



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Self-determination: the story of the liberal appropriation of a socialist principle

Calculi, M.; Fassi, E.; Parsi, V.E.

Citation

Calculi, M. (2021). Self-determination: the story of the liberal appropriation of a socialist principle. In E. Fassi & V. E. Parsi (Eds.), *The Liberal World Order and Beyond* (pp. 137-149). Milan: Vita&Pensiero. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3223097>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3223097>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Marina Calculli (2021), 'Self-Determination: the Story of the Liberal Appropriation of a Socialist Principle' in Fassi E., Parsi V. E. (eds.), *The Liberal World Order and Beyond* (Vita&Pensiero, Milan): 137-149.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	VII
Introduction, <i>Enrico Fassi and Vittorio Emanuele Parsi</i>	IX
MICHAEL COX John Maynard Keynes and the Crisis of the Liberal Order: 1919 and Beyond	3
VITTORIO EMANUELE PARSI The Liberal World Order. A Historical Exception?	17
G. JOHN IKENBERRY A World Order in Upheaval	39
ANDREA LOCATELLI The Military Foundations of the Liberal Order	59
MATTHEW EVANGELISTA Wilson's Ideas, Carr's Critique and the Role of Russia in the Post-Soviet Space	77
ENRICO FASSI Exceptionalism, Pluralism and Transatlantic Democracy Promotion. Wilson's Ideas One Century On	91
JOSEPH M. GRIECO Searching for a Comparative Advantage. How the Field of International Relations Might Contribute to Improved Foreign Policy	117
MARINA CALCULLI Self-Determination: the Story of the Liberal Appropriation of a Socialist Principle	137
Contributors	151

MARINA CALCULLI

Self-Determination: the Story of the Liberal Appropriation of a Socialist Principle

1. *Introduction*

“Self-determination was invented by liberal democrats” – Daniel Philpott claimed, adding that “its intellectual history is a discussion among them”¹. There is no better way to capture the mainstream understanding of self-determination, and what is fundamentally wrong about it. For not only is such a reading ahistorical; it silences the origins of the principle, the politics behind it, the radically different forms it has taken and the diverse ways in which it has been received.

This chapter reconstructs the history of the principle in order to recover the parts of the ideological struggle from which it emerged and took its current shape, in particular the Marxist-Leninist contribution. The socialist conception of self-determination is what renders it a radical, anti-colonial principle, which is something that has been wrongly attributed to US President Woodrow Wilson, when in fact he co-opted the principle and emasculated its potential and implications. This revisionist history is necessary to understand not only the emergence but also the trajectory and uses of the principle of self-determination, in particular its selective use which continues to spark controversies to the present day: it suffices to mention the denial of self-determination to the Kurds, the Palestinians, or the Tibetans².

Drawing from primary and secondary sources, the chapter begins by reconstructing the battle between Vladimir Lenin and Woodrow Wilson over the meaning of self-determination – the former conceiving it as a right that all peoples could claim, whilst the latter having in mind

¹ D. PHILPOTT, *In Defense of Self-Determination*, “Ethics”, 105 (1995), 2, pp. 352-385.

² J. MASSAD, *Against Self-Determination*, “Humanity Journal” (blog), September 2018, [online] available at: <http://humanityjournal.org/issue9-2/against-self-determination/>; M. SPANU, *The Hierarchical Society: The Politics of Self-Determination and the Constitution of New States after 1919*, “European Journal of International Relations”, 26 (2020), 2, pp. 372-96; M. CALCULLI, *Reconceiving the Struggle Between Non-State Armed Organizations, the State and the International in the Middle East*, in L. SADIKI (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics*, Routledge, London 2020, pp. 419-431.

self-government for a few European nations, keeping the colonial architecture of the world intact. It then explores the dynamic of the battle, especially during 1917 and 1919, and finally shows why the Leninist – rather than the Wilsonian – meaning of self-determination triumphed, ultimately becoming an international norm after World War II. The revisionist history of self-determination ultimately serves a wider objective: it indicates how ideological confrontations to advance rival visions of world order have far-reaching and devastating consequences in the real world.

