



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the event of the Polish Republic commemorating the  
80th anniversary of the beginning of the Second World War  
at Warsaw, Poland  
on 1 September 2019**

In no other square in Europe do I find it more difficult to speak, to address you all in my native language of German.

Esteemed President Duda, I stand here humbly and gratefully. You have invited me to commemorate this anniversary with you and your fellow Poles.

On this day 80 years ago, my country, Germany, invaded its neighbouring country of Poland – your homeland. It was my compatriots who unleashed a horrific war that would cost far more than 50 million people – among them millions of Polish citizens – their lives.

This war was a German crime.

The history of this place is testimony to that. From the very first day of the war, Germans bombarded Warsaw. They rampaged in this city for years. They razed entire districts to the ground. They deported the residents. They murdered men, women and children. Poland, its culture, its cities and its people – all living things were to be annihilated.

The terror began in Wieluń – a place whose fate is still unfamiliar to far too many people in my country. Esteemed President Duda, you and I paid tribute to the first victims of the German invasion in Wieluń this morning.

We often use the term “immeasurable” when we describe this war. We speak of the immeasurable suffering that Germany caused Europe. It is true that we cannot measure this suffering. But “immeasurable” does not mean that we are freed from the effort of sharing the victims’ pain.

No, the past is not over. On the contrary, the further back this war lies, the more important remembrance becomes. A war ends when arms fall silent. But its impact is a legacy that lasts generations.

This legacy is a painful one. We Germans accept it and pass it on.

As President of the Federal Republic of Germany, I, along with the Federal Chancellor, want to tell all Poles today that we will not forget. We will not forget the wounds that Germans inflicted on Poland. We will not forget the suffering of Polish families and nor will we forget the courage of their resistance. We will never forget. Nigdy nie zapomnimy!

The first German guest came to Poland over a thousand years ago. His name was Otto, and he entered this country barefoot, as a simple pilgrim, in a gesture of peace and humility.

I, too, stand barefoot today before the people of Poland, as a human being, as a German, weighed down by a huge historical burden.

Nothing can rewrite the past. Words cannot heal the pain. Deeds cannot bring back what was lost.

I stand barefoot before you – but I am inspired by the spirit of reconciliation that Poland bestowed on us.

Over there is the cross where the Polish Pope, John Paul II, said in his homily on the Eve of Pentecost 40 years ago: "Let your spirit descend and renew the face of the Earth! This Earth!"

Poland renewed this Earth and this continent.

Poland's spirit – your spirit of liberation tore down the Iron Curtain. Your spirit of reconciliation gave us Germans the gift of a new beginning. In your spirit of renewal, we achieved a new and peaceful Europe together. This spirit should spread today from this square all over the world!

Look at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier! Look at the Polish nation's heroism and indomitable love of freedom, which stand as a shining example of the many proud nations of Europe gathered here in such great numbers today.

Look at the representatives of over 40 countries! Together, all of you, whose ancestors fought and suffered in this war, show today that the desire for a common future is stronger than the divisive rifts of the past.

And look, too, at the fact that a German President is allowed to stand before you and speak here on this square and on this day. That shows the living miracle of reconciliation!

Reconciliation is a blessing that we Germans could not demand, but one we want to live up to. You should measure us by the responsibility we take on.

Europe is our responsibility!

The united Europe is what saves us. It is the lesson of centuries of war, devastation, enmity and hatred.

Yes, this Europe saw people at their worst, yet it started anew and counted on their best.

The united Europe is built on humanism, the Enlightenment, freedom, justice, and the wealth of its languages and cultures. This Europe is, and will remain, a project of hope.

I am well aware that my country has a special responsibility for this Europe. The fact that Germany – despite its history – was allowed to grow to new strength in Europe means that we Germans must do more for Europe. We must contribute more to European security. We must do more for Europe's prosperity. We must listen more for the sake of European cohesion.

We Germans want to take on this responsibility. And we want to do so humbly. In view of our history, we Germans have every reason to be the happiest people in Europe. But we have no reason whatsoever to see ourselves as better Europeans.

We are also responsible for the transatlantic partnership. On this anniversary, all of us look gratefully to the United States. The strength of its armies – combined with its western and eastern Allies – defeated National Socialism. And the power of the United States' ideas and values, along with its foresight and generosity, paved the way for this continent to a new and better future.

Mr Vice President, that is the greatness of the United States that we Europeans admire and are bound to. This United States opened the world's eyes to the irrepressible strength of freedom and democracy – and that was particularly the case for us Germans. A united Europe was always important to this United States. This United States wanted a real partnership and friendship with mutual respect.

Today, it seems that much of this is no longer a matter of course. So let us not forget what made us strong on both sides of the Atlantic! Let us preserve our common ground in this world full of change and fading certainties!

We are well aware that Europe must become stronger and more self-confident. However, we also know that Europe should not be strong without the US – let alone against it. Instead, Europe needs partners. And I am certain that the United States also needs partners in this world. So let us look after this partnership! Let us hold on to the conviction that "the West" is more than a point on the compass!

For us Germans, our responsibility also means this: Never again may nationalism resurge!

Never again may Germans cry "Germany, Germany above all!" Never again should nations rise over other nations – people over other

people, races over other races. Never again should reason be lost. Never again should hatred and egoism be unleashed among the peoples of our world.

Our fathers and mothers learned from the past. They sought reconciliation over the graves of their dead. Together they found a new path to the future – the path of being good neighbours, the path of working together, with rules for peace and legally enshrined rights for all. My dear partners and friends, let us uphold this spirit of reconciliation. Let us continue on the path paved by what unites us!

As a German guest, I stand barefoot before you on this square.

I look gratefully to the Polish people's fight for freedom.

I bow in grief before the victims' pain.

I ask for forgiveness for Germany's historical guilt.

I recognise our enduring responsibility.