



**TOESPRAAK DOOR KRIS PEETERS
VLAAMS MINISTER-PRESIDENT EN
VLAAMS MINISTER VAN ECONOMIE, BUITENLANDS BELEID,
LANDBOUW EN PLATTELANDSBELEID**

Historiker Dialoog KU Leuven

11 oktober 2012

Your Excellency Mr Ambassador,
Dear Rector,
Dear Vice-Rector,
Dear Dean,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are standing on the eve of commemorating the centenary of the First World War, also referred to as the "Great War". This commemoration is an ideal moment for reflection. Not only to reflect on the historic events that took place a century ago, but also on the way in which this war has shaped our collective consciousness and our society.

This commemoration is of great importance to Flanders. In the summer of 2014, a century will have passed since our country and the world was pulled into this tragic global conflict. This conflict cost the lives of more than 9 million soldiers and almost 7 million civilians. Most of our country was confronted with 4 years of occupation. Many fled the horror, the hunger and the violence.

In the Westhoek, better known as *Flanders Fields*, there are thousands of silent witnesses of the horror that took place back then. Many soldiers came from far-away countries to die a far too early death. Those who visit the Westhoek today are still confronted with this horrific past. The region is forever linked to the Great War.

The Government of Flanders therefore wishes to set up a unique commemoration project in the coming years. This must be a humanitarian and internationally-focused project; one that is sustainably linked to the theme of peace.

In addition, we want to raise awareness among current and future generations on themes such as tolerance and international relations. We want to make it clear to them that these are crucial building blocks for an open society.

The preparations for this large-scale project are underway. A project office has been operational since 2010, and provides the coordination and follow-up of the World War One Action Plan. This action plan includes many specific initiatives that will be implemented in the coming years.

I want to sign, for instance, the *Flanders Fields Declaration*, together with a number of like-minded partners. We want this declaration to provide a structural foundation for the commemoration of World War I. Furthermore, it calls for scientific research and for awareness to be raised among the general public and young people. On the 6th of November, I will organise a broad international meeting on this declaration, with the aim of creating a platform that is as wide as possible.

The project of the "Memorial Gardens" was launched in June 2012. These Memorial Gardens will be built at symbolically important places around the world. With this initiative, we seek to honour and remember all those who fought and died during the Great War.

At the same time, these gardens are a symbol of hope, peace and reconciliation, with a view to a better, shared future. The official opening of the first garden, the London Memorial Garden, will take place in November 2014. Talks on the realisation of Memorial Gardens in France and New Zealand have started.

A third project, and maybe the most important one, is the International Peace Symposium that we will organise in November 2013. This will take place in the presence of Nobel Peace Prize winners, such as Desmond Tutu, Willem-Frederik De Klerk and Aung San Suu Kyi. They will be joined by many high level decision-makers, scientists and experts. "Science for Peace" is the symposium's key theme. The focus will be on the subjects of trauma and transformation.

We will discuss conflict-related and disaster-related psychological traumas and post-traumatic disorders, as well as attention for a targeted treatment of these. Transformation refers to the structural rebuilding and reorientation of societies, that have gone through periods of intense conflict. Through this symposium, we want to add value to the scientific research, and formulate specific recommendations for structural, international policy actions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Even today, 100 years after the date, the First World War evokes many emotions. This shared horrific past is now the stimulus for shared reflections on these events. The enemies of those days have become close allies in a European Union.

That evolution is the purpose of this dialogue, this search for our common past.

Through this series of discussions, the academic world is making an important contribution to the commemoration of the Great War Centenary.

The creation of the "Historischer Dialog" is therefore fully in line with the goals of the Government of Flanders. Because the "Great War Centenary" project is a broad, social project. The commemoration project represents critical reflection and open dialogue on war and peace, on remembrance and awareness-raising. We want to frame our past, so that we can learn from it for the future.

Dialogue is the key to better understanding. To a society where the phrase "No more war" is self-evident. So it is with great anticipation that I am looking forward to Ambassador Cuntz's lecture, and I wish you all a fruitful dialogue on this immensely important theme.

Thank you.