11 November Lecture: Unjust peace

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(musical interlude: Elias Bachoura)

How much longer?

“The lesson that humanity learns from history consists mainly – if not exclusively – in the fact that mass murderers are inspired by their predecessors.” [1] These are the sombre words of Karel van het Reve. Gerard Reve’s brother was himself a gifted intellectual, an outstanding writer and also a great expert on Russian culture and history. He apparently did not believe in intellectual and moral progress. The dark pages of history are doomed to repeat themselves. We do not learn from the mistakes of the past.

It is difficult to completely disagree with Van het Reve. The story of humanity sometimes seems like a record that keeps skipping at the same wrong moments. When we look at history or the news, it is invariably a story of war, conflict, violence and the wounds with which we must continue towards the next war, the next conflict, the next violence. Nevertheless, I believe that looking back on the past is not entirely futile. I believe that we can draw meaningful lessons from the past to improve the present, even though humanity seems to be slow at learning. Today, on the date that marks the end of the First World War, I want to look at what that war can tell us about the wars that plague our world today, in particular the war in Ukraine.

Strangely, we do not always seem to realise this, but the war in Ukraine is a European war – it is our war, our new “great war”. What can the Great War of the past tell us about the great war of today? And also, what can we learn about what is often seen as the opposite of war: peace? The desire for peace is naturally strongest when war is raging. “How long until peace comes?” is therefore a question we often hear today, and probably ask ourselves.

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[1] van het Reve, 1989, p. 41.

How long until peace comes? It will soon be four years since Russia launched its large-scale attack on Ukraine. Four years. That is 48 months. That is 208 weeks. That is 1,460 days. That is roughly the duration of the First World War. Four years, 48 months, 208 weeks, 1,460 days. That is a lot of time for us, on the sidelines, to indulge in a luxury we cannot afford: war fatigue. Every day, Ukraine is still being attacked with missiles and drones. Every day, thousands of soldiers are still risking their lives on front lines that are barely moving. Every day, civilians are still forced to take shelter in basements and underground stations. Every day, Ukraine still wakes up as a wounded nation, and every day, Ukraine still goes to sleep with new wounds. It is an evil to which we, from the comfort of our distance, have become accustomed. What would once have been front-page news is now only worthy of a brief mention. The reporting on the war is only a shadow of the horror, the concern and the solidarity that filled us at the start of the invasion. Public disinterest is also translating into political unwillingness. Even though Russia is waging its hybrid warfare against us, even though it is openly threatening and undermining the European Union, European political support for Ukraine is eroding. In numerous EU countries, politicians who want to stop or scale back military aid to Ukraine have won elections.

Europe is, of course, far from being the only continent experiencing war. In the Middle East, Hamas’ barbaric attack on 7 October 2023 awakened a spirit of vengeance in Benjamin Netanyahu. Israel has tried to crush Hamas with ruthless destructive force. It seems to be merely a matter of semantics whether one speaks of “collateral damage”, “ethnic cleansing”, “war crimes” or “genocide”. The phrase changes little about the reality that tens of thousands of civilians have lost their lives in two years. According to some estimates, we should be talking about 100,000 or more. Be that as it may, behind every figure, behind every number, there is a human being whose life was stolen by the decisions of a few and the complicity of many.

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza are currently the most widely reported military conflicts, but that should not blind us to the fact that there are many other trouble spots around the world. In Africa alone, there are currently more than 35 armed conflicts and wars being fought, in locations such as Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Somalia and the Central African Republic. In Asia, armed violence is flaring up in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Myanmar and 18 other countries. In Colombia, Mexico, Peru and other Latin American countries, gang violence is reaching such proportions that it is being referred to as civil war. And then there is Syria, the country that has been torn apart by war for more than ten years.

How long until peace comes? It should be clear that peace on earth is nothing more than an annual Christmas wish. And it should be clear that this wish is far from being fulfilled – and probably never will be. Both history and the present support the assertion that as long as there are people, there will be war. This does not mean, of course, that striving for peace, and by extension world peace, is not worthwhile. But, in order to pursue an ideal, it is obviously necessary to have a proper understanding of it. You cannot strive for goodness if you do not, more or less, have a clear idea of what goodness is. You cannot compose a musical masterpiece if you do not, more or less, have a clear idea of what beauty is. You cannot achieve peace if you do not understand what peace is.

