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Eleanor Roosevelt and The Bok Peace Prize

Elaine M. Anderson

On July 2, 1923, in headlines three columns wide at the top of the front page, *The New York Times* announced “\$100,000 Prize Offered By Edward W. Bok For a ‘Practicable’ Plan to Enable Us to Co-operate in Keeping World Peace”¹ The announcement created an immediate sensation across the country. Historian Charles DeBenedetti notes that these few words were the beginning of the “most comprehensive single expression of popular thinking on questions of war and peace in American history.”² For a generation of Americans who, only a few years earlier fought the war to end all wars, the enduring question of a lasting peace was paramount.³ Five years after the end of the Great War, the American government was still arguing the pros and cons of membership in the League of Nations and the World Court. To encourage American citizens to become involved in the national debate, Edward W. Bok, the former editor of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, tendered, what *The Times* called, “the most princely sum ever offered for a non-commercial idea.”⁴ In an era when contests of all kinds were a national obsession, DeBenedetti observes that Bok’s “beneficence electrified the country.”⁵ The response of the American public was immediate. In short order, according to Bok

¹“\$100,000 Prize Offered by Edward W. Bok for a ‘Practicable’ Plan to Enable Us to Co-operate in Keeping World Peace,” *The New York Times*, 2 July 1923.

²Charles DeBenedetti, “American Peace Award of 1924,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 98 (1974): 224.

³Gary Gerstle, “The Protean Character of American Liberalism,” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (1994): 1052.

⁴*The New York Times*, 2 July 1923.

⁵DeBenedetti, 224.

biographer, Salme Harju Steinberg, the offices of the Bok Peace Prize received thousands of entries tendered “by a wide variety of people, from scoffing intellectuals to day laborers.”⁶ Ultimately, the Bok Peace Prize created controversy and led to Senate hearings, but in the beginning, hopes were high.⁷

Eleanor Roosevelt’s hopes were high, as well. Although her husband, Franklin, was the politician in the family, by 1923, ER was an emerging figure in New York political circles in her own right. She became an active member of the League of Women Voters, the Women’s Trade Union League and the Democratic State Committee, holding numerous positions within these political organizations. Many of the women with whom she worked were also active in the peace movement that consumed the United States after the end of the Great War. After seeing an entire generation of young men die on the battlefields of France, these women were determined it should never happen again. Lois Scharf, Eleanor Roosevelt biographer, notes that ER had “embraced the peace movement of the 1920s,” particularly, “those women’s organizations like the National Conference on the Cause and Cure of War and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.”⁸ Women’s groups such as these were pacifist in their nature and internationalist in their scope.⁹ Like many of her contemporaries, Eleanor Roosevelt was committed to the cause of world peace. Witnessing first hand the ravages of the Great War, only confirmed her belief in the need for peaceful solutions for the world’s

⁶Salme Harju Steinberg, *Reformer in The Marketplace: Edward W. Bok and The Ladies’ Home Journal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 141.

⁷DeBenedetti, 224.

⁸Lois Scharf, *Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady of American Liberalism* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 117-118.

⁹Scharf, 118.

problems.¹⁰ It was ER's conviction that individuals, working together, were the true source of world peace.¹¹ The Bok Peace Prize competition would bring together, for the first time, Eleanor Roosevelt and thousands of Americans from all walks of life in a dialog on world peace.

Roosevelt scholars agree on the importance of the Bok Peace Prize and the work ER performed for the Policy Committee. However, there would be a cost. The controversies that surrounded the Prize were among the first challenges in her public life. For the first time, Eleanor Roosevelt would be exposed to the "kind of public criticism that would remain a feature of her life," notes ER biographer, Blanche Wiesen Cook.¹²

The Bok Peace Prize was the brainchild of retired publisher, and former editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, Edward W. Bok.¹³ The son of Dutch immigrants, Bok was a self-made man. He left school at age thirteen to help support his family and never attended school again.¹⁴ He became a journalist and, ultimately, an editor for the Curtis Publishing Company. After watching amazing changes taking place in Europe after the war, Bok began to realize that Americans were struggling to come to grips with a radically different world and America's place in that world. *The New York Times* reported that Bok believed a "fundamentally changing Europe [meant] a changing America and that the peace of the

¹⁰Eleanor Roosevelt, "Because the War Idea is Obsolete," *What I Hope to Leave Behind: The Essential Essays of Eleanor Roosevelt*, ed. Allida M. Black (New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1995), 495.

¹¹Joseph P. Lash, *Franklin and Eleanor: The Story of their Relationship, based on Eleanor Roosevelt's Private Papers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.), 285.

¹²Blanche Wiesen Cook, "'Turn toward Peace:' ER and Foreign Affairs," *Without Precedent: The Life and Career of Eleanor Roosevelt*, eds. Joan Hoff-Wilson and Marjorie Lightman (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984), 112.

¹³*The National Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, *Bok, Edward William*, ed. Henry Suzzallo (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, Corp. 1937), 174.

¹⁴Steinberg, 36.

world [was] our problem.”¹⁵ Furthermore, Bok, himself, commented that a note of dissatisfaction with political affairs, both national and international, had crept into his correspondence. In the preface of the book, *Ways to Peace*, Bok wrote that by 1921, he came to realize that “although it was three years since the ending of the war, practically nothing had been done by the United States Government to avoid another war,” and that his correspondents were concerned there were no plans to, “preserve the peace of the world.”¹⁶ In 1923, looking for a way to give the American people a public forum for their concerns, Edward Bok established the Bok Peace Prize contest.

