

America, Germany, and the Versailles Peace: A Reassessment

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The Versailles settlement, imposed on Germany by Britain, France, and the United States in 1919, was the only major peace settlement in modern times to be worked out by the great western democracies, and by them alone. It was also the most unstable major peace settlement in modern history—much less stable than the settlement negotiated in Vienna after the Napoleonic Wars, and less stable even than the *de facto* European settlement that came into being during the Cold War period. One therefore has to wonder whether there was a causal relationship here—whether the Versailles settlement was so unstable *because* it was in some sense a “democratic peace,” a peace rooted in the ideology of the major democratic powers.

The question is important because most historians have taken the view that the extraordinary instability of international politics in the interwar period cannot really be blamed on that ideology. It is commonly assumed, in particular, that its most prominent torch-bearer, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson, should not be held responsible for what happened after the war. Given political realities, the argument runs, he had no choice but to compromise with more conservative elements, both at home and in Britain and France, for whom the whole idea of a liberal peace had no appeal. But could it be that the liberal philosophy itself lay at the heart of the problem—that the approach that Wilson championed was in itself a major source of instability?

That latter possibility is particularly worth exploring because, if the goal has been to create a relatively stable international order, Wilsonian-type policies have historically not been terribly successful. Over and over again, the story is the same: the attempt to implement that kind of policy has been followed by a deepening of international tensions. The Wilson experience and its aftermath is the most obvious example. But the case of Wilson’s hero William Gladstone—the future president called him “the greatest statesman that ever lived”—is also very much worth noting.¹ Gladstone was swept back into office as Prime Minister of Great Britain after outlining a foreign policy program in November 1879 that looks very much like a forerunner of Wilson’s own Fourteen Points program. Gladstone’s program, to be sure, had only six points, but he sounded what we would now view as characteristic Wilsonian themes: that foreign policy “should always be inspired by a love of freedom,” that it was important “to acknowledge the rights of all nations,” that a major goal of policy should be “to cultivate to the utmost the Concert of Europe,” and so on.² But Gladstone’s attempt to pursue that kind of policy as prime minister (1880-85) put Britain at odds with every major continental power; even France and Germany came together briefly in an anti-British entente focusing on colonial issues. As the great British diplomatist Lord Salisbury noted ruefully after the fall of the Liberal government in 1885, Gladstone and his colleagues had achieved their long-desired Concert of Europe all right: they had “succeeded in uniting the continent of Europe—against England.”³ And other examples could be cited. One thinks especially of Jimmy Carter’s failure as U.S. president in the late 1970s—and Carter was perhaps the most Wilsonian U.S. leader in the whole post-World War II period.

¹ Quoted in Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1927), vol. 1, p. 57.

² R.W. Seton Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question* (New York: Norton, 1972), pp. 545-46; originally published in 1935.

³ Lady Gwendolen Cecil, *Life of Robert Marquis of Salisbury*, vol. 3 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), p. 136.

The general issue here is obviously of fundamental political importance. For if the Wilsonian approach is not so much a solution to the problem of international disorder as a major source of instability in its own right, then that would tell us something important about how foreign policy in general should be conducted. And given that Wilson's own policy is the canonical example of a Wilsonian foreign policy, to get at that general issue it makes sense to focus on the Wilson period, and especially on the period beginning with the run-up to America's entry into the First World War in April 1917 and ending with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919. What was Wilson's policy in this period? Was his ultimate goal to achieve a peace of reconciliation with Germany? Was his policy in any way responsible for the extraordinary instability of great power politics in the whole interwar period? These questions are especially worth exploring in the present context because of Klaus Schwabe's great interest throughout his scholarly career in issues of this sort.

