

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Woodrow Wilson on the Self-Determination of Nations

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This article addresses the concept of the self-determination of nations, which was to become a visionary and assertive underlying principle for the political and legal emancipation of multi-ethnic societies. It focuses on two political representatives of their respective countries, the American president Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) and the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924), and on the different ways these two statesmen understood national

self-determination at the start of the 20th century, and then enforced it during and after the First World War. I will take account not only of the biographies of the two men but also of the histories of their two countries, and of the interplay between their views and the contrast between their respective historical contexts.

The intellectual and legal origins of the concept of the right to self-determination go back to the Ameri-



Fig. 1: Declaration of Independence of the United States presented by drafting committee to the 1776 Congress, painted by John Trumbull 1819.



Fig. 2: Ulyanov family in Simbirsk 1879: (standing left to right) Olga, Alexander and Anna; (sitting from left to right) mother Maria Alexandrovna, their younger daughter Maria, Dmitry, father Ilya Nikolayevich and Vladimir (front right).

can Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Revolution (1789). First and foremost, the right to self-determination emphasises that the people are sovereign, and that the government is answerable to the people. The concept was then taken up in the 19th century by nationalist revolutionaries such as Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872) and applied to ethnic national groups.¹

The principle of national self-determination became a powerful political lightning rod in the multi-ethnic empires of Europe, where tensions desperately needed resolution. As the First World War and its many geopolitical and ideological upheavals drew to a close, the concept of the right to self-determination and of the principle of self-determination gained new prominence as a means of emancipation; key political leaders of the time, in particular Woodrow Wilson and the Russian party leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, were quick to see that it could serve their own political purposes.²

The concept of self-determination remained prominent throughout the 20th and 21st centuries; indeed, it became one of the most successful political and legal slogans, not only undergirding nations' claim to equal rights but also providing the basis for an international order of self-governing nations, along the same lines as the United Nations.³

The Nation as Reference Point

The right to self-determination was defined with reference to a nation. Nations evolved along very different paths, but the idea of a nation held out the promise to anyone who was recognised as belonging to it that they would have a share in the collective achievements of a community defined by its language, its origins and its traditions. Lenin to some extent invoked the Austro-Marxists Otto Bauer (1881-1938) and Karl Renner (1870-1950), who had drawn on their experiences in the multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire to examine in detail the concept of the nation and the many ways in which it exerted its appeal. The idea of the nation could be weaponised under the slogan 'national self-rule', since the working classes generally placed a higher value on their national allegiance than on internationalism.⁴

Lenin was well aware of the significance of state independence, and it later became clear that he was equally conscious of the international dimension of the right to self-determination; Bauer and Renner, meanwhile, saw the right to self-determination above all as a national privilege.⁵ There was an unparalleled attraction to seeing the nation as a shared resource, provided the nation also functioned as a state. All national movements wanted above all to have their own state.⁶ A state defined who could and could not claim solidarity with the nation, providing a border that gathered together those who were members and excluded those who were not. It embodied the promise of something fundamentally new in the long history of statehood: an open society of basically equal citizens collaborating as one nation. This symbiosis between state and nation made the nation state seem a very attractive option.⁷ In Eastern Europe especially, a vision of a future that was furthermore legitimated by the prospect of the right to self-determination exerted a particular appeal.

Lenin's Understanding of the Right to Self-Determination

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, known by his alias Lenin, had been born in 1870 in Simbirsk (now Ulyanovsk), and had grown up in the multi-ethnic south of the tsarist empire. He was partly of Jewish extraction, but he had not suffered any ethnic discrimination during his youth. He was brought up at home to be a Russian European.⁸

During and after his law studies he became increasingly involved in the proletarian social democratic movement in Russia. His early travels to European countries such as Germany, France and Switzerland confirmed his international outlook. According to Boris Meissner, '[h]e detested any manifestation of what he called Great Russian chauvinism. His knowledge of ethnogeography and his privileged background meant that his view of the "national question" could differ from that of his Party comrades' among the Russian-speaking revolutionaries: 'The young Lenin sought to find ways to address the "national question" in the light of the specific problems arising from the multi-ethnic character of the Russian empire.'¹⁰ He was strongly influenced by the international debates on the right to self-determination and the anti-tsarist, early Socialist writings of Alexander Herzen (1812-1870), Michail Bakunin (1814-1876) and, especially, Georgi Plekhanov (1856-1918).¹¹

Lenin understood the right to self-determination to mean the right of a nation with a clear territorial delineation to decide whether it wanted to become separate or to remain a part of its existing union – in other words, to assert its claim as an independent national state with territorial autonomy.¹² In 1903, Lenin evolved his understanding of the right to self-determination against the background of the debate among the large General Jewish Labour Bund and the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL). Both groups, however, resisted Lenin's efforts to create a centralised organisation for the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), inspired by the cultural and organisational autonomy of the Austrian model. Subsequently, at the 2nd conference of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, the Jewish Bund split away from the Party and the Polish Social Democrats ruled out any merger with their Russian sister party.¹³

In 1912, Lenin's thinking on the question of the right to self-determination once again became highly relevant when the question arose of keeping the 'Caucasian' Party members in the RSDLP and at the same time offering them the prospect of national independence.¹⁴ Lenin's own party, the Russian Social Democrats, were very irritated by his commitment to the issue of nationalism. At the Second International he engaged in further lively debate on the matter with his party comrades and with other Russian intellectuals. Both before and after the 1915 conference in Zimmerwald he fiercely defended his conviction that the principles of the Second International encompassed the principle of self-determination for nations and thus also the freedom to declare independence from another state, and that it was therefore legitimate to mobilise the masses to resist national oppression.¹⁵

Lenin conducted a year-long discussion with Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), one of the leading theoreticians.



Fig 3: The Polish-German politician and theoretician Rosa Luxemburg.



Fig. 4: After the First World War Wilson as a segregationist paid little attention to a couple of racist riots against African Americans in the United States while campaigning for democracy in Europe. Editorial cartoon by William Charles Morris in *New York Evening Mail* about the East St. Louis riot of 1917.

cians of Polish and later German social democracy, whom he acknowledged to be a 'revolutionary Socialist', on the 'problem of the question of nationalism'.¹⁶ She was convinced that achieving a Europe-wide revolution would necessitate collaboration between the Polish and Russian Labour movements, and she rejected the idea that Poland might become independent from Russia. Luxemburg obviously failed to recognise that national independence was the principal driving force behind Poles' political activity, right across the left-orientated parties.¹⁷ The notion of emancipatory nationalism was the main reason for the support all parts of Polish society gave to Józef Piłsudski (1867-1935), and which enabled him to lead Poland to independence in 1918 at the end of the war.¹⁸ In this respect Lenin and Piłsudski, who had known each other for decades, fully shared a realistic assessment of the ethnic and social centrifugal forces seeking to blow apart the tsarist empire.

