

## Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points

The war that broke out in Europe in August 1914 was worldwide in its scope and effect. But the United States did not enter World War I until April 6, 1917, after more than two and a half years of European bloodletting. The Americans joined the side of Britain, France, and Russia (known as the Allies). By 1918, the tide of battle turned against Germany and the other Central Powers.

U.S. President Woodrow Wilson did not support all of the war aims of Britain and France. Those European powers were fiercely anti-German and had made a number of secret agreements about breaking off parts of Germany and the territory of other enemies. Wilson spoke out against such agreements, insisting instead on the principal of *self-determination* of peoples. By that he meant that ethnic and national groups like Croats and Poles should be able to decide their future for themselves-whether to remain part of an existing country, agree to be annexed by another country, or set up their own independent government.

Self-determination formed a central part of a peace plan that Wilson announced in a speech to Congress in January 1918. His so-called Fourteen Points were designed to stated Allied war aims in such a way as to win maximum possible support for the alliance. The fate of "subject peoples" was being hotly debated at the time. Also, Russia, one of the Allies, after severe defeats, had signed an armistice with Germany and was negotiating for a peace treaty (finally signed in March 1918). Since the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917, Russia had been ruled by a Communist government that was stirring up hopes of self-determination among "subject peoples."

Wilson's Fourteen Points were much debated at the Paris Peace Conference that followed the war. Nonetheless, many of the points were left out of the final treaties.

The following excerpts from the Fourteen Points show how Wilson hoped to bring about a peaceful and tolerant world.

...It will be our wish and purpose that the processes of peace, when they are begun, shall be absolutely open and that they shall involve and permit henceforth no secret understandings of any kind. The day of conquest and (enlarging one's state at the expense of others) is gone by; so is also the day of secret covenants (agreements) entered into in the interest of particular governments and likely at some unlooked-for moment to upset the peace of the world...

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 secured once (and) 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. The program of the world's peace, therefore, is our program; and that program, the only possible program, as we see it, is this:

- I. Open covenants (agreements) of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.
- II. Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action for the enforcement of international covenants.

- III. The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance.
- IV. Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.
- V. A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial (fair) adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty (control) the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.
- VI. The evacuation of all Russian territory (by the Central powers) and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world... The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their good will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy...

(Articles VII-XIII describe in detail Wilson's proposals for establishing the independence and integrity of specific nations.)

XIV. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike...

An evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak. Unless this principle be made its foundation no part of the structure of international justice can stand...

### **Review Questions**

1. What secret agreements did Britain and France make before the Versailles Conference?
2. Why did Wilson propose "open covenants of peace"?
3. What did Wilson mean by the principle of "self-determination"?
4. Why did the Bolshevik Revolution stir up hopes of subject peoples?
5. According to Wilson, why did the United States enter World War I?
6. What was Wilson's main goal in proposing a "general association of nations"?
7. Why do you think the idea of an "association of nations" was appealing to the rest of the nations attending the Versailles Peace Conference?