One can begin the analysis by looking at how historians have dealt with the question of Wilson's fundamental goals at this time. And when one examines the historical literature, one gets the distinct impression that most scholars think that Wilson continued throughout this period to aim at a moderate peace with Germany. They point especially to Wilson's "peace without victory" speech of January 1917. America had not yet entered the war, but was nonetheless very interested in playing a major role in the postwar international order. But the United States would play that role, Wilson declared, only if that international order was worth supporting. The settlement therefore had to be relatively moderate; it had to be a "peace without victory." For victory, he said, "would mean peace forced upon the loser, a victor's terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand."⁴

That speech was given before the United States entered the war, but many scholars have argued that Wilson's policy continued to be based on that kind of thinking even after America became a belligerent. Arthur Link, the chief editor of what would become a 69-volume collection of Wilson's papers and a man who devoted most of his scholarly life to the study of the 28th president, certainly thought so.⁵ Wilson's basic position, Link argued, did not change after the United States entered the war in April 1917. His objective "was still the attainment of a peace of justice and reconciliation."⁶ The president, to be sure, had had to take domestic political realities into account, and also needed to work with the Britain and France, and for those reasons was not able to achieve a peace settlement fully based on his principles. And his policy, Link admitted, had clearly hardened after the Germans imposed the Brest-Litovsk treaty on Russia in March 1918.⁷ But deep down, the argument ran, Wilson remained committed to the liberal peace program, and it was not really his fault that the Versailles treaty did not lay the basis for a stable international order.

Link was by no means the only scholar to argue along those lines, and, in fact, that general view is quite common.⁸ But when you read Wilson's wartime addresses and look at what Wilson was saying during the peace negotiations and their aftermath in 1919, you can scarcely help wondering whether that interpretation captures the heart of the story. Consider, for example, the whole tone of a speech Wilson gave to the Congress in December 1917. It was quite clear to him that Germany was responsible for America's war with

⁴ Woodrow Wilson address to the U.S. Senate, January 22, 1917, in Ray Stannard Baker and William Dodd, eds., *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 4 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1926), pp. 407-414; the key passage is on p. 410.

⁵ Arthur Link et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966-1994).

⁶ Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace* (Arlington Heights, IL: AHM Publishing, 1979), p. 77.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸ See the references given in John A. Thompson, "Woodrow Wilson and 'Peace without Victory': Interpreting the Reversal of 1917," *Federal History*, no. 10 (2018), pp. 10-11.

that country. “The intolerable wrongs done and planned against us by the sinister masters of Germany,” he said, “have long since become too grossly obvious and odious to every true American to need to be rehearsed.” It was also clear to him that the goal now was “to win the war”; “we shall not slacken or suffer ourselves to be diverted,” he said, “until it is won.” But what exactly was America fighting for? His answer was not at all in keeping with the philosophy outlined in the “peace without victory” speech. The American people, he declared, “desire peace by the overcoming of evil, by the defeat once for all of the sinister forces that interrupt peace and render it impossible.” They were “impatient with those who desire peace by any sort of compromise.” And he claimed to speak for them in outlining what America’s objectives were “in seeking to make conquest of peace by arms”:

First, that this intolerable Thing of which the masters of Germany have shown us the ugly face, this menace of combined intrigue and force which we now see so clearly as the German power, a Thing without conscience or honor or capacity for covenanted peace, must be crushed and, if it be not utterly brought to an end, at least shut out from the friendly intercourse of the nations; and, second, that when this Thing and its power are indeed defeated and the time comes that we can discuss peace,—when the German people have spokesmen whose word we can believe and when those spokesmen are ready in the name of their people to accept the common judgment of the nations as to what shall henceforth be the bases of law and of covenant for the life of the world,—we shall be willing and glad to pay the full price for peace, and pay it ungrudgingly. We know what that price will be. It will be full, impartial justice—justice done at every point and to every nation that the final settlement must affect, our enemies as well as our friends.⁹

That speech, it is important to note, was given months before the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed. By the end of 1917 Wilson’s rhetoric had thus already shifted dramatically from what it had been at the beginning of the year. And the December 1917 speech was no anomaly: Wilson continued to take that line throughout 1918. On July 4 of that year, for example, he again argued against a compromise peace: “No halfway decision would be tolerable.” There would be no peace, he declared, until the United States and its European associates achieved their fundamental goals, the first of which was the “destruction of every arbitrary power anywhere that can separately, secretly, and of its single choice disturb the peace of the world; or, if it cannot be presently destroyed, at the least its reduction to virtual impotence.”¹⁰ He sounded the same theme on September 27:

We are all agreed that there can be no peace obtained by any kind of bargain or compromise with the governments of the Central Empires, because we have dealt with them already and have seen them deal with other governments that were parties to this struggle, at Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest. They have convinced us that they are without honor and do not intend justice. They observe no covenants, accept no principle but force and their own interest. We cannot “come to terms” with them. They have made it impossible. The German people must by this time be fully aware that we cannot accept the word of those who forced this war upon us. We do not think the same thoughts or speak the same language of agreement.