The Right to Self-Determination after the October Revolution

Following the October Revolution, which admittedly was more akin to a coup d'état against the provisional government, Lenin presented the 'Decree on Peace' on 26 October 1917 to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. In it he demanded an immediate cease-fire and offered to all the warring nations and their governments an immediate start to negotiations to settle a just and democratic peace.¹⁹

It was an astonishing step to take, which following three years of war led to an immediate suspension of conflict, and it hugely boosted trust in the Bolsheviks among war-weary Russian farmers. The peace decree strengthened the right to self-determination among smaller nations especially, as they could now not be held against their will within the borders of a larger state. The theoretical musings of a revolutionary were now going to be measured against the reality of striving for political independence within multinational post-tsarist Russia.²⁰

Lenin had addressed the issue of the right to self-determination for colonial nations as early as 1917, and in the following months he would renew his demands for the purposes of propaganda. Out of regard for the colonial powers of England and France, and his own support for racial segregation, Woodrow Wilson was not interested in supporting these demands.²¹

Following the October Revolution and Lenin's election as chair of the Council of People's Commissars in November 1917, the newly established Russian foreign policy was in some ways ambivalent. On the one hand, the Bolsheviks published the 'Declaration of the Rights of the People of Russia', which enshrined in law the principle of self-determination for all nations, enabling them to defect from the ill-defined nationality policies of the Provisional Government. On the other hand, the new leadership tried to stem the disintegration of the state as the power of the Bolsheviks was supposed to extend to the country's periphery.²²

This new nationalities policy was assiduously monitored, especially in the regions close to Russia's western and southern borders. The Finnish parliament, which declared Finnish independence on 23 November 1917, was the first to gain recognition



Fig. 5: A Volhynian peasant with his children during First World War.

from Soviet Russia.²³ When further regions – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkestan – all followed the Finnish example, the Bolsheviks began to fear that Soviet Russia would fall apart before it had consolidated its power in peripheral regions. As a result, they either simply did not recognise the independence declarations of these provinces and states, or only did so under international pressure. After the Bolshevik takeover, there was a fundamental change to how the ‘national question’ was addressed: the constitutional reforms, which would otherwise have been determined by the nationality principle, had diminished in importance in the face of the domestically conducted class struggle.²⁴

Soviet Russia’s nationalities policy was primarily aimed at solving domestic issues. It became a foreign policy issue where a national group made a claim for their own territory and declared independence. Poland’s opportunity to claim the right to self-determination was more fruitful than that of Ukraine.

Western Europe recognised the partitioned Poland and territorial autonomy was granted at the time of the Provisional Government in Russia.²⁵ Poland’s efforts to gain independence were strongly supported during the final year of the war by Woodrow Wilson and the Entente, whereas the Ukraine could only rely on brief selfish support from Germany and Austria-Hungary, who were principally serving their own best interests.²⁶

In 1914 Lenin had made sketchy statements about Ukrainian independence. He abandoned any thoughts of it during the Russian civil war, favouring instead an alliance with Ukrainian farmers against the White Guards.²⁷ Unlike Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) and other Party functionaries, Lenin was trying hard to ensure that Ukraine, Armenia and other regions would have a fair deal in a ‘Union of European and Asian Soviet Republics’.²⁸

The Russian civil war, with its wide range of forces and competing interests, temporarily obscured the distinction between domestic and foreign policy. Eth-

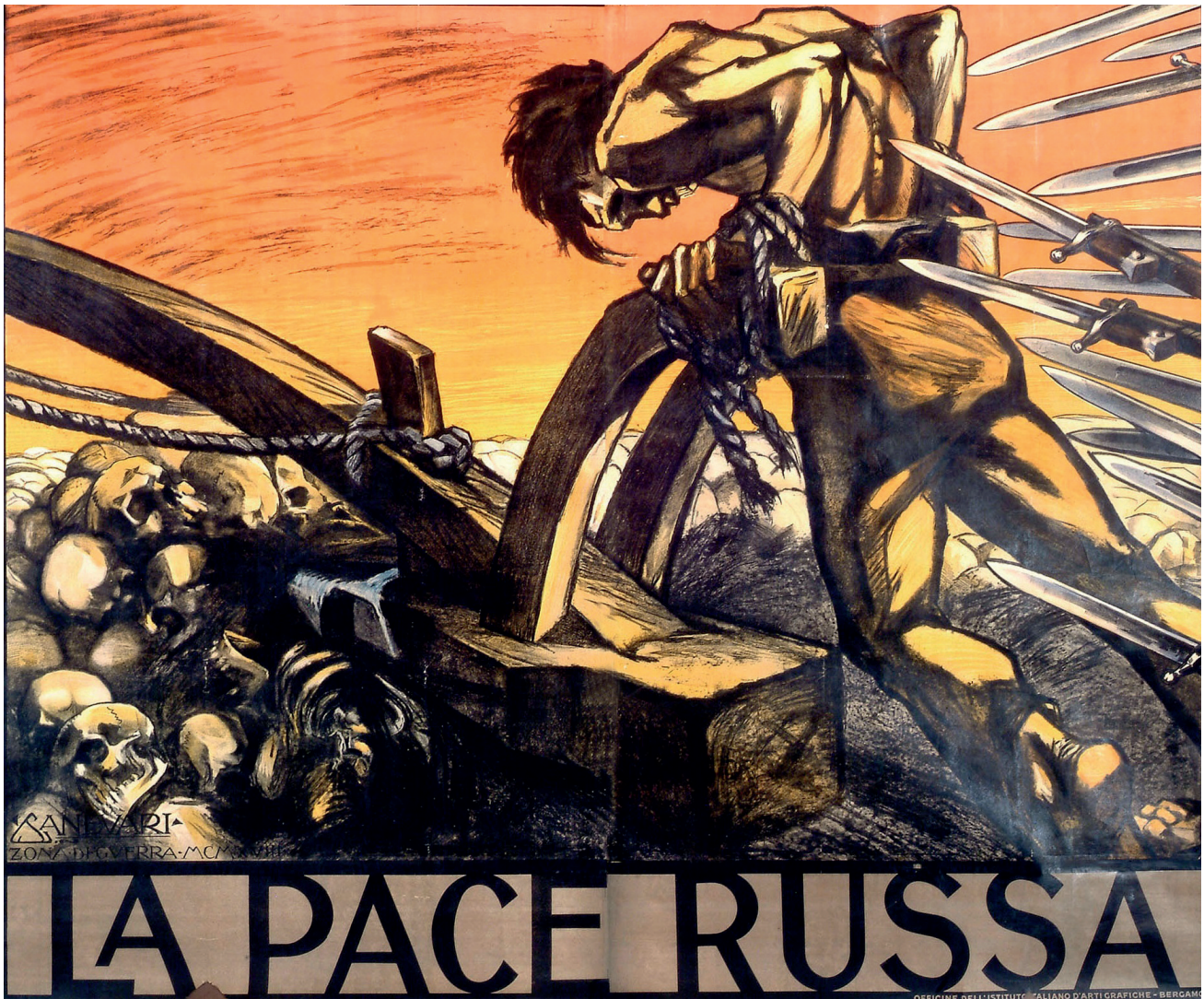


Fig. 6: 'Russian peace' (La Pace Russa). In this poster, the Bolshevik Russia that assented to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is represented as a serf, bayonets in the back, forced to carry out death's terrible work, designed by Sergio Canevari, 1918.

