



Bundespräsident
Alexander Van der Bellen

Speech at the Commemoration of 12 March 1938

12 March 2018
Ceremonial Hall of the Vienna Hofburg

Check against Delivery.

The end of Austria – 1938 – did not come as a surprise.

When German troops crossed the border with Austria during the night of 11 to 12 March, there were those who saw their hope fulfilled, while for others, an anxious apprehension turned into certainty.

This put an end to a desperate, awkward and in part half-hearted struggle to uphold Austria's autonomy.

This change also opened the gateway to expropriation, deportation, excesses of violence, torture, war and “industrialised” mass murder.

It marked the beginning of the darkest chapter in the history of our country.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you all very much for gathering at the Vienna Hofburg today to commemorate together the takeover of Austria by the National Socialists.

As we remember the events of that time, we are fully aware that 80 years later it still demands our full attention to grasp how a disaster such as this could come about.

How the lowest feelings and emotions could seize people's hearts;
how neighbours could turn into “enemies of the people”, and fathers into mass murderers; how people could both listen to Mozart and turn on the gas valve.

The German armed forces came overnight.

What did not come overnight was contempt for democracy, militarism, intolerance and violence.

These had slowly crept into many a mindset in Austria and taken hold.

Humanism and the rule of law were being continuously undermined. It was a multiple organ failure on the political and social levels, caused by the illnesses of

growing political polarisation,

ideological irreconcilability,

racism

and anti-Semitism.

Ladies and gentlemen, 12 March 1938 has a history behind its history and ultimately marks the culmination of a disastrous development. That is precisely why today we must continue to take a very close look at how it was possible things could go that far. And we must demonstrate strong resolve in drawing our lessons.

The lesson that democracies, too, are susceptible to populism and demagoguery.

The lesson that discrimination constitutes the first step towards dehumanisation.

The lesson that racism and anti-Semitism do not simply disappear, but continue to exist today, both on a small and large scale.

And last but not least, the lesson that it is crucial to raise our voices early enough, clearly and unequivocally, and stand up against any form of degrading and inhumane ideology.

This is why it is the responsibility of each and every one of us, of you and of me, to sharpen our senses, and to stay alert and sensitive, trying to recognise the possible writing on the wall.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Austria has a shared responsibility for the atrocities of National Socialism.

Austrians were not only victims but also perpetrators, oftentimes in leading positions.

Austria admitted this responsibility, sometimes very late. It will also acknowledge it in the future.

Therefore, we bow in humility to all victims of National Socialism.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1945, many people said that it was not yet possible to work through the Nazi past, that this was the time to tackle the democratic new beginning. That it was too early to admit guilt and start to actively deal with it and work through it.

Today, some people say that we are already much too far away from these past events. Many, in fact most of us, were not even born yet at that time. There is no need to work through this anymore.

However, that then raises the question:

When, in fact, would be the right moment to deal actively with the worst crime in human history?

When?

The answer is very simple: yesterday, today and tomorrow!

Because there is no excuse for a self-imposed lack of knowledge, for looking the other way, for historical ignorance, or for limiting the significance of what happened in any way.

Far too often, we have heard that “one simply could not have known all of that”.

Today, we *can* know about it. This is why we should and must acquire this knowledge. And we must not turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to what happened.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Austria stands by its responsibility.

Thus, Austria will uphold the memory of the horrors of National Socialism, war, persecution and the Holocaust.

We have learned from history, and we will pass on the lessons learned to future generations.

It is our duty and obligation to face and actively deal with this dark chapter of our country's past, especially when personal experience can no longer bear witness to the misery of war and totalitarianism and the number of those who are able to give testimony to it is constantly decreasing.

It might be true that history does not repeat itself.

This does not mean, however, that lessons would have been learnt once and for all and that respect for human rights and human dignity could be considered a secured common good.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On this very day, in particular, I would like to draw your attention to the tradition of courage and character that we also have here in Austria.

People who took great risks and shouldered considerable burdens in order to help others;

people who stood up when others did not dare to;

people who resisted;

people who demonstrated humanity and a sense of dignity even in difficult times.

They can and should serve as an example for us all.

I am directing this at young people, in particular.

Young generations who fortunately grew up in times of peace;
whose guiding principle is not to obey but rather to question things in a critical
way.

Whose actions shall not be legitimised by blindly following orders but rather
through humanistic values.

Therefore, it cannot be merely about defending our values of an open, democratic
society.

No.

To the contrary, we need to develop and strengthen these values, and anchor them
ever more firmly in each and every one's identity.

Self-confident and self-determined, open-minded and demonstrating solidarity,
peace-loving and tolerant – this is the image to which Austria feels committed.

It is my hope that our children and children's children will continue to fill this
image with life and carry it into the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I now ask you all to rise from your seats and observe a moment of silence with
me in memory of the victims of National Socialism.

Thank you.



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