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THE 1919 PEACE SETTLEMENT: A SUBALTERN VIEW

Stephen A. Schuker

Erez Manela. *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. xiv + 331 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95.

As every schoolboy knows, or used to know before the rise of multiculturalism, in the early twentieth century Europe and North America dominated the world. A recent president of the American Historical Association reports that, with postcolonial studies firmly anchored in the curriculum, our students now learn that “Europe—that funny little peninsula jutting off the edge of Asia—is not the center of history.”¹ So much for history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. No one thought that way ninety years ago.

Europe, the United States, and other Western offshoots encompassed 33.9 percent of world population and produced 67.7 percent of world GNP at the time. Taking account of the productivity of the fifty million Europeans who had emigrated abroad and revolutionized agriculture and trade in such places as Latin America’s Southern Cone, North Africa, and Asian city-states, people of European stock generated three-quarters of world income. The United States and Britain alone came close to producing half of global manufactured goods.² One analyst estimates that between 1400 and 1900 the four principal West European civilizations contributed roughly 80 percent of humankind’s achievements in the realms of science and technology, art and music, and literature and culture.³ The European civil war of 1914–1918 thus constituted a tragedy of immense proportions. The statesmen who, in the midst of unprecedented economic travail and an influenza pandemic, struggled to craft the Versailles treaty in 1919 had their hands full. They had to reconstruct Europe, contain Germany, clean up the detritus left by three collapsed empires, and found the League of Nations.⁴ Could they, and should they, also have made time to address the stirrings of anti-colonial nationalism in Egypt, India, China, and Korea, the subject of Professor Erez Manela’s much-praised book? If one reads history within its unfolding context rather than backward from the present, the notion seems less than reasonable.

No one will quarrel with Manela’s premise that the history of anticolonialism and decolonization figures among “the most important historical processes

of the twentieth century" (p. xi). But when did that process shift into high gear? Was there, as Manela asserts, a "Wilsonian moment" in 1918–19? Or is he looking through the wrong end of the telescope?

The years after World War I witnessed a vast expansion of the British Empire as well as consolidation of the French and Japanese empires. The United States had a more nuanced policy, consisting, as William Howard Taft had once said, of "substituting dollars for bullets." Still, as Woodrow Wilson discovered in the course of his frustrating dealings with revolutionary Mexico, it proved far from easy to "teach the South American republics to elect good men."⁵ Wilson found himself obliged to land troops at Port-au-Prince in 1915 after the Haitians chopped their president into small pieces and paraded the body parts around the city. He also maintained military forces in the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua. Washington embraced more subtle methods of control in Latin America only between 1930 and 1934, and the Good Neighbor Policy had its limits too. Franklin D. Roosevelt adopted an anti-imperialist stance and undermined the British, French, and Dutch empires during World War II, yet even he did not extend consent-of-the-governed principles so far as to renounce control of the Pacific islands that the U.S. Navy had liberated from Japan.⁶

To be sure, social movements build over a long period of time. Correlating them with political changes is an imprecise art. An abundant literature still proclaims 1848 to be the "springtime of the peoples" in Europe despite the fact that the old order triumphed and that nationalism did not percolate down to the masses for several decades thereafter.⁷ Manela likewise may exceed the bounds of permissible interpretation when he claims that the Egyptian, Indian, Chinese, and Korean "reformers" of 1919 were not anti-Western "as such" and that they yearned to remake their own societies along "liberal democratic models." Notwithstanding Manela's powerful rhetoric, the evidence does not show that the pioneers of third-world nationalism turned to force for achieving sovereignty and dignity because the Western powers refused to accept "the international discourse of legitimacy." Nor does it show that they became disillusioned owing simply to "the failure of the peace to break the power of imperialism" (pp. 5, 10, 224–5).

President Wilson often conflated "self-determination" with human rights and democracy. His latter-day acolytes persist in that confusion, frequently to the detriment of American foreign policy. Historical experience suggests, unfortunately, that when self-determination is thrust upon traditional societies characterized by mass illiteracy, the result is often to substitute an exploitative, kleptocratic native dictatorship for an imperial power willing to supply capital and technology and bound to some degree by the rule of law. Manela strives so hard to "remove the Eurocentric lens" that he becomes blind to that point (p. xii). In the Arno Mayer tradition, Manela perceives legitimate opinion to

span the spectrum from liberal internationalists to Socialists and Communists.⁸ Thus Lenin, he informs us (without reference to his later reconquest of the Soviet borderlands), championed “the liberation of all dependent, oppressed, and non-sovereign peoples.”⁹ The difference between Lenin and Wilson on liberation of the oppressed, according to this interpretation, did not bulk very large at the time (pp. 37, 43, 77). By contrast, Manela loses no opportunity to twist the lion’s tail. The British, he holds, are autocratic, brutal, oppressive, imperious, and barbarous (pp. 78, 161, 17, 81, 91, 143, 173, 91, 169, 141, 155).