The world, he argued, needed a League of Nations to guarantee the peace, because without it the peace of the world would “rest in part upon the word of outlaws and only upon that word.” He left little doubt as to who those “outlaws” were. The Germans themselves could not be treated as equals—not right away, at any

⁹ Woodrow Wilson address to a joint session of Congress, December 4, 1917, in Ray Stannard Baker and William Dodd, eds., *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 5 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), pp. 128-39; the key passage is on pp. 128-30.

¹⁰ Woodrow Wilson Mount Vernon speech, July 4, 1918, *ibid.*, pp. 233-34.

rate; Germany would “have to redeem her character, not by what happens at the peace table, but by what follows.”¹¹

Wilson often spoke of the need to establish a “just peace”; the principles that such a peace would be based on, he said, should apply to victors and vanquished alike. But the key point to note here is that this did not mean that the Germans were to be treated gently. He was totally convinced that Germany had caused the war. “For him,” as Schwabe notes, “Germany’s war guilt was an article of faith which was not subject to question”; Wilson, in fact, at one point “called the German government’s refusal to acknowledge Germany’s responsibility for the outbreak of the war ‘incredible.’”¹² This was a very cavalier way of treating a complex historical problem, one that could only be analyzed on the basis of the documents, the bulk of which were not even available at that point. And it is quite extraordinary that a trained scholar, to this day America’s only president with a Ph.D. (in political science no less), could approach the problem in this way.

But Wilson was firmly convinced that the Germans had caused the war; a “just” peace, to his mind, was therefore one which punished the Germans for their crimes. During the peace conference period he made this point over and over again. “I am sorry,” he wrote one of his correspondents in April 1919, “that you are so deeply discouraged about the work of the conference. It is undoubtedly true that many of the results. . . are far from ideal, but I think that on the whole we have been able to keep tolerably close to the lines laid down at the outset. . . .The treaty. . . must unavoidably seem harsh towards the outlaws who started the war, but when the details are read and understood I believe that the impression will be largely removed.”¹³ Or to cite a second example: when, toward the end of the peace conference, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George tried to soften the peace terms, Wilson told him that “he was not willing to change anything in the Treaty because it was severe; that he wanted this to be a historic lesson, so that people might know that they could not do anything of the sort the Germans attempted without suffering the severest kind of punishment.”¹⁴ He had made the same point a couple of weeks earlier in a letter to the South African statesman Jan Smuts. “The Treaty,” he wrote, “is undoubtedly very severe indeed. I have of course had an opportunity to go over each part of it, as it was adopted, and I must say that though in many respects harsh, I do not think that it is on the whole unjust in the circumstances, much as I should have liked to have certain features altered. . . . I feel the terrible responsibility of the whole business, but inevitably my thought goes back to the very great offense against civilisation which the German State committed and the necessity for making it evident once and for all that such things can lead only to the most severe punishment.”¹⁵

And he used the same kind of argument repeatedly in his campaign in late 1919 to win public support for the peace settlement. Thus on September 4, 1919, he declared that the treaty sought “to punish one of the greatest wrongs ever done in history, the wrong which Germany sought to do to the world and to civilization, and there ought to be no weak purpose with regard to the application of the punishment. She attempted an intolerable thing, and she must be made to pay for the attempt.” He made the same point in another speech a few days later: “I hear that this treaty is very hard on Germany. When an individual has committed a criminal

¹¹ Woodrow Wilson speech in New York City, September 27, 1918, *ibid.*, pp. 255-56.

¹² Klaus Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking, 1918-1919: Missionary Diplomacy and the Realities of Power* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 341. This was a revised and somewhat condensed version of the original German edition published fourteen years earlier: Klaus Schwabe, *Deutsche Revolution und Wilson-Frieden; die amerikanische und deutsche Friedensstrategie zwischen Ideologie und Machtpolitik 1918/19* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1971).