Unjust peace

What is peace? It can be instructive to take a few dictionaries as a starting point. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “peace” as a form of freedom: peace is ‘freedom from civil unrest or disorder”. Or, to put it positively, peace is “public order and security”. Larousse defines “paix” as a “state of countries and nations not at war with each other” or “the ending of war”. The DWDS describes “Friede” as “a contractually regulated situation between states that guarantees coexistence in peace and security on the basis of international law”. The Polish dictionary PWN defines “pokój” as “a relationship between states that are not at war with each other” or “an agreement to end fighting between states at war”. These examples show a broad consensus: peace is the opposite of war; peace is the silencing of weapons.

However, consensus is not synonymous with correctness. After all, peace is more than just the absence of violence. For us to be able to speak of peace between peoples or nations, it is not enough that they do not try to kill or oppress each other. Are the United States and Iran currently living in peace with each other? Although they are not bombarding each other with missiles or bombs, they are sworn enemies. They are not at war, but they do not have peace. To speak of true peace, more conditions must be met than the absence of physical violence. Peace is not measured solely by outward behaviour, but also by attitudes and ideas: by how people or groups think and speak about each other, and what they feel. There can be no peace, certainly no lasting peace, between two people who are not *at peace* with each other. Peace requires inner harmony and mutual goodwill, and therefore also the absence of hostile feelings, such as resentment, hatred, envy, jealousy, aversion and contempt for the other in his otherness.

The fact that peace is more than the opposite of war is also reflected in the Van Dale dictionary. The comprehensive dictionary of the Dutch language gives various definitions of peace, looking beyond the mere end or absence of armed conflict. Peace is described as a “state of tranquillity”, but that tranquillity is not merely external of character. It also involves “peace of mind”, inner peace and good relations. This is a lot more than just not trying to shoot each other.

Whereas dictionaries must limit themselves to a handful of words to define a concept, philosophers can use an abundance of language to explain things. Philosophy attempts to gain a better understanding of the world through better concepts. Conceptual analysis is a fundamental part of the philosophical endeavour of gaining a deeper understanding of our *human condition*. Since warfare and the threat of war are an integral part of our existence, it should come as no surprise that there is also a rich, centuries-old philosophical tradition on war and peace. Entire bookshelves can be filled with philosophical treatises, essays and reflections on the subject. Countless great thinkers have pondered the question of “just war”. Humans are a violent species; there is no escaping that fact. Violence is often terrible. But at the same time, violence can sometimes seem necessary to prevent a greater evil. What criteria must a war meet in order for us to call it “just”? Philosophers have spun a multitude of ideas around this, but, broadly speaking, the answer to the question boils down to two components: the end and the means. On the one hand, we look at the *why* of war, and, on the other, at the *how*. The *why* concerns the domain of *jus ad bellum*: the cause, the motivation, the reasons for waging war. The *how* concerns the domain of *jus in bello*: the manner in which the war is fought. You can have a just reason for waging war – for example, in self-defence or to stop a genocidal mass murderer. But, if you then commit mass murder yourself, you cannot speak of a just war. The reverse is also possible, of course. In order for us to be able to speak of a just war, both the goal and the means must be legitimate[2].

However, there is a remarkable gap in the centuries-old history of thought. Curiously, the opposite of “just war” has attracted almost no philosophical interest. I am not referring to “unjust war”. The ultimate opposite of “just war” is not “unjust war”, but “unjust peace”. The concept of “unjust peace” may seem somewhat strange, and perhaps even contradictory. Isn’t peace, understood as the absence of physical violence, always a good and just thing? Isn’t it always good when people, groups, countries and nations don’t deliberately try to kill each other? The answer, as is often the case in human affairs, is complex. When we talk about “unjust peace”, we are referring to the all-too-neglected domain of *jus post bellum*: the justice of the agreements and provisions made after the war, and how former enemies relate to each other from then on. When we think about a “just war”, we must look not only at the aims and means of warfare but also at its consequences. And these are by no means always just.

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[2] A good overview of further interpretations of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* in the tradition of just war can be found in Carl Ceulemans’ *On War and Ethics.*

When we look at history, we learn that many peace treaties have been unjust, both intrinsically and in their consequences. The prototypical example of this is the end of the First World War, whose peace provisions paved the way for the Second World War. There is some debate about the extent to which and the manner in which this was the case, but there is little to no debate about the fact that it was the case. The Second World War arose from the psychological, social, economic and political ruins of the First World War.

