

Woodrow Wilson & the Fourteen Points: The Tragedy of Discontent

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ABSTRACT

The most important peace treaty of the five prepared at the Paris peace conference was signed on June 28th, 1919 at the Palace of Versailles, by Germany and the victors of the Great War. The peace treaty concluding “the war to end all wars” was a result of cascading events and negotiations that enveloped all of Europe in its grandiosity. The process began in earnest with the ideals of Wilson and the Fourteen Points, which was intended to furnish diplomacy with a new formula for pursuing peace and stability in the world, and abandoning the old notion of a “balance of power”. According to Kissinger it was “complete reversal of the historical experience and method of operation of the great powers” (Kissinger, 1994, pp. 221 – 245). However, after the Versailles agreement was shaped and signed, it was clear to the world “that the new order had merely fouled the old” (Nicolson, 1933, p. 187).

This paper will attempt to delve into the concept of President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, the subsequent applicability of the principles as a guiding light in pursuing peace at the conference in Paris, and its impact on the eventual treaty signed in Versailles, and answer fittingly, to what degree did President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points shape the Treaty of Versailles? Firstly, the paper outlines and explains the background of events, with reference to the conceptualization of the Fourteen Points, and the avenues through which the notion was debated to bring an end to hostilities, and provide a pathway towards peace. In light of this, it then elucidates the reasons “the ideals set forth, were under the best of circumstances, not wholly realizable” (Bailey, 1944, p. 27), drawing upon the existing literature concerning the principles echoed by Wilson and the eventual treaty signed by the negotiating parties. The paper then concludes with analyzing the comprehensive picture and defending satisfactorily the position that despite the loftiness of the Fourteen Points as a worthy and constructive means of pursuing peace, it did not to a substantial degree shape the Treaty of Versailles.

INTRODUCTION

The war that engulfed Europe from 1914 – 1918 culminated in a loss of 20 million lives, and a complete disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman and Russian monarchical establishment. Congruently, it was perplexing for all trying to understand the reason for such monumental carnage (Kissinger, 1994, p. 217).

The study of international relations is dominated by varying accounts of what started the war, some scholars look to the ineptitude of the Kaiser, and others look to the “imperial rivalry” between the European powers, while others heap the blame on the inevitability of the “balance of power” system to crumble, perpetuated by deceit, perfidy and desire for conquest. According to Best *et al* one thing is for certain, whatever approach they may hold self-evident, a very significant reason was the implosion of great power alliances that turned a seemingly isolated crisis

in the Balkans into a global war. Thus, if the path to war was this circuitous, what then would constitute the path to peace? (Best *et al*, 2015, p. 18)

The year 1917 ushered the Russian Revolution, but it also ushered in America’s entry to war, subsequently making defeat of Germany more probable, consequently it brought to prominence a man leading a powerful nation with fresh ideas on ending the war and creating enduring peace (Best *et al*, p. 31). President Wilson had given various speeches early in the year justifying America’s entry into the conflict, and outlining his vision of a post war international order that would bring about “eternal peace”. He subsequently appointed “a committee of experts known as The Inquiry” to refine and bring cohesion to his ideas for peace. Employing their recommendations, Wilson presented his Fourteen Points to a “joint session of Congress on January 8, 1918” (Office of the Historian, 2016). It is often

suggested the Fourteen Points were steeped in idealism, with Foreign Secretary Balfour describing them as “certainly admirable but very abstract principles”. This paper contends the Fourteen Points were as exact as can be, and Nicolson also buttresses this argument, with his insistence that the Fourteen Points were “precise to the point of recklessness” as they brought to light specific issues that could scuttle the peace process (Nicolson, 1933, p. 39). In addition, Bailey asserts that one of the great weaknesses of the Fourteen Points was “they lent themselves to sloganizing” and accordingly, they were devoid of any practical aims at the time of pronouncement (Bailey, 1944, p. 29). Conversely, the paper disagrees and argues that the pronouncement of the principles at the time was intended as a statement: to Russia that it would not be vilified for the new course it had charted, to stimulate the morale of the allies and to cajole the enemy powers (Office of the Historian, 2016), and ultimately to address key issues that had caused the war in the first place, namely: the rise of nationalism, growth of militarism, entanglements of alliances, and the advance of imperialism. The Fourteen points aptly summarised, include but are not limited to:

Open covenants openly arrived at, freedom of the seas, the removal of economic barriers, the reduction of armaments and the foundation of a League of Nations, Belgium would be restored; Poland made independent; Alsace – Lorraine returned to France; and Italy’s frontiers redrawn along national lines, and the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires would be forced to grant autonomy to their subject peoples (Best et al, 2015, p. 40).

