



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
in the memorial lecture to mark the eightieth anniversary
of the execution of members of the student resistance
group White Rose
in Munich
on 6 February 2023**

What forceful, rousing words they were: "Rip up the mantle of apathy laid around your heart! Decide, before it's too late!" Words that the resistance group White Rose wrote at the beginning of 1943, addressed to all Germans. The "Appeal to all Germans" – it was unequivocal. It was urgent. And above all, it was infinitely brave. Anyone who dared to publicly criticise the Nazis' regime of terror, anyone who openly called for resistance – and the White Rose did nothing less – anyone who dared to do this risked their own life as well as the freedom of their family, their friends.

The members of the White Rose were aware of this danger, very aware. And yet they wrote flyers from the summer of 1942 onwards and distributed them in ever greater numbers. "Freedom", "Down with Hitler", they also wrote these words on the walls of houses and at the entrance to this university building. And that too was unequivocal. And infinitely brave.

Sophie and Hans Scholl. Christoph Probst. Kurt Huber. Alexander Schmorell. Willi Graf. Hans Leipelt. They all paid for their bravery with their lives.

The men and women of the White Rose did not want to remain silent any longer. They wanted action to finally be taken. It was above all one conviction that drove them: that everyone must and can do something. They called on all Germans to finally awaken from their lethargy, from their indifference, to finally raise their voices, rise up against the – as it was called in the third flyer – "dictatorship of evil".

Eighty years have gone by since the first members of the White Rose were executed. Their resistance, their actions incensed the Nazi regime. On 18 February 1943 they fell into the hands of the authorities

– the same day that Joseph Goebbels was to give his infamous Total War speech in the Berlin Sportpalast. On this 18 February, Sophie and Hans Scholl laid out the sixth flyer here in the university; it was to be the last. They threw the rest of the copies down into the atrium. Jakob Schmid, the university's caretaker, saw them, detained them and informed the rector, SS member Walther Wüst. Sophie and Hans Scholl were handed over to the Gestapo. Christoph Probst was arrested not long afterwards.

This much bravery, this much decency, this much belief in humanist values, was for Hitler's henchmen a danger that had to be thoroughly stamped out. Hitler's feared judge Roland Freisler travelled specially from Berlin to Munich with his so-called People's Court and handed down the death sentences, in a furious rage. Highly treasonous aiding and abetting of the enemy, preparation of high treason and demoralisation of the troops were the charges brought. The sentence was intended to deter anyone who might have similar ideas or convictions. It was carried out the very same day, by guillotine. A second trial was held just a few weeks later, in April: against Alexander Schmorell, Willi Graf, the lecturer Kurt Huber and eleven other members of the White Rose. Schmorell, Graf and Huber were sentenced to death and executed. Hans Leipelt was murdered in 1945.

The trials and the death sentences made a mockery of law and justice. But while the Nazis could break every law, they could not break the people whom they sentenced to death. "Long live freedom," those were the last words of Hans Scholl.

Peace, freedom, the dignity of every human being and the responsibility of every individual – these values guided the White Rose back then. Today they are the foundation of our freedom-based democracy. As we gather here today to remember the women and men of the White Rose, we are aware that it took sacrifices to fight for and achieve peace, freedom and respect for human dignity. They are not a matter of course! And, yes, our constitution is a response to despotism and tyranny, but democracy too is not a matter of course! And it is certainly not guaranteed for all eternity. We live in a time in which liberal democracies are being more strongly challenged, indeed attacked, both from within and from outside. This is the great challenge of our age. And precisely this challenge makes the things that the White Rose fought for so urgently relevant for our present. Their fight for freedom and human dignity concerns us today, too. The responsibility of every individual within society, this concerns us today, too. There will be more to say about that later.

The best-known members of the White Rose are without a doubt Sophie and Hans Scholl, the two siblings for whom the square outside LMU's main building and the political science institute are named. Many schools in our country bear their names, and Sophie Scholl in particular

has in recent years become a role model, featuring in books, in films, on social media.

