



## Woodrow Wilson Still Fuels Debate on ‘Who Lost Russia?’

May 12, 2016

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*Abstract: This article wrestles with the question: could there have been something in the Woodrow Wilson presidency that remains germane to the continuing debate about whether the United States and its Western allies “lost” Russia following the ending of the Cold War and disappearance of the Soviet Union?*



Woodrow Wilson (Photo: Library of Congress)

The controversy over Woodrow Wilson's well-documented racism<sup>1</sup> has obscured the fact that Wilson's *foreign policy* agenda remains central to contemporary debates about international security. Certainly the impending centenary of the president's historic decision to ask Congress to declare war on Imperial Germany in April 1917 will lead scholars to revisit Wilsonian diplomacy as it

<sup>1</sup> “The Case Against Woodrow Wilson,” *New York Times*, Nov. 25, 2015, p. A26; Alexandra Markovich, “Wilson Name Will Be Kept at Princeton,” *New York Times*, April 5, 2016, p. A23.

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related to his decision to intervene in World War I. But the *current* foreign-policy controversy involving Wilson dwells upon a different set of questions on the issue of America's relations with Russia today.

The question is: could there be *something* in the Woodrow Wilson presidency itself that remains germane to the continuing debate about whether the United States and its Western allies “lost” Russia following the ending of the Cold War and disappearance of the Soviet Union? Is there a theoretical or policy link that connects a long-dead Woodrow Wilson to a Vladimir Putin, who remains very much alive and kicking?

Obviously, Wilson cannot be as directly implicated in this current foreign-policy debate as in the domestic one over race. Some “revisionist” writers, however, have sought to do just this, by insisting that the opening acts of the Cold War took place during the Wilson Administration, and stemmed from the President's decision to send troops to revolution-wracked Russia.<sup>2</sup> In the revisionist reading, there is a direct line connecting Woodrow Wilson to the contemporary state of U.S.-Russia relations, with the 1918 intervention constituting the original sin for which expiation has never been possible. This perspective holds Wilson “responsible” for Putin to a certain extent. Now, this is not the only connection between the two leaders that will be probed in this article, and not only because the revisionist argument fundamentally misconstrues the U.S. intervention in Russia's internecine conflict of a century ago.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the connection between the former American leader and the current Russian one resides elsewhere than in fusty arguments about who started the Cold War. If found at all, it is in a decidedly *post*-Cold War set of assumptions and deeds—all considered somehow to be derived from, and testimony to, an enduring “Wilsonian” tradition in both U.S. foreign policy and International Relations (IR) theory. Wilson the *individual* may be neither here nor there regarding contemporary Russian-American relations; but *Wilsonianism*, many contend, does play a central role in this contemporary diplomatic saga.

<sup>2</sup> For that claim, see especially Arno J. Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918-1919* (New York: Knopf, 1967); and N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). See Alan L. Seltzer, “Woodrow Wilson as ‘Corporate-Liberal’: Toward a Reconsideration of Left Revisionist Historiography,” *Western Political Quarterly*, June 1977, pp. 183-211.

<sup>3</sup> For a persuasive rebuttal of the revisionist contention, see J. Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916-1931* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), especially pp. 156-57, where the decision to intervene in Russia is depicted as being taken *not* out of fear of Bolshevism, but rather of *Kaiserism*. “The scenario that haunted the Allies and impelled them to action *was* a ghostly premonition of the future. But what was on their mind was not the spectre of revolution or an anticipation of the Cold War, but a foretaste of the summer of 1941 when the military triumphs of the *Wehrmacht* threatened to extend Hitler's slave empire throughout Eurasia.”

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