



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
on the 75th anniversary of the liberation from National
Socialism and the end of the Second World War in Europe
at the Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of
Germany to the Victims of War and Tyranny (Neue Wache)
in Berlin
on 8 May 2020**

Seventy-five years ago today, the Second World War came to an end in Europe.

8 May 1945 marked the end of the Nazi reign of tyranny, the end of night-time bombing raids and death marches, the end of unprecedented German crimes and the end of the Shoah, that betrayal of all civilised values. Here in Berlin, where the war of annihilation was conceived and from where it was unleashed, and whither it returned with the full force of destruction – we had planned to commemorate this day jointly with others.

We had planned to commemorate the day together, with representatives of the allies from East and West who made huge sacrifices to liberate this continent. Together with our partners from every corner of Europe that suffered under German occupation, and yet were willing to seek reconciliation. Together with the survivors of German crimes and the descendants of those who perished, so many of whom reached out to us in reconciliation. Together with everyone around the world who gave this country the chance of a fresh start.

We had planned to remember, too, with the older generation in Germany who experienced that period themselves. Hunger, violence and being driven from their homes – all this they suffered through as children. After the war, it was they who rebuilt this country, both in the East and in the West.

And we had planned to commemorate this day with the younger people of today, who, three generations later, ask what the past can teach them now. To them I say, "It is you who are the key! It is you who must carry forward the lessons we have been taught by this

terrible war!" For this reason we had invited thousands of young people from around the world to Berlin today, young people whose grandparents were enemies, but who themselves have become friends.

That is how we had planned to mark this 8 May together. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled us to commemorate this day alone – separated from those who mean so much to us, and to whom we are so grateful.

Perhaps this state of being alone will for a brief moment return us in our minds to 8 May 1945. On that date the Germans really were alone. Germany had suffered military defeat, political and economic ruin, and moral collapse. We had made enemies of the entire world.

Today, 75 years later, we are forced to commemorate alone, but we are not alone! That is today's good news. We live in a vigorous and well-established democracy, in the thirtieth year of a reunified Germany, at the heart of a peaceful and united Europe. We are a trusted member of the international community and we reap the fruits of cooperation and partnership around the world. We Germans can definitely now say that the day of liberation is a day of thanksgiving!

It has taken three generations for us to admit it wholeheartedly.

8 May 1945 was indeed a day of liberation. But at the time people did not perceive it as such.

The liberation of 1945 was imposed from outside. It had to come from outside – this country had descended too far into the evil, the guilt, it had brought upon itself. Likewise the economic reconstruction and democratic renewal in the western part of Germany were only made possible by the generosity, far-sightedness and readiness for reconciliation of our former foes.

But we, too, played a part in the liberation. In our internal liberation. This did not take place on 8 May 1945, and not on a single day. Rather it was a long and painful process which involved facing up to the past, investigating what people knew and what they had colluded in. Raising painful questions within families and between the generations. Fighting to stop silence and denial from prevailing.

It took decades – decades in which many Germans of my generation gradually found their peace with this country. These were also decades in which our neighbours came to trust us again, decades that allowed a cautious resumption of relations, from ever closer union within the European Communities to the treaties concluded in the course of West Germany's Ostpolitik. It was in these decades that the people of Eastern Europe's courage and desire for freedom grew until they could no longer be kept behind walls – leading to that gladdest moment of liberation: Germany's peaceful revolution and reunification. These decades of struggling with our history were decades that allowed democracy to mature in Germany.

And the struggle continues to this day. Remembrance never ends. There can be no deliverance from our past. For without remembrance we lose our future.

It is only because we Germans look our past in the face and because we accept our historic responsibility that the peoples of the world have come to trust our country once more. And this is why we, too, can have confidence in this Germany. This is the core of an enlightened, democratic spirit of patriotism. No German patriotism can come without its cracks. Without light and shadow; without joy and sorrow, gratitude and shame.

Rabbi Nachman once said: "No heart is as whole as a broken heart." Germany's past is a fractured past – with responsibility for the murdering of millions and the suffering of millions. That breaks our hearts to this day. And that is why I say that this country can only be loved with a broken heart.

Anybody who cannot bear this, who demands that a line be drawn under our past, is not only denying the catastrophe that was the war and the Nazi dictatorship. They are also devaluing all the good that has since been achieved and even denying the very essence of our democracy.

"Human dignity shall be inviolable." This first sentence of our constitution is and remains a public reminder of what happened in Auschwitz, of what happened in the war and during the dictatorship. It is not remembrance that is a burden – it is non-remembrance that becomes a burden. It is not professing responsibility that is shameful – it is denial that is shameful!

But what does our historic responsibility mean today, three-quarters of a century after the fact? The gratitude we feel today must not make us complacent. We must never forget that remembrance is a challenge and a duty.

"Never again," we vowed after the war. But for us Germans in particular, this "never again" means "never again alone." And this sentence is nowhere so true as in Europe. We must keep Europe together. We must think, feel and act as Europeans. If we do not hold Europe together, also during and after this pandemic, then we will have shown ourselves not to be worthy of 8 May. If Europe fails, the "never again" also fails.

The international community learned from this "never again". After 1945, it forged a new foundation out of all it had learnt from this catastrophe, it built human rights and international law, rules to preserve peace and cooperation.

Our country, from which so much evil once emanated, has over the years changed from being a threat to the international order to being its champion. We must not allow this peaceful order to disintegrate before our eyes. We must not allow ourselves to be

estranged from those who established it. We want more cooperation around the world, not less – also when it comes to fighting the pandemic.

“8 May was a day of liberation.” In my opinion, these famous words of Richard von Weizsäcker’s have to be reinterpreted today. When they were spoken, they constituted a milestone in our efforts to come to terms with our past. But today they must also point to our future. For “liberation” is never complete, and it is not something that we can just experience passively. It challenges us actively, every day anew.

In 1945 we were liberated. Today, we must liberate ourselves.

Liberate ourselves from the temptations of a new brand of nationalism. From a fascination with authoritarianism. From distrust, isolationism and hostility between nations. From hatred and hate speech, from xenophobia and contempt for democracy – for they are but the old evil in a new guise. On this 8 May, we commemorate the victims of Hanau, of Halle and Kassel. They have not been forgotten in the midst of COVID-19.

“If it can happen here, it can happen anywhere.” These words were spoken by Israel’s President Reuven Rivlin on Holocaust Remembrance Day in the German Bundestag earlier this year. If it can happen here, it can happen anywhere. But today there is nobody to liberate us from these dangers. We have to liberate ourselves. We were liberated to be responsible for our own actions!

I am well aware that this year 8 May comes at a time of great upheaval and great uncertainty. Not just because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but very much exacerbated by it. We do not yet know when and how we will emerge from this crisis. But we do know the attitude with which we entered it: with great confidence in this country, in our democracy, and in what we can shoulder together. That shows how very far we have come in 75 years. And it gives me hope for all the challenges that may lie ahead.

Fellow citizens, we cannot come together for a commemorative event because of coronavirus. But we can grasp the silence. We can pause to reflect.

I ask all Germans to remember silently the victims of the war and the victims of National Socialism. Wherever your roots may lie, take a moment to revisit your memories, your family’s memories, the history of the country in which we all live. Think what the liberation and what 8 May means for your life and your actions.

75 years after the end of the war, we Germans have much to be thankful for. But none of the positive achievements since that date are safe in perpetuity. That is why we must remember: 8 May was not the end of the liberation – rather, preserving freedom and democracy is the never-ending task it has bequeathed us!