But the White Rose included other members who were just as brave. There was Alexander Schmorell, originally from Russia, who met Hans Scholl during their medical studies and wrote the first flyers together with him. There was Christoph Probst, who also aimed to become a doctor, the only one of the White Rose's student members who was already married, who had a family, had children. There was Willi Graf, another aspiring doctor. A devout Catholic. There was the philosophy professor Kurt Huber, who was politically a conservative nationalist but was one of the few lecturers who had the bravery not to wordlessly accept the enforced conformity of the universities. There was Traute Lafrenz, a friend of Hans Scholl and another aspiring doctor, who took the flyers to Hamburg. She is the only one of the resistance group who survives to this day, and I was deeply touched to be able to award her the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany several years ago.

The group in Munich was joined by like-minded peers in other university cities, in Ulm, Stuttgart, Saarbrücken, Hamburg. Falk Harnack, Karl Ludwig Schneider, Heinz Kucharski and Margaretha Rothe, Hans and Susanne Hirzel, Hans Leipelt, whom I have already mentioned, Heinrich and Wilhelm Bollinger, to name just a few. They were all involved, in different ways, in distributing the flyers across the length and breadth of Germany.

These brave members of the White Rose have often been commemorated only in passing. I firmly believe that they all deserve to take up a greater space in our memory. They all lit a light with their bravery in a dark time. They all dreamed of a different, a better Germany.

Yes, the members of the White Rose had dreams, and they were young, very young. But to deride them as apolitical dreamers, as some have done in the past, would in no way do them justice.

It is true that hardly any of them were against the Nazi regime from the beginning. When Hindenburg handed the reins of power to Hitler on 30 January 1933, most of them were still children or teenagers; and initially, Sophie and Hans Scholl were fans of Hitler. Kurt Huber too was quite impressed by the new leadership in the beginning.

But the more the regime did to enforce total conformity and subjugate every individual, the more brutally it treated its opponents, the more terrible the crimes committed in the name of an inhuman racial ideology became, the more these young people came to recognise the true state that Germany was in. And to recognise the only way that it could be changed: by taking a stand and resisting.

Their flyers discussed sabotage at every level and in every area of society. The White Rose set out their aim clearly: "The purpose and objective of passive resistance is to bring down National Socialism." And the fifth flyer, that "Appeal to all Germans", was underpinned by the conviction that the war was definitively lost, despite all of the lies and propaganda. Some of the medical students had served as medics in Russia, shortly before the defeat at Stalingrad, had seen cruelty beyond imagination, had lived through hell.

Here, in the fifth flyer, the resistance group sketched out their ideas for a possible post-war order: a federal Germany in a united Europe. "Freedom of speech, freedom of confession, protection of the individual citizen from the despotism of criminal violent states," it reads. And this was the vision that the White Rose's members had for the time after the war, after Nazi rule. A vision for peace, and at the same time a vision for the foundations of the new Europe.

For Hans and Sophie Scholl and all the others, having hope for the future did not mean repressing the present. It was also very clear to the White Rose how deeply culpable their fellow Germans had become. "Every individual is guilty, guilty, guilty!" As early as the summer of 1942, they exposed the lies of all those who would claim at the time, and for many years after the war, not to have known about the crime against humanity that was the Shoah, about the other grave crimes that were committed. The murder and persecution of Polish Jews and young aristocrats – the White Rose denounced both equally. Asking in despair: "Why do the German people behave so apathetically in the face of all these most abhorrent, most degrading crimes?" And: "They see nothing and they hear nothing."

In fact, very few people had the bravery to object, let alone resist. It was a lonely resistance, a resistance of outsiders, as the historian Wolfgang Benz wrote. But they did exist, these brave individuals, who joined forces, who together sought to act and together took action. They existed in the workers' movement, there was the Christian resistance, there was the Kreisau Circle, the Red Orchestra, the members of the 20 July group. There were individuals with integrity such as Georg Elser, there were Jews who resisted – and of course there were students, too. And there were the "silent heroes" who helped people facing persecution, hid them, fed them.

Young soldiers too sympathised with the White Rose, as we know from a piece of testimony in Walter Kempowski's work *Das Echolot*. One of them talked about the group in great detail to Jacob Kronika, a Danish correspondent in Berlin, three days after the first executions: "The White Rose has probably been crushed this time around. But only this time around. The masses of young Germans who feel the same as those executed and arrested in Munich will grow." He was to be proved wrong, this young soldier. Also disappointed were the British, who dropped

millions of copies of the "Appeal to all Germans" over the cities of western Germany.

