

# A NORTH WEST LAMENT FOR EUROPE

By Andrew Harris



The UK can leave the European Union but it can't leave Europe. But what is Europe? Excluding Russia west of the Urals and Belarus for political rather than geographical reasons, Europe is home to nearly 600 million people who live in 46 countries although 9 – like Gibraltar – are not independent and have tiny populations. If our region was a country it would be the 19th most populous European state.

The history of Europe is glorious and tragic in equal measure. For centuries it has led the world in literature, music and art but also conflict. In the 1,000

years after the birth of Christ there were only 44 recorded conflicts in Europe. But in the following 9 centuries there were 462 recorded conflicts – an average of 51 every 100 years. The continent became much more bloody in the 20th century with no fewer than 184 wars, revolutions and major battles which killed millions. We like to think that we have put all this behind us but in the first 19 years of the 21st century there have already been 23 conflicts – of which 4 are continuing. The ability to record conflict may have improved over the centuries but the massive

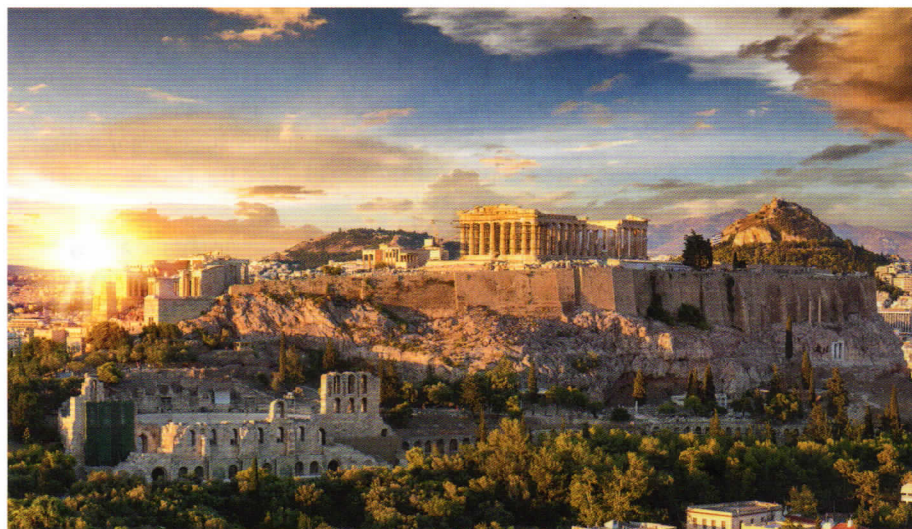
slaughter in Europe during the last 105 years is undeniable.

Even genocide hasn't gone away. The slaughter of 8,372 Bosniak men and boys in Srebrenica in July 1995 should remind us that it can all happen again. As the British statesman Edmund Burke (1729-94) said "*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing*".

What is now the European Union was created for noble reasons. In the shadow of World War 2 it brought France, Germany, Italy and the 3 Benelux countries together



**The Europe of 2019.**



**Symbol of our ancient civilisation. The Acropolis of Athens.**



in the European Coal and Steel Community so that the first 3 would be interdependent and unable to wage war against each other. The leading light in proposing this Community was Jean Monnet (1888-1979) who was a man of great vision and influence – often called the ‘Father of Europe’ - but who never held any elected office. He and Robert Schuman – Prime Minister of France for 8 months – insisted on lofty principles such as the free movement of goods, services, capital and people and ‘ever closer union’. The people were never consulted about these aims which became the Holy Grail. The basis of European unity progressed through the European Economic Community, the European Community to the European Union without any of these principles changing in any way. At every stage this evolving union was successful in enabling member states to improve their economies – helped by transfers from rich to poor countries - and this attracted more members so that after Croatia joined in 2013 no fewer than 28 of the 37 independent states in Europe were members of the European Union.

European structures are confusing. They range from geographical Europe of 48 countries including Russia and Belarus to (without the UK) the 27 countries of the European Union to 19 countries in the Euro Area (aka the Euro Zone) to a different 28 European countries in NATO to 26 countries in the Schengen area with no border checks then 31 countries in the European Economic Area – which includes non-EU members – and the Customs Union with 31 countries without the UK.

