



DOCUMENT BASED QUESTION

Peace Talks and Questions of Self-Determination

Recommended Grade Levels: 10-12

Format: DBQ with Primary and Secondary Sources

Authored by: National WWI Museum and Memorial



SUMMARY

Students are asked to evaluate an historian's arguments with review of related primary documents related to Woodrow Wilson and self-determination for post-WWI colonies. They will respond with their assessment in an essay providing examples of their critical thinking and document interpretation.

LESSON

In his essay "[The World Beyond Europe in the Wilsonian Imagination](#)," from the book *Jefferson, Lincoln and Wilson: The Dilemma of Race and Democracy*, historian Erez Manela addresses the international response to Woodrow Wilson's call for self-determination in his famous Fourteen Points proposal. He writes:

In the wake of a war, Wilson's words captured the attention of millions of nonwhite peoples and seemed to many of them to carry the promise of self-determination... Across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, then, subject peoples saw in the American president a potential champion of their struggles for self-determination. An American president had never before spoken, as Wilson did during the war, on such a grand stage, to such a broad audience, and with such a widespread effect.¹

Wilson's recommendations excited many, but also startled some allies who did not allow their colonies to govern themselves. Curiously, the premise also seemed to contradict U.S. policies regarding its own territories. Who exactly Wilson intended to receive rights of self-determination, then, is left somewhat murky. Despite a positive response from many areas of the globe, self-determination was ultimately granted

¹ Erez Manela, "'Peoples of Many Races': The World Beyond Europe in the Wilsonian Imagination," in John Milton Cooper and Thomas J. Knock, eds., *Jefferson, Lincoln and Wilson: The Dilemma of Race and Democracy* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 185.

largely only to white Europeans, while non-white colonials and inhabitants of newly formed nations shifted to a governance system as mandates, receiving enforced guidance by major Allied nations and a system overseen by the League of Nations. Subsequent treaties related to WWI followed suit.

Read Manela's essay and the primary documents provided here. (Note: important excerpts are included, but students are encouraged to read complete documents.) In an essay based on these sources, respond to the following ideas:

- **Where was the disconnect between Wilson's words about self-determination, major allies' interpretations and non-European interpretations?**
- **Do you believe Wilson's intent for national self-determination was meant to be all-inclusive or limited in scope? Did this change between initial speeches and the Paris Peace talks?**
- **How does the theme of disappointment, for both allies involved in peace talks and those seeking self-determination, apply?**

Document A: Erez Manela, “‘People of Many Races:’ The World Beyond Europe in the Wilsonian Imagination.”

http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/manela/files/manela-peoples_of_many_races.pdf.

Document B: President Woodrow Wilson’s “Peace Without Victory” speech to the Senate, Jan. 22, 1917.

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook_print.cfm?smtid=3&psid=3898.

Excerpt:

The equality of nations upon which peace must be founded if it is to last must be an equality of rights; the guarantees exchanged must neither recognize nor imply a difference between big nations and small, between those that are powerful and those that are weak. Right must be based upon the common strength, not upon the individual strength, of the nations upon whose concert peace will depend. Equality of territory or of resources there of course cannot be; nor any other sort of equality not gained in the ordinary peaceful and legitimate development of the peoples themselves. But no one asks or expects anything more than an equality of rights. Mankind is looking now for freedom of life, not for equipoise of power.

And there is a deeper thing involved than even equality of right among organized nations. No peace can last, or ought to last, which does not recognize and accept the principle that governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed, and that no right anywhere exists to hand peoples about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were property...

Document C: President Woodrow Wilson's Message to Congress, Jan. 8, 1918.

<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=62&page=transcript>

Excerpt:

We entered this war because violations of right had occurred which touched us to the quick and made the life of our own people impossible unless they were corrected and the world secure once for all against their recurrence. What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us.

Document D: President Woodrow Wilson's speech to the Senate, Sept. 30, 1918.

https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss46029.mss46029-480_0018_0618/?sp=59&r=1.075,0.017,3.15,1.722,0.

How does this speech differ from earlier speeches?

Excerpt:

The peoples who have but just come out from under the yoke of arbitrary government and who are now coming at last into their freedom will never find the treasures of liberty they are in search of if they look for them by the light of the torch. They will find that every pathway that is stained with the blood of their own brothers leads to the wilderness, not to the seat of their hope. They are now face to face with their initial test. We must hold the light steady until they find themselves. And in the meantime, if it be possible, we must establish a peace that will justly define their place among the nations, remove all fear of their neighbours and of their former masters, and enable them to live in security and contentment when they set their own affairs in order. I, for one, do not doubt their purpose or their capacity. There are some happy signs that they know and will choose the way of self-control and peaceful accommodation. If they do, we shall put our aid at their disposal in every way that we can. If they do not, we must await with patience and sympathy the awakening and recovery that will assuredly come at last.

