1914–2014: never again

A shadow hangs over the world: the looming centenary of 1914, posing the question of whether we are any safer today than then. How did humanity stumble into a century of conflict, whose last smolderings remain with us even today? What lessons must we still draw from the catastrophe? Can the world's scientists and academics offer any special insight or prescription to prevent a recurrence?

Very few people nowadays can understand the events that unfolded in the 'July Crisis'. Even with the benefit of history books and internet resources that describe them in fine detail, it is mystifying how the pride and miscalculation of a handful of monarchs, courtiers and their parliamentary counterparts led to wars that resulted in the deaths of millions, to abominable crimes perpetrated upon civilians and to ugly repressive regimes that enslaved half the planet and still blight us.

The deeper causes of the conflict are a much-studied and hotly contested subject. In 1913, it was undeniable that the world had enjoyed almost half a century of unprecedented peace, rapidly growing prosperity, technological advances fuelled by scientific discovery and the first stirrings of social emancipation. It was a world of globalized trade, currency and customs unions, benignly governed multi-ethnic empires and emerging democracy [1].

The parallels with today are obvious and disturbing, especially when we add to the mix the great power rivalries, the lack of effective instruments of global governance or even conflict resolution, and the brewing ideological schisms that motivate individuals to commit—and the masses to condone—acts of mass murder. As we enter the anniversary year this summer, we should consider how to avoid a second century of destruction and suffering. Who today would not wish to somehow divert the course of history from the actions and

errors of 1913 that resulted in the eruption of an incomprehensible war a year later?

First and foremost, we need an emphatic, collective affirmation; a simply understood, two-word statement that we will not allow such a disaster ever to repeat itself—'Never Again', 'Nie Wieder', 'Jamais Plus'. But such a pledge is meaningless, if it is mouthed only by a vanguard of wise men and women, national leaders or intellectuals. It is equally impotent if articulated only by ordinary people. It has to be adopted as an overriding commitment by everyone in the world: our universal, number one aspiration, irrespective of faith, political or national allegiance, social class or lifestyle. Those with a strong religious conviction or ideological passion do not need to abandon their beliefs. They just need to incorporate 'Never Again' into their own philosophies as a top priority, the indispensable condition for everything else they believe in.

Unlike the world of 1913, today we have the means to create a worldwide movement that seeks to propagate a simple message. Even those of us who tend to sneer at social media can see their value in such a task. The slogan affirming the collective will of the people of the world should insinuate itself into every media platform and every event of 2014, from village fairs to the World Cup, from scientific congresses to TV soaps. Although only a beginning, I believe the power of this message could catalyse the deeper changes needed to avoid future peril. Never again!

Second, it is time to forgive and expiate the last traces of hatred and guilt stemming from the 1914 catastrophe. Blame for the slaughter on the Somme, for the Rape of Nanjing, for Nagasaki or Treblinka lies with the dead, not with any nation, religion, ideology or person alive today. Germany, in particular, must finally revert to being seen and seeing itself as a nation like any other. Communists should be able to proclaim their

belief in workers' ownership without having to bear the shame of Stalin's genocidal acts. Those who believe fervently in one or another version of a universal god should not have to apologize for the irrational, murderous hatred of their forbears. Scientists collaborated with those who made war, and sometimes were among their most enthusiastic and effective supporters. But today's scientists are innocent of such crimes. We share only the common duty to strive to ensure that future knowledge is applied for good not evil. Burying the past should be indissolubly linked to the affirmation of faith in the future.

Finally, affirmation and expiation are of little value unless accompanied by practical steps to rectify the world's underlying faults. Effective security instruments are needed to prevent conflict and deal with the consequences, when preventative actions fail. The importance of this is obscured by the usual fog of current events: the Eurozone debt crisis, the sequester, the ongoing chaos unleashed by the Arab Spring and the posturing of the North Korean leadership. But real, imminent and grave threats to world peace are out there and can be enumerated by any intelligent person. We need a UN with teeth.

Bush, Gorbachev, Thatcher and Mitterrand, emerging dazed from their Cold War bunkers in 1989, missed a golden opportunity to create the instruments we desperately need. But it is doubtful that inspired global leadership will come from the current generation of politicians either. Instead, the pressure must come from us, the people. Those of us who already apply our minds to solving theoretical conundrums about the natural universe have an important part to play, not least as advocates for action.

REFERENCE

1. Ferguson N (2006) *The War of the World*. Penguin

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