If we take the First World War and the interwar period as a case study, we can detect recognisable patterns that also threaten peace in Europe today. History warns us: today’s unjust peace contains the seeds from which tomorrow’s war will sprout. If we want to understand what exactly an “unjust peace” means and what dangers it harbours, we need to better understand the components of a lasting, genuine peace. I would like to highlight four criteria – humanitarian, psychological, cultural and political – that a state of non-violence must meet in order to truly be called a state of peace. A peace that does not meet these criteria is unjust.

Humanitarian justice

Peace treaties that did not bring peace: these were Versailles, Trianon and the three other treaties concluded in 1919 and 1920. They immediately gave rise to new armed conflicts and wars. The map of Europe was completely redrawn and, in many border areas that had been shifted, fighting for national sovereignty and territorial integrity continued throughout the 1920s and beyond. It is often overlooked in the European historical consciousness that, in the aftermath of the First World War, some ten million Europeans were condemned to the existence of displaced persons, refugees and stateless individuals. Around 600,000 Belgians fled to France and the Netherlands during the war, and in many cases, they were able to return after the turmoil had subsided. But in Central and Eastern Europe, this was not the case for millions of refugees. They could not return to where they had come from, and they were not allowed to stay where they were. As a consequence, millions of refugees had nowhere to go after 1918. Although the League of Nations proclaimed so-called minority treaties, in practice these remained dead letters. For those millions of people, the end of the war was by no means the beginning of peace. They were treated unfairly, inhumanely and unjustly in refugee camps.

War and violence invariably bring about a humanitarian catastrophe. People flee, lose their homes and, more importantly, lose their sense of belonging. The first task of a just peace is therefore to care for these displaced persons: they must be given a new home in a new world. A peace that does not set this as its primary goal is a false peace and the beginning of a new war.

This is a theme that Hannah Arendt explores in depth in her groundbreaking work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The book was published in the mid-1950s. Over hundreds of pages, Arendt examines the ideological, political and social causes of the rise of Nazism and communism. For Arendt, the direct relationship between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second World War was indisputable. That causal link existed, among other things, in the way Europe abandoned its own refugees to their unjust fate.

In her writings, the philosopher shows great concern for minorities and refugees. This is no coincidence. After all, Arendt herself had experienced firsthand what it meant to be a refugee. After fleeing the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s, she had been stateless for more than ten years. She knew what she was writing about, and not just from a theoretical point of view. We have a fundamental moral duty to take care of war refugees, both during and after a war. If we fail to fulfil that moral duty, we are not only failing them but also ourselves. After all, a situation in which countless people are displaced is a social powder keg that threatens public order, security and peace, both within and between countries.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt described how harmful it is when the plight of stateless persons and war refugees is not recognised and resolved. A crucial aspect of totalitarian ideology is the demonisation and dehumanisation of refugees and minorities. As the number of people labelled as undesirable in a country increases, so does the size of the police state. This leads to a downward spiral, after which state oppression ultimately takes on its totalitarian form. In the nation states that emerged from the First World War in a precarious condition and were at a loss as to how to deal with the scale of the refugee problem, the solution of forcibly removing “undesirable subjects” became increasingly apparent. And in order to do that – to put the euphemistic phrase “removing undesirable subjects” into practice – it was not just convenient but necessary to rob the “undesirable subjects” of their humanity. When we no longer see another person as human, it becomes easier to get rid of them.

Psychological and cultural healing

The abandonment of this humanitarian mission after the First World War was not just an intrinsic moral failure. Its consequences also proved disastrous. It led to increased tension between peoples, ethnic groups and nations, resulting in ever less understanding and ever more hatred between them. And where hatred reigns, peace cannot prevail.

The 1920s were an era of resentment, as described by Arendt. The humiliation and reparations imposed on Germany only fuelled hatred and aversion. The decade is also known as the “Roaring Twenties” in English, owing to developments that mainly took place in the United States: economic growth and exciting cultural innovations, such as the rise of cinema, sound film and jazz music. But in Europe, the 1920s were a time of economic, political, and social malaise and instability. Hostility was the result. This was a time of “pervasive hatred of everybody and everything, without a focus”, in which “everybody was against everybody else”.[3] Solidarity between nationalities, peoples and individuals was at an all-time low, and it is not possible to build peace at such a low point. New conflicts are always brewing in the deepest depths of socio-economic malaise.

