

The United States and Estonia, 1918–1921: Approval de facto before Recognition

Eero Medijainen

University of Tartu, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Institute of
History and Archaeology, Ülikooli 18, 50090 Tartu, Estonia;
eero.medijainen@ut.ee

Abstract. In terms of population, the Republic of Estonia was the smallest country to gain independence after the First World War. While according to President Woodrow Wilson's policies, the United States was considered a supporter of small countries, gaining de jure recognition for Estonia from America was a complicated issue. This article analyses Estonia's struggle for recognition through the triangle of American-Bolshevik-Estonian relations during the years 1918–1921. In achieving recognition, economic rather than political or ideological arguments became decisive.

Keywords: Estonian independence; de facto and de jure recognition; President Woodrow Wilson's policy; self-determination.

INTRODUCTION

Before the outbreak of the First World War, there were about 50 independent states. At the end of the war, many nations applied for the same status. Independence was achieved by about a dozen new small countries, most of them in Europe.¹ This process has often been

¹ President Wilson announced on 28th June 1919 that the Great War and subsequent peace conference had liberated more than a hundred million people from imperial rule, and nine new democratic countries were established in Europe (he meant evidently Austria, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Yugoslavia,

associated with the name of Woodrow Wilson and his new world order. As Wilson began preparing for his second term, and for the United States to enter World War I, the President gave a 12-minute speech at a meeting on 27th May 1916. In his speech, Wilson confirmed his plan to break the US out of isolation, as it had become part of the world, and the interests of other nations seemed to be part of those of America. In the President's view, this included three principles. Firstly, the right of all peoples to choose the government they wanted; secondly, he argued that small countries deserved the same respect as large ones; and thirdly, the world had the right to escape the disturbances caused by aggression and disregard for the rights of peoples and small nations. This speech marked a turning point in world history.² The President's speech gave new perspectives for many small nations, including Estonia.

For contemporaries, the main novelty in the diplomacy of the US primarily meant propaganda slogans that were developed to justify entering the war. The noblest of these was the plan to make the world safe for democracy and, for this purpose, the US had to enter the war to end all wars. Later, there has been justified doubt whether the slogans formulated by Wilson were original, or if they were formulated in the US at all. Quite a bit was taken over from Europe, including a new, open, democratic diplomacy programme.³ Moreover, events in eastern and central Europe, particularly in Russia, compelled the usage of the slogans of new diplomacy.⁴ After the war, a number of important changes took place in international relations as well as in legal and behavioural norms. We can even talk about the beginning of a new era in world history. Central to these changes were the achievements of the Paris Peace Conference and the aftermath of the decisions reached during its course. It is often claimed that the new system of international relations was established there.

Estonia is suitable for testing the values upon which an attempt was made to establish new relations between states after the war. For example, elsewhere, new contradictions were associated with the application of the principle of self-determination when two or more nations claimed the same territory. Unfortunately, this was the case

and not Ireland). See: P. O'Toole. *The Moralists: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2018, 400.

2 P. O'Toole. *The Moralists*, 205–206.

3 T. J. Knock. *To End all Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, 37.

4 A. J. Mayer. *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917–1918*. Vintage Books, New York, 1970, 35.

all over eastern Europe.⁵ In the case of Estonia, the contradictions in establishing the border with Latvians were minimal and of no wider significance. This article examines Estonia, the smallest among the new countries, as a successful example of Wilsonian policy – even though Wilson himself never officially recognised Estonia. I will examine this issue through the Estonia-US-Russia triangle. Estonian politicians and Bolsheviks in Russia had somewhat similar relationships with the US. Both were interested in achieving recognition, or at least economic and trade relations with the US. I speculate even that, if the Allies had recognised the authority of the Bolsheviks in Russia immediately after they took power, Estonia's independence would not have materialised.

Nowadays, extensive research on Wilson's contribution and legacy is available, including concise historiographical reviews.⁶ Wilson never considered the principle of self-determination to be universal, or applicable anytime and anywhere.⁷ At the end of the war, the aspirations of many nations of the British and French empires for independence became increasingly visible.⁸ Wilson was not in favour of the Allies' imperialist ambitions, but he was convinced that most colonial nations would not yet be ready for independence. Besides, applying the principle of self-determination to the winners was complicated. Therefore, Ireland's full independence was similarly not recognised until 1922, and the attitude towards Armenia remained ambiguous. The Armenians were divided between Turkey and Russia. The winning countries sympathised with the Armenians, but the country was not recognised. The *de facto* recognition promised to Armenia by Wilson in April 1920 seemed a desperate step, and one that was of little help to Armenia anymore.⁹

Before Wilson, the idea of self-determination had undergone a long development. It was associated primarily with the independence of the US itself, but also with the German Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the creation of nation states in the nineteenth century. The term was used by Karl Marx to explain overcoming the alienation of human beings. By the beginning of the twentieth century, self-determination became important for the left-leaning political parties in

- 5 L. Wolff. *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2020, 98–99.
- 6 L. E. Ambrosius. *Woodrow Wilson and American Internationalism*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2017.
- 7 J. M. Cooper. *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2009, 423–424.
- 8 E. Manela. *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, 15–62.
- 9 C. Laderman. *Sharing the Burden: The Armenian Question, Humanitarian Intervention, and Anglo-American Visions of Global Order*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2019, 127, 181.

eastern and central Europe. Thus, the concept of the individual initially developed into a programme of action for nations seeking liberation from empires.¹⁰ The term itself gained international significance in the summer of 1917, when it became prevalent in discussions about Russia's future.¹¹ This principle had become so popular throughout eastern Europe that it was adopted by almost all political forces. Even the peace negotiations between the Bolsheviks and the Central Powers and their outcome, important points in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, were linked to the principle of self-determination. Prior to that, Germany had already offered independence to Poland, Lithuania, and the Baltic German assemblies of Estonia, Livonia, and Courland. Although the plan to grant full independence to the Baltic governments was discussed at the German *Reichtag*, it was not realised in the additional Berlin Treaty of 27th August 1918.¹² Nevertheless, the Brest peace treaty can be considered to mark the end of the Russian Empire.¹³

Today, self-determination seems to be becoming a phenomenon inherent in human rights, or rather scholastic interpretation of the idea, and it is losing its historical uniqueness, its connection with Wilsonianism and nation-building after the First World War. Self-determination is losing its special, unique significance associated with the establishment of the highest degree of the emancipation of nations – the state.¹⁴

From the days of the Estonian foreign delegation in 1917/1918 to 1921, numerous attempts were made to send a representative to the US. Efforts were made to appoint members of foreign delegations, well-known Estonian politicians, officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as several Estonians who had previously emigrated to the US, students who started studying there at the beginning of independence, and even American citizens as envoys, consuls, or, simply representatives. These experiments deserve attention, but are beyond the scope of this article. Albert N. Tarulis, a historian of Lithuanian origin, was the first to write a comprehensive study of the efforts of the Baltic states to achieve *de jure* recognition from the US and to appoint official representatives.¹⁵

10 E. D. Weitz. *Self-Determination: How a German Enlightenment Idea Became the Slogan of National Liberation and a Human Right*. – *The American Historical Review*, 2015, 120, 2, 462–496.

11 J. A. Sanborn. *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and destruction of the Russian Empire*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, 246–247.

12 A. Tooze. *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916–1931*. Penguin Books, New York, 2015, 135–137, 107, 164–165.

13 J. A. Sanborn. *Imperial Apocalypse*. 233–234.

14 A. Moltchanova. *National Self-Determination and Justice in Multinational States*. Springer, Dordrecht, 2009.

15 A. N. Tarulis. *American-Baltic Relations 1918–1922: The Struggle over Recognition*. Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 1965.