nic, social and ideological lines of conflict overlapped, and class and independence struggles became confused.²⁹ Various states formerly within Russia had claimed self-determination and obtained independence, notably the Baltic states and Finland. The Bolshevik leadership, however, were not intending to destroy the Russian Empire, but rather to shore it up through revolution, first within Russia and then worldwide. Lenin saw more clearly than other Bolsheviks that in order to secure the solidarity and co-operation of the working class beyond Russia's boundaries, it was necessary first to abandon the

tsarist policy of oppressing non-Russian national groups.³⁰

The Bolsheviks and the West

The governments of the Entente nations displayed confused uncertainty on hearing about the seismic changes in Russia. The new leadership acted in a way incompatible with all received political wisdom: Lenin's Decree on Peace, which was immediately adopted, the publication of secret treaties and appeals to the workers in the 'West' gave rise to con-



Fig. 7: The signing of the ceasefire agreement between Germany and its allies and Soviet Russia on 15 December 1917 in Brest-Litovsk. From the front, left side: Hakkı Paşa (Ottoman Empire), Kajetan Mérey (Austria-Hungary), Prince Leopold of Bavaria, General Max Hoffmann, Colonel Peter Gawtschew (Bulgaria). From the front, right side: Lev Kamenev, Adolf Joffe, Anastassija Bizenko and Admiral Vasili Altfater.

sternation among the Entente nations, who shrank away from discussing their war aims between them. They were especially severely hit by the loss of Russia as a military ally; Russia was now engaging in peace negotiations with the German Empire and with Austria-Hungary at Brest-Litovsk in order to end a war that was overwhelmingly unpopular at home, and to ensure its own political survival. The allies had no consistent idea, let alone any strategic plan, about how to deal with the new Russian government, especially since they avoided direct contact with Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks, and Paris, London and Washington were reliant on the fragmentary impressions of the various emissaries present.³¹

The struggle for a solution in Brest-Litovsk became a test case for implementing the promises of peace and self-determination. The negotiations,

moreover, thrust the participants onto a tense world stage from which none of the First-World-War participants could withdraw, because the opponents sitting opposite them had a radically different understanding of peace and had a new world order in view.³²

Both sides instrumentalised the right to self-determination at the negotiating table to shore up their own position. The head of the Russian negotiating team, Adolf Abramowitsch Joffe (1883-1926), emphatically told the leader of the Austrian-Hungarian delegation, the foreign minister Ottokar Count Czernin (1872-1932), that nations' right to self-determination should be made available as widely as possible around the world, in order to enable mutual love between 'these liberated nations'. Czernin defended himself from this suggestion by referring to the sovereignty of the Habsburg monarchy, and the possibil-



Fig. 8: Woodrow Wilson's parents, Joseph Ruggles Wilson and Janet Woodrow Wilson.

ity that the talks might fall through. Joffe jovially retorted: 'But I hope we shall succeed in triggering a revolution in your country too.'³³

The German delegation leader, Richard von Kühlmann (1873-1948), secretary of state in the foreign office, was hoping that from a position of military strength he could conclude a peace agreement that would establish a German protectorate over a bloc of independent east-central European states. The Supreme Army Command favoured annexation, and von Kühlmann sought to obtain this with reference to the right to self-determination of Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. He presented this plan both in the German Reichstag and during the negotiations with Joffe, and later with Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), who took over leadership of the Russian negotiations from 8 January 1918.³⁴

The Russian side rejected Kühlmann's suggestion, citing the right to self-determination, since the will of the people could clearly not be expressed so long as

foreign troops occupied the territories in question. Addressing Western European socialists, Trotsky furthermore demanded that they should grant the right to self-determination to their oppressed colonies.³⁵ The Supreme Army Command observer at the peace negotiations, General Max Hoffmann (1869-1927), rejected this appeal to the right to self-determination. The Russian government, he claimed, did not even grant the right within their own borders to Ukraine, while 'the nations in the occupied regions had clearly and unambiguously expressed their wish to become separate from Russia'.³⁶

The Central Powers engineered a meeting between the Russian and the Ukrainian delegations, but the charged atmosphere eliminated any chance of reaching an understanding. The Ukrainians confidently pointed to their state's independence, and accused the Russians of being completely uninterested in the right to self-determination, for all that they claimed otherwise.³⁷

The Russian negotiating team, for their part, referred to the fact that it was Bolshevik forces that had captured Kiev by the beginning of February 1918, and insisted that the principle of national self-determination required that the revolutionary masses should seize power. This process always and everywhere took precedence over the principle. In Brest-Litovsk, the Ukrainian Rada delegation cooperated with the Central Powers' dominant forces and concluded their own separate peace treaty, which in the eyes of the Bolsheviks meant that they had turned traitor to the revolution.³⁸

Wilson's Understanding of the Right to Self-Determination

Woodrow Wilson had been raised in the southern states of the USA. His father was a pastor in the Presbyterian Church, and his mother also came from a clerical family. The young Wilson was shaped in his way of life and his understanding of the world by his Calvinist convictions. Later critics were wrong, however, in accusing him of constantly going around quoting the Bible. He was no fundamentalist, and did not see the Bible and science as being in contradiction.³⁹

As a child, he had experienced the defeat of the Confederates in the American civil war between 1861 and 1865. As a young man, he treasured the memory

of his childhood homeland, but he did not unduly lament the disappearance of the Old South or the Confederacy. He recognised that, had the southern states become independent, they would have fallen even further behind the northern states in economic terms, and would have been isolated in international terms.⁴⁰

Wilson had enjoyed a remarkable academic career at the end of the 19th century. At the age of 32 he became a professor of history in Middletown, Connecticut, and two years later a professor of law in Princeton. By 1917, Lenin had already been taking an interest in the subject of nations' right to self-determination for several years; Woodrow Wilson was fourteen years Lenin's senior, but his origins and career had given him little acquaintance with the subject. Wilson had received a broad interdisciplinary academic education, but his own nation, the USA, remained the focus of his research and interests. As a moderate Southern segregationist and convinced statist, his background was completely different from that of Lenin, a professional international revolutionary. In 1893 Wilson published a history of the American civil war, which, given that it came from the pen of a Southerner, was remarkably thorough and unbiased.⁴¹

