

Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the opening of the exhibition **Mass Shootings. The Holocaust from the Baltic to the Black Sea, Topography of Terror, Berlin**

27.09.2016

Professor Nachama,
Mr Neumärker,
Tim Renner,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Vibrant green; birch trees and shrubs in the background; a gentle slope downwards,
and in the foreground white summer flowers in bloom.

I am describing a photograph of a landscape in the east, a photo that could almost be taken for a painting. You will soon find it in the exhibition, on the far right-hand wall, and it will feel to you like an oasis. It is a recent photo that was taken outside the gates of Mizocz, a small town in western Ukraine.

The photo is almost a prototype for the broad stretches of countryside of a region which, more intensively than any other, has been the focus of my activity as Foreign Minister over the last few years. Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Moldova, the Baltic region – no other region of the world have I visited more frequently in recent years; no other landscapes have I passed through or flown over as often as these.

Allow me to mention a few other place names I encountered during my preparations for this speech: Minsk, Riga, Dnipropetrovsk, Kyiv, Odessa, Chisinau – big cities, and smaller ones: Dubăsari, Pavlograd, Artyomovsk. All these are places I have visited in the last 12 months – and which many of you probably know from the news and newspapers.

For today, these landscapes are dominated by conflicts and tensions that directly affect the security and future of Europe; indeed, they have even pushed the issue of war and peace on our continent back into the spotlight. We, the shapers of German foreign policy and our partners, are working as best we can to promote peace and understanding in the east of our continent, particularly in the conflict surrounding eastern Ukraine.

But – and this is a very important “but” – these landscapes, under what we see here today, harbour hidden layers that connect us as Germans much more deeply and poignantly with this region. Seventy-five years ago, Nazi Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union started a war aimed at annihilation and conquest of indescribable brutality. More than 25 million people in the Soviet Union lost their lives – the vast majority of them civilians. More than two million Jews were among them. The massacres started in the very first few days after the German attack, and soon became systematic mass shootings. That is the appalling truth that lies hidden

under these landscapes. As beautiful as the landscapes I have described to you are, they are wounded landscapes. They remain so to this day. The historian Timothy Snyder called them “Bloodlands”.

This exhibition has now set out to scrape off the layers and, by removing them one by one, is unearthing the details of a past that is not only an eastern past, but also part of our own history. Let me list those places once again:

Minsk – 55,000.

Riga – 45,000.

Dnipropetrovsk – 16,000.

Kyiv – 35,000.

Odessa – 20,000.

Chisinau – 1500.

Dubăsari – 5000.

Pavlograd – 1500.

Artyomovsk – 1500.

Those are the numbers of Jewish men, women and children in the cities mentioned who – often in the space of just a few days – were shot by German forces, members of the SS and police officers.

Right at the entrance to the exhibition you are about to enter, you will see a map. It shows the region from the Baltic to the Black Sea. A large number of black dots have been drawn on the map. Each dot on that map indicates a place where more than 500 people were shot. The places I mentioned are just ten of those. A total of 722 dots have been drawn on that map. 722.

I’ll be quite honest: the first time I looked at that map, I was shocked. Maybe you feel the same way. And probably this will be the case for many Germans who visit the exhibition, and I hope there will be a lot of visitors. But – and this, too, is a very important “but” – that map may come as a shock to us Germans – but it is no shock for the people in the region. It’s much worse than that: it is an expression of a memory that is very much alive. Many people there, especially the older generations, are familiar with those black dots and the history behind them. They know about silent, terrible places outside the gates of their village; mass graves over which green grass has grown. The Jewish communities and the members of the Roma minority used to be part of everyday life in the towns and villages. Today they have vanished from most places, and the people there now have only dark memories. They live with the knowledge that their parents and grandparents had to assist with the shootings, dig graves or

fill them in, sort the victims' clothing or cook for the murderers. You could say that these landscapes are topographies of terror.

Ladies and gentlemen,

If at the start of my speech I had mentioned the names Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka or Sobibor, we would immediately have thought of the Holocaust of the extermination camps. This exhibition will be instrumental in ensuring that the names Riga, Kyiv, Odessa and Chisinau no longer stand only for current events and current tensions. Rather, they will also remind us of the Holocaust of mass shootings, and the many layers and histories, as well as the ethnic changes and upheavals that lie between that period and what we see today on the surface. This is the first time that we are seeing an exhibition on this topic in Germany – the forgotten Holocaust, the Holocaust of mass shootings. I would like to thank the exhibition creators for this. For as Foreign Minister I am sure that without the awareness of those layers under the landscapes, we Germans – despite all our sincere efforts to promote understanding – will never be able to do justice to this region and the role we play there.

As is so often the case when we think of the Holocaust, the sheer scale of the destruction is barely conceivable. For that reason, this exhibition makes use of examples. It tells the stories of victims and survivors. And it also gives the perpetrators a face, it describes their actions and motives, as well as subsequent attempts to come to grips with what they had done or to cover it up.

