The Rise of Democracy
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Published by Edinburgh University Press

Hobson, Christopher.
The Rise of Democracy: Revolution, War and Transformations in International Politics since 1776.

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Chapter 6

THE WILSONIAN REVOLUTION: WORLD WAR ONE

Democracy is more vindictive than Cabinets. The wars of peoples will be more terrible than those of kings.

Winston Churchill (1901) (quoted in Canfora 2006: 113)

The world must be made safe for democracy.

Woodrow Wilson (1917) (Fried 1965: 308)

INTRODUCTION

The consequences of the Great War were felt long after the guns fell silent on 11 November 1918. The course of the war and its outcome would decisively shape democracy’s emergence in international relations. When hostilities commenced there was certainly little thought about the war being waged for democracy, or any other great idea for that matter. The nature of the conflict would alter dramatically as a result of two events in 1917: the Russian Revolution and the entry of the United States into the war. The manner in which US President Woodrow Wilson defined the war in reference to democracy, followed by the defeat of the Central Powers, would prove pivotal in the normative and political rehabilitation of the concept. One of its most important outcomes was the completion of a process that had commenced with the American Revolution, as popular sovereignty supplanted monarchy as the dominant form of state legitimacy. This also confirmed democracy’s remarkable ideational transformation into a normatively acceptable, and for many a desirable, method of government. ‘After 1919 democratic values were increasingly accepted as a kind of ideological equivalent to the coin of the realm,’ James Mayall observes, ‘even if circumstances prevented it from being minted in most parts of
the world’ (Mayall 2000a: 64). Put differently, even if the descriptive component of democracy was heavily contested, and would remain so, the evaluative side of the concept had completed its remarkable shift from negative to positive.

The magnitude of the shift that had taken place in how democracy was perceived can be appreciated through comparing the Versailles peace conference with its predecessor, the Congress of Vienna. When international society was rebuilt in Vienna, it was explicitly constructed against the popular doctrines that had emerged from revolutionary France. Yet little more than a hundred years later, the statesmen in Versailles worked through the consequences of fighting and winning a war meant to make the world ‘safe for democracy’. Carl Schmitt observed the significance of this shift: ‘The development from 1815 until 1918 could be depicted as the development of a concept of legitimacy: from dynastic to democratic legitimacy. The democratic principle must today claim an importance analogous to that earlier possessed by the monarchical’ (Schmitt 1985: 30). This chapter will explore the role of the First World War in completing and confirming that transition.

THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

The advance of democracy has not been as pronounced as many people were inclined to suppose … There has been a tendency … to over-estimate the strength of democracy, or rather to under-estimate the power of the old forces that have held sway for so long.

Arthur Ponsonby (1915: 36)

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 proved to be the spark that would set Europe’s smouldering tensions alight. Within a month Europe broke down into a state of general war. Given how central democracy became in framing the conflict, it is notable, though not necessarily surprising, that it was absent from considerations in 1914. The speed with which events unfolded meant that no parties were clear in declaring their war aims at the outset. Even if they had been, any goals would have likely been traditional in nature, as both sides sought to make territorial gains and establish a favourable balance of power. Alliances were determined by these considerations, not regime type. This was reflected in the Entente, composed of Britain and France, the most liberal and
democratic powers in Europe, and Russia, the most despotic. This arrangement troubled many British, who felt they had much more in common with Germany. During the House of Commons debate over Britain’s entry into the war, one MP succinctly conveyed these doubts: ‘We must look upon this question as a whole, and remember that we are fighting for Russia when we are fighting against Germany, and that if Germany stands for tyrannical government, Russia stands for atrocious tyrannical government’ (Hansard 1914). Russia’s place in the Entente would remain a source of consternation and embarrassment for the British, effectively foreclosing any possibility of pursuing more liberal war aims. This reflects that when the conflict began it was one primarily between the so-called civilised powers, with their perceived similarities far outweighing their differences. Simply put, the war was not yet seen as a struggle between democracy and autocracy.

That democracy was not initially identified as a war aim may have also been related to popular control not having been extended to foreign affairs. In Great Britain, where democracy had advanced furthest, foreign policy was still removed from popular oversight. This reflected a longstanding belief that the people were too ignorant of the subtle intricacies of diplomacy, and further democratisation in this realm posed grave risks to state interests. In his influential study Modern Democracies, James Bryce summarises this influential argument:

Statesmen, political philosophers, and historians have been wont to regard the conduct of foreign relations as the reproach of democratic government. The management of international relations needs – so they insist – knowledge, consistency, and secrecy, whereas democracies are ignorant and inconsistent, being moreover obliged, by the law of their being, to discuss in public matters unfit to be disclosed. (Bryce 1921b: 402)

These warnings were strongly contested in Great Britain by the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), which included notable figures such as Norman Angell, John Hobson, Arthur Ponsonby, Bertrand Russell and Charles Trevelyan. The UDC were confident that the people would ‘rise to the occasion and prove themselves worthy of the charge entrusted to them’, just as they had ‘proved themselves in the successive stages of internal self-government’ (Ponsonby 1915: 110). The UDC also believed that extending democratic control to foreign affairs would
create the possibility for pacifying relations between states. While the UDC were somewhat marginalised because of their pacifism, they still helped to direct public opinion towards liberal war aims, and their arguments notably found a receptive audience in Woodrow Wilson.¹

The UDC was not alone in recognising that the war would have significant consequences for democracy’s fortunes. Writing in 1915, Albert Bushnell Hart, an American commentator, reflected on ‘the war and democracy’, observing that ‘democracy was considered the ripest flower of the highest civilization.... Today ... democracy seems, for the time being, submerged’ (Hart 1915: 1–2). Hart’s concerns were twofold: first, whether the conflict signalled ‘the end of European democracy’, and second, anticipating Wilson’s fears, whether America’s democracy could survive in a world dominated by non-democratic states. Hart’s conclusion was straightforward, but accurate: ‘The future trend from or towards democracy will depend on who is the victor’ (Hart 1915: 32). Speaking a month later, President Wilson was fully cognisant of the changes the war was bringing, but was less certain as to what they would mean:

This is a struggle which will determine the history of the world, I dare say, for more than a century to come. The world will never be the same again after this war is over. The change may be for weal or it may be for woe, but it will be fundamental and tremendous.
(Scott 1918: 164)

Wilson’s words would ring true, and as the war progressed the president developed a clearer vision of what this new world should look like. Fundamental to his programme was the principle of ‘government by the consent of the governed’, whereby ‘every people should be left free to determine its own polity’ (Fried 1965: 287). Two momentous events in 1917 would result in the war soon being framed in these terms, increasingly conveyed in a single phrase: ‘self-determination’.

THE RUSSIAN AND WILSONIAN REVOLUTIONS

The year 1917 would prove to be a definitive one not only for the conflict, but for the whole century. The event for which it is best known is the Russian Revolution, but there was a second ideational development that was also of great significance. This could be called ‘the Wilsonian
revolution’, a term that encapsulates the changes brought about through America entering the war in democracy’s name. In this regard, communism was not the only doctrine that emerged in 1917; this was also the year when democracy fully stepped onto the international stage.