Underscoring his Manichean view of international affairs, Manela quotes with approval the Egyptian intellectual, Muhammed Husayn Haykal, who perceived a “violent conflict between East and West, between imperialism and self-determination, between slavery and freedom, between darkness and light” that began with the 1918 Armistice and would continue until “right prevails” (p. 215). A cultivated man with a doctorate from the Sorbonne, Haykal evolved from a belief in cultural cross-fertilization to the conviction that Eastern and Western civilization stood in unending conflict and that Egypt must reaffirm Islam and repulse the modernizing ideas of Kemal Atatürk. Perhaps Manela would have curbed his enthusiasm if he had followed the course of Egyptian nationalism, and that of his other “subaltern” peoples, over time. Haykal remained a leader of the Wafd, a constitutional party that dominated parliament after Britain granted nominal independence to Egypt in 1922. The next generation, however, pushed his ideas to their logical conclusion, and it did not require so great an ideological jump for Sayyid Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood to conclude that the West had gone irretrievably wrong ever since the Enlightenment.¹⁰

Before rehearsing Manela’s accounts of the 1919 disturbances in the four countries under review, it is worth considering whether Woodrow Wilson really favored self-determination for black and brown peoples as well as for Europeans. Did anti-colonial revolutionaries interpret what he said accurately, or did they fall victim to auto-intoxication? The evidence is not wholly unambiguous, but on balance indicates that Wilson never contemplated early self-determination for peoples of non-European stock.

The president figured as an eloquent but slippery phrasemaker. He was much given to winged words when his speeches did not bind him. Thus in February 1918 Wilson described self-determination as “an imperative principle of action.” The following July, he implied that the United States sought liberty for “peoples of many races and in every part of the world.” George Creel, head of Wilson’s propaganda bureau, the Committee on Public Information, made the most of such snippets, with the multiple aims of whipping up enthusiasm at home, undermining morale in enemy and neutral lands, and countering the putative attractions of Bolshevism.¹¹ Propaganda, however, differs from policy. Irresponsible rhetoric from a president can do harm, not

least when it reaches the ears of third-world student expatriates who do not understand American politics. As Manela shows, Wilson himself developed qualms about Creel's success in raising expectations. On the ship to France, Wilson told him: "I am wondering if you have not unconsciously spun a net for me from which there is no escape. . . . People . . . will tear their deliverers to pieces if a millennium is not created immediately."

When one examines policy, it becomes clear that Wilson never intended to play the Pied Piper in a general anti-imperialist crusade. During the pre-Armistice negotiations of October 1918, Colonel Edward House asked the newspapermen Walter Lippmann and Frank Cobb to translate the winsome platitudes of the Fourteen Points into some kind of policy stance. Their exegesis of Point V on colonial claims noted that the references to "interests of the populations concerned" applied narrowly to the lands slated to be removed from German control and placed under the trusteeship of Great Britain and Japan. "Obviously," wrote Lippmann and Cobb, that provision did not involve the "reopening of all colonial questions." Wilson accepted the Lippmann-Cobb document as a satisfactory interpretation of principles and cabled back to House, "Admission of inchoate nationalities to peace conference most undesirable."¹² When the assembled statesmen considered the draft covenant of the League of Nations in February 1919, as Manela concedes, Wilson moved to strike any "application of the principle of self-determination to future claims for territorial readjustment" (p. 61).

In one of the least satisfactory parts of his book, Manela talks around the issue of the president's core beliefs. Manela is too careful a historian to deny Wilson's prejudices against the non-white races, but he explains away the record as much as he decently can. He deems Wilson's racial views "surprisingly mild" for someone who grew up in Georgia and South Carolina, more a matter of "intellectual and social habit" than earnest reflection and analysis (pp. 25-34). Whether consent of the governed applied to the "politically undeveloped races," wrote Wilson the political scientist, required further research. The Filipinos, Wilson maintained, still required tutelage, but they were not inherently incapable of liberty once they had learned the "habit of law and obedience" three or four generations down the line (p. 29). Finally, Manela submits, what Wilson actually believed is less important than the sentiments that third-world nationalists attributed to him. "The message stood independently of the man, and it could be used without regard, sometimes in conscious disregard, of his intent" (p. 34).

