

# Woodrow Wilson and the principle of ‘national self-determination’: a reconsideration

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**Abstract.** Examination of Woodrow Wilson’s concept of national self-determination in light of both Wilson’s own intellectual development and the evolution of wartime strategy and diplomacy establishes that there was no prior consideration of ethnic or collective *versus* liberal or civic nationalism in Wilson’s idea of ‘national’ self-determination and that the actual enunciation and application of the principle was deeply affected by considerations of wartime strategy and diplomacy, above all to counter defeatist tendencies following Russia’s withdrawal from the war as well as to induce a separate Austrian peace. Wilson thus understood that the idea could not be applied in an unqualified way, that considerations of national self-determination might in specific instances have to yield to compelling questions of security, diplomacy and economics. At the same time, Wilson was not well informed about many key aspects of nation and state in East-Central Europe. In the end, Wilson accepted many unsatisfactory compromises at the peace table based on the promise that the League and its version of collective security held for international security and justice. Ignorance, liberal myopia, and political incompetence thus have to be weighed against Wilson’s considerable tactical pragmatism in prosecuting the war when arriving at a final judgement on Wilson and the legacy of national self-determination.

‘Theory and practice in politics are never safely divorced’.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Adherents, opponents, and agnostics agree that Woodrow Wilson’s liberal internationalism has decisively shaped the theory and practice of foreign policy and international politics throughout the twentieth century. No less a critic than Henry Kissinger has ruefully observed that ‘Wilsonianism has survived while history has bypassed the reservations of his contemporaries’.<sup>2</sup> By fits and starts, and (less emphasized) backed up by American power, the Wilsonian premises that peace depends upon the extension of democracy, that individual ethics may be applied to judge the behaviour of states, and that the national interest is best realized in adhering to international law, have survived the ordeals of a second world war, of ‘cold war’, and of the intellectual challenge of political realism to frame the academic and policy debates on world politics on the threshold of the twenty-first century. The liberal-democratic theory of peace that has contended forcefully with realism and then neorealism since the mid-1980s traces its roots directly to the Wilsonian

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Cobban, *National Self-Determination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. iv.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p.30.

patrimony.<sup>3</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, Western governments, and that of the United States in particular, have repeatedly invoked the Wilsonian paradigm in justifying the use of military force, most notably against Iraq (1991) and Serbia (1999). In the latter case, Western governments argued insistently, and indeed more plausibly than in the former, that there were no strictly national interests at stake with respect to Kosovo that could justify war. It remains to be seen whether, in the absence of such interests, Western governments will remain committed to underwriting geopolitical and domestic order in southeastern Europe. What cannot be denied is that they have embarked upon the enterprise full of conviction that, in post-Cold War circumstances, Wilsonian principles can be applied in ways that a previously more polarized international system had prevented.

It is indeed the end of the Cold War that has given new life to the Wilsonian conviction. The conversion of Gorbachev's Soviet Union to generally recognized standards of human rights, itself a reflection of the repudiation of Lenin's long-standing argument with Wilson over the domestic sources of international conflict, made conceivable a concert of the great powers on behalf of liberal values. The consequent disintegration of the Soviet Union underscored in dramatic fashion the unparalleled superiority of power—in virtually all dimensions—that the liberal states now possessed in world politics and which greatly eased the task of employing that power to advance liberal values. Moreover, the fact that the Cold War ended so suddenly, and peacefully, with the political conversion of one state, that is, a unit-level consideration, challenged the theoretical premises of political realism in entirely novel ways. As a result, the end of the Cold War has seen a widespread resurgence of liberal critiques which, whatever their particular guise, share the Wilsonian assumption that international conflict is not necessarily embedded in the structure of relationships among peoples and states but rather in the terms on which governments rule at home.<sup>4</sup> If one can change the governing principle, one can then change the proclivity of the international system toward conflict. The basic liberal insight—one anticipated, incidentally, by Metternich—is that power and interest themselves, the central concepts of political realism, may be defined in terms of political and even moral community.<sup>5</sup> American leaders lose no sleep over the theoretical capacity of the British or French nuclear force to destroy much of the United States east of the Mississippi. Likewise, Old Regime Europe was relatively unconcerned about the remarkable increase in Russian power achieved under the reign of Catherine II, while Austrian leaders welcomed the introduction of Russian troops in 1849 to suppress a republican Hungarian revolution seen as a common threat by each Old Regime power.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Michael Doyle, 'Liberalism and World Politics', *American Political Science Review*, 80 (December 1986), pp. 1151–69; David Lake, 'Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War', *American Political Science Review*, 86 (March 1992), pp. 24–37; John Owen, *Liberal State, Liberal Peace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Doyle, 'Liberalism and World Politics Revisited', in Charles W. Kegley Jr. (ed.), *Controversies in International Relations Theory: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 83–106, and Mark W. Zacher and Richard Matthew, 'Liberal International Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands', *ibid.*, pp. 107–50.

<sup>5</sup> For an impressive discussion across several kinds of international system, see Mark Haas, *Political and Ideological Homogeneity and Threat Perception: Four European Cases*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia (2000). Kissinger writes, 'Austria sought to spin a web of moral restraint to forestall tests of strength'. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 21–27, 39–42, 75–84, 89–103, 146–159 et passim.

At the centre of Wilson's liberal world view lies the idea of the self-determination of peoples. This has been commonly understood in terms of national self-determination, or the self-determination of nations, and while this is not exactly what Wilson had in mind at the outset, it remains his lasting legacy to world politics, both during his lifetime and thereafter. Critics, such as George Kennan, have long focused on Wilson's idealism and legalism in constructing a peace along the lines of national self-determination as well as collective security (as embodied in the League of Nations).<sup>7</sup> Others, such as David F. Trask, have shown how much a realist Wilson could be in prosecuting his war aims so as to afford the United States maximum negotiating leverage at the post-war conference table.<sup>8</sup> Whichever side one comes down on in this hoary debate—this article hopes to advance a more complex view of the issue (see below)—the fact remains that it was the Wilsonian *democratic* impulse, in terms of both ideals and power, that went far in legitimizing the nationalist principle in world politics. The fragmentation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire along lines of nationality, in part a consequence of Wilsonian policies, created a belt of weak and unstable states throughout Eastern Europe that would inevitably be a bone of contention between Germany and Russia. Hitler's invocation of the language of Wilsonian national self-determination with respect to the Rheinland, Austria, Sudetenland, and Danzig did much to paralyze Western (especially liberal) resistance to the growth of Nazi power in the late 1930s.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the language of Wilsonianism was repeatedly employed by nationalist leaders, democrats and demagogues alike, to legitimize and mobilize support from the liberal West for the secession of Slovenia and Croatia from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and for the Baltic states from Gorbachev's Soviet Union. More broadly, the discrediting of empire as a principle of governance as well as the very existence of the United Nations (adapted as it is from the model and experience of Wilson's League) trace their lineage directly and decisively to Wilson's legacy. Because so much of importance in world politics today remains tied to what Wilson attempted, and because so much of what Wilson attempted reflects issues and choices that confront us still, a re-examination of Wilson's effort to construct a peace based on national self-determination may prove instructive in thinking through critical trade-offs involving peace, security, justice, and nationalism, *as well as the relationship between democracy and nationalism*.

