



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
on the occasion of the official commemoration
of the 40th anniversary of the Oktoberfest bombing
in Munich
on 26 September 2020**

Four decades have passed since the Oktoberfest bombing in 1980. Nearly two generations and a great deal of history lie between that 26th of September and today. Two German states have meanwhile joined to become one; next week, we will celebrate the 30th anniversary of German Unity. It feels like an eternity has passed. And yet, that terrible day is not far from our mind. We all again sense its horror, particularly now, after the murder of Walter Lübcke, and after the attacks of Halle and Hanau.

Especially for you – the victims and survivors – 26 September 1980 is forever fresh in your mind, an indelible date. It changed everything, and the pain will not go away. No one can escape the shadows that an act of terrorism casts on a life. Victims, investigators, politicians, legal counsels and public prosecutors – all of them feel the burden of the past forty years.

Yet it weighs especially heavily on you – the victims who survived, the family members who lost children, mothers and fathers in the attack.

How is a seven-year-old supposed to forget the image of his seriously injured mother? How can he forget the helplessness he sensed in his father, and in the grown-ups who surrounded him at the time? How can he forget the fireman who wanted to say the Lord's Prayer with him?

How is a passionate mountain climber whose foot and back were torn apart by the bomb supposed to forget that in all the long years since she has only seen mountaintops on photographs and instead has had to painstakingly relearn to walk?

And above all, how have the mothers, fathers and children who lost loved ones gone on with their lives? With the bomb having left a

hole in their lives that could never be filled? They have had to bear the grief of their loss, as well as the anger that their questions have remained unanswered – namely, questions about who inflicted this pain on them, and why?

Yes, forty years on, we must shamefacedly admit that many questions remain open. Questions that a thorough criminal investigation should have answered. Questions that were not answered by the first and could no longer be answered by the second investigation. We are left with this open wound. Which means that we have an even greater obligation today to support the survivors, beyond those criminal investigations. How are they getting on; how are they doing today? Who eases their pain; who helps them in everyday life?

These questions, too, were not asked for some time, or remained unanswered. They were fought over for decades, and gave rise to a great deal of disappointment and despair on the part of the family members and the victims.

That is why I am glad and grateful that, now that forty years have passed, those who were affected are receiving – in addition to what has been done so far – at least the financial support that they have been waiting for so long. Lord Mayor, you have mentioned this. The fund in the amount of 1.2 million euro that the Federal Government, the Free State of Bavaria and the City of Munich will be setting up sends a late but important signal of solidarity with the victims.

Beyond practical solidarity, we have a second obligation: the obligation not to forget. To keep the memory alive. To grieve and commemorate together. And that is why I first and most warmly want to thank you, the survivors and the family members of the victims, for coming here today, for speaking to us and with us. We need your words and your testimony, as we commemorate the victims of this attack, as we commemorate those who died and those who survived.

I want to thank the City of Munich and the youth organisation of the German Trade Union Confederation, which have made possible this and other commemoration events before it.

I want to thank Ulrich Chaussy, who over the past forty years did not give up. He always refused to accept the inconsistencies between eyewitness testimony, evidence and investigation results and instead, surmounting all obstacles, pressed ahead with his own investigations and research.

Many thanks, too, to Werner Dietrich, who as the victims' legal counsel gave them a voice and fought tirelessly for the case to be reopened – an effort that finally succeeded on the third attempt.

Yes, and I also want to thank Minister of the Interior of Bavaria Joachim Herrmann, as well as the Bavarian state government, for supporting the reopening of the case.

I thank all of you, because you have done everything in your power to shine light on the blind spot of the attack and to help clarify the circumstances. The reopened investigation could no longer answer the questions that remained. But it did lead to a clear finding by the Federal Public Prosecutor General: The bombing of the 1980 Oktoberfest was a right-wing terrorist attack. This discovery makes a difference. Like every discovery, it provides a little more freedom. It was necessary – and an achievement.

