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Berlin, 14/11/2021
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**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the ceremony to mark the Day of National Mourning
on 14 November 2021
in Berlin**

Today is a day of mourning. We mourn the victims of violence and war all around the world, the women, men and children who have lost their lives, or whose lives have been overshadowed by war.

When we talk about mourning, we also always talk about that which came before, and what is necessarily linked to it: that we remember, remember people and their names, as well as places and events.

And what we are doing here today – as citizens of this country, commemorating the dead – has another precondition: a collective memory, a space for memories that we share, in Germany and in Europe; names, places and events that are inscribed in such a collective memory.

As we marked the 80th anniversary this year of the invasion of the Soviet Union by the German Wehrmacht, many of us had to admit to ourselves that the places the German Wehrmacht traversed on its march through Poland, the Baltic region and Belarus, through Ukraine and into Russia, as well as deep into the Caucasus – that they had never heard of these places.

The same holds true for many of the places where German atrocities were committed in former Yugoslavia and in Greece, which were also invaded 80 years ago. Most of us are not familiar with these place names, either. We do not link them to any events, even less than to our own history, to Germany's history.

Luckily, things are different when it comes to Central and Western Europe. But these places, too, must be reclaimed for Germany's

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collective memory, often by overcoming resistance and with a delay of several years, or even decades: Oradour in France, the Ardeatine Caves in Italy and Lidice in the Czech Republic. They are part of a collective memory, part of Germany's and of our collective European memory. These are places our thoughts turn to on days like today.

Yet our memory fails us when we ask it for details about the war fought and the crimes perpetrated in the eastern and south-eastern parts of Europe.

It fails to recall the crimes committed against civilians, forced labourers and Soviet prisoners of war, hundreds of thousands of whom died in the first few months after the invasion – of starvation, being beaten or shot to death.

It fails to recall the countless mass atrocities perpetrated under the pretence of fighting a partisan war in the former Yugoslavia, in Greece and on Crete, fails to remember the tens of thousands of civilians who were killed by German firing squads.

Our memory has little recollection, often none, of places like Maly Trostenets in the vicinity of Minsk, where between 1942 and 1944 tens of thousands of Jewish families were murdered. One name, Auschwitz, has come to symbolise the murder of millions of European Jews. But our memory has no map of the countless other places where German atrocities were committed, beyond the extermination camps: in Belarus, in Ukraine, in Russia and in other places in Eastern Europe. Yet it should be familiar with these places, because that is where it would find the mass graves of Polish, Belarussian, Ukrainian and Russian Jews – shot to death in what is referred to as the Holocaust by bullets, nameless victims buried in mass graves, who have disappeared under the silent earth.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to visit Maly Trostenets, this place near Minsk, where I was able to jointly commemorate the dead together with descendants and those they left behind. And for the opportunity – only a few weeks ago – to travel to the Ukrainian town of Koriukivka, where over the course of two days German troops murdered nearly 7000 men, women and children. It is a place where, despite this, we, as the German guests, were greeted with open arms, with a great deal of warmth even, and where they told us they would like to establish a town twinning.

Countless other places where German crimes were committed have been forgotten, like the village of Khatyn in Belarus that was razed to the ground in early 1943, or the small city of Mizocz in western Ukraine where outside the city gates, on a single day in October of 1942, the entire Jewish population was shot to death.

Knowing the names of these places makes a difference – for our identity as a nation and for our collective identity as Europeans on this continent.

But if we want to remember, then we must also know what links these places have to the present day. For I firmly believe that when we understand that, and how, this past shapes our present, then we will also rediscover our interest in the chapters of history we have pushed aside. We will understand what the Israeli historian Omer Bartov explains so well, namely that we are all links in a “fragile yet astonishingly resilient chain of generations, of fate and struggle, in which history’s events are relentlessly unfolding”.

We owe who we are, and what we remember, to the complex interplay of our origin, the places we’ve been to and the events we’ve witnessed in our lives, as well as to human actions – both our own and our forebears’.