It is strange that nearly 600 million people who live in the 46 countries of our Europe are intimidated by Russia with a population of 145 million. The combined GDP or wealth of the 46 countries (\$18,441 bn) is more than 11.6 times larger than the economy of Russia (\$1,578 bn) which is only 60% the size of the UK economy (\$2,638 bn) on its own. Despite this the United States of another continent – and Canada - are more concerned about the security of Europe than most European countries. The NATO target and requirement for defence spending is 2% of GDP but this is currently only achieved by

**St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Symbol of Christianity.**



**The Piazza San Marco aka St Mark's Square in Venice. Nearly 1,000 years of history.**



**The Battle of Waterloo as depicted by the Dutchman Jan Willem Pieneman 1779-1853.**



**The horrors of trench warfare.**

4 European countries – the UK, Poland, Greece and Estonia – although others promise to improve. The United States spends 3.5% of GDP on defence but they have major military commitments in parts of the world – like the Pacific – where NATO is not involved.

Due to its population and wealth Europe should surely be able to defend itself as it may not be able to depend upon others for ever. If the United States can betray their Kurd allies today they could abandon Europe tomorrow. A recent authoritative report in the 'Economist' said "*The transatlantic relationship is faltering. Europe and America no longer feel they can rely on each other to the extent that they could in the past. Mr Trump has proved an unreliable ally which is why more and more Europeans talk about the need for 'strategic autonomy'.*" That prospect is, hopefully, a long way off but it could be a sign of things to come.

The 1776 constitution of the United States of America begins 'We hold these truths to be self-evident'. By the same token is it not self-evident that the independent countries of Europe should co-operate in some way to achieve their peace and prosperity? This can take many forms without trampling on the sovereignty of proud and ancient countries. Your columnist believes that most of us can probably agree about the defects of the European Union but disagree about what to do about them. The obvious options are to remain and work for reform or leave. But then what? The existing structure of the European Union has 5 major defects –

- No form of unity can command the hearts and minds of the people it serves if it is led by commissioners who are not elected. The sight of unelected commissioners dictating to the elected ministers of member countries is unacceptable to



**Going over the top. Often to a terrible death.**

many people.

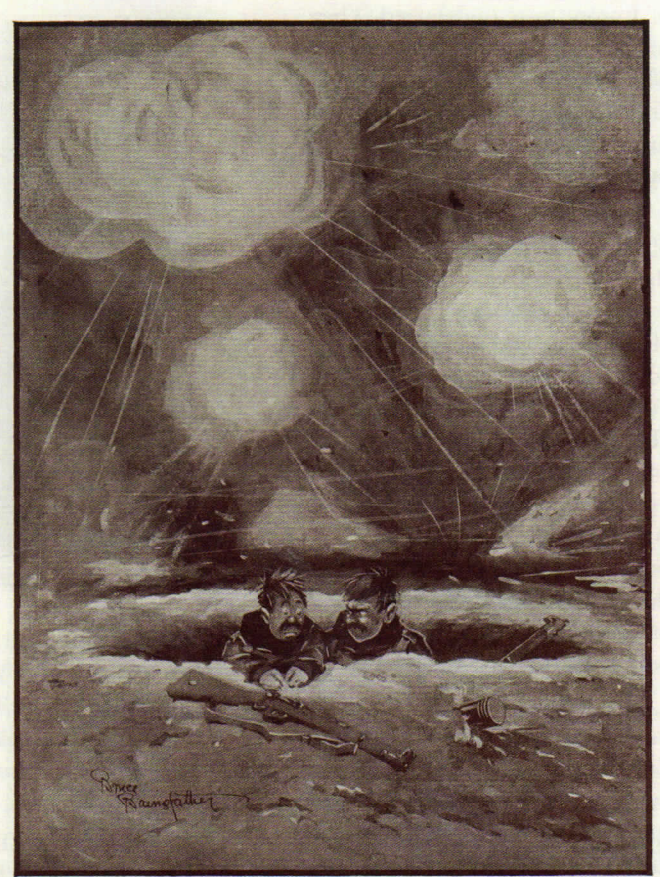
- The European Commission is the master of Europe but should be its servant. It would achieve much more if it was the 'civil service' for Europe really accountable to elected ministers from member countries working together. It should be headed by a 'permanent secretary' by another name. There is no place for a President who complains that he has no presidential residence where he or she can entertain foreign presidents and prime ministers. If any form of European Union needs a President he or she should be elected by the people.