After the First World War, this widespread resentment, hatred, fear and aversion in relation to the “other” proved to be the driving psychological force behind the rise of totalitarianism. When the end of armed conflict is not accompanied by the beginning of a psychological transformation, peace is a long way off. When two countries or two people want peace with each other, they must overcome the psychological sources of enmity within themselves.

Antipathy on the psychological level translates into nationalism on the cultural level. Nationalism should not be confused with patriotism, love of country or national sovereignty. Nationalism is an ideology based on one’s own nation’s supposed supremacy and opposition to other cultures. To understand this, we can consult the British conservative philosopher Roger Scruton. Scruton himself was a fervent defender of popular sovereignty and the idea of the nation state, but at the same time he was a critic of nationalism. The healthy basis for popular sovereignty is patriotism, but nationalism is a perversion of patriotism:

> *Suspicion of the patriotic motive arises partly because people confuse patriotism with nationalism. The latter is not a form of loyalty, but an ideology and a call to arms on behalf of it. Often nationalism results from the collapse of empire, when*

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[3] Arendt, 2017, p. 350.

> *people previously ruled by a distant metropolitan power look for a more local form of legitimate government, a form that will correspond to the customs, language and history that tie them to each other. Almost invariably, however, this involves an act of self-assertion – either against the collapsing empire, or against rival nationalities embarking on the same project of 'self-determination'. The history of this project in our time is not a happy one.* [4]

Where Scruton, putting it mildly, writes that the history of nationalism is not a happy one, he is obviously thinking of the First and Second World Wars. Both arose from nationalism of the worst kind: a culture and ideology driven by the mindset of hostility towards others.

Political change

In order for countries to truly exist peacefully with each other after a war, it is necessary to overcome the psychological and cultural sources of division. And that effort must, of course, be reflected on the political stage. A change of course is needed – not only in society but also among the political leaders of that society.

Earlier, I said that philosophers have almost entirely neglected the domain of *jus post bellum*. In the limited literature that exists on the subject, one of the main questions is this: to what extent is "regime change" a necessary part of a just post-war settlement? Can two countries that were previously at war with each other begin to coexist peacefully if those politically responsible for the violence of war remain in office? The literature puts forward the argument that this kind of political change – a change of personnel or regime – is only necessary when the political leaders of a country have committed genocide. [5]

It goes without saying that you cannot build lasting, long-term peace with a country whose political leaders have committed genocide. But that provision seems to me to be only a minimum condition. After all, it is wrong to see "genocide" as the top step of a pyramid of evil. Professor of international law Philippe Sands also points this out. Genocide is a different, but not necessarily greater, evil than, for example, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other mass murders. [6] Such atrocities also fall under international criminal law, and, if justice is a prerequisite for genuine peace, it follows that lasting peace cannot be achieved with political leaders who are responsible for such atrocities. In many cases, political change is necessary to achieve genuine peace after a war. This involves holding war criminals and those with the highest political responsibility to account, but it is just as much about changing the political discourse. The political discourse in wartime and the political discourse in peacetime are worlds apart. Countries that have fought each other in the past must find a new way of talking to and about each other.

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[4] Scruton, 2001, p. 26.

[5] See, for example, *Jus Post Bellum* by Gary Bass.

The role of forgiveness

One of the most important ways in which countries can work towards psychological, cultural and political healing is forgiveness. Forgiveness is a prerequisite for lasting peace. Indeed, forgiveness is a crucial political virtue. What applies to individuals also applies to nations: they can only move forward when they forgive one another for the evil they have done to each other. There are many examples to support this claim. It took years of penance and forgiveness for Germany to develop normal, peaceful relations with its neighbours after the Second World War. That process is immortalised in the iconic image of the “kneeling chancellor”: Willy Brandt kneeling in Warsaw in 1970 as a sign of remorse for the suffering that Nazi Germany had inflicted on Poland. Similarly, South Africa moved on from apartheid only after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a passionate preacher of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a prerequisite for peace.

Forgiveness is not the same thing as trying to “forgive and forget”; it is not the same thing as sweeping the past under the carpet. Forgiveness means consciously reflecting on the evil that has been done and learning to give it a place. Forgiveness is necessary to turn the page on the past. Without forgiveness, we remain stuck in the same chapter. Where the process of forgiveness is lacking, lasting peace is also lacking. And we see that today.