Previous relations with the US have also begun to be investigated in the independent Baltic states. This has been done within the framework of compiling the entire history of the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic legations.¹⁶ Later, several historians of Estonian origin have been interested in problems of how the presidents of the US, the principle of self-determination, and the achieving of independence were connected.¹⁷ The Latvian historian Ēriks Jēkabsons has completed a comprehensive account of the relations between Latvia and the US, mainly regarding the aid of the US Red Cross and American Relief Administration to Latvia in the years 1918–1922, in which he also provides an overview of the formation of missions.¹⁸

FIRST CONTACTS WITH AMERICANS

With the support of the Estonian Provincial Assembly, the first foreign representatives rushed to seek recognition and support at the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1918. In January 1918, Estonians Jaan Poska and Julius Seljamaa, elected to the Russian Constituent Assembly, visited foreign diplomatic embassies in Petrograd. At the US Embassy, they were greeted by Counsellor Joshua Butler Wright on 25th January. Estonians informed him of Germany's promise to recognise their independence on the condition that they agreed to become a protectorate. The guests informed the Counsellor that Estonia would have preferred to be part of a Russian Republic as an autonomous region, but this possibility was no longer considered realistic. They were interested in whether the US would also be ready to guarantee Estonia independence if Russia did so. Estonians referred to self-determination, but they did not yet emphasise the desire for national independence. They formulated a dilemma, presenting the issue of recognition as a temporary solution until the Russian Constituent Assembly or a peace conference convened. They went on to explain that the homogeneous population of Estonia

16 E. Medijainen. Saadiku saatuse Eesti välisministeerium ja saatkonnad 1918–1940. Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, Tallinn, 1997.

17 O. Arens. United States Policy Toward Estonia and the Baltic states 1918–1920 and 1989–1991. – Ajalooline Ajakiri, 2016, 3/4 (157/158), 347–368; O. Arens. Wilson, Lansing ja Hoover: Ameerika välispoliitika ja Eesti riigi tekkimine. – Acta Historica Tallinnensia 2006, 10, 60–68; H. Kalm. Enesemääramise paleus ja pragmaatika: Tartu versus Pariis. – Ajalooline Ajakiri, 2020, 3/4, (173/174), 243–301; M. Kuldkepp. Rahvusliku enesemääramise kaudu Saksamaa külge: eestlased anneksionistliku Saksa poliitika sihtmärgina 1918. aasta okupatsiooni eel. – Esimene maailmasõda ja Eesti II. Toim. T. Tannberg. Eesti Ajalooarhiiv, Tartu, 2016, 369–433.

18 Ē. Jēkabsons. Latvijas un Amerikas Savienoto Valstu attiecības 1918.–1922. gadā. Latvijas Vēstures institūta apgāds, Rīga, 2018.

is equally opposed to the restoration of tsarist Russia as well as its transformation into a German protectorate.¹⁹ Counsellor Wright was of the opinion that the Bolsheviks did not represent Russia and they were under German influence.²⁰ At the meeting, the Estonians assured Wright that if they received US recognition, it would be easier for them to resist German influence. Estonia's independence was initially asked to be recognised conditionally and temporarily, or at least to be given a promise that the issue would be discussed at a peace conference and that Estonia would be invited. By that time, internal relations at the US Embassy in Petrograd had become quite tense.²¹ It is unlikely the arguments of the Estonians were taken into consideration at all.

A report of this visit was sent to Washington by Ambassador David R. Francis on 8th February. He confirmed that the Estonians were informed about US policy in detail, relying on both the general instructions received by the Embassy and the public statements by the President (evidently his Fourteen Points speech). In any case, Estonians apparently learned that the US would wait and see, but rely on the principles of democracy and hope that the majority of the Russian peoples would soon express their will.²² It can be concluded from this document that the request of Poska and Seljamaa was not very demanding, but rather one of providing information to US officials. At that time, the Americans were not asked to recognise either the Estonian Provincial Assembly or even the elected Estonian Constituent Assembly, let alone the Republic of Estonia. It was too early to do the latter; even the Independence Manifesto had not yet been published.

At the same time, the British Embassy in Stockholm confirmed to the US State Department that Great Britain was ready to recognise the Estonian Constituent Assembly *de facto*, as were France, and Italy. The Estonian foreign delegation – Jaan Tõnisson, Mihkel Martna, and Karl Menning – soon met with the US representatives in Copenhagen. A more serious conversation took place between US Naval Attaché John A. Gade and Secretary of the Embassy Lithgow Osborne on 5th April. The US Counsellor made a long presentation to the Secretary of State,

19 E. Medijainen. Self-Determination, Wilson and Estonia. – *Diplomaatia*, 2018, 173/174 <<https://icds.ee/en/self-determination-wilson-and-estonia/>>, accessed 23rd August 2022.

20 D. S. Foglesong. *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism: U.S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917–1920*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1995, 199–200.

21 W. T. Allison. *American Diplomats in Russia: Case Studies in Orphan Diplomacy, 1916–1919*. Praeger, Westport, 1997.

22 The Ambassador in Russia (Francis) to the Secretary of State, Petrograd. 8th February 1918, Papers Relating to the Foreign Relation of the United States, 1918. Russia, vol. II (further: FRUS). U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 1932, 816–817.

in which he stated that Estonians expect the same recognition from the US as was offered in the decree of national self-determination of the Bolsheviks.²³

As a clear answer was avoided in Washington, Ants Piip, who was appointed the representative of Estonia in England, addressed the US Embassy in London on 9th May with a statement that went beyond previous appeals.²⁴ He presented the US with three requests: 1) recognition of the Estonian Democratic Republic (no longer the Constituent Assembly or the Provincial Assembly) within its ethnic boundaries; 2) recognition of the Estonian Provisional Government as the only legal power in Estonia; and, 3) guarantee Estonia the right to participate in the forthcoming peace conference so that it can defend its interests, introduce the issue of permanent neutrality already proclaimed in the Independence Manifesto, and obtain international guarantees to Estonian neutrality. The State Department was not quick to respond, although the *de facto* recognition of Estonia by England and France, for example, was already known.

Ira Nelson Morris, the US Minister in Stockholm, was sympathetic to the Estonians' requests. At the time, the Estonian foreign delegation attempted to send one of its members to the US and, on 10th July, Ferdinand Kull asked the US legation for a visa to travel to America to clarify the situation. Morris supported the application.²⁵ Unfortunately, Washington refused to grant a visa without any explanation. It soon became clear that the Americans would not issue visas to any Estonian representative.²⁶

Almost a year earlier, a research group (The Inquiry) of about 150 specialists (historians, geographers, lawyers, sociologists, linguists, economists, etc.) was formed in the US. More than 20 of their experts accompanied the President to Paris. By the summer of 1918, experts were convinced that the separation of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Bessarabia, Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine from Russia should be considered because they should not be required to submit to the Bolsheviks' superiority. In the case of Estonia, Latvia and some other areas, experts recommended holding referendums.²⁷ At the same

23 The Charge in Denmark (Grant-Smith) to the Secretary of State, Copenhagen. 29th April 1918. – FRUS, 822–825.

24 The Estonian Delegation to the American Ambassador in Great Britain (Page) London. 3rd May 1918. – FRUS, 827–828.

25 The Minister in Sweden (Morris) to the Secretary of State, Stockholm. 11th July 1918. – FRUS, 831.

26 E. Virgo to J. Tõnisson. 27th August 1918, *Rahvusarhiiv*, ERA.1621.1.126.

27 L. E. Gelfand. *The Inquiry: American Preparations for Peace, 1917–1919*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1963, 210–214.

time, Wilson's closest foreign affairs aides could not reach a common conclusion. Secretary of State Robert Lansing was apparently unaware of the work on the research project coordinated by Colonel Edward M. House. He did not yet know that the President himself and his advisers were also coming to Europe. Lansing drafted his own guidelines for the future US delegation. In a memorandum signed on 21st September 1918, he recommended autonomy for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania within a Russian Federation. He confirmed that he understood the difficult situation of Estonians, but as the US had openly, officially, and repeatedly expressed friendship and loyalty to the Russian state and people, any premature step before the peace conference was convened should be avoided.²⁸ A year later, Lansing himself criticised the President for not following the principle of self-determination. At that time, he considered Estonians and other peripheral Russian peoples to be nations who, in his opinion, had the right to complete independence.²⁹ In 1918, the arguments of Estonians were not very convincing for other officials of the State Department either. The reason was not only the Americans' adherence to the concept of preserving Russia's integrity. The views of the Estonian politicians themselves changed during 1918, and primarily in an attitude towards a possible union with a Russian republic, federation, or some other potential democratic state structure that could have developed after the overthrow of the Bolsheviks.³⁰

THE BOLSHEVIKS' ATTEMPT TO GAIN RECOGNITION

By 1917, many Finns and Estonians living in America were relatively radical, as people with pronounced left-wing views left Russia after the events of 1905. Santeri Nuorteva (née Aleksander Neuberg) was one of the best-known Finns in America in early 1918. In March and April 1918, he tried to represent the Finnish Reds in America. Nuorteva was a well-known linguist and a skilled agitator. He received noteworthy attention in June 1918 when he organised a spectacular rally in New York in support of the recognition of Soviet Russia.³¹ It was there that it was decided

28 The Secretary of State to the British Charge (Barclay) Washington. 27th November 1918. – FRUS, 852–853.

29 R. Lansing. *The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative*. Kennikat Press, Port Washington, 1969, 99, 192.

