There can be no historical dispute about the importance of the invocation of nationality and self-determination to the reorganisation of states and citizenship in the bloody and chaotic wake of the First World War. However there has been historical disagreement over their political significance. Some historians have presented Wilson’s wartime attachment to nationality as a strategic appropriation of the ideal of self-determination from the Bolsheviks, intended in one instance to distract the disgruntled from the politics of class.¹ United States, British, and French government documents also show that toward the end of the First World War the idea of nationality was used by the Allied military as a ruse for undermining the strength of the Austro-Hungarian military, and for a strategic border realignment. The Western powers would provoke and assist the peoples of Central Europe to revolt under the banner of national self-determination in order to undermine Austria-Hungary’s military strength.² To some extent the strategic concerns that lay behind official Allied interest in nationality rendered the question of the specific legitimacy of each national cause irrelevant. In 1918, Wilson’s closest advisor Colonel House wrote in his diary that he did not care ‘to go into the interminable question who does or who does not represent a majority of the Poles.’³

When it comes to the meaning of nationality and self-determination, rather than their Realpolitik purpose, historians have found themselves in as murky waters. Even if we are to accept John Breuilly’s broad description of national self-determination in this period ‘as a rather unclear mixture of ideas about cultural identity and individual liberty’, we are left with the problem of describing those ideas.⁴ It should come as no surprise that contemporaries repeatedly found themselves facing the same problem. When, in late 1918, Robert Lansing, the American Secretary of State, found himself en route to France as head of the delegation to Paris, he recorded his perplexity in regard to the mission ahead: ‘When the President talks of ‘self-determination’ what unit has he in mind? Does he mean a race, a territorial area, or a community?’⁵ Tomáš Masaryk, president from 1918 of

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the new Czechoslovak state that had been carved out of the remnants of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and one of the great defenders of national self-determination, recognised that ‘in point of fact, [self-determination] has never been clearly defined. Does it apply only to a whole people or is it valid also for sections of a people?’ Alfred Cobban, a later historian of the 1919 peace conference, reflected on this same aporia: ‘the basic problem of the whole policy of self-determination’ is ‘to what kind of community should it apply?’ We might agree with an official French observer of American preparations for peace who declared that ‘the right of peoples to dispose of themselves had still hardly been defined, whether in popular consciousness or in international law.’ Certainly Wilson’s social secretary, Edith Benham, felt compelled to ask how he got his impression ‘of what the new national ideals are, or what truths are to be presented to the people’. Her boss replied only that he got them ‘from different sources’, piecing them together ‘as one should a mosaic’.

My aim in this chapter is to piece together the mosaic of the idea of nationality and its meanings during the First World War. It is clear is that by the time Wilson had officially allied the principles of justice to the principle of nationality, and nationality to the promise of self-determination, the nation had a privileged political status in mainstream trans-Atlantic thought. When in 1918 Wilson referred to ‘the wishes, the natural connections, the racial aspirations ... of the peoples involved’, he was invoking what had by the end of the war become a pervasive and trans-Atlantic, or even more broadly ‘Western’, view of modern political life and of liberal democracy that focused on the vitality of national identification in individual subjectivity and the psychological primacy of nationality. During the war nationality was ‘the subject of widespread discussion – by liberal peace societies, political writers, national governments and the political leaders of those nationalities who wished to be independent.’ It is no coincidence that amongst the most influential of the wartime discussants of nationality were precisely those American, English, and French men and groups who played some part in preparations for the peace, and in the peacemaking theatre of 1919.

National will and new Europeans

In 1917, young intellectual progressives such as Walter Lippmann were absorbed not only by the seemingly endless European war, but by the thoughts of what peace might bring. These thoughts brought Lippmann to promote the political weekly The New Europe as ‘the one most indispensable periodical in the English-speaking world’. This widely influential London-based magazine was at the hub of European political propaganda advocating the principle of nationality as the expression of individual and collective consciousness and as the basis of a new world order.