The conditions embedded in the principles were not an entirely innovative and startling phenomenon, three days earlier on Jan 5, 1918 Prime Minister Lloyd George addressed the Trade Union Congress, at Caxton Hall, London (Woodward, 1971, p. 22). It is claimed he basically “mentioned all of Wilson’s fourteen points except three”; it is further argued Lloyd George was also responding to the announcements of the Bolsheviks a week earlier which also placed considerable emphasis on the importance of self-determination (Bailey, 1944, pp. 24 - 27). Nevertheless, the Fourteen Points as proclaimed and espoused by Wilson had enveloped the world, but at this point they were considered “merely the starting points of [any possible] negotiations, never a binding basis for a peace of understanding”. The war waged on and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed by Germany

and Bolsheviks Russia revealed the German appetite; the Germans compelled the Russians to surrender all entitlements to the Baltic region, and at the time the treaty was widely considered “the harshest in modern European history” (Showalter, 2002, p. 3).

However, by the month of September 1918, the tide changed and Germany had recognized its inability of military victory, and at “this critical juncture” the German Foreign office began to discern into more concrete terms the applicability of the Fourteen points (Schwabe, 1998, pp. 37 - 67). On October 5, 1918, Prince Maximilian of Baden sued for peace with America and appealed to Wilson to negotiate peace on the basis of the Fourteen Points, and after much diplomatic manoeuvrings among the allied and the associated governments, a month after, on November 4, 1918 a consensus was agreed upon with the approval of Colonel House, the British prime Minister Lloyd George, the French Prime Minister Clemenceau, and the Prime Minister of Italy Orlando. This was endorsed by Wilson and he immediately pressed his Secretary of State to inform Congress and cable this resolution to the German High Command. Subsequently, Secretary Lansing dispatched a note indicating the “willingness of the allies... to make peace with Government of Germany on the terms of peace laid down in the Fourteen Points”, and accordingly Marshall Ferdinand Foch was approved to stipulate the terms of the ceasefire, and it was in tandem with this “pre-armistice agreement” that the Germans acquiesced and accepted peace (Lentin, 1985, pp. 9 – 14). Another noteworthy condition attached to the pre-armistice agreements according to Nicolson was they were subject to the conditions of “Freedom of the Seas”, one can argue this was to placate the British, and the “principles of restoration”, in other to cover “damage done to the civilian population of the Allies” (Nicolson, 1933, pp. 10 – 13). The above proceedings elucidate the allied and associated powers and the Germans were under no misapprehension the conditions on which peace was to be negotiated, and though the principles of restoration were included, it did not explicitly state the Germans would incur heavy pecuniary punishments or be baptized as the solitary reason for war. However, in the game of diplomatic procedure, conditions and principles can be subject to interpretation.

It can be debated the German high command had negotiated on the basis of the Fourteen Points to prevent the humiliation of unconditional

surrender, and protect itself from the ambitions of the European victors. One can also argue the main allied colleagues of Wilson (the big three) were doubtful of its applicability and grasped the olive branch of the principles to halt Europe from further carnage. Lentin also supports this position; he asserts that these celebrated points “were of a quality new to the chancelleries of warring Europe, [as] they called for settlement freely negotiated between equals” this was an entirely new concept to the Europeans involved, as it turned the notion of victors and vanquished on its head (Lentin, 1985, p. 3). The peace to come, and the spirit, and ideals through which they would be birthed has been referred to by scholars as the dawn of the “new diplomacy” a model different from the “old diplomacy” that was “esoteric, elitist, and far from the madding crowd” thus, the new virtuous pathway by Wilson offered an opportunity to arrive at peace in a spirit of collectivism (Marshall, 1997, p. 9).