30 E. Medijainen. *Ants Piip Eesti kohast rahvusvahelistes liitudes, 1918*. – *Kleio*, 1994, 9, 37–41.

31 A. Kostiaainen. *Santeri Nuorteva and the Origins of Soviet-American Relations*. – *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 1972, 15, 1–14.

to establish the Soviet Russian Recognition League (SRRL). The rally received special attention from the press as George V. Lomonossoff, an engineer who had been working on railway issues at the Russian Embassy, also participated. The Russian Provisional Government's Ambassador Boris A. Bakhmetev immediately dismissed the latter from the service of the Embassy, and Lomonossoff joined the Bolsheviks. The SRRL, which grew into the Soviet Information Bureau (see below) run by Ludwig (Christian Alexander Karl) Martens. Americans with liberal, socialist, and radical views, such as John Reed and William C. Bullitt, were among Nuorteva's closer social circle. He even gained the attention of Colonel House.³² House asked him for suggestions on who could potentially be sent to meet the Bolsheviks to represent the US.

Numerous studies and journalistic reviews have been written about the Paris Peace Conference, its main actors, the individual countries in the context of the conference's work and specific actions.³³ The US played a special role in this conference. The legal, economic, military, and political status of the latter differed from that of the other winners in World War I. The US went to war as a country associated with the Entente Powers and not as an Ally. Washington did not bind itself to commitments before, during, or even after the war as President Wilson did not trust the motives or goals of the Allies.³⁴

On issues related to Russia, the US delegation to the Paris Peace Conference and representatives of other countries were disconcerted.³⁵ It was not clear whether Russia should be treated as an Ally, a winner, or rather as an enemy during the conference. Bakhmetev, other Russian ambassadors, and leading emigrants formed their representative office in Paris, the Russian Political Congress. The issue of Russia required more attention and energy from the Allies during the peace conference than, for example, the problems of Germany or other Central Powers.³⁶

32 D. W. McFadden. *Alternative Paths: Soviets and Americans, 1917–1920*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, 273.

33 See: F. S. Marston. *The Peace Conference of 1919: Organization and Procedure*. Greenwood Press, Westport, 1981; A. Sharp. *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking in Paris, 1919*. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1991; C. R. Lovin. *A School for Diplomats: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919*. University Press of America, Lanham, 1997; *The Paris Peace Conference, 1919: Peace Without Victory?* Ed. by M. Dockrill, J. Fisher. Palgrave, New York, 2001; M. MacMillan. *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*. J. Murray, London, 2001; C. W. Melton. *Between War and Peace: Woodrow Wilson and the American Expeditionary Force in Siberia, 1918–1921*. Mercer University Press, Macon, 2001; M. MacMillan. *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*. Random House, New York, 2002.

34 I. Floto. *Colonel House in Paris: A Study of American Policy at the Paris Peace Conference 1919*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1980, 25.

35 A. Walworth. *Wilson and His Peacemakers: American Diplomacy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919*. Norton, New York, 1986.

36 A. J. Mayer. *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918–1919*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1967, 285–287.

Official relations with the Bolsheviks were not considered possible, but they could not be completely ignored either. Wilson's views and motives for action have been much debated and it is uncertain whether he was inclined to support the relatively Bolshevik-friendly (or at least tolerant) views of House, his special representative, or the more anti-Bolshevik views of Lansing, the Secretary of State.³⁷

The Russian Provisional Government had promised its border nations and minorities autonomy and decentralisation of power. After the coup, the Bolsheviks offered the right of self-determination until their separation from Russia. At the end of 1918, Paris was faced with the problem of which government to recognise as Russia's representative, if the former empire could not be restored. The Soviet regime was partly able to take advantage of this confusion and develop a kind of quasi-diplomacy, playing on the controversies between the Allies.³⁸ US-Soviet relations between 1917 and 1921 have been studied in detail. It has thus been concluded that throughout 1918, Vladimir Lenin, Maksim Litvinov, and other Bolshevik leaders sought to increase American political, economic, and trade interests in Russia. They hoped to break through a possible Allied front via the US and were relatively successful in doing so.³⁹

The viewpoints of representatives of the US peace delegation, the State Department, and other institutions were far from homogeneous.⁴⁰ In addition, there was no consistency regarding recognition in international law. It must be borne in mind that *de facto* recognition itself is ambivalent. Firstly, there are differences between recognising a state and a government. At the end of the war, no one doubted that states like Russia or Turkey (unlike Austria-Hungary) would remain on the world map as countries. There was no doubt about the survival of the state, but rather which government would control and represent the new borders. Secondly, *de facto* recognition was not of fundamental importance, as any transaction between authorities of two countries could be interpreted as such without being publicly declared. Moreover, it was explained to Wilson at the beginning of his presidential career that the US was itself the result of a revolution and had always adhered to the principle that every government exists *de facto*, regardless of whether

37 D. S. Foglesong. *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism*, 4–5.

38 J. M. Thompson. *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1966, 91.

39 D. W. McFadden. *Alternative Paths*, 15–54.

40 E. P. Trani. *Woodrow Wilson and the Decision to Intervene in Russia: A Reconsideration*. – *The Journal of Modern History*, 1976, 48, 3, 440–461.

they came to power by universal suffrage or otherwise. Thus, Wilson's new diplomacy could also include his demand that only democratically formed governments should be recognised *de facto* in the future.⁴¹ Unfortunately, he was not very consistent in his demands, or in the distribution of recognition.

Wilson believed that a democratic Russia would help lead the world towards a liberal future. In the US, it was then believed that guaranteeing normal conditions and freedom of action for some parts of Russia – a functioning infrastructure, a market for agriculture, creating the conditions for free trade, and consolidating local government – would strengthen democracy in Russia in the typical Western sense. Wilson admitted that he was sweating blood thinking about what would be right and possible to do, fearing that Russia would disintegrate under his touch like mercury.⁴² It was hoped that US-Russia relations would continue to improve through providing loans and supporting the private sector.⁴³ We must bear in mind that the belief and hope that the Russian people would follow the example of the US on the path to democracy still remained in the days of the Paris Peace Conference. The Bolsheviks' rise to power in Russia a year earlier still seemed like a small obstacle that would disappear.⁴⁴ At the beginning of the peace conference, Estonia could count on Wilson's biased yet benevolent attitude of not wanting to interfere in Russia's affairs, but ready to support democracy in the border regions.

The Allies prepared for the peace conference in December 1918 and January 1919. The primary task of the peace conference was to end hostilities and ensure world peace. This was to be achieved everywhere, thus they were forced to respond to the resumption of hostilities in eastern Europe. All the more so that even in the truce with Germany, the Allies recognised the Germans as a potential force against the invasion of the Bolsheviks. This raised an ethical question – if the Estonian national forces were able to oppose the Bolsheviks, how would it be possible not to recognise Estonia, at least *de facto*? In addition, the American delegation received information about the democratic and individualistic mindset of Estonians, and their readiness to resist the Reds.⁴⁵ At least

41 P. O'Toole. *The Moralists*, 84–85.

42 L. Killen. *The Russian Bureau: A Case Study in Wilsonian Diplomacy*. The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1983, 5–32.

43 L. J. Bacino. *Reconstructing Russia: U.S. Policy in Revolutionary Russia, 1917–1922*. Kent State University Press, Kent, Ohio, London, 1999.

44 D. S. Foglesong. *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire": The Crusade for a "Free Russia" since 1881*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2007, 35.

