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This article argues that Woodrow Wilson's efforts to enshrine religious freedom protection in the Covenant of the League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference brought about the first modern international legal regime of religious freedom. He sought to include a legal guarantee of religious freedom in three different contexts: in the League Covenant as a rule of universal application and, following his failure to do so, in the mandate system and in the minorities protection treaties. This account relates Wilson to issues of religious freedom protection with focus on the Paris Peace Conference. Recognizing Wilson's as yet unacknowledged personal involvement in this field, the account challenges conventional notions that the religious freedom protection regime inaugurated by the Covenant largely focused on collective religious rights from the outset. In fact, Wilson sought to apply this guarantee in all its possible guises as expediency and practicality would allow. Wilson, however, sought not to protect religious freedom for its own sake but as a complement to his League, that is, to preserve world peace.

Introduction

Woodrow Wilson's adventure in Paris was by most accounts a tragic failure of epic proportions. Critics had characterized the terms and resulting

1) For a rare account that takes a somewhat sympathetic view of the events and achievements of the Paris Peace Conference, see Margaret MacMillan, Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World (New York: Random House, 2003).
peace of the Treaty of Versailles as a mockery of the principles of collective security and self-determination, the two key principles supposedly animating the entirety of the Paris Peace Conference. The moribund League of Nations, the creation of which was the biggest achievement of the Peace Conference, was dogged from the outset by its failure to include Russia and Germany. It had become the supreme embodiment of the huge chasm between warm American idealism and cold European reality.

Instead of being, in Wilson’s words, a “definite guarantee of peace,” the League of Nations became a wellspring of resentment that would fuel the horrors of the Second World War. Within ten years from the signing of the Treaty, the apparatus of collective security instituted by the League fell apart. Japan, one of the founding members, withdrew from the League after its occupation of the Chinese territory of Manchuria in 1931. This would be followed by the withdrawal of Germany, and the Italian invasion of modern-day Ethiopia. In addition, the various peoples in the new nations created in the wake of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had various reasons to dislike, if not, outright reject the Versailles settlement. Ethnic Germans in Poland and Czechoslovakia felt betrayed by what appeared to be a denial of their right to national self-determination. Polish leaders resented several terms of the Polish Treaty which recognized Poland as an independent state, particularly those concerning minority rights, as unwarranted interference with their national sovereignty. And Eastern European Jews felt that the League did not go far enough in protecting their group and individual rights.

This account of the Versailles tragedy, and in particular, the focus on the failure of Wilson’s idealism to grasp and to take into account the sordid reality of the European situation, has now become a tired truism. As the story goes, with his obstinate zeal and signature high-minded rhetoric – at one point, the French minister of war Georges Clemenceau exclaimed that talking to Wilson felt as if he was talking to Jesus Christ – Wilson’s seemingly unrealistic attempt to remodel the entire structure of international affairs after the war resulted in a League of Nations which was a mere shadow of what it was originally envisioned to be. The Treaty’s rejection by the U.S. Senate, and consequently, the exclusion of the United States as a founding member, notwithstanding a courageous and physically taxing

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