



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
on the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Dresden
during the Second World War,
at Kulturpalast, Dresden,
on 13 February 2020**

As dawn was breaking a few months ago, on 1 September, I stood on a market square in a small town in Poland: in Wieluń, a town that is unfamiliar to most Germans. Alongside the Polish President, and in the presence of many mourners, we remembered the bombing of the town 80 years ago.

On that day, on 1 September 1939, Luftwaffe dive bombers rained death and destruction on Wieluń, without any advance warning whatsoever. Their hail of bombs hit a sleeping, unsuspecting, defenceless town, which was of absolutely no military importance. The air strikes destroyed the hospital, demolished the market square, burned the town centre to the ground and killed 1200 people in that first hour of the war.

The bombing of Wieluń was the first crime in a war that National Socialist Germany unleashed on the world. The bombs were harbingers of the brutality that German hubris, German racist fanaticism and German lust for destruction wreaked throughout Europe in the following six years. They marked the start of the unfettered violence that claimed the lives of far more than 50 million people during the Second World War. Just a few weeks ago, in Yad Vashem, Auschwitz and Berlin, we remembered the six million murdered Jews and the people who were tortured and killed in the concentration camps.

The attack on Wieluń also marked the beginning of a brutal bombing war that put urban civilian populations in the firing line. Over the course of the war, the Luftwaffe on the one side, and British and American bombers on the other, destroyed hundreds of towns in almost every country in Europe. They left an unprecedented trail of destruction that stretched from the United Kingdom and Germany to Russia. When this war ended in May 1945 with the liberation of Europe

from National Socialism, large parts of the continent lay in ruins under a shroud of ash.

We have gathered here today to remember the air strikes on Dresden 75 years ago. We remember the victims of the bombing war in this city, in Germany and in Europe. And we remember all victims of genocide, war and violence.

Time and again, eyewitnesses have described the inferno unleashed on Dresden on the night of 13 February and the early morning hours of the following day. British aeroplanes bombed the city in two waves, with fire and explosive bombs setting off a devastating firestorm. When the Americans continued the air strikes on Ash Wednesday, they saw a city in flames.

We now know that up to 25,000 people were killed in the bombing and that large parts of the historic town centre and nearby residential districts were destroyed. In a few hours, the bombs annihilated much of what people here in Dresden had built over the course of centuries.

It was merely a matter of chance whether you lived or died. The bombs rained down on children, women and men, on people from Dresden and refugees from East Prussia and Silesia. They fell on soldiers and prisoners-of-war alike. They made no distinction between staunch Nazis or members of the Gestapo and resistance fighters, forced labourers and concentration camp prisoners. And in the same indiscriminate way the bombs extinguished the lives of tens of thousands of people, they were also the salvation of a few people. Jews such as Henny Wolf and Victor Klemperer ripped the yellow star off their clothes that night and were able to disappear or flee in the general chaos.

Many of those who survived the firestorm were left with lifelong physical or mental scars. The wailing of the sirens; the ominous droning of the aeroplanes and the flickering red light in the sky; the mortal fear and the crowding in the cellars; the impact of the bombs, the shattering glass and the exploding walls; the roaring blaze that sucked the air out of the streets, the buildings and the small caverns among the ruins; the bodies of people who had burned to death and the shell of the city – countless eyewitnesses never forgot the sights, sounds and smells of that dreadful night. Their souls bore the brand of feelings of fear and powerlessness. And many of the people who helped or were used as forced labourers in the following days to recover the disfigured corpses from the ruins were never able to shake off the horror of what they had seen.

Many people recorded their experiences in notes, letters or diaries in an attempt to banish the oppressive burden in this way. Many people told their children and grandchildren about the bombing.

Some only found the strength years later to recount their story, in part encouraged by a new interest among the public about the bombing war and by the debates on suffering and guilt we have conducted in our country since the late 1990s.

Here in Dresden, the words of Dora Baumgärtel, Liesbeth Flade, Günter Jäckel, Götz Bergander and many others tell us about that night and the suffering that followed it. Many of the survivors never saw their families again. They lost their homes and personal mementos. All they had was what they were able to grab when the alarm sounded. Those who had escaped with their lives often looked desperately for something to hold on to in the ruins of their home town.

Sometimes we are moved by just a few words, such as those written by Lina Skoczowsky on a small postcard here in Dresden a few days after the bombing:

“Dear Daddy, The three of us are together. We’ve lost everything.”

We do not only know such words from Dresden. We also know them from all German cities that suffered air strikes during the Second World War, some of them repeatedly. We know them from Lübeck, Hamburg, Wuppertal, Cologne, Pforzheim, Würzburg, Darmstadt, Hanover, Berlin, Potsdam, Halberstadt, Magdeburg, Rostock, Chemnitz and many other places.