The situation was probably at best how Ricarda Huch saw it after the war. She concluded that "Thousands thought: These young people have done what we should have done and did not dare to do." The great majority of Germans, however, kept the mantle of apathy laid around their heart. They did not want to see and hear. Because they were fanatic believers in Hitler, because they feared the consequences of the truth, and most of them probably because they believed that going about their lives without attracting attention would at least allow them personally to escape hell and to survive.

The news of the first executions filtered through newspapers from Switzerland and Sweden to reach a global audience. The world was deeply moved by the events at the university in Munich, said Thomas Mann in one of his radio addresses to the German people from exile. It was not least these addresses by the great writer on the BBC that had heavily influenced the White Rose. Thomas Mann paid tribute to the resistance group in June 1943: "Good, wonderful young people! You shall not have died in vain, shall not be forgotten."

Today, eighty years later, we remember these young people, their belief in truth and humanity, in freedom – and their indescribable bravery in standing up for all of this. We remember not simply for the sake of looking back, or in order to put the members of the White Rose on a pedestal. They were certainly heroes, but we also look back in the knowledge that no line can ever be drawn under the responsibility imposed by our history. Our history must be a warning to us, for the present and the future. So that what happened cannot happen again – as the great Primo Levi, himself a survivor of the Shoah, put it.

Remembrance, for us Germans, always involves painful questions, every time. They must be painful if we are serious about this responsibility imposed by our history.

How was it possible for what happened to happen? How was it possible for most Germans to support a regime that betrayed any kind of humanity and cast the pall of war over all of Europe, tortured people, enslaved them, murdered them, that meticulously planned the crime against humanity that was the Shoah and carried it out through the bureaucratic division of tasks among countless functionaries; how was it at all possible for most people to join, to follow, to help keep the silence?

And another question poses itself to us, albeit one that can scarcely be given a real and honest answer. How would I personally have behaved in those circumstances? How would I act, and would I act at all, if I knew that the price of doing so would be prison, torture or even death?

These questions are painful, and some remain open, perhaps must remain open in light of the monstrosity of the crimes against humanity committed by Germans. But it still remains important, even eighty years after the execution of Hans and Sophie Scholl, to ask these questions!

Each generation has its own perspective on the time in which Germany sank into darkest night. It was a long while before we Germans admitted that our country did not liberate itself from Nazi tyranny. It was liberated by others. Defeat in the war was the condition of our freedom. It was also many years before the external liberation was followed by internal liberation. Years in which Germany glossed over its own crimes and Nazi elites were able to retain their influence within the state and society. Anyone who wants to gain an idea of this situation should rewatch the film *The People vs. Fritz Bauer*, with Burghart Klaußner playing the protagonist. It was a long time before we finally asked ourselves why it was possible for what happened to happen. Before members of the resistance and those who had managed to flee into exile were finally no longer branded as "traitors". This internal liberation took decades – today it is an indispensable part of our democracy.

Our perspective today is shaped by our experience of having lived in a freedom-based democracy for decades; an experience that has in fact been shared by all Germans for more than thirty years now. It was the brave people in East Germany who peacefully resisted and thus brought down the Wall. What an enormous fortune this is: We live united in a democracy. Bravery such as the White Rose and the other resistance fighters had, such as they had to have, this bravery is not needed today.

The members of the White Rose, on the other hand, were resisting a dictatorship, a regime of horror that inflicted every conceivable brutality on its opponents, that made fear and terror the principles of its rule. This criminal regime, to whom human dignity and human lives meant nothing – more still: who denied people their very personhood – this regime had no claim to obedience. It had to be fought.

That was the stance that united the women and men of the German resistance, no matter how different their motives were. And no matter how much their visions of a new, a better Germany differed. They all wrestled with the legitimacy of what they did. Do I have the right to break laws, even to commit acts of violence? Do I have the right to violate my beliefs or my oaths?

