

## Wilson and the Segregation of the Eastern European ‘Races’<sup>\*</sup>

Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe. By Larry Wolff.  
Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. 304 pp.

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There has hardly been an American president with a more interesting personality than Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924); it is no coincidence that Sigmund Freud himself wrote a seminal work on psychohistory about him, and according to the doctor’s diagnosis: “His Super-Ego was insatiable.”<sup>1</sup> President Woodrow Wilson, who intervened in World War I and sent troops across the Atlantic Ocean, thought of himself not simply as a politician but as a political messiah whose mission was to “make the world safe for democracy.” This is why the realist Henry Kissinger wrote in his book *World Order* that Wilson’s entire career “would appear more the stuff of Shakespearean tragedy than of foreign policy textbooks.”<sup>2</sup> After all, all the conservatives’ negative prejudices were confronted by the ideas of the progressive American president, Woodrow Wilson, an ‘egghead’ Princeton professor and university president who came into politics from the outside and had a scientific degree (Ph.D. in history and government), who wrote a book about constitutional government and then wanted to implement his ideas in practice.

In Hungary, in early 1919, Wilson was still seen as a savior, a symbolic figure ensuring the ‘self-determination of nations.’ On 1 January 1919, Mihály Károlyi summed up his foreign policy in three words: “Wilson, Wilson, Wilson” (p. 102). However, the Hungarian political elites quickly became disillusioned with Wilson, as Peter Pastor presented in a book from 1976, *Hungary between Wilson and Lenin*. In the USA, Americans considered him one of the ‘great’ presidents until recently: the peak of the American Wilson cult was during World War II, the emblematic product of which is the 1944 biographical film *Wilson*, which celebrated Wilson

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<sup>\*</sup> This study was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

1 Freud and Bullitt, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson*, 94.

2 Kissinger, *World Order*, 268.

and his vision of the League of Nations as a precursor of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the soon-to-be-born United Nations. However, in recent years, the racism of the Democratic president (between 1913 and 1921) has been highlighted: namely, Wilson believed that—in the emblematic words of Rudyard Kipling—“the white man’s burden” was to civilize and make the world better.

It is a strange contradiction that, while the Black Lives Matter movement has been mobilizing Americans to get rid of the memory of the racist Wilson who practiced segregation (as a result, in 2020, the management of Princeton University decided that the School of Public and International Affairs would omit the president’s name from its designation), initiatives are being launched in Eastern Europe precisely to restore memorial sites honoring Wilson. Although Wilson never visited Eastern Europe, the ‘small nations’ that gained independence after World War I erected statues to him in gratitude. Although the Wilson statues were removed one by one by the Nazis and the Communists, they returned after the transition. For example, the Wilson statue in front of Prague’s main railway station (named after Wilson between 1945 and 1948) was reerected in 2011.

The great merit of Larry Wolff’s book *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, published in 2020, is that it resolves the contradiction between Wilson’s domestic policy-supported racial segregation, which has been considered reactionary, and his progressive foreign policy in favor of separate nation-states. According to Wolff’s thesis, the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination can also be identified as a type of ‘segregation’ of nations aimed at eliminating the problem of the coexistence of different ‘races’ (namely nations). According to the idea of ‘nation-states’—which undergirded the ideology of the redrawing of Eastern Europe—the kinds of states must be created in which the state framework is filled by a specific national community. Sitting behind the desk in the White House, this idea did not seem impossible, but when the peacemakers tried to put the idea of the ‘self-determination of nations’ into practice, it turned out to be utopian. According to an anecdote, Wilson only realized when on board the USS George Washington while sailing to the Paris Peace Conference that there were three million Germans living in the Czech Republic: “That’s curious! Masaryk never told me that!” Wilson cried out (p. 169).

The New York University professor and the author of the paradigmatic monograph *Inventing Eastern Europe – The Map of Civilization in the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994), Larry Wolff, started to deal with President Wilson, the main proponent of the redrawing of our region after World War I, from the perspective of Eastern European history, not the American one. Wolff’s opus belongs much more to the genre of intellectual history than diplomatic history because the author answers the following questions: why did an American president embark on this

superhuman enterprise that exceeded his strength and, according to his critics, caused more trouble than it solved? What did Wilson think about the East European region, its empires, and its peoples? With what kind of topoi and schemes did he interpret the problems of Eastern European history, and how did he project his ideas onto the region? Overall: what ‘mental map’ did Wilson have of Eastern Europe, where he had never been? For this reason, among the epigraphs of the book appears a quote from the Tintin comic book *King Ottokar’s Sceptre* (1939), set in an imaginary Balkan country, Syldavia.