Curiously, the end of the Cold War has seen the return of a number of the specific issues relating to national self-determination that haunted Wilson before and during Versailles, especially the Yugoslav issue, and post-Cold War liberals have been vexed in responding to ethnically driven nationalisms. This is so in part because liberal theory, as with *Marxist* theory, has no real place for ethnic, as opposed to

<sup>7</sup> George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Seymour, 'Woodrow Wilson and Self-Determination in the Tyrol', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 38: 4 (1962), p. 570; and David F. Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking, 1917–1918* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993) and idem, *The United States in the Supreme War Council: American War Aims and Inter-Allied Strategy, 1917–1918* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961); Lawrence E. Gelfand, 'The American Mission to Negotiate Peace', in Manfred F. Boemeke, Gerald D. Feldman and Elisabeth Glaser (eds.), *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment After 75 Years* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 199–200.

<sup>9</sup> Cobban, *National Self-Determination*, pp. 38–43; Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, pp. 310–17.

civic nationalism.<sup>10</sup> Latter-day liberals (*and socialists*), as did Wilson, struggle uncomfortably not only with the tensions among power, interests and ideals but also with the political force of ethnicity and the limits this often imposes upon civic liberalism (*or socialism*). As this article will demonstrate, Wilson was neither a starry eyed idealist nor a Machiavellian realist but rather a statesman attempting to reconcile power politics and liberal ideals so as to underwrite a structure of international security that would be both stable and just. To the extent that this characterization rings home today, we remain well within the ambit of Wilson's shadow.

### Wilson's understanding of the principle of political self-determination

While the precise term 'national self-determination' did not become current until the First World War, the concept had been in the air since at least the French Revolution. Even before 1789, international opinion was shocked by the liquidation of the Corsican independence movement by the French—after purchase of the territory from Genoa—and especially the subsequent elimination of Poland from the map of Europe. The French Revolution itself affirmed a principle that had already been developing in the Anglo-American world, that is, that the 'source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation'. The French consequently instituted the practice of the plebiscite in order to justify the annexation of Avignon, Savoy, and Nice in the 1790s. Between 1856–66, this device was used many times in Italy and the Balkans, and was contemplated for the Duchy of Schleswig. The mid-nineteenth century is also, of course, the era of first romantic, then liberal, and eventually chauvinistic nationalism, as exemplified by the principles and practice of Herder, Mazzini, and Wilhelm II, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

Still, as the fate of liberal nationalism after 1848 implies, the idea of 'self-determination', whether popular or national, was not consistently or even often applied in the half century before the First World War, nor did it have any foundation in international law. While many nations in the Balkans were fighting for independence or national aggrandizement, Russia crushed the Polish rebellion in 1863, the Austro-Hungarian Ausgleich of 1867 was settled on dynastic grounds, and

<sup>10</sup> John Stuart Mill argued forcefully that a common nationality, including a common language, was a prerequisite for republican government, as without a common public discourse, the common weal could not be established: 'Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities'. Latter-day theorists have also noted the complications that ethnicity implies for democratic consolidation. John Stuart Mill, 'Representative Government', in J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government*, ed. H.B. Acton (London: Dent—Everyman's Library, 1972), p.392; Adam Przeworski, *Sustainable Democracy* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 19–33: '[C]ulturally or nationally heterogeneous societies are not viable candidates for successful democratization'. (p.33); Allen Buchanan, 'Self Determination and the Right to Secede', *Journal of International Affairs*, 45: 2 (Winter 1992), p.351; Timothy Snyder, *Nationalism, Marxism, and Modern Central Europe: A Biography of Kasimierz Kelles-Krausz* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Papers in Ukrainian Studies, 1998), p. 248.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Heater, *National Self-Determination: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 1–10; Cobban, *National Self-Determination*, pp. 5–7, 56–60; William O. Shanahan, 'Political Liberalism and Nationalism', in *Chapters in Western Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), pp. 107–22.

the British crushed the Irish nationalist rebellion of 1916; nor should one forget the great surge of European imperialism in Africa in the 1880s.<sup>12</sup>

Given this context, as well as Wilson's own political and intellectual development, we should not expect to find any body of developed thinking on the idea of specifically *national* self-determination before the onset of the First World War. Wilson's was a parochial, US political education and experience. As Stephen A. Schuker has stated in the context of Wilson's war aims, 'Wilson derived his bedrock views not from empirical scrutiny of the German war record, but rather from the predispositions of nineteenth-century humanitarian liberalism and the Presbyterian religion'.<sup>13</sup> He did not expect his presidency to be focused on foreign, not to mention European, affairs. Where Wilson did reflect upon foreign policy, as over the war with Spain or the acquisition of the Philippines, both of which he approved, it was as a vehicle to restore unity of national purpose to the American people and government. As Niels Aage Thorsen has written, Wilson showed 'little interest in either the theoretical or the practical aspects of imperialism .... His few comments on the ... practical aspects of long-term overseas involvement were largely overshadowed by his attention to the restoration of leadership as a legitimate part of American government. [They were not] an attempt to clarify the ambiguities in the actual goals and means of foreign policy'.<sup>14</sup> (Ironically, in light of his later paternity of a *nationalist* process of self-determination, Wilson, himself moved by the impulse to repair the rift caused by the US Civil War, retained an 'enduring bias against localism and sectionalism in almost any conceivable form'.<sup>15</sup>)

Beyond the Founding Fathers, it was British political and constitutional thought and experience (as well as German work on public administration) that informed his world view.<sup>16</sup> What were some of these fundamental views? Most importantly, they involved a commitment to free trade; a belief in the need for government to provide sound, efficient administration; and faith in the possibility of progress, which entailed, in Wilson's mind: (1) vigorous leadership to guide the people; (2) a reforming administrative machinery; and (3) a restraining hand on *laissez-faire* economic principles for the sake of economic justice. Moreover, Wilson's political thought was characterized by a cluster of ideas embracing Christianity, self-government, democracy, nationality and the organic state, which together form the ingredients of what would eventually become Wilson's concept of 'national self-determination'.<sup>17</sup> One is struck, for example, by a deeply Calvinistic interpretation of

<sup>12</sup> Cobban, *National Self-Determination*, pp. 9–11. Writing in 1913, French historian Charles Seignobos concluded, 'The hope of winning their independence by force of arms is closed henceforth to little nations oppressed by foreigners'. As cited *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen A. Schuker, 'Woodrow Wilson versus American Public Opinion: The Unconditional Surrender Movement of 1918', in Guido Mueller (ed.), *Deutschland und der Westen. Internationale Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), p. 102.