¹³ Wilson to Herron, April 28, 1919, quoted in Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson*, p. 517 n.76.

¹⁴ Bernard M. Baruch, “American Delegation to Negotiate Peace. Memoranda, Comments and Notes in Diary Form,” entry for June 2, 1919, p. 60, Baruch Papers, vol. 656, Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton NJ.

¹⁵ Wilson to Smuts, May 16, 1919, in Sarah Millin, *General Smuts*, vol. 2 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936), pp. 232-33.

act, the punishment is hard, but the punishment is not unjust. This nation permitted itself, through unscrupulous governors, to commit a criminal act against mankind, and it is to undergo the punishment.”¹⁶

But how is all this to be understood? Historians of the Wilson period generally tend to play down statements of this sort, as though the kind of thinking they represented was just an unpleasant growth on an otherwise healthy body. They are often explained away as tactical responses to the political exigencies of the moment. But it is hard to believe that Wilson did not mean what he was saying—that he really still believed in a “peace without victory” even though his statements pointed in exactly the opposite direction. Wilson had many faults, but such extreme dishonesty was not one of the them.

This is not to say, of course, that the sort of thinking laid out in the “peace without victory” ceased to count for anything after April 1917. It certainly did not disappear entirely, and one sometimes has the sense that there were two Wilsons: one who still interested in a moderate peace and another more concerned with holding the Germans accountable for their crimes. But one gets the clear sense from the sources that in 1918 and 1919 the second Wilson had come to totally overshadow the first one.

Or to put the point somewhat differently: the main reason the kind of thinking you see in Wilson’s wartime addresses is not to be dismissed as empty rhetoric, adopted for purely tactical short-term political purposes, is that it was firmly rooted in Wilson’s basic approach to international politics. It was one thing to talk about “peace without victory” when the United States was still a non-belligerent, but as soon as America entered the war the thinking was bound to shift. The United States, Wilson assumed, would not have gone to war unless it had been forced to stand up to truly sinister forces; the moral issues had to be unambiguous, for otherwise America would not have entered the conflict. That meant that the war was a struggle between good and evil; a compromise peace was therefore out of the question; the enemy had to be crushed. And since Germany had engaged in virtually criminal behavior, if justice were to prevail she would have to be punished after she was defeated. More conservative types might take a more jaded view and be more inclined to see things in less moralistic terms. But Wilson was convinced that Germany had caused the war and that that country therefore had to make amends for its crimes. The punishment, to be sure, was not to last forever; but before the Germans were welcomed back into the community of civilized nations they would have to “redeem their character” by proving through their behavior after the peace was signed that they deserved to be taken back in. In the meantime, they were to be put on probation and consigned to an inferior status. “Until we knew what the German government was going to be, and how the German people were going to behave,” he said, “the world had a moral right to disarm Germany, and to subject her to a generation of thoughtfulness.”¹⁷

Would the Germans voluntarily accept a peace settlement based on the idea that they had caused the war? Wilson seems to have believed, at least at times, that they would. He seemed to think, in other words, that his own beliefs about the origins of the war were so obviously correct that every honest person would share them and therefore accept as just a peace based on that assessment. The settlement, he seemed to feel, ultimately had to be based on trust and not on coercion: “sooner or later,” he said, “the Allies would be compelled to trust Germany to keep her promises.” And he asked rhetorically: “When peace would be signed, should we still be compelled to maintain a great army of occupation to make sure that Germany would keep

¹⁶ Wilson speeches in Columbus, Ohio, and Omaha, Nebraska, September 4 and 8, 1919, in Baker and Dodd, *Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 5, pp. 590-91, and vol. 6, pp. 33-34. For more on this aspect of Wilson’s thinking, see Alexander Sedlmaier, *Deutschlandbilder und Deutschlandpolitik: Studien zur Wilson-Administration (1913-1921)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003).

