

Joint commemoration can make Europe Stronger

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Speaker

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Dear colleagues,

A commemorative ceremony is challenging.



For one, the subject is still a minefield. For even now, the collective memories of the countries we come from relate different narratives and nourish different sensitivities of lost territories, people slaughtered senselessly and vain promises. Some commemorate the independence of their country.

Furthermore, the line is tight between pathos - and doing justice to the horrors of one of the deadliest conflicts in the history of humanity.

But we can grow stronger though joint commemoration. An open and diverse identity calls for understanding different perspectives.

The First World War shattered the established order in Europe. Political leaders in 1914 expected the war to be a limited conflict, remodelling equilibrium in the Balkans and between opposing powers and alliances. What a terrible illusion.

Instead, this conflict turned into a long intercontinental war, involving America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa, mobilising more than 30 nations.

Nobody imagined that the war could be so terrible. The number of both civilian and military casualties is estimated at around 37-40 million people. We are remembering a fratricide. Those reducing the conflict to the simplistic fact that one country won and the other lost it are mistaken. War is not black-and-white, even if the images we have of it are. Its colour is the red of blood, the jarring multiple colours of hatred and fear.

The European Union can look back on 70 years of peace, and we can be proud of this achievement.

And we must be careful of our own contemporary European arrogance, thinking that war cannot ever happen again.

But before we settle back comfortably on our rhetoric of 70 years of peace - allow me to point out, of course, that the terrors of war are still alive in the memories not only of the generation which still experienced World War II. They are alive in the citizens of former Yugoslavia, and in the memories of the terror in Northern Ireland. They are also very much alive in the refugees who seek a safe haven here. And alive in the memories of our soldiers who fought and are fighting beyond our borders, as well as the medical corps and people engaged in humanitarian aid in war zones.

We must not believe we are different.

We are no different from the people who are living in war at this very moment- in Ukraine, in Syria, in Kurdistan, in Yemen.

We are no different from the generations before us.

When Picasso painted the *Demaiselles d'Avignon* in 1907, little did he expect war to break out only a few years later. Georges Méliès screened his vastly successful science-fiction film *A trip to the moon*. Leos Janacek composed *Jenufa*, Bela Bartok *Bluebeard's castle*. Richard Strauss' opera *Salomé*, based on the British Oskar Wilde's play (which he had written in French), was staged internationally. Puccini composed one of the world's most famous operas, *Madama Butterfly*, in 1904. It premiered in La Scala in Milano, was staged in the Opéra de Paris, the Royal Opera House in London, the Metropolitan Opera in New York and the Teatro de la Opera in Buenos Aires within the three following years. Who would have thought that a decade later, Italian soldiers would sing Puccini's arias in the trenches.

We who believe that culture is a key to understanding European identity must acknowledge that understanding this identity means also living with the stark discrepancy between the beauty of art and the links these works create - and our capacity to go to war against our European brothers. To our capacity to let evil arise in our hearts, feed our minds, our words and our actions and push us to break fundamental rights, to divide, to violate, to exclude, to kill.

We have learnt from the past however and have installed systems of governance, checks and balances and means to further social equality. The European Union is our most beautiful project, of reconciliation, of solidarity, of mutual trust based on the rule of law, of peace and prosperity.

Of course, we are today commemorating not the war, but its end.

The bombs and machine guns fell silent. They left behind wounded and traumatised fathers and sons, going back to their families. People were hungry as harvests in 1918 were scarce. The Spanish flu killed many more. And in many areas, conflict continued.

The war did not give Europe the desired new order based on peace and freedom.

The war did not produce wealth and well-being, not even for the winners, but pain, suffering and bitterness.

The war did not resolve the old controversies among states, but created new and even more serious ones.

We know the devastating consequences: The 'armistice', for peace it was not, ended only two decades later, when citizens believed the simplistic narratives and promises of fascist and later nazi politicians.

We need to remember this in face of new forms of nationalism, antisemitism and racism gaining ground today. Furthermore, the threat of global conflicts is flaring up. So let us not forget that something as inconceivable as war is not impossible. European reconciliation, peace and unity is not to be taken for granted for ever.

But by creating a political space which interlinks our interests, by perfecting the art of compromise, we may have created the most reliable system for long-term peace in the world. We send our young people abroad not to fight wars, but to study and work.

We do not oppose with guns and bombs, but we discuss in Parliaments, the Council, the EESC, conferences, dialogues, platforms, everywhere, looking for consensus, even when it seems impossible.

Let me be clear:

Without Peace there is no growth, no decent jobs and no cohesion.

Without Peace there is no sustainable Europe- no sustainable Earth.

So, as we commemorate those that died, we should honour their legacy by continuing to build a strong Europe, by driving a rEUnaissance, a new Renaissance for our Union on citizens. We need to oppose those who pretend that going back to national formats, building walls and fences, will save the day.

It will not.

But let me now give the floor to a specialist in this field, French historian Nicolas Offenstadt. Mr Offenstadt is a specialist on the Great War and its memories and teaches historiography at La Sorbonne. He is a member of the Scientific Council of the mission of the First World War Centenary and head of the Centenary Observatory at the University of Paris I.

Mr Offenstadt, the floor is yours.