<sup>14</sup> Niels Aage Thorsen, *The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 164–66, 174–80.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17–40, 68–88; Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 75; George W. Egerton, *Great Britain and the League of Nations* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), p. 201; Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, pp. 223–4.

<sup>17</sup> The term appears to derive from the German metaphysical concept of *Selbstbestimmungsrecht*, in which the focus is on the individual, as distinct from any collective, self. Michla Pomerance, 'The United States and Self Determination: Perspectives on the Wilsonian Conception', *American Journal of International Law*, 70: (1976), p. 2.

equal opportunity, which underlies the idea that all men are fit for self-government; this, however, is an evolutionary process, one that depends on a guided democracy: leadership is essential here.

By nationalism, Wilson did not mean the 'New Nationalism' of Theodore Roosevelt, that is, much more centralized government; he did not mean an aggressive, militaristic patriotism or an assertive imperialism. Wilson did believe that the USA had a moral duty to liberate 'mature' peoples from autocratic government, though mainly by example. The First World War would provide Wilson with the opportunity to move beyond exemplary to interventionist methods to achieve that end.<sup>18</sup>

As we have already implied, there is no reference to the idea of 'national self-determination' in Wilson's writings or speeches before 1914. To the extent that Wilson had thought about issues of nationality, it was primarily in terms of language, a point which, considering that language would be the chief test of nationality in the post-war settlements, is of some significance. This notion, with roots obviously deep in the west European and US political tradition, tended to blind Wilson to a major intellectual flaw in his concept of national self-determination, that is, the premise that the principles of nationality and self-determination must necessarily coincide. Wilson assumed, as did many other Allied policymakers, that attachment to state and attachment to nation must be as coincident in East-Central Europe as they were deemed to be in the North Atlantic political cultures. Community of speech and civic community were tightly bound to each other in Wilson's conception. Nevertheless, this is not a deeply developed strain in Wilson's thinking, and it is one that is developed not at all with respect to European politics in the era of dynamic nationalism. In effect, as Ronald Steel has argued, Wilson dealt with the lack of correspondence between state borders (actual or prospective) and ethnic borders 'by pretending that it did not exist'.<sup>19</sup>

For Wilson, the right of 'self-determination of peoples' was rooted in the Anglo-American tradition of civic nationalism: that is, for Wilson self-determination meant the right of communities to self-government. It had nothing to do with the tradition of collective or ethnic nationalism, in which the principal agent was the nation as distinct from the individuals constituting the nation. Whereas in the West, and specifically in England, nationalism developed as an agent of democracy, in many later cases, Eastern Europe and Russia included, it served no such function. In its English version, nationalism had an important individualistic component, emphasizing the sovereignty of the individuals constituting the people, or nation; in many later cases, emphasis was instead placed on the uniqueness of a people/nation and nationalism assumed a collectivistic and often ethnic form. In such nationalisms, which obtained throughout East-Central Europe, 'the sequence of events was the opposite' from that which obtained in the development of the original, individualistic and civic, nationalism: 'the importation of the idea of popular sovereignty—as part and parcel of the idea of the nation—initiated the transformation of the social and political structure', rather than the other way around.<sup>20</sup> The source of sover-

<sup>18</sup> Heater, *National Self-Determination*, pp. 15–27.

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Steel, 'Prologue—1919—1945—1989', in Boemeke, et al. *The Treaty of Versailles*, p. 25; William R. Keylor, 'Versailles and International Diplomacy', *ibid.*, pp. 475–6.

<sup>20</sup> Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.10.

eignty was thereby reversed and thus the nature of nationalism changed, from individualistic and civic, conducive to liberal democracy, to collectivistic and ethnic.<sup>21</sup>

Hans Kohn, who prefers the distinction between Western and East European nationalisms as opposed to individualistic *versus* collectivist, also emphasizes the significance of the reverse development of nationalism throughout Eastern Europe:

While the new nationalism in western Europe corresponded to changing social, economic, and political realities, it spread to central and eastern Europe long before a corresponding social and economic transformation ... Nationalism in the west arose in an effort to build a nation in the political reality and struggle of the present without too much sentimental regard for the past; nationalists in central and eastern Europe created, often out of myths of the past and the dreams of the future, an ideal fatherland, closely linked with the past, devoid of any immediate connection with the present, and expected to become sometime a political reality.<sup>22</sup>

Wilson entered upon wartime diplomacy unaware of such distinctions and without any programme to put his credal commitment to national self-determination into effect.

Consequently, when Wilson spoke—in the abstract—of the ‘self-determination of peoples’, what he meant to say to the world and what the most attentive publics in that world (that is, in East-Central Europe) heard him to say were often very different indeed. Moreover, and especially as Wilson began to face the programmatic complexities of actually implementing the idea of national self-determination in East-Central Europe, he began to express significant reservations about the concept himself. As the Bolsheviks themselves embraced the principle, albeit with very different content, Wilson, while reaffirming the validity of national self-determination in principle, believed that:

in point of logic, of pure logic, this principle which was good in itself would lead to the complete independence of various small nationalities now forming part of various Empires. Pushed to its extreme, the principle would mean the disruption of existing governments, to an undefinable extent ...<sup>23</sup>

In this statement we see just one of innumerable examples in which Wilson is led to confront the tensions between national self-determination as creed and as policy. Whittle Johnston has captured well the ambiguities and tensions within Wilson’s framework (tensions that bothered Secretary of State Lansing deeply):

[W]hat is to be the unit and what the means through which the consent of the governed [which Wilson held to be the foundation of any stable peace] is to find expression? Does the principle point to national self-determination, does national self-determination mean national sovereign determination—that is, that each nationality is entitled to possession of its own sovereign state—or does it mean autonomy within the given state structure? Does the same policy apply to all nationalities, great and small? If to the former only, then what are the policy implications for the latter? As instances of contradictory implications, what policy does one follow when the lines of settlement in accord with national self-determination (however defined) diverge radically from those in accord with state security? Or when pursuit of peace

<sup>21</sup> Reneo Lukic and Allen Lynch, *Europe From the Balkans to the Urals: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1996), pp. x-xiii, 12–15.

<sup>22</sup> For sources and discussion, see S. I. Griffiths, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Threats to European security*, SIPRI Research Report, no.5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 11–12.

