



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the second section of the Maly
Trostenets memorial site
near Minsk, Republic of Belarus
29 June 2018**

When approaching this place, the visitor's heart grows heavier and heavier. The burden of knowledge of what occurred here becomes almost unbearable. Visitors to this place will have read or heard about the crimes that were committed here by Germans against Belarusians, against their European neighbours, and against their own people. They will know about the dreadful destruction that this last and vicious war wrought on this country. More than one-fourth of the population of Belarus did not survive the period of the German occupation.

Some of you will remember, as I do, a film that was shown many years ago in cinemas, in 1985: *Come and See*, a film by Elem Klimov. It was the year that events were slowly set in motion that would later lead to the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the year that this film by a great Russian director was shown all over Europe, in the East and in the West.

It is an encounter with war. Not a war like the ones people had seen before. No, it was a war that would erase the memory of all previous wars, one that traumatised generations and scarred the face of our shared continent. The destructive war of the German Wehrmacht against the Soviet Union.

For many Western Europeans, this film marked their first encounter with your country, Belarus. For German audiences, it was at the same time a confrontation with their own fathers and grandfathers, who had been brought here by the war – not just anywhere, not just to a non-descript place in the east, but right here, to the forests of Belarus, a country that has a name, although the film only hints at what country that might be.

That is because Klimov is not interested in specific locations or in where battle fronts run. He is fully focused on us, as people, and on

how this war, this orgy of destruction, has changed us. He shows how childhood, youth and innocence are torn away, how people are robbed of their humanity, become killing machines and leave behind a no-man's land that is completely barren, without a name, and in which all bearings have been lost.

Possibly this insight also explains why it has taken us so long to rediscover places like this, and why we have not found our way back here until today, more than seven decades after the end of the war, so that we can remember the crimes that were committed here – against thousands upon thousands of Belarusian, German, Austrian and Czech Jews, and against Soviet prisoners of war and Belarusian resistance fighters and civilians.

“Come and see” – heeding that call is a difficult task. And it remains so, particularly here.

We are shocked by the hundreds of thousands of people that fell victim to this inferno, who were robbed of their names before they were driven into camps, gassed or led immediately from the trains that had arrived in Maly Trostenets to the edge of a ditch where they were shot.

We are shocked by a war that was planned, commanded and executed as a war of destruction. Belarus had to experience first hand what that meant. More than 600 villages in this region – including their inhabitants – were wiped from the face of the earth.

We understand that what befell this country and its neighbours back then was the work of men. The architects bore German names, such as Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich, Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski and Oskar Dirlewanger. The millions of murders perpetrated by these men were not a matter of destiny. This death was expertly organised, it was efficient, and the plans for it were made in government buildings in Berlin – Wilhelmstraße 101, Prinz-Albrecht-Straße 8, Rauchstraße 18, Wilhelmstraße 72.

The murder plot was devised by entire ministries, and its tasks were assigned to administrative bodies, to operational units of the SS (Schutzstaffel) and the SD (Sicherheitsdienst), and to firing squads of the security forces (Sicherheitspolizei), the police force (Ordnungspolizei) and, yes, also the Wehrmacht. Each individual was a cog in the machinery, dependent on and dovetailing with the others, each doing its part until the shot that brought death was fired.

As this war was waged through bureaucracy, with support from an entire apparatus and division of labour, each individual's responsibility became almost unrecognisable. In the end, all those involved would declare that they played such a small and insignificant part in the scheme of things, and that they were only executing orders.

The commando units reached Maly Trostenets in the spring of 1942. It was a remote place, at the time just beyond the outskirts of Minsk. By order of Reinhard Heydrich, this place became a murder site; the former Karl Marx collective farm was transformed into a labour and death camp. All that was needed to make this happen was to reactivate a rail line that led to a remote facility where executions could be conducted.

Thousands upon thousands of people were shot in the Blagovshtshina woods, or gassed in specially-built lorries – but only on weekdays. Trains arriving in Maly Trostenets on weekends were not processed. The people on them – who were doomed to die – had to wait until the firing squads returned to duty on Monday. This shamelessness shown by the perpetrators was of a piece with the mechanisation of murder. Here, every human trace and last bit of humanity was to be eradicated.

The place, Maly Trostenets, which had been occupied by the German Wehrmacht as “Lebensraum in the east”, was a place of death. Located at the very end of a chain of command, it did not appear on any map – but it did indeed appear on a plan for the so-called final solution to the Jewish question. Bringing this place back into the historical consciousness of Europe is a long-overdue step.

What happened here left deep wounds. And they are visible for all who want to see. Come and see. This call, as painful as it is, is directed at us – at us, the generations born after the war.

What has now been created here, in this place, is so invaluable because knowledge about places like this, and remembering what occurred here, are essential for knowing who we are. There is no way to think the 20th, or indeed the 21st century without this knowledge.

Europe’s shared responsibility and commitment to the “never again!” rallying cry is based on us knowing what people did to their fellow human beings right here.

If we want to continue to remember, also without the help of survivors, why this Europe built on humanitarian principles, this common European continent, is so important, then we must teach and learn its history, and that knowledge must be passed down to every new generation.

This historical memory of Europeans, and especially also that of Germany, necessarily includes the history of Belarus. After nearly three decades of independence, the time has come for drawing our knowledge of and understanding about this country out of the shadow of the Soviet Union. Most importantly, the time has come for Belarus to be recognised as a country with its own history, present and future.

This place, Maly Trostenets, is a place of horror in the history of Belarus. But today it also stands for joint remembrance. This place of

remembrance, just like the History Workshop Minsk, came about thanks to joint efforts of Belarusian and German historians, as well as the work of civil society groups such as the Association for International Education and Exchange in Belarus and in Germany.

Yet it is also true, and I want to emphasise this, that without the willingness on the Belarusian side to pursue reconciliation, this cooperation would have been unthinkable.

We must never forget that this German war of destruction had set itself the aim of eradicating this country and its people. This makes me all the more humble before and grateful to the people of Belarus for their willingness to engage in reconciliation.

It took Germany far too many years to admit to having perpetrated these crimes. It took far too long a time for us to own up to our responsibility. Today, this responsibility means that we must keep the memory of the things that happened here alive. And I can assure you that we will uphold our debt of responsibility, also defending it against those who say it will eventually be paid off.

“Come and see” is an eternal duty. I stand before you here today as Federal President, as a German and as a human being, and I am grateful for the signals of reconciliation that you have sent, and I am filled with shame and grief by the suffering that Germans have brought upon your country.