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Then there were all the expectations of those people who had not yet had or who, for some time, had not had their own country. The Paris Peace Conference operated in a context when national self-determination was something that was a very powerful force. This was not something that had mattered during the Congress of Vienna from 1814-1815 which met to create the peace settlements at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. At that time the idea that nations should run their own affairs had not yet really taken hold of Europe or indeed of the world outside Europe.

By 1919, it certainly had taken hold. Woodrow Wilson is sometimes blamed for this – for creating all these expectations that ethnic groups should have their own nation states. This again is unfair. He certainly gave encouragement to the idea in his public statements, including the Fourteen Points, but he did not create what was by now a very powerful force. Europe had already seen how powerful nationalism and the desire of nations to have their own states could be with both Italian and German unification. It had already seen how powerful that force could be in the Balkans. Ethnic nationalism and the idea of self-determination for ethnic states was not suddenly created by a few careless words from the American president.

Given such an array of expectations, from revenge to a brighter tomorrow, is it any surprise that the peace settlements are so often seen as failures? The Paris Peace Conference was only partly about making peace settlements and about making a better world; it was also the focus of the hopes and expectations of nations trying to reconstitute themselves, in the case of Poland, who wanted their independence from an empire, in the case of the Baltic states, or who were new nations such as Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, or Kurdistan. Paris was in the six months between January and June 1919 the centre of world power, perhaps even a sort of world government. The peacemakers rapidly discovered that they were dealing with an agenda which kept on growing. An obscure assistant chef at the Ritz Hotel laboriously drew up a petition about his own very small part of the French empire in Asia which he failed to get to the attention of the peacemakers. Ho Chi Minh decided on another way to lead Vietnam to independence. Day by day, fresh petitioners came in, from nations that nobody had heard