We also know similar words from towns in Italy and occupied France, from Naples, Genoa, Le Havre and Royan. We know them from the European cities that were destroyed by the German Luftwaffe – from Warsaw, Rotterdam, London, Coventry, Liverpool, Belgrade and Leningrad, among many others. And we know them from Guernica, the Basque city that Condor Legion fighter planes from Germany had annihilated in 1937. At the time, Wolfram von Richthofen, who would later give the order to bomb Wieluń, made the following terse remarks in his diary:

“Guernica, a town with a population of 5000, literally razed to the ground. [...] you can still see the bomb craters on the streets, just great.”

It was also this inhumane cynicism that led to disaster. Photos taken at the time reveal the extent of the devastation all over Europe. They show us what was lost forever in our cities, including here in Dresden. They give us an inkling of what was achieved afterwards, especially by the many women who began rebuilding immediately after the end of the war, often with only their bare hands. And I think that we should – indeed must – try today to imagine the fear, pain and desperation of the victims and survivors of this bombing war. I would like to thank all those who work tirelessly here in Dresden and in many

other places to keep memories of the past alive – and who at the same time stand up to those who want to exploit this memory to foment new hatred and new resentments.

It is also thanks to these active citizens that we can say here today that the victims of the bombing war have not been forgotten. Their lives and fates are and will remain inscribed in our collective memory.

I firmly believe that, anyone who thinks today about the fate of their family or city during the bombing war will be better able to imagine what others suffered elsewhere. Sincere remembrance teaches us compassion. Sincere remembrance allows us to see and better understand both our own lives and those of others. It allows us to feel empathy for the fate of all victims of war and violence, beyond national borders. I would like to thank all those here in Dresden who have been working for years to broaden the confines of what remembrance encompasses and have sought dialogue with cities all over the world, from Coventry to Wrocław to Saint Petersburg.

When we remember the history of the bombing war in our country today, then we remember both things – the suffering of Germany's urban population and the suffering that Germans caused others. We do not forget that it was Germans who started this brutal war and ultimately it was millions of Germans who waged it – not all, but many of them, out of conviction. It was the National Socialists and their willing enforcers who carried out the mass murder of European Jews. And it was the Nazi regime that did not stop the murders even when it knew the war had long since been lost. We do not forget German guilt. And we live up to our abiding responsibility.

When we remember the bombing war today, we also know that even back then the United Kingdom and the Allies debated whether the so-called carpet bombings, which also claimed the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers from the Bomber Command, made military sense, complied with international law and were morally legitimate. This question continues to occupy historians and philosophers to this day, not least in the United Kingdom.

We need this objective view in order to understand how it was possible for violence to escalate to such an extent during the war. We need it in order to find answers to the question of which means can be necessary and permitted today in order to end terrible crimes. But the question of Allied guilt leads us down the wrong path when it is asked in order to downplay German guilt. When we remember the victims in German cities today, our intention is not to accuse, let alone to offset one thing against another.

Far too often and for far too long, the narrative of the air strikes on Dresden was used for ideological and political means, first by the

National Socialists and then by the SED regime. And in this anniversary year, too, we have been forced to witness how political forces want to manipulate and reinterpret the past and exploit it as a weapon.

That is why I want to say clearly here today that as democrats, we must stand up to all those who still offset the dead of Dresden against the dead of Auschwitz, who try to downplay German crimes and who falsify historical facts despite knowing better. We must refute them loudly and in no uncertain terms!

But I also want to say that those who ignore or trivialise people's suffering and the pain of the victims of the bombing in this city, who say the bombing was a "deserved punishment" or make a travesty of gestures of mourning do not do justice to the past; they, too, mock the victims.

Let us therefore stand up together for a form of remembrance that focuses on the suffering of the victims and survivors, while also asking what caused this pain. Let us join forces in combating all those who want to exploit remembrance to use as ammunition in order to win their ideological battles!

I am pleased that many active citizens here in Dresden have been pursuing this path for a long time. The human chain that thousands of people will form once again here in Dresden this evening is a truly powerful symbol of this type of remembrance in a spirit of understanding and I am grateful that I will be able to be part of this chain with you later on.

Here in Dresden, your remembrance has long been focused not only on the history of the air strikes, but also on the history of your city during the period of National Socialism – not for the purposes of offsetting one kind of suffering against another, but in order to learn lessons from the past for the present and the future.

We know that the destruction of the cultural city of Dresden did not happen overnight and was not restricted to February 1945. The destruction of the cultural city of Dresden began as early as 1933 – as did the destruction of many cultural sites and cities of culture throughout Germany. It began when books were burned in the streets just a few weeks after the handover of power to Hitler, when conductor Fritz Busch was booed out of the Semperoper because he worked with Jewish and "foreign" musicians, when Otto Dix and other contemporary artists were driven away and Jewish academics hounded from their university chairs.

The destruction of the cultural city of Dresden began when directors, writers, journalists, publishers and many others were persecuted and hunted down because of their Jewish origins or their political convictions. Many, like singer Therese Elb and actress Jenny Schaffer-Bernstein, were subsequently deported and murdered. Here

in this city, too, the burning down of the Semper Synagogue in the night of 9 November 1938 – many years before the Semperoper – was a warning flare.