2. Lenin's Self-Determination

In 1914, Lenin published *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, where he defended the “complete equality of rights for all nations”³. Lenin equated the “freedom to secede” to the “freedom to divorce”, accusing critics of both forms of freedom to be hypocritical defenders of privileges, leading to the “subordination of the proletariat to the bourgeoisie’s policy”⁴. He saw attacks on the right to self-determination, which came from several currents, including Marxists such as Rosa Luxemburg, as a “defence of the privileges of the dominant nation and police methods of administration, to the detriment of democratic methods”⁵. In this way, he aimed to clear once and for all a question that had been long discussed among Marxists, especially at the London Congress of the Second International in 1896, which endorsed the “right of nations to self-determination and opposition to colonialism”⁶.

In particular, Lenin offered a scathing critique of Rosa Luxemburg’s position on nationality as something liable to fragment the unity of the proletariat. Luxemburg had criticised the 1905 programme of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), which had defended the view that “all nationalities forming the state have the right to self-determination”⁷. For Luxemburg, this position was an unacceptable concession to the bourgeois mindset which exalted the common belonging to the nation in order to distract workers from class struggle⁸. But

³ *Ibidem*, p. 451.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 414.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 415.

⁶ A summary of the proceedings of the London Congress of the Second International can be found online at: <https://www.marxists.org/glossary/events/c/congress-si.htm#1896>.

⁷ R. LUXEMBURG, *The National Question: Selected Writings by Rosa Luxemburg* (1907), NYU Press, New York 1976, p. 8.

⁸ Luxemburg claimed that “[t]he position a workers’ party assumes on the nationality

Lenin took the opposite view, dismissing Luxemburg’s stance⁹. He saw the achievement of full national self-determination as a necessary step towards the unification of the world proletariat – one in which the oppressed people could truly liberate themselves from the yoke of the oppressors. What Luxemburg saw as a concession to the bourgeoisie, was for Lenin a practical, strategic move. In his 1914 pamphlet he wrote that

the working class supports the bourgeoisie only in order to secure national peace [and] equal rights and to create the best conditions for the class struggle. Therefore, it is *in opposition to the practicality* of the bourgeoisie that the proletarians advance their *principles* in the national question; they always give the bourgeoisie *only conditional* support¹⁰.

Lenin’s radical approach was a reaction to the hierarchical order of nations as exemplified by the Czarist Empire. Since “the nation” was an instrument in the hands of the bourgeoisie to justify the oppression of other nations, Lenin believed the proletariat had to mobilise the same instrument as part of a gradualist approach to eradicate “all inequality, all privileges, and all exclusiveness”¹¹. These observations were intimately linked to his anticolonial critique of World War I, which he considered as nothing more than an “armed struggle between the ‘Great’ Powers for the artificial preservation of capitalism by means of colonies, monopolies, privileges and national oppression of every kind”¹². In his famous 1916 *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin defined the war as “imperialist (that is, an annexationist, predatory, war of plunder) [...] a war for the division of the world, for the partition and repartition of colonies and spheres of influence of finance capital”¹³.

question [...] must differ in method and basic approach from the positions of even the most radical bourgeois parties” (R. LUXEMBURG, *The National Question*, cit., p. 8). Luxemburg’s position on self-determination was also consistent with her own political activism. In particular, when in 1893 she founded the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (*Socjaldemokracja Królestwa Polski i Litwy*), together with Leo Jogiches, she had advocated for a socialist revolution and staunchly opposed the pursuit of national self-determination before the establishment of socialism. See: T. KOWALIK - R. LUXEMBURG, *Theory of Accumulation and Imperialism*, Palgrave, London 2014, p. vii.

⁹ D. WHITEHALL, *A Rival History of Self-Determination*, “European Journal of International Law”, 27 (2016), 3, pp. 719-743.

¹⁰ V.I. LENIN, *Collected Works*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1976, p. 409; emphasis mine.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² V.I. LENIN, *Socialism and the War*, in R. TUCKER (ed.), *The Lenin Anthology*, Norton, New York 1975 (1914), p. 186.