¹⁷ Minutes of the Council of Ten, February 12, 1919, in U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: The Paris Peace Conference* [henceforth: FRUS:PPC], vol. 3, p. 1002. See also Klaus Schwabe, “Woodrow Wilson and Germany’s Membership in the League of Nations, 1918-19,” *Central European History* 8, no. 1 (March 1975), pp. 12, 16.

her promises?”¹⁸ Much the same view was reflected in his distaste for the idea that the League of Nations should have a military force at its disposal: he was clearly against “substituting international militarism for national militarism.”¹⁹ But the idea that the peace, in the final analysis, had to be based on trust reflected the assumption that it *could* be based on trust—that Germany, in fact, would voluntarily comply with the peace terms her enemies were working out.

Was this the kind of approach that could be expected to lead to a stable peace? The Germans could scarcely be expected to accept a settlement based on the idea that they had been responsible for the war. This was hardly a recipe for stability: as Wilson himself had pointed out in the “peace without victory” speech, a peace “accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice” would “leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand.” And if the Germans did resist, would the victor powers use force to make them comply with the treaty? It was already clear in 1919 that Wilson and those who thought like him would be very reluctant to do so. In their world-view, force was not a normal and legitimate element of international political life. So the Germans were being provoked to resist the peace settlement which at least some of the main victor powers were not eager to enforce. This was hardly a recipe for a stable international order. But this was by no means the only way Wilson’s policies had a destabilizing effect, and there are two other points that should be noted.

The first has to do with the way the western powers turned their backs on the pre-armistice agreement with Germany, something which would have fateful consequences in the post-Versailles period, both in Germany itself and in the West. According to that agreement, Germany agreed to lay down her arms after her enemies had assured her that the peace would be based on Wilson’s Fourteen Points speech and subsequent wartime addresses, subject to only two qualifications. One, having to do with freedom of the seas, was not terribly important, since that reservation meant that the victor powers were not committing themselves to anything in this area. But the other was to play a key role in the postwar period. The victor powers noted that in the Fourteen Points speech Wilson had declared “that invaded territories must be restored as well as evacuated and freed,” and they wanted to make it clear what that provision meant: “By it they understand that compensation will be made by Germany for all damage done to the civilian population of the Allies and their property by the aggression of Germany by land, by sea and from the air.” Germany accepted those terms and an armistice was then signed; a “pre-armistice agreement” had been reached, limiting in theory what the victorious western powers could demand of Germany.

The reference in the pre-armistice agreement to civilian damages was understood at the time to mean that what Germany would be asked to pay would be fairly limited—that, in particular, she could not be asked to compensate her enemies for the entire cost of the war, but that the bill would be limited to damages to civilian property caused by the war. That certainly was the view of the American experts at the Paris Peace Conference. But when the British proposed adding pensions and separation allowances to the reparation bill, Wilson agreed to their inclusion. This was despite the fact that the French had made it clear that they would prefer to base the reparation settlement on a strict interpretation of the Fourteen Points (i.e., excluding pensions), which, as they noted, would have resulted in figure for the whole reparation bill considerably lower than what even the Americans had proposed. And it was also despite the fact that the U.S. experts explained to Wilson that the same logic that had ruled out war costs should also rule out pensions. “Logic! Logic! I don’t give a damn for logic!” the president exclaimed. “I am going to include pensions!” His reason was that damage to property was no more deserving of compensation than damage to people—a view that reflected his notion of what was just; he was, characteristically, not thinking mainly about the political consequences of the decision. But the inclusion of pensions was almost bound to be viewed as an egregious violation of the

¹⁸ Minutes of the Council of Ten, January 24, 1919, FRUS:PPC, vol. 3, p. 709.

