

Translation

Speech by
Professor Roman Herzog,
President of the Federal Republic of Germany,
in Dresden on 13 February 1995

During the night of 13-14 February 1945 the city of Dresden was destroyed by bombs within just a few hours. Tens of thousands of people perished in the fire storm. The suffering of the survivors was beyond imagination. Irreplaceable values of European culture were lost for ever, values which were also part of the human soul.

As we recall this event today, as so often before, clarification is needed. No one present in this room intends to indict anyone or expects anyone to show remorse or indulge in self-accusation. No one wants to offset the wrongs committed by Germans in the Nazi state against anything else. If that had been the intention, the people of Dresden would not, once again, have extended such a warm welcome to our British and American guests.

We are here first and foremost to mourn, to lament the dead - an expression of human emotion dating back to the beginnings of civilization. Each year, on our national day of mourning, we remember the victims of war and tyranny with the following words, which I would like to recall here:

"Today we remember the victims of violence and war - children, women and men of all nations.

We remember the soldiers who died in the two World Wars and the people who lost their lives through acts of war or as prisoners, expellees or refugees.

We remember those who were persecuted and killed because they belonged to another nation or to another race or whose life was deemed not worth living owing to illness or disability.

We remember those who lost their lives because they resisted tyranny and those who died because they remained true to their convictions or their faith.

We mourn the victims of the wars and the civil wars fought in our time, the victims of terrorism and political persecution, the victims of senseless violence who sought refuge in our country.

We mourn with the mothers and with all who grieve for the dead."

In this same spirit we mourn the German victims of our history, the countless people who lost their lives or whose health was ruined in the war or in camps, during flight, through expulsion or deportation, in houses and on the streets, in ditches and cellars. One cannot come to terms with the past, one cannot find peace or reconciliation unless one faces up to history in its entirety.

We object to our mourning being seen as an attempt to square the suffering of the victims of crimes committed by Germans against people of other nations, and against fellow countrymen, with the suffering of German victims of war and expulsion. Anyone who, like the Germans of today, wants to break the vicious circle of injustice and violence, of war and inhumanity, anyone who seeks peace, friendship and reconciliation among the nations, cannot simply strike a balance between the dead, the injured and those who suffered distress in the various nations. One cannot offset life against life, pain against pain, fear of death against fear of death, expulsion against expulsion, horror against horror, degradation against degradation. Human suffering defies accounting. We can only overcome it together, through compassion, reflection and learning.

I direct this reminder not least to the historians, professional and non-professional, who continue arguing even today about the number of victims on each side, and especially the number of victims of the Second World War and Nazi tyranny. These calculations have rightly been called "bookkeeping exercises in monstrosity". They do not take us any further, nor do they reflect the way of thinking of the vast majority of Germans today. By letting democracy take firm root in our country and committing ourselves to the cause of European integration, we have drawn the right consequences from our history. We are able to face up to the past. That is why we are not trying to lighten our own burdens by comparing them with those of others. It is our own history that concerns us here, not the history of others. One's own history teaches one the best lesson.

For the sake of truth let me add this: there is no point in trying to judge whether or not the bombings, whose inhumaneness no one doubts, were legitimate in a juridical sense. Where

does that take us, given the fifty years that have passed since then and the painful recognition that the international order is even today virtually powerless against war and mass murder?

Whoever wants to draw conclusions from the experiences of that time, whoever wants to heal the wounds inflicted then, faces an entirely different question. It is the question of whether we have learnt enough from the past and whether we are doing all we can to prevent a recurrence of such terror. It is a question for each and every one of us, in every generation and every nation. And I say this in particular to our young people, on whom much more depends than on the older ones among us, who do, after all, still bear the scars of the war and the Nazi period. This is the message which must go out from Dresden to all corners of the globe.

No other place in Germany is better suited to convey this message than the city of Dresden. I say this because I take seriously the tradition of the candlelight processions from the Kreuzkirche to the ruins of the Frauenkirche which have taken place here for many years on 13 February. These processions by the citizens of Dresden were initially intended as a deliberate manifestation of resistance to attempts by the communist regime to turn the commemoration of the destruction of the city into an anti-British, indeed anti-western demonstration. With the means available to them at the time, the citizens of Dresden protested against this and showed the right way: from remembrance and mourning to peace and understanding, not hatred and revenge. They showed that they were able by their own strength to overcome the shadows of the past and thus open the door to a better future.