- The European Parliament is a sham. Its role is to dispose of issues rather than propose them and is therefore entirely negative. It is held captive by the European Commission which has the initiative. Unless Europe becomes a country it doesn't need a parliament.

- No single parliament can effectively represent the people of Europe. Any major and fundamental change – which could be an improvement – should be approved by a referendum and the result should be binding.

- Any European 'government' should fully apply the principle – long accepted in theory - of 'subsidiarity'. This is a clumsy word which means that a central authority 'should only perform those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level.' This is, as Hamlet put it, more honoured in the breach than in the observance. Being perceived as getting involved in the shape of bananas and such trivia is the quickest way of losing public support.

The only time that the people of Europe have been asked about the way in which European unity should evolve was in 2005 when the proposed Constitution for Europe was rejected by 55% of those who voted in France after a turn-out of 69%.



**"Well, if you knows of a better 'ole, go to it."**

**Bruce Bairnsfather saw grim humour in almost everything.**



**Tyne Cot Cemetery in Belgium. The biggest British and Commonwealth military cemetery in the world reminds us of the deaths of more than 35,000 young men.**

Voters in the Netherlands rejected it by a similar margin. The masters of Europe were undeterred. They rehashed the proposed Constitution which became the Lisbon Treaty and was approved without any further consultation with or voting by the people.

It is hoped that the great majority of fair-minded people accept the idea that the countries of Europe should co-operate in some way in the interests of the peace and security of their continent. But the people of the UK, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, Hungary and Ireland have in different ways and different times rejected the imposition of what Brussels wants. Anyone who has the best interests of the people of Europe at heart must regret this trend which judges only one form of European co-operation. Opinion polls tell a more ominous story.

According to a think-tank in Berlin, most Europeans believe that the European Union (EU) will collapse over the next 2 decades – raising the spectre of new conflicts and war on the continent.

Polling in 14 European countries found that majorities in France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, the Netherlands, Austria, Slovakia, Greece and the Czech Republic thought that



**World War 2 saw the destruction of complete cities by bombing.**

the EU would fall apart in the next 10 to 20 years. This YouGov survey for the European Council on Foreign Relations also found that many voters thought that this year's Europe-wide elections would be the last.

President Macron of France wants to strengthen the European project but voters in his country are deeply pessimistic – with 58% believing that the EU is doomed. His La République En Marche party is polling behind Marine La Pen's anti-EU National

Rally party with 46% of her supporters believing that a new European war is likely.