Because inadequate investigation of this act of terrorism has hurt not only those who fell victim to it at the time. It also left a wound in our democratic community and our state based on the rule of law – a wound that is still open to this very day. The perpetrator Gundolf Köhler's ties to the radical right-wing paramilitary group Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann were a known fact, already in 1980.

However, when the criminal investigation was reopened in 2014, there was no physical evidence that could be submitted for the proceedings, for instance through DNA analysis. Important, perhaps decisive evidence was no longer available. It could therefore no longer be proven that Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann or other right-wing extremist networks were involved in the bombing. An unresolved case that could have been, and needed to be, solved is inexcusable and a failure – as it affects trust in the investigative authorities and the judiciary.

Something like this must never happen in Germany again! This is the lesson we at least wish we had collectively drawn from what happened in Munich. It is a wish that would not come true. In 2011, we learned about the series of murders committed by the National Socialist Underground (NSU). Ten people were murdered by perpetrators who were motivated by right-wing extremism – without any of the criminal investigations seriously considering this motive.

Were right-wing extremist networks only rarely noticed and taken less seriously in criminal investigations? There are two possible conclusions, based on the history of right-wing extremist crimes and attacks in our country: Either the realisation emerged only slowly – too slowly – that these perpetrators, too, have ties to others and are a part of networks or inspired by them; or this realisation was intentionally ignored.

If we want to do justice to the victims of the attack forty years ago, then our commemoration of them must include reflecting on ourselves; we must think about mistakes made, about actions not

taken and about blind spots during investigations into past right-wing extremist attacks.

This reflection includes asking whether criminal investigations were deficient in certain ways, again and again, and whether such deficiencies possibly still exist today.

We know that right-wing extremist networks exist. The NSU series of murders cast a light on this opaque area of criminal investigations. It proved, also in the assessment of security authorities, how investigations yield nothing if they are not led the way they should be, namely free of bias, but rather with preconceived ideas and guided by prejudices; how the roles of victims and perpetrators are confused when investigators are steered by resentment; and how certain patterns and contexts of crimes are not identified when investigative authorities do not exchange their findings.

Mistakes like these can turn criminal investigations into the exact opposite. Yes, they endanger the democratic state that is founded on the rule of law. That is why we must identify and correct them – decisively and with full dedication.

The perpetrators and their accomplices who act based on racist, contemptuous motives, who use hate, violence and bombs, and who commit serial murders, who mock their victims and deny responsibility for their crimes – they have a target. They are targeting all of us. It is our sense of community, our society, and our liberal order, an order that they ridicule as “the system”, that they seek to destroy. Their aim is to instil fear.

We will not allow ourselves to be forced into this corner. We see the threat, and we have overcome our fear. We will stand together and we will help the victims and the survivors reclaim a sense of safety and of being fully part of our society.

Thinking back to the autumn of 1980, when the Oktoberfest bombing was carried out, it brings to my mind a film by Margarethe von Trotta that was released in cinemas soon afterwards: *The German Sisters* (German title: *Die bleierne Zeit*, or: *Leaden times*).

The kidnapping and murder of Hanns Martin Schleyer, the dramatic hijacking of the Lufthansa aeroplane *Landshut* and the suicide of leading members of the RAF – all this occurred only three years prior to October 1980. The German Autumn – as this depressing period in September and October of 1977 is known to this day – cast a long, depressing and “leaden” shadow over our country.

In 1980, in the midst of those turbulent times, Bundestag elections were held. Everyone who experienced it will remember how contentious that election cycle was, characterised by harsh, rhetorical debates between the candidates and highly emotional politics.

The politicians going head to head were Franz Josef Strauß and Helmut Schmidt. Two men who were political opponents but, as we know today, respected one another.

During the 1980 election, no one could have imagined that their political rivalry would one day give way to mutual appreciation. The bitter disputes that Schmidt and Strauß had during this election, and even more so the unrest and riots that accompanied it, made the very idea seem impossible. They were polar opposites, their rhetoric was too hurtful, and the rift was too deep. Between these two people and between their political camps.