<sup>23</sup> As cited in Victor S. Mamatey, *The United States and East Central Europe, 1914–1918: A Study in Wilsonian Diplomacy and Propaganda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 174.

without victory is in contradiction with a settlement that rests on the consent of the governed? Or where both the consent of the governed and the security of the state are at odds with the requirements of economic rationality? In the first set of problems, the needle of one's compass swings around erratically and points in no single direction; in the second, one's compass has several needles, and the direction of each is different.<sup>24</sup>

Sheer ignorance as well as conceptual ambiguities informed Wilson's course on the issue of national self-determination during the First World War. Wilson himself came to admit as much:

When I gave utterance to those words [that all nations had a right to self-determination], I said them without a knowledge that nationalities existed, which are coming to us day after day ... You do not know and cannot appreciate the anxieties that I have experienced as the result of many millions of people having their hopes raised by what I have said.<sup>25</sup>

By way of example, it transpired on the trip to the Paris Peace Conference that Wilson simply did not know that large numbers of Germans lived in Bohemia.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Wilson extended US recognition to the Czechoslovak National Council on 3 September, 1918, without any thought apparently being given to the future of the German minority in Bohemia and Moravia or to the Slovak question, or to the implications of Czechoslovak independence upon international relations after the war.<sup>27</sup> Wilson, anticipating FDR, thought that 'all such detailed questions should be left to the peacemakers or the League of Nations to decide'.<sup>28</sup> Wilson thus 'always turned away any overtures [of a territorial nature] which representatives of the nationalities bordering on Germany had ever made'.<sup>29</sup> As we shall see, short-term military considerations drove much of US, as of Allied policy, on such issues.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Wilson's overarching commitment to the post-war League enabled him to rationalize much of his ignorance and/or indifference: what really counted was the depth of the US commitment to making the League work as an agent of European and collective security. Within that framework, all nationality issues, as well as the tensions between nationality, economics, and international security, would be justiciable or at least manageable.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Whittle Johnston, 'Reflections on Wilson and the Problems of World Peace', in Arthur S. Link (ed.), *Woodrow Wilson and a Revolutionary World* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 207; Keylor, 'Versailles', p. 476.

<sup>25</sup> Heater, *National Self-Determination*, p. 8; Klaus Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking, 1918–1919*, trans. from the German by Rita and Robert Kimber (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 173.

<sup>26</sup> Heater, *National Self-Determination*, p. 56.

<sup>27</sup> For the exchange between Wilson and his Secretary of State Robert Lansing on the issue of Czechoslovak recognition, see *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States. The Lansing Papers, 1914–1920* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1940), pp. 130, 139–141. (Hereafter cited as *Lansing Papers*.)

<sup>28</sup> Mamatey, *The United States and East-Central Europe*, p. 310.

<sup>29</sup> Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson*, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> By May 1918, Robert Lansing, Wilson's Secretary of State, was explicit that the question of whether to promote the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire along national lines should be decided solely in terms of how best to win the war. In justification, Lansing invoked to Wilson the German precedent in encouraging the national disintegration of the Russian Empire. *Lansing Papers*, pp. 126–7; *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 47 (13 March–12 May, 1918), ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 589–91.

<sup>31</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, pp. 218–45; L.E. Gelfand, 'The Mystique of Wilsonian Statecraft', *Diplomatic History*, 1: 3 (1977), p. 101. For evidence of the haphazard translation of the Fourteen Points—by a lone Walter Lippmann—into items for actual negotiation, see Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1980), p. 149.



In one of the most stunning examples of Wilson's misunderstanding of the force of European nationalisms, Wilson, who had acquiesced in the Italian acquisition of Austrian South Tyrol on security grounds, as well as of Trieste and much of Istria, sought to foil Premier Orlando's claim to Fiume and Dalmatia by appealing over the head of Orlando directly to the Italian nation. Orlando was able to delay the publication of Wilson's appeal until he had prepared his own *riposte*, during which time he succeeded in inflaming Italian opinion on the issue. Wilson's moralistic inflexibility and messianic sense of mission combined with his ignorance of the facts on the ground to seriously weaken his negotiating position on Italian and Yugoslav issues, as well as to open the door a bit wider to domestic critics.<sup>32</sup> Later, Wilson was to admit, 'It was on the basis of insufficient study that I promised Orlando the Brenner frontier'.<sup>33</sup>

Nor was any thought given to a rump Austria's relationship to Germany, that is, of *Anschluss*. As with so many of these issues, Wilson and his aides simply deferred the question to the Peace Conference, where Austria was deprived of the status of successor state, including the right of *Anschluss* (that is, national self-determination), classified as a defeated enemy power and forced to assume all of the obligations of the Austrian Empire.<sup>34</sup>

### Self-determination as creed, not programme

Wilson's commitment to 'national self-determination' in fact reflected an attitude rather than a policy or a programme. There was no serious planning, either before the US declarations of war—against either Imperial Germany or Austria-Hungary—or after, about how nationalist aspirations in East-Central Europe might fit in with either US war strategy or post-war aims. Victor Mamatey has summarized Wilson's views on self-determination as of his neutrality speech of May 1916:

The president's proposals were not a program but a creed. He had not given, and for a long time was not to give, any thought to their concrete implementation. The principle of government by consent of the governed or national self-determination, which the Founding Fathers had invoked to justify the American revolution, was for him a self-evident truth, a natural right, an indispensable corollary of democracy—but not a principle of action. *He was unaware of the revolutionary implications of this principle if applied to the Austrian or the Russian and Ottoman Empires.* At this time, he most certainly had no intention of destroying them.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Daniel M. Smith, *The Great Departure: The United States and World War I, 1914–1920* (New York: Wiley, 1965), p. 164; Richard Schober, *Die Tiroler Frage auf der Friedenskonferenz von Saint Germain* (Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1982), pp. 71–124, esp. p. 98. For an exchange on national self-determination between Wilson and Orlando that is worthy of Thucydides, see *The Deliberations of the Council of Four (24 March–28 June, 1919). Notes of the Official Interpreter Paul Mantoux*, vol. II, trans. and ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 223–5; *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. I, eds. Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927), pp. 460–3, 465–8.

<sup>33</sup> Seymour, *Woodrow Wilson and Self-Determination.*, p. 582.

<sup>34</sup> Mamatey, *The United States and East-Central Europe*, p. 351; Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson*, pp. 172–3; 464, fn. 66.

<sup>35</sup> Mamatey, *The United States and East-Central Europe*, pp. 41–2. Emphasis added.

Indeed, as late as February 1918, Wilson stated to Congress that: '[A]ll well defined national aspiration shall be accorded the utmost satisfaction that can be accorded them *without introducing new or perpetuating old elements of discord* that would be likely in time to break the peace of Europe and consequently the world'.<sup>36</sup> As in the Second World War, military considerations trumped political ones in US policy during the war itself. The only qualification here is that Wilson was determined to conduct the war in such a way as to leave the US with the maximum freedom of action at the Peace Conference. (Thus the US was an Associated rather than an Allied Power.) As in the Second World War, the defeat of Germany and the overthrow of its government were the overriding objectives of US policy. A stable peace would follow from that fact and the US commitment to underwriting the peace that was reflected in Wilson's project of the League of Nations. Everything else was in a sense detail, which could be ironed out within the framework of a new, US-led world order.