¹³ V.I. LENIN, *Collected Works*, cit., pp. 189-190.

In this vein, as early as 1915 the foreign policy Lenin envisioned for Russia, in the case of victory against the Tsar, was based on the promotion of a world revolution, “without annexations, without indemnities”¹⁴. Lenin’s understanding of self-determination became also central in the rationale of the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917. As August H. Nimtz notes, the very first decree of the Soviet government, drafted by Lenin himself, was about war and land seizure. It called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, “without annexations i.e., without the seizure of foreign lands, without the forcible incorporation of foreign lands”¹⁵. Though, Lenin did not see the world revolution he had hoped following the Bolshevik revolution, and embraced a more pragmatic foreign policy until he died in 1924¹⁶. But Lenin’s views resonated widely in the colonized world, which is only partially the result of the attractiveness of Marxism-Leninism among the colonized people. In fact, as the contours of a transnational anticolonial struggle were starting to take shape after World War I, another emerging world power seemed ready to embrace self-determination, alongside Russia: the United States. In 1919, US President Woodrow Wilson proposed his famous “fourteen points” at the Versailles conference, outlining his vision for a durable peace. Wilson challenged the colonial order the European empires were so eager to preserve. But his ideas about colonialism were very different from Lenin’s.

3. *Wilson’s Self-Determination*

The dominant view on the origin of the principle of self-determination is a liberal story. It is presented as a principle of the legacy of the French Revolution that was finally elevated to its current status by the fateful intervention of Wilson¹⁷. There is little if any reference to the long-standing debate about this principle among diverse Marxist currents, or the contribution of Lenin in particular. This is an unwarranted omission because only when recovering this part of the story do we understand

¹⁴ R. GREGOR, *Lenin, Revolution, and Foreign Policy*, “International Journal”, 22 (1967), 4, p. 571.

¹⁵ A.H. NIMTZ, *Marxism versus Liberalism. Comparative Real-Time Political Analysis*, Springer, London-New York 2019, p. 206.

¹⁶ S. KULL, *Burying Lenin: The Revolution in Soviet Ideology and Foreign Policy*, Routledge, London 2019.

¹⁷ R. EMERSON, *Self-Determination*, “American Journal of International Law”, 65 (1971), 3, pp. 459-475; D. PHILPOTT, *In Defense of Self-Determination*, cit.

its meaning, use and reception. The popularized understanding of the principle of self-determination as “independence from external rule” is attributed to Wilson, but it comes straight from Lenin.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that the principle of self-determination was never central in Wilson’s Liberal Internationalist project. To begin with, there is no trace of the notion of self-determination in Wilson’s speeches and writings before 1914¹⁸. As Trygve Throntveit further notices, the term was absent even from the three major speeches that are usually considered as the cornerstone of Wilson’s Liberal Internationalism: the discourse on the *Democratic Platform* of 1916, the *Peace without Victory* speech of 1917 and the *Fourteen Points* of 1918-1919¹⁹.

More crucially, Wilson had a much more restrictive understanding of the principle, with which he sought to expand American influence without disrupting the colonial system²⁰. Even in the (very few) occasions in which he used the term “self-determination”, he actually referred to what we should better name “self-government”²¹. Wilson never promoted equality among nations, but rather the idea that the ruled had a right to have a say about how they were ruled. This notion was not incompatible with the preservation of an imperial, hierarchic global order. Quite on the contrary, it was essentially based on an idea of the world as founded on racial hierarchies.

Wilson was committed to democracy, but he was firmly convinced that only white people could appreciate this form of rule²². In his 1889 reflections about *The State: Elements of History and Practical Politics*, he thought non-white people as unfit for democracy and prone to despotism, which he saw as “involuntary, inbred” and born out of the habit of the race²³. He remained committed to a non-egalitarian worldview until the end of his life. If anything, he was willing to make colonial rule more humane – a paternalistic idea that the League of Nations fully embraced under his influence (albeit creating a further hiatus between the words

¹⁸ A. LYNCH, *Woodrow Wilson and the Principle of “National Self-Determination”: A Reconsideration*, “Review of International Studies”, 28 (2002), 2, p. 424.

