**The Great War that set the stage for another war:**

**How to make commemoration personal and prevent other wars on EU soil**

**By Luca Jahier, President of the European Economic and Social Committee**

Who would dispute that memory and commemoration are not part of the journey towards crafting stronger national identities? No historian, no anthropologist, no ethnographer would argue against that. However, as we prepare to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of the Great War, there is a risk of limiting our commemoration to representing the past through lengthy speeches, exhibits in historical museums, and brief visits to historic sites.

No civilisation can survive and take a bold view of its own future if it lacks a sense of memory. Yet young generations lose sight of the true meaning of memory, perhaps because they perceive commemoration in a different way to their parents, who experience commemoration through the perspective and stories of family personal histories.

Today, young people are more likely to learn from history books, which makes it even more remote. So how to make it more personal?

The First World War shattered the established order in Europe and offered an unprecedented challenge to the legitimacy of the nation-state. Military theorists and political leaders at the time expected the war in 1914 to be a limited and decisive conflict, aimed at restoring equilibrium in the Balkans.

Instead, this conflict turned into a long and protracted first intercontinental war, involving America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The conflict required the total mobilisation of the entire societies of over 30 belligerent nations. Modern technology heightened the alienation and dehumanisation of soldiers who served in the trenches.

It was a war that exposed the European ruling classes' inability to reconcile national aspirations and interests in a peaceful and collaborative manner; they instead surrendered to the flattery of aggressive nationalists and their expansionist rhetoric.

Nobody could have imagined that the war would be so terrible, especially for the troops at the front. Nobody could have imagined that it would cause the sacrifice of more than 10 million soldiers, and an unspecified, very high number of civilian casualties.

Moreover, the war did not give Europe the new order based on peace, concord and freedom that many had sincerely desired.

The war did not resolve old controversies among states, but created new and even more serious ones, plunging ancient and civilised European nations into the barbarity of totalitarianism and laying the foundations for another, even more destructive, inhuman global conflict.

The war did not produce wealth and wellbeing, not even for the winners, but rather pain, misery and suffering, while the primacy of Europe in the world vanished in the bloodshed.

Those who reduce the conflict to the simplistic fact that one country won the war and another lost it are mistaken.

We need to reflect on this fundamental aspect as we witness new forms of nationalism creeping in, which we see thriving on grievance, division and dissatisfaction with the political status quo. Because this is a threat to many of today's societies, but especially for Europe, which, in the aftermath of the Second World War, had the courage to unite and set aside futile pride and past divisions.

That is how we can make it personal for the millions of young Europeans. While young people fought each other in 1918, young people in 2018 travel to study together under the Erasmus programme.

Reconciliation and peace are the greatest achievements of the European Union. By interlinking our economies and interests, by perfecting the art of compromise, we have created the most reliable system for long-term peace in the world.

But let us not forget that something inconceivable like war is not impossible. The threat of global conflicts is flaring up in the light of recent shifts in geopolitics.

For the very first time since its creation, the EU is challenged by a divorce (Brexit) and by growing tensions in its neighborhood – the Balkans, the Southern Mediterranean and its eastern borders.

At home, some fail to uphold fundamental rights, and the values of freedom, solidarity, democracy and the rule of law. We are aghast at rising antisemitism, racism, terrorism and protectionism.

Worryingly, the world and Europe are not prepared. Let me be clear: without peace, there can be no growth, no decent jobs and no cohesion.

Without peace, there is no sustainable Europe. So, as we commemorate those who died in the senseless slaughter of the First World War, we should take action to build a European identity to defeat those who claim that going back to national models will save the day. It will not.

Clearly, we have often made mistakes in thinking about how certain results were achieved because we have taken certain conditions for granted. Rather, it must be made clear, including to the younger generations, that these conditions are never permanently acquired or overcome.

The only certainty is that, despite its limitations, the European Union is still the best gift we can give to our children and our children's children. That is how we can make the commemoration personal.