¹⁹ Meeting of the Peace Conference Commission on the League of Nations, February 11, 1919, in David Hunter Miller, *The Drafting of the Covenant*, vol. 2 (New York: Putnam’s, 1928), p. 294.

pre-armistice agreement—a breach of faith that would become a key element in the case against the treaty, not just in Germany, but soon in the West as well.²⁰

The second point also has to do with a promise (this time implicit) which Wilson had made to the Germans prior to the armistice. He had suggested repeatedly, and quite unmistakably, that the kind of peace terms Germany would be offered would depend on the sort of regime that country had. If the old imperial regime remained intact, the peace terms would be harsh; the clear implication was that if Germany became democratic, the settlement would be much more tolerable. The issue of democratic governance had been touched upon even in the “peace without victory” speech.²¹ But Wilson’s wartime speeches, as the passages quoted above show, suggested much more unambiguously that unless the Germans basically changed their system, the peace terms would be severe. The point was spelled out explicitly in the notes the U.S. government sent to Germany immediately preceding the armistice. The American position was, in fact, so extraordinary that the key documents are worth quoting at length:

It is necessary also in order that there may be no possibility of misunderstanding [the Germans were told on October 14], that the President should very solemnly call the attention of the Government of Germany to the language and plain intent of one of the terms of peace which the German Government has now accepted. It is contained in the address of the President delivered at Mount Vernon on the fourth of July last. It is as follows: ‘The destruction of every arbitrary power anywhere that can separately, secretly, and of its single choice disturb the peace of the world; or, if it cannot be presently destroyed, at least its reduction to virtual impotency.’ The power which has hitherto controlled the German Nation is of the sort here described. It is within the choice of the German Nation to alter it. The President's words just quoted naturally constitute a condition precedent to peace, if peace is to come by the action of the German people themselves. The President feels bound to say that the whole process of peace will, in his judgment, depend upon the definiteness and the satisfactory character of the guarantees which can be given in this fundamental matter. It is indispensable that the Governments associated against Germany should know beyond a peradventure with whom they are dealing.²²

The point was made again, even more explicitly, in the final note on October 23, the note that was to be the basis of the pre-armistice agreement:

The President would deem himself lacking in candor did he not point out in the frankest possible terms the reason why extraordinary safeguards must be demanded. Significant and important as the constitutional changes seem to be which are spoken of by the German Foreign Secretary in his note of the twentieth of October, it does not appear that the principle of a government responsible to the German people has yet been fully worked out or that any guarantees either exist or are in contemplation that the alterations of principle and of practice now partially agreed upon will be permanent. Moreover, it does not appear that the heart of the present difficulty has been reached. It may be that future wars have been brought under the control of the German people, but the present

²⁰ See John Foster Dulles, “Memorandum of Conference had at President Wilson’s Hotel, Paris, April 1, 1919, at 2 P.M.,” in Philip Mason Burnett, *Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference from the Standpoint of the American Delegation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), vol. 1, p. 776; Thomas W. Lamont, “Reparations,” in Edward M. House and Charles Seymour, eds., *What Really Happened at Paris* (New York: Scribner’s, 1921), p. 272; and Marc Trachtenberg, “Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference,” *Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 1 (March 1979), pp. 41, 45. See also Antony Lentin, *Lloyd George, Woodrow Wilson and the Guilt of Germany: An Essay in the Pre-History of Appeasement* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984).

²¹ Baker and Dodd, *Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 4, p. 414.

²² Secretary of State Lansing to the German Government, October 14, 1918, in Baker and Dodd, *Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 5, pp. 278-79.

war has not been; and it is with the present war that we are dealing. It is evident that the German people have no means of commanding the acquiescence of the military authorities of the Empire in the popular will; that the power of the King of Prussia to control the policy of the Empire is unimpaired; that the determining initiative still remains with those who have hitherto been the masters of Germany.

Feeling that the whole peace of the world depends now on plain speaking and straightforward action, the President deems it his duty to say, without any attempt to soften what may seem harsh words, that the nations of the world do not and cannot trust the word of those who have hitherto been the masters of German policy, and to point out once more that in concluding peace and attempting to undo the infinite injuries and injustices of this war the Government of the United States cannot deal with any but veritable representatives of the German people who have been assured of a genuine constitutional standing as the real rulers of Germany. If it must deal with the military masters and the monarchical autocrats of Germany now, or if it is likely to have to deal with them later in regard to the international obligations of the German Empire, it must demand, not peace negotiations, but surrender. Nothing can be gained by leaving this essential thing unsaid.²³

