

Conclusion: Toward a “Family of Nations”

The violent conflict between East and West, between imperialism and self-determination, between slavery and freedom, between darkness and light; this violent conflict, which began on the day that the Great War ended and will continue until light triumphs and right prevails—is it not the consequence of these great principles, that some today see as illusions? They are not illusions. They are a force which has built up over the ages, created by general suffering and hopes, by individual dreams and yearnings, by the ideas of philosophers and the words of poets, by all the power, feeling, and desire of the human soul. And then, fate chose President Wilson to be their translator and spokesman.... Wilson has died, but his ideas remain, and they will no doubt triumph.

—Muhammad Husayn Haykal, 1924

When I gave utterance to those words [on the 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.

—Woodrow Wilson, June 1919

On August 6, 1919, shortly before he left Paris, Kim Kyusik threw an evening banquet for friends and supporters of the Korean cause at the Foreign Press Association quarters on the Champs Élysées. The guests, some eighty in all, included editors and correspondents for numerous French, American, British, and Italian newspapers, as well as a smattering of midlevel officials and diplomats sympathetic to Korea's plight. Several Chinese were present, including the consul general in Paris. The hall was decorated with the French tricolor and the Korean national flag, and at their seats, each guest found several souvenirs: a handsomely printed copy of the Korean Declaration of Independence in French, a small Korean flag, and a copy of a slim book, *Pauvre et Douce Corée*, by the French journalist

Georges Ducrocq. In his keynote address that evening, Kim summarized the history of Korea and its contributions to civilization since ancient times. He then turned to describe the “unforeseen repercussions” in the Far East of those “principles so often reiterated during the entire war—Liberty, Justice, the rights of the peoples.” Koreans, he assured his audience, had taken to heart the declarations of European and American statesmen calling to uphold such principles. President Wilson had said that the treaty recently signed at Versailles puts “an end to the right of conquest and rejects the policy of annexation” and guarantees that peoples “will no longer be subjected to the domination and exploitation of a stronger nation.” The people of Korea, Kim concluded, wished to be included in that process to become part of the “family of nations of the world.”¹

The Chinese in 1919 shared the same aspiration. They had envisioned the coming of a new era of self-determination and equality in international relations, and though their faith in Wilson crumbled when he failed to apply his principles to China, the experience left its mark. Sun Yat-sen, the icon of Chinese nationalism, suggested a few years later

the far-reaching implications of this process, which he, like Mao, viewed within a broad global context:

Wilson's proposals, once set forth, could not be recalled; each one of the weaker, smaller nations ... stirred with a great, new consciousness; they saw how completely they had been deceived by the Great Powers' advocacy of self-determination and began independently and separately to carry out the principle of the "self-determination of peoples."²

China had failed to win its case in Paris, but the failure was only temporary. The Japanese had won Wilson's agreement to their claims in Shandong only by promising to return the territory shortly to China, and in fact they did so, under U.S. pressure, on the margins of the Washington Naval Conference of 1921–1922. By then, however, it was too late to reverse the broader consequences of the Paris decision, and in any case, Chinese nationalists now wanted nothing less than a complete abrogation of the unequal treaties. That goal, too, was largely achieved by 1928, as China, newly reunited under the Guomindang leader Chiang Kai-

shek, renegotiated its treaties with foreign powers, achieving tariff autonomy and doing away with legal extraterritoriality.³ But this successful self-assertion was quickly overshadowed by the Japanese encroachments of the 1930s, which began with the conquest of Manchuria in 1931 and culminated in the outbreak of all-out war between China and Japan in 1937. When Mao Zedong, now head of the victorious Chinese Communist Party, announced in 1949 that the Chinese people had “stood up,” he declared the attainment of the goal that Chinese nationalists had pursued for the better part of a century.

