

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

40 – *Woodrow Wilson*
(17 April 2019)

THOMAS WOODROW WILSON – a Psychological Study

Author: Sigmund Freud and William C. Bullitt

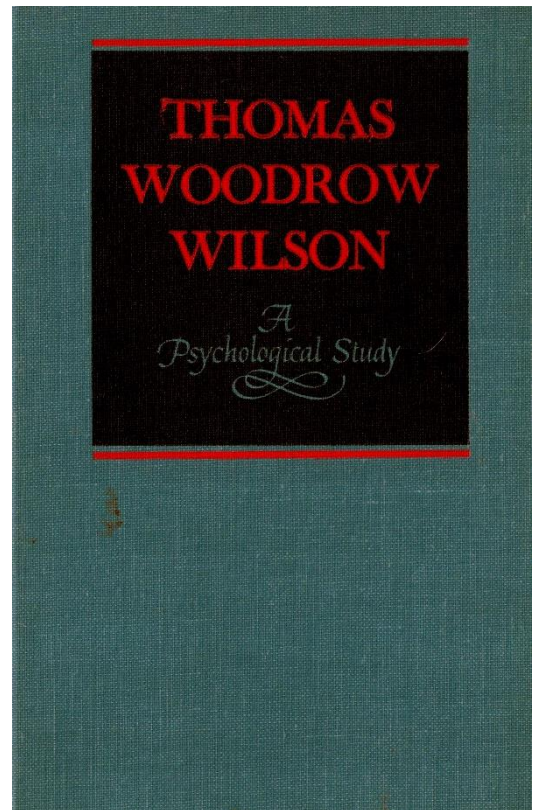
Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, 1966 (completed in the 1930s but withheld till all characters mentioned had died)
(available on Amazon, [click on cover image for link](#))

Descriptor: Unconventional study of why the 28th President wanted peace so badly from 1914-1919, and how he failed to preserve it by negotiating the Versailles settlement in 1919.

RusRoL relevance: *Shows how STATUS in a father-son relationship can produce a public man who is so obsessed by CONTRACT ideals that he is determined to thrust them on everyone around him, STATUS-style.*

Reason to read: Anyone who does not believe in the “great man” theory of history—or even if they do but without the “great”—should read this book and ponder. It was written jointly by William Bullitt, who knew and worked for **President Wilson** at the **Versailles** peace conference (for which purpose he paid his first visit to Russia; he was later to be the first US Ambassador to the Soviet Union), and Sigmund Freud, who requires no introduction even if you, like me, have never read a line of his work. They show how much power Woodrow Wilson had to influence events. Whether he emerges as “great” from that is a separate question. The authors’ point is that his unconscious drive for power and prestige, as the Christ-like peacemaker, was what ultimately guided him and therefore, given his and his country’s position in the world at the time, guided events. A “man” did make history, though opinions differ on just how “great” he was. These authors, however, are in no doubt that he was only occasionally “great”. More often, due to complexes inherited from his childhood, he was egocentric, preachy and self-righteous.

The background idea is that character formed in childhood has a profound, and in this case tragic, effect on character in later life. Wilson wanted to be even more devout and righteous than his Presbyterian Minister father, whom he admired to the exclusion of most of the rest of the human race, except his own wives. While I suspect some of the Bullitt/Freud argumentation is over-wrought—and rarely does the case for the defence come through—the general idea of analysing adult performance in



terms of childhood-acquired complexes yields interesting insights, and ought to be used more by historians. (I cannot believe **Winston Churchill** would not make a suitable subject; and what about **Mr Putin** and his well-known fear of bullies in the backstreets of Leningrad when he was a wee, pouting teenager determined to outflank them by joining the big boys in the KGB?) The trick is to avoid psycho-babble, which can be very irritating, but once these authors get beyond Wilson's youth, their analysis seems to me far more illuminating than irritating. By the end, I was thirsting for more—to the extent that I felt sorry for Col. House after the way he had been used and abused by St. Woodrow the Apostle of Peace. I even felt a pang for Grandpa Clemenceau—he of the super-soup-strainer moustache—and that's saying something.

Main talking points: There are so many, that I will confine myself to those which have some relevance to *Russia and the Rule of Law*.

