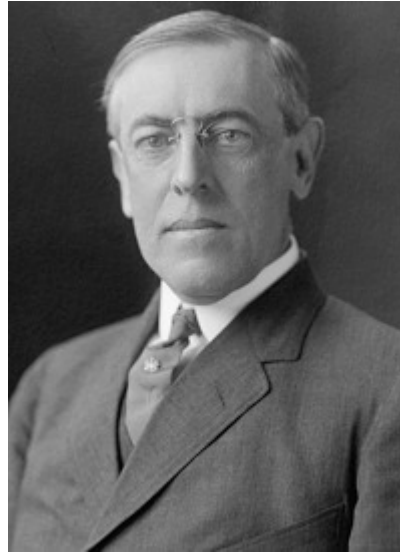




Recalling the Failure of Wilson's "Fourteen Points"

The Fourteen Points were:

1. "Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at ... always frankly and in the public view."
2. "Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas...."
3. "The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations...."
4. "Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety...."
5. "A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims...."
6. "The evacuation of all Russian territory ... a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing...."
7. "Belgium, the whole world will agree, must be evacuated and restored...."
8. "All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored...."
9. "A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality."
10. "The peoples of Austria-Hungary ... should be accorded the freest opportunity to autonomous development."
11. "Rumania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea...."
12. "The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty... other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured ... autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage...."
13. "An independent Polish state ... which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea...."
14. "A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike."



The leaders of the major Allied Powers —Lloyd George of Britain, Premier Clemenceau of France, and Prime Minister Orlando of Italy — were highly skeptical of the practicality of Wilson's points. But because at this point in the First World War those nations were highly dependent upon the United States, not just for soldiers and convoy escorts, but for food, fuel, munitions, and money, these political



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leaders reluctantly signed off on the Fourteen Points.

These European leaders on the Allied side also understood that the propounding of these Fourteen Points to the war-weary citizens of Germany and Austro-Hungary would push those peoples to press their governments to make peace. Wilson, in making his Fourteen Points speech and later in negotiating the Treaty of Versailles, deliberately excluded Republican leaders in the United States Senate, whose approval for any treaties was constitutionally required.

Without the support of the heads of government of the three major European allies — Britain, France and Italy — and without the support of the U.S. Senate, it is hard to understand exactly what Wilson thought he could accomplish with his Fourteen Points. One practical effect was that many Germans — aware of the Fourteen Points and convinced that this promised a modest peace if Germany signed an armistice — agitated for the German government to end the war.

What happened at Versailles bore little resemblance to the Fourteen Points. Secret agreements, like the promises that induced Italy to enter the war against its erstwhile allies in Triple Alliance in 1915, were still on the table, although the Italians were not given all that they had believed they were entitled to (leading to the rise of Mussolini and Fascism).

The promises of non-involvement in Russia were likewise not seriously considered, although exactly what moral force and legal authority anyone ought to have given to the Bolshevik junta was murky. What did not happen, and what Wilson was understood to have promised, was national independence for those people who were not Russian: Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Kazaks, Uzbeks, White Russians, and others. Therefore, by the early 1920s, the Bolsheviks had dragged back into the Russian Empire most of the peoples who had a flickering few years of independence.

The national sovereignty for the constituent peoples of the Austro-Hungarian empire, including the Poles, as well as other peoples of Eastern Europe, created a powder keg. Much of the Polish state was inhabited by other peoples — Ukrainians, Germans, Mauserians, Lithuanians, Ruthenians, and others. The Czech nation was a polyglot of Bohemians, Moravians, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians, Poles, and others.

In the West, France received back Alsace-Lorraine, perpetuating the discontent between the German-speaking people of Alsace and French-speaking people of Lorraine. Belgium — a creature of the Great Powers after the Napoleonic Wars, which cobbled together Walloons and Flemish — saw its boundaries restored. Additionally, Malmedy was annexed out of Germany.

The German people, who had been horrified by “The Great War,” as the First World War was long called, were also aghast at the peace terms. Impossible reparations payments were imposed; territories such as Schlesweg-Holstein were gratuitously transferred from Germany to Denmark; the two German states of Weimar Germany and the Austrian Republic were forbidden from joining; and the armaments of Germany, but not of the victorious nations, were severely limited.

In the end, the Fourteen Points were a failure. Within four years Mussolini had become Premier of Italy, partly out of resentment concerning the promises believed made by Wilson. Also within four years, Lenin had brutally won the Russian Civil War and established (the same year Mussolini took power) the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic. And 15 years after Wilson’s famous speech, Hitler would become Chancellor of Germany, rising to power largely because the Germans felt they had been tricked by Wilson.

The most important of the Fourteen Points was the last one calling for “a general association of



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nations.” The League of Nations, although America never joined it, was formed and operated through the start of the Second World War. The real purpose of the League of Nations was to dilute national sovereignty and replace it with a global government. The U.S. Senate, reflecting the traditions of our republic, rejected the League of Nations. The Fourteen Points were, in general, a flop, but nowhere more clearly than in the 14th point, the notion that was the precursor to the United Nations today.

Photo: Woodrow Wilson



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