In this heated and hostile atmosphere, the attacker of 26 September 1980 detonated his bomb – nine days before the election.

Even forty years later, the memories are all too vivid: the chaos, the screams, the blood. Twelve people were murdered, and 213 were injured – many so severely that they spent days fighting for their lives in Munich hospitals. The Oktoberfest continued. It was only interrupted for 24 hours on the day of the memorial service.

The political sparring, however, did not stop for even one hour. The debates grew more heated yet. During the remaining days up until the Bundestag election on 5 October, there was then the “clash of the parties” over who should bear political blame for the attack. The bombing became a campaign issue and was used for mudslinging on both sides. They accused one another of being partially responsible, and each side threatened to charge the other with libel.

This is the situation I am referring to when I speak of the perfidiousness of terrorism. Suicide bombers kill in cold blood. Their victims are simply a means to an end. That end, however, is only attained when what they are seeking to destroy – the political order – responds in the expected way. The aim of the right-wing extremist terrorist attack forty years ago was exactly what occurred: democrats were locked in a heated dispute over who was to blame for the act of terrorism; even worse, they blamed one another for it.

The fact that this dispute, and the reciprocal placing of blame, has been overcome – at least among our country’s democratic parties – is evidence of our country’s democratic culture and civility. The jury is still out on whether the lesson has been learned for good. This will depend on whether in the future the democratic parties continue to make the important differentiation between opposition and controversy, on the one hand, and enmity, hatred and disdain, on the other. Democracy needs controversy – and this may well include sharp confrontation. However, scorn, hatred and disdain create an atmosphere that encourages some to resort to violence.

This threat has not diminished forty years after Munich. Three days ago, I met in Berlin with family members of the victims that were

murdered in cold blood in Hanau. Two weeks from now, it will be the anniversary of the attack on the synagogue in Halle.

Let us therefore keep the memory of Munich alive – which includes the mistakes that were made. Only those who see their mistakes will then be able to correct them. Because, also in the cases of Hanau and Halle, we may know who specifically perpetrated the crimes. But that specifically does not free us from the obligation to understand their motives, to investigate the contacts they had and to shine a light on the networks to which they had links.

Looking the other way is no longer an option. Not after the Oktoberfest bombing, not after the NSU trial, not after the threatening letters attributed to NSU 2.0; not now that weapons caches and enemy lists of self-styled prepper groups have surfaced that have ties to Bundeswehr reservists and staff members of security authorities; and not now that a right-wing extremist chat group has been uncovered in the North Rhine-Westphalia police force.

It's clear to me that alarmism will not help anyone. Yet there is also danger in calming ourselves. The integrity of our institutions based on the rule of law is at stake. We must protect them – to ensure the future of our democracy!

I trust our police force. I trust the many officers who enforce the law and protect democracy every single day, and who are proud to be safeguarding freedom. I have met and talked with many of them. I know how hard they work. They need this trust, and they deserve it. Enemies of freedom and democracy must not be tolerated in the ranks of the police force. Everything possible must be done to expose right-wing extremist networks, wherever they may be. The police force's leadership and those with political responsibility must not tolerate any climate that can give rise to such networks, or in which such networks can be concealed by others.

It's in our shared interest. However, I firmly believe that the overwhelming majority of women and men in the police force, too, do not want their reputation and the trust we place in them to be harmed by those who show disregard for our constitution.

Right-wing extremism has deep roots in our society. Commemoration of the many right-wing extremist acts of terror, also those committed after 1980, and the memory of the large number of victims, must be adequately reflected in our country's collective memory. Today should be an opportunity for us to nurture this memory and keep it alive.

The right-wing terrorist murders of the past decades were not committed by deranged individuals. The perpetrators were closely integrated into networks of hatred and violence, or they were pressed

to commit their acts by those networks. We must find these networks.
We must fight them – more decisively than in the past!