1. On 22 January 1917 in the US Senate, with the country still neutral, Woodrow Wilson gave “one of the greatest speeches of his career” in which he demanded “**peace without victory**”. (p. 188) The price was no annexations and no indemnities. With another month to go before the Russian Revolution, the German people were already beginning to wonder if the war could ever be won. The Ambassador, Count Johann-Heinrich von Bernstorff, had tried to negotiate peace using Wilson as the Arbitrator-peacemaker-representative of God on earth. But the German government had been taken over by the military (see [Bethmann-Hollweg review](#)) so, instead of following Wilson's “divine” lead and offering peace, it announced the resumption of unrestricted **submarine warfare** on 1 February.¹ It was that move which, along with the **Zimmerman telegram**, brought Wilson's dreams crashing down and his country into the war. It is hard to believe that **Leon Trotsky** did not know about the idea of peace without victory, without annexations and indemnities, since that was exactly what he proposed as a way out of the Brest-Litovsk impasse a year later. At the time of Wilson's speech, he was living in New York and an avid reader of newspapers. [Kenneth Ackerman in his book](#) discusses the speech, though without mentioning Trotsky's response. But still...
2. Bullitt writes about his personal attempt, on 6 April 1919, to get a decision from Wilson on the peace terms in the Russian war against the Allied, anti-Bolshevik intervention that **Lenin** had proposed to him in Moscow shortly before. Lenin offered to recognise all the non-Soviet regimes in the areas round about, including Finland, Archangelsk, the Baltics, the Caucasian states and half the Ukraine, plus “*the whole of the Urals and all Siberia*”. Thus, Lenin had offered to confine Communist rule to Moscow and a small adjacent area, plus the city now known as Leningrad... [He] had also offered to recognise Soviet responsibility for the debts of the Russian Empire.” (p. 253, emphasis added) But Wilson had a one-track mind and he was absorbed by more pressing matters, so the offer was not taken up. With some justice, Bullitt comments, “It is

¹ It is a feature of STATUS that it brooks no competitor or opposition. The German high command was as outraged at America's active defence its merchant shipping from German submarines in 1917 as it had been about the Belgian Army's active defence of its country's frontiers in August 1914. Obviously, it would have been even more outraged if the opposite had happened at Germany's expense.

not impossible that Wilson's refusal to burden his 'one track mind' with Russia may well, in the end, turn out to be the most important single decision that he made in Paris."²

3. In connection with Wilson's failure to force his vision of the future of the world on **Lloyd George** and **Clemenceau** at Versailles, Bullitt/Freud write: "In order to solve the inner conflict which was torturing him Wilson needed only to discover some rationalisation which would permit him both to surrender and to remain in his own belief the Saviour of the World." (p. 261) His excuses for surrender were the **League of Nations**, international co-operation and fear of the threat of Bolshevism. ("He hated and feared Communists far more deeply than he hated and feared militarists." p. 247) He persuaded himself that he should compromise rather than fight—and compromise meant the demeaning process of negotiating with Lloyd George and Clemenceau. The alternative was to cut off credits to the Allies and force them to do his bidding by, amongst other things, treating Germany better so she could help prevent Bolshevism from invading Europe. "Thus he was able to convince himself that he had suppressed his personal masculine wish to fight in order to spare Europe from the dreadful consequences which would have followed the release of his masculinity. It became self-sacrificing for him not to fight. By this somewhat circuitous route he managed to bring further support to his conviction that he had sacrificed himself for the welfare of humanity, and therefore resembled Christ." (p. 263)
4. After the Treaty was signed, Bullitt (who wrote most of the historical content) returns to the theme of Wilson's ability to ignore facts and to deceive himself about realities he found distasteful. Wilson "returned to America, and on the wings of his wishes soared away from the ugly facts until they fell below the horizon of his mind and he was able to declare that the Treaty was almost perfect, 'a ninety-nine percent insurance against war'." (p. 280)

Incidental interest: In the middle of his period of swithering about fighting for a lasting peace or compromising with his ex-co-belligerents, Wilson got so exasperated with **Clemenceau** that he ordered his transport, the battleship *George Washington*, made ready for sea in Brest harbour so he could return home at short notice. In fact, Wilson did not intend to use it immediately, but word got through to the French leader that the great man was preparing to sail, and he semi-panicked. Her stared "no deal" in the face. Suddenly he was all sweet reasonableness, and compromise was again on the table. If only Mrs May had read some of this history...

