map of German places of remembrance, it has never been accorded the importance it actually deserves. It is the poor relation of our democratic history – and also because 9 November is actually an ambivalent day, because it stands for light and darkness, because we almost never consider the democracy that started back then from its beginning, but usually from its end.

Sometimes it seems to me as if this turning point is doomed to be overshadowed for eternity by the failure of the republic and discredited and debased by 30 January 1933. Indeed, the end of the Weimar Republic marked the beginning of the descent into the most terrible chapter in German history. However, it was not democracy that was on the wrong side of history – it was the enemies of democracy that were on the wrong side of history. Ultra-nationalism, the dictatorship, the inhumane ideology of the National Socialists brought war and heinous crimes to Europe and ruined this country politically and morally. It was to the great fortune of us all that we were given a second chance to enjoy self-determination in unity and freedom – and this chance became reality. It, the republic, proved that it was on the right side of history. We should remind ourselves of this fact one hundred years later on and, I might add, also celebrate this fact.

Of course, there is no denying that this was a paradoxical, contradictory revolution from the outset. Its story cannot be told in a clear-cut way. But, then again, can that be said of any chapter of Germany's history?

The contradictory nature of the revolution was in evidence that very same day, 9 November, when Karl Liebknecht, the leader of the Spartacus League, proclaimed the republic for the second time – just two hours after Philipp Scheidemann. Friedrich Ebert wanted first and foremost to prevent chaos, civil war and military intervention on the part of the victorious powers; he was driven by the desire to give the people employment and livelihoods. The Council of People's Representatives had limited room for manoeuvre in these uncertain months, in the maelstrom of more radical forces to both the left and right.

And yet the People's Representatives probably should have dared to bring about greater change than they considered to be justifiable from their point of view at the time. Too many avowed opponents of the nascent republic retained their posts in the military, judiciary and administrative apparatus. Of course, Friedrich Ebert's People's Representatives were forced to defend themselves against the radical left's attempt to prevent the elections of the National Assembly by force. However, there was no justification whatsoever for giving the brutality of nationalist Freikorps de facto free reign. Many people were murdered back then, including Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. We also want to remember the many victims of those days today.

Indeed, this revolution was also one characterised by wrong turns and dashed hopes. Nevertheless, it remains the great achievement of the moderate workers' movement that they, in a climate of violence, in the midst of suffering and hunger, sought compromise with the moderate forces of the middle classes and that they gave precedence to parliamentary democracy.

This day, 9 November 1918, is a milestone in the history of German democracy. It stands for the birth of the republic in Germany. It stands for the breakthrough of parliamentary democracy. And this is why it deserves pride of place in our country's culture of remembrance. After all, those who believe today that our democracy is something that we can now take for granted and that this parliament is an everyday object, very much like a piece of old furniture, should take a look at this chapter of history. No, this parliament is not something to be taken for granted, and it is certainly not a footnote. It is a historic achievement, and one that we must fight for – everywhere, but first and foremost in this House.

In the Weimar Republic, 9 November was never able to assume the symbolic power of a founding myth. Even staunch republicans were not prepared to wholeheartedly throw their weight behind a revolution whose prospects were so dim from the outset, as Theodor Wolff wrote in the "Berliner Tageblatt" on the first anniversary of the proclamation of the republic. Instead of promoting unity, the memory of 9 November even exacerbated ideological divisions in society. For parts of the radical left, this date was synonymous with the supposed betrayal of the working class, while for the enemies of the republic on the right it came to symbolise the lie that was the "stab in the back", the alleged betrayal of the soldiers at the front. It was no coincidence that Hitler made his first attempt to overthrow the republic in Munich on 9 November 1923 of all days, that "un-German system" whose representatives were subjected to the murderous hatred of extreme right-wing nationalists.

In particular, it was the flag of the republic that was the subject of its enemies' ire, and which they dragged through the mud time and again. Black-red-gold, the colours of the German freedom movement since the Hambach Festival of 1832. That alone is reason enough to bring 9 November 1918 out of the shadows of political history. Anyone who despises human rights and democracy today, who rekindles old nationalist hatred, certainly has no historical right to the colours black, red and gold.