45 A. M. Asgarov. *Reporting from the Frontlines of the First Cold War: American Diplomatic Despatches about the Internal Conditions in the Soviet Union, 1917–1933*. PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2007, 96.

some leading Americans agreed to support this, and from February 1919, the first aid shipments were sent to Estonia through the emerging network of diplomatic and military missions in Scandinavia, and the American Relief Administration (ARA).⁴⁶

PRINKIPO AND THE QUESTION OF RECOGNITION

The Estonian peace delegation arriving in Paris prioritised two issues: 1) to gain *de jure* recognition from Britain, France, and Italy, in addition to at least *de facto* recognition by the US, if not *de jure*; and 2) to obtain as much financial assistance as possible. The latter was for warfare against the Reds, for the development of economic life, and as a means to combat hunger in the spring of 1919. The questions were interlinked because, without recognition, it was virtually impossible to obtain credit from banks to pay for goods. Even for obtaining permits and visas for the free movement of purchased goods, diplomatic recognition was required. Both issues depended primarily on the relationship between the US and Russia, which became the world's central problem in January 1919.

The Soviet authorities had two choices. Leon Trotsky, Grigori Zinoviev, and their followers favoured the World Revolution. This appeared to be supported by events in Germany, Hungary, and elsewhere. Soviet propaganda even contributed to the escalation of class conflict in the US. On the other hand, supporters of Lenin and his direction had already prevailed in concluding the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. Lenin, Georgy Chicherin, Leonid Krassin, and Litvinov were not sure that the World Revolution was about to break out in the coming days and considered it vital to restore diplomatic and economic relations (in particular) with the West, especially the US. Concerning the recognition of Estonia, it did not matter whether the approach to the US was considered important only temporarily, in order to gain time to restore Russia's influence, and to rouse the vigilance of the capitalist countries. This so-called 'Lenin's Approach' provided Estonia with the opportunity to create an independent state.

⁴⁶ Organization of American Relief in Europe 1918–1919. Including Negotiations Leading up to the Establishment of the Office of Director General of Relief at Paris by Allied and Associated Powers. Documents Selected and Ed. by S. L. Bane and R. H. Lutz. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1943, 73, 162–163.

From the Armistice that ended the Great War on 11th November 1918, to the start of the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, Lenin's representatives approached Wilson at various levels at least seven times to end hostilities. Most of the appeals seemed to be sincere, although in some instances they intertwined with the propaganda of the World Revolution. In November 1918, Litvinov was sent to Scandinavia as a diplomatic representative of the Soviet Government. At that time, the Soviet authorities had not yet nationalised all the former banks, and the union connecting Russian agricultural cooperatives, *Tsentrosoyuz*, was allowed to operate. As an institution that ostensibly brought together individuals and initiatives, it was given the opportunity to operate in Europe and the US. Litvinov was granted a visa to Scandinavia as a representative of *Tsentrosoyuz*. He immediately focused on other topics, because in Scandinavia the recruitment of local volunteers to send to Estonia had begun. Litvinov appealed to the Western embassies to end hostilities. He made a special address to Wilson, who had arrived in Paris for Christmas. Wilson, who had acquired the status of an angel of peace in the eyes of the world, wanted to learn more about the initiative. He sent William H. Buckler, who knew modern left-wing political figures (including Litvinov) to Stockholm. The latter took Arthur Ransome – a well-known British journalist with Bolshevik associations – with him and thoroughly interviewed Litvinov on 14th–16th January in Stockholm. The Soviet Government promised to partly pay off the debts of the former Russia, offered economic concessions, and confirmed its readiness to suspend military actions. Western countries were expected to end military intervention in Russia, recognise it, and restore trade and economic cooperation. Litvinov confirmed that the Soviet power recognises the right of the Russian border peoples to self-determination. Lenin's government offered the US the same level of agreement as it had reached with the Central Powers a year earlier. More specifically, this meant restoring diplomatic relations, which had been severed a few months earlier due to Allied intervention, and the Red Terror. As early as June 1918, the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Chicherin, had already authorised Litvinov to be sent to Washington as an ambassador, but this did not occur.

Litvinov's proposal reached Paris in the Buckler Report on 20th January 1919. Mediated by Wilson and the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, a memorandum was drawn up by 22nd January, inviting all parties of the Russian Civil War to meet. Following disputes, Prinkipo Island near Constantinople in the Marmara Sea was designated

as the meeting location. The meeting was to take place no later than 15th February, when Wilson intended to return home. During these few weeks, the issue of the recognition of both the Bolshevik regime and the Estonian Government by the US was raised.

Although the Prinkipo meeting was not successful, it is worth recalling as it can be interpreted as *de facto* recognition by the US, at least in the case of Estonia. Historians who have studied the Paris Peace Conference have given different answers to the question as to who was ready to attend the Prinkipo meeting.⁴⁷ The invitation was issued without a specific addressee and was valid for anyone acting in one way or another on behalf of Russia or in the territories of the former empire, except Poland and Finland. The authors who assessed this period as the first Cold War have even thought that only the Bolsheviks and Estonians were ready to participate in the joint conference.⁴⁸

As head of the Estonian delegation, Poska pushed for an affirmative answer and was pleased with the surprising effect of that response on the Allies. The members of the Estonian delegation were ready to meet in Prinkipo, even if only they, the Americans, and the Bolsheviks took part. Moreover, even before a consensus was reached, in a meeting of the Estonian delegation on 2nd February, Jaan Tõnisson asked whether it could even be possible to offer peace to the Bolsheviks immediately, before the meeting in Prinkipo.⁴⁹ In the following weeks and months, signals began to reach the Estonian delegation that the Soviet side was also ready for bilateral peace with Estonia. The US special delegation, which visited Russia in March 1919 to meet with high-ranking Bolsheviks, was clearly informed of this development. It was led by a young radical, Bullitt, who had close contacts with the American Socialists. He was provided with a list of special economic offers from Moscow that could serve as a basis for further negotiations with Western countries, again with a particular view to the US.⁵⁰

Moscow once again expressed its readiness to recognise its independent neighbours. It would have been appropriate for Bolshevik Russia to resume economic and trade relations with the US, even without the solemn confirmation of *de facto* recognition. In such a situation,

47 For different answers to the Prinkipo proposal, see: A. J. Mayer. *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking*, 431–435; D. W. McFadden. *Alternative Paths*; J. M. Thompson. *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace*, 125; A. Walworth. *Wilson and His Peacemakers*, 129.

48 D. E. Davis, E. P. Trani. *The First Cold War: The Legacy of Woodrow Wilson in U.S.-Soviet Relations*. University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 2002, 160–161.

49 Eesti välisdelegatsiooni protokollid 23. Jaanuar–9. veebruar 1919, ERA.1619.1.5.

50 W. Brownell. *So Close to Greatness: A Biography of William C. Bullitt*. Macmillan, New York; Collier Macmillan, London, 1987, 73–100; B. Farnsworth. *William C. Bullitt and the Soviet Union*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1967, 41–43.

Estonia's position became important for both the US and the Bolsheviks, as it had potential to become a mediator. This did not succeed as the US refused to recognise Soviet Russia for more than twelve years.

ESTONIA BECOMES A TESTING GROUND

In January and February 1919, two interesting personal issues were discussed at the meetings of the Estonian peace delegation. It was considered again whether it would be sensible to send an official representative to America. The issue remained unresolved because it seemed that American politicians important to Estonia were in Paris anyway. In addition, no suitable candidate could be found within the delegation, or among Estonians in the US. One of them, Peeter A. Speek, was refused to be accepted as representative by the Russian division at the State Department. His application was sent back to him under the pretence that the US did not officially communicate with those areas of Russia.⁵¹

Therefore, the question was raised regarding the proposal of Ivan Narodny, another former Red activist in the US, whose letter had arrived in Paris. He recommended obtaining a bigger loan from the US, and to promote Estonia in the American press. Narodny assured that he was ready to organise any support in American political and economic circles. He advertised himself as the head of a Russian-Asian company and was ready to represent Estonia in the US. Narodny had already been in correspondence with Piip since August 1918, and had even approached the State Department on behalf of Estonia (or Estonians). Until now, he had relied on the view that the only possible option was a democratic and federal Russian republic, to which Estonia would belong.⁵² The Estonian peace delegation did not afford Narodny any legal credentials.

