

As we all know, WW1 began in Summer 1914, after the assassination of Archiduke Franz Ferdinand, and lasted for 4 years and 3 months, until 11 November 1918, exactly one century ago.

Due to new military technologies and the horrors of trench warfare, WW1 saw unprecedented levels of carnage and destruction. By the time the war was over, and the Allied Powers claimed victory, more than 18 million people across 25 nations and territories—soldiers and civilians alike—had died.

It is the memory of those innumerable dead that we commemorate today.

In the terrible tragedy that unfolded during 4 years and 3 months, the two nations most affected, in relative terms to their population (Russia was the country which suffered the highest number of casualties), were Germany and France, each of which sent some 80 percent of their male population between the ages of 15 and 49 into battle.

The multiple consequences of the war were of a scale until then unknown.

In particular, the political disruption surrounding WW1 contributed to the fall of four venerable imperial dynasties—Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Turkey.

WW1 also brought about massive social change, as millions of women entered the workforce to support men who went to war, and to replace those who never came back. The first global war also facilitated the spreading of one of the world's deadliest global pandemics, the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, which killed an estimated 20 to 50 million people.

WW1 has also been referred to as the first modern war; many of the technologies we now associate with military conflict (machine guns, tanks, aerial combat and radio communications) were indeed introduced on a massive scale during WW1.

Among the very many direct witnesses of the end of WW1, I would like to share with you today three vivid accounts.

The first account emanates from one of the most famous statesmen of the 20th century, Sir Winston Churchill, who, before becoming 20 years later the unforgettable Prime Minister of Britain during the darkest hours of 1940, began WW1 as the First Lord of the Admiralty and ended it as the British Minister of Munitions. Here is what he had to say on the very day of the Armistice:

« It was a few minutes before the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. I stood at the window of my room looking up Northumberland Avenue towards Trafalgar Square, waiting for Big Ben to tell that the war was over. My mind strayed back across the scarring years to the scene and emotions of the night at the Admiralty when I listened for these same chimes in order to give the signal of war against Germany to our Fleets and squadrons across the world. And now all was over! ... All the Kings and Emperors who we had warred were in flight or exile. All their Armies and Fleets were destroyed or subdued. In this Britain had borne a notable part, and done her best from first to last.

... And then suddenly the first stroke of the chime. I looked again at the broad street beneath me. It was deserted... Then from all sides men and women came scurrying into the street. Streams of people poured out of all the buildings. The bells of London began to clash... I could see that Trafalgar square was already swarming ... All bounds were broken. Yes, the chains which had held the world were broken. Links of imperative need, links of discipline, links of brute force, links of self-sacrifice, links of terror, links of honour which had held our nation, nay, the greatest part of mankind, to grinding toil, to a compulsive cause -every one had snapped upon a few strokes of the clock. After fifty-two months of making burdens grievous to be borne and binding them on men's backs, at last, all at once, suddenly and everywhere, the burdens were cast down ».

The very same day, 200 miles to the South, on the other side of the Channel, in the city of Paris, where, in less than one hour from now, over 70 Heads of State and government will assemble at the Arc de Triomphe to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armistice, a young American serviceman, Captain Charles S. Normington, of the 127th Infantry, 32nd Division, who had come to fight in France all the way from Marshfield, Wisconsin, wrote to his family, back in the United States, to share his feelings and emotions with them. This is what he had to say: « Arrived here last night and was on the street today when the Armistice with Germany was signed. Anyone who was not here can never be told, or imagine the happiness of the people here... Immediately a parade was started on the rue des Italiens... In the parade, were hundreds of thousands of soldiers from the U.S., England, Canada, France, Australia, Italy and the colonies. Each soldier had his arms full of French girls, some crying, others laughing; each girl had to kiss every soldier before she would let him pass... There are some things, such as this, that never will be reproduced if the world lives a million years. There is nowhere on Earth I would rather be today than just where I am. Home would be nice, and is next, but Paris and France are free after 4 years and 3 months of war... Paris, that grand old city that has been dark for so long, is now all lighted up... Thank God, thank God, the war is over. I can imagine all the world is happy. But nowhere on Earth is there a demonstration as here in Paris. I only hope the soldiers who died for this cause are looking down upon the world today... The whole world owes this moment of real joy to the heroes who are not here to enjoy it ».

Two months later, in January 1919, in the very same city of Paris, not looking back to the event but attempting to chart the path for a better future, another man took the floor at the opening of the Paris Peace Conference. This man was the French Premier, Georges Clemenceau. This is what he had to say:

« The time is no more when diplomatists could meet to redraw with authority the map of the empires on the corner of a table. If you are to remake the map of the world, it is in the name of the peoples, and on condition that you shall faithfully interpret their thoughts, and respect the right of nations, small and great, to dispose of themselves, and to reconcile it with the right, equally sacred, of ethnical and religious minorities - a formidable task, which science and history, your two advisers, will contribute to illumine and facilitate.

You will naturally strive to secure the material and moral means of subsistence for all those peoples who are constituted or reconstituted into States; for those who wish to unite themselves to their neighbours; for those who divide themselves into separate units; for those who reorganize themselves according to their regained traditions; and, lastly, for all those whose freedom you have already sanctioned or are about to sanction...

While thus introducing into the world as much harmony as possible, you will, in conformity with the fourteenth of the propositions unanimously adopted by the Great Allied Powers, establish a general League of Nations, which will be a supreme guarantee against any fresh assaults upon the right of peoples.

You do not intend this International Association to be directed against anybody in future. It will not of set purpose shut out anybody, but, having been organized by the nations that have sacrificed themselves in defence of Right, it will receive from them its statutes and fundamental rules. It will lay down conditions to which its present or future adherents will submit, and, as it is to have for its essential aim to prevent, as far as possible, the renewal of wars, it will, above all, seek to gain respect for the peace which you will have established, and will find it the less difficult to maintain in proportion as this peace will in itself imply greater realities of justice and safer guaranties of stability.

By establishing this new order of things, you will meet the aspiration of humanity, which, after the frightful convulsions of these bloodstained years, ardently wishes to feel itself protected by a union of free peoples against the ever-possible revivals of primitive savagery.

An immortal glory will attach to the names of the nations and the men who have desired to co-operate in this grand work in faith and brotherhood, and who have taken pains to eliminate, from the future peace, causes of disturbance and instability.

... You are assembled in order to repair the evil that was done and to prevent a recurrence of it. You hold in your hands the future of the world. I leave you, gentlemen, to your grave deliberations, and I declare the Conference of Paris open. »

Well, we all know that, in particular because of the flaws in the Treaties that were to be signed soon after, this grand ambition did not bring the fruits Clemenceau had in mind on the opening of the Paris Peace Conference, and that the world would soon embark on another tragedy of an even larger scale.

Whatever those flaws and their dramatic consequences barely a generation later, today is the day to commemorate the nagging concern which excruciatingly animated the world leaders in charge of building a peace and security architecture in the immediate period following WW1, and which can be summarized in just two words: « never again »./.