At this juncture one can ascertain the evolution of Wilson’s points from the exalted position of idealism in many circles, to the eventual position of practicality. The Fourteen points eventually became the backbone for negotiations of a suitable peace agreement among all parties involved, and there was an arresting belief in many circles at the time that “only upon the principles of President Wilson could a durable peace be founded” (Nicolson, 1933, p. 17). Nonetheless, there was also a sense of incoherence amongst Wilson’s allied colleagues; as they were content with the military terms of the armistice, but “the question of the Fourteen Points found them perplexed and impatient” (Lentin, 1985, p. 10). Hence, one can comprehend the inability of the principles to shape a suitable agreement at Versailles, as a result of the differing aims and objectives of all parties involved in the peace process, and the contradictory nature of the Fourteen Points itself; and a case in point was that of Poland; it was promised independence and unencumbered access to the seas. “But the only possible corridor to the sea ran through territory inhabited by a considerable body of Germans. If Poland did not get the corridor, one of the points would be violated; if she did get it the point relating to self-determination would be at least partially violated” (Bailey, 1944, p. 26).

THE PEACE AT VERSAILLES

The peace conference that drafted the Treaty of Versailles began on 18 January, 1919 in Paris. The conference was to transpire in the spirit of democracy, devoid of the vestiges of the Congress

of Vienna. However, unlike in 1815, “the Paris peace conference did not include the defeated powers” in the negotiating process. It involved twenty-seven states, but was dominated by the Council of Ten – a coalition of the big four (the leaders of Italy, United States, France, and Britain) plus Japan, and their respective foreign ministers. The conference itself is quite intriguing, as there was arguably no agenda and structure to the initial activities, inexorably contributing to lethargy, and a proliferation of committees handling “peripheral subjects”. For instance, all together the delegates attended 1646 meetings (Kissinger, 1994, p. 232). The balance of Wilson’s idealism and the practical objectives of the big three powers as indicated previously escorted the leaders to the conference. Similarly, the choice of Paris was particularly incredulous; this is because it had witnessed the carnage of war first-hand. It was suggested neutral Switzerland host the conference. However, Wilson himself rejected it on the grounds it was “saturated with every kind of poisonous element and open to every hostile element in Europe” (Sharp, 2014, pp. 5-7). It has also been speculated Wilson was in an awful state of health at the time of the proceedings, and he eventually suffered a paralyzing stroke barely three months after the peace treaty was signed, and it can be argued some of these issues though minute in detail, did influence the actions at the conference (Washington Post, 2007). In light of this, I will proceed to elaborate on certain aspects of the Fourteen Points of President Wilson and expatiate on why it bore little resemblance to the Treaty of Versailles.

The issue of “secret agreements” and diplomacy bereft of public scrutiny was Point one of the Fourteen Points. Nevertheless, during the proceedings secret agreements during the war surfaced and according to Nicolson “it was largely through them that an atmosphere of discord and disorder was introduced into the conference”. For instance, the arrangement negotiated and signed on May 16, 1916, by George Picot and Sir Mark Sykes effectively partitioned Asia Minor and the Arabian lands between the British and French, and further subdivided Arab governed regions into spheres of influence. The “Sykes-Picot agreement” produced numerous quarrels between the two powers, but it was ultimately settled by Wilson without violating the principles. On the other hand, the “Treaty of London” consisted of an offer of “South Tirol and the Dalmatian Coast” by the allies to entice the Italians into their fold, and

Prime Minister Orlando, and Foreign Minister Sonnino of Italy were intent on abiding by it (Nicolson, 1933, pp. 140 - 147). This posed a conundrum as South Tirol was largely composed of Germans and this also conflicted with the principle of self-determination. It deadlocked the conference until South Tirol only was transferred to Italy. The compromise further altered the perception of the Fourteen Points as unchangeable (Kissinger, 1994, p. 231). In addition, the “Treaty of Shantung” between the British and the Japanese was also a thorny issue; in early 1917 the British appealed to the Japanese for assistance and the Japanese government agreed, but on the condition it was promised the Chinese province of Shantung, the treaty was signed on February 16, 1917 and was further honoured by the French, the agreement was opposed by Wilson at the conference and at that point Japan threatened to withdraw from the gathering. Ultimately Wilson acquiesced stating “I know I shall be accused of violating my own principles. Yet nevertheless I must work for world order and organisation against anarchy and a return to old militarism” (Nicolson, 1933, p. 147).