Even as Mao, in 1919 still a twenty-five-year-old activist in a remote Chinese province, analyzed the international events from Changsha, the urbane, Cambridge-educated twenty-nine-year-old Jawaharlal Nehru made similar observations in Allahabad. Penning a review of the philosopher Bertrand Russell’s 1918 book, *Roads to Freedom*, Nehru suggested the turn away from the Wilsonian millennium with the quote from Karl Marx with which he chose to preface his review: “A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of communism.” “Much was expected of the war,” Nehru lamented. “It was to have revolutionised the fabric of human

affairs, but it has ended without bringing any solace or hope of permanent peace or betterment. President Wilson's brave words have remained but words, and the 'fourteen points,' where are they?" Nehru noted Russell's observation that "the Millennium is not for our time. The great moment has passed and for ourselves it is again the distant hope that must inspire us, not the immediate breathless looking for the deliverance." Russell, Nehru continued, argued for a combination of anarchism and guild socialism as the ideal regime for the present times. Nehru had some doubts about this formulation, but recommended that Indian politicians pay close heed to them. Indians must first struggle for representative government, but in time perhaps "some form of communism will be found to suit the genius of the people better than majority rule."⁴

The Wilsonian moment had encouraged Indian and other nationalists to formulate their claims for self-government in language that resonated with a wider, international discourse of legitimacy. Veteran nationalists like Tilak and Lajpat Rai left the confines of the British Empire, physically and conceptually, to take their case before world opinion. The principle of self-determination supported both Indian demands for home rule and their

claim for representation in the international arena, and though India's colonial masters denied those demands, they could not deny their legitimacy. The new radicalism of the Indian National Congress under Gandhi was reflected in its continued rejection of postwar reforms as insufficient, as it boycotted the elections for new provincial councils in 1921 and the visit of the Simon Commission, sent to propose further reforms, in 1928. Indian nationalists were no longer willing to accept the measured, piecemeal process that London wanted. In 1929, at the annual gathering of the INC in Lahore, Nehru, now presiding over the session, officially announced the Indian goal as *purna swaraj*, or complete independence. "The brief day of European domination is already approaching its end," he declared in his presidential address. "The future lies with America and Asia. . . . India today is part of a world movement."⁵ And so it was: a movement away from empire and toward the self-determining nation-state as the organizing principle of governance in the non-European world.

In Egypt, too, Wilson's rhetoric led nationalists to expect immediate independence after the war and helped to shape their demands and the ways they pursued them as they prepared for the

postwar world. Like Koreans and Indians, Egyptian nationalists believed that with Wilsonian principles on the ascendant, the formation of the League of Nations would allow demands for self-determination to come before a tribunal of the world community, shifting the balance of power in colonial relationships away from the colonial powers. Egyptian nationalists saw the numerous representatives of subject nations who rushed to Paris to present their demands and could see little reason that they should be excluded from that opportunity. The violent clashes that erupted in response to British intransigence escalated Egyptian resistance to their rule, broadened the social base of the movement, and hardened Egyptians' commitment to nationalist goals. When Wilson died in 1924, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, the Egyptian intellectual, could easily recall the striking impression his appearance had made: "We all know Dr. Wilson. We all remember the time when we gazed at the Fourteen Points in awe. We all remember the great hopes built upon those principles, hopes which still grip the world." The emergence of the Wilsonian moment had heralded the end of a great conflict, the European war, but its dissipation gave rise to a greater one still, one

“between East and West, between imperialism and self-determination.”⁶ The new era of self-determination had come, but it was one of conflict rather than cooperation.

The ad hoc alliance that Zaghlul had created to bring Egyptian claims to the peace conference became a political party that dominated Egyptian politics for nearly three decades. Zaghlul himself, who returned from his European sojourn in 1920, remained the most popular political figure in Egypt. He served as prime minister for ten months in 1924 following a landslide election victory for the Wafd, and when he died in August 1927 he was widely hailed in Egypt as the “Father of the Nation.” The British, attempting to accommodate nationalist sentiment while preserving their interests, ended the protectorate and granted Egypt limited independence in 1922, but the nationalists found it inadequate and continued to demand full sovereignty. They won a greater measure of independence in 1936, but the struggle against British influence in Egypt continued until 1956, when the last of the British forces evacuated Egyptian territory in the wake of the Suez crisis. By then, however, Egyptians no longer imagined the United States as a benevolent and well-intentioned force in

international affairs as they had in 1919. In 1958, when tensions between the United States and a newly assertive Egypt were at a peak, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser—who was born on January 15, 1918, exactly one week after Wilson’s Fourteen Points address—accused the United States of forgetting “the principles invoked by Wilson.”⁷

