



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the inauguration of the Robert-Blum-Saal with artworks
depicting Germany's history of democracy
at Schloss Bellevue
on 9 November 2020**

According to legend, the last words of Robert Blum were "I die for freedom, may my country remember me." He was executed – shot – by imperial military forces on 9 November 1848, one day before his 41st birthday. The German democrat and champion for freedom, one of the most well-known members of the Frankfurt National Assembly, thus died on a heap of sand in Brigittenau, a Viennese suburb.

The bullets ended the life of a man who had fought tirelessly for a Germany unified in justice and in freedom – as a political publicist, publisher and founder of the Schillerverein in Leipzig, as a parliamentarian in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt, and finally with a gun in his hand on the barricades in Vienna.

To the very last, Robert Blum fought for a German nation-state in the republican mould, legitimised by parliamentary structures. He campaigned for a brand of democracy in which civil liberties and human rights were accorded to one and all. And he fought for a Europe in which free peoples should live together in peace, from France to Poland and to Hungary.

His death on 9 November 1848 marked one of the many turning points in our history. By executing the parliamentarian Robert Blum, the princes and military commanders of the Ancien Régime demonstrated their power and sent an unequivocal message to the Paulskirche National Assembly. This action has come to represent the imminent defeat of the democrats and the failure of the revolution of 1848/49.

However, the underlying ideas, the ideas for which Robert Blum, Adam von Itzstein, Louise Otto-Peters and many others had fought lived on – in individual state parliaments, in liberal and democratic parties, in workers educational associations and in trade unions. They

re-emerged in the revolution of 1918 and the Weimar National Assembly, in resistance and exile during the Nazi reign, in the Bonn Parliamentary Council in 1949 and the peaceful revolution in the GDR in 1989. They were ideas that were ahead of their time and that form part of this country's democratic heritage.

9 November 1848 was the first 9 November to be of significance in our country's chequered history, marking our long, winding and stony path to democracy, which was lined with setbacks and contradictions, beset by wars and brutal crimes. Today we also remember other events that happened on this date, by coincidence or political calculation: the proclamation of the first German republic in 1918, the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, the November Pogrom of 1938 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

More than any other date in German history, 9 November reminds us of both the bright and the dark moments of our past, a complex and contradictory collage that evokes mixed feelings, including joy and euphoria as well as sorrow and horror. It is important, it is perhaps more important today than ever before, for us to keep alive the memory of both the dark and the bright sides of our history, and that not just today, but well beyond this awkward anniversary.

We must do even more, and go down new roads, in order to keep fresh in people's minds the memory of the depths to which German history has sunk, of dictatorship and war, and above all of the Shoah, the murder of millions of Europe's Jews. "Never again" is the grand promise enshrined in our Basic Law, which we must live up to today.

We should, however, also do more to keep alive the memory of our past successes, of progress, on which we can build today. I attach great importance to doing more to preserve our democratic heritage, putting the places that symbolise our democratic history back on the map and recalling the great minds behind the democracy movements. The German liberation movements – from the proud traditions of the free imperial cities and the peasants' revolution in the early modern period to the peaceful revolution in the GDR – still do not hold the place in our country's collective memory that they deserve and that we should definitely accord them.

That is why I am calling for the Paulskirche in Frankfurt to be made into a modern memorial. And it is why I am calling for the peaceful revolution of 1989 to be commemorated at a central site, at a place that is more than a memorial.

Robert Blum is a particularly tragic example of the shortcomings of our culture of remembrance. Die for freedom he did, but hardly anyone in his country remembers him. The writer Ludwig Pfau, another forgotten German revolutionary, said this of Blum: "His people will

raise a memorial to him that will be greater than the memorials of all of their heroes, for his memorial will be the German republic." This prophecy has come true only in part. The German republic, unified in justice and freedom, became a reality again in 1990, after its previous incarnation in 1918. But hardly anyone nowadays knows who Robert Blum was, and what he did for this republic.

Today, on 9 November this year, we intend to try to reclaim Robert Blum for our republic. Here in Schloss Bellevue we want to raise a modest memorial to Robert Blum by naming the room next to this after him.

By naming the Robert-Blum-Saal, we underscore the fact that this palace, originally built as a Prussian prince's summer residence, is now the official residence of the President of a democratic republic rooted firmly in liberal traditions. The name also serves as a reminder that this room and this palace are a democratic space, a place where German citizens can meet as equals and exchange views and ideas.

I think that this is an important signal, especially now, this November, when we have again been forced by the pandemic to place tighter restrictions on public life and cannot receive any guests in the palace this morning. The corona crisis has reminded us again just how much our democracy needs public spaces. And for that reason too, I am glad that I am able to dedicate the Robert-Blum-Saal today.

The artwork on display is also intended to reflect the history of this palace as a democratic space. Just recently, on the floor below, we exhibited paintings from the time of the peaceful revolution and it is wonderful that we have been able to adorn the Robert-Blum-Saal with six paintings that recall the German freedom movements in the first half of the 19th century, the "black, red and gold prehistory", as the historian Ralf Zerback described it. I extend my heartfelt thanks to those who have made the paintings available and all those who assisted in the selection process.