According to the dictates of the Fourteen Points on the “impartial adjustment of all colonial claims” a fair compromise was expected, this proved not to be so. The privileges hitherto enjoyed by Germany in Morocco, Thailand, Turkey and Bulgaria were deemed null and void. In addition, under the innovative “mandate system” of the League of Nations, she was stripped of her possessions across the world. Hence, other “advanced nations” namely Britain and France took over the German colonies in Africa, and the possessions in the Pacific islands were placed under Australian control “while those to the north of the equator” were to be administered by the Japanese (Johari, 2004, pp. 39 - 40). Likewise, it can be further argued that equally radical were the terms of German demilitarization;

The German General Staff was abolished; a ban was imposed on compulsory conscriptions and military training outside the army areas. [The] manufacture of tanks, armoured cars, military aeroplanes and submarines was prohibited; the strength of the army was reduced to 10,000 soldiers with 4,000 officers, the naval strength of Germany was restricted to 6 battleships of 10,000 tons, 6 light cruisers, 12 destroyers and 12 torpedo boats, and personnel of 15,000 with 1,500 officers. [Furthermore] she was asked to dismantle all fortifications [on certain islands

and coasts] and the right bank of the Rhine was permanently demilitarized to a depth of 50 kilometres (Johari, 2004, p. 40).

As well, under the Treaty of Versailles the concerns of Turks were largely ignored, up until the drafting of the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, at which point the revolution of Kemal Ataturk had changed situation of things considerably, moreover the point noting the freedom of Russia to determine its own government was paid lip service to, as Russia was not even invited. One can argue that the emergent Russia posed a threat to the peacemakers and their nations, though it was an “impotent” state at the time, it was fortified by its own idealism; the spread of revolution, the propagation of war among classes, and its own stance on imperialism and self-determination. In addition, the once powerful Austria-Hungarian Empire was dismantled and Austria became an independent entity (Sharp, 2014, pp. 9 - 14). Thus, far from the even-handed principles of the Fourteen Points, one can appreciate the permeation of personalities as the case of Italy shows and purely political considerations of the great powers in settling certain outstanding issues of colonies, demilitarization, and even the cardinal point of secret treaties.

Further negotiations reconstituted the entire European landscape and Central Europe was in particular completely altered by the peacemakers, with little significance attached to the exalted principles of self-determination and respect for nationalism. For instance, the delegation of Yugoslavia was at the commencement of proceedings already in charge of Bosnia - Herzegovina, and Croatia but it still wanted more. The Greek clamoured for complete control of the European part of Turkey, as did the defeated Bulgaria, there was the idea of partitioning Albania between the Greeks and Yugoslavs, the King of Montenegro expected for himself a portion of Bosnia and the absorption of Serbia, and the Romanians desired a considerable foothold at the coast of the Black Sea, while Serbia looked-for a more considerable stake in Macedonia, whereas the Slovenes “insisted on Klagenfurt”, and the Hungarians wanted the alluvial plains of Merdmurje and Prekomurje at the banks of the Mur river. It was clear that far from relying on the Fourteen Points to guide proceedings, the Balkan states in particular were intent on seizing as much territory and control as they could, and they

were by and large aided by the capriciousness of the great powers. This assertion is supported by Macmillan, she contends “there was fine talk of saving civilization and fighting for right and honour; [but] underneath were the calculations of *realpolitik*” (Macmillan, 2002, pp. 123 – 136).

Additionally, the big powers pursued their own aims; as the Italians were content with the dissolution of Austria – Hungary but were quite weary of another power propping up in their backyard. The French were “as always” guided by the threat of Germany and sought an “enlarged Serbia and Romania and, to the north, Czechoslovakia and Poland” to check any future excesses of Germany, while the British were guided by commercial interests and protection of key naval routes around the continent, and overall pursued the creation of stable enough states to halt a revitalised Russia. Wilson had envisioned Europe “becoming friends along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality”. Towards the end of the process it was clear that the Americans and their “new diplomacy” had largely not envisaged the overwhelming influence of old school land grabbing and balance of power, and the “thickets of the old diplomacy” was clear for all to see (Macmillan, 2002, pp. 125 – 136). As earlier alluded the position of the big four powers was diverse, and their varying objectives on territorial claims influenced eventual outcomes, and one can thus perceive the influence of the great powers on the eventual treaty. At the end of proceedings under the guise of self-determination, the great European powers had recalibrated the region to suit their intentions and more people resided under foreign rule than during the heyday of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. (Kissinger, 1994, p. 241)

To a certain degree the Fourteen Points did contribute to the eventual Treaty of Versailles. Alsace –Lorraine, the long-contested territory between Germany and France was returned to the French. In addition, arguably the most important stipulation of the Treaty of Versailles was the creation of the “League of Nations”, a world body designed to monitor and enforce the peace. Wilson argued on Feb 14, 1919 that the League represented the “first real step forward... to correct the mistakes which are inevitable in the treaty. Kissinger further maintains that Wilson acquiesced on foremost aspects of the Fourteen Points on the basis of the League being a sort of “*deus ex machina*” to rectify the issues discussed at the Paris peace conference. The