In fact, the United States did not enter the war in order to stimulate the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the US delayed a declaration of war against Vienna until December 1917, and it was clearly a formalistic initiative. In the first place, the United States had no direct conflicts of interest with the Habsburgs (for example, as compared to Germany's submarine policy). Second, as late as March 1918 Wilson hoped to split Austria-Hungary from Germany and thereby expedite the conclusion of the war. This could not be done while simultaneously advocating the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire. Wilson admitted as much in his December 1917 address to Congress asking for a declaration of war against Vienna, in which he curiously mentioned 'the great Empire of Austria-Hungary' in the same breath with the 'victim states' of German aggression:

... [T]he peace must deliver the peoples of Austria-Hungary from the impudent and alien domination of the Prussian military and commercial autocracy ... [W]e do not wish in any way to impair or to rearrange the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It is no affair of ours what they do with their own life, either industrially or politically. We do not purpose or desire to dictate to them in any way. We only desire to see that their affairs are left in their own hands, in all matters, great or small'.<sup>38</sup>

[This meant in their own hands apart from Prussia/Germany.—ACL]

The Fourteen Points should therefore *not* be interpreted as sanctioning the application of the principle of national self-determination *via* dissolution to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Whereas Wilson openly supported an independent Poland (which was originally put forward by Imperial Russia and then the Central Powers as wartime psychological warfare),<sup>39</sup> he called only for 'autonomy' for the peoples of Austria-Hungary.<sup>40</sup> Indicatively, key leaders in the nationalist movements,

<sup>36</sup> *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, p. 183. Emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup> Lloyd E. Ambrosius, 'Feature Review. Wilsonian Self-Determination', *Diplomatic History*, 16: 1 (Winter 1992), pp. 141–8.

<sup>38</sup> For the text of Wilson's speech, see *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States. 1917* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1926), pp. xi–xii. (For examples of how smoothly most normal diplomatic business was transacted between Washington and Vienna right through 1916, see *ibid.*, pp. 9–25.) For a discussion, see Mamatey, *The United States and East-Central Europe*, p. 57.

<sup>39</sup> Piotr Wandycz, 'The Polish Question', in Boemeke, et al., *The Treaty of Versailles*, pp. 315–16.

<sup>40</sup> For the text of the 14 Points speech, see *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States. 1918. Supplement 1: The World War* (in two volumes). Vol. I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), pp. 12–17; for discussion, see Cobban, *National Self-Determination*, pp. 13–15.

such as Benes and Pasic, as of key irredentist states, such as Italy and Rumania, reacted with alarm at what they saw as the implications of the Fourteen Points for their political agendas. By contrast, the Habsburg leadership (for example, foreign minister Czernin) responded very favorably to Wilson's declaration, seeing in it a possible way out of the war and thus preserving the Empire intact.<sup>41</sup> In December 1917, when the Fourteen Points were drafted, it was the Austro-Hungarian 'self' that required liberation from Germany.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, the essential purpose of the Points was neither the promotion of national self-determination *per se*, nor the satisfaction of any particular national claim, but rather to keep the allies in the war and sow discord in the enemy camp at a precarious moment on the battlefield in the West and at the conference table in the East (that is, the German-Soviet peace talks just begun at Brest). 'Through his initiative', Ronald Steel has written, 'and in the face of Bolshevik exposure of the Allied secret treaties and embrace of a cognate idea of a "democratic" peace also based on "self-determination"', Wilson hoped to push the Allies toward more liberal peace terms, drive the German people away from their own government, and establish an entente among the Allies, the German people, and the national groups that formed the Austro-Hungarian Empire ... The Fourteen Points had to reconcile complex and contradictory goals: to meet the national aspirations of each ethnic group, yet keep them limited ...'.<sup>43</sup>

### The influence of the military campaign on Wilson's diplomacy

Only *after* the US became convinced that it would be impossible to separate Austria-Hungary from Germany, and that Austria-Hungary was decomposing from within due to forces largely beyond the influence of external forces (aside from the fact of the war itself), did the United States embrace the nationalist dissolution of the Habsburg Empire, in June 1918.<sup>44</sup> Contrary to much of the 'realist' criticism of Wilson,<sup>45</sup> Wilson 'kept open his lines with the enemy. He retained hope for the preservation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the hour was very late, and he changed his view only after it was obvious that the Habsburg Empire was breaking up for reasons beyond his control. Wilson 'did tireless battle with the extremism of Allied war aims, kept an eagle eye on America's freedom of action, and seized the earliest possible moment to terminate hostilities with a minimum prejudice to the future stability of the Continent'.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> For Czernin's reaction, see *ibid.*, pp. 36, 38, 126–7; for the correspondence between Wilson and Emperor Charles between 5–23 March, 1918, see *ibid.*, pp. 183–7, and *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 46 (16 January–12 March, 1918), pp. 162–68, 223–9, 440–2, 507–8. For a discussion, see Francois Fejto, *Requiem pour un Empire Defunt* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1988), pp. 278–81; Mamatey, *The United States and East-Central Europe*, pp. 187–232.

<sup>42</sup> Pomerance, *Perspectives*, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> Steel, 'Prologue', pp. 134–5; Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922), pp. 207–16; Thomas J. Knock, 'Wilsonian Concepts and International Realities', in Boemeke, et al., *The Treaty of Versailles*, p. 115.

<sup>44</sup> *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 48 (13 May–17 July, 1918), pp. 96–7, 205–6, 435–8.

<sup>45</sup> See George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (New York, 1951), p. 63, et passim.

<sup>46</sup> Johnston, 'Reflections on Wilson', p. 193. This view is echoed by Fejto, *inter alia*. See Fejto, *Requiem*, pp. 286–94.

Recall that by the winter of 1917–18, conditions in Austria-Hungary were far more serious than in Germany, and were comparable to those in Russia the year before, on the eve of the collapse of the Russian monarchy. Food and fuel shortages were endemic, as were desertions from the army at the front; labour unrest begun in Germany in January 1918 had spread to the industrial cities of the Empire, while the peasantry (resisting requisitioning) and the nationalities (rejecting autonomy in favour of independence) emerged into open revolt against the state. Czechs, Austrian Yugoslavs and Poles were by late January 1918 openly calling for a peace settlement providing for national independence.<sup>47</sup> (As noted, Wilson had up to then only come out in favour of *Polish* independence, as had all of the belligerent powers, on both sides.)<sup>48</sup> Not surprisingly, Austrian leaders were far more anxious for an early peace than were the Germans, who expected great results from the forthcoming spring 1918 western offensives, and saw in Wilson's Fourteen Points precisely the avenue for ending the war and preserving the empire intact (if reformed along federalist lines, as Wilson's Inquiry specialists also favoured at the time).<sup>49</sup> By March–April 1918, however, the demonstrated inability of the Habsburg leadership to break with Germany combined with the parlous military situation in the west induced by Ludendorff's spring offensives, led Allied leaders to formulate for the first time a coherent policy aimed at the Habsburg nationalities. It should be noted that military considerations were predominant here: the nationalities were being cultivated in order to induce by pressure an Austrian break with Germany that diplomatic feelers had failed to produce. The specific impetus on the US side was the fear in early May 1918 that Austria might seek a separate peace with Italy *via* generous territorial concessions, thereby taking Italy out of the war.<sup>50</sup> In fact, the US underestimated both the extent and intensity of Italian territorial ambitions and thus overestimated Italian interest in possible Austrian feelers. By the end of May 1918, following the Emperor Charles' meeting with Wilhelm II at Spa, US Secretary of State Lansing concluded, and Wilson concurred, that:

Fundamental to every policy which this government adopts at this time is the supreme purpose of destroying Prussianism .... Karl at German Grand headquarters signing away his birthright lost any sympathy which had been felt for him before that event .... In view of the

<sup>47</sup> Mamatey, *The United States and East-Central Europe*, pp. 194–7. Fejto understates the internal dimension of Habsburg disintegration. See Fejto, *Requiem*, pp. 295–378. He posits the crucial cause of Habsburg collapse in Allied policy, as distinct from the effects of the war *per se* on the coherence of the Empire. American diplomats and policymakers were well aware of the mounting internal crises throughout the Empire. For examples of official US perceptions, see *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States. Supplement I: The World War* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931), p. 39; *Lansing Papers*, pp. 639–64. On 10 February, 1917, Lansing stated, '[W]e know the desperate internal situation of Austria ...'. (Ibid., p. 596) Throughout 1917, however, US policymakers argued for having the Entente, in Lansing's words, 'to so modify their peace terms that Austria would not feel that they might mean the dismemberment of that Empire ...'. (Ibid., p. 596)

<sup>48</sup> For US relations with the Polish National Committee, see *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: 1917. Supplement 2, Vol. I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1932), pp. 759–90.

<sup>49</sup> *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: 1917. Supplement I: The World War* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931), pp. 38–9. For the recommendations of the Inquiry of mid-December 1917, see *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 45 (11 November, 1917–15 January, 1918), pp. 459–74, esp. pp. 461, 463, 466–7. The document was signed, *inter alia*, by Walter Lippmann, general secretary of the Inquiry, Wilson's advisory committee on war aims.

<sup>50</sup> *Lansing Papers*, p. 127.

new state of affairs it seems to me that Austria-Hungary must be practically blotted out as an empire. It should be partitioned among the nationalities of which it is composed.

[P]rimarily as a war measure, and also because it is just and wise for the future, we should encourage in every possible way the national desires of these peoples. If need be, I would favor going so far as to promise them their independence when the Central Powers are defeated if that should induce them to revolt against German-owned Austria-Hungary.<sup>51</sup>

Consequently, on 29 May, 1918, Lansing declared on behalf of the US government that 'the nationalistic aspirations of the Czecho-Slovaks and Jugoslavs for freedom have the earnest sympathy of this government'.<sup>52</sup>

What is striking about the 29 May declaration is that it came so late and rang so timid. War expediency was clearly the predominant motive in its issuance. The short-term defeat of Germany through the weakening of Austria-Hungary rather than the long-term reformation of the international order in East-Central Europe lay at the foundation of this shift in Wilson's policy. American public opinion as well as the Habsburg Slavs seized upon the declaration as a reflection of American commitment to a democratic (and nationalist) peace, thereby restricting the State Department's previous freedom of action on Habsburg issues. Wilson now emerged as the champion of national independence for the Austrian Slavs. By early September 1918, the course of the war, Wilson's ideological commitment to self-determination, as well as effective propaganda and diplomacy by Masaryk, had led the US to recognize the Czechoslovak National Council as a co-belligerent and thus finally commit the United States to the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>53</sup>

It should not be forgotten that the original external stimulus of Habsburg nationalisms lay not in Washington, DC but in London and Paris, in the guise of the secret treaties, which certainly envisaged the dismantling of large parts of the Habsburg domains, but for *raisons d'état*, not from any principled concern with national self-determination.<sup>54</sup> Fejto has sensibly argued that:

Whether the dual monarchy tied its fate to that of Germany in defeat or whether it abandoned its ally, it was in any event condemned by virtue of the secret treaties that had been concluded by the Allies with the Serbs, Rumanians, and Italians.<sup>55</sup>

Even so, the fact remains that in the course of the secret Armand-Revertera negotiations that took place in 1917 and early 1918, in which France undertook to induce Austria to make a separate peace, the French had proposed to restore long-lost Silesia to Austria and even to reward her with Bavaria and Poland, which, had

<sup>51</sup> Robert Lansing, *War Memoirs* (Indianapolis, 1935), pp. 267ff., as cited in Mamatey, *The United States and East-Central Europe*, p. 257.

<sup>52</sup> *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: The World War, 1918. Supplement I*, vol. I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), p. 808ff. Lansing wrote to Wilson on 21 May, 1918, '... the Jugo-Slavs are a sufficiently defined nationality to be entitled to self-determination ... [I]f the suppressed nationalities of Austria-Hungary are to be aroused, now seems to be the time'. *Lansing Papers*, pp. 129–30.

<sup>53</sup> *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 49 (18 July–13 September, 1918), pp. 287–8, 382, 399, 405, 416.

<sup>54</sup> Arthur Balfour made this distinction explicit in his summary of war aims to the Imperial War Council in mid-May 1918. For the text of Balfour's discussion of the implications of the Entente commitments to Poland, Italy, and Romania, see *Lansing Papers*, pp. 23–5.

<sup>55</sup> Fejto, *Requiem*, p. 291. Still, and contrary to Wilson's disavowal before the Senate that he had been aware of the secret treaties, the Fourteen Points had been drafted with specific reference to the Allied arrangements with Serbia, Italy, Rumania, etc., so as to minimize the chance that the Points might disrupt the US-West European alliance. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, pp. 210–14 and Steel, 'Prologue', pp. 133–4.

the talks succeeded, would actually have substantially strengthened the Habsburg domains, and in spite of losses to Rumania, Serbia, and Italy.<sup>56</sup> The French high command was strongly opposed to efforts to dismember the Habsburg Empire, both because it would undermine any chance of a separate peace and inevitably magnify Germany's power in the post-war period.<sup>57</sup> In the final analysis it was the practical inability of the Habsburg leadership to dissociate itself from the German alliance (by 1918 the German and Austrian armies were effectively integrated) which triggered the Allied commitment to the application of the principle of national self-determination to the Habsburg domains.

Otherwise, many variations of a compromise peace leaving the Empire intact would have been possible, as numerous French and American initiatives throughout 1917 and the spring of 1918 testify. There was thus no coherent, preordained policy or programme on the part of either the Allied (Britain and France) or Associated (the United States) powers to realize the principle of self-determination in East-Central Europe.<sup>58</sup> The eventual commitment to national self-determination emerged as a result of the military course of the war. By mid-1918 the military requirements of the Entente, combined with Wilson's principled sympathy to the idea, had raised 'national self-determination' as a central war aim, one to be applied now with vigour to an Austria which could not otherwise be separated from Germany.<sup>59</sup> Yet *Entente* leaders, and least of all Wilson, had hardly begun to think through the geopolitical consequences of applying the principle, not to mention the manifold practical difficulties involved in implementing it in the first place.<sup>60</sup>

At all times, Wilson's support of the principle of national self-determination was qualified and subordinated to his understanding of US security interests. Wilson, while deeply and sincerely committed to the principle of national self-determination,<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> As related in Mamatey, *The United States and East-Central Europe*, p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> Fejto, *Requiem*, pp. 251–65; Mamatey, *The United States and East-Central Europe*, pp. 142–3.