The revolution of 1918/19 was the dawn of democracy, of a political experiment whose outcome was uncertain. We now know what a heavy burden the contemporaries who attempted democracy in the Reich and Länder had to bear back then.

The lost war and its bloody legacy of violence, the impact of the Treaty of Versailles, the turbulence of the economic crisis and inflation, of hunger and mass suffering – all of this put the Weimar Republic under strain and overwhelmed it from time to time.

And it was above all the long tradition of anti-liberal thought that poisoned the political culture of the republic. Intellectuals such as Carl Schmitt railed against the plurality of interests of the “modern mass society” and vilified the “tactical compromises and coalitions” of a so-called political “class”. Members of the radical left berated parliaments and governments as instruments of the “bourgeoisie”.

When we consider these challenges today, we realise just how impressive the achievements of those who shouldered political responsibility at the time were – who brought about a democratic constitution, modernised the judicial and education systems, provided housing and unemployment insurance, helped the arts and sciences to flourish, and – throughout all these years – steered highly fragile coalitions through the storms of domestic and foreign policy crises. Reich Chancellors and Ministers such as Hermann Müller, Gustav Stresemann and Matthias Erzberger, as well as parliamentarians such as Marianne Weber and Helene Weber, Ernst Heilmann, Marie Elisabeth Lüders and Marie Juchacz. Too many of them have been forgotten today.

Stalwart democrats supported the constitutional state in the judiciary and administration. Teachers of constitutional law such as Hugo Preuß, the father of the Weimar Constitution, Gerhard Anschütz, Richard Thoma, Hermann Heller and Hans Kelsen developed ideas that continue to inspire people today. Academics such as the economist Moritz Julius Bonn and the theologian Ernst Troeltsch advanced liberal thinking. Many who devoted themselves to the republic were derided, ostracised and attacked by the enemies of democracy. Leading politicians such as Matthias Erzberger and Walther Rathenau fell victim to right-wing extremist, predominantly anti-Semitic motivated murders.

Let us stop claiming that the Weimar Republic was a democracy without democrats. These courageous women and men have languished in the shadows of the history of the failure of the Weimar democracy for far too long. I believe that we owe them respect, esteem and gratitude.

The thoughts and actions of the Weimar democrats continued to reverberate above and beyond the first republic. After 1945, the founding mothers and fathers of the Federal Republic, many of whom had been deeply influenced by their experiences of the Weimar era, were able to build on their knowledge and also learn from their mistakes. To quote Heinrich August Winkler: “The fact that Bonn did not become Weimar is also due to the fact that Weimar existed.”

I would like to draw on his sentiment with respect to our Berlin of today. It is true that we are living at a time in which democracy is coming under pressure once again, when its opponents are becoming more vocal and self-confident. But when whispers of the spectre of "Weimar-like conditions" are to be heard from time to time, then I reject these in the strongest possible terms. Such statements will make our democracy smaller and its enemies bigger than they actually are. And there is no reason to do either.

Especially when we recall the courageous women and men of the past, when we consider their experiences to be our foundations, then this gives me cause for hope. Not only are our institutions stronger and more robust, but, above all, we as democrats can learn from those who went before us. Freedom, the rule of law and democracy are our inheritance from these mothers and fathers – let us stake our claim to this legacy with self-confidence, and let us preserve it wisely and watchfully.

On 9 November, we Germans remember both things – the light and the shadows of our history. 9 November is a day of contradictions, a day of light and darkness, a day that demands us to consider what will always be part of looking at Germany's past, namely the ambivalence of remembering.