In November 1918, on the deck of the *George Washington* en route to France, Woodrow Wilson ruminated on the task ahead of him and the unsettled state of much of the world. His chief propagandist, George Creel, recalled the president’s trepidation about the hopes and expectations that his words had raised. Disillusionment, Wilson feared, was inevitable:

One evening, as we walked the deck, I spoke to the President of the tremendous help that his addresses had been to us in our work—of the wholehearted response of the people of the earth, their gladness in his words, the joyful liberation of their thought....

The President stood silent for quite a while, and when he turned to me at last his

face was as bleak as the gray stretch of sunless water.

“It is a great thing that you have done,” he said, “but I am wondering if you have not unconsciously spun a net for me from which there is no escape. It is to America that the whole world turns to-day, not only with its wrongs, but with its hopes and grievances. The hungry expect us to feed them, the roofless look to us for shelter, the sick of heart and body depend on us for cure. All of these expectations have in them the quality of terrible urgency. There must be no delay. It has been so always. People will endure their tyrants for years, but they will tear their deliverers to pieces if a millennium is not created immediately. Yet you know, and I know, that these ancient wrongs, these present unhappinesses, are not to be remedied in a day or with a wave of the hand. What I seem to see—with all my heart I hope that I am wrong—is a tragedy of disappointment.”⁸

The events that unfolded in much of the colonial world over the next several months—indeed, over the next several decades—bore out

Wilson's apprehensions, as the language of self-determination became a central component of the nationalist challenge to the imperial order in international relations. Partly through the efforts of Creel and his crew, Wilson's words had been disseminated around the world, far beyond the primary audiences in Europe and the United States for whom they were intended. By the time of the armistice, many in the colonial world expected Wilson to lead a transformation of international affairs and mold an international society in which the right to self-determination would be recognized and the equality of nations guaranteed. The credibility of Wilson's pronouncements among colonial nationalists was bolstered by a prevailing image of the United States as a nation that represented a more benign version of Western modernity when compared with the practices of imperial aggression associated with the European powers. This perception was reflected in the views of intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore and Hu Shi and of political activists like Lajpat Rai, Zaghul, and Syngman Rhee. Many colonial intellectuals during this period saw the American Revolution as a pioneering movement of national liberation from imperialism and admired American political,

social, and economic institutions as models for the progressive, “modern” society and popular government to which they aspired.⁹

The millenarian, quasi-religious renderings of Woodrow Wilson—Sastri’s description of Wilson as “Christ, or Buddha,” Aiyar’s rendering of him as an agent of “salvation,” or Kang Youwei’s hope that the president could be the purveyor of *datong* utopia—reflected a powerful if fleeting sense in the immediate wake of the war that a historical moment had arrived in which humanity could transcend the logic of Darwinian competition and long-established power relationships and found an international community in which all nations would enjoy recognition and dignity. Wilson, as the leading icon of the moment and its possibilities, appeared to colonial nationalists to be poised to take international society beyond the dichotomies that hitherto governed the relations between colonizer and colonized: powerful versus weak, advanced versus backward, material versus spiritual, might versus right. Hu Shi’s view of the president as a leader who could remain uniquely pure and unworldly even while wielding political power in the world depended on imagining Wilson as at once

bridging and transcending these poles, which in the past had seemed inescapable.

