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Ancient demons return to Europe

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out on whether Europe will heed the lessons of its past.

"We now live in a time in which the eyewitnesses of this terrible period of German history are dying," she said of World War II. "In this phase, it will be decided whether we have really learned from history."

The last World War I veteran died in 2012. And the number of those who experienced World War II and the Holocaust is rapidly shrinking, too.

Politicians are apt to use history selectively when it suits them. But the history in this case is ominous.

Now as then, Europe's political center is weak and the fringes are radicalizing. Nationalism, laced with ethnic hatred, has been gaining momentum. Populists sit in several European governments.

In Italy, a founding member of the European Union, the nationalist deputy prime minister, Matteo Salvini, has turned away migrant boats and called for the expulsion of Roma. Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary speaks of a "Muslim takeover" and unapologetically flaunts his version of "illiberal democracy."

"In 1990, Europe was our future," he said earlier this year. "Now, we are Europe's future."

The political discourse is deteriorating in familiar ways, too. In Germany, the far right has become the main voice of opposition in Parliament, mocking the mainstream media as "Lügenpresse," or lying press — a term that was first used by the Nazis in the 1920s before their ascent to power.

Traute Lafrenz, the last surviving member of the White Rose, an anti-Nazi student resistance group in the 1940s, said she got goose bumps seeing images of Hitler salutes at far-right riots in the eastern German city of Chemnitz recently.

"Maybe it's no coincidence," Ms. Lafrenz, now 99, told Der Spiegel. "We are dying out and at the same time everything is coming back again."

After World War II, the European Union sought to prevent anything like it from happening again by creating a common market, a common currency, a passport-free travel zone and by pooling sovereignty in a number of areas.

But now, there are a number of nationalist leaders who would like to pull the European Union apart — among them President Trump, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey.

Historians guard against drawing parallels between the fragile aftermath of World War I and the present, pointing to a number of notable differences.

Before World War I, a Europe of empires had just become a Europe of nation states; there was no tried and tested tradition of liberal democracy. Economic hardship was on another level altogether; children were dying of malnutrition in Berlin.

Above all, there is not now the kind of militaristic culture that was utterly mainstream in Europe at the time. France and Germany, archenemies for centuries, are closely allied.

"What is being eroded today, is being eroded from a much higher level than anything we had ever achieved in Europe in the past," said Timothy Garton



A man in a French World War I uniform was among those commemorating the armistice at a cemetery in Verdun, France. Below, photographs of soldiers killed in the war at the Menin Gate in Ypres, Belgium.



Ash, a professor of European history at the University of Oxford.

Still, Mr. Garton Ash sees 1918 as a warning that democracy and peace can never be taken for granted.

"It's a really sobering reminder that

what seems like some sort of eternal order can very rapidly collapse," he said.

In that sense, if Europe's motto after World War II was "never again," the lesson of World War I is "it could happen again."

Daniel Schönplüg, a German historian who published "A World on Edge," an evocative book tracking 22 characters in the interwar period, points out that for centuries, periods of prolonged war in Europe's violent history have been followed by periods of prolonged peace.

"But once the generation with living memory of fighting had died, the next war came along," Mr. Schönplüg said. "History teaches us that when the generation that experienced war dies out, caution diminishes and naïveté toward war increases."

"That means we have to be very careful today," he said.

In 1918, the artist Paul Klee made "The Comet of Paris," a tightrope walker hovering precariously in the air with a comet searing through the sky above and the Eiffel Tower below. What is unnerving about the image is that one cannot discern the rope even though one knows it is there.

"It sums up where people were then, and in a way where we are today," said Mr. Schönplüg.

No one knows what might come next. Europe has entered the unknown.

In 1929, as it happened, people entered a murderous decade without even knowing.

"That's what's so eerie looking back," said James Hawes, a historian and author of "The Shortest History of Germany." "Right up to 1931-32, no one realized what was about to happen. They thought they were just entering another decade."

What might future historians write about the Europe of 2018?

Antony Beevor, the British author of numerous best-selling history books, is pessimistic. He predicts that the moral dilemmas of the future will undo European liberal democracy. And he says the migration crisis of 2015 was only a foretaste of what is to come.

"Future waves of migration are inevitable and Europe is their main destination," Mr. Beevor said, pointing to the disruptive forces of poverty and climate change in developing countries as the main reasons. "European leaders will face the choice of turning back starving refugees or of handing ammunition to the far right and eroding the fabric in their own societies," he said.

Others see it differently. Niall Ferguson, a British historian and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, says the biggest problem facing Europe is not populism but the incomplete currency union of the euro.

"The major threat of Europe at the moment is not Orban or Salvini, the major threat is that the E.U.'s institutional arrangement is unstable," Mr. Ferguson said.

It has been a goal of President Emmanuel Macron of France to fix that; but there is no consensus backing him.

Whatever the future of Europe's institutions, one big difference from 100 years ago is that the Continent is no longer at the heart of geopolitics.

"A century ago, Europe was the center of the world — even if it was the dark tragic center of the world," said Dominique Moïsi, a French author and thinker. "Today we might be back to tragedy but not to centrality."

"History is moving elsewhere," he said.

Christopher F. Schuetze contributed reporting from Berlin.

Steering a technology giant through turbulent times

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search, ads and Android. He was made chief executive in 2015 and joined the board of Alphabet, Google's parent, last year.

This interview, which was condensed and edited for clarity, was conducted in New York.