His view was that the total defeat of the South in the American civil war precluded the option of independence for the southern states, and required instead that the two sides become reconciled and equal, in order to become integrated as one nation in one state. As Jörg Fisch has argued, if one excludes the oppressed and permanently disadvantaged indigenous peoples, 'unlike the Russia and many European states, the USA was not a multi-ethnic state in the sense of having territories with different ancestral histories. From this point of view, the USA (apart from Mexico) had no difficulties with nationalities and so-called border nations. Against the background of the United American States, Wilson's concept of self-determination was in effect self-government, the government of the people by the people.'⁴²

In the context of his academic work, Wilson made a comparative examination of constitutional law in Great Britain and the USA, and was greatly influenced by the writings of the economist Walter Bagehot (1827-1877) and above all the philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-1797). According to these two

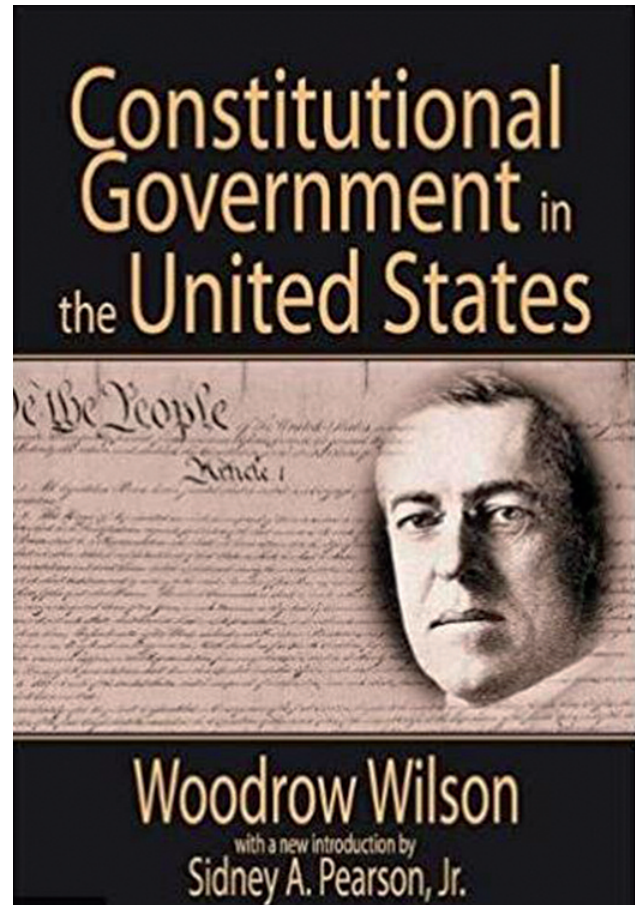


Fig. 9: Book cover of Woodrow Wilson's *Constitutional Government*.

authors, political life was not founded on abstract principles, but on historical experience and evolved tradition. In his book *Constitutional Government*, published in 1908, Wilson emphasised that the defence of freedom must form the core of any political constitution. He also asserted that a nation's constitution must be capable of evolving to remain relevant, but barring radical upheaval. Wilson was a professor but also nurtured political ambitions, and he maintained that any social change should be guided and controlled by a set of moral and religious values.⁴³ Wilson not only thought that the American nation – free from monarchy or commitment to colonies – was better equipped for this challenge than the states of Europe, but also that it was predestined to serve as a model democratic republic for other states.⁴⁴

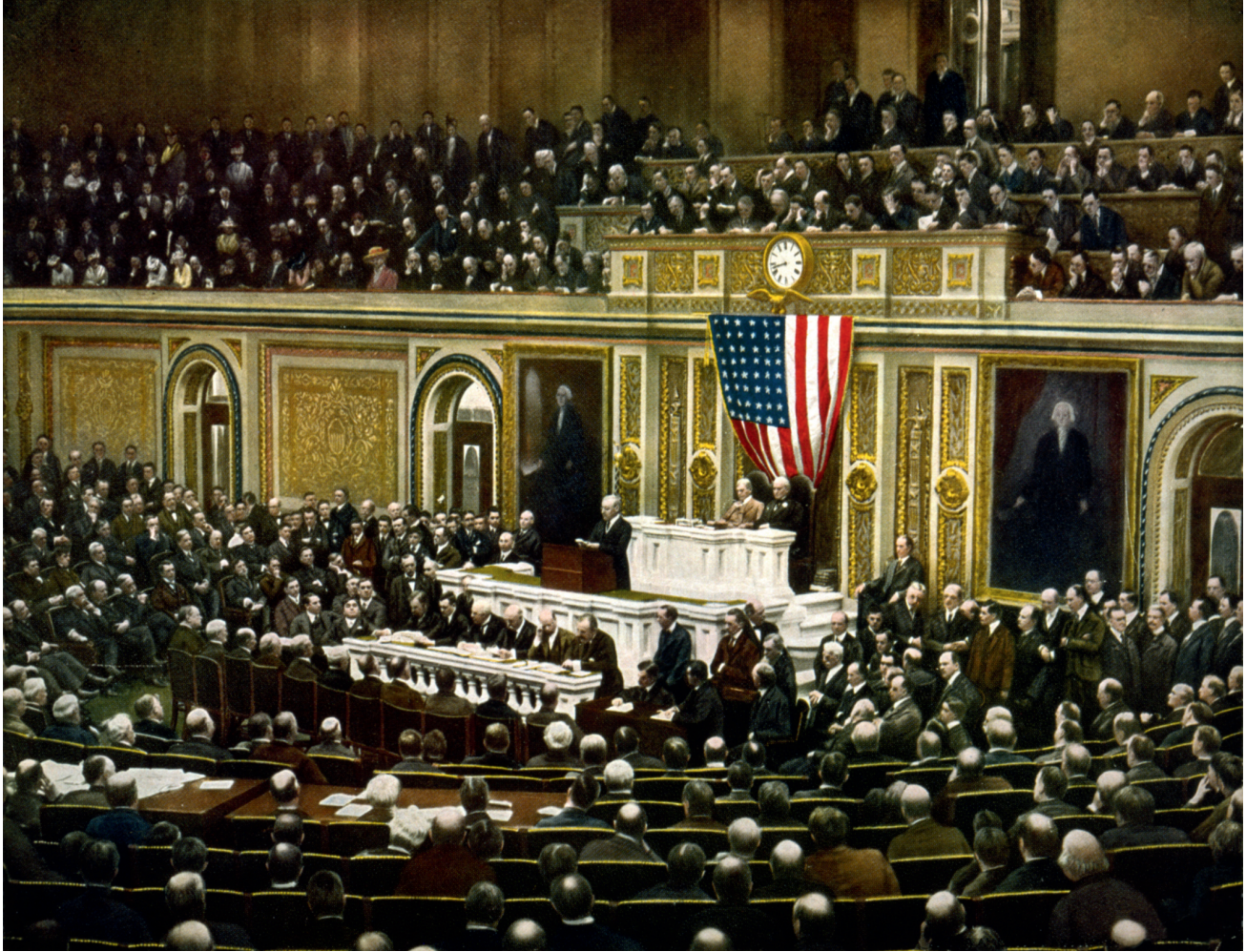


Fig. 10: Woodrow Wilson's speech to Congress with the request a declaration of war against Germany, 2 April 1917.