In Russia longstanding socio-economic and political problems combined with the strain of a failing and costly war effort to push the tsarist regime to collapse. Shortly after demonstrations broke out in Petrograd, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated on 15 March 1917, taking with him the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty. One immediate consequence for the war was that it meant the battle lines between the Entente allies and the Central Powers could be redrawn. Great Britain, and to a much lesser degree France, had been constrained in their ability to advocate liberal war aims due to their alliance with tsarist Russia. Fighting alongside one of the most despotic states in Europe prevented the conflict being presented as between democracy and autocracy. Tomáš Masaryk would later recall that it was not until the downfall of Nicholas II that he felt assured that the aims of the Entente were ‘the liberation of small peoples and the strengthening of democracy’ (quoted in Cobban 1945: 11). The Entente could now present itself as fighting for democracy and self-determination, terms that were much more favourable to progressive world opinion and more importantly, to the US president.

The overthrow of the Russian tsar by a putatively democratic revolution was also fortuitous for Wilson, who was feeling increasingly compelled to enter the war on the side of the Entente. Shortly after the abdication of Nicholas II news reached Washington that three US merchant ships had been destroyed by German U-boats. Secretary of State Robert Lansing, stressed to Wilson that ‘to go to war solely because American ships had been sunk and Americans killed would cause debate … the sounder basis was the duty of this and every other democratic nation to suppress autocratic governments like the German’ (quoted in Mayer 1959: 167). Framing the conflict in this manner was necessary to win over a Congress and public that remained sceptical about the United States abandoning its isolationist policy. Lansing was clear in presenting the war as one between the opposed systems of democracy and autocracy: ‘The Entente Allies represent the principle of Democracy, and the Central Powers, the principle of Autocracy, and … it is for the welfare of mankind and for the establishment of peace in the world that Democracy should succeed’ (quoted in Ambrosius 1987:
It was in these terms that Wilson would announce America’s entry into the war two weeks later. Returning to the conceptual discussion in Chapter 2, here one can see how utilising the concept of democracy, which had become a politically valuable term in American political discourse, made a certain course of action – the United States entering the war – possible.

On 2 April 1917 President Wilson went before Congress to ask for a declaration of war against Germany. Unlike the other belligerents, Wilson was explicit about America’s reasons for fighting. The president announced:

> Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples, and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not the will of their people. (Fried 1965: 305)

Strongly echoing Kant, Wilson identified autocracy as the source of war. The conflict was not the fault of the German nation, but their rulers, who still practised the old kind of politics in which the ‘people were nowhere consulted … and wars were provoked and waged in the interest of dynasties or of ambitious men’ (Fried 1965: 306). In contrast, public opinion prevented ‘cunningly contrived plans of deception or aggression’ emerging from ‘self-governed nations’ (Fried 1965: 306). For Wilson, the form of government determined whether a state could be trusted to pursue war or peace, with democracies following the latter path and autocracies the former. Signalling the need for a democratic league of nations, Wilson continued:

> A steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants. It must be a league of honor, a partnership of opinion … Only free peoples can hold their purpose and their honor steady to a common end and prefer the interests of mankind to any narrow interest of their own. (Fried 1965: 306)

Here Wilson explicitly set out the opposition between democracy and autocracy that would subsequently frame the war.
Wilson imbued democracy with great significance by explicitly linking it to the war aims of the United States and its allies. He was clear that as long as an autocratic Germany remained, ‘there can be no assured security for the democratic Governments of the world’ (Fried 1965: 308). Instead of democracies, it was now autocracies that were identified as behaviourally and ontologically threatening to international society. And the danger they represented provided the primary reason for America’s entry into war. Wilson powerfully proclaimed that ‘the world must be made safe for democracy’ (Fried 1965: 308). These words have been so commonly repeated that much of their original force has been lost. Without too much exaggeration it can be said that in this speech, and specifically with these words, Wilson reshaped the very terms on which the Great War was fought. Only one month earlier the conflict remained a carryover of nineteenth-century balance-of-power politics, with no clear ideological distinction between the opposing sides. Moreover, the aims of the belligerents were certainly not to advance any high-minded ideals, as the disclosure of secret treaties by the Bolsheviks would soon reveal. Georges Clemenceau would later admit: ‘One must have the courage to say it, but we did not enter the war with a liberation program’ (quoted in Mayer 1959: 184). This was certainly not the case for the US president, however, who wanted to simultaneously liberate peoples from autocracy and the world from war. In Wilson’s mind these two goals were deeply interconnected: if the world could be made safe for democracy, democracy would make the world safe.

In Wilson’s speech the progressive traits of democracy were identified through their antithesis in autocracy, with the two working as counter-concepts. The former entailed ‘the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments’, whereas the latter ‘did what it pleased and told its people nothing’ (Fried 1965: 307, 309). Central to this conceptual opposition was a temporal comparison, whereby autocratic Germany was associated with the ‘old, unhappy days’ in contrast to progressive democracies, which pointed towards the future. This difference was reflected in the distinction drawn between ‘old’ and ‘new’ diplomacy. Wilson’s programmatic ‘Four Points’ speech in 1918 offered a particularly clear demonstration of this temporal opposition:

On the one hand stand the peoples of the world … opposed to them … [are] governments clothed with the strange trappings and
the primitive authority of an age that is altogether alien and hostile to our own. The Past and the Present are in deadly grapple. (Fried 1965: 329)

This conceptual pairing is an example of a ‘temporal asymmetric opposition’, whereby ‘the ones who define themselves as living in the present justify their actions against the ones that are trapped in the past’ (Feres 2006: 271). The counter-concepts of democracy and autocracy were also connected to the civilised–barbarian conceptual pair, with Germany’s autocratic government leading to its reclassification as being beyond the bounds of civilisation (Salter 2002: 82–3). The war effort thus gained a certain civilising dimension: temporally advanced democracies would give birth to a more progressive international society by destroying the backward autocratic regimes responsible for the war.

The manner in which Wilson employed democracy in this consequential speech is a powerful example of ideological innovation. By defining the purpose of the Great War – a conflict by then recognised as epochal in nature – primarily in terms of democracy, Wilson placed in the concept a value and importance that was unprecedented in modern international politics. At the time of the war, democracy’s position was far from assured, and proponents feared that the conflict would be a significant setback for its fortunes. With the US president stepping into the fray, democracy was no longer on the defensive. Wilson effectively transposed the positive evaluative dimension of democracy from the American domestic context into the international realm. Without qualification or hesitation, he announced popular sovereignty as a legitimate form of state and democracy as a desirable form of government. The US president effectively inverted the formula that held at Vienna: domestic principles of legitimacy remained of fundamental importance for international society, only now popular sovereignty and democracy were not a threat but necessary cornerstones for peace and stability.

When considering Wilson’s legacy there is a tendency to focus on his unfulfilled hopes of a new liberal international order, which means the profound consequences of his decision to fight in democracy’s name are overlooked. His bold pledge to make the world safe for democracy was heard across the globe, with the address being widely reported, printed and translated (Manela 2007: 36). Wilson’s
powerful defence and advocacy of democracy reinforced the normative shift that had occurred in the late nineteenth century and helped transfer it into the international realm. The manner in which the war was subsequently formulated in terms of the democracy–autocracy conceptual opposition reflected how successful he was as an ideological innovator. Quite simply, Wilson announced that democracy would henceforth be a pivotal concept in international society, one that would influence political discourse and shape standards of legitimacy.