Exactly 80 years ago, during the night of 9 to 10 November 1938, synagogues burned in Germany. Jewish shops were looted and destroyed. Hundreds of women and men were killed by the Nazis, took their own lives, or died after being mistreated in concentration camps. These pogroms, which everyone could see at the time, were the harbinger of the persecution and annihilation of Europe's Jews. The pogroms stand for an unparalleled rupture with civilisation and for Germany's rapid descent into barbarism. Today we remember the victims of National Socialism. We are aware of our responsibility – a responsibility under which no line can ever be drawn.

This one date, 9 November, poses what is arguably the most difficult and painful question of German history: How was it possible that the same people that had the courage to embark on the path of democratic self-determination on 9 November 1918; that achieved so much in so many areas of human endeavour in the following years; that listened intently to symphonies in its concert halls and danced to swing in its nightclubs; whose scientists won Nobel Prizes; whose workers built housing cooperatives; whose artists merrily broke with tradition; and whose films packed cinemas worldwide – how was it possible that, in just a few years, this very same people brought the enemies of democracy to power in democratic elections; unleashed war and destruction on its neighbours in Europe; looked the other way – or perhaps even gawked or cheered – when in their own streets in Germany Jewish neighbours, homosexuals and people suffering from

mental illnesses were dragged out of their homes by the henchmen of a criminal regime – a regime that crammed Jewish families into cattle wagons and sent parents and their children to the gas chambers?

That remains the most difficult and painful question of German history.

No historians' congress can answer this question for us. Nor can it be explained by putting it into historical context, thus putting our minds at rest. The answer can certainly not be provided by words alone. Instead, we can only provide it through our actions.

Remembrance that we only dutifully mouth at commemoration events, but which does not define our actions – such remembrance ossifies into a ritual. In the worst case, it even leads to resentments, to a sense of alienation between official remembrance and daily life and to how people feel, especially young people, who ask "what does this have to do with me?"

Esteemed Members of this House, honoured guests, in our actions we must prove that we Germans have truly learned from the past and truly become more vigilant because of our history. We need to take action any time another person's dignity is violated. We need to take a stand when a language of hatred spreads its tentacles. We cannot allow a situation where some people claim once again to be the sole voice of the "true people" and marginalise others. We need to speak up when certain groups are defined as scapegoats and when people are automatically regarded with suspicion simply because of their religion or skin colour. And we will not let up in our fight against anti-Semitism. We need to prevent groups from becoming ever more entrenched. We need to go out of our way and reach out to each other. We need to ensure that people keep talking with one another.

And we also need to fight once more for cohesion in Europe and for an international order, which is currently being called into question, even by our partners, because it is thanks to this European integration and this international order that we Germans are a people once again that has regained economic and political strength; overwhelmingly wants to live in an open-minded and pro-European way; is respected, indeed even valued, by many people in the world; still listens intently to symphonies in its concert halls and still dances in its nightclubs, albeit more likely to electro beats than to swing these days; whose scientists win Nobel Prizes once again; whose athletes break records; and whose firms and universities attract young people from all over the world, including even, and in particular, large numbers from Israel – a fact that I personally find to be most gratifying.

Living up to this great fortune through our actions is the true mandate of 9 November. It is a task for all Germans that goes far beyond commemoration events. Let us take on this task!

Berlin is not Weimar and nor will it become Weimar. The dangers of the past are not the dangers of the present. Those who only ever warn of a resurgence of the past are at risk of losing sight of new challenges. However, remembrance can focus one's sight on them. And they certainly exist.

Just as democracy on 9 November 1918 was not predestined to fail, its success, 100 years later, is not guaranteed. We are witnessing growing dissatisfaction with party democracy, right into the mainstream in our society. We are experiencing how some people no longer want to accept parliaments as places for political solutions. Not all of these people oppose democracy – but democracy is lost upon them. After all, the history of the Weimar Republic in particular shows how much we need people who are willing to take on responsibility and who put in the hard work of democratic politics because they believe in its value.

My wish today, on our parliamentary democracy's centenary, is that as many people as possible do not only sense its value, but also draw the strength and courage from it to play a part in and for this democracy. After all, courage is also needed for this today. But having courage is, fortunately, far easier than in the first German democracy after 1918.

