



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the memorial ceremony to mark the eightieth  
anniversary of the massacre at Babyn Yar  
on 6 October 2021  
in Kyiv/Ukraine**

"Wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar

[...]

Here, silently, all screams,

and, hat in hand, I feel my hair changing shade to gray.

And I myself, like one long, soundless scream

[...]

No fiber of my body will forget this."

What pain. What anguish. What suffering. A suffering that leaves us without words.

Many of you will be familiar with the lines of this poem. Written by Yevgeny Yevtushenko in 1961, it broke down the wall of silence, the taboo that had until then surrounded the murder of the Jews here in Ukraine and across the Soviet Union. The music that we have just heard from the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, too, leaves us wordless and deeply affected. Dmitri Shostakovich's symphony inspired by Yevtushenko's poem stands as a musical memorial to the victims of Babyn Yar. It was writers, musicians, intellectuals who first dared to address the crimes committed here eighty years ago. We owe them a great deal. They uncovered the memory of these crimes – and paved the way, at last, for remembrance.

As a German and as Germany's Federal President, it is a hard path that brings me here, to Babyn Yar. But at the same time I am grateful to be here. I thank you, the descendants of the victims, I thank you, Boris Zabarko, and I thank you, the people of Kyiv.

I am also especially pleased to be here with you, President Zelensky, and you, President Herzog, and deeply grateful for this opportunity for us to remember and pay tribute together.

Here, in Babyn Yar, in the last days of September 1941, German troops murdered almost 34,000 Jews. It was Germans who perpetrated these atrocities. Words fail us in the knowledge of inconceivable cruelty and brutality.

This act – it was not an act of reprisal. The mass murder of Kyiv's Jews was a meticulously planned crime – planned and carried out by members of the SS, the security police and the Wehrmacht. All of them were involved.

On the morning of 28 September, writes a Kyiv teacher in her first-hand account of those days, she witnessed an endless row of people moving through her street. "Women, men, young girls, children, elderly people – entire families were going. [...] They were walking in silence. It was terrible."

Most of them believed they were to be resettled elsewhere. In the ravine, the German troops ordered the unsuspecting victims to undress and forced them to lie on the ground, face down, on the bodies of those who were already dead. Then they shot them.

Women and men. Young girls. Children. Elderly people. Entire families.

33,771 people in just two days.

Their murderers were supplied with warm meals, drinks and liquor.

Only a handful of Jews survived.

The crime against humanity that was the Holocaust did not begin in the German factories of death: in Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, Majdanek, Belzec. It began earlier than that, as the German invaders first pushed eastward, in forests, on the outskirts of villages. Well over a million Jews in Ukraine lost their lives to this Holocaust by bullets. Here in Kyiv, in Odessa, in Berdychiv, Lypovets, Chernivtsi, Mizoch – in so many other places.

Who in my country, in Germany, knows about this Holocaust by bullets today? Who knows these names, these blood-soaked names?

All of these places have no suitable place in our memory. On the map of our memory, Ukraine is sketched in far too lightly, far too vaguely.

And so it is important to me to be here today.

And it was important to me to visit Koriukivka today, too – a small northern town where, over the course of two days, 6700 men, women and children were murdered.

I am here today to remember.

Because we must remember in order to recognise where untrammelled hatred and nationalism, antisemitism and vile racist

doctrines can lead. The German war of aggression and extermination was a murderous barbarity. It cost millions of people their lives. They were killed, murdered, enslaved as forced labourers, deported. People whom the Nazis did not consider to be people. Here in Ukraine, whole swathes of land were to be systematically "cleansed" – that was the wording of the orders – and Kyiv was to be razed to the ground.

Here in Babyn Yar, too, the killing continued – after the massacre of the Jews of Kyiv – into 1943, when the Germans retreated. Tens of thousands of Sinti and Roma, members of the Ukrainian liberation movement, disabled people, prisoners of war lost their lives in this ravine.

The perpetrators attempted to erase all of the traces, to cover up their crimes. But they could not be erased. Their effects are felt even now. The shadows cast by these crimes, the scars left by the war – they are still visible today. The suffering inflicted in this war continues today, in so many families, in so many villages and towns in your country, in Ukraine.

For this reason, too, we must remember – there can be no bright future without candid remembrance.

I stand before you today as Germany's Federal President and bow down before the dead in grief and sorrow. And at the same time I am deeply thankful for the reconciliation that you, President Zelensky, the people of Ukraine, and the descendants of the victims have made possible by extending your hand to us Germans. Reconciliation is not something that can be requested. It can only be granted. And so I am all the more grateful for the close partnership that unites our two countries, President Zelensky, today. And all the more grateful for the shared foundation to which we are committed: international law and human dignity, the freedom of all peoples and their right to political self-determination and territorial integrity, and a safe and peaceful Europe. We stand on this foundation, and we must protect it – that, too, is part of the responsibility imposed on us by our history.

To all of you, the descendants of the victims, the people of Ukraine, to you, President Zelensky, President Herzog, I would like to say today that we Germans are aware of the responsibility imposed on us by history. We can never draw a line under this responsibility. It is a responsibility for our shared future.

President Herzog, how I wish that I could state this as an unconditional truth. How I wish that I could say: We Germans have learned the lessons of history once and for all.

But I cannot. It pains and angers me that antisemitism is, in Germany too – in Germany, of all places – gaining strength once again. It pains and angers me that – in the throes of a pandemic, of all times

– old hatred is being reworked in new conspiracy theories, whipping up enmity, threats and violence.

The evils of the past are re-emerging in a new guise. For us Germans, there can only be one response: never again! The fight must go on – the fight against antisemitism and all forms of hatred, and the reckoning with the crimes committed in those dark days, a process in which, as we have seen very recently, legal proceedings are one essential element.

Ten years ago in Italy, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the author of the Babyn Yar poem, met Wolf Biermann, the German poet and singer whose father was murdered in Auschwitz and who was expelled by the East German regime in 1976. After their meeting, Wolf Biermann composed a new version of Yevtushenko's poem, in German – and he presented these lines to me for my trip today.

I would like to end with these lines, with the words of two poets, with these, in a certain sense, shared words on Babyn Yar – on the horrors for which there are, in truth, no words, in memory of the victims, whom we must never forget:

„Kein Schuß, kein Wimmern. Nur es rascheln noch  
im Wind die Steppengräser unten in der Schlucht  
Paar alte Bäume stehn wie strenge Richter rum  
Und ich steh hilflos da und schreie,  
offnen Mundes,  
steinestumm

Ich steh alleine hier am Abgrund wie vorm eignen Grab  
bin selbst ein Greis, bin Mutter, das erschossne Kind

Sie alle sind versammelt hier für immerdar!  
ergraut bin ich vor lauter Grauen,  
denk ich an Einundvierzig,  
an das schlimmste Schreckensjahr“