

Speech on Remembrance Day, 13 November 2016 at Cannock Chase

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends from Germany and Britain,

Last year in this place we commemorated the end of the Second World War 70 years ago and reflected that such remembrance days are always also a call to us to reexamine the way we look at the present and future. If we look at developments in all the crisis areas of the world in the last twelve months, one cannot but feel that the world has learned little from the terrible experiences of our history, and the memorials to the wars, like this military cemetery here at Cannock Chase, are not having the effect that they really should.

In places like here at Cannock Chase, we become especially aware of the consequences of tyranny, terrorism and war. This beautiful piece of countryside is the central cemetery for the German soldiers who fell in Britain in the two world wars. The graves of the people buried here are a symbol and reminder for us of the immeasurable suffering which their fate brought upon their families and friends and which war means for all people.

When we consider that in the Second World War alone altogether 55 million people lost their lives, the scale of the human catastrophe becomes unimaginable. We must presume that every family in Britain and in Germany is directly affected and lost relatives in the two world wars.

I would like today together with you not just to remember the military sacrifices of the two world wars, but all victims of tyranny, terrorism and war.

Since 1952 the German President has spoken before the German Parliament on Remembrance Day. This morning President Gauck said these words which I would like to share with you:

“Today we remember the victims of violence and war, children, women and men of all peoples.

We remember the soldiers who died in both world wars, the people who lost their lives through acts of war or afterwards in captivity, as exiles and refugees.

We remember those who were persecuted and killed because they belonged to another people, another race, were part of a minority or whose lives were regarded as unworthy because of illness or disability.

We remember those who lost their lives because they resisted tyranny, and those who died because they stood by their beliefs or their faith.

We mourn the victims of the wars and civil wars of our time, the victims of terrorism and political persecution, the soldiers and other personnel who lost their lives on missions abroad.

We also remember today those who became the victims of hatred and violence against foreigners and the vulnerable.

We grieve with all those who are mourning the dead, and share their pain. But our lives are defined by the hope of reconciliation among people and peoples, and our responsibility is for peace among people at home and in the whole world.“

The war graves that lie before us remind us, the living. They are part of our history and our European identity. As we remember those who were not granted these universal values, we reaffirm their importance as a supreme asset worthy of protection. In this I see one of our most urgent tasks, not just on Remembrance Day.

I bow in deep sorrow and reverence before the dead.