Whereas Germany went through a decades-long process of reckoning with its misdeeds, Russia has never had to atone for its own: not for the millions of people who were put in gulag camps and died, not for the Holodomor genocide (the famine deliberately created by Stalin in the Ukrainian countryside), not for the millions of victims of Russia's deadliest export product: communism. We are seeing the consequences of this today in Ukraine, where history is repeating itself. Nothing Putin is doing today was not also done by his predecessors. One might almost believe that Karel van het Reve was right after all. What we learn from the past is mainly how to kill each other.

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[6] A particularly instructive book in this regard is Sands' *East West Street.*

For dictators like Putin, the 20th century is a manual, not a warning. He reads the so-called black book of communism as a script for his own repressive regime. Crime and Punishment? These concepts may be central to a masterpiece of Russian literature, but in Russian international politics, they seem not to exist. The massive crimes of Russian leaders go unpunished. Russia has not had to confess its guilt or pay for its past misdeeds. History repeats itself, and that makes forgiveness enormously difficult, if not impossible.

After all, atonement and a sense of guilt are essential conditions for forgiveness. Both Hannah Arendt and the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch emphasise this in their reflections on forgiveness. Remarkably few philosophers have placed the phenomenon of forgiveness at the centre of their thinking, but Arendt and certainly Jankélévitch did. They consider the notion of the unforgivable to be as important as that of forgiveness itself. For them, the Nazi criminals who showed no remorse for their actions were unforgivable. In his 1967 book *Le pardon*, Jankélévitch does not shy away from harsh words: one must not forgive "pigs and their sows", he says. He calls doing so "cowardly indulgence" and "fraternising with the executioners".[7] Forgiveness is only possible if the perpetrator comes to understand what he has done and begins to repent. True forgiveness is a personal relationship between people, and it involves the whole person. Forgiveness is a moral and psychological *tête-à-tête*. Unfortunately, Russia has never shown such an attitude. And that causes great concern in 2025.

Concerns for today

Stopping a war is easy; achieving peace is difficult. That realisation forces us to be pessimistic about reality. We can see how difficult it is to achieve a ceasefire and a genuine truce in Ukraine and in Gaza. How much more difficult will it be to let peace truly speak after the silencing of the weapons? The former does not automatically follow from the latter. It is not because the weapons are silent that peace speaks. Peace is a long-term endeavour. And if not everyone is willing to work towards it, every peace will be short lived.

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[7] Jankélévitch, 2025, p. 225.

When we consider the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the humanitarian, psychological, political and cultural changes necessary for peace do not appear to be imminent. It seems highly unlikely that Russia and its political leaders will have to answer for their crimes before the International Criminal Court. It also seems, at best, a very distant possibility that Netanyahu will ever have to answer or apologise for the suffering he has caused hundreds of thousands of people. We should not expect any apologies from Hamas for the 7 October attacks. And, while some of Hamas' leaders have been eliminated, the psychological sources of mutual aversion and hatred have only grown stronger in the Middle East over the past two years.

We must also be concerned about the fate of the millions of refugees created by the violence of war in Ukraine and the Middle East. What should be done about the thousands of Ukrainian children who have been stolen and sent to Russian re-education camps? What should be done about the former and current inhabitants of the areas in eastern Ukraine where the fighting has been most intense? When there is no long-term vision, there is no vision for peace.

The same applies to the millions of Palestinians living in refugee camps. Over the past two years, almost all of the attention has been focused on Palestinians still in Gaza. Of course, a solution must be found for those whose homes have been reduced to ruins. But the same applies to the millions of Palestinians who have been displaced since 1948. Ten years after the Nakba, a dozen academics and experts wrote a report on what should happen to the Palestinian refugees. One of those experts was, not coincidentally, Hannah Arendt. The report contains the following sentence, which has unfortunately only become more relevant:

> *The Palestine refugee problem must be solved first if there is to be any change in the psychological climate and any prospect of a genuine stable peace in that part of the world.*[8]

Peace in the Middle East will only be possible when the psychological climate fundamentally changes – when hatred and resentment are overcome, both in Israel and among the Palestinians. And that can only be achieved by treating each other with humanity and allowing each other to live a dignified life: a life that is not possible in the deprivation of refugee camps.

