Wilson Violation of Democratic Voting

The **Racial Equality Proposal** (Japanese: □□□□□□□□ ; lit. "Proposal to abolish racial discrimination") was an amendment to the Treaty of Versailles that was considered at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.

Though it was broadly supported, the proposal did not become part of the treaty, largely because of opposition by the United States and the dominions of the British Empire Delegation, namely Australia, Canada and New Zealand.[1]

After the end of seclusion in the 1850s, Japan signed unequal treaties, the so-called Ansei Treaties, but soon came to demand equal status with the Western powers. Correcting that inequality became the most urgent international issue of the Meiji government. In that context, the Japanese delegation to the Paris peace conference proposed the clause in the Covenant of the League of Nations. The first draft was presented to the League of Nations Commission on 13 February as an amendment to Article 21:

> “The equality of nations being a basic principle of the League of Nations, the High Contracting Parties agree to accord as soon as possible to all alien nationals of states, members of the League, equal and just treatment in every respect making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of their race or nationality.

In a speech, the Japanese diplomat Makino Nobuaki stated that during the war men of different races had fought together on the Allied side, leading to say: "A common bond of sympathy and gratitude has been established to an extent never before experienced."[8] The Japanese delegation had not realized the full ramifications of their proposal since its adoption would have challenged aspects of the established norms of the day's Western-dominated international system, which involved the colonial rule over non-white people. The intention of the Japanese was to secure equality of their nationals and the equality for members of the League of Nations,[9] but a universalist meaning and implication of the proposal became attached to it within the delegation, which drove its contentiousness at the conference.[10]

After Makino's speech, Lord Cecil stated that the Japanese proposal was a very controversial one and he suggested that perhaps the matter was so controversial that it should not be discussed at all.[8] Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos also suggested that a clause banning religious discrimination should also be removed since that was also a very controversial matter.[8]

Cecil removed all references to clauses that forbade racial and religious discrimination from the text of the peace treaty, but the Japanese made it clear that they would seek to have the clause restored.[8] By then, the clause was beginning to draw widespread public attention. Demonstrations in Japan demanded the end of the "badge of shame" as policies to exclude Japanese immigration in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand received much attention in the Japanese media.[8]

In the United States, the clause received much negative media coverage on the West Coast.[8]

Makino Nobuaki, the career diplomat who headed the Japanese delegation, then announced at a press conference: "We are not too proud to fight but we are too proud to accept a place of admitted inferiority in dealing with one or more of the associated nations. We want nothing but simple justice."[13] France declared its support for the proposal since the French position had always been that the French language and culture was a "civilizing" force open to all regardless of skin color.[12] British Prime Minister David Lloyd George found himself in an awkward situation since Britain had signed an alliance with Japan in 1902, but he also wanted to hold the British Empire's delegation together.[12] South African Prime Minister General Jan Smuts and Canadian Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden tried to work out a compromise by visiting Makino and Chinda Sutemi and Hughes, serving as mediators.[12] Borden and Smuts were able to arrange a meeting between Makino, Chinda, and Hughes, which ended badly. The Japanese diplomats wrote that Hughes was a vulgar "peasant" who was loud and obnoxious, and Hughes complained that the Japanese had been "beslobbering me with genuflexions and obsequious deference."[12] However, Borden and Smuts were able to persuade Hughes to accept the clause if it was declared that it did not affect immigration.[12] Makino and Chinda then rejected the compromise.[12]

On April 11, 1919, the commission held a final session.[14] Makino stated the Japanese plea for human rights and racial equality.[15] The British representative Robert Cecil spoke for the British Empire and addressed opposition to the proposal.[16] Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando spoke in favor of the statement on human rights.[17] French Senator Léon Bourgeois urged its adoption and stated that it would be impossible to reject the proposal, which embodied "an indisputable principle of justice."[18]

Vote

The proposal received a majority vote on the day,[14] with 11 of the 17 delegates present voted in favor of its amendment to the charter, and no negative vote was taken:

- Japan (2) Yes

- France (2) Yes
- Italy (2) Yes
- Brazil (1) Yes
- China (1) Yes
- Greece (1) Yes
- Serbia (1) Yes
- Czechoslovakia (1) Yes

Total: 11 Yes

- British Empire (2) – Not Registered
- United States (2) – Not Registered
- Portugal (1) – Not Registered
- Romania (1) – Not Registered
- Belgium (2) – Absent[19]

The chairman, Woodrow Wilson, overturned it by saying that although the proposal had been approved by a clear majority, the particular matter had strong opposition manifest itself (despite the lack of any actual votes against the proposal[19]) and that on this issue, a unanimous vote would be required.[20] French delegate Ferdinand Larnaude [la; sv] immediately stated that "a majority had voted for the amendment."[21] Meanwhile, the Japanese delegation wanted the transcript to show that a clear majority had been voted for the amendment.[21]

Aftermath

Cecil felt that British support for the League of Nations was far more important than the clause. The Japanese media fully covered the progress of the conference, which led to the alienation of public opinion towards the US and would foreshadow later, broader conflicts.

In the United States, racial riots resulted from deliberate inaction.[26]

> The international mood had changed so dramatically by 1945, that the contentious point of racial equality would be incorporated into that year's United Nations Charter as a fundamental principle of international justice.

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