



**Volker Prott.** *The Politics of Self-Determination: Remaking Territories and National Identities in Europe, 1917-1923.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 272 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-877784-7.

**Reviewed by** Conan Fischer (University of St Andrews, School of History)

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**Commissioned by** Cristian Cerel (Centre for Advanced Study)

## Effecting the Politics of Self-Determination: Ambition and Reality

The First World War, as a pivotal moment in global history, continues to generate fresh research and provoke intense debate. Its legacy is further explored here in Volker Prott's insightful new work, *The Politics of Self-Determination. Remaking Territories and National Identities in Europe, 1917-1923*. As his title betrays, Prott focuses on the issue of national self-determination, where he offers fresh perspectives on this ideological cornerstone of the Paris Peace Settlement.

When the American president, Woodrow Wilson, promoted national self-determination as his central war aim in January 1918, he could not have anticipated how it would be received and how it would assume concrete reality across a particularly complex range of contexts. Each of the Allied powers conceived of self-determination in a way that reflected its particular interests, sometimes merely employing Wilsonian language as window dressing for more traditional geopolitical objectives. British and French colonial ambitions were one such case in point. Furthermore, what was agreed at the peace conference could contrast starkly with reality in particular regions or even entire countries. Insurgency and even banditry sometimes shaped events with scant regard to liberal conceptions of nationhood.

Prott's account is broadly chronological, beginning with wartime planning for the postwar order before moving on through the peace conference to its troubled immediate aftermath. He concludes by examining the part

played by the League of Nations in the revision or amelioration of the peace terms during the interwar years, a role Woodrow Wilson had always envisaged for this new, supranational institution. The League, he notes, largely confined its interventions to the protection of minority rights, rather than seeking to revise the postwar frontier settlements. Chronology aside, he juxtaposes decision making at the center against the unfolding of events on the spot, paying particular regard to two selected regions: the Franco-German borderland of Alsace-Lorraine and the Turkish province of Anatolia, where Greek territorial ambition squared off against resurgent Turkish nationalism.

We are guided through the deliberations of wartime "expert" committees, often comprising academics who found themselves unexpectedly influencing world affairs, and on to the reception and manipulation of their findings by political and military leaders. Once the peace conference opened, the experts continued to pore over their maps and to deliberate arcane ethnological conceptions of what did or did not constitute nationality. But political leaders listened to them with only half an ear as they thrashed out the broad outlines of peace agreements with the respective defeated enemy powers. For these statesmen and their officials, military and strategic imperatives, economic assets, and (sometimes bogus) historic heritage could steer decision making every bit as decisively as national self-determination, which some-

times served as a fig leaf, lending a veneer of legitimacy to claims and acquisitions pressed for very different reasons.

In the then-and-there of Alsace-Lorraine and Anatolia, however, local reactions were often triggered by high-level diplomacy before they assumed a dynamic of their own. French leaders had determined at a very early stage of the war that an Allied victory would see Alsace and the Moselle (German Lorraine) returned to France, no ifs, no buts, and certainly without a plebiscite. The largely Germanophone Alsace-Lorrainers, Paris maintained, were inherently French, although the considerable number of newcomers residing in the provinces from elsewhere in Germany or beyond were not. They faced ethnic screening and, as often as not, removal eastward across the Rhine, voluntary or forced, from their adopted home. Since the native population had not necessarily welcomed these incomers in the first place, and had then suffered heavy-handed German military rule during the war, the Allied victory triggered a variety of local reactions which complemented official French efforts to cement Paris's control of the recovered provinces. A limited degree of mob violence was accompanied by a spate of denunciations which, as often as not, served to remove business competitors or even personal enemies. However, the authorities never let popular feelings run out of control and official measures were scaled back once the Versailles Treaty confirmed the status of Alsace-Lorraine as part of France.

Anatolia witnessed much more extreme violence, however, after the Allies gave the nod to a Greek mili-

tary occupation of the west of the province. Greek forces made initial gains, but Turkish resistance grew to embrace a combination of local guerrilla action and more conventional military operations by the revived and reorganised Turkish army. The ambiguity of nationality, in a region that had been home for generations to Muslim Greek-speakers and Christian Turkish-speakers among others, added to the arbitrary and extreme character of violence across the region. Eventually those deemed Greek were expelled or fled from the Asian mainland while Turks resident in Thrace (in northeastern Greece) were deported eastward into Turkey.

Prott, then, has offered us a wide-ranging and multidimensional study of the politics of self-determination in the years following the First World War. His account is far from comprehensive, but does not make any such claim; he certainly succeeds in locating his well-documented and meticulously researched case studies within their broader historical context. However, a little more contextualization might, perhaps, have served the reader well in one or two instances. For example, French policy in and perceptions of the Saar District and the Rhineland would have offered some remarkable parallels with policy in Alsace-Lorraine, while Allied involvement in the Anatolian crisis also related to wider European colonial ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean basin and the Middle East. However, this is to quibble. Volker Prott has offered us an absorbing and enlightening addition to the literature on the First World War and its aftermath, which supplements the existing literature very nicely indeed.

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