



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the ceremony in Schloss Bellevue on 4 December 2018
to award the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of
Germany
for services to remembrance for the future**

Welcome to Schloss Bellevue! I am delighted to see you all. And naturally, I would like to extend a particularly warm welcome to those of you who will shortly be awarded an honour here.

One of the most enjoyable parts of my role as Federal President is to present honours to people who do not only think about themselves, but work on behalf of our country and make a great contribution to it through their endeavours.

All of you seated here in the first row have rendered outstanding services to the culture of remembrance. You have done so in very different ways. We have here among us academics who have conducted research, people who support local historical research, and eyewitnesses who share their experiences and suffering with others.

Twentieth-century German history cannot be understood without remembering the suffering of the victims of violence. We must remember the Nazi genocide and the war of annihilation. We need to remember in order to understand the importance of "never again!" by which our country has been guided since 1945. We must remember the communist tyranny and the many people in East Germany who were deprived of their freedom and dignity. We need to remember and understand in order to be able to comprehend the good fortune of the peaceful revolution.

I am particularly glad to be able to present honours here today to two guests from France and the Czech Republic. Fanatic nationalism and Germany's despicable racist insanity drove people and nations into devastating wars during the first half of the twentieth century and brought untold suffering to the victims of persecution and annihilation.

Today, shared remembrance can bring us together again. The idea is not to downplay our historic responsibility, but rather to see even more clearly what unites us. Shared history should be shared far more often. Esteemed guests, through your endeavours, you help to ensure this and we in Germany are particularly grateful indeed to you for this.

Nevertheless, every society naturally has its own specific way of seeing the past. At least two aspects are particularly important to me as regards the culture of remembrance in Germany.

Firstly, remembrance never ends. Especially when we are talking about the suffering and injustice caused by Germans and about the responsibility that arises from it, no line can be drawn under the past and nor can there be any return to nationalism. The remembrance I have in mind is neither a disgrace nor a form of weakness. On the contrary, it makes us stronger and more aware of democracy and human dignity.

Remembrance of the Shoah and the victims forms part of our country's identity today. The lessons learned from the past mean that we must show great determination in fighting against anti-Semitism, which remains virulent to this day. At the same time, a point recently made by a clever person holds true – people will only have understood this lesson when discrimination against all minorities, regardless of whether it is on the grounds of their religion, culture, background, social situation, sexual orientation or identity, is banned. However, learning such a sweeping lesson from the past also requires us to face all parts of our history, including those that were forgotten for a long time. One example is German colonialism and the suffering it caused people in Africa in particular, but also its long-term ideological impact on racism back here in Germany. I think – and you see it every day when you read the papers – that we still have some work ahead of us here.

A second point is important to me, too. We should also pay attention to positive remembrance, that is, to remembrance of the peace and democracy movements in German history. When we commemorated the centenary of the proclamation of the German republic in the Bundestag on 9 November, I said: "I would like us to devote more attention, more lifeblood and also more financial resources, to the places and protagonists of the history of our democracy." And today I would like to add that we should also pay more attention and indeed award more honours to those who do outstanding work on behalf of the history of democracy.

That is why I am very pleased to be able to present honours today to people who preserve memory of the Vormärz period and the pioneers who fought for our fundamental rights; who ensure that the sailors' mutiny of 1918 and the democrats of the Weimar Republic are not forgotten; who tell the success story of the emancipation of women

and homosexuals; and who courageously stood up themselves for freedom and democracy as civil rights activists in what was then the GDR.

I would like to reiterate what I said on 9 November – 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.

Ladies and gentlemen, through your work, all of you play a part in furthering the history of freedom and democracy. This history is the wellspring of an enlightened and democratic patriotism. That is why your work is so valuable. Thank you so much for everything you do!

An honour does not merely convey gratitude and recognition. Those who receive an honour can also serve as a role model and inspiration for others.

For some time now, I have also invited young people to each award ceremony. This morning, some of you who will shortly receive an award spoke with pupils from Berlin. They attend schools named after people who stand for important parts of our history – Georg Herwegh, Hans and Hilde Coppi, and Robert Havemann.

Naturally, history is not life's teacher, as Cicero believed. History does not repeat itself. However, there is no doubt that history is an important resource for our society. At a time when freedom and democracy are being disparaged once again, it is important to remind ourselves of what it once took to establish democratic values in Germany, of the struggle involved and the sacrifices made. The history of democracy can thus also help to strengthen democracy. That is why I encourage you pupils in particular to explore the past, that is, to follow in the footsteps of those who will shortly receive an honour. The idea here is to question the past, not to glorify it, and to question it in a very concrete way, not abstractly. Perhaps the motto should be the one that was used so successfully by history workshops many years ago: "Dig where you stand."

In this regard, another point is very important to me. When I hear that some teachers and pupils are now being accused and pressurised for political reasons and pilloried online for raising the topic of the Shoah and racism, then there can only be one response. We cannot allow this to happen. Democracy can only grow and flourish through self-confident young people. That is why schools must remain free from the intimidation and denunciation that some people have recently been demanding once more.

As regards the past, what my predecessor Gustav Heinemann once said holds true – Germany is a difficult fatherland. However, I firmly believe that looking back critically at the past makes our country

more alert, more self-confident and more resilient. It also strengthens friendly and democratic patriotism – a patriotism that does not see itself as superior to others or relish triumph over others, but instead enhances cohesion; a patriotism that does not exclude people, but instead works for a better future for all those who live here; a patriotism that does not leave the historical symbols of Germany's quest for freedom to those who disparage these values today, symbols such as the colours black, red and gold and Hoffmann von Fallersleben's "Song of the Germans".

But now I look forward to hearing more about the 28 men and women whom we are honouring today and who have made such an outstanding contribution to our country.

A very warm welcome once again to all of you who have come here today!