Surprising points: We in Britain are so convinced of our country's diplomatic rectitude at Versailles, that it comes as a shock to read Bullitt's explanation of why the Anglophile of Scots-Irish descent changed to an Anglophobic American Southerner as a result of **Lloyd George's** slippery negotiating style. "Wilson at the Peace Conference had never attempted to use his hands to pick pockets while using his mouth to utter the words of Christ, and his contempt for Lloyd George and the British policy of *preach and grab* grew violent in July 1919. All the illusions about the nobility of British statesmen which he had cherished since his childhood were shattered. He began to have most friendly feelings for Clemenceau, who spoke the truth and did not smear the demands of France with British moral

² This offer is not often taken seriously by most historians, presumably because they assume it was made cynically. However, it is dealt with more respectfully in Alexander Etkind's new biography of Bullitt, which will be reviewed here shortly.

marmalade.” (p. 276, emphasis added) At issue was not only British colonial aggrandisement but the contrast between self-determination for the subject peoples of the defeated empires and the very different treatment accorded to British imperial subjects, especially in Ireland. Wilson surely had a point there?

On 23 June, the German government had accepted the draft Treaty, following Anglo-French orders to their armies to advance unless a signature were obtained immediately (much as the Germans had done to Trotsky at Brest a year before). However, “the German submission produced no elation in Wilson. His hatred and loathing of nearly all mankind, which must have been at bottom a hatred of himself, had reached a fantastic pitch. He was overflowing with bile. And the hatred which he had not dared to let loose against either Clemenceau or Lloyd George burst against **Poincaré**, President of the French Republic... He refused to attend the farewell dinner which Poincaré wished to give him before his departure for America.” (p. 277) Then Bullitt gives a page and a half description of the feminine way in which Wilson allowed himself to be sweet-talked round to attending the dinner. In the psychological scene-setting at the beginning of the book is this statement: “Our second theorem declares: **all human beings are bisexual**. Every individual, whether man or woman, is composed of elements of masculinity and femininity.” (p. 37) The thesis is that Wilson had a strong female side which never quite managed to satisfy the male side which required him to get approval from his father for his Christ-like, and therefore approval-worthy, behaviour.³ Certainly, the tease of Poincaré reveals a feminine side to the President-Redeemer.

Thought(s) provoked: We need more books like this about virtue-signallers. The inner deformities of war-mongers and crooks are easy to understand. It is the deformities of those who wish to convince us (and therefore themselves) of their own moral rectitude that are more interesting and subtle, and also under-represented in the literature.

Negative issue(s): The first hundred-odd pages are hard going due to all the psychological theorising. Once the action takes over and is described with secondary reference to that psychology, the book comes alive. However, there is a lingering suspicion that Wilson’s motivation may not have been so childhood-derived as these authors assert, though the list of Wilson’s 14 breakdowns given on page 80, indicates that he was not a “normal” human being. Though he was eleven years old before he learned to read, between breakdowns Thirteen and Fourteen he wrote his Fourteen Points, which Bullitt is right to imply shook the world more in the long run than John Reed’s Ten Days.

Style: Well written; and witty when it comes to juxtaposing Wilson’s self-delusions and auto-Messianism with political/diplomatic reality.

³ One of the main themes in my book, *Isles of the West*, is the apparent “hatred and loathing for nearly all mankind” that is rife within the ecology, conservation and bird-venerating worlds. They want to “save the planet” but without having much regard for the human cost of their grand schemes (like all dictators). This is a form of pseudo-spiritual exhibitionism that is not unlike that which Freud and Bullitt say Wilson suffered from. The difference in his case is that he did not attempt to profit from his campaigning. He did not “preach and grab”, as Lloyd George allegedly did, and modern ecologists certainly do when making a connection between virtue and donations to their campaigns.

Author: Sigmund Freud is well-known, but Bullitt is, to me, the more interesting character, and also it is he who wrote the bulk of the text. He was a Philadelphia mini-brahmin with the appropriate degree of benevolent idealism. His tenure of Spaso House while Ambassador in Moscow in the mid-1930s was a classic case of idealism stripped naked by close contact with reality—as will be discussed in *Russia and the Rule of Law*. That experience may have influenced his assessment of Wilson, who had similar idealism but no equivalent disillusionment since he refused to recognise reality when it got in the way of his ideals. In 1924, Bullitt married Louise Bryant, an idealistic feminist and communist who had been married to John Reed. But he suffered domestic disillusionment by 1930, when they were divorced. At the time of the German invasion of France in 1940, Bullitt was US Ambassador in Paris. He distinguished himself in dealing courageously with the chaos there as Wilson’s “99% insurance against war” proved uncashable.



Link(s): The well-known historian of World War I, Margaret MacMillan, gives a less psychological but more balanced view of Wilson here: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?323695-1/discussion-president-woodrow-wilsons-term>

Overall recommendation level: HIGH, despite being ignored by “the academy”.

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell’s Book Recommendations](#).