

Before I came here, I thought a lot about what my speech could be like. I would have the chance to thank my inspiring professors, my fellow students who came so close to my heart, my supportive parents, my brother who maybe more than anything else taught me serenity, my incredible partner, and my friends who always stood by my side. I could talk about the competition and competitors along the way, how this has driven me to excel academically, about the challenges I have faced, and the limits I have reached. I read some of the most famous of such speeches from the most prominent people. Most of them sending students from universities into the world, very few welcoming new students into a program. While all of the mentioned would have its place in this moment, would be a valuable contribution to this event and even more so this is a moment in which a heartfelt “thank you” is more than appropriate, I have decided to take another direction.

I want to tell you a story, because this is exactly what I have learned to value in this program: that the power of the story shapes the course of history.

About four years ago, the world was a different place. A student that decided to study war and conflict would do so because he or she would be fascinated by the gunboats of the early 20th century, the strategic implications of wars waged outside of our borders or far back in history or – and this was the matter in my case – a theoretical interest in the very nature of human violence as something so distinct from what one had witnessed that it sparks the curiosity of the researcher. While all these intentions have their place and are good reasons to come to Potsdam, that is for sure, the world has changed and so has this program. Some here might have seen the world changing long before Russia attacked Ukraine, and while I was always interested in peace and conflict, I have to say: I did not.

But so it happened, and just in my first semester, I saw not only the world changing, but also my cohort. I think all of us felt a sense of responsibility in February 2022, and I proudly witnessed how my fellow students, and by then friends, became activists – advocates for peace and security.

I want to tell their stories that might be otherwise forgotten, but illustrate not only how we as a cohort adapted to the new reality, but also how society changed in the past years.

I want to start with one very remarkable of my friends. When war is happening, we tend to say, the world is watching. But is this really the case? While the world might try to watch, the fog of war usually prevents us from knowing the details from the ground, picturing what is happening on front lines or in the living rooms of families losing their children to the aggressor's bullets. This one friend decided to become our eyes. She went to Ukraine to document the terror, to send the pictures into the world. I cannot forget one session in Dr. Wittmann's seminar on the post-Soviet era. This friend of mine followed the seminar online from Ukraine throughout the semester and for this last session came back to tell us what she had seen. What in her transcript of records might now be a „Teilnahmeleistung“ was so much more to us. It made the war tangible and, in a way, personal.

Another friend of mine took a very different way, no less important. My relationship with him was always characterised by intellectual tension. While we did not agree politically, theoretically, and even socially on so many points, from the first day on, we decided to become friends. It was the pure lust for competition, the desire to be challenged and to challenge, and the apparent truth that together we could create. I think none of us would have gotten where we are right now, if it was without the other. We chaired the Potsdam Academic Association for Security Studies for over two years and, through that, developed our shared network, ending up in together with a group of likeminded founding our own organisation with the urge to shape the discourse on peace and security in Europe. This friend of mine used his strengths to bring his beliefs of the idealist politician into a political party. The idealist politician is, in my opinion, something we lost in decades of wealth and stability and something so essential for our democracy that I hope someday he will become an idealist politician himself, one who values beliefs over political power.

As I have said earlier, I am convinced that stories shape the course of history. This is why memory is such an integral part of our societies. While as historians, quite a number of my fellow students decided to conserve history and, by that, tell stories and create memories, one of them came especially close to my heart. Coming from a humanities bachelor, my historical knowledge and also my knowledge about the methods to study it were limited. She taught me what a book could not. Even before her master's she had worked at a memorial site. When she talked about history, it became so vivid and her enthusiasm for what

was gone for so long sparked interest and fostered memories for whoever would listen to her. She even convinced me to do my first archival research, and while this never became my favourite thing to do, I now understood better how important it is to preserve history to give a chance to following generations to learn from it and create their own stories.

And then there is one, I am proud to share a vision with. Nobody before could understand me like she did, she became my companion and supporter and gave me the strength to go beyond my limits. She is a true feminist, always eager to fascinate not judge. A beacon of change even making Prof. Neitzel say “slay”. The fighter she is, she decided to take fate into her own hands and stand at the frontline of history to defend what she is convinced is worth defending.

A few days in the programme, I met this guy who was fascinated by ships. He told me about some war ship of the second World War and damn wasn't I interested. But I listened carefully. Because it wasn't what he was explaining to me but his honest passion when he described in every detail the features of the board cannon and its pros and cons for maritime warfare. Guess what this guy, my friend, is doing today? He is counting ships. Not in Germany but all over the world, contributing to one of the most significant annual military publications that is a point of reference also in my daily work. He, for me, is the perfect example of how niche curiosity is important for gathering quality intelligence and driving development.

One of us even made it into the office of a member of parliament responsible for democratic control of the services. She was always determined, kind, welcoming, and worked so hard that I am proud seeing her succeeding in her job and being such a wonderful person in private.

And there might be one, a few, or none of us who dedicated their lives to gather and analyse information to ensure our security. Doing jobs they will never be honoured for, because sometimes secrecy is the key to security.

I had fellow students campaigning for peace in Gaza, working on German support for Kongo, Sudan, Mali, some who dealt with Israel's security, engaged in transatlantic relationships, or tried to rethink international cooperation. We became historians, political scientists, soldiers and consultants. Some of us are now activists, journalists, teachers, parents or took another way to inspire and contribute.

I want to thank all of these remarkable people and also all of those I have not mentioned today that you inspired me, challenged me, made me a better researcher, a better friend, partner, and human being.

But I told their stories not to say thank you. I told the story for all of you, who are embarking on your journey in this program. To remind you of what you can become here, what it can mean to make something meaningful. And how diverse this can look.

And also to remind you that taking responsibility comes with a price. Determination means sacrifice. And it is invaluable to find people who might not share the same beliefs or ideals, but understand being driven by contributing to peace and security.

The strength of this program lies in its community. The heterogeneity of your fellow students can be a chance to challenge your beliefs and find synergies that would outside of this programme, probably never create impact. I told you their stories to become just as remarkable as they are. The people in this programme can and will support you with that, and I hope that I can also support you in one way or the other. Do not hesitate to connect also beyond your cohort, organise yourselves, be open for other perspectives, prove your arguments, and become better individually and collectively.

To conclude, I want to encourage you to tell your stories, because they will be remarkable in one way or the other and, for sure, shape the course of history.