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Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe [Book review]

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Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, Stanford University Press, 2020. 304 p. ISBN 978-1503-611-18-4, 978-1503-611-19-1

Larry Wolff is an American historian working at New York University, best known for *Inventing Eastern Europe* (1994), a work on the construction of the East-West dichotomy by thinkers of the 18th-century Enlightenment. For the construction of its own identity, Wolff argued, Western Europe needed a ‘complementary other half’ that was different but at the same time familiar, something less developed than Western Europe, but at the same time capable of achieving the same standard of civilisation. Eastern Europe was not the ‘definitive other’ in the sense of ‘the Orient’. Instead, Eastern Europe was imagined as the past of the West, to which one could travel by crossing an imaginary border located somewhere between Prussia and Poland.¹

Wolff wrote the book at a time when the seemingly solid Cold War boundary, given precise geographical form by Churchill’s iconic metaphor of the Iron Curtain, had only recently been overcome. However, he referred critically to many examples of the continued existence of that boundary in the mental map of Western observers, and predicted that Eastern Europe as a cultural trope and artefact of the West would continue to persist for a long time to come. Indeed, the West’s orientalisng look towards the ‘new’ countries of Eastern Europe has recently become a major topic among scholars discussing contemporary political and social troubles. Western inattention toward the experiences and criticism of the resulting policy choices of ‘East Europeans’, like for example during the 2015 migrant crisis, has been referred to as a major source of disappointment towards ‘Brussels’, while, paradoxically, support for the European project as a whole has been stronger in the eastern parts of

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¹ L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The map of civilization on the mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 1994).

Europe than in the historic core of the European Union.² Wolff's book can thus be taken as far-sighted, but it was also stimulating in scholarly disciplines such as nationalities studies. Peter Bugge has recently noted that Wolff's work was an early inspiration for scholars who began to question the perceived wisdom of Western theorists who had detected a gap between Western and Eastern types of nationalism, between the supposedly civic nationalism in the West and ethnic nationalism allegedly dominant in Eastern Europe, seeing in it a peculiar form of orientalism.³ Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe* has thus been influential in discussions about the historical situatedness of the supposed East-West difference, a construct that has had an enormous impact on European politics to this day, but less perhaps on the history of the ideas of Enlightenment, because of Wolff's light-hearted attitude towards establishing what were, in fact, the main issues and discussions of the era, in which his heroes and their works on 'Eastern Europe' were engaged.

Wolff readily admits that his new book *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe* (2020) is not really his area of expertise, but at the same time, it can also be seen as a logical continuation of his interest in the constructivist make-up of Eastern Europe. As he pointed out in *Inventing Eastern Europe*, the Enlightenment image of Eastern Europe was a region in permanent anarchy and chaos that needed to be dominated, disciplined and ordered, if not outright conquered, and from this perspective the 1919 Paris project of reconstructing Eastern Europe, in which the US President Woodrow Wilson played a major part, could be seen as an example of the Enlightenment in action. Indeed, in his earlier work Wolff considered the Peace Conference as the culmination of 'diplomatic operations from afar upon the map of Eastern Europe', in which Eastern Europe served as an object to be operated upon by the West, but acknowledging the impact of not only the Enlightenment but also the intervening 19th-century great-power practices.⁴

The idea that the political structure of interwar Eastern Europe was largely the result of the imagination of peacemakers at Paris is rooted in the assumption of Western dominance, to which Wolff's work on Woodrow Wilson, perhaps unintentionally, lends credence. By focusing on the sanguine deliberations in Paris, it is easy to overlook the fact that the

² I. Krastev, *After Europe* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); J. Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ P. Bugge, 'The history of the dichotomy of civic Western and ethnic Eastern nationalism', in: *National Identities*, 1 (2018), p. 18.

⁴ Wolff, *Inventing*, p. 364.

Allies had neither the boots on the ground nor the will to use force in East-Central Europe, while the regular and irregular armies of successor states fought to maximise their territorial gains before, during and after the conference from 1918 to 1923. There is now a large body of work that explores the 'sky beyond Versailles', to use Robert Gerwarth's phrase,⁵ or the 'Greater War', that takes stock of the broader chronological and global frameworks beyond the West European-centric dates of 1914-1918/1919. In this sense, I would argue that Wolff overrates the importance of Wilson, and underestimates the role played, for example, by Polish arms in the conquest of territories in Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania, when he states that the Versailles Peace Settlement 'gave Eastern Europe its twentieth-century form on the map as a system of interlocking national states'. True, the role of the Peace Conference was to bestow sovereignty on the 'new' states through the practice of recognition, which in itself was a novel development in international relations.⁶

This is not to say that Wolff is oblivious to the events on the ground, as he mentions the fighting between Poles and Ukrainians over Galicia, between Hungarians and Romanians over Transylvania, etc, and admits that all this 'compromised the peacemakers' capacity to impose their principles freely upon the map of Eastern Europe', merely that this is not sufficiently emphasised.⁷ Despite this caveat, Wolff is probably right to underline not only the exceptionality of Wilson among all the US presidents for his preoccupation with Eastern Europe, but also that 'his' reinventing of Eastern Europe was probably the most lasting part of his legacy. His interest and personal engagement in the region is surprising, considering that this part of the world had only fleetingly figured in his mental map before the war; and still during the war, the ambassador of Austria-Hungary noted the president's 'utter ignorance of facts and geography', an apparently universal assumption about American presidents and Americans in general that comes to the fore, for example, in Estonian diplomatic papers from the 1990s.⁸ From this perspective, Wolff's work is definitely an important addition not only

⁵ R. Gerwarth, 'The Sky beyond Versailles: The Paris Peace Treaties in Recent Historiography', in: *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 93, issue 4 (2021), pp. 896–930.