Larry Wolff emphasizes that Wilson was not really interested in Eastern Europe before World War I, and what he did know about it was related to the burning ‘Eastern question’ during his university studies. The Ottoman Empire appeared in his imagination as a source of crisis and as an outdated, despotic power that had been pushed out of Europe—and, of course, as a devout Christian, Wilson’s mind was full of anti-Muslim prejudices. Wilson considered the Ottoman Empire a geopolitical and moral anomaly, and what is particularly interesting is how Wilson projected this negative image onto the Habsburg Empire—the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy—after 1917. Looking at both multi-ethnic empires, Wilson saw the emerging cause of oppressed peoples fighting for their sovereignty. Wolff’s monograph thoroughly documents Wilson’s intellectual ‘development’ during World War II, which—in addition to the Inquiry, a group of experts established in September 1917—was greatly influenced by Eastern European intellectuals and politicians. The chapter entitled “Wilsonian Friendship: Personal Sympathy and Geopolitical Transformation” deals with them as a whole.

During the reorganization of Eastern Europe, the biggest change involved the re-creation of Poland, which had disappeared from the map of Europe after its third partition in 1795. Wilson announced the reestablishment of independent Poland as one of his Fourteen Points, published on January 8, 1918. This special attention Wilson paid to the ‘Polish question’ was partly due to positive, romanticizing topoi about the ‘freedom-loving’ Polish people and partly for domestic political reasons. There was a significant Polish community in the USA, so with the promise of an independent Poland, the president wanted to pull a bloc of voters to the side of the Democrats: the most important figure in the Polish lobby was the pianist Ignaz Paderewski, who played Chopin in the White House in 1916.

Roman Dmowski, who was Polish as well, recommended to Wilson in November 1917 that among the aims of the war should be not only the restoration of an independent Poland but also the ‘emancipation’ of the nationalities oppressed in the Habsburg Empire. The term ‘emancipation’ particularly resonated in American political culture (thanks to Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation). By 1919, the term ‘enslaved nations’ had entered Wilson’s dictionary, and the President wanted to

make the European settlement of the World War accepted by the American public an 'emancipation project': "The struggle against slavery, for Wilson, was an ongoing campaign, reaching back to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and culminating now in the Treaty of Versailles." (p. 114). We may reasonably believe that Lincoln became Wilson's 'super-ego.' This assumption is supported by the fact that the Lincoln Memorial was built in Washington during Wilson's presidency (between 1912 and 1920).

It is a postmodern principle that the key words that structure our thinking not only describe reality but also construct it, so it is particularly interesting how the dictionary of Wilsonism was put together. The term 'national self-determination' was still missing from the speech announcing the Fourteen Points: it was only later taken from Lenin by Wilson and his Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, and initially only used in quotation marks. The term 'small states' was borrowed from Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who gave a lecture in London in 1915 entitled "The Problems of Small Nations in the European Crisis."

In order to achieve his political goals, Masaryk himself played with the analogy with Lincoln, flattering Wilson and appealing to his vanity. After the intention to create an independent Czechoslovakia was stated in the Pittsburgh Agreement on 31 May 1918, Masaryk gave a speech addressed to Wilson on the Gettysburg battlefield at the beginning of September:

"At an historical moment of great significance Lincoln formulated these principles which were to rule the internal policies of the United States—at a historical moment of world-wide significance you, Mr. President, shaped these principles for the foreign policies of this great Republic as well as those of the other nations: that the whole mankind may be liberated, that between nations, great and small, actual equality exists—that all just power of governments is derived from the consent of the governed." (p. 95)

The struggle of Lincoln for emancipation was reincarnated in Wilson's struggle for the liberation of the 'small nations', which nations—in Wilson's interpretation—had to be separated from each other to prevent further conflicts. Wilson was also afraid of the integration of 'races' in the USA: Wilson was born and raised in the South; his Virginian family supported the Confederate States of America in the Civil War, so it is not surprising that despite being a progressive politician, Wilson played an important role in the resegregation of the federal government. According to perhaps the most inspiring statement in Larry Wolff's book, Wilson's view of the necessary segregation of races may be paralleled in the way Wilson thought about nations, so it is significant that Wilson used 'race' in the sense of 'nation' (because this practice was very common at the time).

Finally, the question arises: to what extent did the ‘new’ Eastern Europe, structured along the lines of nation-states instead of a supranational imperial structure, become functional? As a result of the ‘Wilsonian’ arrangement, two states—Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia—were formed, which Wilson—mistakenly—considered ‘nation-states,’ even though they were not, and later disintegrated into their components, precisely along the principle of national self-determination. In addition, the ‘new’ Eastern Europe, reorganized after World War I, not only did not fully realize the idea of national self-determination, but the resulting ‘small states’ later proved to be weak against Hitler’s conquering aspirations: a great power vacuum was generated in the region, so Nazi Germany first economically, then politically, and finally also militarily invaded the ‘sovereign’ small states.

According to Larry Wolff, historians have a duty to remind us that President Wilson was a racist and segregationist and to shed light on this dark side of the progressive politician’s career. But if the purifiers of identity and memory politics erase the Wilson memorials, the opportunity to debate his legacy will disappear—like the present-day map of Eastern Europe, more or less.

## Literature

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