Tell me about growing up in Chennai. There was a simplicity to my life, which was very nice, compared with today's world. We lived in a kind of modest house, shared with tenants. We would sleep on the living room floor. There was a drought when I was growing up, and we had anxiety. Even now, I can never sleep without a bottle of water beside my bed. Other houses had refrigerators, and then we finally got one. It was a big deal.

But I had a lot of time to read. I was processing a lot. I read whatever I could get my hands on. I read Dickens. Friends, playing street cricket, reading books — that was kind of the totality of life. But you never felt lacking for anything.

What was it like coming over to attend Stanford?

It was the first time I had ever been on a plane. I always wanted to be in the Valley. I kind of knew that's where everything happened. I remember landing in California, and I stayed with a host family for about a week. I was in the car going from the airport, and was like, "Wow, it's so brown here." The family was like, "We like to call it gold-en."

When I was back at I.I.T., I had access to the computer so rarely — maybe I'd been on it three or four times. To come and just have these labs in which you had access to computers and you could program, it was a big deal to me. I was so wrapped up in that, that to some extent I didn't understand there was a much bigger shift happening with the internet.

You started at Google 14 years ago. Does it still feel like the same company you joined?

When I first joined Google I was struck by the fact that it was a very idealistic, optimistic place. I still see that idealism and optimism a lot in many things we do today. But the world is different. Maybe there's more realism of how hard some things are. We've had more failures, too. But there's always been a strong streak of idealism in the company, and you still see it today.

What's your approach to technology and screen time with your family?

When I come home on a Friday evening, I really do want to let go of my devices for a couple days. I haven't quite succeeded in doing that. At home, our television is not easily accessible, so that there is "activation energy" before you can easily go watch TV. I'm genuinely conflicted, because I see what my kids learn from all this. My son is 11 years old, and he is mining Ethereum and earning money. He's getting some insight into how the world works, how commerce works.

Every generation is worried about the new technology and feels like this time it's different. Our parents worried about Elvis Presley's influence on kids. So, I'm always asking the question, "Why would it be any different this time?" Having said that, I do realize the change that's happening now is much faster than ever before. My son still doesn't have a phone.

Why does it seem so easy for tech companies like Google to ban pornography and graphic violence from social media platforms, but so much harder for them to root out propaganda, misinformation and disturbing content aimed at kids?

There are areas where society clearly agrees what is O.K. and not O.K., and then there are areas where it is hard as a society to draw the line. What is the

difference between freedom of speech on something where you feel you're being discriminated against by another group, versus hate speech? The U.S. and Europe draw the line differently on this question in a very fundamental way. We've had to defend videos which we allow in the U.S. but in Europe people view as disseminating hate speech. Should people be able to say that they don't believe climate change is real? Or that vaccines don't work? It's just a genuinely hard problem. We're all using human reviewers, but human reviewers make mistakes, too.

How do you approach this in China, where Google is considering returning to the market with a search engine?

One of the things that's not well understood, I think, is that we operate in many countries where there is censorship. When we follow "right to be forgotten" laws, we are censoring search results because we're complying with the law. I'm committed to serving users in China. Whatever form it takes, I actually don't know the answer. It's not even clear to me that search in China is the product we need to do today.

An estimated 20,000 Googlers participated in a sexual harassment protest this month. What's your message to employees right now?

People are walking out because they want us to improve, and they want us to show we can do better. We're acknowledging and understanding we clearly got some things wrong. And we have been running the company very differently for a while now. But going through a process like that, you learn a lot. For example, we have established channels by which people can report issues. But those processes are much harder on the people going through it than we had realized. [After this interview took place, Google said Thursday that it would end the practice of forced



Sundar Pichai has been chief executive of Google since 2015. "Technology doesn't solve humanity's problems. It was always naive to think so," he said.

arbitration for claims of sexual harassment.]

Is there a morale problem at the company?

There's a lot of challenges in the world, and given what Google does, we feel

like we are on the cutting edge of many of these issues. But when people say, "Wow, there's a lot of challenges," I always say, "There's no better time to be alive." I go through the exercise of placing myself at different times in the world. If you were alive during World

War I, or influenza, or the Great Depression, and there's World War II to come. If you were in the 1960s, and Martin Luther King was shot dead, and R.F.K. would later get shot dead, and we were in Vietnam and there was a Cold War and a Cuban missile crisis — there is no better time to be alive.

But having said that, I think as humanity we're increasingly dealing with bigger things. As a company like Google, we have a deeper mission, and we feel the weight of that on our shoulders. I feel like people are energized and people want to change and make the world better.

Do you worry that Silicon Valley is suffering from groupthink and losing its edge?

There is nothing inherent that says Silicon Valley will always be the most innovative place in the world. There is no God-given right to be that way. But I feel confident that right now, as we speak, there are quietly people in the Valley working on some stuff which we will later look back on in 10 years and feel was very profound. We feel we're on the cusp of technologies, just like the internet before.

Do you still feel like Silicon Valley has retained that idealism that struck you when you arrived here?

There's still that optimism. But the optimism is tempered by a sense of deliberation. Things have changed quite a bit. We deliberate about things a lot more, and we are more thoughtful about what we do. But there's a deeper thing here, which is: Technology doesn't solve humanity's problems. It was always naive to think so. Technology is an enabler, but humanity has to deal with humanity's problems. I think we're both over-reliant on technology as a way to solve things and probably, at this moment, over-indexing on technology as a source of all problems, too.