*The following excerpt is taken from historian* [*Erez Manela’s*](https://history.fas.harvard.edu/people/erez-manela) *portion of a May 2019 Carnegie Council/Macaulay Honors College panel entitled “*[*100 Years After Versailles*](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/calendar/data/2019-05-07-100-years-after-versailles)*.” A video of this excerpt is available on* [*YouTube.*](https://youtu.be/RA-2efg_7RM) *This transcript has been edited for classroom use.*

**How did Woodrow Wilson’s professional background as a historian influence his decision-making as president?**

[T]he thing that was unusual [about Woodrow Wilson] among presidents, and indeed unique, is that Wilson had a Ph.D. in history. No other president in American history, either before or after Wilson, had a Ph.D.

Wilson was an intellectual [and] had an analysis of the historical moment in which he lived through, in which he was a leader. It was an analysis that predated [World War I], but I think was deepened in some sense, or made more urgent in his view, by the war…

Wilson came of age in the latter decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. He was a child and a teenager during the [U.S. Civil War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War), but he became an adult and a professor and then president of Princeton at the time when the United States and the world were undergoing unprecedented transformations, which we now call "modernity" or "globalization."

In his lifetime he saw the spread of technologies like the steam engine, which revolutionized production, the telegraph, which revolutionized communications, and the automobile, which revolutionized transportation…. So he was very conscious of living through an age of unprecedented technological and economic change.

He also saw massive immigration into the United States. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries you had more people living in the United States who were foreign-born than at any time before or since. He was very, very conscious of this massive movement of people around the world, and specifically in the United States. You had processes like industrialization and urbanization that were rapidly accelerating during his time, during those decades that he was a professor and a university administrator….

How did all of this fit into that analysis [of the historical moment in which he was living]?

…[A]ll of these economic, technological, and demographic transformations, led to the "[Gilded Age](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilded_Age)," [which was] an unhealthy concentration of power in the hands of the few. Unhealthy concentration of power, rising inequality—Wilson saw these trends as anti-democratic. That is to say, power, in his view, had become in his lifetime less accountable, and he saw it as his mission to make power more accountable.

Why? Not because it was the right thing to do morally--although also because of that--but because, in his analysis, unaccountable power, once it goes beyond a certain tipping point, leads inevitably to revolution because those who are being oppressed, after a certain turning point, rise up.

[H]e saw the revolutions in his time, those that preceded the [Bolshevik Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_Revolution)—for example, the [Mexican Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican_Revolution) of 1910, which happened when he was just becoming governor of New Jersey not long before he became president; the [Chinese Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xinhai_Revolution) that swept away the last dynasty in 1911 also happened as he was coming into the presidency.

[Also there was] disorder in the United States—labor uprisings, the [assassination](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination_of_William_McKinley) of President [McKinley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_McKinley) by a professed [anarchist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Czolgosz), and generally the sense that anarchism was spreading in the United States. All of these things he saw as inevitable responses, historically speaking, to the unaccountable concentration of power.

This analysis, which was first developed in the domestic U.S. context, he also took internationally. Once the war began and he started figuring out what was going on, he said: "Okay, we have the [Russian czar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholas_II_of_Russia) and we have the [German kaiser](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_II,_German_Emperor). They are representatives of unaccountable power, that's why they're so aggressive and doing this war, and that is going to lead to anarchy and possibly revolution." In fact, he was right. It did lead to revolution both in Russia and in Germany [although] the [one in Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Revolution_of_1918%E2%80%9319) was suppressed.

His solution both domestically and internationally, was to try to reconstruct or reform political arrangements in such a way as to make power more accountable. In a domestic context that had to do with what we think of as [Progressive Era](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive_Era)reforms. In an international context that was his idea behind his negotiating position in Paris.

The [League of Nations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/League_of_Nations) was a central construct that was designed to make power in the international arena more accountable and so reduce the chance of revolution and anarchy—that is to say, to replace revolution with reform. In this sense, Wilson's analysis had a lot in common with [Lenin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Lenin)'s analysis. The difference between them is that Lenin saw only two options: either you have oppression and imperialism or you have revolution; there is no in-between. Wilson was going for the in-between. He thought that there was an option to reform international affairs in a way that would both lessen "autocracy" but also stave off revolution. That was the design.

1. **How did Woodrow Wilson’s professional background as a historian influence his decision-making as president?**
2. **Think of a major political, social, or economic issue today. Using a historian’s point of view how would you “analyze” the issue? What would you suggest as a response to the issue with the viewpoint that it will be looked back at as a major historical turning point?**