Ultimately, however, they all came to the conclusion that not taking action, remaining silent, meant tolerating violence as a principle, injustice as normality, the genocide perpetrated by Germany. Not taking action, remaining silent, meant being guilty of complicity. Resistance was therefore not just allowed, it was imperative. This dictatorship had to be brought down. That was the conviction that guided the members

of the White Rose. That was what they were prepared to risk their lives for.

Those who know this historical background, who know how high the price for resisting the Nazi regime often was – those who know this are aggravated when the word “resistance” is casually used in the occasional political argument today and historical parallels are drawn. Nothing justifies equating protest in a democracy with resistance in a dictatorship!

Our Basic Law not only guarantees the dignity of every individual – one of the most important lessons from the Nazi era. It also guarantees freedom of opinion, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press. And those are not just abstract assertions. These freedoms are our constitutional reality. The Constitutional Court ensures the safeguarding of these personal freedoms. In our democracy, objecting is not just expressly possible. It is necessary! Criticism, demonstrations, and protests too are part of the essence of democracy. Including and in particular by minorities, including with methods that the majority criticises, that it finds disruptive, irritating.

Democracy is the only form of government that is designed to allow for discussion of mistakes and of undesirable developments. Above all, it is the only form of government that has the possibility for self-correction incorporated into its legal and political make-up. For this to happen, it needs debates and controversies, it needs dispute. That is what sustains democracy!

A right to resistance, in our democracy, exists only in one case: if this democracy is to be abolished. That has been laid down in Article 20, paragraph 4 of the Basic Law since 1968: “All Germans shall have the right to resist any person seeking to abolish this constitutional order if no other remedy is available.” “Other remedy” means democratic protest, it means legal action via our judicial institutions, it means free and fair elections, and it means every form of democratic involvement. Everything, then, that shapes our democratic coexistence today, at a very basic level.

Objection is necessary in democracy. But there is no right to deploy violence against democratically taken majority decisions. Anyone who claims a right to resistance against democratic institutions in this context today in our country is abusing the concept; some of these people, in their identitarian delusion or nationalist frenzy, are even abusing the names of those who resisted and risked their lives in doing so. This dishonours the legacy and the reputation of all those who sacrificed their lives in resisting the barbarity of the Nazi regime!

Our democracy, our society is today challenged more than it has been in a long time. The return of war to Europe and the obvious attempt to reshape the geopolitical order along old lines, along the lines of the

Cold War, as well as the consequences of the pandemic and the fight against climate change – it is an enormous change, a transformation that lies ahead of us.

The twenty-fourth of February 2022 was an epochal shift. This illegal war has been bringing terrible suffering to the people in Ukraine for a year now. Destruction, hunger, death, severe human rights violations perpetrated on women, children, elderly people. But we too are feeling the effects of this war, and I do not just mean rising energy prices. This twenty-fourth of February means for us Germans that the time after the fall of the Wall and reunification is over, that time in which we looked to our neighbours with optimism and full of hope. A time in which we believed that freedom and democracy were gaining ground everywhere. The twenty-fourth of February has made it very clear to us Germans, too, that we must do much, much more than in past decades to protect and to defend our democracy.

What we need is a democracy that is vigilant, is capable of defending itself!

It was an academic from Munich, from this university, who developed the concept of vigilant democracy, wehrhafte Demokratie, in the shadow of Hitler's dictatorship and the spread of fascism in Europe – Karl Löwenstein. A Jewish legal expert who was expelled from this institution in 1933 and had to emigrate to the US; he died fifty years ago.

What does Löwenstein's concept of vigilant democracy tell us today? And what does it have to do with Russia's war against Ukraine? This war is an inhumane war of aggression involving land grabs and a disregard for all of the principles of international law, principles which are important to us too. This war is fed by Putin's imperial delusion and the Kremlin autocracy's fear of democracy. Another reason why this war concerns us. It is not just a question of solidarity with Ukraine – although this is at the moment what matters most – it is also a question of how we can better protect ourselves and our democracy.

What do I mean by this?