¹⁹ T. THRONTVEIT, *The Fable of the Fourteen Points: Woodrow Wilson and National Self-Determination: The Fable of the Fourteen Points*, “Diplomatic History”, 35 (2011), 3, p. 448.

²⁰ A. CASSESE, *Self-Determination of Peoples: A Legal Reappraisal*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995.

²¹ T. THRONTVEIT, *The Fable of the Fourteen Points*, cit.

²² G. GERSTLE, *Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson*, in J.M. COOPER (ed.), *Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson: Progressivism, Internationalism, War, and Peace*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Washington D.C. - Baltimore 2008, pp. 93-124.

²³ Cited in T. THRONTVEIT, *The Fable of the Fourteen Points*, p. 451.

and deeds of imperial powers which embraced the League principles, whilst continuing to rule through violent oppression in their colonies and mandates)²⁴.

Such paternalistic attitude is traceable in Wilson's approach toward the US colonial occupation of the Philippines. In Wilson's perspective, the US were "defending peoples who are trodden upon and degraded by corrupt and selfish governors"²⁵. The notion that colonialism was essentially an enforcement of self-government is best articulated in the 1912 *Speech of Acceptance* in which Wilson said:

We are not the owners of the Philippines Islands. We hold them in trust for the people who live in them [...] It is our duty, as trustees, to make whatever arrangement of government will be most serviceable to their freedom and development²⁶.

Colonialism was never in question. In fact, when the New York Anti-Imperialist League, that was established with the purpose of opposing the American annexation of the Philippines, asked Wilson to sign a letter in support for Philippines' independence, Wilson responded: "I do not think the movement in favour of Philippine independence either wise or opportune"²⁷.

However, in 1917 Wilson became more articulate about self-determination, outlining his idea of the world as one in which:

no nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people, but [...] every people should be left free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little along with the great and powerful²⁸.

²⁴ On the discrepancy between what the League of Nations said it was and the way League members actually behaved in the colonies and new mandates established by the League, see S. PEDERSEN, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015.

²⁵ Cited in A.H. NIMTZ, *Marxism versus Liberalism. Comparative Real-Time Political Analysis*, cit., p. 194.

²⁶ W. WILSON, *Speech of Acceptance*, in J.W. DAVIDSON (ed.) *A Crossroad of Freedom: The 1912 Campaign Speeches of Woodrow Wilson*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1956, p. 18.

²⁷ Cited in A.H. NIMTZ, *Marxism versus Liberalism, Comparative Real-Time Political Analysis*, cit., p. 194.

²⁸ Quoted in A. SHARP, *The Genie that Would Not Go Back into the Bottle National Self-Determination and the Legacy of the First World War and the Peace Settlement*, in S. DUNN - T.G. FRASER (eds.), *Europe and Ethnicity: The First World War and Contemporary Ethnic Conflict*, Routledge, London and New York 1996, p. 10.

But what nations did Wilson have in mind at this point in history? Since the end of World War I was approaching, his focus was solely on Europe, and on those nations under German domination more specifically. He was interested in liberating Poland, Bohemia, Yugoslavia and Romania from German rule. It is in this light that we need to understand his support for the League of Nations. In the speech he delivered in front of the American Congress in 1919, praising the League, he said:

All the nations that Germany meant to crush and reduce to the status of tools in her own hands have been redeemed by this war and given the guarantee of the strongest nations of this world that nobody shall invade their liberty again²⁹.

Otherwise, his hierarchical worldview did not change after the end of the war. Wilson was not interested in people living under external and brutal colonial domination outside of Europe. His embracement of self-determination was dependent on his particular, historically determined interests, and very far from Lenin's universalist approach to self-determination. But Versailles became a major turning point in world history, not just in Europe. In 1919, people in the colonies had genuinely believed that Wilson could help them get rid of European imperial rule. Their aspirations, however, were shattered and dismissed, forcing them to (re)discover Lenin.