Similar developments could be observed in US-Soviet relations. On 2nd January 1919, Martens, an engineer and revolutionary of German nationality, was confirmed by Moscow as a plenipotentiary of the Soviet Government in the US. He became head of the Soviet Information Bureau, attempting to take over the former Russian embassy

51 Speek to the Department of State. 8th March 1919, National Archives, RG 59, 860i.00 P. R./1 - 860i.0159/- 1910-29.

52 Narodny to Piip. 21st August 1918, ERA.1583.1.386; on the activity of Ivan Narodny, see: T. Kitvel. Kolm nime – üks mees: lugu Verioralt pärit kirjanikust, kes Atlandi tagant Eesti vabariiki toetas. Külüm, Tallinn, 2017, 115–126.

and consulate in the US. The State Department refused to recognise Martens' credentials, but as a figure known to the administration, he was allowed to continue. Subsequently, Martens, along with his main aide, the Red Finn Nuorteva, and a staff of up to 50 members were able to attract dozens of American companies and banks to cooperate with the Soviet Information Bureau. Its location in Manhattan was notable, and its maintenance was supported by several private individuals, in addition to the American International Corporation. The latter was an umbrella organisation, founded in November 1915, that brought together businesses and major American banks, which has raised suspicions that American millionaires (Wall Street) were a significant factor in the survival of the Bolsheviks.⁵³ Martens' office signed contracts with nearly a hundred American companies and banks, but for various reasons, most ended up on hold for nearly a year.

Estonia was much more successful when compared to the Bolsheviks. It was able to present itself as a democracy worthy of help and recognition. In April, Estonia's first parliament was elected – the Constituent Assembly, which prepared a new appeal for national independence and called directly on the Allies to recognise Estonia's independence *de jure*.

At the same time there were several reasons for the decline of the topic of recognising Soviet Russia. Firstly, a so-called Red Scare campaign was launched in the US in the spring of 1919. In the process, left-wing organisations, individuals, and generally Bolshevik-friendly policies, were attacked. This resulted in the arrest of nearly 10,000 people, followed by hundreds of deportations of left-wing citizens to Russia, via Finland and Estonia. Martens, Soviet Information Bureau became one of the targets of the attack. Secondly, the initially successful operations of the Russian Whites began in the late spring of 1919, and therefore the Reds were expected to fall soon. There were also enough supporters of the intervention among Americans. Among the members of the American military mission and officers associated with the ARA, who had been operating in Estonia and Latvia since March, there were those who did not rule out the joint action of Finnish and Estonian troops together with the Russian Whites against Petrograd. This became relevant in May 1919, and *de jure* recognition given to Finland was viewed as a sign of encouragement for Estonia.⁵⁴ The hope of conquering Petrograd probably facilitated the distribution of food aid, weaponry,

⁵³ A. C. Sutton. *Wall Street and the Bolshevik Revolution*. Valiant Publishers, Sandton, 1975.

⁵⁴ R. M. Berry. *American Foreign Policy and the Finnish Exception: Ideological Preferences and Wartime Realities*. SHS, Helsinki, 1987, 55.

and equipment to Estonia as well. Before food aid curated by Herbert Hoover was sent through Denmark and elsewhere to Estonia, the US announced that the boycott of trade with Estonian harbours would be lifted. Along with this decision, the First US Official Representative was sent to Latvia and Estonia. However, Warwick Greene, the head of the military mission, confirmed the continued arrogant attitude of the Americans. He admitted that the young countries had been wronged by being forced to accept Americans whose credentials confirmed that they had been sent to Russia's Baltic provinces.⁵⁵ Thirdly, the conclusion of a peace agreement with Germany became more important in Paris, which required more time and attention. Moreover, domestic opponents in the US increasingly attacked Wilson's policies in Paris. Fourthly, Wilson was no longer able to address the Russian issue for health reasons. He fell ill in early April after returning to Paris and apparently suffered brain damage. Wilson abandoned attempts to develop democracy in Russia and agreed to appoint Admiral Alexander Kolchak a higher authority.

Wilson was no longer interested in issues related to Russia. His health was already poor and he was facing a decisive battle in the Senate over the League of Nations. For the first time in the history of the US, Congress did not ratify a treaty prepared and signed by the President himself.⁵⁶ The US selected the path of isolationism, and Wilson's planned world order interested few in Washington.⁵⁷

UNOFFICIAL RECOGNITION OF ESTONIA

During the Paris Peace Conference, the Baltic Commission was chaired by Esmé Howard, the British Minister to Scandinavia and a politician well disposed towards the Baltic states.⁵⁸ Samuel E. Morison represented the Americans as the delegation's chief expert on Russia and the Baltic region. Both supported the independence of the Baltic states.⁵⁹ The

55 Letters of Warwick Greene, 1915–1928. Ed. by R. W. Hale. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1931, 181–182.

56 A. D. Burns. *The United States, 1865–1920: Reuniting a Nation*. Routledge, New York, 2020, 117–118.

57 The US isolation policy that developed in the following years was caused and justified by a number of different factors. See: K. D. Rose. *American Isolationism Between the World Wars: The Search for a Nation's Identity*. Routledge, New York, 2021, 55–76.

58 B. J. C. McKercher. *Esmé Howard: A Diplomatic Biography*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.

59 E. Goldstein. *Winning the Peace: British Diplomatic Strategy, Peace Planning, and the Paris Peace Conference, 1916–1920*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, 140–149; K. Nelson. "That Elusive Entity British Policy in Russia": The Impact of Russia on British Policy at the Paris

Wilson administration never formally recognised Estonia, but in May–June 1919, its existence was accepted *de facto* and attempts were even made to take advantage of this turn of events. Several members of the American peace delegation made proposals to officially recognise Estonia. Morison, for example, suggested doing so even if conditionally. He warned the leadership of the US delegation that without official recognition, Estonia would turn to the Bolsheviks and conclude a separate peace. Wilson's decision to recognise Kolchak as Russia's top official irritated many. A total of five members left the US peace delegation to protest against this development; most notably Bullitt in May, and Morison in June.⁶⁰

However, the President had already agreed to Hoover's and House's proposal to help Russian areas where there was hope for democracy to prevail with arms, ammunition, food, clothing and other supplies. Of these countries, Estonia best met the expectations, because only there (in addition to Finland) a democratically elected parliament – the Constituent Assembly – had convened. The ARA contacted the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Estonian Copenhagen legation. There was interest in how Estonia intended to pay for seeds.⁶¹ Denmark had become an ARA interim depot from which cereals and other aid was distributed. Estonia urgently needed seeds for spring sowing. Thus started the first part of Estonia's future debt to the US. However, what was to follow was much more grandiose.

Estonia was well suited to the transactions that the American expeditionary forces undertook to get rid of the military equipment transported to Europe. The stockpiles were located in France for an army of almost two million men and included a wide range of basic necessities, medicine, foodstuff, clothing, etc. Returning this property to the US would have been too expensive. Therefore, it was decided to sell all the stock quickly and at the best possible price. Formally, a solution was found in which the ARA, led by Hoover, repaid their assets to the US military, and then distributed goods to European countries.⁶² This plan eventually did not appear to be in full compliance with US laws. At the end of February 1919, Secretary of State Lansing complained that the Baltic states should be supported, but the US legislation does not

Peace Conference. – The Paris Peace Conference, 1919, 67–101.

60 J. M. Nielson. *American Historians in War and Peace: Patriotism, Diplomacy and the Paris Peace Conference, 1918–1919*. Academica Press, Bethesda, 2012, 325, 375–377.

61 K. Hovi. *Estland in der Anfängen seiner Selbständigkeit. Die Tagebuchaufzeichnungen des dänischen Generalkonsuls in Reval Jens Christian Johansen 13.12.1918–29.5.1919*. Turun yliopisto, Turku, 1976; K. Jaanson. *Jälle see Taani võlg! – Kleiu, 1989*, 2, 90–92; Ferry K. Heath to Estonian Legation. 5th May 1919, ERA.1583.1.189.

62 *Organization of American Relief in Europe 1918–1919*, 395–398.

permit this.⁶³ In the spring of 1919, it did not matter to Estonia how legal the subsequent transactions were or to what extent it was the private initiative of the US military. In May 1919, the Estonian peace delegation was approached informally and it was explained that it was now possible to buy US goods. The transaction could only take place between private individuals or companies. In order to avoid legal obstacles, the private company Revalis was established on 27th May 1919. The name was suitable because, in Europe, Tallinn was known by this name, and thus implied a certain state guarantee. Estonia transported six shipments of goods from warehouses in France to Tallinn, for which loan papers were issued for more than 12 million dollars. The loan became the biggest problem in the relations between Estonia and the US for the next two decades.