History, understood this way, is always also family history. We should not only expect to be asked by coming generations “what does this have to do with me?” Rather, we must be able to answer that question! We can only understand who we are, and the things we care about, once we know who and what came before us.

I most recently thought about this when we paid tribute to the soldiers of the Bundeswehr for their service in Afghanistan. Because this important ceremony says a great deal, not only about the bravery of our soldiers – but also about the society that owes them such a tribute and recognition of their efforts.

The experience of two world wars, guilt and shame have shaped the relationship between German society and its armed forces up to the present day. Our Bundeswehr is a parliamentary army. It stands immutably on the bedrock of Germany’s constitution. We, and our democracy, rely on it. We also place our security and the responsibility we have towards the world and our allies in the hands of our servicemen and women. We refer to them as “citizens in uniform”. But when we plan to honour them, as we did recently in front of the Reichstag in Berlin, then many fellow citizens say they would rather see them wearing civilian clothes, and without a torch in their hand.

Many Germans feel uneasy about military rituals. They do not want to be reminded of what employing an army, including the Bundeswehr, means. Death and trauma, German soldiers in armed missions, in foreign countries – these are things we prefer to repress. We talk about these things far too seldom and only reluctantly.

In a country the name of which remains tied to such immeasurable suffering, that brought two World Wars to Europe, the army of which was responsible for a deadly and aggressive war, this unease may be understandable. That does not, however, make it easy for those who

risked their lives for our country, for the veterans of missions abroad, and especially for the families of those who have fallen.

Because their trauma, their loss, their fear, pain and shame do not disappear simply because many forcibly close their eyes to these facts. On the contrary,

What we repress and remain silent about as a society, what we do not want to be reminded of, we nevertheless still owe as a society. We owe it to the women and men of the Bundeswehr, the injured, the fallen, and their families.

Accepting this responsibility for our history should not mean avoiding a debate about the conflicts of our present day, or about those who bear a heavy, even the heaviest responsibility in this regard. This, too, makes today, the Day of National Mourning, an important day. We must overcome the silence – including the silence of large parts of our society with respect to our armed forces! That is what we are called on to do today.

Mourning – what today is for – mourning only becomes possible when we come face-to-face with our memories, even those that pain us. This is why memory is not an end in itself and not an act of penance. We remember the past for the sake of the present and the future.

The German War Graves Commission has for many decades worked to preserve our memory, by tending to and creating places where former enemies in war can together commemorate their fallen. I will, for example, never forget how in 2017 I visited Hartmannswillerkopf memorial, which came to be known as the man-eater during the First World War, in freezing weather together with President Emmanuel Macron for an act of commemoration. Places of remembrance such as this create spaces not only for mourning, but also for reconciliation.

Because mourning unites generations in Europe and beyond our continent's frontiers – and has done so for decades.

My generation grew up in the shadow of the Second World War. Our parents were children of this last war that overshadowed everything. These children's helpless and often silent mourning of their fathers, mothers and brothers, of everyone who bore the scars of this war, regardless of whether or not they survived – their mourning also shaped us. It shaped us, my generation – as it did our neighbours on this continent, in Western Europe, just like in Poland, the Baltic countries, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, in the former Yugoslavia and in Greece.

Many survivors from our parents' generation are with us here today. Their lives, their life stories could no longer be separated from the horrors they experienced during their childhood and the horrors of war, as if they have been forced to eternally walk along the bank of this one river, without ever being able to cross it.

I feel deep pain knowing that, in Europe today, there are once again children who have not been spared this fate. Children like Oleg, whose story as a child of war in eastern Ukraine is told in a film by the Danish director Simon Lereng Wilmont, which was recently aired on German television.

I want to conclude my speech with a few lines from a poem written by Yulia Drunina, a Russian poet who was seventeen years old when the German Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union, and 67 when she took her own life in disillusionment, because no bright future followed after that dark past. She was a child of war.

"I am descended not from childhood, but from war.
From this, I believe, stems my difficulty
in bearing silence, unlike you, and why I see the essence
in each new day and every hour.

[...]

I am descended not from childhood, but from war.
And thin-skinned will I be to my dying day."