First of all, it must be understood quite literally. We Germans, too, must change our thinking. The twenty-fourth of February has already led to a realignment of our security and defence policy. Together with our partners in NATO, we are providing Ukraine not just with humanitarian and financial support but also with military support. This was not without controversy, I know. But it is necessary so that the victims can defend themselves against the perpetrators. It is necessary if we do not want to merely acknowledge Russia's flagrant violation of international law. Large-scale support with our own military equipment for a state under attack, this is a new development in the postwar history of our country. But the situation we are in is a new one, too. We have

seen the return of what we believed we had left behind us. There is once again war in Europe. We are helping Ukraine, but we are not a warring party. And yet we must also respond to threats that could affect us and others. A vigilant democracy, in the face of these new threats, implies a well-equipped Bundeswehr that is ready to provide defence. And as a strong country at the heart of Europe, we have a responsibility not just for ourselves but also for our partners in the Alliance. And these partners must be able to rely on us!

We must take external vigilance more seriously, but that does not mean that internal vigilance has become less important. German history has lessons for us in that regard.

We cannot today commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the deaths of Sophie and Hans Scholl, of Christoph Probst, without also thinking of the ninetieth anniversary of the transfer of power to Hitler in 1933, the beginning of that reign of injustice and violence. And on this day we must equally recall the one-hundredth anniversary of Hitler's Beer Hall Putsch in 1923 here in Munich. The Weimar democracy was destroyed in part because the instruments for protecting the Republic were used far too rarely, because officials within the state, the judiciary and the police were far too often enemies of this democracy.

In the Federal Republic of Germany, opponents of our constitution shall not succeed again in attacking democracy at its very core. Our democracy has seemingly robust instruments at its disposal to ward off attacks by extremists: the ability to prohibit parties and associations that are hostile to the constitution; the forfeiting of basic rights if they are misused to fight against democracy; the eternity clause, which is designed to make a legal abolition of democracy impossible; our domestic intelligence services. And yet our democracy, too, has come under greater pressure in recent years.

In our country, too, right-wing populists and identitarian extremists attract supporters. In our country, too, hatred and hate speech are on the rise, particularly online.

Our country, too, is familiar with hatred against minorities. Our country, too, has been shaken in recent years by racist and antisemitic attacks. The series of murders committed by the NSU are not forgotten. The murder of Walter Lübcke in June 2019 is not forgotten. The attack on the synagogue full of worshippers in Halle on 9 October 2019 is not forgotten. Nor are the murders of nine citizens of Hanau in an act of right-wing terrorism in February 2020 forgotten. Just a few months separated these last three bloody acts.

In our country, too, local politicians, mayors, members of local councils face hostility and physical attacks, are forced to give up, even receive death threats. And in our country, too, there are far-right extremist groups who are hostile to the constitution and want to bring

down the so-called "system", and the old rallying cries of the enemies of democracy that rail against the "establishment parties" are in fashion once again.

All of this worries me. But it is not enough for the Federal President alone to be worried – and not even when many others share in this sentiment.

Our conception of vigilant democracy cannot and must not be limited to the state's instruments of prohibition and the worries of its citizens. Because there is something missing from that conception, something utterly crucial. A vigilant democracy needs committed citizens whose political judgement is rooted in a firm and clear moral position, who actively work for our country, for our democracy. It needs citizens who are empowered and able to engage in democracy, who see democracy as their own cause. That is the best protection!

I know that there are millions of people in our country who do precisely that, who are actively involved, who help others, who work or volunteer in associations, with the fire service, with the Federal Agency for Technical Relief, with churches, unions, charities, in so many different ways. Everyone who thinks of more than just themselves, who takes care of others, who is not indifferent to undesirable developments in their community, in their region, in the country, strengthens the backbone of democracy. I am grateful to each and every one of these wonderful people. It is precisely this dedication that strengthens cohesion in our society. And it is this cohesion that we need in order to defend our freedom and our democracy! Looking at the world the way it is, I am convinced that we will need even more of it in the coming years.

The longing for freedom and democracy, as well as the commitment to working for freedom and democracy, are significant in many parts of the world. I believe that we can draw optimism from this. Day after day, the Ukrainian people are showing us with their bravery and their fortitude that a democracy can defend itself in the face of such an attack. I also draw optimism from the fact that we Europeans are acting together and in a spirit of solidarity in this crisis. And it is encouraging to see that the elections in the United States of America and more recently in Brazil have strengthened all those who work for democracy, for respect for human dignity and human rights, for international cooperation.