Document E: *Revendications du Peuple Annamite* [Claims of the Annamite People], an enclosure submitted with a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing by Nguyen Ai Quoc (later known as Ho Chi Minh), Paris, June 18, 1919.

<http://vietnamwar.lib.umb.edu/origins/docs/Lansing.html>.

Why do you believe Nguyen Ai Quoc gave this letter to a U.S. representative rather than someone from France? Does it surprise you to learn this proposal never received recognition? Nguyen Ai Quoc later became known as Ho Chi Minh. Do you think this experience may have influenced his feelings about the United States?

While waiting for the principle of national self-determination to pass from ideal to reality through the effective recognition of the sacred right of all peoples to decide their own destiny, the inhabitants of the ancient Empire of Annam, at the present time French Indochina, present to the noble Governments of the entente in general and in particular to the honorable French Government the following humble claims:

- (1) General amnesty for all the native people who have been condemned for political activity.
- (2) Reform of Indochinese justice by granting to the native population the same judicial guarantees as the Europeans have, and the total suppression of the special courts which are the instruments of terrorization and oppression against the most responsible elements of the Annamite people.
- (3) Freedom of press and speech.
- (4) Freedom of association and assembly
- (5) Freedom to emigrate and to travel abroad.
- (6) Freedom of education, and creation in every province of technical and professional schools for the native population.
- (7) Replacement of the regime of arbitrary decrees by a regime of law.
- (8) A permanent delegation of native people elected to attend the French parliament in order to keep the latter informed of their needs.

The Annamite people, in presenting these claims, count on the worldwide justice of all the Powers, and rely in particular on the goodwill of the noble French people who hold our destiny in their hands and who, as France is a republic, have taken us under their protection. In requesting the protection of the French people, the people of Annam, far from feeling humiliated, on the contrary consider themselves honored, because they know that the French people stand for liberty and justice and will never renounce their sublime ideal of universal brotherhood. Consequently, in giving heed to the voice of the oppressed, the French people will be doing their duty to France and to humanity.

IN THE NAME OF THE GROUP OF ANNAMITE PATRIOTS:

Nguyen Ai Quoc
(Ho Chi Minh)

Document F: Article 22, Treaty of Versailles.

https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919Parisv13/pg_93.

Compare Wilson's early speech content with these final decisions regarding governance and self-determination. (Note: For a more complete look at oversight assignments and other decisions, including those made in subsequent treaties, be sure to read the Notes section following Article 22.)

1. *To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and 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 and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant.*
2. *The best method of giving practical effect to this principle is that the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are willing to accept it, and that this tutelage should be exercised by them as Mandatories on behalf of the League.*
3. *The character of the mandate must differ according to the stage of the development of the people, the geographical situation of the territory, its economic conditions and other similar circumstances.*
4. *Certain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish Empire have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognised subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone. The wishes of these communities must be a principal consideration in the selection of the Mandatory.*
5. *Other peoples, especially those of Central Africa, are at such a stage that the Mandatory must be responsible for the administration of the territory under conditions which will guarantee freedom of conscience and religion, subject only to the maintenance of public order and morals, the prohibition of abuses such as the slave trade, the arms traffic and the liquor traffic, and the prevention of the establishment of fortifications or military and naval bases and of military training of the natives for other than police purposes and the defence of territory, and will also secure equal opportunities for the trade and commerce of other Members of the League.*
6. *There are territories, such as South-West Africa and certain of the South Pacific Islands, which, owing to the sparseness of their population, or their small size, or their remoteness from the centres of civilisation, or their geographical contiguity to the territory of the Mandatory, and other circumstances, can be best administered under the laws of the Mandatory as integral portions of its territory, [Page 94] subject to the safeguards above mentioned in the interests of the indigenous population.*
7. *In every case of mandate, the Mandatory shall render to the Council an annual report in reference to the territory committed to its charge.*
8. *The degree of authority, control, or administration to be exercised by the Mandatory shall, if not previously agreed upon by the Members of the League, be explicitly defined in each case by the Council.*
9. *A permanent Commission shall be constituted to receive and examine the annual reports of the Mandatories and to advise the Council on all matters relating to the observance of the mandates.*

Document G: "European Baby Show" political cartoon, 1919.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wilson's_Fourteen_Points_-_European_Baby_Show.png.²

What does this political cartoon indicate about satisfying Allied demands at the Peace Talks? How is this related to changes between Wilson's original Fourteen Points and the final Treaty of Versailles?



² Burt Randolph Thomas, "European Baby Show," *Detroit [MI] News*, June 1919.