

Title—The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism

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Categories: World History, Politics, Nationalism, Anti-colonialism/decolonization

Place: The World (esp. Egypt, India, China, Korea)

Time: 1919-1945

Argument Synopsis:

Erez Manela's *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* aims to tell the story of the 'Wilsonian moment,' or the fervor around self-determination and Wilson's Fourteen Points in the lead up to and during the Paris peace conference, from the perspectives of people on the margins of peace conference and general international society. Although Wilson was thinking mostly of Europe when he spoke of **self-determination**, his words were heard across the world and inspired a plentitude of groups to petition for self-determination. Historians often credit the influence of the Bolshevik revolution on the rise of anticolonial action in the colonial world, at the expense of Wilson. Interestingly, the term self-determination that became intimately tied to Wilson never appeared in his Fourteen Points and actually originated with Lenin. Significant anticolonial actions began in the spring of 1919 when it became clear that Wilson's claims were not going to apply to the colonial world.

Manela explores the specific significance of the Wilsonian moment in the colonial world, focusing on the experience of **Egyptians, Indians, Chinese, and Koreans**, in particular. Although the campaigns for self-determination that emerged in these places had roots in the internal development within each society, but the movements also emerged in the international context of the Wilsonian moment.

When Wilson arrived in Paris, so too did representatives of oppressed nations from across the colonial world. In Egypt, the American Fourth of July celebrations were discussed in the press as an indication that the United States was a place where high-minded ideals trumped mere force; the independence celebrates the non-violent signing of the declaration of independence as opposed to other country's independence days that celebrate violent acts, such as the storming of the Bastille. There was a common perception shared among the nationalists of all four of these societies that Wilson could be a potential champion for their cause, bolstered by his well-publicized high-minded speeches. However, Wilson was not as powerful or as committed to self-determination as the nationalists believed. This truth came to be evident across the colonial world by the spring of 1919.

The Paris peace conference is often seen as a failure to create a European settlement that would bring lasting peace, but how the perspective of the periphery it was a failure to offer them the place in international society that Wilson's speeches implied they deserved. Wilson and his language of self-determination left a lasting impact on the nationalist movements in the periphery. Although the colonial world did not immediately achieve their independence, the Wilsonian moment marked the beginning of the end of the imperial order.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Nationalist and anti-colonialist movements broke out in all four of the aforementioned countries during the spring of 1919
- Concept of self-determination influential for colonized people, even after it was clear they would not be getting support from Wilson