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Page 1 of 7

**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the ceremony of remembrance in the German
Bundestag on the 80th anniversary of the liberation from
National Socialism and the end of the Second World War
in Berlin
on 8 May 2025**

"You know we always expected it. (...) But it's still hard to bear when defeat is suddenly there, and we have lost."

Defeat is hard to bear – those are the words of Helga Felmy, born in 1911, in a letter written on 8 May 1945 to her husband, a pastor and prisoner of war. Her letter is among the documents collected by Walter Kempowski that reveal the Germans' state of mind at the "zero hour" of the war's end.

Germany lay in ruins on 8 May 1945, the day of its unconditional surrender. Cities transformed into an endless sea of rubble, instead of houses mere heaps of debris and skeletons of half-fallen walls. Lone buildings still standing by random chance alone – memorials jutting out amid the destruction. Bridges blown up by the Wehrmacht as signs of a fanatic war waged all the way to utter downfall. Entire regions laid waste. "Berlin has practically ceased to exist," said the BBC reporter Thomas Cadett in a broadcast from the city.

We have all seen countless images of this day. German soldiers disarmed by Allied forces, squatting with their arms behind their heads, their faces now fearful, blank, baffled. Survivors staggering like the undead through the remains of bombed-out cities. The bodies of those for whom liberation came just days too late. Images of bullet-riddled wagons from the German refugee convoys out of the east, and strewn all around them clothing and everything that once was part of a home.

The Second World War was nothing other than a ceaseless horror. Humiliation, persecution, torture, murder, genocide. By the end there

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were more than 60 million people dead in Europe, six million Jews murdered, millions homeless and uprooted, abandoned, broken, wounded, starving.

And yet there was also this: hope and gratitude. "We repeatedly experience a great feeling of relief and gratitude (...) at now having really survived all this (...) danger," wrote Victor Klemperer, still incredulous, in the last days of the war. The great scholar, humiliated, disenfranchised, persecuted, could finally hope to have escaped his extermination.

It was Germans who unleashed this criminal war and dragged all of Europe with them into the abyss. It was Germans who committed the crime against humanity that was the Shoah. And it was Germans who were not willing and not able to throw off the yoke of the Nazi regime themselves.

This is what we – we Germans – remember today, 80 years later. We know that this day profoundly shaped our country. We are all children of 8 May!

On 8 May 1945 we were liberated. Today, 80 years later, our profound thanks still go to the Allied soldiers and the European resistance movements who mustered all their strength and endured great losses in order to defeat the Nazi regime. We will not forget this! Our thanks go to the Americans, British and French and all those who joined them in the fight against Nazi terror.

We also know what the Red Army contributed, Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians and all those who fought in it. At least 13 million of these soldiers and just as many civilians lost their lives. The Red Army liberated Auschwitz.

All of this, we will not forget. But precisely for that reason, we stand firmly against the historical lies now being told by the Kremlin. Even if the assertion is repeated tomorrow at the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow, the war against Ukraine is in no way a continuation of the fight against fascism. Putin's war of aggression, his crusade against a free, democratic country, has nothing in common with the fight against National Socialist tyranny waged during the Second World War. This historical lie is nothing other than window-dressing for imperial delusion, severe injustice and the most heinous crimes!

Even and especially on 8 May, it remains the case that we support Ukraine in its fight for its freedom, for its democracy, for its sovereignty. If we left Ukraine unprotected and defenceless, that would mean abandoning the lessons of 8 May!

We are today, 80 years later, also profoundly grateful for the reconciliation, the trust, that so many countries graced us with after the war. For the reconciliation with our neighbours Poland and France. For

the miracle of reconciliation that Jewish communities around the world as well as the State of Israel gifted to us.

We Germans cannot be grateful enough for this gift of reconciliation!

And yet gratitude is not enough! It can never and must never leave us indifferent when, in our country of all places, antisemitism once again shows its face. It is ignorant of history, it is unbearable, when Jewish people are made to no longer feel safe in our country. Unbearable not just for Jewish people. No, unbearable for our democracy. There must be no place for antisemitism in our society. It is our duty to ensure this!

In 1945, liberation came from outside our country. It had to. Most Germans remained loyal to the regime until the very last day. And by no means all Germans felt gratitude for liberation; they did not even see themselves as having been liberated.

