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Review by Benjamin C. Montoya, University of Colorado, Boulder

Michael Cude’s article touches on themes of national identity, state building in the wake of World War I, and international conceptions of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s notion of self-determination. Cude’s argument builds on the interpretative turn sparked by Erez Manela’s book, The Wilsonian Moment: Self Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism, which addresses how Wilson’s principle of self-determination inspired colonized peoples across the world to express nationalism and to seek national autonomy.¹ Unlike that book, in which Manela focuses less on how smaller peoples related directly to Wilson in regards to their nationalist goals and instead examines how colonized peoples elaborated Wilson’s ideology of self-determination to undergird their development of anticolonial nationalism, Cude discusses how the Slovaks appealed to Wilson’s government in hopes of gaining U.S. support for Slovak nationhood.

The linchpin of Cude’s argument is that there was a fundamental difference between how Wilson’s ideal of self-determination was interpreted among Slovak autonomists (who sought an independent state), on the one hand, and Czech centralists (who sought to lead a new state comprised of Czechs and Slovaks) and U.S. government officials, on the other hand. The central argument of this article is that a Wilsonian coupling of modernity to self-determination precluded U.S. support of Slovak autonomy. Instead, Wilson and his advisors trusted Czechs—who were considered a modern people—to lead ‘Czechoslovakia’ in which the Czechs would guide the Slovaks to modernity, thereby assisting Slovak self-determination.

Cude argues that the United States squelched Slovak demands for autonomy in favor of promoting a Czech-led state. He supports his argument by demonstrating how the Czech leadership relied on modernist notions of self-determination to justify their administering of a new postwar state project that aligned the Czech and Slovak peoples. Cude situates his understanding of self-determination upon what historians have deemed a

civic interpretation of this concept, which held that common historical experience, rather than a strict delineation of nationality, should form the basis of state building (156). According to Cude, however, what is overlooked by this interpretation of self-determination is that Wilson prioritized “economic and political modernity as a necessary quality of self-government” (157). Cude argues that U.S. officials sought to recognize independent governments only for peoples whose “standard of modernity” allowed them to form a viable state, integrate less-developed peoples into those states, and teach lesser peoples modernity (“serve as guides and protectors”) (157).

Cude shows how Czech centralists utilized such an understanding of self-determination by promoting their modernism as evidence of their ability to uplift unsophisticated Slovaks. According to Cude, the Czechs justified their leadership of a combined state in two respects: their attributes as leaders, and the Slovaks’ inability to govern themselves. In regards to leadership, the Czechs touted their modern economy, and their historically active role in Austrian politics. Notably, the Czechs also pointed to their previous case of statehood. Czech leaders then referred to the shortcomings of Slovaks, a peasant people who practiced Catholicism and had no history of independent statehood (157).

Czech centralists propagandized Slovak backwardness to justify their leadership in a shared state (161). On the one hand, the Czechs pointed to common linguistic and cultural ties that warranted their joining with Slovaks into a single polity. On the other hand, Slovak backwardness—attributed to a millennium of Hungarian rule—fostered an image of “the Czech savior,” which would inculcate the benefits of modernity for the Slovak people (161). Also, the Czechs promised to industrialize the undeveloped parts of Slovakia (162). Eventually, U.S. officials agreed to the creation of Czechoslovakia because they were convinced of what Cude calls “the developmental legitimacy” of the Czech people (159). In contrast to other East Central European peoples, so U.S. leaders believed, the Czechs were a thoroughly modern people which could lead a viable state and uplift their non-modern brethren to the east, the Slovaks.

Slovak autonomists rejected the modernist framework that Czech centralists used to endorse their leadership, especially as it rested on the backwardness of the Slovaks. In response, the Slovaks mounted a robust defense of their right to independent statehood. A prime strength of this article is the way in which the author highlights how immigrant groups pressured U.S. policymakers to consider Slovak self-determination. This theme bears out as the author describes the Slovak-American community’s advocacy of Slovak statehood in East Central Europe. Cude shows how the effort occurred on both sides of the Atlantic, but that it was the Slovak-American community which led the way.