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[8] A. Lerner, H. Arendt, et.al., 1958, p. 10.

Unfortunately, there is no indication that this humanitarian task will be made the primary goal of peace negotiations. Moreover, the Palestinian refugee problem has only become more complex. We have put millions of them in camps – these sinkholes of history – and hoped that they would simply disappear in them. But, several generations and 80 years later, they are still there. Spread across 68 refugee camps, approximately 5 million Palestinians live displaced lives. Generation after generation, they are stuck in those camps with no realistic prospect of a solution: no dignified existence, no prospect of peace.

The danger of nationalism

The absence of a process of forgiveness, the lack of a humanitarian plan for millions of displaced persons, the resurgence of hatred and resentment – all of this makes the dream of peace on earth today all the more illusory. Added to this is the fact that we are living in a time of resurgent nationalism. Politicians of this ilk are gaining ground worldwide: a nationalist spectre is haunting Europe and the wider world.

We see this in the European Union, where nationalist politicians are stringing together election victories. We see it in the United States, where a president is trying to assert the greatness of his own country with a foreign policy and a trade policy that are aggressive and hostile. And it also struck me, very deeply, when I was recently in Sarajevo. I was ten years old when the siege of Sarajevo began in April 1992. The television images are etched in my memory forever. During the four-year siege, more than 10,000 civilians were killed. Many died in mortar attacks or were shot by snipers from the surrounding hills. This is a fraction of the estimated 100,000 people who lost their lives in the Bosnian War.

We are now, more than 30 years later, 25 years into a new century. But the 21st century teaches us that there is no escaping the 20th. The same demons from the past continue to haunt us. And nationalism is one of those demons. The Bosnians still feel the hot breath of Serbian nationalists on their necks. And among their other neighbours, the Croats, another unhealthy nationalist revival is underway. The threat comes from outside and from within, because in Bosnia and Herzegovina itself, Serbian nationalists are undermining the country’s right to exist. Milorad Dodik, president of the Serbian entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is suspected of plotting to secede. Despite an international arrest warrant, Dodik has spent the past few months in Russia, Hungary and Serbia for meetings with Putin, Orbán and Vučić. It may seem somewhat ironic, but we have seen it clearly in recent years: today's most active globalists are nationalists. There is a globalisation of right-wing nationalism underway. Nationalist power politicians seek each other out and stand shoulder to shoulder on the international political stage. Once again, the slightest spark could quickly turn into a global conflagration, with various alliances dragging countless other countries into armed conflict, as we saw at the outbreak of the First World War. Nationalism, and nationalist alliances, threaten world peace.

We must face up to the dangers of nationalism as an ideology and dare to call it by its name. In the words of Rosa Luxemburg, nationalism is a dangerous "reactionary utopia". [9] Luxemburg was a left-wing thinker who deeply engaged with the world in a practical and meaningful way. The fire with which she fought *for* democracy, freedom of expression and the improvement of the lot of the less fortunate was as great as the fire with which she fought *against* nationalism, war and injustice. She spent almost the entire First World War behind bars for organising anti-war protests and writing anti-war pamphlets. In the heated run-up to the war, she sensed how nationalism was adding fuel to the fire of international tensions. She had a strong feeling that the world was heading for an unprecedented cataclysm. In an article published in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* in April 1913, she already predicted that a small spark would set the whole world ablaze. She sensed this so clearly because she was aware that war rarely, if ever, comes out of the blue. It is necessary to look at how a society thinks, writes and talks about others. War does not begin with weapons but with words, just like murder. That is why language is the canary in the coal mine: when public discourse shifts towards systemic hate speech, bloodshed is not far off. Luxemburg asserted that war is methodical mass murder that requires a kind of mental derangement, a moral insanity, before it can take place. The cruelty of our speech and thoughts precedes the cruelty of our actions. As Luxemburg wrote:

> *In normal people, systematic murder is only possible when a state of intoxication has first been created. This has always been the tried-and-tested method of those who wage war. The brutality of actions must be accompanied by a similar brutality of thoughts and attitudes; the latter must prepare and accompany the former.*[10]

The surge in nationalism and dehumanising language used today should put us on high alert and make us realise that peace is further away than we would like. Leading Israeli politicians who are still in office have used genocidal hate speech. The horrific attack on 7 October 2023 was only possible because the perpetrators no longer saw their victims as human beings but as targets. The large-scale Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022 was preceded by years of hateful rhetoric in the Russian state media. We see this time and again in other trouble spots around the world. Before you can take people's lives on a massive scale, you must first rob them of their humanity through the way you talk and think about them.