But individual courage will not be enough. We need this uniting moment because we can feel that new forces are tearing at the fabric of our society and that the rifts are becoming deeper – not only the economic, but also the cultural rifts.

We all have a profound need for a place to call home, a profound need for cohesion and orientation. And how we see our own history plays a crucial role in this. All peoples seek meaning and a sense of belonging in their own history – why should that not hold true for us Germans?

We need remembrance. And that is also why today is an important day. Yes, 9 November can provide orientation – but no absolute clarity.

One cannot explain this Federal Republic without the catastrophe of the two World Wars and the crime against humanity of the Shoah. They are immutable parts of our identity.

But equally, the Federal Republic cannot merely be explained *ex negativo*, on the basis of "never again" alone. One cannot explain our country without the widespread roots of the quest for democracy and freedom, which existed for centuries and from which the Federal Republic was able to grow after 1945.

I know that it is difficult to carry both notions in one's heart, but we can certainly try. We can be proud of the traditions of freedom and democracy, without averting our eyes from the abyss of the Shoah.

And we can be aware of our historic responsibility for the rupture with civilisation, without denying the pleasure in what we have achieved in our country.

Yes, we can allow ourselves to trust this country, even if – or indeed because – these two things form part of it, as we take both of them to heart. That is the core of an enlightened patriotism. It does not strive either for wreaths of laurel leaves or crowns of thorns. It is never loud or boastful – it is a soft-spoken patriotism, a patriotism that has mixed feelings.

Some may consider this to be a weakness – in particular those who are fanning the flames of a new, aggressive nationalism. I think it is the exact opposite. Nationalism gilds one's own past and wallows in the triumph over others. Nationalism, including in its new form, invokes the golden era that never existed.

However, democratic patriotism is not a comfort zone, but rather a constant incentive. An incentive for all those who do not say that the best days are behind us, but rather those who are willing and able to make the future better. That is the optimism of democrats – and that should be the attitude that we adopt.

The women and men who went before us on the long path to unity and justice and freedom in our country showed a spirit of optimism. There were pioneers at the time of the French Revolution, during the very short-lived Republic of Mainz, in the liberal Vormärz period, during the 1848 Revolution and in St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt, whose spirit not only permeates the Weimar constitution, but also our Basic Law today.

And if we look carefully, we discover even earlier beginnings of emancipation and the separation of powers, beginnings that date back as far as the Middle Ages, to the pride of the free imperial cities or Hanseatic towns, to the German peasants' demands for freedom and the old constitution of the German Empire, which even – and this will come as a surprise to you – served as an inspiration for the founding fathers of the US Constitution.

We also remember those who fought for freedom and democracy during the German Reich, the Weimar Republic, in exile and in the anti-Nazi resistance, many of whom lost their lives.

And above all, we are thinking today about the women and men who poured into the streets in the autumn of 1989 – in Leipzig, Dresden, Plauen and Chemnitz, in Berlin, Potsdam, Halle and Magdeburg, in Arnstadt, Rostock and Schwerin. They paved the path to the reunification of our country. Without their Peaceful Revolution, courage and great desire for freedom, we would not have experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall, the happiest 9 November in our history. We also remember that today with gratitude.



All of these women and men gradually achieved what Germans could only dream about for a long time – a free, united and democratic Germany. Too many of them have been forgotten today. I would like us to devote more attention, more lifeblood and yes, also more financial resources, to the places and protagonists of the history of our democracy. On behalf of our Republic's identity, we should invest in more than merely royal crypts and princes' palaces!

All of us who believe in democracy, the millions of people who work every day to make this country a better place, are part of this tradition. In the example they provide every day, they show that democratic patriotism is not something abstract or intellectual. Their commitment does not come from cold reason or calculation alone, but in almost all cases from passionately held convictions. So let us be brave! Let us dare to demonstrate the hope and the republican passion of those days in November 1918 in our own era. Let us dare to say once again with conviction – long live the German Republic! Long live our democracy!