League was to be based on the principle of collective security, and was created as a primary alternative to “aggression, selfishness, and war” and would also rely on the scrutiny of public opinion. However, the League was precarious from the start, as the preponderant condition of collective security, was not embraced whole heartedly by France. The French were hard pressed to comprehend Wilson’s assertion of collective assessment and reaction to threats, and they demanded the partitioning of Germany, but Wilson negotiated on the basis of the non-hesitance of the United States to invoke force to guarantee the Monroe doctrine (Kissinger, 1994, pp. 218 - 245). On the other hand, Wilson’s advisers were adamant in resisting the proposal of collective military security backed by either a “standing army or permanent military commitment”, noting succinctly: “a war automatically arising upon a condition subsequent, pursuant to a treaty provision, is not a war declared by congress”. Thus, to assuage the insistence of France to create a “Rhenish republic as a demilitarized buffer zone” the British and the United States negotiated a treaty ensuring it would come to its aid were it ever attacked by Germany. A perfect disagreement with this was from Colonel House, cited in Kissinger, he states: “The league is supposed to do just what this treaty proposed, and if it were necessary for nations to make such treaties, then why the [need of the] League of Nations?” It was a pertinent question, as that treaty imbued the other nations with an air of cynicism regarding the League, and subsequent events in the United States at the end of the peace conference seemed to enforce the necessity of the question. (Kissinger, 1994, pp. 219 – 243)

The most preponderant issue regarding the incoherence of Wilson with the eventual peace treaty was the issue of the “guilt clause” and “reparations”. Though not embedded in the Fourteen Points itself, the subsequent speeches of Wilson; namely the “The Four Principles” and the “Five Particulars” contained the statement “that an eventual peace should contain no annexations, no contributions and no punitive damages” (Nicolson, 1933, pp. 40 – 41). The paper further argues the Germans went into discussions with the allied powers on the basis of not only the Fourteen Points, but on the whole essence of Wilsonism itself and thus the provisions contained in Article 231, and 232 were extreme to say the least. Johari further opines that they were quite “terrifying”. Article 231 states:

The allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the allied and associated governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies (Johari, 2004, pp. 40 – 41).

Then Article 232 contained provisions for “complete reparations for all such losses and damage done to the civilian population of the Allied and Associated powers and to their property”. A commission was to be set up to pursue this prerogative and draft a schedule for commencement of payment on May 1, 1921, nevertheless in the interim, Germany was to “supply large quantities of coal to France, Belgium, and Italy and build for the allies a yearly tonnage of 200,000 for 5 years”. For the next 5 years the allies were “accorded concessions in matters of import from and export of goods to Germany”, and were to have “most favoured treatments in her markets”. As a result of the Treaty, Germany “stood like a pale person in the comity of nations” and rightly so, these particular provisions were widely seen in many circles as unfair, and far removed from the equitability of the Fourteen Points. The provisions were sent to the Germans for “observations” and the Germans retorted: “This is not the just peace we were promised, it stands in full and irreconcilable conflict with the basis agreed upon for a just and durable peace” (Johari, 2004, pp. 38 – 47). The reply of the Germans is an apt reproach to a treaty that was largely devoid of the conditions and principles on which peace, not just for Europe, but for the world was expected to rest upon.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that though the Americans led by Wilson and his Fourteen Points were imbued with noble intentions, the disposition and avarice of the other great powers created an eventual Treaty etched in an unshakable disparity with the Fourteen Points. The aims set forth in the Fourteen Points were not wholly compatible with the times and the people involved. For his efforts in Paris and as the architect of the League of Nations, Wilson was honoured with the 1919 Nobel Peace Prize; however, the major prize of the League and an enduring peace for all eluded him. The Senate refused to ratify the treaty thus the United States never joined, and the defeated powers of Russia

and Germany did not join the League. After the signing of the treaty, Marshall Ferdinand Foch admitted: “This is not peace, it is an armistice for twenty years”, and his utterances came to fruition as exactly twenty years later, conditions inherent in the Treaty of Versailles dragged the world into another bloody spectacle, greater even than the Great War (Murray & Lacey, 2009, p. 209).

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