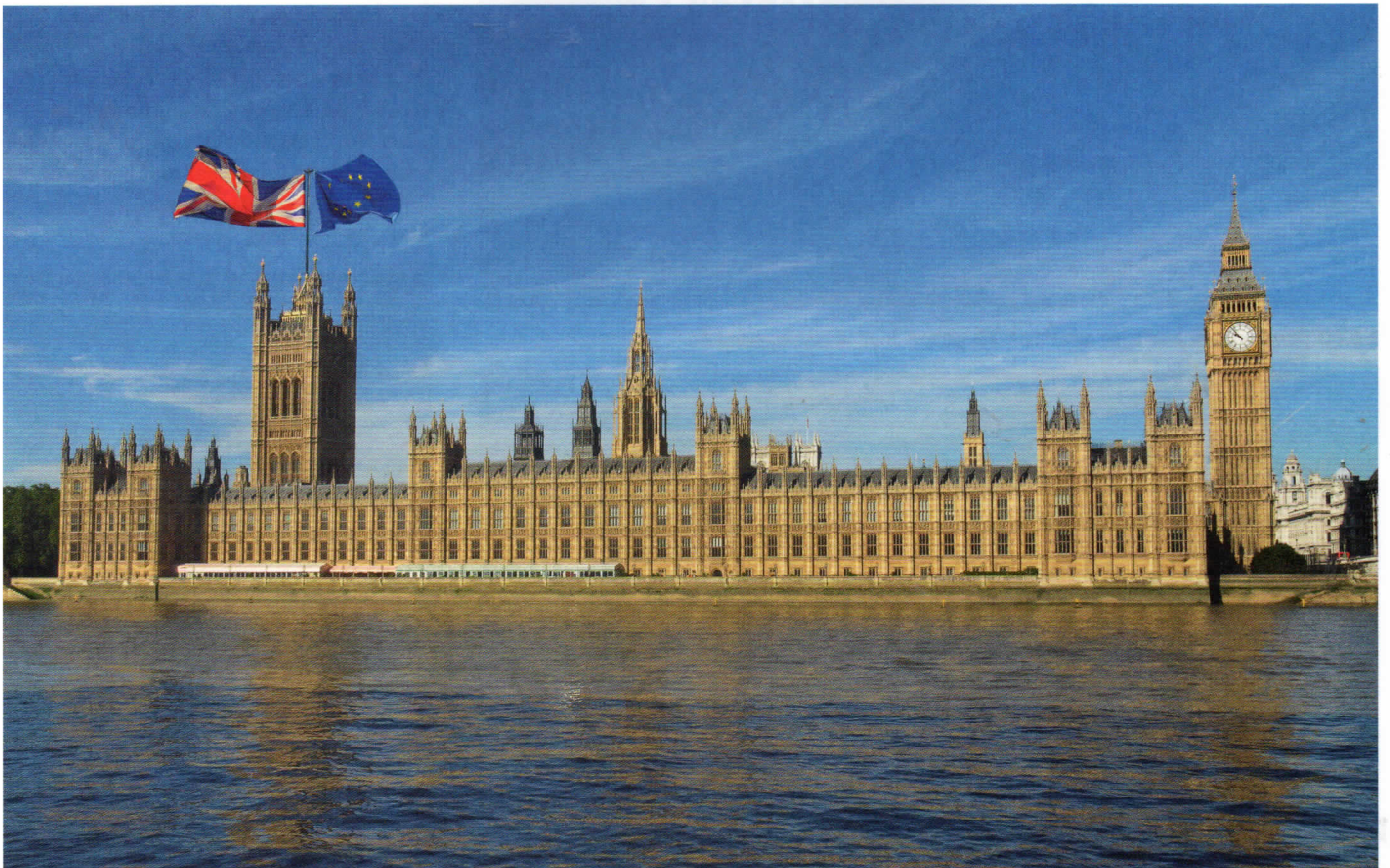
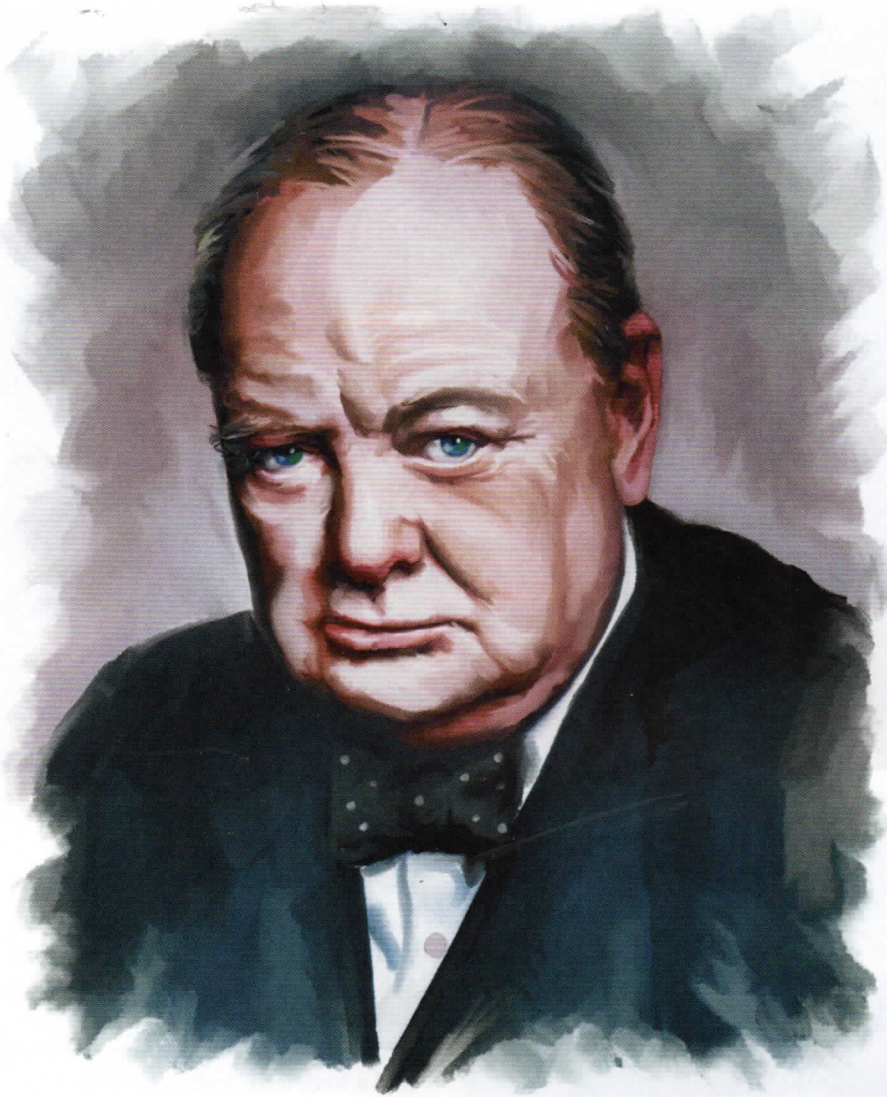
The survey found that younger voters aged 18-34 are particularly worried about the potential for conflict breaking out between EU countries with fears most strong in the Netherlands, France, Poland and Germany.