Such views of Wilson, of course, hardly reflected the man himself. A supporter of the U.S. conquest of the Philippines, Wilson thought that non-European peoples needed the trusteeship of more “civilized” powers in order to develop the capabilities for self-determination. Though his wartime rhetoric did not explicitly exclude non-Europeans from self-determination, he never specified how that principle would apply to them beyond a vague promise, perfectly compatible with the reigning theory of colonial trusteeship, to take into account the “interests of the populations concerned.” Moreover, Wilson’s background and approach was well known to some colonial leaders, who noted and criticized the injustices of American society and foreign policy. Lala Lajpat Rai had carefully studied and documented the state of American race relations, and Chinese intellectuals had long deplored and protested the ill treatment and exclusion in the United States of Chinese migrants. During the height of the Wilsonian moment, however, the deficiencies of the United States and its president as champions of freedom seemed

to be overshadowed by Wilson's image as a vigorous advocate of international justice.

In the fall and winter of 1918–1919, such perceptions of Wilson and the United States reinforced the sense that a window of opportunity had opened and thrust the issue of colonial liberation to the fore. The proliferation of demands for self-determination put before the peace conference created a domino effect that drew in more claims still. As some new nations achieved recognition in Paris, representatives of others doubled their efforts to stake their own claims to independent nationhood. Self-determination became the order of the day. Leaders such as Zaghlul, who were previously willing to accommodate empire as an instrument of progress and reform, now came out decisively against it; old opponents of empire, such as Tilak, moved from the margins of the movement to its center and often quickly came to be seen as too moderate as popular sentiment rushed past them.

In the campaigns that they launched to claim the right to self-determination for their own peoples, anticolonial nationalists appropriated Wilsonian language to articulate their goals and mobilize support for them both at home and abroad. Western-educated nationalists like Syngman Rhee and

Wellington Koo and expatriate communities more generally played central roles in speaking for their nations in international society, reflecting their geographic, intellectual, and cultural proximity to the arenas of power and influence in international society. But diverse groups back home—religious communities, local councils, professional organizations, and women's groups—also mobilized to ask the peace conference for self-determination. In thousands of petitions, pamphlets, declarations, and memoranda, they adopted Wilson's language, refracted it through the lenses of local conditions and sensibilities, and harnessed it to claim their rights in international society.

The simultaneous eruption of anticolonial upheavals in the spring of 1919 occurred in this context. In Korea and Egypt, the protests initially broke out as part of the campaigns to bring demands for self-determination to international attention. In China and India, the upheavals reflected the collapse of the expectations for change, as the peace conference rejected Chinese claims and the promulgation of the Rowlatt acts signaled that Britain had little intention of loosening its grip on the empire's crown jewel. By the spring of 1919, as the contours of the peace settlement began to

emerge, it became clear that the leading powers, including the United States, had little intention of applying the principle of self-determination significantly beyond Europe. The faith in Wilson's commitment to a more just international order, or in his ability to fashion one, began to ebb, and disenchantment with the Wilsonian promise spread.

Still, the experiences of the Wilsonian moment cemented ideological and political commitments to anticolonial agendas, and the movements launched then did not disappear with its demise. The colonial authorities moved to stem the anticolonial wave, and the popular momentum of the spring of 1919, driven by international events, could not last indefinitely. In its wake, however, political programs and organizations committed to self-determination became more powerful and more pervasive than before. Moreover, the upheavals of the spring of 1919 themselves created narratives of colonial violence and popular resistance that quickly became etched into collective memories and that came to symbolize each nation's striving for liberation. These movements—the 1919 Revolution, the May Fourth movement, the Rowlatt Satyagraha and Amritsar, and the March First movement—became focal points in the construction of national identity

and inspired continued commitment to nationalist agendas. The language of self-determination as a central norm of legitimacy in international relations remained central in the rhetoric of anti-colonial movements, useful in mobilizing public opinion and action both at home and abroad and in rejecting any accommodation with empire.