Post-modern scholars who give pride of place to memory and perception may glide over that last sentence without batting an eye. Old-fashioned readers preoccupied by the documentary record will prefer to learn the grubby facts. Those facts would have made uncomfortable reading for those who conjured up the image of Wilson as a seer with moral authority comparable

to that of the Buddha or Jesus Christ. In his scholarly days during the 1890s, when he could speak and write freely, Wilson opined that slavery “had done more for the negro than African freedom had done since the building of the pyramids.” The slaves, he insisted in his bestselling books, were “too numerous and too ignorant to be set free,” and the disenfranchisement of “ignorant and hostile” Negroes by the Redeemers after 1877 seemed to him necessary albeit distasteful in execution. Wilson also sympathized with West Coast laborers who demanded the exclusion of “Orientals,” beings “who, with their yellow skin and strange, debasing habits of life seemed to them hardly fellow men at all, but evil spirits rather.”¹³

As president of Princeton and then of the United States, Wilson learned to be more circumspect—a critic might say hypocritical—but he did not fundamentally alter his views. In 1912 Wilson discerned, for the first time since the Civil War, the chance to attract some African-American votes to the Democratic Party. Black organizations saw Taft as unsympathetic and were repulsed by the “lily white” stance of the Progressives. Wilson publicly assured a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church that his people could count on him for “absolute fair dealing.” Wilson’s election, however, marked the return to power of the southern white oligarchy in the Executive Branch as well as in Congress, and the new president abruptly reversed course.

Spurred on by the first Mrs. Wilson, who was shocked at the spectacle of white and black civil servants eating together, Wilson forthwith authorized southern cabinet members, notably Secretary of the Treasury McAdoo and Postmaster-General Burleson, to reinstitute racial segregation. Their departments segregated toilets and lunchrooms and set up barriers in offices. The barriers guaranteed that blacks would not supervise whites and that the two races would not sit together. Although menial employees did not lose their jobs, the Civil Service Commission introduced a photograph requirement in May 1914; thereafter, black applicants for higher-level government positions were systematically weeded out. Although a proposal to reintroduce Jim Crow on Washington streetcars failed, Wilson chose not to enforce a Supreme Court mandate integrating Pullman cars when the government took over the railroads.

Faced by complaints from his left-wing supporter Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of the *New York Evening Post*, Wilson vigorously defended segregation as necessary to avoid friction and in the interest of the blacks themselves. He spurned the proposal of a National Race Commission as impracticable. When the black bishop to whom he had made promises during the 1912 election returned and produced the letter of commitment, Wilson took it from his hands and never gave it back.¹⁴ After throwing a black radical out of his office for impertinence, Wilson devolved the chore of receiving future African-American delegations on his secretary. He spoke out against lynching in 1918

only when Army Intelligence reported mounting unrest among black soldiers. The president and Edith Galt Wilson, his second wife, also upheld the color line in their private lives. When warned before embarking for Europe that her lady's maid would be received in Buckingham Palace and accorded a place of honor in the servants' hall, Edith blanched and said: "I will let her have a sandwich in her room and lock her in."¹⁵ The literature on these themes is massive, and it does not support Manela's depiction of Wilson as a moderate on race questions.¹⁶

On the positive side, Wilson welcomed the formation of a Chinese Republic in 1913. He continued to oppose Far Eastern immigration, yet when the California legislature banned Orientals already resident from owning land, Wilson unsuccessfully proposed recasting the law to avoid invidious mention of a particular racial group. Despite much else on his mind, significantly, Wilson never overlooked the racial implications of the world war. After the Reich resumed unconditional submarine warfare in February 1917, the president startled his Cabinet by enunciating his priorities: "If he felt that, in order to keep the white race or part of it strong to meet the yellow race it was wise to do nothing, . . . he would do nothing."¹⁷ When the activist W.E.B. Du Bois, bypassing State Department opposition, secured permission from Clemenceau to assemble a Pan-African Congress in Paris in February 1919, the official American delegation ignored the congress and placed Du Bois under strict military surveillance. Altogether, it seems hard to dissent from the latter's conclusion that at Versailles Wilson did not understand "the world-wide problems of race."¹⁸

The concept of a planet-wide "Wilsonian Moment," in short, appears to be one part self-deception by emerging nationalist movements, one part cynical manipulation by challengers of the prevailing order, and one part artful packaging by the author. The overarching thesis will persuade only the politically correct. All the same, this book has the considerable merit of describing unrest in Egypt, India, China, and Korea and relating the four "liberation" movements of 1919 to each other. Manela possesses unusual linguistic skills and boasts an extraordinary range of research interests. Twenty years ago Sally Marks famously complained about the tendency of American diplomatic historians to look exclusively at American sources and to present "the world according to Washington."¹⁹ These days the finest representatives of the craft have developed truly international range. Originally an Israeli, Manela writes fluent English, only slightly inflected by post-modern jargon, and has mastered Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, and French as well. He has clocked more time at the National Archives in New Delhi than at the National Archives in Kew. He demonstrates enterprise beyond the norm by turning up apposite material in American church archives and the records of the Korean National Association. Those achievements set a high standard.