Moving on from academic publications, Wilson started on a successful political career: in 1910 he was voted in as Governor of New Jersey for the Democrats, and two years later elected as President of the United States. He was re-elected in 1916 thanks to the slogan 'He kept us out of the war'. In a speech to the League to Enforce Peace on 27 May 1916, he promised that the USA would collaborate in setting up an association of the nations. This established his claim to be an advocate for the security and integrity of smaller nations. He maintained that all nations should have the right to make sovereign decisions over their own fate.⁴⁵

In pursuing this line of argument, the president was subtly preparing his fellow citizens for political and military participation in the First World War,

even though – as he pointed out in his introduction – he had no interest in becoming involved in the competing European forces that had led to the war. Wilson offered a solution in his speech to the US Senate on 22 January 1917 entitled 'Peace without Victory', in which he outlined the new internationalism he had in mind. When he announced to the nation on 2 April that he intended to declare war, he added the famous slogan: 'The world must be made safe for democracy'. It was only through the establishment of democratic states that would work together, he asserted, that long-term peace could be secured. So it was that Wilson enthusiastically welcomed the fall of the tsar in the February Revolution, and proclaimed that the Russian people had a democratic soul.⁴⁶

The United States and Russia

The USA and Soviet Russia were to exert an unprecedented influence on Europe's fate after 1918. Their politicians' actions and ideas on political order awoke both hopes and fears across Europe; the two states, having hitherto been peripheral, therefore increasingly took note of each other and developed their policies each with an eye on the other. The new superpower in the West was conscious of its economic and military strength, and was able to characterise its president, Woodrow Wilson, as the bringer of peace. In economic and military terms, post-tsarist Russia was a collapsed state, yet it embodied the political allure of peace and self-determination. With missionary zeal, Lenin was meanwhile calling on the working masses to rise up in revolution in their own countries. His rallying cry was politically powerful, and it aroused both positive and negative reactions among all those who had been involved in the war.⁴⁷

On 6 April 1917 the USA entered the war on the side of the Entente and against the Imperial German Reich and its allies. Russia, an ally of the Entente, was no longer an autocracy but a democratic partner, and this lent weight to Wilson's call to fight for democracy in nations where the people had shown they wanted it, and gave him increased authority in persuading his fellow Americans of the need to join in the war. It was clearly right to deploy 'peace and justice' to counter an autocratic claim to power.⁴⁸

Wilson's call for a liberal political order was immediately challenged by the October Revolution and the Bolshevik proclamations. Wilson's and Lenin's projects, however, did in fact display some similarities. Both were raising universal and global claims on the basis of a social interpretation of the social environment.⁴⁹ Wilson's 'peace without victory' and Lenin's 'peace without annexations or indemnities' shared some features, and there were further similarities: the appeal to the principle of self-determination, the critical view of the European imperial powers, the rejection of secret treaties and the commitment to a new internationalism. That the two perspectives presented by Wilson and Lenin each elicited widespread interest suggests that other peace solutions had exhausted their appeal.⁵⁰

Lenin's concept of unconditional peace, published on 7 November 1917 as his Decree on Peace, was rap-

idly and widely circulated in the 'West' and caused consternation in the French and British governments. Paris and London (and indeed Washington) decided it was preferable simply not to acknowledge the Bolshevik government and to avoid any discussion of war aims. The governments of the Entente and the USA nevertheless felt under so much pressure from the Decree on Peace that they were then forced to explain their own aims for the peace.

Wilson and the Bolsheviks

Wilson presented his Fourteen Points, a peace programme for Europe, in his speech to Congress on 8 January 1918. It was no accident that this coincided with the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. And Wilson managed to include some words of praise for the Bolsheviks. He acknowledged that they were conducting their negotiations 'very justly, very wisely [...] in the true spirit of modern demo-



Fig. 11: Wilson's kind intentions for Russia symbolized by a torn-away bear with the Jacobin hat, drawn by Arthur Johnson, published in *Kladderadatsch* 1917.



Fig. 12: Lincoln Colcord, US-American journalist and advocate of good American-Russian relations, early 1920s.

cracy'.⁵¹ He stressed that Russia was entitled to obtain 'opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy' and to expect 'a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing'.⁵² Behind these warm words, however, was a careful calculation aimed at preventing any German peace conditions that would have undermined Russia.⁵³

Wilson saw the Russian population as an important part of the international public he hoped to address through his speech. On 13 January 1918, the US embassy in Moscow sent a telegraph to say that Lenin agreed with Wilson's speech and thought it promoted peace. Wilson's careful choice of words hit a different tone from those of the Entente governments, who made no effort to hide their anti-Bolshevik feelings, and as a result his speech was well received in Russia and among the Bolsheviks.⁵⁴ Wilson viewed a military intervention in Soviet Russia with extreme scepti-

cism. From 1918 to 1920, he committed to no more than the defensive and ultimately aborted deployment of 5000 US soldiers in Arkhangelsk and 8000 in Vladivostok, to secure munitions for the Allies and help the Czechoslovakian Legion evacuate from Russia.⁵⁵

By the start of 1918 Wilson had not yet reached a firm view on the Bolshevik coup; he had been consulting those around him, as he also did before the start of the Paris Peace Conference. One of these was Lincoln Colcord (1883-1947), who had made a name for himself as a young political columnist on the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, and who had been recommended to the president's circle of associates by Edward Mandell (Colonel) House (1858-1938). Colcord argued that the new Russian government should be approached with an open mind, and rejected the image of Russian anarchy and chaos widely presented in the US press. He argued that the new Russian ruling party's efforts to achieve peace should be taken seriously, and that their government should be recognised.⁵⁶ Secretary of State Robert Lansing (1864-1928), however, opposed recognition of the new Russian government, as he judged that they had forced their way into power and were exerting class-based despotism. The US indeed did not grant Russia full recognition, but the administration made every effort to maintain channels of communication with Petrograd and Moscow.⁵⁷

Notwithstanding the seizure of power by the 'Maximalists', as the Bolsheviks were named in liberal and conservative circles, at the start of 1918 Wilson expressed some sympathy for the large east European nation that only a few months earlier had cast off the tsarist yoke. With half an eye to the Central Powers, he insisted on 'the evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations', and that Russia's further development should be given every encouragement.⁵⁸