4. Self-Determination as a Semantic Battleground

We have seen what Lenin and Wilson respectively meant by self-determination: the former embraced a *literal*, universalist notion of the term, whilst the latter espoused a *lax*, particularistic one. But how did these two understandings of the principle interact in the complex, transitional moment of the end of the World War I? This question is crucial to retrieve the dialectic between the American and the Bolshevik worldviews that started to take shape at that point in history. Lenin and Wilson were undoubtedly the champions of this dialectic, especially in the period from 1917 to 1924. They "not only read the same events in real-time but knew, as well, how each other was responding to them – including, most importantly, the actions of each other" – Nimitz argues³⁰.

²⁹ Wilson's Speech in Support of the League of Nations, 5 September 1919, Digital Public Library in America, [online] available at: <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/treaty-of-versailles-and-the-end-of-world-war-i/sources/1892>.

³⁰ A.H. NIMTZ, *Marxism versus Liberalism. Comparative Real-Time Political Analysis*, cit., p. 184.

One important site in which this dialectic manifested itself was the *language*. Both the United States and Russia adopted new *common* words to make sense of the *fin-de-siècle* exhaustion of the Eurocentric imperial order. Self-determination was a prominent one among them. But even as the United States and Russia were on the same page about overcoming a European-dominated world order, they differed greatly on the ways they intended to achieve this goal: the former sought to subvert global hierarchies; the latter sought to preserve and preside over them. National self-determination – as the core principle informing the constitution of an inter-*national* order – became the battleground of a semantic struggle, in a way preceding and informing the political struggle over the egalitarian or hierarchical nature of the world order that was yet to come.

After the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, Wilson began to seriously worry about the potential contagious effect of Marxism-Leninism. This feeling was shared by liberal politicians and intellectuals across Europe, for whom Marxism-Leninism represented the outmost threat to liberalism³¹. The strategic competition between the United States and Western Europe on the one hand, and the Soviet Union on the other, was never separated from the ideological character of the struggle. Lenin had directly challenged Western commitment to the Great War as a colonial enterprise to preserve capitalism³². Moreover, as the war was coming to an end, he sought to conclude a separate peace with Germany – that is what he eventually did.

Wilson was aware of the appeal Marxism-Leninism had in the West, and was in search for a new approach to neutralize it. One way he tried to do so was by co-opting Lenin's ideas and language about equality and self-determination with the aim of neutralizing them. Wilson's 14 points were largely a response to the growing appeal of Marxism-Leninism – as also Manela concedes³³. But the Bolsheviks also took advantage of this linguistic shift and used it to entrap Wilson in his own liberal contradictions³⁴. They publicized the speech in which Wilson claimed that every

³¹ J. MOREFIELD, *Covenants without Swords: Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2016, p. 62.

³² See *supra*, notes 12 and 13.

³³ E. MANELA, *Wilson and Lenin*, "Diplomatic History", 42 (2018), 4, pp. 521-524. The position Manela takes in this article is interesting because he revises his own previous position on Wilson as the major inspirer of the anti-colonial movement in the non-Western world (see: E. MANELA, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009).

³⁴ On "liberal contradictions" see in particular: J. MOREFIELD, *Covenants without Swords*,

nation should determine its own polity, especially as Wilson had directly addressed the Russians therein.

It did not take too much for Wilson's strategic embracement of self-determination to cause a backlash. Some figures in Wilson's entourage anticipated the storm. Most notably, Secretary of State Robert Lansing asked:

When the President talks of "self-determination", what unit has he in mind? Does he mean a race, a territorial area, or a community? [...] It will raise hopes which can never be realized. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives. In the end it is bound to be discredited, to be called the dream of an idealist who failed to realize the danger until it was too late³⁵.

Yet the force of the principle of self-determination had been unleashed, and escaped the control of Wilson and the liberal politicians who initially appropriated the principle in order to domesticate it. Wilson himself seemed to have realized that, before falling ill and stepping back from the stage of that transitional historical moment. "When I gave utterance to those words [that "all nations had a right to self-determination"] – he said in his address to the congress at the end of 1919 – I said them without the knowledge that nationalities existed, which are coming to us day after day"³⁶. Sidney Sonnino, the Italian foreign minister, who represented Italy at the Versailles Conference argued that "the War undoubtedly had had the effect of overexciting the feeling of nationality [...] Perhaps America fostered it by putting the principles so clearly"³⁷.