Wilson himself did acknowledge that the peace conference failed to deal with colonial claims, especially those related to the possessions of the Allied powers, in accordance with his much-advertised principles. In Paris, he said shortly after his return to the United States, there were numerous delegations clamoring to be heard, and though the conference, limited to issues that arose directly from the war, could not take up their demands, it did lay the institutional groundwork for dealing with them. Now that the League of Nations was established, oppressed peoples would receive justice in the court of world opinion.¹⁰ Soon after, however, the president suffered the stroke that ended his career, and on March 19, 1920, the U.S. Senate finally rejected the Treaty of Versailles and with it the League of Nations covenant.¹¹ The United States never joined the League of Nations, and even if it had, it is hard to imagine that the league, controlled as it was

by the major imperial powers, would have been sympathetic to colonial demands for self-determination. In the end, the Wilsonian moment did alter the relationship between colonizer and colonized, but it did not do so in the consensual, evolutionary manner that Wilson had envisioned.

Framing the Wilsonian moment in the colonial world as an international and transnational event is not merely an analytical device or an expression of a particular historical method. Rather, it reflects the perceptions and actions of historical actors at the time, and much of what they saw and did at the time is rendered incomprehensible, even invisible outside that framework. The moment was inherently international in that it played out in an arena defined by the interactions between sovereign nation-states and in which such states were the primary actors. It was also transnational, meaning that the perceptions and actions of the actors regularly transcended and crossed existing political boundaries; indeed, in many cases such crossings—for example, in order to travel to Paris or to Washington—were among the primary purposes of their activities at the time. Moreover, the Wilsonian moment in the colonial world operated

both internationally and transnationally in a number of related but distinct fashions that were juxtaposed and overlaid upon each other in various combinations at different times and places during the unfolding of events.

First, individuals and groups that participated in the events of 1919 in the colonial world were located across the globe rather than confined to specific national or imperial territories, and they interacted with each other intensively across the boundaries of such territories as they launched their respective movements. Koreans from Shanghai to Philadelphia were integral to the March First movement; Chinese in Paris, Peru, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, took part in the May Fourth protests; Egyptians in Manchester and Geneva joined the 1919 Revolution; and Indians in London and New York City were crucial to the campaign for Indian self-determination. Moreover, the very “national” character of the territories they each claimed to represent—the Korean peninsula, the Indian subcontinent, the British protectorate in Egypt, a Chinese subcontinent ruled by a patchwork of warlords and at least two governments vying for legitimacy—was at the time a central point of contestation, though we have since

come to take it for granted. An important goal of nationalist activists was precisely to achieve international recognition that these territories were in fact “national” territories in the first place, and therefore deserving of a sovereign status in the new international society.

Moreover, even those anticolonial nationalists in 1919 who were based within their respective national territories—and they certainly played crucial roles in the events—saw their own conditions as embedded within a broader global order that was now on the cusp of change. Egyptians noted the arrival in Paris of Arab representatives who were promised self-determination and concluded that Egypt deserved no less, and Indians published maps that located India within a world of dependent nations yearning for liberation. Chinese placed their desire to recover the former German territories in Shandong in the context of changing norms of international behavior, and Koreans stressed the similarity of their plight as a Japanese colony to that of Belgium under the German occupation and asked for similar redress. In the fall of 1918, they all carefully followed the gathering in Paris of representatives of the “small nations” of Europe—Poles, Czechoslovaks, Yugoslavs—

that were emerging from the fallen empires of the Habsburgs and the Romanovs. And in the spring of 1919, they each looked to the simultaneous revolts that broke out across much of the colonial world as evidence that their own movements were part of a global wave and that their claims were both just and timely.

As they laid their plans, therefore, anticolonial activists in 1919 sought explicitly to operate on an international stage. They organized broad information campaigns designed to influence “world opinion,” preparing thousands of telegrams, letters, and petitions that were dispatched across national or imperial boundaries and aimed at an international audience. They also initiated and took part in missions that traveled, or sought to travel, abroad to Paris, Washington, and London. Indeed, the preparation and execution of such missions formed a core element of the nationalists’ plans at the time and an important lever of popular mobilization behind those plans. The Anglo-Egyptian struggle over Zaghlul’s demand to go to Paris ignited the 1919 Revolution in Egypt, and the refusal of the peace conference to admit Tilak and the other INC delegates fueled the disillusion that found expression in the protests of the Rowlatt satyagraha. The

March First movement was launched to communicate Korean nationalist goals to an international audience, and much of the effort of those involved in it was directed toward admitting a Korean delegation to the peace conference and putting the case of Korea before “world opinion.” And Chinese nationalists, too, launched campaigns that were international in their conception and purpose and transnational in their operation and audience.