8 May 1945 was for our country the beginning of a long road to freedom and democracy. The Western Allies opened up this road for the people in what became the Federal Republic of Germany. In the east, meanwhile, freedom was kept out of reach as the Soviet Union paved the way for one-party rule by the Socialist Unity Party and for a new dictatorship.

But we Germans first had to liberate ourselves internally, too, in a lengthy, painful process. A reckoning that left wounds – including between the generations. The truth is that in the German Democratic Republic, while antifascism was official state doctrine, there was for a long time no deeper reckoning with history. The truth is also that the new Federal Republic of Germany initially refused almost any reckoning with the past, and above all long refused to punish the perpetrators; instead, many who had been loyal servants of the Nazi regime took up new state offices.

In both east and west, it would take years, indeed decades, before we Germans fully faced up to the torturous questions of blame and responsibility, before families talked about what had happened, about who had known about the crimes yet looked away, about who was guilty yet had kept silent.

Richard von Weizsäcker's statement that "8 May was a day of liberation", in his historic speech on 8 May 1985, was not uncontroversial even 40 years after the war's end. And yet it marked a turning point in our approach to our past.

Federal President von Weizsäcker was speaking for the Federal Republic of Germany, but his words resonated in the German Democratic Republic, too.

And today, another 40 years later? The Day of Liberation on 8 May has become a core part of our collective German identity. And yet we

are not celebrating this 8 May today in a spirit of calm self-assurance. Because we can see that freedom is not the grand finale of history. Freedom is not guaranteed for all time.

Today we therefore no longer need to ask: Did 8 May free us? But we ask: How can we stay free?

Eighty years on from the end of the war, the long twentieth century has definitively come to an end. The lessons learned from two dictatorships and two world wars are now fading. The liberators of Auschwitz have become new aggressors. By unleashing war against Ukraine, Putin has shattered our European security order – which we had hoped was a lesson learned once and for all from the horrors of war.

The international community had drawn its conclusions from the war of extermination and genocide, had introduced rules to curb nationalistic ambitions and foster cooperation, and created an international order on the basis of international law. All of this was never perfect, never uncontroversial, but the fact that now even the United States, who did so much to shape this order, is turning its back on it is a shock on an entirely new scale.

It is no less than a double epochal shift – Russia's war of aggression, the US' break with its values – that marks the end of the long twentieth century.

Both fascination with the authoritarian and populist enticements are once again gaining ground here in Europe, too, and doubts in democracy are being voiced aloud. We are seeing with horror that even the world's oldest democracy can rapidly be endangered when the judiciary is disdained, the separation of powers is overridden and academic freedom is attacked. We are looking at our country, where extremist forces are gaining strength. They deride the institutions of democracy and those who represent them. They poison our debates. They play on people's concerns. They profit from fear-mongering. They turn people against each other. They bring old evils back to life.

Those who want good things for this country will protect our coexistence, our cohesion, and the peaceful balancing of interests. That is what I expect of all democrats in this country.

How can we remain free, how can we preserve and protect our democracy? Amid this epochal shift, we cannot carry on as usual when it comes to remembrance. 8 May still has a great deal to tell us.

I really do wonder sometimes about the obstinacy with which some people – regrettably including some in this House – demand that we "draw a line" under our past and our responsibility. But what is that really supposed to mean? Should we forget what we know?

What would we gain by that? Do we really want to choose to withhold our solidarity from Holocaust survivors, who view the present

day with grave concern? Do we want to be a country that recalls only its supposed glory days and plays down the darkest chapters of its history, or even denies them outright? Do we want to be a democracy that forgets where it came from and what is at the core of its identity?

And, on the other hand, do we really want to forgo the knowledge that fanatical nationalism can be overcome, that peace can follow war? That peace and democracy also bring prosperity? That our efforts to come to terms with our past have earned us respect and recognition around the globe?

Would we really be better off if we were to forget all that we have experienced and simply divest ourselves of the memories like a set of old clothes?

Over the past 80 years, we have in fact repeatedly seen the strength that lies in shared remembrance. The experience of the Second World War, of suffering, destruction, persecution, terror, death, displacement – this is deeply engrained in the Europeans' collective memory, although the events themselves become more distant each year. Experiences are passed on from generation to generation, in families in France, in the UK, in Belgium, Italy, and the countries of Eastern Europe. I myself have seen this time and again at commemorative events, as survivors and relatives of Nazi victims tell me of their pain, and nevertheless shake my hand as a sign of reconciliation. I was deeply touched when, in Warsaw to commemorate the uprising 80 years ago, a survivor took me by the hand and said: "Poland and Germany are friends today. That is something I could never have imagined." My message is: We can achieve and have achieved so incredibly much through reconciliation. Let us keep working to this end!