An oil painting by Carl Wendling now adorns the Robert-Blum-Saal, depicting party followers at the time of the French Revolution. Men are facing one another caught up in passionate debate, surrounded by intrigued listeners. What you see are not subjects, but self-confident citizens. The colourful scene presumably unfolded in Landau, the artist's hometown, in which there was a particularly lively Jacobin Club. The image reminds us of the men – back then it was almost exclusively men – who disseminated the ideas of the French Revolution in Germany in the late 18th century and designed the first republic on German soil in Mainz.

A smaller piece by Erhard Joseph Brenzinger shows the crowds streaming towards Hambach Castle, a cradle of our democracy, in May 1832, when tens of thousands of people were out demonstrating for

civil liberties and German unity. They planted the German flag, back then still gold, red and black, on the pinnacles of the castle ruins. Polish flags were also waved in an early sign of European solidarity.

In this dynamic Vormärz period, Robert Blum went to Leipzig and became a secretary at the theatre, a journalist and a politician. The portrait we are delighted to be able to display shows him in the last years of his life. Blum grew up in Cologne in humble circumstances. He was a self-taught man, making him an exception amongst the many lawyers and professors in the Paulskirche parliament. He was an engaging tribune of the people but at the same time a pragmatic politician who doggedly sought parliamentary solutions, who was able to mediate between parliamentary groups and who strived for compromise.

Our fourth piece of art, a coloured steel engraving based on a drawing by Jean Nicolas Ventadour, shows the backdrop to Blum's work, the interior of the Paulskirche. We see the packed chamber of the National Assembly, decorated with the three German colours, now in the sequence black, red and gold. A parliamentarian at the lectern gesticulates wildly as he speaks, watched by the many spectators on the gallery who, as the parliamentarian Ludwig Bamberger tells us, livened things up greatly with their thunderous applause or their spirited hissing.

The oil painting by Moritz Oppenheim also depicts an animated scene. A family has gathered on a balcony in July 1848 to cheer on the Regent of the Provisional Central Power as he parades into Frankfurt. The majority of the moderate liberals in the Paulskirche had elected Archduke John of Austria to this office and Robert Blum would presumably have been somewhat sceptical about the outpourings of joy depicted here. He did not want a man at the helm who might let the Reich go to rack and ruin. What he wanted was a democratic government accountable to parliament.

Our last piece tells the story of the closing stages of the revolution in May 1849. It depicts the Neumarkt in Dresden where the democrats had taken up arms to defend the Paulskirche constitution – the first constitution for the whole of Germany, which laid down fundamental freedoms. But troops from Prussia and Saxony fired canons at the uprising and just a few months later when Rastatt Fortress also fell, the German revolution had been quashed.

The six pieces of art take us right to the heart of our history. They show us the courage and determination with which women and men in this country fought tyranny and suppression, often risking their lives. We owe all of them, the pioneering champions of our democracy, our gratitude and respect.

The pictures, however, also reveal contradictions in the freedom movements and give rise to questions. That is only right and proper. With its artwork, the seat of the Federal President can also be a place where we reach a better understanding of ourselves, a place where we talk about how we became what we are. Many pieces here provide reminders of the history of this building and that is to remain so. That is why we are currently working on dedicating another room in the Palace to Schinkel and Prussian Classicism, and a further room to the Prussian Enlightenment by creating a Wilhelm-und-Alexander-von-Humboldt-Saal. Preparations are underway and are to be completed next spring.

However, we also want to hold our heads high and show the traditions on which our democracy is based. If, for example, we call to mind the Hambach Festival or the Paulskirche, we are making clear that black, red and gold are the colours of our democratic history, the colours of unity and justice and freedom. We must not allow them to be hijacked and abused by those who want to fan the flames of new nationalist hatred. Those who hold parliamentary democracy and human rights in contempt have no right to lay claim to these colours.

But we can also use the memory of the democratic new beginnings played out throughout our history to draw strength for the huge tasks that lie ahead. Courage to change and the firm belief in the future – that is what made Robert Blum so special. When the censorship authorities forced him into prison and his sister urged him to give up his dangerous political work, he replied indignantly: “There would never have been Christianity and never a Reformation and never a state revolution and indeed nothing that is good and great, if everyone had always thought ‘but you won’t change anything!’”

We should take a leaf out of Robert Blum’s book, especially now as we fight the virus, but also when we look to the future at the time after the pandemic. If we want to deal with the corona crisis together, if we want to change things and embark on a new beginning, we could well use a dose of his democratic passion.

I for one am delighted that we have managed to revive the pioneering spirit of that era here this morning. We will now hear songs from the revolutionary movement; instrumental versions will be played because COVID-19 means we cannot sing. Katharina Thalbach will recite song lyrics and excerpts from the work of Robert Blum, while the historian Ralf Zerback will tell us more about the life of a courageous champion of freedom and democracy.

I hope we are making a small contribution to help rediscover the history of German democracy, here in Berlin and all across our country. Ladies and gentlemen, may you draw inspiration from this encounter with Robert Blum, no matter where you are listening or watching.

Thank you very much.