

*The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin and U.S. President Woodrow Wilson presented competing visions of the rights of nations and peoples to self-determination. As opposed to a balance-of-power among unequal states, these new ideas suggested an international order of equal states operating collectively for their common security. For Wilson, the organization to provide this collective security was the League of Nations; for Lenin it was the Comintern. In 1918, Wilson stated to Congress that self-determination was not “a mere phrase” but rather “an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril” (p. 41).

Yet it was Wilson, and not Lenin, who captured the political imagination of oppressed people’s around the world. In *The Wilsonian Moment*, Erez Manela brilliantly reconstructs the story of the colonial world at the end of WWI and the impact of Wilson’s new ideas for world peace and justice on the anti-colonial movement. Rather than focusing on the views and actions of the great powers, Manela documents the impact of the negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 on the hopes and aspirations of those experiencing colonial domination. Wilson’s ideas reached a global audience, and, “when peace came, colonial peoples moved to claim their place in the world on the basis

of Wilson's proclamations" (p. 6). The book's title, *The Wilsonian Moment*, refers to the period from autumn of 1918, when the Allied victory seemed assured and Wilson's ideas for a new world order appeared destined for success, to the spring of 1919 when the terms of the Treaty of Versailles became public and the failure of the Wilsonian promise became obvious.

Manela focuses his book on the experiences of four groups: Egyptians, Indians, Chinese, and Koreans. He documents the responses of these four emergent nations to Wilson's ideas, conclusively demonstrating the impact of the new international norm of self-determination on these local movements. He shows how the Egyptians, Indians, Chinese, and Koreans shared important elements of historical experience, and how the "Wilsonian moment" presented opportunities for each group to advance claims of self-determination and nationhood both at home and abroad. While each campaign for self-determination "had roots in internal developments within each society...they were also intricately enmeshed in the international context of the Wilsonian moment" (p. 12).

Nationalism can thus only be understood within a global context. As Manela writes, "Nationalism, as an ideology and as a form of political practice, evolved conceptually and historically within an international context, and it cannot be fully understood outside that context" (p. 8).

One of the most important insights in Manela's study is the power of global norms and ideas on local political action. The nationalist activists in Egypt, India, China, and Korea saw themselves as part of a global movement on the international stage to reshape international relations based on respect for internal and external self-determination. Each group sought to harness Wilson's power and rhetoric to achieve

international recognition and equality for their countries. When it became clear in the spring of 1919 that there would be no new Wilsonian world order based on rights to self-determination, the colonial world was convulsed in revolt, with many nationalist leaders, feeling betrayed by Wilson and the U.S.

In fact, Wilson never really believed in the self-determination of non-white people. Wilson's racism is well-known. He had a record of supporting immigration exclusion and the "Yellow Peril" and racial segregation within the US. When Wilson referred to government by popular consent, he was fundamentally referring to the situation in Europe and gave little thought to the dependent territories elsewhere. As Manela writes, "If certain groups were not sufficiently 'modern,' certain communities not fully 'enlightened,' they could be excluded, at least for the time being, from the brave new world that the president envisioned" (p. 24).

No single issue attracted more global attention at the Paris Peace Conference than that of race. For millions of people around the world who had been subjected to colonial exploitation and victimized by the legacy of slavery, racial discrimination was the central problem of international relations in the twentieth century. Japan, the first nonwhite country ever to be invited to such a momentous peace conference, proposed a single clause in the Covenant of the League of Nations supporting the principle of the right to racial equality. Wilson did all he could to undermine and thwart Japan's efforts. Even after Japan's motion on racial equality received a majority of votes from the conference participants, Wilson frantically declared that the proposal had failed because it had been unable to secure unanimous approval. This unilateral and shocking decision, in violation

of the conference rules, produced a storm of global indignation at the hypocrisy of the US president.

Manela's exceptional study reveals the pain these actions brought to the non-white world. He demonstrates that it was only when the quest to achieve self-determination through the peace conference failed, that anti-colonial activists sought alternative ideological models and other sources of support. Having become disillusioned by Wilson's liberal internationalist rhetoric not matching his actions, these activists turned to more radical approaches and against the West. The "revolt against the West," emerged "not from the experiences of the war; rather, it came from the failure of the peace to break the power of imperialism and allow colonial peoples a voice as full-fledged members in international society" (p. 224).