<sup>58</sup> The author of the first systematic Allied proposal on applying national self-determination to Central Europe was evidently Arthur Balfour, in 1916. Balfour later changed his mind. Fejto, *Requiem*, pp. 196–8, 236.

<sup>59</sup> Lansing, who throughout 1917 had fought against policies that implied the dismemberment of the Habsburg Empire, by summer 1918 argued that the practical inability to dissociate Austria-Hungary from Germany justified the full embrace by the United States of the 'national revolutionists' pushing for Czechoslovak and Yugoslav independence. Wilson agreed. See *Lansing Papers*, pp. 140–1. Fejto argues provocatively that it was French perhaps even more than American ideological zeal which propelled the Habsburgs toward their end (reflecting a mentality of 'republicaniser l'Europe' combined with a determination for total victory/vengeance). See Fejto, *Requiem*, pp. 305–36.

<sup>60</sup> With curious logic, on 19 August, 1918, Lansing justified Czechoslovak independence to Wilson arguing, 'Austria-Hungary as an Empire should disappear, since it is the keystone of Mittel-Europa ...'. *Lansing Papers*, p. 139. Kurt von Schuschnigg, Austrian Chancellor before the *Anschluss*, calculated that, if two million Slovaks and 2.8 million Croats are counted as 'dissatisfied' national minorities, then, 'After 1918 ... the number of 'irredentists' within the same territory stood at 27,600,000—an increase of 200,000'. Cited in Heater, *National Self-Determination*, p. 156. Alan Sharpe has more recently calculated that the peace settlement 'left some 30 million people as inhabitants of states in which they were not the majority nationality; the figure in 1914 had been about 60 million'. The post-1945 settlement produced a much more homogeneous outcome, although one greatly assisted by genocide, mass refugee flight, and the expulsion of millions of Germans from their homelands. Alan Sharpe, 'The Genie that Would Not Go Back into the Bottle. National Self-Determination and the Legacy of the First World War and the Peace Settlement', in *Europe and Ethnicity: The First World War and Contemporary Conflict*, eds. Seamus Dunn and T.G. Fraser (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>61</sup> For convincing evidence of Wilson defending the principle against French resistance with respect to Germany's western borders, see Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson*, pp. 267–76.

never gave absolute rein to the idea. Wilson freely admitted that there were bound to be cases where the principle would have to be subordinated to other considerations—diplomatic, strategic, or economic. The peace settlement would be full of such compromises and Wilson saw the logic of many of them: ceding Austrian South Tyrol up to the Brenner to Italy for strategic reasons; denying rump Austria the right of *Anschluss*; and imposing treaties for the protection of minority rights on the newly independent states. When the latter were protested as a violation of sovereignty, ‘Wilson reasonably replied that since the primary responsibility for the preservation of peace rested upon the major powers, they must insist upon the elimination of potential dangers to that peace’.<sup>62</sup> Finally, the fact remains that ‘national self-determination’ was applied only to the defeated powers, the victors being free to practice self-determination as they saw fit.

Relatedly, Wilson’s bitter Mexican experience had taught him that military intervention to install ‘good government’ could not resolve deeply rooted economic, social, and political problems in the country concerned. Wilson thus consistently resisted a politically inspired intervention in Russia aimed at overthrowing the Bolsheviks.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, in spite of the emergence of Lenin and Wilson as simultaneous champions of very different concepts of national self-determination, and despite Wilson’s incomprehension of the Bolshevik phenomenon, neither Wilson nor his successors ever adopted the principle of national self-determination with respect to Soviet Russia. In spite of the 1920 Treaty of Tartu between Soviet Russia and Estonia, the US waited until 1922 to recognize the Baltic states. The US did not want to jeopardize the territorial integrity of the Russian state as long as there was a plausible chance that the Bolsheviks might be overthrown (from within). The US government even questioned whether the three Baltic states were ‘morally justified’ in proclaiming their independence in the hour of Russia’s weakness.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, in the official declaration of recognition, the United States qualified its demarche as follows:

The United States has consistently maintained that the disturbed conditions of Russian affairs may not be made the occasion for the alienation of Russian territory, and this principle is not deemed to be infringed by the recognition at this time of the Governments of Esthonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which have been set up and maintained by an indigenous population.<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, at no point in America’s relationship with Soviet Russia, including the periods of non-recognition and Cold War, has the imperial character of the Soviet state had a significant effect on American policy toward the Soviet Union. During the period of non-recognition, 1917–33, it was not the denial of *national self-*

<sup>62</sup> Smith, *The Great Departure*, p. 163; *The Deliberations of the Council of Four*, pp. 481–3; Keylor for Paderewski’s protest against the minority treaty for Poland, see *ibid.*, pp. 487–93. On this point, see also Carole Fink, ‘The Minorities Question at the Paris Peace Conference: The Polish Minority Treaty’, in Boemeke, et al., *The Treaty of Versailles*, pp. 249–74, 493–6; for Paderewski’s protest against the minority treaty for Poland, see *ibid.*, pp. 487–93. On this point, see also Carole Fink, ‘The Minorities Question at the Paris Peace Conference: The Polish Minority Treaty’, in Boemeke, et al., *The Treaty of Versailles*, pp. 249–74.

<sup>63</sup> Betty M. Unterberger, ‘Woodrow Wilson and the Bolsheviks: the “Acid Test” of Soviet-American Relations’, *Diplomatic History*, 11: 2 (Spring 1987), pp. 71–90.

<sup>64</sup> *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1922*. 2 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1938), Vol. II, pp. 870–2.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 873–4.

determination that prevented official American dealings with the Soviet government. Such obstacles to US diplomatic recognition of Soviet Russia as Soviet repudiation of Tsarist debts, the Bolshevik seizure of American property, Soviet-inspired propaganda in the United States, and official Soviet atheism did seriously retard the normalization of Soviet-American relations in the 1920s. Yet once these problems had been resolved, or put aside (as they would be in 1933), the repression of national self-determination within the USSR would not serve seriously to complicate the course of relations between Moscow and Washington. American objections to the undemocratic nature of the Soviet system would remain a hindrance to any genuinely intimate set of relations with Moscow, but these objections were rooted in a general revulsion at the dictatorial character of the Soviet regime, and never at the specific subjugation of the nations, Russian and non-Russian, that composed the USSR. The Soviet dictatorship was seen as one over individuals, or even classes, but never in any politically important sense as a dictatorship over a multitude of nations, as was, by contrast, the Tsarist system (the prison house of nations, in language which Lenin helped make popular).<sup>66</sup> Wilson's legacy proved quite enduring in this respect and underscores just how qualified Wilson's and US support for national self-determination as an actual policy, as distinct from an ideological creed, has been.

