

Speech by former Federal President Joachim Gauck

at the opening of the exhibition "On Displaying Violence:
First Exhibitions on the Nazi Occupation in Europe, 1945-1948"

on May 23, 2025, in Berlin

Your Excellencies,

Dear Members of Parliament,

Dear Professor Gross,

Dear representatives of museums and memorials,

That was strange! Although it is certainly a cause for celebration when a renowned director of a renowned institution calls you. But what was strange, dear Raphael Gross, was your request for a greeting from me because you wanted to introduce me to the project of an exhibition about exhibitions. I was inclined to decline. Then your words came, then I agreed. But then your actions still seemed strange to me.

I've come anyway, perhaps because I've learned over the course of my life that what seems strange to us often contains a message for us upon closer inspection, or arouses curiosity, or provides an impulse to think further or rethink.

So, I greet you now with what came to mind about this exhibition after this strange feeling. It's not so much the former Federal President who is speaking to you today, but rather the German citizen who was born during the war and was five years old when the first of the exhibitions you describe opened.

Someone who, in various periods of his life, worked for appropriate remembrance and against forgetting and is now honorary chairman of the citizens' association "Against Forgetting - For Democracy".

As visitors to the new exhibition, we enter the immediate post-war period, encountering the feelings and judgments of people who were subjected to war and tyrannized by Germans. After long, often painful phases of appropriation and reappraisal, we now recognize the guilt of our previous generations. But we still know little about the intensity of the feelings of those who suffered under Nazi Germany.

The exhibitions in London, Paris, Warsaw, and Liberec provide us with insight into this. We see quite different emphases, and we also see that the Shoah, in its horrific uniqueness, has not yet been fully appreciated. We see – if we compare, for example, the London exhibition, with its focus on the suffering of the victims, with the later exhibition in Liberec – a nationalist instrumentalization of an essentially enlightening project.

But all the differences and emphases have one thing in common: They confront us with the profound side of a modernity that – instead of enlightenment, of humanity – is characterized by the contemptuous hubris of a self-proclaimed master race, the majority of whom had abandoned the already existing democratic, even Christian, values.

Now, in 1945, the end had come with horror for the vanquished. And even the opponents didn't really know the sheer number of victims murdered—or the murderous lust with which the perpetrators pursued their victims. Sergeant Mike Lewis, who documented the liberation of Bergen-Belsen with his camera, summed it up: "You have to see it to believe it".

The British exhibition "The Horror Camps" expressed it this way in its motto: "Seeing is Believing." "Believing" here is to be understood in the spirit of Wilhelm Busch: "Only what we believe do we know for sure".

The exhibition organizers in London at that time—like those who convey historical knowledge today—must ultimately be concerned with a kind of seeing that does more to the viewer than simply satisfy curiosity; ultimately, with a kind of knowledge that changes us, causes us (in Havel's words) to "live in truth".

Wherever life and death, destruction, or construction are to be depicted, both in the old and current exhibitions, the first step is to accurately secure and present the facts. This is something that people can be expected to do, even when the facts are evil, horrifying, and cruel. People can be expected to consider what people can do to people. And: Those who seek the truth must not be afraid of perception. Perception comes before all truth.

Thus, we examine the approaches and intentions of previous exhibition organizers not only because, as committed Europeans, we want to know how our neighbors viewed and honored our history of violence and suffering. There is a more important reason to approach past educational activities: We must strengthen our resolve to perceive and document the actions and facts that we encounter today, when war, disenfranchisement, and the degradation of people once again become reality.

If we reexamine the diverse intentions of the exhibition organizers of that time, we also encounter the problem of the historical-political selection of facts by the rulers of Eastern Europe at the time.

Their aim was to portray the horrors of the past in order to gain acceptance of the present. However, the present under communism was a structurally based legitimacy deficit. Therefore, antifascism was needed as an element that legitimized their own rule. With this instrumentalization, however, a "natural" anti-attitude that people develop in the face of murder and crime becomes a form of antifascism that ignores new forms of legal alienation, terror, and oppression, or even legitimizes them.

At this point, it occurs to me that I'm not talking about past historical politics, but also about a very contemporary phenomenon: With Putin's lies about allegedly rampant fascism in Ukraine, the enlistment and instrumentalization of an originally humane, noble defense against injustice to legitimize their own claims to power is resurfacing. The murderous facts of Butscha are then denied, and an artificial anti-fascism is supposed to transform imperial aggression into something necessary, even good.

Recognizing this, we realize: Today's killing fields must not disappear into the mythical fog of a way of life that generally whispers to us of the perpetual existence of evil, thus offering an ultimately fatal message of reassurance. We also know enough by now about a shock that remains without consequences when people persist in a feeling of helplessness and inaction.

While we have spoken here of selective and purposive remembrance by authoritarian rule, we should not, on the other hand, overlook a fear of, or rather, denial of, facts that existed among large sections of the population in democratic post-war Germany. When the philosopher Karl Jaspers urged that examining Nazi crimes must lead to a "clarification" of society, many feared the pain and shame they would face if they truly confronted the devastating facts and insights about the Nazi era. For many, the reality of their own suffering—for example, in the case of the expellees, the injustice they experienced themselves—blocked the perception of their own guilt. Looking back, we see that facts, historical truth, are threatened by a double threat: from above by undemocratic rulers, and

from below by a population that fears self-criticism, remorse, and reconsideration and seeks to submerge itself in personal ignorance.

How fortunate that a democratic mindset has now been established in this country, both "above" and "below." But how disturbing that its existence

is unable to prevent the presence of "alternative facts," historical lies, and the denial of perception in our present day. So much remains to be done – for civil society as a whole, as well as for the exhibition organizers and mediators of historical and political knowledge.

Because only those who do not shy away from the real facts of the present, who train their eyesight, document events, and do not simply freeze in the face of the monstrosity of evil, will gain access to the form of truth that can transform people.

With this in mind, I hope your exhibition will be visited by as many people as possible who want to see and learn.