⁶ L.V. Smith, *Sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁷ Wolff, *Wilson*, p. 189, also pp. 204–205.

⁸ The Estonian diplomat E.-N. Kross about Strobe Talbott, 27 April 1993, Washington Embassy memos, 07.01.1993 to 30.12.1993, Archive of the Estonian Foreign Ministry (Tallinn, Estonia).

to the already large body of literature on Wilson, but to US policies towards East-Central Europe more generally.

The other great strength of the book follows from Wolff's theoretical framework, which is built around the concept of a 'mental map' that he already used craftily in *Inventing Eastern Europe*. 'Mental mapping' refers to subjective, psychological, cultural, impressionistic and even imagistic aspects of how people perceive and understand places and spaces that they are dealing with, often without ever visiting those places, as indeed was the case with Wilson. Wolff is a master of detail, adeptly detecting unspoken assumptions and sensibilities of Wilson and other players towards places which meshed with their ideals and principles about international order to produce policies towards Eastern Europe, but he complements the concept of mental maps with the concept of 'sympathy', which adds another interesting dimension to the analysis.

The idea of 'sympathy' was very much central to Wilson's idea of himself as a world-historic statesman, and of the role of the United States in world politics in general, as Wolff explains. Since his 1916 Cincinatti speech, Wilson thought of the USA as a neutral power which, unlike other great imperial powers that were taking advantage of other people, had an 'instinctive sympathy' for the rights of all men and all nations everywhere. However, it is difficult to develop sympathies towards a place on a map, and much easier if that place comes in the form of a person. Indeed, during the war and during the Peace Conference, Wilson's mental map of Eastern Europe acquired the form of connections with real individuals, either through meetings or correspondence, who for Wilson began to represent their countries and ethnic groups. Wolff describes, often amusingly, how the pianist and composer Ignacy Paderewski came to represent Poland, the philosopher Tomáš Masaryk became for Wilson the quintessential Czechoslovak (or Czechoslav in Wilson's language), and how an essentially random group of village representatives in folk costume could, in Wilson's mind, become authorities speaking for a province or a national minority. In the light of this, Wolff's conclusion that Wilson's political consciousness was shaped 'as much by irrational fantasy as by logical principle' seems to the point.

Beside the aspect of randomness, the other problem with sympathy was that it could not be universally or precisely applied once the USA became part of the coalition of powers, all of which had their own conflicting sympathies for nations who were fighting each other. It was impossible to confer sympathy on each group to the same degree when those groups were making conflicting claims. In a telling paragraph,

Wolff shows the impossibility of reconciling sympathy for the dynasty of Montenegro, and for Serbia bent on abolishing that dynasty, as a result of which Wilson's 'mental map was becoming confused with overlapping sympathies that could not be translated into a clearly interlocking political settlement'. Wolff demonstrates that the idea of 'sympathy' can be used to good effect to analyse the entwining of sentiments and 'rational' choices of actors such as Wilson.

Baltic historians and readers are certainly interested to know where the Baltic provinces fit into all of this. In Wolff's book, the Baltic States come up only in relation to Poland, which was for Wilson a much more important question than the Baltic provinces. Wolff notes the sympathies felt towards the idea of Baltic independence by the Inquiry in 1918, the research body that Wilson set up to study and give him the scientific credence to remake the map of Europe. In his meetings and correspondence with Polish agents, Lithuania came up as an object of Polish ambitions, but Wilson also met with Lithuanian representatives demanding recognition. Wilson, Wolff implies, remained noncommittal, although he wanted to limit the Polish land grab, and worried about minorities in a future Polish commonwealth. The overarching strategic concern, Wolff notes, was the desire not to weaken Russia as a counterweight to Germany.

As Wolff discusses Wilson's policies towards Russia and the Baltic States only in passing, I am going to add a few thoughts, based primarily on the work of the Estonian-American historian Olavi Arens, adding to it my own reading of the papers of the Inquiry in Yale University Library. Wolff's assertion that the Inquiry supported Baltic sovereignty seems to be corroborated by the position of Wilson's influential adviser Colonel Edward M. House, who was in charge of the Inquiry, and who by October 1918 was privately expressing support for the dissolution of the Russian Empire into several parts.⁹ Arens refers to the views of the 31-year-old Samuel Eliot Morison of Harvard University, who was among the research staff of the Inquiry, and also a member of the Polish-Russian unit of the US delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. Morison was responsible for the Finnish, Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian questions, received their delegates, and recorded and mediated their concerns and claims. In February 1919, Morison sent a memorandum to Isaiah Bowman, one of the heads of the Inquiry, advising the government to