Even when ideological differences came between Wilson and the Bolsheviks, he recognised that the Western powers did not have the means to force a sympathetic regime upon Russia, nor would it be legitimate for them to do so.⁵⁹ It was indeed far more likely that foreign intervention would provoke a wave of patriotic reaction in favour of the Bolsheviks,

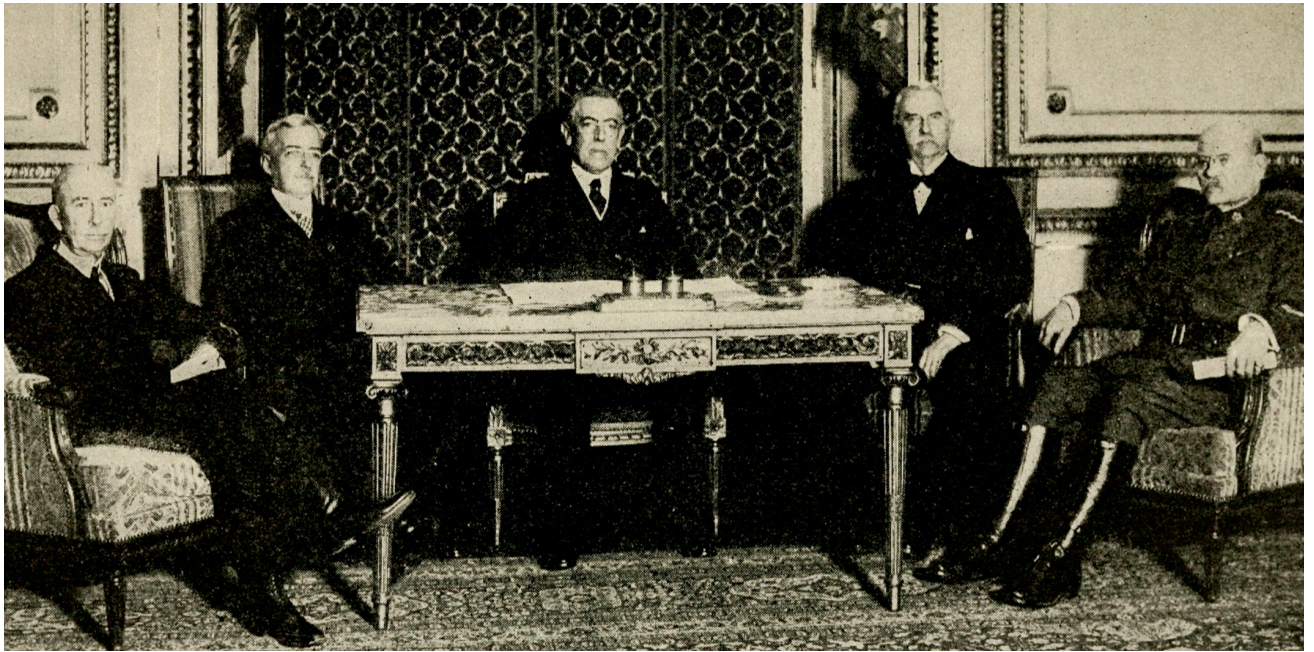


Fig. 13: Wilson with his advisors, including ministerial and military personnel, at the Versailles Peace Conference; depicting Edward Colonel House, Secretary Robert Lansing, President Wilson, Henry White, General Tasker H. Bliss (from left to right).

as the French government discovered to their cost when they attempted to intervene in southern Russia at the end of 1918. Any intervention, moreover, would have contradicted – before the whole world – the undertaking in the Fourteen Points that Russia too was promised the ability to determine its own political development.⁶⁰ In the light of the October Revolution, Wilson indeed urged his Allied colleagues not to overlook the rights of the workers.⁶¹

Wilson's occasionally contradictory attitudes towards Soviet Russia were also reflected among his advisers and officials in the US Department of State. There could be major differences of opinion on a coherent foreign policy for the USA vis-à-vis the huge country lying to the east of Europe and the north of Asia. This was especially true of Wilson's close adviser Colonel House and Secretary of State Robert Lansing.⁶²

Lenin and the Bolsheviks on Wilson

Lenin viewed the USA and Wilson with a certain amount of benevolence from his place of exile in Switzerland, as they had been far less involved than France and England in the First World War and were

free of colonial baggage. After his return to Petrograd in the spring of 1917 and the USA's entry into the war, however, he changed his view. In his April Theses, he called for unity among all groups and factions established on the basis of internationalism and proposed a new concept of worldwide society in conflict with Wilson's perspective. Lenin unflinchingly described the struggle between democratic nations and autocratic governments, as Wilson saw it, as a 'predatory war by the ruling classes'.⁶³

Behind Lenin's declamatory style, his political attitude vis-à-vis the USA was thoroughly consistent and pragmatic. He was keen to nurture wide-ranging working relationships with the government and with American society in order to foster beneficial economic contacts. He was not particularly interested in encouraging American workers to follow the Russian example of revolution, but rather in establishing effective relations between the two countries, in the short term in order to stave off any military intervention in Russia by the US administration, and in the medium term to build up preferential relations between the USA and Soviet Russia.⁶⁴

On the occasion of the ratification of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 11 March 1918, the president con-



Fig. 14: Georgy Vasilyevich Chicherin, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs in the Soviet government 1918-1930.

firmed that he wanted to 'secure for Russia once more complete sovereignty and independence in her own affairs and full restoration to her great role in the life of Europe and the modern world'.⁶⁵ The Bolsheviks responded unambiguously on 14 March in a message addressed to 'nations bleeding to death and suffering from the imperialist war', announcing that the time was approaching 'when the working masses in all bourgeois nations would throw off the yoke of capitalism and establish a Socialist civic order that would be the only guarantee of a just and lasting peace'.⁶⁶ This admirably summarised the revolutionaries' proposed worldwide programme. It was no longer possible to overlook the ideological and social divide between Petrograd and Washington.