As you may perhaps know, I occasionally say, and this is my deep conviction, that united Germany's democracy, based on the rule of law and on the commitment to peace, has its roots not only in the West Germans' patient reconstruction effort and willingness to learn, but just as much in the bloodless revolution by the East Germans in 1989, an achievement unprecedented in German history. Here in Dresden I would like to add this: the friendship and confidence which West Germany earned over four decades in its relations with the former adversaries, and which they extend to us still today, was similarly gained by the unmistakable manner in which the citizens of Dresden and of many other East German towns for years observed days of remembrance like this one. In this respect, too, united Germany will rest firmly on two pillars.

Grief, remembrance and commemoration, yes - but no accusation, no settling of accounts. What matters is mutual understanding and above all a warning for the future. Here, too, the Germans in east and west are much closer than some of us want to believe. In their relations with the victors of the Second World War, the citizens in East and West Germany have voiced

very different opinions, depending on the different political options open to them, but they did so in the same spirit and with the same intentions. This is a good basis for the future and also for our future foreign and alliance policy.

Together we have embarked on the way towards peace and understanding. Together we want to help close the wounds which have still not healed completely. Together we want to face up to the past, both where Germans were the perpetrators and where they were the victims. And together we must fight to ensure that war and totalitarianism, tyranny and the loss of one's homeland never recur.

Dresden is above all a beacon against war. True, the Second World War claimed millions and millions of victims, people of all nations, in the former Soviet Union and Poland more than anywhere else. Dresden is thus not the most blatant example of the horrors of modern warfare - and we must never forget that it was destroyed in a war unleashed by a German government. Precisely for this reason, however, Dresden reflects the utter senselessness of modern wars.

If one looks at history merely in terms of states and nations, the settlement of accounts seems simple: the Germans started the war, and just punishment was meted out to them for doing so. But this is too simplistic a view. Only if one imagines all those different people who must have died in that night of destruction does the human tragedy of modern warfare become fully apparent. There were dyed-in-the-wool Nazis. There were Gestapo officers who drew up the lists for the deportation of Jews. There were the Jews on these lists. There were people who had rejoiced when the war broke out, but also those who had cried and could do nothing only because they had not resisted at the outset, in 1933, or had not found sufficient support for their resistance. There were silent enemies of the Nazi regime, there were the fellow travellers and those who turned a blind eye. There were resistance fighters, those still busy secretly distributing leaflets to protest against the madness or those already behind bars for having done so. There were refugees in Dresden who had lost their homes, and there were young people from Poland, Russia, Ukraine and many other countries who had been pressganged into forced labour in Germany.

Here, too, any balancing or offsetting would be utterly futile. No human mind could even remotely undertake a moral appraisal. This reveals the immense danger inherent in thinking in terms of collectivities, a mental pattern which blinded people at the time and to which we must never return.

Only this is certain: it is war as such that we must resist, that we must hate. And especially modern warfare, in which there are neither fronts nor homelands. We must use every means at our disposal to prevent war, not only through pacts and alliances, but first of all by ensuring that the nations learn to live with one another peacefully and in a spirit of trust.

Many European peoples have learnt this lesson over the past decades. And there is tangible proof of this today - beyond the politics of these decades. How else could former enemies meet on 8 May this year to mark the end of the war by jointly contemplating the future? And how else could our British and American friends, led by His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent and the Ambassador of the United States of America, be with us here today?

It is with particular pleasure that we welcome them and their delegations not as representatives of former adversaries, but of today's friends. Nothing could better manifest this change than the American institution "Friends of Dresden" and the British "Dresden Trust", whose donations will help us rebuild the Frauenkirche.

When this former symbol of the destruction of Dresden soars over the reconstructed city, its spire will bear a cross that we owe to British donations. It will be a symbol more powerful than words.

Standing high above the city, this cross will forever remind us that, half a century after Dresden's destruction, we have found peace with each other. That is the right course. We Germans will do our utmost to ensure that we continue along this path.

(Courtesy of Fumio Matsuo)