

**A Speech by
Wolfgang Schneiderhan,
President of Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V.
The Bundestag, Berlin, 15th November 2020**

*Dear Mr Steinmeier,
dear Ms Büdenbender,
Your Royal Highnesses,
dear Mr Schäuble,
dear Mrs Schäuble,
dear Mr Haseloff,
dear Mr Harbarth,
dear Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer,
Welcome!
Dear Mr Müller,
dear Mr Wieland,
dear Ms Högl,
dear Mr Zorn,
dear Ms Gallard,
Welcome!*

I also salute the representatives of our national and international partner organisations as well as the many Bundeswehr soldiers and reservists, whom I would like to thank for their untiring support of our work.

Welcome to the plenary chamber of the Bundestag. This year, I would also particularly like to welcome the many people who will be following this memorial service on TV, which includes many guests who were unfortunately unable to attend in person due to the smaller scale of the event for pandemic-related reasons.

The Second World War came to an end 75 years ago, leaving between 60 and 70 million dead in its wake.

For the survivors, the war did not end with the laying down of arms. They had lost their relatives or their homes, their health or the will to live. No war in the history of humankind claimed more victims than the Second World War, and Germany was not only beaten in military terms; it had also destroyed itself in moral terms with its crimes against civilisation: the national-socialist dictatorship, the Holocaust and its war of aggression and annihilation.

The military defeat was also a victory; it liberated Europe and also Germany from the national-socialist evil. However, many people in Germany felt unable to see it this way in 1945.

The uncertainty of the present and the fear of the future were too overwhelming. Would it be possible to reunite the families that had been torn apart, to heal the wounds caused by persecution and denunciation, to develop democratic structures and to be accepted once more into the European family?

"When fear comes knocking, let faith answer the door." An oft-cited saying in a difficult situation, although in the case of Germany's western zones, it was actually the other way round. Fear was behind the door, and faith was knocking.

A mere sixteen months after the end of the Second World War, the British statesman Sir Winston Churchill, who had been the prime minister of the United Kingdom for a total of ten years between 1940 and 1955, called upon the victors to "stretch out hands of succour and guidance". There could be no revival of Europe, Churchill said in his famous speech at the University of Zurich in September 1946, without a spiritually great Germany.

Together with the two other western Allied forces, the British played a major part in allowing Germany, or the zone that was under their influence, to become democratic and to develop economically.

They came as victors, but stayed on as friends. They showed solidarity with the Germans, even though they had to make huge sacrifices in the war and the wounds ran deep. We have much to be grateful for – and we do thank them for it. I am delighted that we are able to say this to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales today in person. His presence here is a great honour, and it is a sign of the close bonds between Germany and Britain that run through all areas of society.

The large number of twinned German and British towns is just one example of many. Another is the large remembrance wreath made by German apprentices which you will see in a minute in a short film. It is decorated with British poppies along with German forget-me-nots. We were divided by war, but are united in commemoration and remembrance – across the generations.

Defeat became victory, fear became a beacon of hope, solidarity a leap of faith. These experiences have made us who we are, and we would be well advised to recall them today. Solidarity, as opposed to selfishness, won the day. This can be applied to relationships between nations, but also to the relationships within society. In view of the truly frightening global developments, the willingness to turn fear into hope, rather than to pretend it does not exist, is an important driver. Something that feels like a defeat because it has a negative impact on the familiar could also be seen in positive light, because it reveals approaches to new ways of doing things, which is an important precondition for taking a long, hard look at the future.

Much has changed this year; we have all felt this. It is particularly this aspect that adds an unusual profoundness to our remembrance this year. It highlights the major importance of solidarity between nations, but also on a national level. Those whom war robbed of their youth and who rebuilt the ruined country are now particularly vulnerable, and the young generation is afraid that they will also be deprived of what should be the carefree years of their youth, just like their grandparents were all those years ago.

Young and old are facing experiences they thought they would never have to make. However, they realise that they can only master these challenges together, rather than by fighting against each other.

The Second World War was finally over three-quarters of a century ago. Sometimes, you hear people say that those who fell in the wars can teach us something, but they did not die so we may learn from them but because we proved ourselves incapable of learning, and allowed the catastrophe of the First World War to be followed by the calamity of the Second a mere two decades later. Not only can we learn from this, we must.

We have experienced that narrow-minded nationalism and authoritarian structures lead into the abyss, and that the peaceful development and increasing prosperity of our societies can only be achieved in unity.

We can learn that hatred and xenophobia, national conceitedness and contempt for others, that anti-Semitism and racism fan the flames that can lead to a global inferno. We must do everything we can to ensure that these flames are not allowed to spread in the first place but are extinguished as soon as they flare up, at the latest. Peace education does not begin after a war has started but much earlier with the prevention of any emergence of warlike stirrings. We are fortunate enough to be living in peace in our part of Europe. The past 75 years represent the longest time of peace in European history, but that alone does not guarantee that it is also going to stay this way. Peace is like our health; we must look after it.

We have also learned from the Second World War that aggression against others always backfires. The German soldiers who were killed by air raids or the German civilians who perished fleeing the advancing forces, and the prisoners of war who died in the prison camps are also victims of war. They also deserve our compassion. Granted, many of them may have been fervent supporters of the war of aggression and annihilation, particularly in the first couple of years, but ultimately, they were also devoured by it. Those who started it did not escape the war, either.

In 1969, the British musician John Lennon created a song entitled "Give Peace a Chance", but we must give peace not just a chance but ensure that it has a safe and stable future.

Today, we are remembering the victims of war and tyranny; we are mourning them together with their relatives; we are silent for a few brief moments in recognition of their suffering. However, we do this not only in remembrance of the past but also with the firm determination that we never again want to have to mourn such victims in future.