⁹ O. Arens, 'Wilsonianism ilma Wilsonita: Ameerika Ühendriigid ja Eesti, 1918–1922', in: *Ameerika sajand. USA ja Eesti suhete sada aastat*, ed. K. Piirimäe and M. Kuldkepp (Tartu, 2022), pp. 19–44.

support the Baltic nations and accept the Bolsheviks as the government of Russia.¹⁰ We know that Morison's proposal to recognise the Baltic States de facto was defeated on 9 May 1919 in the Foreign Ministers' Council by the US secretary of state Robert Lansing, but what has been discounted in historiography are the positive aspects of the Council's decisions: to send much-needed supplies, including military supplies, to the Baltic States, and to put pressure on Germany to evacuate troops from Latvia and Lithuania.¹¹

However, the close reading of the Inquiry's files raises doubts about the experts' support for Baltic independence. On 24 July 1917, Albert R. Putney, a former dean of the Illinois College of Law and a confidant of many Slavic activists in the USA, discussed the Lithuanian claim to independence as part of the problem of delineating the borders of Poland, and concluded that it was a matter of justice that the Polish claim to Lithuania should not be granted.¹² The report of 15 January 1918 by F.A. Golder, a Jewish immigrant from Russia and a graduate student at Harvard,¹³ was mostly noncommittal but sympathetic towards Estonians and Latvians: 'It would be most inhumane to allow them [Esths and Letts] to become subjects of Germany. After seven centuries of slavery, they should be given a chance to be free once more and the right to develop along their own lines.'¹⁴ However, the memorandum by the Harvard historian Sidney Bradshaw Fay of 12 March 1918 on 'The Lettish Question' was not promising: 'Lettland does not seek, and could not maintain a position as an independent state.' The promise of self-determination, Fay thought, was met by Lettland's autonomy under Russia.¹⁵

In another report on 27 November 1918, Fay supported the attachment of an autonomous 'United Esthonia' to a federated Russia, because Estonia was too small for independent existence and its ports were crucial for Russian trade. Probably reflecting the changed situation on

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. Cf H. Kalmo, 'Enesemääramise paleus ja pragmaatika: Tartu versus Pariis', in: *Ajalooline Ajakiri. The Estonian Historical Journal*, vol. 173, Nr ¾ (2020), pp. 243–301.

¹² 'Poland and Lithuania', Reports and Studies, Inquiry Papers, Group 8, Series III, Box 18, Yale University Library Manuscript Collection (ULMC), New Haven, USA.

¹³ M.B Biskupski, 'Re-Creating Central Europe: The United States "Inquiry" into the Future of Poland in 1918', in: *The International History Review*, vol. 12, Nr 2 (1990), pp. 249–279 (256).

¹⁴ 'The Baltic Provinces', p. 63 (What do the natives want?), Reports and Studies, Inquiry Papers, Group 8, Series III, Box 8, ULMC.

¹⁵ 'The Lettish Question', Reports and Studies, Inquiry Papers, Group 8, Series III, Box 15, p. 60, ULMC.

the ground, however, Fay thought Estonia should be accorded 'autonomy and provisional independence', and its security guaranteed by the Powers, if Russia's internal situation did not improve soon; but much of his discussion focused on the question whether Latvia and Finland should join Estonia to form a Baltic Federation.¹⁶ To sum up, the reports and studies of the Inquiry are in the final analysis quite inconclusive as to whether the experts of the Inquiry, apart from Colonel House and the sympathetic Morison, in fact supported Baltic independence, as both Wolff and Arens seem to indicate. Their support was, at best, conditional on developments in Russia, and they did not go further than suggesting 'provisional independence', whatever that was supposed to mean.

The analysis of the Inquiry experts should be studied further in its own right, but this will hardly change our understanding of President Wilson's policies. Although attentive to the supposedly scientific expertise of his advisers, it is unlikely that he ever read those reports on the Baltic provinces. They were never his priority. Arens is probably right to emphasise that Wilson limited the application of the principle of national self-determination to the defeated powers of Ottoman Turkey, Germany and Austria-Hungary, developing no consistent policy or understanding of developments in Russia. He liked neither Tsarist Russia nor Bolshevik Russia, but could not make up his mind what groups to support in the former Russian territories, except for Poland in ethnographic borders and Finland.¹⁷

To conclude, Larry Wolff's book on Wilson's 'reimagining of Eastern Europe' is an exciting book for anyone interested in the peace settlements after the First World War, the history of East-Central Europe, and US engagements with Europe. It is not a must-read like his *Inventing Eastern Europe* of 1994. The main idea to take away from his methodological framework is the 'politics of sympathy', which can be used to unlock other instances of how personal connections with a region have meshed with principles to produce policies towards the region.

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¹⁶ 'The Baltic Provinces: Latvia and United Esthonia', 27 November 1918, p. 55, Reports and Studies, Inquiry Papers, Group 8, Series III, Box 8, ULMC.

¹⁷ Arens, 'Wilsonianism ilma Wilsonita'.