Finally, the aspirations expressed by the anticolonial movements of 1919 were international in their scope and ambition. They aimed to bring into existence a vision of international relations in which hitherto dependent nations would obtain recognition of their equality and sovereignty and join a League of Nations where they would enjoy equal status regardless of size or power. The great majority of the petitioners that tried to make themselves heard on the international arena, whether political leaders, civic organizations, or simply individuals who were moved to communicate directly with the powerful foreign leaders they read about in newspapers, had this image of a new international society in mind. They anticipated a transformation of international relations along liberal anticolonial lines, which would render

illegitimate the suppression of national claims within imperial structures, and they wanted to see the national entity with which they identified recognized within a broader community of nations constructed on Wilsonian principles. Within this new order, moreover, reforms toward liberal, democratic goals in each emergent national society would proceed in a mutually reinforcing relationship with international norms.

The nationalist leaders of 1919 pursued an anticolonial agenda and sought to challenge an international order in which the groups they represented were subordinated, but, as their perceptions of Wilson suggest, their aims and sentiments were not anti-Western as such. Most of the leaders of the anticolonial campaigns of 1919—men like Sa'd Zaghlul, Lala Lajpat Rai, Wellington Koo, and Syngman Rhee, many of them with a Western education—were reformers who proclaimed their ambitions to remake their societies along the lines of liberal democratic models. The campaigns they led in 1919 did not set out to tear down the existing international order but rather to join it as members of equal status. When the quest to achieve self-determination through the peace conference failed, however, many anticolonial activists, disillusioned

with the results of Wilson's liberal internationalism, began to seek alternative ideological models and sources of practical support in their struggles for self-determination. The "revolt against the West," to use Geoffrey Barraclough's term, that was launched after 1919 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.¹²

The history of the Paris Peace Conference is often read as a tragic failure to fashion a European settlement that would bring lasting peace. But the story of the Wilsonian moment in the colonial world illuminates another, no less important facet of that central turning point in twentieth-century international history. From the perspective of the periphery, rather than the center, of international society, the conference appears as a tragedy of a different sort, as the leading peacemakers, Wilson foremost among them, failed to offer the populations of the non-European world the place in international society that Wilson's wartime speeches had implied that they deserved. At the Wilsonian moment, Egyptians, Indians, Chinese, Koreans, and others glimpsed the promised land

of self-determination, but enter into it they could not. That experience, inasmuch as it shaped the formative stages of major national movements in the colonial world, helped to displace the liberal, reformist anticolonialism that failed in 1919 in favor of the more radical, revisionist nationalism that became an important force in the subsequent history of the twentieth century.

Human agency, John Hall has noted, can matter greatly in international affairs because “international orders are often the result of conscious strategy.”¹³ At least as often, however, rhetoric in the international arena has unintended audiences, and actions beget unintended consequences. The Western powers in Paris ignored the demands and aspirations of non-Western peoples, but their struggles for sovereignty, equality, and dignity as independent actors in international society continued. The Wilsonian moment marked the beginning of the end of the imperial order in international affairs, precipitating the crisis of empire that followed the war and laying the foundations for the eventual triumph of an international order in which the model of the sovereign, self-determining nation-state spread over the entire globe. The Wilsonian moment saw the right to self-

determination vault from the musings of obscure theorists into the center of the international discourse of legitimacy, and though colonial powers—including the United States itself—resisted its implications during the interwar years, it became an integral part of the political agendas of colonial elites. As Wilson faded from the international arena in defeat, anticolonial movements embraced the language of self-determination that he brought to prominence, refashioning their goals and identities in its image even as they recast its meanings in theirs. Their struggles for recognition as fully sovereign actors in international society would shape the history of the succeeding decades.