Allow me, therefore, to talk about one example, just one, and actually I have already started to do so. The photo of the landscape I described at the beginning comes from Mizocz. At the end of June 1941, Mizocz was occupied by the German Wehrmacht. Between early August and early November 1941, 25,000 Jews in the region were shot. In the spring of 1942, all Jews in Volhynia had to move to live in ghettos. At the end of August, the civilian administration agreed with the commander of the security forces to execute all Jews within five weeks, with the exception of 500 experts. On 11 October the ghettos were surrounded, on 13 October they were closed off. The Jewish inhabitants of Mizocz started a fire to allow some people to flee and to prevent their possessions from falling into the hands of the Germans. The fire was extinguished and the Jews herded into the market square. From there, they were taken on 14 October to a hollow outside Mizocz – that green meadow we see on the photo. In the meantime the death squad comprising members of the security forces and security services had arrived. The Jews were led in groups down into the hollow. They were made to remove their clothes and then killed, one by one, by a shot in the back of the neck.

Five photographs from this 14 October exist. They show people before and after the shootings. The photos are included in the exhibition - you can recognise the hollow from the recent photograph quite clearly. It is hard to bear looking at these pictures. The German police officer Gustav Hille took them. The exhibition recounts the eventful story of his photos from the wartime period up to their role as evidence in West German investigations.

But photos and items of evidence are not all. There are also a very small number of survivors – they survived the massacre, the fire in the ghetto, the escape from the Nazis and the Ukrainian militia. One survivor of Mizocz is here today – it is great honour for me to

welcome you, Ms Claire Boren! Ms Boren, you have shared your memories with us: you were a little girl when the Nazis came. The first thing the Nazis did was to take your beloved dog away from you. A German shepherd dog, of all breeds, called Rex. When you were five years old, in 1942, your mother managed to run away with you. Your father was shot. For an unimaginable period of one and a half years you lived with your mother in hiding places, in cold ditches in the forest, later under a farmer's pigsty. In spring 1944, the Red Army came. I am very glad that you are with us here today. There aren't many Holocaust survivors left, and it is so very important that you as an eyewitness help us to remove those layers. Thank you for your willingness to come here today.

I see it also as a duty of the Federal Foreign Office to help scrape off the layers. Our history obliges us to do so, as does our responsibility towards the victims, but it also influences German foreign policy in those regions today. The Federal Foreign Office supports the "Protecting Memory" project, which preserves the sites of mass shootings. Five of these places in Ukraine have been transformed into memorials in recent years. In spring this year, the project organisers identified seven new locations which they intend to work on in the coming years. The Paris-based organisation "Yahad in Unum" also shows impressive dedication in its work to locate sites of mass shootings in Eastern Europe. The Federal Foreign Office has supported its work for many years, and I am delighted that Andrej Umansky from "Yahad in Unum" is also here with us this evening. Incidentally, the map with the black dots is his achievement and a result of his research. A very warm welcome to you, too!

I would like to thank the initiatives undertaken by "Yahad in Unum", as well as you, Mr Nachama and Mr Neumärker, and your teams. You are archaeologists working to prevent the process of forgetting, you quite literally remove the layers of these landscapes.

But in so doing you do much more! The example of that Holocaust of mass shootings, which is all too often forgotten, shows that we Germans are often much less well acquainted with the stories and scars of those multifaceted regions of Eastern Europe than we would like to believe. What is more, we have not made as much progress in getting to grips with our own role in these events as we would like to think. That is the very reason why I believe it is so important for us to take a more active role in focusing on this region in times when new tensions in the east of our continent have emerged. In times like these we need to know more about one another – not less! That is why a new Institute for Eastern European Research here in Berlin is so important, and that is why a Chair in Ukrainian Studies at the University of Greifswald is so important, which we were fortunately able to retain last year thanks to help from the Federal Foreign Office.

Today's generations cannot change what happened. But we need to learn from history. And this history has imposed responsibility on us. We have to embrace this responsibility. The appeal to us to shoulder responsibility is expressed much more movingly in a poem than in the language of foreign policy. The poem is entitled Babi Yar. This week is the 75th anniversary of those two brutal days on which 33,771 Jewish men, women and children were shot in the ravine of Babi Yar, near Kyiv. The Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko composed the poem in 1961, the English translation here is by Benjamin Okopnik, Paul Celan translated it into German. We will shortly hear Ekkehard Maaß read it in its entirety. I want to

conclude with just a few lines. They, too, begin with the layers of the landscape, and then remove them:

“Wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar.

The trees look sternly,

as if passing judgement.

Here, silently, all screams,

and hat in hand [...]

And I myself, like one long, soundless scream

Above the thousands of thousands interred [...]

No fibre of my body will forget this.”