Whereas Wilson and the United States were eager to use self-determination as a tool to *merely* contain the Soviets and remake Europe through punishing Germany, the principle had already spread across the non-West. Its genie could not be put back in the bottle and had already released the unexpected energy which eventually put an end – at least formally – to European colonialism. What is more, it forced the West, very much against its initial intention, to embrace it as a universal – not *ad hoc* – principle, and accept it to be enshrined in the United Nations Charter signed in San Francisco in 1945.

cit.; on Wilson's contradictions see: A.H. NIMTZ, *Marxism versus Liberalism. Comparative Real-Time Political Analysis*, cit., p. 232.

³⁵ Quoted in M. MACMILLAN, *The War that Ended Peace: Paris 1919*, John Murray, London 2019, p. 4.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

5. *The Reception of Self-Determination in the Non-West and its Backlash in the West*

By the time in which self-determination became popular in Europe and the West, people in the colonized world were increasingly calling for independence from colonial rule³⁸. They were ready to challenge European liberal contradictions between their rhetoric of compassionate colonialism and their unashamedly brutal violence through which they maintained their power in the colonies.

Such contradictions became crystal-clear at the Versailles Conference. Non-Western leaders travelled *en masse* to France, eager to use the “Versailles momentum” to liberate themselves from the yoke of European colonialism. Among those who entered the Versailles Palace in June 1919, there was for instance a young Vietnamese, Nguyen Tat Thanh, who became much better known with the *nom de guerre* he acquired some years later: Ho Chi Minh. As David Priestland recalls, Nguyen arrived in Versailles with a petition he intended to deliver to Wilson directly. The only response he received was a letter from Wilson’s senior adviser with the promise to pay attention to his requests³⁹. According to Priestland, this is what led Nguyen look towards the Soviet Union. The conference was a “tragedy” even for the young Mao Zedong who published his views on it in the “Xiang River Review”, encouraging people to direct their hopes towards Bolshevik Russia⁴⁰. Leaders from all over the former Ottoman land also travelled to Versailles to claim independence. Some Arab delegations were even denied entry to Versailles, for France and Great Britain had already concluded a secret agreement in 1916 – the infamous Sykes-Picot agreement – to divide the Arab world into spheres of influence and preferred to avoid the embarrassment of confronting the requests of Arab leaders they had already secretly betrayed⁴¹.

As a reaction to this betrayal, 1919 became the year of anti-imperial revolutions across the Middle East and North Africa. Guerrilla groups in Libya, Egypt, Palestine and Tunisia declared independence. The year after, protests erupted in Iraq and Morocco. The British Royal Air Force

³⁸ J. CHALCRAFT, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016, pp. 198-302.

³⁹ D. PRIESTLAND, *The Red Flag. A History of Communism*, Allen Lane, London 2009, pp. 324-325.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ P. SLUGLETT, *An Improvement on Colonialism? The “A” Mandates and Their Legacy in the Middle East*, “International Affairs”, 90 (2014), 2, pp. 413-427.

responded by bombing protesters in both Iraq and Egypt⁴². In the 1920s a large popular resistance exploded in Syria against the French occupation of the country (legitimated by a mandate by the League of Nations), and lasted until the French *Troupes du Levant* left Damascus in 1946⁴³.

The newly-established Soviet government found a role to play in the Middle East. On 20 December 1919, Moscow addressed an appeal, signed by Lenin, *To All the Working Muslims of Russia and the East*, according to which “all Muslims had the right to be the masters of their country and decide their own destiny as they wished”⁴⁴. Egypt was one of the first countries to feel the impact of Soviet influence, where the term “Soviets” appeared for the first time during the revolution of 1919⁴⁵. Similarly, the model of the October revolution was embraced by anti-colonial movements in Iran, Afghanistan and Yemen. The Soviet Union recognized the independence of Yemen in 1926, whilst the country was still under enormous pressure by Great Britain and Italy⁴⁶. Communist parties started to emerge and organize across the entire region during the interwar period⁴⁷, establishing a long-lasting legacy that deeply penetrated the politics of Middle Eastern States until the end of the Cold War⁴⁸. Marxism-Leninism provided a powerful ideological resource to expose and contest the hypocrisy of Western imperialism, especially during the interwar period. But it also offered an anchor to a variety of political parties claiming self-determination across the region after the formal end of European colonialism⁴⁹.