The European Commission is, of course, well aware of the limited popular support for the current European project as tested by opinion

**Winston Churchill (1874-1965)  
advocated some form of European  
unity to prevent future wars.**

polls – hence the need to prevent any country leaving and being successful without the benefits of membership. The French have a concept of *'pour encourager les autres'* – coined by Voltaire – which loosely translated means *'to encourage the others'*. It was used to justify the execution of soldiers – and our Admiral Byng – so that other Admirals and soldiers would do their duty. This is the response of the European Union to any country which exercises its right to leave the European Union – lest other countries should have the same idea. Sound familiar?

Our traditions, achievements and the English Channel combine to make the UK semi-detached to Europe. Yet the Napoleonic, first and second world wars teach us that distancing ourselves from Europe always leads to trouble. When your columnist was representing the north west in Brussels – regarding the textile industry – it was only the British who had an 'us and them' attitude to the EU despite being one of the 3 most important members. Our European neighbours are our friends not our enemies. We are European so it remains true that the UK can leave the



Flags can unite us.



Remembrance by poppies at the Tower. Every one a life.



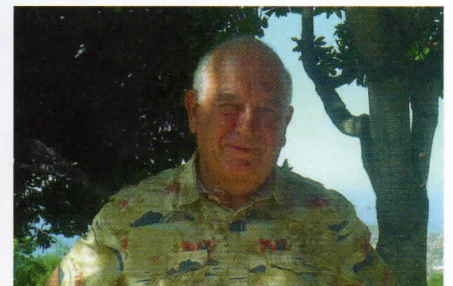
NATO prevented a major war for 70 years but what is next?



Flags can divide us.

EU but not Europe.

The EU is important to our region and our region is important to Europe. Whatever the outcome of the current difficulties the story of European co-operation is not over. Europe still needs find a long-term and sustainable way of securing peace and prosperity which is acceptable to all. The peace and prosperity of Europe could be achieved by a loose confederation of sovereign states with a minimalist approach to what the centre has to control. It could make 'subsidiarity' real and appeal to all. Whether we stay or go we need to find a better way.



**Andrew E. Harris voted to remain but respects leave. Copies of this and previous articles can be seen at [www.andreweharris.co.uk](http://www.andreweharris.co.uk). The 'If you knows of a better hole' WW1 cartoon is by kind permission of the Bruce Bairnsfather Society. The other images have been obtained from Shutterstock.**