THE BOLSHEVIK CHALLENGE

In his address to Congress Wilson made explicit reference to ‘the wonderful and heartening things’ taking place in Russia (Fried 1965: 306). Developments did not proceed as he had hoped, however. The ineffectual provisional government unwisely chose to honour Russia’s war commitments, and found itself increasingly challenged by the radical Bolshevik party, which mobilised around discontent over this matter. In November there was a second revolution, with the Bolshevik-dominated soviets overthrowing the provisional government. Considering that communism has been regularly portrayed as anti- or non-democratic, the role played by the concept of democracy in the Bolsheviks’ original programme is striking. This partly reflected the fact that while liberalism and democracy had been largely reconciled, democracy’s connotations of social equality meant it remained associated with socialism and communism. That Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks framed their actions partly in reference to democracy indicates that Wilson was not the only major source of contestation and revision in the concept during the war. Indeed, it could be argued that Wilson’s rhetoric was also a way of further laying claim to democracy, delimiting the concept in such a manner that it was clearly distinguished from these more radical doctrines.

One of the clearest examples of this counter-discourse of democracy was the Bolsheviks calling for a ‘democratic peace’. Given the subsequent monopolisation of the term by liberals, and its common association with the post-war plans of Wilson, it is a valuable corrective to consider how this idea was employed by the Bolsheviks. An underappreciated dimension of the contest between Wilson and Lenin for leadership of the ‘new diplomacy’ programme included opposing visions
of what ‘democratic peace’ entailed. The first of Lenin’s ‘April Theses’, which recalled his theory of imperialism, stated that ‘without over-throwing capital it is impossible to end the war by a truly democratic peace, a peace not imposed by violence’ (Lenin 1917b). A month later, the All-Russian Conference of Bolsheviks declared that if they were to take power, they would ‘immediately and openly’ offer all peoples ‘a democratic peace’ (quoted in Mayer 1959: 81). This was reaffirmed by Lenin after the overthrow of the provisional government, with the Bolsheviks calling on ‘all the belligerent peoples and their government to start immediate negotiations for a just, democratic peace’. Lenin explained that this meant ‘an immediate peace without annexations . . . and without indemnities’. He contrasted this policy to ‘the deception practised by governments which pay lip-service to peace and justice, but in fact wage annexationist and predatory wars’ (Lenin 1917a). What can be seen is that the Bolsheviks employed ‘democratic peace’ differently to Wilson’s conception and current liberal understandings, in which it entails the absence of war between liberal democratic states. For Lenin, ‘democratic’ was an epithet, describing the kind of peace, namely, a just, fair, equitable one based on self-determination of all peoples. As he explained in his April Theses, such a peace was not possible among capitalist states, regardless of whether they claimed to be democratic or not. Leon Trotsky was even more forthright during the Brest-Litovsk negotiations: ‘The Allied Governments have in no way shown, and, in view of their class character, they could not show, their readiness to accept a really democratic peace’ (Trotsky 1918). For the Bolsheviks, the key factor determining the possibility for peace was not democracy, but capitalism. Contra liberal arguments that capitalism promotes peace, for the Bolsheviks it was just the opposite.

For Lenin and the Bolsheviks capitalism not only prevented a ‘democratic peace’, it also inhibited democratic rule. Echoing Marx, Lenin regarded capitalist democracy as a necessary stage for society to pass through:

Democracy is of enormous importance to the working class in its struggle against the capitalists for its emancipation. But democracy is by no means a boundary not to be overstepped; it is only one of the stages on the road from feudalism to capitalism, and from capitalism to communism. (Lenin 1993)
As it stood, ‘bourgeois democracy’ was ‘always hemmed in by the narrow limits set by capitalist exploitation’ (Lenin 1993). The institutions of liberal democracy, notably the practice of elections, operated to ‘conceal the truth’, namely, that power relations remained unchanged, with the numerically superior working class continuing to be exploited at the hands of the much smaller group that held the means of production (Lenin 1919a). For the Bolsheviks the form of democracy for which Wilson sought to make the world safe was radically incomplete. They instead saw the events in Russia, and the larger war to which they were tied, as an opportunity to challenge and eventually overthrow the bourgeois order. The Great War had ‘stripped bourgeois democracy of its camouflage’ (Lenin 1919b), and the revolution in Russia offered hope that a new kind of democracy could emerge, one that would rule in the interests of the true majority, the proletariat. Recalling democracy’s past, Lenin noted that in different stages of history it had taken on different forms, and this would happen again, with ‘democracy for the rich [being replaced] by democracy for the poor’. The consequences of this would be ‘a gigantic, world historic extension of democracy, its transformation from falsehood into truth’ (Lenin 1919a). This process would eventually entail transcending democracy itself: ‘The more complete the democracy, the nearer the moment when it becomes unnecessary’ (Lenin 1993). From this perspective, democracy was not an end in and of itself, but a means towards the more fundamental goal of human emancipation.

It is important not to overstate the role of democracy in the thought and discourse of the Bolsheviks. Calls for a democratic peace were soon buried under the oppressive conditions imposed by the Germans at Brest-Litovsk, and while Lenin’s stature would later grow, at that time it was dwarfed by the figure of Wilson (Manela 2007: 10). Of greater consequence was the introduction of the term ‘self-determination’ by Russia’s provisional government at the behest of the Bolsheviks. A statement issued on 9 April 1917 declared ‘that the purpose of free Russia [was] not domination over other peoples, nor spoliation of their national possessions, nor the violent occupation of foreign territories, but the establishment of a permanent peace on the basis of the self-determination of peoples’ (quoted in Mayer 1959: 75). This was the first time self-determination was explicitly identified as a war aim by any of the major belligerents. While the programme of self-determination would soon become strongly identified with Wilson, it is important to
recall that it first emerged from revolutionary Russia. When employed by the Bolsheviks it carried a very specific meaning related to their revolutionary project of overthrowing capitalism (Armstrong 1993: 129–30; Manela 2007: 37, 42). As will be seen, the idea was wrestled away by Wilson, who emptied it of the Bolsheviks’ radical intent. In this regard, a remarkable parallel exists with the French revolutionary attempt to overthrow international society, which boomeranged and ultimately reinforced the very anarchical order they sought to transcend. Self-determination was introduced by the Bolsheviks as part of their goal of destroying the capitalist international order, but was subsequently coopted and transformed in such a manner that again the anarchical nature of international politics was preserved, as was the capitalist system.