The popularity of self-determination put the West – and the United States in particular – in a very difficult position. They had never intend-

⁴² H.A.H. OMAR, *The Arab Spring of 1919*, “The London Review of Books”, 4 April 2019, [online] available at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2019/april/the-arab-spring-of-1919>.

⁴³ D. NEEP, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014. Reprint s.l., Cambridge University Press, 2014.

⁴⁴ A. VASILIEV, *Russia’s Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin*, Routledge, London and New York 2018.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁴⁷ W.Z. LAQUEUR, *The Appeal of Communism in the Middle East*, “Middle East Journal”, 9 (1955), 1, pp. 17-27.

⁴⁸ L. FELIU - F.I. BRICHS (eds.), *Communist Parties in the Middle East: 100 Years of History*, Routledge, New York 2019.

⁴⁹ M. CALCULLI, *Self-Determination at All Costs: Explaining the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Axis*, “Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Economics, History and Political Science”, 54 (2020), 2, pp. 95-118.

ed to turn self-determination into an international norm but had embraced it only as an *ad hoc* instrument to pursue limited and contingent goals. Yet, by the end of World War II, the West was no longer able to control the force of self-determination, as the entire world was claiming it, following (intentionally or unintentionally) Lenin's literal and universalist understanding of it. As World War II ended, the "United States National Security Council" explained that "19th century imperialism" was no longer appropriate for it represented "an ideal culture for the breeding of the Communist virus"⁵⁰. By then, the United States could not prevent self-determination from becoming an international norm and a right, enshrined in the United Nations Charter of 1945 and, later, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.

6. Conclusion

The chapter has shown that the principle of self-determination was incorporated into a liberal worldview and became an international norm after 1945 against the intents of liberal internationalists, and especially Woodrow Wilson, who was responsible for popularizing the principle between 1918 and 1919. This was the result of the inter-war mutual containment between the Americans and the Soviets. Amidst such ideological antagonism, a mimetic interlocking dynamic emerged, whereby the liberal side tried to neutralize the ideological appeal of Marxism-Leninism, by appropriating and denaturalizing its rhetorical appeal. But, ironically, the strategy had the opposite effect: instead of reframing the principle according to their likes, the United States had to accept a meaning of self-determination as it was intended by the majority of the world (and much closer to how Lenin had first conceived of it).

Indeed, instead of Wilson, we should credit Lenin for the emergence of self-determination as international norm. Yet, the battle between Wilson and Lenin over the meaning of self-determination has implications that go much beyond the establishment of the correct paternity of the principle. First of all, the battle itself is revealing of the fundamentally ideological nature of the competition which later informed the Cold War – what David Priestland brilliantly defines as "ideological security"⁵¹. Secondly, this story is crucial to understand the reasons why liberals can-

⁵⁰ Quoted in D. PRIESTLAND, *The Red Flag*, cit., p. 232.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 221.

not distance from, and yet have so many problems with self-determination until the present day.

These problems arise from the very fact that, whilst Western states had to accept a fundamentally Marxist principle (all whilst denying it), they always aimed to combine self-determination with domination and hierarchy, even after the formal dismantlement of their colonial empires. Indeed, in spite of the claim that the post-1945 world order – the so-called "Liberal World Order" – was built on the principle of "sovereign equality", hierarchy and domination were and continue to be fundamentally constitutive of it. Liberals ended up being entrapped in their own contradictions, and the delusional, impossible attempt to reconcile the practice of domination with the language of self-determination. This is ultimately why self-determination – conceded to some and negated to others – continues to be, in the eyes of many, an instrument of oppression rather than an instrument of emancipation.