In the next few months of 1918 the Bolshevik representatives fluctuated in their interactions with the US administration between preaching the proletar-

ian revolution and appeals for freedom, justice and signs of increasing trust. This last request made explicit reference to Wilson's fundamental principles: the right to self-determination for nations and the 'New Diplomacy', which amongst other things excluded secret treaties.⁶⁷ The leading Bolsheviks understood foreign policy in a variety of ways, ranging from the 'revolutionary' foreign policy favoured by Leon Trotsky, Karl Radek (1885-1935) and the Comintern associates to a more pragmatic approach that satisfied Lenin and Foreign Commissar Georgy Vasilyevich Chicherin (1872-1936).⁶⁸

When the Soviet Russian government were under pressure from the White Guard in the summer of 1918, they signalled to Washington and to the Entente governments their preparedness to repay their debts and to renege on their threat of world revolution. A few months later matters changed, however, once the Red Army had seen off the threat of the 'Whites'.⁶⁹

Russia was an unseen presence at the Versailles Peace Conference. The developments in the former tsarist empire served as a constant reference during the conference; the delegations from Paris, London and Washington, however, were unable to agree on a shared position vis-à-vis the Bolsheviks.⁷⁰ The American diplomat William C. Bullitt (1891-1967) led a special mission that renewed efforts in February 1919 to revive earlier discussions, but these failed under pressure from the Republics of Councils set up at the time in Hungary, Bavaria and Bremen, and the strikes in central Germany and in the Ruhr. The Western allies found vindication for their scepticism, indeed their fear in the face of the growth of Bolshevism.⁷¹

Comparing Lenin's and Wilson's Understanding of the Right to Self-Determination

The US president sought to seize the initiative as the end of the First World War approached, and to develop a formula for lasting peace in Europe. The USA, as world leader in economic and soon also in military terms, now needed to create a correspondingly high political profile. In order to persuade his sceptical fellow Americans to join the war, Wilson had increasingly spoken about self-rule for nations, and about

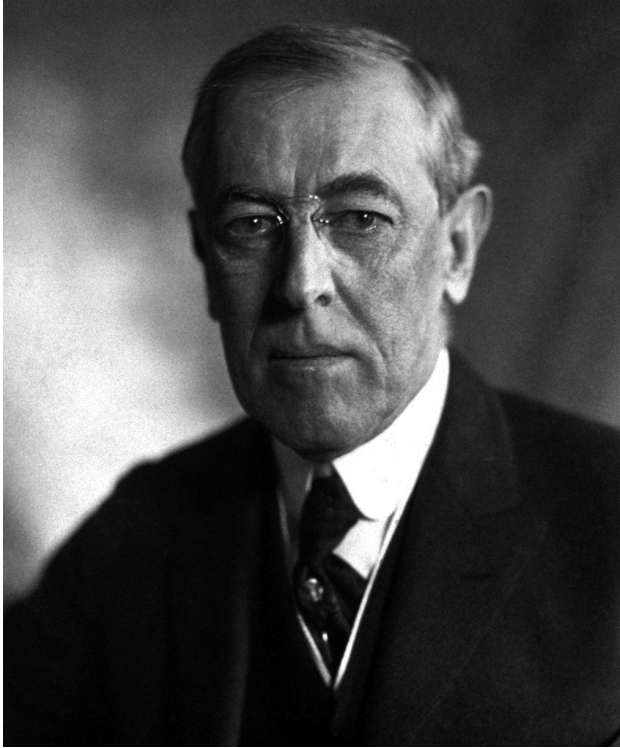


Fig. 15: Woodrow Wilson 1919.

the fight against despotism and autocracy.⁷² Democracy was necessary, he asserted, to underpin future world peace.⁷³

If Wilson wanted to play a central role in the debates on peace in Europe, then he had no other option than to show an interest on Lenin and his ideas.⁷⁴ He adopted in part Lenin's format for defining the right to self-determination for nations, but not the content. On 11 February 1918 Wilson spoke in public for the first time about self-determination and the right to self-determination, but he did not intend this to imply that the wishes of the nations involved would determine peace-time territories.⁷⁵ He chose his explanatory words extremely cautiously and carefully avoided any explicit definition. In keeping with his times, the US president naturally only considered self-determination for white people, since his convictions held that non-whites lacked the fundamental education and moral and political requisites for self-rule.⁷⁶

There was a certain irony here. The US president was reluctant to adopt the definition of right to self-

determination widely accepted in Europe, yet his listeners, and especially the east European nations, were expecting to hear about Lenin's understanding of right to self-determination rather than Wilson's. They wanted to hear it from Wilson rather than Lenin, however, and understandably so, given the political and military situation in 1918.⁷⁷

Huge hope was invested in Wilson, who was seen as the most powerful man in the world, and also as a neutral external mediator. Lenin, on the other hand, was seen as a chancer who divided society into classes and used carefully targeted force. The bourgeoisie above all were appalled by him, since they were excluded from the left-wing proletariat and therefore were accorded little long-term prospect of success.⁷⁸

An idea put forward by Lenin therefore carried less weight than one presented by Wilson. Nor were the two men on an equal footing. In 1918, Wilson became a key figure in world politics, one to whom many looked for peace and justice. Lenin, on the other hand, was a professional revolutionary, hardly known outside Russia before late 1917 except among socialist groupings and parties.⁷⁹

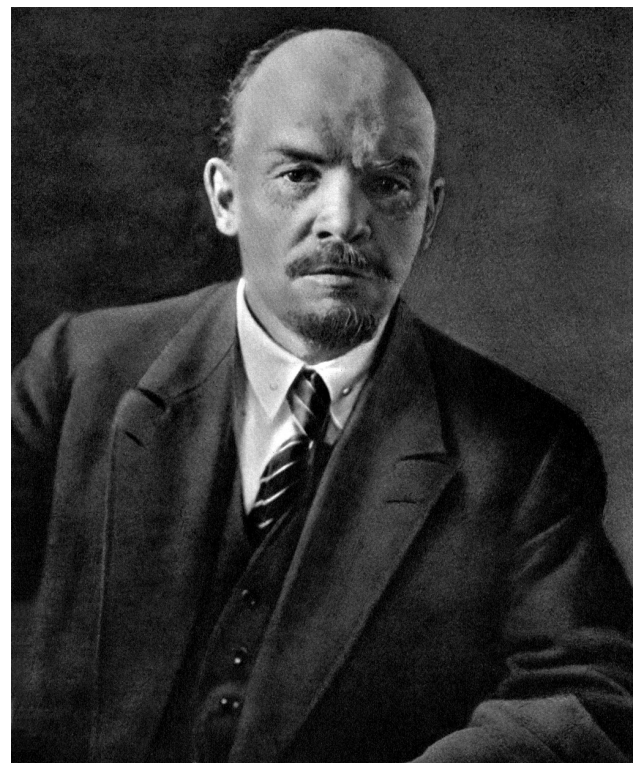


Fig. 16: Vladimir I. Lenin 1920.



Fig. 17: Cartoon depicting Wilson with his vision of a League of Nations. His US opponents and other political observers often characterized him as an idealist and moralist, 1919.