The opening of the Estonian market certainly contributed to the emergence of hopes that relations with Russia will soon return to normal. The end of the economic blockade against Estonia in the spring of 1919 encouraged Martens' Information Bureau and Tsentrosoyuz to look for ways to deliver goods to Russia via Tallinn. In September, Abram M. Berkenheim, the Tsentrosoyuz representative in the US, announced that they had even acquired a new steamship for transporting goods to Russia via Tallinn, to get past the boycott against Russia.⁶⁴

From June 1919, a process to arrange at least consular relations had begun. Both the State Department and the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs began to receive applications from businessmen endeavouring to trade. A characteristic example was Van Arsdale Turner's attempt to monopolise the forest and other goods trade between Estonia and the US. Turner started as an assistant military attaché at the US Embassy in Petrograd in 1917, and continued later as a relief clerk in Russia in 1921. He established The Baltic-American Trading Company in 1919, and was ready to become the American consul in Reval (Tallinn) in summer 1919.⁶⁵ In doing so he was compelled to reckon with another group of adventurers who tried to start trading under the names such as the Russian-American Trading Company, and even the Asian-American Trading Company, for example. In the end, Turner did not become a

63 D. S. Foglesong. *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism*, 238–239.

64 D. W. McFadden. *Alternative Paths*, 279–283.

65 Van Arsdale Turner to the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Estonia, 7th July 1919, ERA.1583.1.189; Van Arsdale Turner. *Baltic-American Trading Company, Exporting and Importing*. NA, RG 59, American Consulate, Reval, Correspondence 1919–1920, 310–720.

consul, but he remained Hoover's trustee in Estonia, especially in issues related to Russia.⁶⁶

In their letters to the State Department in June–July 1919, Thomas M. Gunn, a representative of the International Corporation, and Senator Wesley L. Jones raised the issue of establishing an official US consulate in Tallinn. The correspondence continued until September 1919, and such interest may have been the reason why the State Department decided in favour of the establishment of more traditional representations in addition to a military mission. The term of office of Commissioner Gade, a military representative in Estonia in the summer of 1919, was relatively short. He began as Commissioner in November 1919 and was notified of the appointment of a successor already on 25th March 1920. His main responsibility was keeping in touch with General Nikolai Yudenich's Northwestern Army in Estonia, and he was active in taking care of the Yudenich troops.⁶⁷ However, the opinion that the presence of these units in Estonia was decisive in securing Estonia's independence is overestimated.⁶⁸

Gade became an official in the Russian division of the State Department and was involved in the completion of the Colby Note a few months later. It is possible that since Gade's relations with the Estonian and Latvian Ministries of Foreign Affairs were not the friendliest, he conveyed certain prejudices to Washington.⁶⁹ However, it seems too far-fetched that Evan E. Young, who was Gade's successor as US Commissioner in Riga from May 1920, had to establish a so-called diplomatic counterpart to the existing military observation posts.⁷⁰ Consulates were already established during Gade's time in office, and the military did not appear to oppose the first consuls, most of whom had been demobilised from the army themselves. Young continued to work closely with the military, and in some cases depended on their activity.

At the same time, Estonia again started to look vigorously for ways to send a representative to Washington. In several countries, the first unofficial Estonian representatives, often under the name of consuls or deputies, were found among Estonian expatriates. The aforementioned

66 H. T. Mahoney, M. L. Mahoney. *American Prisoners of the Bolsheviks: The Genesis of Modern American Intelligence*. Academica Press, Bethesda, 2001, 64.

67 P. Devenny. *Intelligence After the "Great War": Captain John A. Gade, US Navy: An Early Advocate of Central Intelligence*. – *Studies in Intelligence*, 2012, 56, 3, 21–30.

68 N. E. Saul. *War and Revolution: The United States and Russia, 1914–1921*. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 2001, 417.

69 E. Medijainen. "Riia ring", "luurepost" ja tööjaotus USA esindustes Baltikumis 1920. aastatel. – *Tuna. Ajalookultuuri ajakiri*, 2012, 4, 53–70.

70 F. L. Propas. *The State Department and the Russian Revolution: The Making of Policy, 1918–1924*. – *UCLA Historical Journal*, 1982, 3, 13.

colourful politician Narodny, a Bolshevik in 1905, was known in Estonia by his birth name – Jaan Sibbul. He moved somewhat away from the radical wing of the revolutionaries and tried to approach the nationalists in 1918. However, it remains questionable how much he was motivated by national ideals. He was a man who was repeatedly associated with peculiar adventures. In 1918, he contacted some other Estonians, and in September 1918, the American Estonians League (AEL) was formed in New York. Under this association, Narodny got in direct contact with the Estonian delegation in Paris, as well as with the members of the government, and the delegates of the Constituent Assembly in Estonia. Soon after, Narodny started to apply for the position of Estonia's representative in the US. He even used the term Estonian diplomat, although the peace delegation did not give him any credentials. Moreover, his letters to Estonian politicians, newspapers, and the leadership of the Constituent Assembly began to sound increasingly arrogant. He even threateningly demanded that the Constituent Assembly and the Estonian Government officially communicate with him and the AEL.⁷¹

Elsewhere, Tõnisson, the deputy of the Estonian Foreign Minister in Summer 1919, also made a peculiar attempt to leave Estonia and go to America as a minister. He left the Estonian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference in February 1919 due to conflicts with other delegates. At that time, he opposed the appointment of any Estonian representative to the US. However, as Tõnisson became the premier minister in November 1919, he organised the Government's decision and prepared to appoint himself to Washington.⁷² Tõnisson's position in Estonia was so high that the decision seemed final. In December 1919, the US Consul in Tallinn, John P. Hurley, sent an inquiry to the State Department about how he should behave if Estonia sends its mission to America.⁷³ It is not known whether this initiative was not realised because of Tõnisson, or because he was not issued an American visa. The plan to become an envoy probably interfered with the appointment of Tõnisson as a member of the Estonian delegation to peace talks with the Bolsheviks in Tartu in December 1919.

71 Narodny to Eesti Asutav Kogu. 20th May 1920, ERA.1583.1.386.

72 Riigi Teataja no. 65. 17th September 1919.

73 John P. Hurley to the Secretary of State. 9th December 1919, NA, RG 59, American Consulate, Reval, Correspondence 1919–1920, 310–720.

EFFECTS OF THE TARTU PEACE TREATY

Russian exile diplomats, led by Boris A. Bakhmetev, became more active after hearing about Estonian peace talks with the Bolsheviks. They demanded sanctions against Estonia, but were already losing their influence in the US State Department. Moreover, the Americans noticed the interest of the British, German, and French trade circles in developing trade with Russia. When the Bolshevik economic delegation, headed by Isidor Gukovsky, set up office in Tallinn in February 1920, all foreign representatives there, including Commissioner Gade, rushed to meet him.

The interest was related to a significant change in relations of the Allies and the US with the Bolsheviks. Namely, in November 1919, Litvinov moved through Estonia to Scandinavia, where he began negotiations with the representatives of the British and other western countries on the exchange of military and political prisoners. Litvinov assured that the citizens of western countries left in the hands of the Bolsheviks would be released if Russian prisoners of war were allowed to return home. According to Litvinov, the negotiations resulted in the *de facto* recognition of the Soviet regime by a number of European countries.⁷⁴ Even more decisive was the decision of the Entente Military Council on 16th January 1920 to end the boycott against Russia. The US refused official contacts, but at the same time encouraged private trade and relations with various non-state institutions in Soviet Russia. In January 1920, the American Commercial Association to Promote Trade with Russia was established, and on 7th July 1920, the State Department finally confirmed that all obstacles to the communication and trade of US citizens and companies with Soviet Russia would be removed.