It is this longing for freedom that today leads many brave people to protest and take a stand against the rule of injustice, against dictatorship and repression. In our time, too, there are people who resist even though they are threatened with death, who fight for fundamental freedoms, the freedom of girls and women, for democratic rights, for freedom of opinion and of the press, in Iran, in Belarus, in Myanmar, in China. And in Russia, too. There, too, there are people who dare to

object and to resist Putin's despotism and his regime – as well as the war.

Resistance often consists of millions of small acts of courage, said Svetlana Tikhanovskaya last year here in Berlin. But even with such small acts, many of these people risk their freedom, their lives. All of them, these brave women and men, they are all the other face of their country, beyond dictatorship and repression. This internal resistance is often the only hope for a better, a peaceful future – and, at the same time, the great driving force.

All of this shows us that nobody should underestimate this longing for freedom and the power of democracy!

That brings me back to the White Rose. Their fight for peace, freedom and human dignity, their appeal to each and every individual to take on responsibility, that is their legacy and it imposes a duty on us, too, we who live in a democracy.

Margot Friedländer, who survived the Holocaust and now, at an advanced age, continues to tell her story in particular to young people in our country, Margot Friedländer often says: "It's for you!" That is her great gift to us.

As I see it, this wonderful sentence also imposes a duty on us. It falls to us! It falls to us to protect our democracy! It falls to us not only to acknowledge this but to act accordingly! It falls to us not to be indifferent! It falls to us to see and to hear!

And, yes, it falls to you, to all of you sitting here before me, you young people, students. You will shape the future of our country. One way or another! By looking closely or looking away, by doing or by keeping your distance.

Do not let anybody persuade you that politics is something for careerists and opportunists. Nothing good can come of leaving the most important public affairs in the hands of the wrong people. Integrity, humanity, warm-heartedness, rationality and responsibility must be a part of politics, are urgently needed there.

So please get involved in our democracy! Become a part of our democracy! There are so many possibilities! I don't want to say "Go out and vote" – you already do that. But contribute your efforts to democratic parties, associations, initiatives, in local politics. Be there for other people!

Be suspicious of those who always know everything and those whose spectrum of colours is limited to black and white! Be critical, express your opinion! Democracy needs criticism! But tolerate ambiguity too, tolerate it when things are for a while perhaps complicated and unclear, and above all remain willing to accept facts!

Do not listen to loudspeakers, do not believe the supposedly simple solutions! Trust in my experience – complex problems and simple solutions rarely go together, and more rarely still do the solutions prove to be good ones.

Do not shy away from debate! Be argumentative! But argue coolly and rationally, no matter how passionate you might be about your cause! Remain curious about other opinions! Never rule out the possibility that the other person might be in the right.

By which I also mean that you should engage in discussions with people who do not share your point of view, too! Yes, I know, I experience it quite often – this is hard work. In fact, it is terribly arduous. But democracy needs these debates, so long as they are not marked by slander and scorn, or indeed by hatred and hate-mongering. It is worth every effort!

Stand up and object when people's dignity is attacked! Work to ensure that our country is and remains a diverse, globally minded one, a country in which people can live together peacefully, regardless of where they come from, what they believe and whom they love! Stand up against all forms of racism, antisemitism and hatred!

Pay attention! Do not look away when people threaten to become radicalised! Looking away does not help democracy.

Work to ensure that your children and grandchildren will find a planet worth living on! To stop climate change from advancing, our country needs you, your ideas, your drive, your creativity. It needs your willingness and your bravery, for a truly fundamental change. It needs, no, we need your impatience, too!

But please also remember that democratic decisions will, time and again, rest on compromises. And they must have the support of a majority. In democracy there is no other way.

Make your dreams a reality, with all of the freedoms and opportunities that our democracy provides! But give something back, too! The future of democracy depends not only on others, but also on you – each and every one of you!

Ladies and gentlemen, dear students, our country needs you, our democracy needs you: committed, passionate, vigilant democrats! Our country needs democrats who see and hear, who speak and act!

Preserve the legacy and the memory of the White Rose in the best way that I can conceive of. Ensure that young people in Germany must never again sacrifice their lives for freedom and humanity.