THE ENDS OF WAR AND THE END OF WAR

The principle of self-determination was soon taken up by the Entente allies, becoming central to their programme in the final year of the war. First to adopt the term was not President Wilson, but the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, under increasing domestic pressure to announce progressive war aims. The rhetoric that emerged from the Brest-Litovsk negotiations pushed him towards a clear statement on the matter (Rothwell 1971: 145–53). On 5 January 1917 he set out the British war aims in a carefully drafted speech. While denying that war was being waged to change Germany’s constitution, Lloyd George mirrored Wilson’s understanding of the relationship between domestic regime type and international behaviour, identifying Germany’s ‘military, autocratic constitution [as] a dangerous anachronism in the twentieth century’ (Lloyd George 1918). Lloyd George also employed the same democracy–autocracy asymmetrical conceptual pairing: ‘The adoption of a really democratic constitution by Germany would be the most convincing evidence that in her the old spirit of military domination had indeed died in this war’ (Lloyd George 1918). Democracy was associated with peaceful behaviour; in contrast, autocracy was militaristic, dangerous, and ill fitting to the modern world. To reinforce this dichotomous framing, the British prime minister emphasised that democracy was a common attribute joining the allies together (Lloyd George 1918). In concluding, one of the three conditions Lloyd George identified as necessary for a ‘just and lasting peace’ was that ‘a territorial
settlement must be secured, based on the right of self-determination or the consent of the governed’ (Lloyd George 1918). Not for the first time in the speech Lloyd George equated ‘self-determination’ with ‘consent of the governed’. Erez Manela describes this as a ‘promiscuous rhetorical flourish’, whereby the considerable differences between ‘the radical anti-imperialist agenda suggested by the former and the liberal reformism implied in the latter’ were papered over (Manela 2007: 39). When identifying self-determination as a central war aim of the allies, Lloyd George carefully redescribed it in a way to remove any traces of its socialist origins. The success of this ideological innovation was evidenced in Wilson’s subsequent shift from talking of the ‘consent of the governed’ to using ‘self-determination’, an important change that became more pronounced through 1918 and 1919.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed on 3 March 1918, allowing Soviet Russia to exit from the war, albeit at a very high cost as the Germans imposed especially punitive conditions. Kaiser Wilhelm II hailed the treaty as one of the ‘great successes of world history’, but for the US president it exposed the true nature of the German regime and made clear that peace could only be assured with its destruction (Link 1979: 85). Discussing the treaty, Wilson emphasised the fundamental incompatibility of Germany’s aims with those of the allies: ‘In such a program our ideals, the ideals of justice and humanity and liberty, the principle of the free self-determination of nations upon which all the modern world insists, can play no part’ (Fried 1965: 325). In accepting what he saw as a basic contradiction between these two world-views, Wilson concluded that ‘there is, therefore, but one response possible from us: Force, Force to the utmost, Force without stint or limit’ (Fried 1965: 325). What had been implicit in Wilson’s thinking was now brought to its logical conclusion: to make the world safe for democracy, ‘the destruction of every arbitrary power’ that threatened peace was necessary (Fried 1965: 329). It was at this time that Wilson’s programme for a new international order began to crystallise, one that included the end of autocratic government. He summarised his vision as follows: ‘What we seek is the reign of law, based upon the consent of the governed and sustained by the organized opinion of mankind’ (Fried 1965: 330).

The conflict was increasingly defined in dichotomous terms: democracy and autocracy, pacifism and militarism, progressiveness and backwardness, self-determination and conquest. Jan Smuts, one of the
Lars Oppenheim, the renowned international jurist, judged it an ‘epoch making’ conflict: ‘Whatever may be the war aims of the belligerents, at bottom this World War is a fight between the ideal of democracy and constitutional government on the one hand, and autocratic government and militarism on the other’ (Oppenheim 1919: 11). In the words of an American commentator, the war was ‘a life-and-death struggle’ between ‘two antagonizing principles or philosophies of government, democracy and autocracy’ (Luckey 1920: 111–12). Lloyd George concurred: ‘The whole future of democracy … all over the world is involved. It is a final test between military autocracy and political liberty’ (Bryce 1917: 199). This is only a sample of the explosion of speeches, pamphlets and articles from 1917–18 that promoted the democracy–autocracy framing of the conflict.

Conceiving of the war as being between two opposed systems was by no means limited to the Allied powers. In an attempt to counteract Wilson’s rhetoric, leading German thinkers presented a series of lectures to the Prussian Diet, which were soon printed under the title of Die Deutsche Freiheit (‘The German Freedom’). Notably, they did not shy away from the dichotomous framing promoted by Wilson, with Germany’s opponents being labelled as ‘democracies’ and collectively the ‘democratic world’, only they regarded such a designation as negative (Christophersen 1966: 222). This worldview was echoed by Kaiser Wilhelm II. In March 1918, he stated in belligerent fashion that ‘if a British parliamentarian comes to sue for peace, he must first kneel before the imperial standard, for this is a victory of monarchy over democracy’ (quoted in Fischer 1967: 618). Speaking at a banquet to celebrate thirty years ruling Germany in July 1918, Wilhelm’s opinion would mirror that of his counterparts in America and Britain: ‘This war is a struggle between two world philosophies’ (quoted in Fischer 1967: 618). With the war being framed in such momentous terms by both sides, the subsequent defeat of Germany also took on the greater
meaning of the victory of democracy over autocracy. Emblematic of this was Guglielmo Ferrero’s announcement in 1919 that, ‘the world war has now annihilated one of the principles of authority which ruled Europe, namely Divine Right ... No other principle remains, therefore, but that of the Will of the People expressed by means of representative institutions’ (Ferrero 1919: 270).

Central to Wilson’s emerging vision of a new international order was that states should be based on the consent of the people. In 1918 he increasingly used the term ‘self-determination’ to express this long-held belief. Speaking at a joint session of Congress of 11 February 1918, the president proclaimed, ‘Self-determination is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their own peril’ (Scott 1918: 368). For Wilson self-determination entailed more than just popular sovereignty: it also naturally extended to democratic government. James Mayall expresses Wilson’s thinking well: ‘For what other purpose would a people claim the right to self-determination if not to rule themselves?’ (Mayall 1990: 44). A strong confidence in the inherent superiority of democracy, combined with his faith in public opinion, led Wilson to the belief that self-determination would necessarily result in democratic government, as had happened in the United States. Indeed, for Wilson, ‘self-government must be a continuing process and must therefore be synonymous with the democratic form of government’ (quoted in Pomerance 1976: 17; original emphasis; see also Cobban 1945: 20). In Wilson’s worldview, popular sovereignty and democratic government – *forma imperii* and *forma regiminis* – were effectively merged.

The way the principle of self-determination developed during the Great War meant it was not simply used as an equivalent to popular sovereignty; rather, it entailed a specific understanding and elaboration of it. Wilson firmly believed in the sentiment earlier expressed by John Stuart Mill: ‘One hardly knows what any division of the human race should be free to do, if not to determine, with which of the various collective bodies of human beings they choose to associate themselves’ (John Stuart Mill 1991: 428). It begged the question, though, of how the boundaries between these different groups would be determined. The answer given was the one that had emerged from the French Revolution: the nation. Thus, self-determination became *national* self-determination. Based on the American experience, Wilson mirrored the earlier thought of Abbé de Sieyès in
understanding the nation in civic, political terms. Yet this thinking was a poor fit for comprehending the situation in Europe. As Michla Pomerance observes, ‘the “self” in Wilson’s “self-government” was not necessarily the “nation” of continental Europe’ (Pomerance 1976: 17). This became increasingly apparent as Wilson’s words were transposed into the complicated realities of eastern Europe, and the ‘self’ transmogrified from a civic to an ethic conception of community (Lynch 2002). It is in this sense that Alfred Cobban and Anthony Whelan talk of self-determination as the combination of democracy and nationalism, in which the latter defines the boundaries of the former (Cobban 1945; A. Whelan 1994).