Manela's first case study deals with Egypt. In 1914 British rule in Egypt seemed secure. Never a nation in the modern sense, Egypt remained a semi-independent part of the Ottoman Empire. Its importance lay not in its small and mostly fellah population of thirteen million, but rather in its strategic position. Egypt contained the Suez Canal, the British route to the Orient; the Nile River, the key to the East African water supply; and the logical zone to station troops for control of the oil-rich Middle East. Trouble arose when the Ottoman Turks joined the German side in the World War. After the Allied victory, those in the effendi class who had supported the Second Reich swiftly discovered in Wilson's speeches the "new bible of humanity." This story is already familiar in its broad lines, but Manela helpfully enlarges on the local perspective.²⁰

Much to the horror of the Foreign Office, High Commissioner Reginald Wingate, following Gladstonian precepts, tried initially to conciliate the chief agitator, vice-president of the legislative assembly Sa'd Zaghlul. This proved a tactical error. Zaghlul formed a delegation to present the group's grievances at the Peace Conference. The British had to get tough. They imposed martial law and exiled Zaghlul's group to Malta. Riots broke out that claimed eight hundred lives, providing a "founding myth" for Egyptian nationalism. Speaking loosely of jihad, radical newspapers advanced the argument that Egyptians were "not barbarians or negroes or red-skinned, but . . . rather the heirs of an ancient civilization" who deserved their place in the sun (p. 153). This species of special pleading buttered no parsnips in Paris. President Wilson harbored no secret wish to obstruct the British Empire's vital communication lines. He refused to meet the Wafd. At the end of 1919, the Colonial Secretary, Lord Milner, arrived in Cairo and sought to determine what Britain could do to propitiate Egyptian moderates. Zaghlul spurned the Milner Commission's advances, citing the transformation in the "international discourse of legitimacy" (p. 156). This dialogue of the deaf continued in various guises until 1956. It is hard to make the case that the Egyptian people have been better off under a succession of home-grown dictatorships than they once were under the British, although Manela would undoubtedly try.

Manela next turns to India, where indigenous organization had deeper roots. Western-educated lawyers had founded the Indian National Congress back in 1885, though originally with the limited aim of obtaining Dominion status within the Empire. Until the outbreak of war in 1914, the British achieved appreciable success in co-opting the Indian elites by engaging them in local self-government. Additional reforms during the war, however, failed to keep pace with the rising expectations of the radicals, who in 1917 seized control of the Congress. Manela shows that the radicals, amply supplied with German money and spurred on by expatriates in the United States, used Wilson's speeches as a lever to force the British hand. It is difficult to determine from

Manela's account how much popular support the extremists managed to accumulate. He quotes liberally from the Indian nationalist press, but never mentions circulation figures. The government of India appointed two highly regarded autochthones, Sir S. P. Sinha and the Maharaja of Bikanir, to the British Empire Delegation at the Peace Conference, and the former later rose to the position of undersecretary of state for India. Yet the most prominent extremists, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mohandas Gandhi, who failed to secure passports, did not consider the official delegates authentic, and their disciples unjustly deprecated those worthies as clowns (p. 194).

In March 1919 the Imperial Legislative Council in Delhi passed the Rowlatt bills, which extended the government's wartime power to intern subversives without trial. The Rowlatt bills scarcely affected the civil liberties of ordinary people. Nevertheless, Gandhi mounted a campaign of so-called non-violent resistance against the legislation. A trigger-happy British brigadier opened fire on a crowd in an enclosed garden in the Punjab, killing several hundred people and wounding many more. This "Amritsar massacre," a bloodcurdling event by any standard, played into the Mahatma's hands. The problems of maintaining order in India escalated. But that had little to do with the Paris Peace Conference. Gandhi and Woodrow Wilson moved in different mental universes. Gandhi opposed all manifestations of modern civilization and advised educated professionals to take up the spinning wheel. He decried collective security under the League of Nations and held that moral force suffices for all exigencies. Gandhi's voluminous writings scarcely mention Wilson. Other Indian intellectuals, such as Laipat Raj, already looked to Bolshevik Russia as the light of the world.