Throughout World War I, immigrant groups such as the Slovak League of America, which had agitated for Slovak autonomy within Hungary for decades before World War I, pressured the U.S. government and Czech centralists to give Slovaks equal say in a shared state. The author discusses two agreements brokered between representatives of the Slovak-American community and Czech leaders during the war which espoused equal partnership in the formation of a democratic republic and promoted Slovak autonomy to lead and administer themselves (163). Slovak Americans also appealed directly to the U.S. government to advocate for Slovak self-determination. An extensive propaganda campaign promoted reasons for Slovak autonomy by likening the American defense of liberty with the Slovak search for statehood and highlighting Slovak volunteerism in support of the U.S. war effort (164). The predominant theme of this propaganda was that the United States would be instrumental in helping the Slovaks accomplish their dream of independent statehood (164).
Ultimately, such efforts to promote the credibility of their autonomy failed to convince the Wilson administration that independent statehood was a viable option for the Slovak people. Cude points to cases of U.S. officials empathizing, even seeming to endorse Slovak nationalism, only to conclude such analyses—both academic and cursory—with shibboleths of the Slovaks’ backwardness and need for Czech guidance. In addition, Czech centralists opposed what they saw as Slovak efforts to undermine their plans to modernize. These leaders decried resistance to Czech leadership as an effort by an “unenlightened, unappreciated” minority working to destabilize Czechoslovakia (166). Finally, Cude states that Slovaks autonomists were no match for Czech centralists, who utilized their political connections and common vision of self-determination to persuade the Wilson administration to assent to the creation of Czechoslovakia.

A recurrent theme of the essay is the subsuming of Slovak nationality with Czech nationality by U.S. officials, as indicated by their referring to Czechoslovakia as “Bohemian.” (167) Such actions, Cude states, show how U.S. officials did not give equal consideration to Slovak national desires as they did Czech nationalism. Cude attributes this neglect to a modernist prejudice—shared among U.S. officials and Czech centralists—that the Slovaks were inherently backward. In other words, U.S. officials purposely circumscribed Slovak nationalism for the sake of building a robust, Czech-led state.

There is much to commend in this article. First, Cude’s discussion of the Slovak League of America enlightens readers to the ways in which immigrant groups in the United States tried to shape U.S. diplomacy toward their home regions. Second, Cude gives a sense of how smaller peoples of Europe utilized Wilson’s concept of self-determination to fight for independent statehood. This theme reminds us of how widespread and passionate the ‘Wilsonian moment’ was in the immediate years after World War I.

Yet, Cude runs the risk of overstating his argument when he claims that Czech centralists had a “stranglehold” on U.S. and West European leaders (167 and 178). It is not at all clear that, first, Czech diplomats wielded that much power over the Wilson administration and, second, that East-Central European affairs were so central to U.S. foreign policy interests in the postwar era. Additionally, alongside an analysis of how Wilson abandoned Slovak self-determination in principle should be a consideration of what the United States could realistically have done to support Slovak nationalism.

In a broader sense, this article would benefit from a better explanation of how the larger geopolitical context of peacemaking explained Wilson’s relative neglect of Slovak nationalism. How did the diplomatic pressures of formulating lasting postwar stability determine Wilson’s response to the Czech calls to lead a new state and to Slovak demands for self-determination? And Czech centralists offered the Western powers something Slovak autonomists could have been accused of disrupting: postwar security in East-Central Europe. Such considerations would help illuminate the practical concerns of postwar stability that forced Wilson to balance—even truncate—his propagated ideal of national self-determination with realpolitik. And such analysis may help complicate the author’s argument that Wilson squelched Slovak nationalism. Relations between the United States and Czechoslovakia after World War I would not have existed in a vacuum, nor should they be treated as such.

The author concludes his essay by suggesting that had the Wilson administration “shown more understanding and interest in the Slovaks, instead of supporting a system designed to squelch an independent Slovak state, future ethnic and nationalist conflict in East Central Europe could have been mitigated” (179). It is hard to see, however, how a view to respect the Slovaks’ “particularistic” self-determination held more promise for stability than a centralized Czech state in the heart of a war-scarred continent (157 and 179).
Benjamin C. Montoya earned his Ph.D. from the University of Colorado, Boulder. He studies U.S.-Mexican relations, and his dissertation, entitled “Risking ‘Immeasurable Harm’: The Diplomacy of Immigration Restriction in U.S.-Mexico Relations, 1924 to 1932”, considers how American efforts to place a quota on Mexican immigration affected foreign policy between the two nations. He is a co-editor of and contributor to Beyond 1917: American Legacies of the Great War, forthcoming from Oxford University Press. Also, his article, “‘A Grave Offense of Significant Consequences’: Three Mexican Perspectives on the U.S. attempt to place a quota on Mexico’s immigration during the late 1920s,” was recently accepted for publication by the Pacific Historical Review. Benjamin currently teaches for the History Department and the International Affairs Department at the University of Colorado, Boulder, while he seeks a permanent position within academia.

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