The policy outlined here gave the Germans an enormous incentive to change their political system in order to get more moderate peace terms. And the policy the U.S. president laid out in those notes, as Klaus Schwabe pointed out in his monumental study of Wilson and Germany during this period, did have a profound impact: the changes in the German political system that took place at the end of the war, ending with the November Revolution and the establishment of the new German republic, are very much to be understood in the context of what Wilson was insisting on.²⁴ But the problem here was that, being fully aware of the role their own demands had played in producing those changes, Germany's enemies, including Wilson, would have every reason to suspect that they were not genuine—that the main aim was to get a softer peace, and that the power of the old elites had not really been broken. And that would not have been a foolish or entirely unwarranted assumption. A number of major figures in the German political establishment, such as the foreign secretary, Paul von Hintze, did take the view that a “revolution from above” might lead Wilson to conclude that Germany should be offered moderate peace terms; but Hintze was quite clear in his own mind that the goal was merely to create a “democratic façade.”²⁵ Other prominent figures were thinking along similar lines. The politically active Hamburg shipping magnate Albert Ballin, for example, told the Kaiser (in Schwabe's words) that “if Germany accommodated the President with a clever and rapid ‘modernization’—what Ballin meant by this was a democratization—then Germany could hope, with Wilson's help, for a peace settlement which would guarantee the economic equality and territorial integrity of Germany.”²⁶

Wilson could thus legitimately wonder whether the German revolution was for real. Given what his policy had been, any changes that had ostensibly taken place in Germany were inherently suspect; they might well have been designed mainly for the purpose of getting better peace terms. Even in June 1919 he was still not sure whether “the change in government and the governmental method in Germany” was “genuine and permanent.”²⁷ It was largely for that reason that Germany could not just be welcomed into the community of

²³ Lansing to the German Government, October 23, 1918, *ibid.*, pp. 284-85.

²⁴ Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson*, esp. p. 31. This point is important because not every scholar has recognized how important a role Wilson played in these matters. Hajo Holborn, for example, stated flatly that “it was not Wilson who undermined the monarchy in Germany.” Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany, 1840-1945* (New York: Knopf, 1969), p. 510.

²⁵ Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson*, pp. 31, 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁷ Meeting Between the President, the Commissioners, and the Technical Advisers of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace, June 3, 1919, in FRUS:PPC, vol. 11, p. 215. On this point, see also Daniel Larsen, “Abandoning

democratic nations as an equal but rather had to be put on a kind of probation. His attitude on a number of issues—on the question, for example, of Germany’s admission into the League of Nations, on disarmament, or on the fifteen-year occupation of the Rhineland—was rooted in that sort of thinking.

All this had momentous consequences. First, on the American side: given his doubts about whether Germany’s democratic conversion was genuine, Wilson did not feel any strong need to support the democratic forces within that country. Indeed, he did not even care much how the German people would react to the settlement the western powers were working out. “Whether Germany was satisfied” with the peace treaty or not, Schwabe writes (paraphrasing a May 1919 entry in the diary of Wilson’s advisor Colonel House), “was a matter of indifference to him.”²⁸ And this from a man who was supposedly concerned above all with building a stable international order!

The impact on Germany was even more important. Wilson, the Germans believed, had promised them that how harsh the peace would be depended on whether the imperial regime remained intact—and that was by no means an unwarranted assumption their part. And they had done what he had demanded. They had gotten rid of the old regime, and still the peace was based on the notion that their country was responsible for the war. They were thus bound to feel that they had been led down the garden path. So it is scarcely surprising that the publication of the draft treaty triggered what Peter Krüger, one of the great specialists on this period, called a “storm of indignation” in Germany. That reaction was quite widespread. “Not just for the rightists,” Krüger wrote, “was the Treaty of Versailles a fraud and a deception”; the general view now was that “Wilson was a swindler and hypocrite.” As no less a figure than Gustav Stresemann put it at the time, what Wilson had done was the “greatest swindle history has ever seen.” Even the Social Democrats agreed that Germany had been taken for a ride. But with Wilson so thoroughly discredited, everything associated with him (including the new republic, which he had played such an important role in bringing into being) was tainted; his self-righteousness probably made matters even worse. The Germans certainly felt that they had been duped by Wilson, and that reaction provided important support for the belief that the Treaty of Versailles lacked moral validity and thus that the Germans were morally justified in resisting it.²⁹