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[9] Luxemburg, 1903, p. 383.

[10] Luxemburg, 1916, p. 13.

Among the most poignant passages in Luxemburg's oeuvre are her descriptions of the violence of war in her pamphlet essay *The Crisis of Social Democracy*, written while she was in prison. War does not mean merely material destruction or loss of human life. What is lost in war is the humanity of human beings themselves; that which distinguishes us from animals, that which is grandly called "civilisation". The "other" is made into an enemy, a veritable devil, and dehumanised:

> *Cities are turned into ruins, countries into deserts, villages into graveyards, entire nations into beggars. […] Every diplomat calls his colleague in the enemy country a desperate criminal, every government regards the other as the evil spirit of a people who deserve only the contempt of the world. […] Capitalist society stands ashamed, dishonoured, dripping with blood and bathed in filth. Not as we usually see it – playing the role of enforcer of peace, of justice, of order, of philosophy, or of ethics – but as a roaring beast, as an orgy of anarchy, as a pestilential breath, destroying culture and humanity.*[11]

The lament of the earth

Humanity itself is being destroyed by warfare. Every person who cares about our shared humanity should therefore feel personally involved in every war that is raging. However, the opposite is often true. At the beginning of this lecture, I alluded to the hundred or more wars and violent conflicts being fought on our planet. Often, we are barely aware of them, if at all. You cannot care about something if you do not even know it exists. But even with the war closest to us – the war in Ukraine – we do not always feel truly involved. As I said, we now shrug off news reports that would have horrified us two years ago.

Even if we don't realise it, the war in Ukraine is our war – our new, great European war. This is not only because we are providing military and other assistance to Ukraine. It is not only because Russia is waging a hybrid war against European countries. It is also because Ukraine belongs to the heart of Europe. Ukraine may seem to us a distant country on the periphery of our continent. But, both historically and culturally, Ukraine is intimately connected to the whole of European history and culture. Countless great figures from literature, art, science and philosophy have their roots in that seemingly far-flung corner of our existence. Joseph Roth, the European writer *par excellence* of the interwar period, came from Galicia. Emmanuel Lévinas, the great French philosopher who explored the face of the "other", spent his early teenage years in Kharkiv. Martin Buber, that other great thinker, grew up in Lemberg, now Lviv. The list is long.

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[11] Ibid., p. 4.

If we do not even realise the many ways we are involved in the war in Ukraine, if we do not realise that the war in Ukraine is our war, how can we expect to feel moved by and involved in conflicts that are being fought even further afield? Yet every war concerns us directly, not only because of our shared humanity but also because of our shared planet. It is not only people and humanity that perish in war time; the earth, the planet that sustains us all, also bleeds in every armed conflict. For those who are willing to hear it, the lament of the suffering earth resounds in each war.

Almost every war is an ecological catastrophe. There are countless examples of this. Here, too, the First World War is a point of reference. Its ecological impact was greater than that of previous wars. After all, the First World War was the first one in which chemical weapons were used on a large scale. The same applies to artillery; the heavy metals in artillery shells polluted the soil over the long term. Specific acts of war, such as the destruction of oil refineries, caused large-scale pollution of water and soil. These are just a few examples of many incidents that prove the same thing: where war rages, the earth bleeds. And, long after the clamour of arms has ceased, war continues to claim victims.

It is no coincidence that the term "ecocide" came into use during the Vietnam War. The American biologist Arthur Galston coined the term in 1970 in the *Journal of Environmental Science* in connection with studies on the impact on health and the environment of "Agent Orange", the toxic defoliant that the United States dropped by the millions of tonnes over Vietnam.

Today, we continue to see that war is synonymous with environmental destruction. In June 2023, Russia blew up the Kakhovka Dam, contaminating the soil within a radius of many kilometres with heavy metals: an act of ecocide, according to Ukraine and many observers. A report by the Initiative on Greenhouse Gas Accounting of War revealed that the war in Ukraine has resulted in an additional 230 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions. To put that into perspective, 230 million tonnes of carbon dioxide is the annual emission of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden combined.