Precisely because we remembered, a new united Europe rose from the ruins of the Second World War after 1945, a Europe that had learned lessons from the catastrophe. It had learned the value of peaceful coexistence instead of inimical antagonism; cooperation instead of a free for all; respect for international law and universal human rights. These choices brought us decades of peace, freedom and prosperity.

I firmly believe that facing up to the past does not mean forgoing the future. Our past is not a prison in which we are incarcerated. It is not ballast holding us down, also not those of us born after the events.

Far from it. It is a precious treasure trove of experience, with all its highs and lows. It is the key, for us, for our children and our grandchildren, the key with which we can unlock the solutions to present and future crises. And that is why it is so important, at this of all times, to make sure that the experience of dictatorship and war, and likewise the experience of reconstruction and reconciliation, is passed on from generation to generation. Why should we have to go through the pain of

learning and experiencing anew something that we have already learned and experienced so bitterly in our German past?

Today, I am more convinced than ever that we have learned so much from our past which has made us what we are today. Let's not carelessly relinquish that which made us strong! Let's not run from our past. Let's not throw its lessons overboard at the very time when they place demands on us. That would be both cowardly and wrong!

Taking it a step further, let me ask: Have our history, our experiences, not in fact prepared us particularly well for the tribulations of these times?

We cannot sleepwalk into anything now. We know where isolationism leads, where aggressive nationalism and contempt for democratic institutions can end. That's how we lost democracy in Germany once already. Therefore, let us trust in our experience! And let us stand up for our values. We mustn't be paralysed by fear! We must instead assert ourselves.

When others lapse into nationalism and seek to assert their interests through brute force, we have all the more reason to join together with our partners to seek solutions – because it is right. When others cast doubt on the United Nations and violate international law, we must uphold these institutions – because it is right.

When the zeitgeist harps on about disruption, it's obvious that what's behind this is all too often just an unwillingness to set out how and why change can be brought about. And we know the price we would pay if we abandoned all rules, resulting in a future in which the "strength of the law" no longer applies, and the "law of the strong" returns, with all its brutality. This cannot – and must not – be the path we take.

When others curtail democracy, freedoms and rights, we are quick to take a stand. When the doubts about these values grow in our country, too, let us demonstrate that each and every individual can live a better, freer life in a democracy than under any kind of authoritarian regime. Let us convince as many of the doubters as possible! Let's win them back for our democracy! Democracy is never completed! It is an arduous journey! It requires dedication. But, there is no better system of government!

And if new wars are causing us concern today, we are the very last people who should lose sight of peace! We know where war leads. And we fear it for good reason. Peace thus remains our guiding principle. But peace does not reign simply if we exercise restraint, if we refrain from strengthening our own defence capability. For we face a harsh reality, and must do everything we can, together with our European partners, to stop Putin's land grab. We must show that democracies are not defenceless victims.

We must increase our military strength – not to wage war, but to prevent war. Not as a substitute for diplomacy, but to make it more credible – with an active foreign policy, which does not abandon the diplomatic field to those who only seek to pursue their self-serving interests and increase their power. We should be active, wherever we can be of use. Germany is needed to help restore peace where it has been lost. That is also what 8 May requires of us.

Today, on this 8 May, we are a different country from the one we were 80, or even just 40 years ago. We are a country that has had the great fortune to experience a peaceful revolution and reunification, a diverse, open country. Our past provides not only the blueprint to prevent a catastrophe. The past also tells us of the miracle of reconciliation between Germany and Israel, and how Jewish life became part of our country again. It tells us of how, in 1989, the people in Eastern Europe and the GDR overcame the division of Europe and gained freedom. It tells us the incredible success story of a country that came back from total collapse – including moral collapse – and again came to enjoy freedom, economic strength and prosperity, earning international respect and even understanding. Who would have thought such a thing possible on 8 May 1945?

We can trust in this country. We can trust in ourselves.

We are all children of 8 May, as Jürgen Habermas once said, a sentence that expresses hope. Defiant hope! Hope in spite of everything! Nobody from outside can give us our freedom today. We have to stand up for it ourselves. We know what steps need to be taken. And we know that it is always possible for something new to begin.

We are, indeed, all children of 8 May! With that in mind, let us protect our freedom! Let us protect our democracy!