

Mandates and Trusteeships - League of nations mandates

President Woodrow Wilson presented the text of the Covenant of the League of Nations to the Paris Peace Conference on 14 February 1919. He explained to his colleagues that they would find incorporated in the document an old principle intended for more universal use and development—the reference was to mandates for former colonies. In this fashion the mandate system became a part of the new world that Wilson imagined would emerge from the deliberations in Paris. Mandates developed historically from the practice of great power supervision of areas subservient to the controlling power usually adjacent to that power's territory; acceptance of British, French, and American conceptions of the rule of law and colonial freedom and self-government; Edmund Burke's suggestion of the trusteeship principle in administering British colonies in the interest of the inhabitants, taken to heart and subsequently expanded by Parliament after the American Revolution; and the Concert of Europe concept, in which Prince Metternich of Austria attempted to create a conservative coalition to preserve stability and prevent revolutionary changes in Europe at the end of the Napoleonic wars, and its application to former Turkish and French holdings in Africa and the Near East. While the principle may have been old, Wilson's perception of it was new because he wished to universalize it.

Although the British and French delegations at Paris did not oppose the mandate system, they were not in the forefront of those demanding it. Nor were they particularly eager to accept Wilson's freewheeling interpretation of the general mandate system as applying to any and all former enemy colonies. The Japanese and Italian representatives were even less enthusiastic about mandates that might restrict their control of former German colonies. They preferred a division of territory. The Americans were insistent that former enemy colonies would not be treated as spoils of war. In a meeting of the Council of Ten on 28 January 1919, the mandatory principle was discussed. Vittorio Orlando of Italy asked how the former colonies should be divided, what provisions should be made for government, and what should be said about independence. Baron Shinken Makino of Japan asked whether mandates had been accepted, and Georges Clemenceau of France responded that the question was to be taken up later. Wilson would not permit the subject to be buried, so the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, presented a proposal for defining mandates on 30 January 1919, suggesting a division into three types—ultimately defined as A, B, and C mandates. Without citing specific locations, it is sufficient to observe that most of Africa, part of the Middle East, and most of the Pacific island groups were considered to be in one of the categories: A—mandates quickly able to be prepared for independence; B—mandates needing tutelage for some time before being considered for independence; and C—mandates that probably would never be ready for independence.

Wilson's associates at Paris hoped for U.S. participation in the postwar enforcement of the Versailles settlement and did not feel they could strongly oppose him on the mandate issue. Many members of the conference sincerely believed that the mandate system might work, but that it had to draw on existing experience in the colonies and should not promise too much to peoples who could not in the foreseeable future be prepared for nationhood and full citizenship rights. Wilson agreed that in some cases this would be true, but he was less restrictive in the number of former colonies he would place in this category than were some of his colleagues.

There was a tendency at the peace conference to identify someone else's mandates as ready to be placed in the category reasonably close to independence with minimum preparation rather than one's own. Lloyd George, for example, saw most of the colonies being assigned to Great Britain and British Commonwealth nations as more suitable for either direct annexation or deferral. South-West Africa (Namibia), he argued, should be annexed to South Africa because it was not likely to proceed to independence; and South Africa would be better able to care for the people of South-West Africa under South

African laws and tax structure. Papua might better be classed as an area that would never be self-governing, and therefore should be permanently assigned to Australia. He could visualize French mandates in northern Africa being prepared for independence. Clemenceau, however, was more inclined to see British mandates as nearing preparation for independence. In effect, then, the mandate system would only be as good as the determination of the powers in the league to carry it out.

Woodrow Wilson was the master planner for the mandate system, but the man responsible for laying out the detailed plans of the process was General Jan Christian Smuts of South Africa. The process began with Wilson's Fourteen Points, drawn up by the journalists Walter Lippmann and Frank Cobb under the general supervision of Colonel Edward House. They read through the president's statements of war aims and compacted them into the program that Wilson set forth in an address to Congress on 8 January 1918. Point 5 called for "A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined." It was made clear in the Council of Ten discussions at Paris, partly because of British fears concerning the Irish and Indian independence claims, that colonial questions would be restricted to colonies belonging to Germany or coming into being as a result of the war. In practical terms this meant that mandates applied only to the German African and Far Eastern holdings and the non-Turkish parts of the former Ottoman Empire.

