

# German President Gauck's state visit to France

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On Wednesday, President Joachim Gauck became the first high-ranking German politician to visit Oradour-sur-Glane. The village in the centre of France was the scene of a brutal war crime in 1944.

Four days after the invasion of the allies at Normandy, forces of the SS tank division "Das Reich" executed all of the inhabitants of the village in retaliation for a supposed raid by partisan fighters. 642 people died in the massacre, including 207 children and 254 women, who were locked in a church and burned alive. Only six people survived.

As was the case with other German war crimes in Italy, Greece, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the German justice system never held any perpetrators to account or extradited them to France. Only a court in East Germany (GDR) sentenced the 63-year-old Heinz Barth to lifelong imprisonment in 1983, because he had taken part in the attack as an SS officer. After the reunification of Germany, Barth was given a war victim's pension and was released from prison in 1997. He died in 2007.

In 1953, a French military tribunal in Bordeaux sentenced two SS soldiers who participated in the massacre to death and 18 more to forced labour. Fourteen of those convicted came from the province of Alsace, and were immediately released due to an amnesty law for French citizens. Even the German SS members, including those who were sentenced to death, were freed by 1959.

Along with French President Francois Hollande and one of the survivors, Gauck visited the location of the massacre, which has been maintained as a ruin as a memorial. He spoke of a "barbaric and appalling crime," and expressed his "thankfulness and humility" for the invitation to Oradour. It was "a gesture of reconciliation, a gesture which one could not request, but could only receive as a gift."

Relying on the philosopher Karl Jaspers, Gauck acknowledged "the collective moral responsibility of all

Germans for the events between 1933 and 1945." He reassured his listeners that the "children and grandchildren of the criminals" had newly established "the spiritual conditions of German life," so "that our country would never again be the source of ideologically motivated anti-humanitarianism, of racial fanaticism, crimes, murder and war."

"We will never forget Oradour and the other European locations of horror and barbarism," Gauck promised.

In reality the invocation of terrible past crimes is not aimed at drawing the lessons to secure a peaceful future, but rather to blend out the present and prepare new war crimes.

This was underscored by the debate that was taking place at the same time 400 kilometres away in the French parliament where deputies discussed the war against Syria. They were not permitted to vote, since President Hollande, who has the power to take the decision according to the constitution, decided some time ago to support a military strike along with the United States.

Germany, France and the United States have no compulsions about collaborating with Islamist "rebels" in Syria, who are committing crimes just as brutal as the SS did against their opponents. They are murdering political opponents and members of the Christian, Kurdish and Alawite minorities, while boasting of their deeds in online videos.

Hollande did not shy away from utilising the crimes committed at Oradour to justify a further war, which would clearly breach human rights. Without naming Syria directly, he drew a parallel between the massacre of 1944 and "massacres in the world" today. He meant the use of poison gas in Syria, which France and the United States have blamed on the Assad regime as a pretext to carry out a war which has long been prepared.

Significantly, Gauck never uttered a single syllable about the war preparations against Syria in the address at

Oradour, or in the statement he made after an official dinner in Paris one day earlier. The former pastor from East Germany, who so willingly speaks of freedom, morality, responsibility and similar sanctimonious notions, remains silent when it comes to the preparation of a war crime before the eyes of the population of the world.

His visit to Oradour, which was praised highly by the German and French media, was aimed at giving Hollande's war plans moral cover. Gauck represents the line of the German government and the Social Democrat-Green Party opposition, which have indicated their agreement with a war on Syria, even if they have been somewhat reluctant to directly support a military strike during the federal election campaign.

Gauck never grew tired of praising the French-German alliance during his visit to France. His speech in Oradour ended by hailing European unity, and appealing to hold on "to this Europe" and build it further.

The carefully choreographed appearance in Oradour was designed to recall a September 1984 meeting between French President Francois Mitterrand and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl at Verdun. In order to underscore the close political alliance between France and Germany, both politicians walked hand in hand across the most well known battlefield of the First World War in front of the world press. In Oradour, Gauck and Hollande repeated this gesture, demonstratively holding hands.

The fact that they saw it as necessary to repeat this gesture after 29 years is a sign that relations between France and Germany are extremely tense. This was underscored by Gauck's remark that Germany was today "a good country," which wanted to "build Europe, but not rule over it." If Germany were not striving for dominance, there would be no reason for Gauck to explicitly deny this.

In reality, French-German relations have been characterised by tensions since the outbreak of the global economic crisis in 2008. The austerity policies, which Germany has forced upon the EU as the strongest economy, have made it extremely difficult for France and its closest economic allies in southern Europe to cope.

In addition, Germany has profited significantly from the euro, which was originally seen in Paris as a means to contain the economic predominance of its neighbour to the east. The single currency benefited Germany's export industry on the European market and helped establish a relatively low exchange rate for trade outside of Europe.

Since the interest rates for state debt have diverged

during the euro crisis, however, the low interest in Germany has acted like an artificial economic stimulant, while borrowers in southern Europe suffer under high interest rates.

French and German interests are also drifting apart in foreign policy, after the plans for a united European foreign policy largely failed.

Under President Nicolas Sarkozy, France had already begun to concentrate on its traditional areas of influence in the Mediterranean, Africa and the Middle East. It returned to the command structures of NATO for this reason, cooperating closely with the United States. The war against Libya took place mainly at Sarkozy's initiative, and Hollande has continued this course in Mali and Syria.

In contrast, Germany's interests are focused in Eastern Europe, which it sees as an extended production centre for its industry, on Russia, which is its main supplier of energy, and on China, which is its fastest growing export market. Germany abstained from participating in the Libyan war, which is seen today in Berlin as a mistake. German foreign policy officials have drawn the conclusion from this that their interests can only be secured in alliance with the United States, at least for the time being. Berlin has therefore given the green light for an attack on Syria.

In this context, Gauck's state visit to France, the first by a German President in 17 years, pursued two goals: he sought to dampen the conflict between France and Germany and give Hollande backing for his war in Syria. To do so in the graveyard of the victims of Oradour is an act of unparalleled cynicism.



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