To a certain extent, the Tartu Peace Treaty ended the competition between Estonia and the Bolsheviks for attention from the US. This treaty gave the Bolsheviks free access to the port of Tallinn and the sea. In addition, Estonia promised to exempt Soviet goods from transit and import taxes. The result was favourable to all parties. Between 1920 and 1924, 80% of all goods exported to Soviet Russia passed through the Baltic ports. At the same time, from May to December 1920, 76% of the total volume of Soviet exports went to the west via Tallinn.⁷⁵ The

74 H. D. Phillips. *Between the Revolution and the West: Political Biography of Maxim M. Litvinov*. Westview Press, Boulder, 1992, 41–43.

75 C. White. *British and American Commercial Relations with Soviet Russia, 1918–1924*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1992, 149.

Bolsheviks paid mainly in platinum, gold, and precious stones, which were essentially stolen from state institutions (including churches) and individuals. The acceptance of the “bloody gold of the Bolsheviks” was sharply criticised, but it still found its way to the West.

Around the same time, reports of very ambitious business plans reached the US. Through his agents, the representative of Soviet Russia, Gukovski, proposed to conclude various transactions with the company Pressed Steel Car to the sum of nearly 500 million dollars. These were very attractive offers. The mediator in the US for the Estonian Revalis company, Max Rabinoff, and Martens met in April, agreeing that Revalis would receive millions of dollars’ worth of orders. At the end of April 1920 in Copenhagen, Rabinoff met with a sales manager, Vaclav Vorovskis, at Siemens-Schuckert, a former German-Russian metalworking company. Vorovskis had been informally representing the interests of the Bolsheviks in Scandinavia for some time. The first deal was signed between him and “Rabinoff Revalis” for the purchase of US locomotives.⁷⁶ The deal was approved by Leonid Krassin, People’s Commissar for Foreign Trade, who in May 1920 invited representatives of other American companies to meet him, offering a series of concessions in Russia.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, in the US, some people were doubtful of the major deals. In early June 1920, a sceptical letter from Commissioner Young in Riga reached the State Department. On 11th June 1920, the US Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, sent a letter to the President specifying the circumstances of the sale of the locomotives. He claimed that the Estonian Government wanted to buy American locomotives for gold and had promised not to send them to Russia. As the US had not recognised Estonia yet officially, he was not sure that the transaction was legally correct. The minister expressed fear that this gold was of Bolshevik origin and that Estonia itself needed about six locomotives, certainly not a hundred.⁷⁸

76 E. Medijainen. Eesti vedurid ja Poola-Vene sõda. – *Akadeemia*, 2014, 26, 4, 665–676.

77 N. E. Saul. *Friends or Foes?: The United States and Soviet Russia, 1921–1941*. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 2006, 100–102.

78 Newton D. Baker to the President. 11th June 1920, NA, RG 59, 8601.51/-8601/512.

BANKRUPTCY OF WILSON'S POLICY – THE COLBY NOTE

President Wilson apparently realised after somewhat recovering from his illness that his policy had failed, but feared he had not been able to control the administration for some time. Both Poland and the League of Nations were founded with his strong support. Poland was recognised by the Allies as a warring party in the Great War and was allowed to sign the Treaty of Versailles, thus becoming a founding member of the League of Nations. The League of Nations began its work in January 1920 and was supposed to ensure peace in the world, but already in April the war between Poland and Soviet Russia began, which in September 1920 extended to Poland's invasion of Lithuania.⁷⁹

It was difficult for Wilson to ignore the new wars, especially as the Red Army approached Warsaw and threatened to reach Berlin. His response was awaited by European countries, but especially by Hugh Gibson, the US Minister to Poland.⁸⁰ The upcoming presidential elections were even more important for the President. According to Wilson, elections were becoming a peculiar referendum on the topic of both his and the League of Nations' policy. However, the Russian question was completely unresolved. For almost 14 months after leaving Paris, he had not spoken about Russia, the Bolsheviks, or the border states. It is possible that, due to health problems, he still believed that the Bolsheviks would be overthrown for internal reasons and that the problem would resolve itself.

Now he was forced to speak on the topic of Russia again, but had lost the freshness of his thought. Unfortunately, his new Secretary of State, Bainbridge Colby, was not prepared to help him either. He was Wilson's obedient assistant, but quite inexperienced in foreign policy. Thus, the so-called Colby Note, published on 10th August 1920, was not produced by the Secretary of State or the President himself. The note was formally issued as a public letter to an enquiry by an Italian ambassador in the US.⁸¹ The Colby Note has later even been referred to as a doctrine that established the official attitude of the State Department towards

79 A. E. Senn. *The Great Powers: Lithuania and the Vilna Question, 1920–1928*. Brill, Leiden, 1966, 47–48; T. Balkelis. *War, Revolution, and Nation-making in Lithuania, 1914–1923*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2018, 148–149.

80 G. Schild. *Between Ideology and Realpolitik: Woodrow Wilson and the Russian Revolution, 1917–1921*. Greenwood Press, Westport, 1997, 118–125.

81 The Secretary of State to the Italian Ambassador (*Avezzana*), 10th August 1920. – FRUS II, 463–468.

Soviet Russia and also the Baltic states, i.e. their non-recognition.⁸² It was also a renunciation of the current principle of self-determination. The note affirmed that the US would recognise the secession of only those countries that had once been annexed to Russia by military force. The argument of self-determination was therefore replaced by a historical justification. It was a theoretical and ideological construction that denied the real situation in eastern Europe. The real author of the note, socialist theorist John Spargo, and perhaps Wilson himself, were still hoping that they would defend the values of democracy and Russia's territorial integrity, and use this scheme to unite all anti-Bolshevik troops and force the Bolsheviks to voluntarily relinquish power. The attempt to involve the Swedish Social Democratic Government, led by Hjalmar Branting, in the plan was quite strange. According to Wilson and Spargo, Sweden should have called for the Colby Note to be realised. Branting refused citing, among other things, the reason that the Swedish Government was prepared to recognise Estonia.⁸³ This document declared that the US did not recognise the independence of any of the border countries other than Finland, Poland, and (conditionally) Armenia.

As one practical step, the Colby Note banned the sale of locomotives and other railway-related equipment to the Bolsheviks, but this matter was somewhat relegated to the background. The note was followed by thorough explanations from Estonia and Latvia as to why it was still necessary to recognise them. Besides, it was remembered that Estonian and Livland areas were overtaken from Sweden by Russia with military force.⁸⁴

The Bolsheviks, led by Chicherin, the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, also protested against the note. Moscow had already signed peace agreements and thus legally recognised Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, and was preparing for peace talks with Finland and Poland. Wilson had lost the ideological competition with Lenin over the right to self-determination and very soon lost the presidential elections as well.

The Colby Note (doctrine) formally remained in effect for Soviet Russia for twelve years. Practical, everyday relationships were somewhat more complicated. The US needed Russia as a potential counterweight to Japan. Between Japan and Russia, a formally independent Far Eastern Republic was formed in spring 1921, which was effectively operated under

82. D. M. Smith. *Aftermath of War: Bainbridge Colby and Wilsonian Diplomacy, 1920–1921*. American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1970, 56–57.

83. R. Radosh. John Spargo and Wilson's Russian Policy, 1920. – *The Journal of American History*, 1965, 52, 548–565.

84. Estonian answer to the Colby note. ERA.957.11.483.

Moscow's control until November 1922. The US was ready to accept it as it had accepted the informal missions of Latvia and Lithuania. In 1921, the representations of the Far East and the Baltic states were legally on an equal footing with Washington.⁸⁵ The Far Eastern Republic became a peculiar Trojan horse, used to maintain and coordinate relations with the Bolsheviks in order to reduce the influence of Japan. Contacts with the Bolsheviks never ceased, although the State Department refrained from official relations until 1933.

The Colby Note also meant a formal denial of Estonian sovereignty, but the actual attitude of the State Department towards Estonia differed later significantly from the attitudes towards the Bolsheviks. On 26th January 1921, the former Allied Supreme War Council (France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan) recognised Estonia and Latvia *de jure*. The State Department formally protested against the exploitation of Russia's moment of weakness and the violation of its territorial integrity.⁸⁶ However, there were no plans to impose sanctions. Argentina, Poland, and the Scandinavian countries also immediately extended recognition to Estonia.