A recent study by various researchers from the United Kingdom calculated that the climatic cost of the war in Gaza is greater than the annual carbon dioxide emissions of many entire countries. The ecological footprint after 15 months of warfare was comparable to the annual emission of an astounding 84 (!) gas-fired power stations. These are figures that give pause for thought and cause for pessimism. The ecological cost of the arms race – the production of weapons – is immense in itself; the use of those weapons is nothing short of disastrous. We need to become more aware of the long-term ecological effects of warfare. Wherever war rages, biodiversity, nature and the climate suffer alongside people. This too is a fact that must be taken into account in *jus post bellum*. If we want a just order after war, there must be accountability for the ecological damage that has been caused.

The world has entered a new arms race, which is bad news in both the short term and the long term: for humans and for the environment. While politicians perform all kinds of daring feats to multiply defence budgets, there is no money for other urgent problems. And the biggest problem of all seems to have fallen off the political agenda almost entirely, even though it is only exacerbated by the turmoil of war: the destruction of the environment and climate change. This should concern us all the more because we know that climate change will only lead to more conflicts as the habitability of our planet diminishes.

This realisation, the realisation of the ecological cost of warfare, necessarily brings with it another. When we know how harmful war is to the planet that sustains us, we must also take into account the fact that every war is *our* war. Every war concerns us directly, because it is fought on our earth and because our earth is its victim.

Martin Luther King famously said: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” We can expand on that statement: if war is raging somewhere, it threatens peace everywhere. *War anywhere is a threat to peace everywhere*. We see this in various ways today, and not only in how Russia is threatening our peace. I previously quoted Hannah Arendt and other academics on the need to find a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. That solution is necessary for peace in the Middle East, but the quote goes even further, stating: “Nor is it only the peace of the Middle East which is in danger. The whole world is living under the shadow of nuclear catastrophe."[12] Today, we are seeing how that warning is as relevant and accurate as it was back then. The war in Gaza is causing global instability, an increased threat of terrorism, rising anti-Semitism and, as the ultimate threat, a possible global escalation due to the fact that various superpowers are in different alliances. Those who shrug off war in the world are shrugging off their own future.

How much longer?

How much longer until peace comes to Europe? It is my fear that the humanitarian, psychological, cultural and political changes necessary for lasting peace are not a priority on the agendas of world leaders. Peace is a long-term endeavour, but in politics, short-term thinking is often the norm. If we do not work towards a just peace, the question is not how long it will take for peace to come to Europe. The real question is: how long until a new war breaks out?

I have called the war in Ukraine our new great European war. Like the old Great War, it has been raging for almost four years. And the parallels are numerous and not very hopeful. The First World War and the peace that followed show how rising nationalism was both a driving force behind the war and an offshoot of it. They show how disastrous the psychology and politics of hatred, aversion and resentment are. As at the beginning of the last century, a nationalist revival is underway in Europe that is undermining peace. Today, Europe is again ravaged by war and all the humanitarian and ecological misery that goes with it. And today, too, there is a danger that this war will be concluded with a peace that is unjust.

The cliché is that in times of peace, one must prepare for war. The opposite is equally true: in times of war, one must prepare for peace and think very carefully about what kind of peace one wants to achieve. Unfortunately, Ukraine's allies lack a coherent, unanimous view of what kind of peace they are striving for and, above all, what kind of peace they should absolutely avoid.

We can look back today, but that only makes sense if we also look ahead and hold up the past as a mirror to ourselves. I believe we *can* learn from the mistakes of the past, but we must also *be willing* to learn. The past should make us aware of the consequences of an unjust peace. I do not have a crystal ball, but it is very likely that Ukraine will be forced into an unjust peace. It will lose territory, it will receive few concessions and guarantees, and, above all, it will receive no apologies from Russia. Russia never apologises for what it does to its neighbours. The wounds of the past have never been able to heal. How, then, can the wounds of the present be healed?

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[12] A. Lerner, H. Arendt, et.al., 1958, pp. 10-11.

“Forgiveness is an effort that must be made again and again,[13]” wrote Vladimir Jankélévitch, quoted earlier. Forgiveness is a lasting and, above all, mutual effort. If one of the parties is not prepared to make that effort, the path to forgiveness is closed to the other party as well. And therein lies the beginning of a future conflict. When the weapons are finally laid down in Ukraine, the country will unfortunately be far from peaceful. And neither will we.

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[13] Jankélévitch, 2025, p. 7

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