Wilson's and Lenin's Dilemmas

Having led the USA into the war, Wilson had lost his earlier status as a mediator by 1918. He had cast his lot in with France and Great Britain, whose governments would not contemplate losing to the Central Powers. The ambition Wilson had voiced of a 'peace without victory' remained a chimera. In the United States there was growing opposition to the president's policies. His Republican opponents, who had fiercely rejected Wilson's internationalist reform policies, were gaining influence thanks to a surge of jingoistic enthusiasm for the war among Americans who saw imperial Germany as the root of all the evils of the world.⁸⁰

It was Wilson who had introduced the key concept of self-determination and promoted the idea of a League of Nations; as Jörg Fisch has correctly pointed out, he was therefore inextricably involved in the challenge of establishing peace. Had his original message been received in the American sense he had intended – as an encouragement to establish self-rule and democratisation – then a clear and consistent plan of action might have evolved.⁸¹

By 1918, Wilson's self-determination was received as a principle granting legitimacy to nation states. As a result, this legal structure gained an intrinsic value, and it then gave shape to the negotiations in Paris and to the establishment of the League of Nations. It aroused huge expectations of the notion of national independence, undeliverable even by Wilson. Robert Lansing had warned at the end of 1918 of the risks inherent in the right to self-determination as it was described: 'The phrase is simply loaded with dynamite. It will raise hopes which can never be realised. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives. In the end it is bound to be discredited, to be called the dream of an idealist who failed to realise the danger until too late to check those who attempt to put the principle into force. What a calamity that the phrase was ever uttered! What misery it will cause!'⁸²

Things did not turn out quite so badly, but by twelve months after the end of the war it had become clear that any true implementation of Wilson's intentions would be dependent on a great many other factors. Wilson's Fourteen Points had raised great hopes among the German people, but they had been given an insipid peace agreement and felt betrayed; this sentiment was no doubt exacerbated by self-deception over the scale of their defeat and a collective denial of reality among the population of the new Weimar Republic.⁸³ Matters were not improved by Wilson's clumsy domestic policies. Republicans did not trust Wilson's far-reaching but poorly defined plans for a new peace order. At the turn of the year in 1919/1920, the US Congress refused to back the Versailles Treaty and entry into the League of Nations.⁸⁴

The right to self-determination as promoted by Lenin until 1917, and which Wilson adapted a year later, gave rise to a number of serious questions that needed to be tackled by the international community. The post-war territorial arrangements discussed at the Versailles Peace Conference were influenced by factors that were beyond the victor nations' control. These included the fact that language statistics were to be a decisive factor in determining national borders, and that a plebiscite over territorial changes could favour one of the defeated nations. The representatives of the relevant victor nations – Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929), David Lloyd George (1863-1945) and Woodrow Wilson – had to choose between accepting these factors and the consequent

weakening of their position, which affected their popularity both at home and among the newly established nations, or breaking their commitment to the defeated powers, which risked causing frustration and fanning political radicalisation.⁸⁵

Lenin too had nourished unrealistic expectations and was forced to face reality. From 1917 onwards, up to 40 national entities with varying levels of stability emerged across the lands that had formerly constituted the Russian Empire. On 31 December 1917 the Bolsheviks recognised Finland's independence under the right to self-determination. But they were not prepared to do the same for Ukraine. Until 1920, they also resisted granting independence to the Baltic states. The Bolshevik party leadership had before then fiercely resisted the concept of federalism, but they finally adopted it in order to prevent any further Russian disintegration.⁸⁶

Thanks to the Bolshevik seizure of power, the revolutionary solution of the national question prevailed over efforts at constitutional reform, and the territorial principle prevailed over the concept of the nation as an association of people. In the Russian civil war, however, the nationality principle lost ground to the concept of class struggle, and in the context of Bolshevik centralisation the Russian territorial principle led to the establishment of a union of national regional entities (the later Soviet Republics).⁸⁷

Illusions?

Both Lenin and Wilson faced difficulties in the years following 1917/1918 in persuading their fellow citizens to accept the principle of the right to self-determination. Both encountered vigorous opposition from domestic political opponents. Each had a sense of superiority in terms of intellect and ideals, and made the mistake of resorting to ignoring them and indulging in patronising polemics. They displayed remarkable inertia vis-à-vis the clear reservations intimated by close political colleagues such as Nikolai Bucharin (1888-1938) and Joseph Stalin in the case of Lenin, and Secretary of State Robert Lansing and William C. Bullitt in the case of Wilson. And in each case, their now failing health impaired the ability of each man to assert his position.

Lenin's great illusion was the notion of world revolution. His fundamentalist belief was a conviction



Fig. 18: Lenin speaks at the inauguration of a monument for Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Moscow, 16 November 1918.

that history, as he understood the writings of Karl Marx (1818-1883), would follow a clearly defined path into the future. He himself worked with missionary zeal to ensure that these ideas became reality. And indeed the revolution did break out; however it was not, as the theory suggested, in one of the developed capitalist nations but in backward Russia, with serious consequences for that vast nation and for the development of political antagonism throughout the 20th century.⁸⁸

In terms of both his actions and his words, Wilson was a complex and somewhat contradictory character. On the one hand he was a statist who believed in America's moral exceptionalism and her special mission in terms of historical progress, yet he also saw himself as an internationalist, believing passionately that the USA must take a leading role in promoting world peace. 'As president, he was convinced that he represented the true will of the peoples, one that he would be able to carry out through peaceful changes in the international order.'⁸⁹



Fig. 19: Cartoon about the difficulty of reconciling the different ideas of self-determination and territorial claims in the cartography after the Paris Peace Conference, drawn by Clifford Berryman 1919.

Their own contemporaries already recognised that both Wilson and Lenin were 'do-gooders'. Wilson was 'the first to foresee that without a worldwide association of countries the nations would be unable to sustain their existence. A second attempt at improving the world through social and political means was carried out in Russia. [...] It is clear that mankind must choose between Lenin and Wilson.'⁹⁰

With the benefit of a century's hindsight, it is clear that at first glance Lenin and Wilson each failed because of their far-reaching utopian ideas and the persistently severe social and national damages inflicted by the 'Great War'. On the one hand lay a worldwide classless society; on the other was an international peaceful order of sovereign and democratic nations.⁹¹ Lenin's radical vision was lived out for decades in violent and dramatically inhumane form; in contrast, Wilson's efforts to establish worldwide standards promoting peace, and his principles that fostered beneficial co-existence among the nations, are still doing good one hundred years later.

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88. Fritz Klein, 'Schicksalsjahr 1917: Wilson oder Lenin. Weichenstellung der Weltgeschichte,' *UTOPIE kreativ* vol. 203 (September 2007), 836-850, here 844-845.
89. Berg, *Woodrow Wilson*, 12.
90. Herman Kessler, 'Den weltpolitischen Defätisten!,' *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 27 October 1918; Cf. Harry Graf Kessler, *Tagebücher 1918-1937* (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2017), 121-122.
91. Cf. Robert Lansing, *Die Versailler Friedens-Verhandlungen. Persönliche Erinnerungen* (Berlin: Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1921), 75.