According to the Tartu Peace Treaty, the *de jure* recognition of Estonia by the western countries led to the expansion of the Bolshevik trade mission. Litvinov was now appointed the first Soviet plenipotential envoy in Tallinn, and in February 1921 all foreign representatives already operating in Tallinn rushed to meet him. Actually, it became known that there was a plan to appoint Litvinov as Ambassador to the US as soon as possible.

Over the course of almost a year, Estonia's experience of diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia and "red gold" became increasingly attractive. Great Britain reached a tangible result on 16th March 1921, when the British-Russian Trade Agreement was signed in London and the Soviet trade mission became active there. Diplomatic relations between Germany and Soviet Russia were still formally severed, but German trade began to compete with the British for the Russian market. The behaviour of Colonel Rafael Hurstel, the head of the French military mission in Tallinn until autumn 1920, was also typical. He resigned and returned to Estonia in February 1921; already a representative of a private company engaged in Russian-French trade.⁸⁷ Hopes for the

85 P. Dukes. *The USA in the Making of the USSR: The Washington Conference, 1921–1922, and "Uninvited Russia"*. Routledge, London, New York, 2004, 74–94.

86 Evan Young memorandum. 3rd March 1921, NA, RG 59, Office of European Affairs, U.S.S.R. Section, General Records 1911–1940, Box 3, NARS A-1, ENTRY 370.

87 E. Medijainen. *Sajand Prantsusmaa de jure tunnustusest Eestile*. Eesti Suusaatkont, Paris, 2021.

normalisation of relations were boosted by the announcement of a new economic policy in Russia in March 1921.

Competition for the opening of the Russian market across Estonia also bolstered Tallinn's confidence. Back in autumn 1920, Eduard Virgo, the Foreign Minister's deputy, had been appointed as a representative to the US. Estonian newspapers wrote about the appointment, and American officials discussed it thoroughly among themselves.⁸⁸ In his letter to the State Department, the US Commissioner had already expressed concern that he could not explain to Estonians why he could operate without restrictions, but a representative of Estonia with a similar status would not be accepted in Washington.⁸⁹ The American representatives in Estonia did not feel comfortable. Commissioner Young assumed that Estonia might now completely give up attempts to appoint a representative to the US. Therefore, the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was encouraged by Americans to send their representative and his status was promised to be confirmed.

Diplomatic, political, and economic relations between Estonia and the US intensified. By the beginning of 1922, Americans became more interested in granting final recognition to Estonia and the other Baltic states. Young found several arguments that justified this decision. During the preparation of a final decision on the question of recognition, the US Commissioner submitted a long report in April 1922 to the State Department on his thoughts about the need to recognise the Baltic states. In it, he stressed once more that a time was likely to come when Russia's integrity would be restored in one form or the other, and that it would even be in the US interests. At the same time, he unequivocally supported the recognition of the Baltic states so "this part of Russia will remain free from the ravages of the present Moscow regime".⁹⁰ The final declaration (28th July 1922), recognised the governments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, but not the states. The US administration declared that this decision did not mean retreat from the policy of recognition of the territorial integrity of Russia. The note stated that the US has consistently maintained that the disturbed conditions of Russian affairs may not be made the occasion for the alienation of Russian territory, and this principle is not deemed to be infringed by the recognition of the governments of the Baltic states. It means that the decision was still

88 Tallinna Teataja. 7th October 1920.

89 Young to the Secretary of State. 25th March 1921. – NA, RG 59, 860i.01.

90 Young to the Secretary of State. 6th April 1922. – FRUS, 869–872.

conditional. This was, at least in part, formally a continuation of the Colby doctrine.

CONCLUSION

To a world accustomed to empires, the attempt of a nation of little more than a million people to create their own independent state was an idealistic, even utopian desire. The world's most influential leader, US President Wilson, and the founders of one of Europe's smallest nation states used rather similar arguments in their policies, but unfortunately, this did not result in their relationship becoming closer.

In 1916–1920, President Wilson defended in his statements the rights of small nations, and even the right of self-determination of all Russian people, but not the right of self-determination of all nations in Russia. In spite of Wilson's attitude, from 1921 onwards, the decision of final recognition of Estonia by the US was increasingly an issue of finding the right occasion. At that time, other factors culminated to obstruct the granting of recognition, which were resolved on 28th July 1922. After this declaration, nothing significantly changed in Estonian foreign policy or Estonia-US relations. There was no longer a rush to send a diplomatic representative to Washington from Estonia, as there had been before. It was not until the last day of 1923 that President Calvin Coolidge accepted the credentials of Piip, the first Estonian envoy and the last minister of the interwar period. Estonia was satisfied with the situation that had developed by the summer of 1919. Final, *de jure* recognition was more a matter of honour and prestige, rather than a serious economic or diplomatic problem. Wilson did not succeed in making the world safe for democracy, but democracy became decisive as to why Estonia, a country of only a million people, gained independence.

AMEERIKA ÜHENDRIIGID
JA EESTI 1918–1921:
DE FACTO TUNNISTAMINE ENNE
AMETLIKKU TUNNUSTAMIST

Eero Medijainen

Esimese maailmasõja puhkemise eel oli maailmas umbes 50 iseseisvat riiki. Sõja järel taotlesid kümned rahvused sama staatust. Eesmärgini, iseseisvuseni, jõudis tosinkond, enamik neist Euroopas. Seesugust asjade käiku on sageli seostatud Woodrow Wilsoni nime ja tema uue maailmapoliitikaga. Kui jälgida Wilsoni poliitika teostumist väikeriigi tasemel, on Eesti sobiv näide, kuna tegemist on Esimese maailmasõja järel iseseisvunud riikidest elanike arvult kõige väiksemaga. Maailma mõjukaim liider, USA president Wilson, ja Euroopa väikseima riigis rajajad kasutasid välispoliitika tegemisel sarnaseid argumente, kuid kahjuks see neid ei lähendanud.

Wilson pidas oma „uue diplomaatia“ osaks nõudmist, et edaspidi tunnustatakse isegi *de facto* üksnes demokraatlikke riike, ehkki ka ta ise ei olnud selles nõudmises ega tunnustuste jagamisel järjekindel. Rahvusvahelises õiguses puudus tunnustamise küsimuses selgus. *De facto* tunnustusse suhtuti ambivalentset, näiteks eristati riigi ja valitsuse tunnustamist. Lisaks polnud *de facto* tunnustusel põhimõttelist tähtsust, sest sel moel võis tõlgendada igasugust läbikäimist kahe riigi asutuste vahel, ilma et seda avalikult deklareeriti.

USA administratsioon ei tunnustanudki Eestit kunagi ametlikult *de facto*, aga alates maist-juunist 1919 suheldi Eestiga kui iseseisva riigiga, sealhulgas tunnustati erafirma Revalise laene kui riigi garantiiga tagatud dokumente. Paljud ameeriklased pidasid Eestit oluliseks kohaks, mis võiks aidata taastada normaalset läbikäimist Venemaaga, seda eriti suhete loomisel enamlaste valitsusega. Wilsoni unistus jagamatust demokraatlikust Venemaast kestis mõnda aega ka pärast tema lüüasaamist 1920. aasta presidendivalimiste järel ning seepärast sõnastati isegi Eesti *de jure* tunnustamise deklaratsioon tinglikuna.

Artiklis on Eesti katsed Ameerika Ühendriikidelt tunnustust saavutada jagatud kolme perioodi. Kui kuni 1918. aasta lõpuni eestlased alles otsisid lähema tuleviku väljavaateid, nõustusid punased Venemaal samal ajal võimu kindlustamise nimel järeleandmistega nii Keskkriikidele kui ka Ameerikale ning lubasid enesemääramist oma endistel piirialadel. Teisel perioodil, Pariisi rahukonverentsi ajal, taotlesid paljud jõukeskused

Venemaal tähelepanu ja tunnustust; Wilson jäi Venemaa territoriaalse terviklikkuse säilitamise doktriini juurde. Kolmandal etapil olid Eestil olemas kõik iseseisva riigi funktsioonid ning USA tunnustuse küsimus oli taandunud teisejärguliseks, majanduse ja rahvusvahelise õiguse teemaks. Alates 1921. aastast jäi USA otsus lõplikust tunnustamisest üha enam vaid sobiliku ajendi taha. Tunnustamise ees oli selleks ajaks veel vaid paar Eestist sõltumatut tegurit, mis leidsid lahenduse 1922. aasta kevadel.