Historians commonly argue that the Versailles peace was unstable largely because Wilson had been forced to compromise on his principles because of resistance from the British and especially the French, and also because his position had been weakened by a major shift toward the right at home. But it is important to recognize that Wilson’s own political philosophy played a major—and, to my mind, far more important—role in shaping the course of events in the whole post-war period. For the Versailles peace was in large measure a Wilsonian peace. By that I obviously do not mean that it was in line with the idea of a peace of reconciliation, a peace among equals, or more generally with the whole approach laid out in the “peace without victory” speech of January 1917. But it *was* in line with the philosophy expressed both in his wartime speeches and in

Democracy: Woodrow Wilson and Promoting German Democracy, 1918–1919,” *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 3 (June 2013), pp. 497-98.

²⁸ Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson*, p. 343 and p. 517 n. 79. See also Larsen, “Abandoning Democracy.”

²⁹ Peter Krüger, “German Disappointment and Anti-Western Resentment, 1918-19,” in Hans-Jürgen Schröder, ed., *Confrontation and Cooperation: Germany and the United States in the Era of World War I, 1900-1924* (Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, 1993; also published in German the same year), p. 328. For the official position, which echoed many of these same themes, see the May 24, 1919, note sent to the allies by German foreign minister Brockdorff-Rantzau, and quoted in Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson*, pp. 344-45. For more on these matters, see Klaus Schwabe, “Anti-Americanism within the German Right, 1917-1933,” *Amerikastudien* 21 (1976), p. 94; Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson*, pp. 333-36 and 514-15 (which contains some new evidence not included in the original German edition); Ernst Fraenkel, “Das deutsche Wilsonbild,” *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien* 5 (1960); and Daniel Patrick Brown, *Woodrow Wilson and the Treaty of Versailles: The German Leftist Press’ Response* (Ventura: Ventura, CA: Golden West Historical Publications, 1978).

what he said, both in public and in private, throughout 1919—the idea that Germany had caused the war and that a just peace would thus be one that held that country accountable for the crimes it had committed. It is simply not plausible to assume that those utterances did not reflect Wilson’s real beliefs—that he just did not mean it when he made this kind of argument over and over again. Such a claim would be at odds with everything we know about this man.

Could such a philosophy have led to a stable international order? Wilson rejected the method of the Congress of Vienna.³⁰ The great issues of the war, he declared, could not be settled by “arrangement, or compromise, or adjustment of interests.”³¹ The peace needed to be based on absolute principles of justice, applied impartially. He would have no part in the “great game, now forever discredited, of the balance of power.”³² And yet was the method of the Congress of Vienna all that bad? Since international stability depends in large measure on the structure of power, wouldn’t it be foolish not to take balance of power considerations into account when building a new international order? The problem with basing the peace on principles of justice is that those principles are bound to be much more subjective and open to debate than Wilson liked to think. Since every country had its own notion of what would be just, political differences are natural, and compromise and negotiation are normal ways of dealing with them. And in that process power realities naturally get taken into account. To ignore them—to deliberately pay no attention to the balance of power—does not make for a more stable world. Quite the contrary: it can be a recipe for disaster.

No one doubts that Wilson wanted to do the right thing. His aim was to create a stable peace, and he believed that a peace based on principles of justice, as he understood them, would almost automatically make for a stable international order. But in international political life good intentions by themselves are just not good enough. Wilson’s ultimate aims might have been admirable—and who doesn’t believe that a lasting peace is a very desirable goal? But that does not mean we should ignore the basic point here—namely, that the instability of the whole postwar period had a good deal to do with the policy Wilson pursued in 1918 and 1919 and with the sort of thinking that policy was rooted in. And if it did, this would not have been the first time in the history of international politics that the path to hell was paved with good intentions—nor, unfortunately, would it be the last.

³⁰ Address to a Joint Session of Congress, December 4, 1917, in Baker and Dodd, *Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 5, p. 133.

³¹ Wilson speech in New York City, September 27, 1918, *ibid.*, p. 255.

³² Address to a Joint Session of Congress, February 11, 1918, in *ibid.*, pp. 182-83