Another important element of Wilson’s vision for a new liberal order was the creation of some kind of international organisation to prevent a similar catastrophe from reoccurring. Wilson did not offer too much detail about what it would look like, but his emphasis on the pacifying effects of public opinion and the untrustworthy, militaristic nature of autocracies suggested that any such organisation should be composed of democratic states. This was apparent in the final of his Four Points, which called for ‘the establishment of an organization of peace which shall make it certain that the combined power of free nations will check every invasion of right’ (Fried 1965: 330). If this organisation was to promote and preserve peace, it could not ‘rely upon the word of outlaws’ (Fried 1965: 334). Many of the proposed plans for an international organisation were much more forthright in calling for exclusively democratic membership, as Wilson remained determined that its constitution should be determined as part of the peace settlement. The British League of Nations Union advocated a ‘World League of Free Peoples for the securing of international justice, mutual defence, and permanent peace’, while their French counterparts proposed that membership ‘should be granted only to nations whose sincerity is guaranteed by democratic institutions’ (Phelps 1919: 49, 51). For such an organisation to achieve its aims, it must be composed of nations

*able to enter into valid covenants, especially in matters of war and peace, a possibility conditioned on [their] possessing a modicum of democratic institutions which will make certain that the will of the people prevails and that the government is adequately controlled. (Phelps 1919: 53)*
Meanwhile, H. G. Wells’s prominent book *In the Fourth Year* called for a ‘League of Free Nations’, proposing that for it to ‘signify anything more than a rhetorical flourish, then certain consequences follow’ (Wells 1918: 27). He explained:

If they [Germany] or any other peoples wish to take part in a permanent League of Free Nations it is only reasonable to insist that so far as their representatives on the council go they must be duly elected under conditions that are by the standards of the general league satisfactorily democratic. (Wells 1918: 28)

John Dewey went even further, arguing that it was not just members of the League that needed to be democratic. The conception of international legitimacy he proposed was far-reaching:

The United States, at least, has been largely in the war precisely because it realized that the dividing line between domestic institutions and foreign policies has become wholly artificial. It was precisely the autocratic domestic institutions of Germany which drew us into … war … The logic of the situation demands such friendly oversight of the affairs of other states from which worldwide conflagration might spring … (Phelps 1919: 274–5)

Dewey’s logic mirrored that of Prince Metternich and the Holy Alliance in arguing that the domestic constitution of states was directly of concern for all members of international society. The key difference is that the threat had been reversed: democracies were regarded as capable of maintaining peace, whereas autocracies were seen as inherently dangerous.

If this new organisation was to be restricted to democracies, there would need to be a way of identifying which states were eligible for membership. Viscount Grey was clear that the ‘League of Nations must not be a sham … [and] that means that you must have every government in the League of Nations representing a free people’ (Phelps 1919: 90). For this to occur it was necessary to be able to ‘define democracy – real democracy, and not sham democracy’ (Phelps 1919: 90). Grey’s response to this dilemma was that people are capable of ‘knowing a democracy when they see it’ (Phelps 1919: 90). This position was hardly satisfying, though it reflected the increasing descriptive variability
in the concept, an emergent characteristic identified in the previous chapter. As the positive normative connotations surrounding democracy became more widespread, its value for political actors increased, but with this increased usage what exactly democracy meant became more contested and unclear. This situation was unhappily observed in a book entitled *The Meaning of Democracy*, where its author complained that ‘it really does not help us much to talk of “making the world safe for democracy,” when what A calls democracy, B calls plutocracy, and what C calls democracy, D calls anarchy, Bolshevism, and the end of all things’ (I. Brown 1920). The American edition of *The Economist* posed a similar question: ‘And what is a “democratic peace,” pray? Why democratic? Is this a democratic war, and therefore there must be democratic peace? Why not plain “peace”? . . . It is not a “democratic peace” but an “American peace” that we want’ (Phelps 1919: 199). For Wilson these were the one and the same thing.

The US president would soon find out what kind of peace could be constructed. On 11 November 1918 the Central Powers offered their surrender on the basis of his Fourteen Points. Now the battles would move from the trenches to the Palace of Versailles, where statesmen would try to establish a new international order. Given that democracy had become so central to the conflict, it was now to be seen how significant a role it would play in the post-war settlement.

DEMOCRACY AT VERSAILLES:
VISION, REALITY, COMPROMISE

Contrary to the wishes of many in Europe and America, President Wilson was determined to go to France for the peace negotiations. Reflecting his Burkean sensibilities, Wilson wanted progressive and controlled change, rather than revolution (Ambrosius 1987: 1). Setting sail for Paris, he expressed this underappreciated pragmatic dimension to his idealism:

The conservatives do not realize ... what forces are loose in the world at the present time. Liberalism is the only thing that can save civilization from chaos – from a flood of ultra-radicalism that will swamp the world ... Liberalism must be more liberal than ever before, it must even be radical, if civilization is to escape the typhoon. (Quoted in Gardner 1993: 264)
This suggests a more nuanced position than the naive optimism commonly associated with Wilson. The international order he envisaged would, as is well known, never come to fruition. This is not so surprising given how untenable the situation was. As Ian Clark suggests, ‘this was not a settlement in which the peacemakers carelessly let the opportunity for consensus-building slip through their fingers: the basic problem of Versailles was that no such consensus could possibly be found’ (Clark 2005: 109–10). There were multiple reasons for this, an important one being the changed conditions under which peacemakers were now operating. The options open to statesmen during the conference were curtailed by the increasingly prominent role played by public opinion. The framing of the war as one of just, righteous democracies fighting against barbaric, autocratic powers would now limit the possibilities for compromise, as publics called for the evil warmongers to be punished (Knock 1998: 117).

The focus here is primarily the drafting of the League of Nations covenant. Debates over the nature of this new organisation, specifically in regard to its membership, represent the most important reflections on democracy and international legitimacy at Versailles. They offer far more fertile soil to till than discussions among the Council of Four, which are light on principles and heavy on specificities. And given the previously widespread calls for an exclusively democratic league it is worthwhile exploring to what extent this hope was actualised.

**The League of Nations: Homogeneous or Heterogeneous?**

The old institutions on which militarism and autocracy flourished lie crumbled in the dust; a great wave of advanced democracy is sweeping blindly over Europe … The psychological and moral conditions are ripe for a great change. The moment has come for one of the great creative acts of history.

Jan Smuts (1918) (quoted in Miller 1928b: 47)

In preparation for the conference, interested parties made plans for the League of Nations, with the US and British drafts proving the most consequential. Wilson finally outlined his ideas in more detail, and in his first Paris draft he proposed the following article in regard to membership in the new organisation: ‘Any power not a party to this Covenant, whose government is based upon the principle of popular
self-government, may apply to the Body of Delegates for leave to become a party’ (quoted in Miller 1928b: 85–6). In contrast, the British draft prepared by Lord Robert Cecil was much more cautious, suggesting that ‘definitely untrustworthy and hostile States should be excluded. Otherwise, it is desirable not to be too rigid in scrutinising qualifications’ (quoted in Miller 1928b: 61). This less rigorous approach reflected the British preference for a more inclusive organisation (Hinsley 1973: 121). As early as July 1918, Cecil expressed his concerns to Colonel Edward House:

I do believe that we might devise an efficient sanction for the commands of a League of peace. One great danger, however, I see in its way: the French suggest that it should be confined to democratically governed nations – at least so I understand them. I cannot help feeling that this is a most dangerous path for us to travel … Prussian militarism is indeed a portentous evil, but if, misled by our fear of it, we try to impose on all the nations of the world a form of government which has been indeed admirably successful in America and this country, but it is not necessarily suited for all others, I am convinced that we shall plant the seeds of very serious international trouble. (Quoted in Schwarzenberger 1936: 28)

Cecil presented here a strong preference for a more pluralist international order. His misgivings were sufficient that in the later Cecil–Miller draft, a combination of British and American proposals, the reference to ‘popular self-government’ found in Wilson’s text had been removed (Miller 1928b: 139–40). It remained, however, in all of Wilson’s subsequent drafts, reflecting his strong attachment to the principle (Miller 1928b: 151).