Secret treaties signed before or during the war had divided these territories among the victorious powers except the United States, which was not a party to them. Wilson went to Paris determined to set aside these treaties and for that purpose had formulated Point 1 of the Fourteen Points, which called for "open covenants 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."

General Smuts set to work to carry out the mandates charge embodied, at Wilson's insistence, in Article 22 of the League Covenant. The article made it clear that certain of the Turkish territories were ready for nationhood almost immediately, that central African peoples needed mandatory powers that would guarantee their human rights and political and moral tutelage, and that the open door to trade would apply in all mandates. It also determined that South-West Africa and certain of the Pacific islands, because of the sparseness of population, isolation, size, and other circumstances, could best be administered under the laws of the mandatory and as integral portions of its territory, with safeguards for the well-being of the inhabitants supervised by the Mandates Commission. The Permanent Mandates Commission, the later official title of the commission, was to receive annual reports from mandatory powers and complaints relative to the treatment of inhabitants. The reports and complaints were to be sent to the League Council for deliberation.

Wilson met his first defeat on the mandate issue when his allies refused to consider turning mandates over to the administration of small neutral nations. The distribution followed the pattern of the secret treaties, with some other powers added to the list. Motives concerning the possession of mandates were mixed. Some Japanese saw mandates as preludes to annexation or as convenient means to establish secure military and market areas, while others saw them as symbolic of great power status and the promise of a stronger position in the future whether the system worked or not. The open door to trade and the defense of colonial peoples, plus democratization of the world, were the primary American objectives. British, French, and Belgian motives shaded to a greater or lesser degree along the lines of Japanese thinking. "Little England" advocates, who supported reduction in the size of the British Empire and a refocusing on trade expansion, were relieved to see the lessening of colonial responsibilities, while the imperial advocates were alarmed but convinced that the empire could hold together and peace could be secured while the United States participated in the peacekeeping system. France and Belgium were pleased to see the diminution of German power and could live with mandates if that were the result.

Japan proved a special case because it had emerged as a great power at a time when the main symbol of such status—empire—was on the decline. Japanese ambitions in China were set in the old imperial structure. During the war Japan secured a position as a major force in colonial exploitation of China as a result of the Twenty-one Demands presented to China, only to encounter demands for surrender of these privileges at the end of the war. Lloyd George and Clemenceau sided with Japan. This, combined with Japan's threat not to join the League of Nations, forced Wilson to accept the assignment of German

rights in Shantung to the Japanese—but with a pledge to return the province to full Chinese sovereignty with only the former German economic privileges remaining to them; Japan was also given the right to establish a settlement at Tsingtao (Qingdao). Thus, Wilson's hopes for an anticolonial postwar structure were already on shaky ground.

Some scholars have argued that the Allies were not sincere in adopting the mandate process and intended to use it as a subterfuge for expanding colonial control. While in some instances this proved to be true, generally the mandates were administered in the interest of the people concerned and a large percentage of the Class A mandates were moved into independence. Most of these were in the former Ottoman Empire, such as Trans-Jordan, Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon. Wilson's charge to the peace conference in the plenary session of 14 February 1919 was only partially observed; but his expectations on mandates were more fulfilled than in most other areas of the Fourteen Points. Wilson told the conference members that they were "done with annexation of helpless peoples," and henceforth nations would consider it their responsibility to protect and promote the interests of people under their tutelage before their own interests. It would remain for the United Nations, not the League of Nations, to carry out this promise.

Often overlooked in judging Wilson's objectives are the underlying premise and promise that he undertook to deliver as a result of American participation in the war—making the world safe for democracy. Success meant the elimination of the monarchical and colonial systems. Wilson envisioned the states that were to emerge from the mandate system as democratic republics.