## Conclusion

Woodrow Wilson was, *for better or worse*, the genuine article. He advanced the principle of national self-determination not, like the British and French, because it might prove to be a useful weapon in power politics, but *also* because he genuinely believed it to be a superior basis for organizing a stable peace. Yet Wilson was in fact no *naïf*. He understood that the idea could not be applied in an unqualified way, that considerations of national self-determination might in specific instances have to give way to compelling questions of security, diplomacy, and economics. Certainly, Wilson proved that he could practice *Realpolitik* with Clemenceau and Lloyd George: he steadfastly refused to merge US military efforts within an Anglo-French command so as to preserve US freedom of action at the Peace Conference, and assiduously preserved his lines of communication with Austria with an aim to concluding a separate peace even after declaring war upon the Dual Monarchy in December 1917. Still, Wilson's commitment to national self-determination suffered from significant conceptual, empirical, and geopolitical limitations.<sup>67</sup>

Conceptually, Wilson tended to interpret political trends in East-Central Europe within an Anglo-US political-historical framework: for Woodrow Wilson, national self-determination meant the right of communities to govern themselves, not the

<sup>66</sup> For a full discussion, see Allen Lynch, *The Cold War Is Over—Again* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), ch. 8.

<sup>67</sup> For limitations intrinsic to the concept, see Cobban, *National Self-Determination*, pp. 44-77, and Pomerance, *Perspectives*, *passim*.



right of every ethnos to its own polity. Wilson saw the nation in civic terms rather than ethnic. Thus, Wilson's embrace of the standard of self-determination triggered expectations in East-Central Europe that were not originally justified by a close reading of his Fourteen Points or of his broader diplomacy. These conceptual limitations were compounded by the fact that Wilson was simply not well informed about the realities of nation and state in East-Central Europe:<sup>68</sup> he did not know about the Sudeten Germans until after he had made his commitment to Masaryk, he greatly underestimated the intensity of Italian nationalist ambitions, and generally did not grasp until it was too late that Habsburg Europe could not be neatly rearranged along lines of nationality.<sup>69</sup>

In this respect, many scholars have judged Wilson harshly for his too uncritical embrace of the idea of national self-determination. Adumbrating the vexing series of issues entailed in the dissolution of any multinational state—above all: where does the process of dividing such a state end?—Ronald Steel has called the whole concept into question:

[I]f democracy means the equality of citizens and the protection of minorities, must not national self-determination—at least in its ethnic or religious form—often be profoundly anti-democratic? The record of European self-determination during the inter-war period—and more recently in the wake of the collapse of the multinational communist empires—makes such a conclusion difficult to escape. If similar catastrophes are to be avoided in the future, the world must take a more restricted view of the right of self-determination.

Perhaps, though, Steel, like most liberal theorists, has got it the other way around. For arguably national self-determination, as a matter of principle, can be regarded as a second-order phenomenon in relation to the idea of democracy itself. If one accepts the liberal premise that a common (and in effect linguistic) culture is a prerequisite of democracy—precisely in order to ascertain and debate the common weal—then in a world in which national (and linguistic) heterogeneity is the norm, what is most striking is that it is democracy itself that entails national self-determination (since the ethnos is usually the bearer of the common language) rather than that national self-determination threatens democratic values, such as toleration. Democracy rather than national self-determination may thus be the primary destructive catalyst of civic (or at least of inter-ethnic) toleration, which has often been enforced effectively by authoritarian polities. That liberal (and socialist) critics continue to focus on national self-determination as if it were only incidentally related to democratic theory, is a measure of the extent to which such critics have failed to come to terms with the ethnos and the tight nexus between democracy and nationalism. The fact that classic liberal conceptions of democracy frequently served

<sup>68</sup> In contrast, the US delegation to The Paris Peace Conference, influenced by the work of the Inquiry, was probably the best informed of the Allied delegations. Co-ordination, however, was often poor. Schober, *Die Tiroler Frage*, p. 59.

<sup>69</sup> For official US reactions to the disintegration of Austria-Hungary, in which the US repudiated its earlier support for mere 'autonomy' as well as Austrian proposals for the federalization of the Empire, see *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States. 1918. Supplement 1: The World War* (in two volumes). Vol. I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), pp. 367-8, 445-7; and *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 51 (14 September-8 November, 1918), pp. 10-11, 258-9, 282, 348-9, 505-7, 526-30.

to justify intolerant and destructive consequences in multinational states should give pause about the universal claims advanced on behalf of liberal democracy itself.<sup>70</sup>

Wilson himself advocated national self-determination as a logical corollary of his broader democratic commitment. As a statesman, he was of course constrained by strategic, economic, and diplomatic considerations in the application of the principle. Still, the effect was shattering in a Europe where few easy correspondences between ethnos and state boundaries existed, or could exist. Thus, Wilson never seems to have grasped the geopolitical fact, as did the French General Staff, that the dissolution of the Habsburg domains would inevitably lead to the disruption of an entire economic region and a surge in German ambitions and power amidst what was sure to become a major European power vacuum. In Wilson's defence, it must be admitted that he tended to discount the import of these problems because of his broader vision of a collective security system, embedded within his League of Nations, that with an American commitment would tend to make such issues manageable, if not justiciable. All of the defects and compromises at the Peace Conference were justified in Wilson's mind by the promise that the League held out for world peace and security. It is beyond the purview of this article to evaluate the realism of his conception of collective security. It may be argued, however, that the presence or absence of an American commitment to the continent has been the single most important factor in shaping the contours of European security since 1918. When that commitment has been credible, the nationalism that was legitimated by Wilson's embrace of national self-determination has not threatened the peace of Europe. Wilson, in repudiating the balance of power, nevertheless demonstrated that the extension of liberal values required liberal power; values and power, whether conservative or liberal, rest upon each other, as do theory and practice. No safe divorce seems practicable. In the absence of this twin commitment of US power and values, of theory and practice, the world may be excused for turning in wistful nostalgia to the comparatively liberal imperial order of the late Habsburg era.

<sup>70</sup> For a powerful, if plaintive, Russian critique, see V.B. Pastukhov, 'Balkanskiy sindrom: istoriya bolezni' [The Balkan Syndrome: History of a Disease], *Polis*, 2 (1999), pp. 115, 118-19, 121. Thus: 'The right of national self-determination is inapplicable to ethnic conflicts if only because the ethnos is not a nation and is not organized on the territorial principle....The West loves not the Albanians but itself, more particularly, its own liberalism....The West should renounce as a matter of principle the idea of national self-determination, which today only provokes ethnic conflicts'.