In contrast to Egypt and India, China found a place on the Peace Conference agenda. Like many of his compatriots, Woodrow Wilson felt vague sympathy for China. Fifty thousand American missionaries in China spent their regular sabbaticals at home proselytizing in Methodist and Presbyterian churches. The notion of an elective affinity between the two countries gained more traction than sober consideration of their mutual interests would justify.²¹ In Paris, unfortunately, Wilson faced a dilemma for which his talents as humanity's wordsmith offered no guidance. During the war, the Japanese Navy had provided vital assistance to the British in the Mediterranean.²² Under the prevailing rules of the game Japan deserved compensation. Japan proposed to add a racial equality clause to the League of Nations Covenant. Realizing that racist southern senators would never accept the League with such a poison pill, Wilson vetoed the clause. Japan then asked for formal transfer of the former German concession in Shandong province, which it already occupied on the ground. The Beijing government had agreed by solemn treaty to the transfer, and the British and French had recognized the new dispensation. Having offended Japan once, Wilson could hardly do so flagrantly a second time.

Contrary to the public impression, however, Wilson fought tenaciously behind the scenes to fashion a compromise that would save part of the province for China. In the end, a fairly reasonable deal emerged. Yet, feigning shock, the Chinese delegation rejected the compromise with contumely. The mandarin elite that had produced Sun Tzu, the ancient theorist of deception in war, had not lost its cunning. The delegation maneuvered skillfully to shift the blame for its own obduracy to the foreigner.²³ On cue, three thousand students gathered on May 4 at the Tiananmen Gate in Beijing to express their indignation. At a time of mass illiteracy, what students believed held considerable importance. Students all over China and in expatriate communities followed with their own remonstrations. In a twinkling, Wilson the "Messiah" became Wilson the "betrayed."

The American minister to China, an academic who followed his own star rather than State Department directives, had no doubt erred by turning loose a propagandist in the employ of the Committee of Public Information to make exaggerated promises.²⁴ All the same, much of the nationalist agitation seemed choreographed. Participants in the May Fourth movement argued on the one hand that there was "one China," despite the fact that rival regimes in Beijing and Guangzhou, and a passel of warlords in between, claimed to represent it. On the other hand, they maintained that outsiders who held the Chinese government to its international obligations were "selfish and materialistic." Manela insists that Chinese nationalists turned to Bolshevism only after the Americans abandoned them. Mao Zedong later identified the summer of 1919 as the "critical point" in the evolution of his views (p. 194). Other scholars dispute this chronology. Bruce Elleman's research suggests that the Bolsheviks had already begun to build upon Tsarist penetration of China. The instant conversion of leading Chinese nationalists from disabused Wilsonianism to Bolshevism may be too pat to be true.²⁵

For his final case study, Manela turns to the abortive independence movement in Korea. That long-isolated country had little direct involvement either in the war or the Peace Conference. The United States had recognized Korea as a protectorate of Japan since 1905; hence during the hostilities Korean nationalists naturally took the German side. After the Armistice, however, an American toilet executive with connections to Wilson arrived in Shanghai and inspired the resident Korean community to demand its national rights. Korean students in Japan joined the movement despite nagging doubts whether their country had the present capacity to govern itself. On March 1, 1919, thirty-three Buddhist divines and Christian missionaries, the latter mostly American, gathered at a Seoul restaurant to proclaim "independence." They undertook to mobilize "the masses," although Manela does not specify what the latter category comprises. Protests spread, allegedly over the entire peninsula, although nothing came of them. The Japanese continued to rule

Korea until 1945 and treated the inhabitants abominably. Luckily, the American "imperialists" came to the defense of South Korea after 1950 and helped create a functioning polity and economy.

So much for the "Wilsonian Moment." The Treaty of Versailles left many issues unresolved, but the most intractable problems lay in Europe and not overseas. The treaty, as Elisabeth Glaser has shown, served as a flexible instrument and could have been adapted had the United States remained a major force in European politics and had Germany shown good will.²⁶ Yet self-determination, where it was applied in Eastern Europe, largely proved a failure. The Habsburg Successor states, sandwiched in between Germany and Russia, failed to maintain either their defenses or democratic forms. More often than not, strict ethnic borders did not make sense economically. Minority treaties turned out not to protect minorities.²⁷ As the decolonization movement gathered steam after 1945, regrettably, the newly independent nations of the third world paid little heed to those lessons.

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