The conference finally opened on 18 January 1919 and with the British pragmatically siding with Wilson’s demand that the League be at the fore of issues dealt with, the Commission on the League of Nations was appointed at the second plenary session on 25 January. Wilson spoke of the centrality of the League to the new international order being founded, as well as the more democratic conditions under which they were now operating: ‘I may say without straining the point that we are not representatives of governments, but representatives of peoples. It will not suffice to satisfy governmental circles anywhere. It is necessary that we should satisfy the opinion of mankind’ (Miller 1928b:
Despite this need to ‘satisfy the opinion of mankind’ the drafting of the covenant was open only to Allied and Associated powers. The defeated Central Powers were excluded, and even neutral nations were not formally included; a problematic situation given the aspirations that the League would become the institutional representation of international society.

The Commission on the League of Nations was personally chaired by Wilson, who used his position to steer the discussion. Commencing with a working draft that had been tabled by the British and the Americans, a final version was produced with remarkable speed, taking just thirteen meetings across February and March. In these sessions the commission made their way through each article in the working draft. At the third meeting on 5 February 1919, the article that dealt with the League’s membership was debated for the first time. As Wilson had decided to introduce the Hurst–Miller text rather than his own, no reference to self-government was initially included. This led Wilson to open the discussion by proposing that the article be amended along the lines of his own draft: ‘Only self-governing States shall be admitted to membership in the League; Colonies enjoying self-government privileges may be admitted’ (Miller 1928a: 164). After two years of loudly proclaiming this principle, Wilson and his fellow statesmen were now faced with the question of what exactly it meant. Cecil, representing the British, was the first to allude to the problem of limiting membership to self-governing states, observing that “self-government” is a word which is hard to define, and it is hard to judge a country by this standard. For example, on paper the Reichstag was a democratic institution.’ He concluded that ‘the bare use of the word “self-governing” is therefore unfortunate’, and would prefer a system whereby a majority of members could impose specific conditions on different states seeking admission (Miller 1928a: 164–5). To this Wilson immediately replied:

I have spent twenty years of my life lecturing on self-governing states, and trying all the time to define one. Now whereas I haven’t been able to arrive at a definition, I have come to the point where I recognize one when I see it. For example, regardless of how it appeared on paper, no one would have looked at the German government before the war, and said that the nation was self-governing. (Miller 1928a: 165)
Given the centrality of democracy to Wilson’s thought and political programme, this represents a truly remarkable admission.

Wilson’s troubles with definitively defining democracy indicated that the great difficulty in seeking to delimit membership to democratic states was determining which states qualified. The growing contestation and variability in the concept of democracy made it highly problematic to apply in practice. Nonetheless, Wilson was resolute that it must be included, regardless of any potential difficulties that might arise in determining which states were democratic and thus eligible for membership. He explained:

We have said that this war was carried on for a vindication of democracy. The statement did not create the impulse but it brought it to consciousness. So soon as it was stated that the war was being waged to make the world safe for democracy, a new spirit came into the world…. They knew that governments derived their just powers from the consent of the governed. I should like to point out that nowhere else in the draft is there any recognition of the principle of democracy. If we are ready to fight for this, we should be ready to write it into the covenant. (Miller 1928a: 165)

Wilson displayed here a keen awareness of the significance of fighting in the name of democracy. The way the conflict had been framed now placed limits on what the statesmen were able to do. This is an example of the theoretical point made in Chapter 2, whereby language can operate to both enable and restrict action. Having been proclaimed so loudly, the principle of democracy needed to be included – in one form or another – in the post-war settlement.

One of the French representatives, Léon Bourgeois, responded to Wilson: ‘What of countries which do not enjoy full self-government? The definition is difficult…. Whether the form of the government is republican or monarchical makes no difference. The question ought to be, is this Government responsible to the people?’ (Miller 1928a: 166). Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, the Italian representative, indicated similar concerns:

This is an exceedingly hard matter to define. You can’t say ‘parliamentary’ very well, because that is not the true test, and we may want some nations in the League whose government would
not come within this class. You can’t say ‘free government’ (‘pays libres’) because that doesn’t take into consideration its external relations. (Miller 1928a: 166)

Wilson remained unconvinced by these interventions, falling back on his previous argument: ‘While “self-government” is not susceptible of definition, neither is “free”. But we all know when a government is properly described by one of these phrases’ (Miller 1928a: 167). The discussion was inconclusive, resulting in Wilson’s proposal being provisionally accepted, with the exact wording to be decided later.

In the ninth meeting, held on 13 February, the commission began a second reading of the covenant draft, after it had been amended by the drafting committee. In regard to the article covering membership, there was a change in the wording, with ‘free countries’ replacing ‘self-governing’. It now read that membership ‘shall be limited to free countries, including Dominions and Colonies’ (Miller 1928b: 309). This provoked a discussion arising from ‘pays libres’ – the French translation of ‘free countries’ – carrying different, and more precise, connotations than in English. The French delegate Ferdinand Larnaude explained that ‘pays libres’ ‘was employed by writers on constitutional law to describe a State whose institutions were democratic or liberal’, and that it ‘was used in regard to the internal constitution of the State’ (Miller 1928b: 303). This opinion was echoed by Orlando, who noted that in Italian law ‘pays libres’ ‘was used in the same sense – its meaning being clear, and understood to refer to the internal freedom of States’ (Miller 1928b: 303). The French and Italian delegates did not share Wilson’s habit of merging popular sovereignty and democratic government. Rather, they saw the two notions as distinct, and believed that only popular sovereignty should be considered in determining league membership. This complication resulted in the English text being changed to the awkward ‘fully self-governing countries’, which was provisionally translated into French as ‘pays de self-government total’ (Miller 1928a: 228).

In the final version of the Covenant of the League of Nations the article dealing with membership was placed at the front of the document. The wording was: ‘Any fully self-governing State, Dominion or Colony not named in the Annex may become a Member of the League’, with the corresponding French reading: ‘Tout État, Dominion ou Colonie qui se gouverne librement’ (Miller 1928b: 720–1). Wilson’s interpretation
of ‘self-governing’ pointed towards a League of Nations made up of democracies in both senses: *forma imperii* and *forma regiminis*, but the above discussion suggests this is not how his European counterparts understood ‘fully self-governing’ or states *qui se gouverne librement* (which translates directly as a state ‘which governs itself freely’). In the discussion that led to ‘*pays libres*’ being removed, the French and Italian representatives made it clear that this term was inappropriate because it was about the domestic form of government, which they regarded as beyond the remit of the league. There is no evidence from the minutes of the meetings that ‘fully self-governing’ was thought to specifically incorporate democratic government, with the implication being that it was understood in a more limited sense in reference to external sovereignty. As noted, it was contrasted against the French term ‘*pays libres*’.

