

Lessons from the Great War Failure of leadership

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High up in the hills above the pretty Macedonian town of Valandovo, about 100 km northwest of Thessaloniki, stands a simple Celtic cross honouring the 386 Irish soldiers, part of the Tenth Irish Division fighting on the Salonika front, who fell on the battlefield far away from home in 1915.

It is one of thousands of monuments and crosses dotted all along the valleys and mountains of the Balkan countries, the scene of fierce battles during the worst conflict the world had witnessed, and all the way up to the Somme and Ypres and further afield. They are silent but powerful reminders of the millions who fought and died in the "Great War", a war whose causes are still the subject of heated debate.

With the passing of 100 years since that fatal shot on a Sarajevo street, the ghosts from the past have caught up with the present. A conference of historians who gathered in Sarajevo to mark the 100 years commemoration ended in disagreement, the discussions caught up in the highly partisan and emotional politics that still prevail in the multi-ethnic societies of the Balkan region. Even the formal ceremonies marking the centenary in Sarajevo failed to bridge the different ethnic perspectives on the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, which helped trigger the start of the war.

As the prominent Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan stated in her Essay published last December by The Brookings Institution, "If we cannot determine how one of the most momentous conflicts in history happened, how can we hope to avoid another such catastrophe in the future".¹ When one looks at the state of the world today, the tens of millions displaced because of conflict, the recent unseemly attempt at redrawing state boundaries in Europe, and the questioning of the principles and rules on which the current world order is based, not to mention the widening fault lines in the Middle East, the continuing ethno-nationalist behaviour in the Balkan region or the use of modern technologies to spread the language of hatred and fanaticism, the cause for concern is real.

¹ "The Rhyme of History: Lessons of the Great War", Brookings Institution Essay, Washington, D.C., 16 December 2013.

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Who would have thought, for example, that as we approach the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, that the general mood in Europe today would have made the drafting of such an historic and worthy document impossible. Yet the Helsinki Final Act, signed in the height of the Cold War, on 1 August 1975, was "the real Magna Carta of detente. Not only was it a charter governing relations between States, it was also a charter of freedom for nations and individuals".² It brought hope to countless individuals and nations suffering from oppression and denial of basic human rights.

Even the basic democratic values and principles on which the European integration process was founded in the aftermath of the Second World War are being questioned by a mixture of extremist and populist elements bent on returning to the nationalist, sectarian politics that caused so much harm in the past. The recent elections to the European Parliament, with the surge of support for such extremist elements were a serious warning to Europe and the vast majority who believe in the European integration project, not to fall into complacency, but to fight back against the historical amnesia that these disparate groups seem to share.

Thanks to the courage and leadership of the founding fathers, who believed in the creation of a new order – a community of nations and peoples where commonality of purpose would make wars obsolete, Europe and the world have witnessed the most successful peace project ever. The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union in 2012 was a fitting recognition of this remarkable achievement. By extending the frontiers of peace and security to include 28 member countries, the EU has brought enormous benefits to its citizens. But, as the voices of populism try to destroy its very foundations, the European Union needs to work much harder at showing that the integration project is both vital and necessary for continued peace and prosperity in Europe.

Failure to fight back against the populist and extremist elements that are gaining ground in several EU member countries will fuel the ethno-nationalist policies still prevalent in some Balkan countries, similar to those that existed over 100 years ago. The deliberate tactics of those Balkan leaders to re-interpret and manipulate history to suit narrow nationalist agendas while glorifying ethnic identity in a manner that deepens division rather than promoting much-needed reconciliation between the different ethnic communities, is causing enormous damage, particularly among the younger generation, many of whom are unemployed. It is as if those leaders were tempting fate, waiting for history to repeat itself.

It would be a grave error for the European Union, as it commemorates the past and contemplates that fatal shot in Sarajevo, to ignore what is happening today on its very doorstep. This is the time for the European Union to show courage and leadership. It needs to demonstrate in a robust manner that all that it has been able to achieve since its creation has not been in vain; that it remains a beacon of hope for those countries in its nearest neighbourhood waiting to join, and for the rest of the world an example of peaceful resolution of conflict and of reconciliation.

This would be the best way to pay tribute to those millions who paid the ultimate sacrifice on the battlefield so long ago. It would also ensure that Europe achieves that special place and moment in time the Irish Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney spoke about "when hope and history rhyme".

² Tarja Halonen, President of Finland, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, published in OSCE Magazine, October 2005.

The President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, eloquently expressed the sense of responsibility of today's leaders in his speech for the inauguration by the European Council of a Peace Bench in Ypres last week: "C'est à nous que revient - en acte et en paroles - d'enrayer les spirales et surenchères, d'entretenir la confiance, de sauvegarder la paix - cette paix qu'on peut rêver perpétuelle".³ Time will tell whether the leaders of the 28 member states who stood together in silence at the ceremony marking the centenary, will take his words to heart.

³ Speech by President Herman Van Rompuy, quoting from Immanuel Kant's 1795 essay, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch" (Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf), at Ypres to mark the centennial of the First World War, 26 June 2014.