The destruction of reason, the destruction of culture and the destruction of civil society also began here in Dresden when perfectly ordinary citizens started to boycott Jewish shops, when they excluded their neighbours from public life, schools, parks, when many curried favour with the Nazi regime or simply remained silent. This city housed countless forced labourers from Dresden and from Europe who had to manufacture ammunition and weapons. The Nazi judiciary had political dissidents murdered in Munich Square. Sick and disabled people were gassed in Pirna-Sonnenstein. Thousands of Soviet prisoners-of-war starved to death in Zeithain near Riesa.

Here in Dresden, too, remembrance takes us right to the abyss of National Socialism. From 1933, also here in this city, human life was appallingly often violated, human dignity was appallingly often trampled underfoot.

Today we commemorate these victims, too, and we remember their suffering. We do not do so to justify suffering inflicted on others. But one reason we do so is to consider a question that still concerns us all: the question of how in an apparently civilised society all dams could break, all rules of solidarity and humanity be thrown overboard and barbaric violence be unleashed.

The bombing of Dresden reminds us of the destruction of the rule of law and democracy in the Weimar Republic, of nationalist hubris and contempt for human life, of antisemitism and racist barbarity. And I fear that these dangers are still with us.

We are witnessing how in some countries the desire for isolation, the fascination with authoritarianism is increasing once again. We are witnessing how, at the heart of Europe, the freedom of the press, of art, of science and academia is once again being restricted. We are witnessing how, in our country, too, antisemitism and xenophobia are starting to poison public life once again, and how the rule of law and democratic institutions are being derided and their representatives insulted and attacked. When members now make a farce and a mockery of the parliaments to which they were elected, this is an attempt to destroy democracy from the inside.

It is not enough for democrats simply to shudder and turn their backs in disgust. None of this must be allowed to go unchallenged in our country. We must repudiate hatred and hate speech, refute insults and take a stand against prejudice. No matter how contentious an issue might be, we must all conduct discussions with reason and respect and protect the institutions in our democracy.

There is a clear line between liberal democracy that protects the dignity of the individual and authoritarian and nationalist policies whose representatives want to exclude those who think and live differently as enemies of the purported "real people". We must defend this line, and that task is not just the responsibility of politicians, it is the task of each and every one of us. For we all – each in our own place – are responsible for society and democracy in our country. That, too, is a lesson to be learned from the wrong path taken by Germany which ultimately led to the destruction of Dresden. We need to take this lesson on board, in the interests of a bright and peaceful future. Let us send out this message here today from Dresden!

In a few months we will commemorate the end of the Second World War and the liberation from National Socialism 75 years ago. Back then, in May 1945, the surviving and persecuted victims of the National Socialist regime had, for the first time, some semblance of a future once again. At the same time, many people on our continent felt that the situation was hopeless, and not only in Germany. Amid the devastation of the bombed cities, hardly anyone dared to believe that there could be any future for Europe.

Yet in the rubble and ruins, one desire put down deep roots: "Never again!" For many who had survived the war, this became their life's motto, a task for the future. "Never again!" That was the start of a long history of peace and reconciliation in Europe which at that time hardly anyone would have believed possible.

We will not forget that as early as the 1950s women and men in Coventry reached out a hand of reconciliation, in the very city that the German Luftwaffe had razed to the ground in 1940. The Coventry Cross of Nails, comprising three nails from the ruined cathedral, remains a very powerful symbol of peace and understanding to this day.

And we will not forget how many British and American people played a part in the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche here in Dresden through their donations after the reunification of our country. The golden cupola cross, designed by the son of a British bomber pilot, is a sign of reconciliation that shines out far beyond the bounds of this city.

I am glad that today we can join representatives of our former enemies to remember the bombing of Dresden. This joint commemoration unites us across borders. Your Royal Highness, Excellencies, I am grateful, we are grateful for this gesture of friendship.

The path then taken by just a few people, the path of reconciliation, led us, after many years, to a common Europe. This Europe is the lesson from centuries of war and devastation, centuries of hatred and violence. It was founded on the spirit of resisting vile,

racist doctrines and totalitarianism – and on the spirit of freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Together we have accomplished an incredible amount. We Germans regret the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union. But we also know that we remain partners. Our friendship is deep seated. That which unites us is stronger than what latterly divided us in the dispute surrounding the EU.

In the wake of the horrific war, the nations of the world defined standards for a peaceful order based on human rights and international law. Especially at a time when the desire for peaceful cooperation is dwindling in some places, we Germans intend to embrace our historic responsibility and defend this peaceful order in cooperation with our partners. For we know that peace is always fragile.

In November 2018 I stood at the Cenotaph in Whitehall alongside HRH The Prince of Wales to commemorate the victims of the First World War. There, I laid a wreath bearing a brief note:

“Honoured to remember side by side,
Grateful for reconciliation,
Hopeful for a future in peace and friendship.”

Ladies and gentlemen, let us continue together along this path of reconciliation. Let us jointly assume responsibility for peace. And let us protect the dignity of every individual. Also and especially here in Dresden.

Thank you very much.