The lack of clarity over what ‘fully self-governing’ actually meant (this was never finally determined) reflected a deeper ambiguity surrounding democracy’s place in the covenant. While democratic government was not considered a *de jure* condition of membership, Wilson hoped that it would be a *de facto* requirement. His Burkean belief that the League would develop organically suggests that he may have expected ‘fully self-governing’ to take on a more extensive meaning over time. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on public opinion by both Wilson and Cecil, the two most influential proponents of the League, strongly implies that some degree of democratic government – understood in terms of representative institutions that mediated and responded to public opinion – was regarded as necessary for the new organisation to fulfil its peace-bringing function. Cecil conceded that ‘what we rely upon is public opinion … and if we are wrong about it, then the whole thing is wrong’ (quoted in Sharp 1991: 62). In this sense, it is best to see democracy operating in the covenant as a regulating, but not binding, ideal. While falling short of the ‘homogeneous universality’ that Wilson favoured, the inclusion of ‘freely self-governing’ in defining membership indicated that the League would not be reconciled to a condition of ‘heterogeneous universality’, as it entailed something more than open membership. In essence, the result was a diluted form of homogeneity. ‘Fully self-governing’ was, in a certain sense, a successor to the notion of ‘civilised’. While the classical ‘standard of civilisation’ continued to operate following the end of the First World War, the distinction between a ‘civilised’ Europe and a ‘barbaric’ other had started to unravel (Salter 2002: 82–3). To be considered a full member
of international society – indicated through membership in its institutional expression, the League of Nations – a state now needed to be ‘fully self-governing’.

The lack of clarity regarding league membership reflected unresolved tensions between contending visions for the post-war order. The covenant could never simply be a Wilsonian statement; it was unavoidably a product of diplomatic bargaining. In concluding this discussion, it is helpful to consider how Wilson justified the covenant and advocated for its ratification after returning to the United States, as it reinforces the suggestion that in Wilson’s mind ‘fully self-governing’ did entail both popular sovereignty and democratic rule:

Only the free peoples of the world can join the League of Nations. No nation is admitted to the League of Nations that cannot show that it has the institutions which we call free. No autocratic government can come into its membership, no government which is not controlled by the will and vote of its people. (Foley 1923: 64–5)

Wilson’s interpretation went much further than the actual text suggested. Echoing the dichotomous logic of his speeches of 1917–18, there was a clear inference that for the League to fulfil its function of maintaining peace, autocratic governments must be excluded. According to Wilson, ‘the League of Nations sends autocratic governments to Coventry’ (Foley 1923: 128–9). Autocratic states were dangerous because of what they did, which was fundamentally a result of what they were. A League of Nations based on democratic states offered the best chance of safety against autocracies as well as a more peaceful international order. In this sense, for Wilson the League had both protective and developmental functions: ‘it is not only a union of free peoples to guarantee civilization; it is something more than that. It is a League of Nations to advance civilization’ (Foley 1923: 67).

There was a clear discrepancy between Wilson’s understanding of the covenant and how it was interpreted by other signatories, who regarded the membership criteria as far less demanding, entailing popular sovereignty but not democratic government. Indeed, of the thirty original members, less than half were democracies, a figure which still represented a highpoint in the democratic makeup of the organisation (T. Smith 1994). Nonetheless, even if there was a certain ambiguity over whether the term ‘fully self-governing’ extended to democratic
institutions, it clearly entailed popular sovereignty. In itself, this was
a fundamental development in international society, representing the
final step in it supplanting monarchical sovereignty. Wilson announced
this in sensational terms: ‘It is the most remarkable document, I
venture to say, in human history, because in it is recorded a complete
reversal of the processes of government which had gone on throughout
practically the whole history of mankind’ (Foley 1923: 52–3). Minus
the hyperbole, his judgement was largely correct: popular sovereignty
had arrived. It would take another world war and the collapse of the
European empires to globalise this principle, but at Versailles popular
sovereignty was firmly embedded within international society.

Expectation and Reality: Self-determination and the Versailles Settlement

The challenges of incorporating popular sovereignty and democracy
into this new international order were also evident when statesmen
had to reach an agreement on the territorial settlement. The strong
emphasis placed on self-determination in the final stages of the war
meant that it could not be easily avoided or forgotten about after-
wards, as some parties might have preferred. The central place of
self-determination in the war aims of the Allies, thrust there by Lloyd
George and Wilson, created an ‘imposing standard’ against which the
peace settlement would be judged (Bain 2003: 90). In attempting to
include self-determination in the settlement they faced grave, perhaps
insurmountable difficulties, which shaped the manner in which it was
upheld.

The idea of self-determination may have seemed like an intuitively
good one (at least to Wilson), but implementing this principle was
incredibly difficult. As Sir Ivor Jennings famously observed, ‘on the
surface, it [the doctrine of self-determination] seemed reasonable: let
the people decide. It was in fact ridiculous, because the people cannot
decide until someone decides who are the people’ (Jennings 1956:
55–6). Equally memorable were Robert Lansing’s remarks, whose
legalistic mind worried about the practical problems that came with
this high-minded ideal:

When the President talks of ‘self-determination’ what unit has
he in mind? Does he mean a race, a territorial area or a com-
munity? Without a definite unit which is practical, application of
this principle is dangerous to peace and stability ... The phrase is simply loaded with dynamite. It will raise hopes which can never be realized. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives ... What a calamity the phrase was ever uttered! What misery it will cause! (Quoted in Pomerance 1976: 10)

But the phrase had been uttered, repeatedly in fact, and therefore it needed to be dealt with as part of the settlement. Furthermore, Wilson remained committed to the principle, even if this was soon tempered by his discovery of the realities of eastern Europe. Indeed, his lack of knowledge of the area led to a number of mistakes that seriously undermined the application of the principle. As Wilson later admitted, ‘when I gave utterance to those words [that all nations had a right to self-determination], I said them without a knowledge that nationalities existed, which are coming to us day after day’ (quoted in Heater 1994: 8).

The difficulties with the principle were manifold: how the ‘self’ in ‘self-determination’ could be established, how competing claims between different ‘selves’ could be reconciled, and how this all could be done in a manner consonant with the interests of the great powers and international society more generally. In addition to these significant practical challenges, few of the key participants at Versailles were supportive of Wilson’s agenda. In particular, France and Italy pursued traditional strategies in which self-determination was disregarded, except where it worked in their favour. Moreover, by the time he had reached France, Wilson’s bargaining power had diminished considerably, thereby limiting his ability to make self-determination a deciding factor when resolving many of the awkward territorial issues the peacemakers had to deal with. While Wilson did stand firm in specific instances, in many cases he ceded ground, hoping that the League of Nations would be able to address these shortcomings in the future (Foley 1923: 60; Lynch 2002: 426). This was cold comfort for those nationalities that did not benefit from the implementation of the principle in 1919, however.

Self-determination was certainly honoured more in the breach at Versailles, but it is misleading to focus solely on instances where it was not implemented, or done so imperfectly. In itself, that self-determination was incorporated into the treaty at all was a significant, if not revolutionary, change. As Rodney Bruce Hall rightly observes,
‘the post-First World War map of Europe was the most substantial institutionalization of the new, system-legitimating principle of national self-determination achievable at that time, and is a monument to the strength of the new principle’ (R. B. Hall 1999: 250). The way it was incorporated at Versailles, self-determination entailed a specific reading of popular sovereignty: the people – the nation – were understood primarily in cultural, ethnic terms. Furthermore, it did not carry the double-barrelled meaning – popular sovereignty and democratic institutions – that Wilson ascribed to it. While democracy had emerged as a legitimate form of constitution, it was overshadowed by the prior and more widely accepted principle of popular sovereignty, activated in the form of national self-determination. The result was that after 1918, ‘the dominant political form was the nation-state’ (Mayall 1990: 45).

While self-determination was meant to be the guiding principle for shaping what would follow in the wake of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, it was much less clear whether it should also apply beyond Europe. The manner in which the war had been framed, combined with Wilson’s strongly held beliefs, worked against a policy of outright annexation, as much as this may have frustrated people like Australian prime minister Billy Hughes. The situation was finessed and resolved through the mandates system, a compromise solution first proposed in a highly influential paper by Jan Smuts. While believing that self-determination should be applied to eastern Europe, Smuts regarded it as completely inappropriate for dealing with Germany’s colonies. He explained that ‘the German colonies in the Pacific and Africa are inhabited by barbarians, who not only cannot possibly govern themselves, but to whom it would be impracticable to apply any idea of political self-determination in the European sense’ (Miller 1928b: 28). The ‘standard of civilisation’ was extended to include the notion of self-determination, thereby continuing the practice of applying a different logic of behaviour for dealing with those beyond Europe not considered as civilised (Keene 2002: 128–9). Wilson regarded the right to self-determination to be universal, but he also was a strong believer in democracy being an evolutionary process, which manifested itself in a clear paternalistic streak in his thinking. As an academic, he commented that democracy was ‘not created by aspirations ... it is built up by slow habit’ and that ‘immature peoples cannot have it’ (quoted in Anthony 2008: 247). Given this dimension of Wilson’s thought it is perhaps not surprising that he strongly agreed with Smuts’s proposal.
The basic idea animating the mandate system was that the League of Nations would act as trustee for peoples not yet sufficiently ‘mature’ or ‘civilised’ to exercise self-determination. In reference to the former colonies of the defeated powers, Article 22 of the covenant stated that to those territories ‘which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation’ (Miller 1928b: 737). Imperial powers experienced in dealing with ‘backwards peoples’ were entrusted with mandates, which were separated into classes A, B, and C. As Bain notes, ‘self-determination implied granting powers of self-government and autonomy in proportion to the capacity of a people to make good use of them’ (Bain 2003: 92). Class A mandates were regarded as most advanced in progressing towards being ready for self-determination, while those in class C were seen as the furthest away. In reality, the distance between class C mandates and outright annexation was very small, but it was a compromise reached between the annexationist desires of the British dominions and Wilson’s refusal to allow the inclusion of something so contradictory to the principles on which the Great War had been waged.

Even if still largely understood in terms of the civilised–uncivilised distinction, and containing more than its fair share of hypocrisy, the significance of the mandate system should not be discounted. Self-determination was most certainly not seen to apply for the time being, but the possibility that peoples could mature to such a status was left open: it represented the guiding principle and end point of the mandate system, in theory at least. In this sense, as well as further weakening the distinction between a European order of toleration and a non-European one of civilisation, it further sowed the seeds for empire’s end (Keene 2002: ch. 5; Manela 2007: xxi).

CONCLUSION

Considering Woodrow Wilson’s part in the Great War, Winston Churchill wrote:

It seems no exaggeration to pronounce that the action of the United States with its repercussions on the history of the world depended, during the awful period of Armageddon, upon the
workings of this man’s mind and spirit to the exclusion of almost every other factor, and that he played a part in the fate of nations incomparably more direct and personal than any other man. (Quoted in Link 1979: 20)

The argument of this chapter generally supports Churchill’s assessment. The tendency to focus on the failure of Wilson’s grand vision for a new international order obscures what he helped achieve. Reflecting with great disappointment over what he saw as the incomplete and hap-hazard institution of the principle of self-determination at Versailles, Harold Nicolson dismissed the outcome as ‘patchwork Wilsonism’ (Nicolson 1933: 70). Contra Nicolson’s lament of its ‘patchwork’ nature, it was remarkable that the settlement was Wilsonian at all. Wilson’s championing of popular sovereignty and democracy was in stark contrast to a historical legacy of thought and practice that had only recently begun to change. In this regard, the current normative dominance of democracy tends to inhibit our ability to fully comprehend the significance of Wilson’s move in waging war in democracy’s name. Without succumbing to the ‘great man’ account of history, it can be argued that the American president played a pivotal role as ideational innovator, acting as both a catalyst and a symbol of the emergence of democracy as a legitimate form of state in international society.

By entering the war under the banner of democracy the United States fundamentally challenged and changed the terms under which it was fought. The reframing of the conflict as one of democracy versus autocracy was facilitated by revolution in Russia, but it was Wilson’s intervention that thrust democracy onto international society’s agenda. As Tony Smith observes, ‘Wilson’s commitment to democracy made him decidedly more radical abroad than he was at home’ (T. Smith 1994: 61). His consistent support for democracy forced it to centre stage, and with the Allied victory it secured a place in the founding of the new international order. The strong emphasis placed on democracy and popular sovereignty helped to shape the Versailles settlement: self-determination could not simply be ignored. Democracy was by no means the ruling ideology, and it had to compete with other principles and interests, but it did place certain constraints on what statesmen at Versailles were capable of doing. Simply carving up the world with no regard for the wishes of local inhabitants, as their predecessors had always done, was no longer possible.
In the context of this study, the great significance of the First World War is that it decisively completed what the ‘Age of Revolutions’ had started: the transition from monarchic to popular sovereignty. This sentiment was expressed by H. G. Wells in *In the Fourth Year*:

The European dynastic system . . . is dead to-day; it is freshly dead, but it is as dead as the rule of the Incas.... Beyond the unstable shapes of the present the political forms of the future rise now so clearly that they are the common talk of men.... The stars in their courses, the logic of circumstances, the everyday needs and everyday intelligence of men, all these things march irresistibly towards a permanent peace based on democratic republicanism. (Wells 1918: 89–90)

A year later, Robert Lansing was even more explicit in arguing that ‘to insure to the world a continuing state of international peace, democracy should be made the standing policy of civilization ... Democracy can make the world what it ought to be’ (Lansing 1919). Here one can identify an understanding of democracy that corresponds to contemporary times, one in which it is strongly associated with peaceful behaviour, and regarded as a legitimate form of statehood and government.

**Notes**

1 Many of the core elements of Wilson’s open diplomacy programme are recognisable in these earlier arguments of the UDC. A letter by the UDC executive committee in May 1917, signed by Charles Buxton, Frederick Jowett, Ramsay MacDonald, E. D. Morel, Angell, Hobson, Ponsonby and Trevelyan, eventually made it to Wilson, via Colonel House, who had written in the margins that it was ‘interesting because of the signatures’ (Mayer 1959: 336).

2 The term had been used by socialists since the turn of the century, who had borrowed it from German metaphysics (Pomerance 1976).

3 These categories are taken from Schwarzenberger (1936: ch. 3).