At the invitation of Bok, Esther Everett Lape, agreed to administer the Peace Prize competition. Lape, an activist for a variety of political causes, impressed Bok with a number of articles she had written for the *Ladies' Home Journal* regarding immigration, women's rights and world peace.¹⁷ With Bok's permission, Lape asked Eleanor Roosevelt to serve on the Policy Committee. Lape and ER had formed a close personal friendship while working together in the League of Women Voters.¹⁸ When her friend asked her to be a member of the Bok Peace Prize Policy Committee, Roosevelt readily agreed. She would be able to work with trusted colleagues toward a common goal that held real significance for all humanity. In addition, to Eleanor Roosevelt, Lape asked another of their colleagues from the League, Narcissa Vanderlip to join the prize committee. According to Joseph Lash, Vanderlip, a Republican, was invited to join the group to help

¹⁵*The New York Times*, 2 July 1923.

¹⁶Esther Everett Lape, ed., *Ways to Peace: Twenty Plans Selected from the Most Representative of Those Submitted to the American Peace Award* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), vii-viii.

¹⁷Maurine H. Beasley, Holly C. Schulman and Henry R. Beasley, ed., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2001), 301-302.

¹⁸Cook, *Without Precedent*, 111.

“establish the nonpartisan character of the competition.”¹⁹ Even though the majority of the twelve-member committee was men, it was this small coterie of women who ran the day-to-day operation of the Policy Committee. Bok was pleased with the selection and distribution of power among committee members. DeBenedetti notes, the make up of the Policy Committee “wholly coincided with [Bok’s] belief that ‘peace is primarily a woman’s problem: she takes it as her own more than does a man.’”²⁰ For Eleanor Roosevelt, this statement rang true.

In 1923, the horrors of the Great War were still painfully fresh in the hearts and minds of the American public. Like many women, Eleanor Roosevelt had done her share for war relief. She worked several shifts a week in the Red Cross Canteen among other endeavors. Historians, Meirion and Susie Harries describe St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, D.C. where Eleanor Roosevelt made regular visits to the ward that housed shell-shock victims: “To be allowed to talk to the men, she had to be locked into the ward,” once inside, she saw “battle-shocked sailors, ‘some chained to their beds, others unable to stop shouting of the horrors they had seen.’”²¹ It was an experience she never forgot.

ER also visited war-torn Europe with her husband in 1919. In France, she was able to see first-hand the total destruction war had brought to the land and the people. Eleanor Roosevelt came away from these experiences with an overwhelming desire to find a way to prevent another devastating war. To this end, ER actively supported the League of Nations and the United States participation in the World Court in the hope that these entities could help secure a lasting world peace.²² She joined several women’s peace organizations and wrote numerous articles on peace-related issues.

¹⁹Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 283.

²⁰DeBenedetti, 226.

²¹Meirion Harries and Susie Harries, *The Last Days of Innocence: America at War, 1917-1918* (New York: Random House, 1997), 453.

²²Beasley, Schulman and Beasley, 396.

Lape's invitation to join the Bok Peace Prize Policy Committee was extended to Eleanor Roosevelt at just the right time.

The Policy Committee had several tasks in addition to the day-to-day management of the competition. The committee read and vetted all submissions, selected the Jury of Award and prepared the terms and conditions of the contest. The deadline for submission of peace plans was to be November 15, 1923. Any American citizen could submit a plan, which was not to be in excess of five thousand words along with a summary of five hundred words.²³ Eleanor Roosevelt was given the job of promoting the American Peace Award, as the contest was now known, in *The Ladies' Home Journal*. In the October 1923 issue of the *Journal*, ER wrote about the desire of Americans for world peace. She acknowledged that most citizens said the same thing, "I am not sure to what degree I want American cooperation with the rest of the world, but I am very sure that I want something more than we now have."²⁴ ER went on to say that the \$100,000 prize was not intended to buy a peace plan. "All the award can do is to open a new avenue through which plans can be offered for public consideration," she noted.²⁵ The prize money for the winning plan was to be awarded in two payments. The first payment of \$50,000 would be made when the winning plan was chosen. The second payment would be made when the plan was approved by either the Senate or by popular referendum of the American people.²⁶

Even before Roosevelt's article appeared in the *Journal*, plans began to pour into the Peace Prize headquarters in New York City. The competition was officially announced on July 2, 1923. By July 8, *The New York Times* quoted a statement from the Policy Committee noting that already, "several hundred plans" had been

²³*The New York Times*, 23 July 1923.

²⁴Eleanor Roosevelt, "The American Peace Award," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, October, 1923, 54.

²⁵Roosevelt, *The Ladies' Home Journal*, 54.

²⁶DeBenedetti, 230.

submitted “prematurely” to the Award offices.²⁷ During the time allotted for the submission of plans, from September 1 through November 15, 1923, the Committee received 22,165 entries, which DeBenedetti called the “fullest expression ever made of the country’s popular attitude toward matters of war and peace.”²⁸ The national dialogue on the issue of peace that Edward Bok hoped to start among American citizens had begun.

The plans were as varied as the people who wrote them. Housewives and shopkeepers submitted their ideas for consideration. Diplomat Christian Herter submitted a plan, as did Gutzon Borglum, the creator of the presidential carvings at Mt. Rushmore. Even Franklin Delano Roosevelt drafted a peace plan. According to Eleanor Roosevelt biographer Blanche Wiesen Cook, FDR’s plan was a “variation of the current League, which he called a Society of Nations (heralding the United Nations).”²⁹ Most plans were thoughtful, some were outlandish, but all had the same theme – lasting world peace.

On September 17, 1923, as Lape and Roosevelt poured over thousands of entries, *The New York Times* announced the Jury of Award for the Bok Peace Prize. Selected for their varied backgrounds, the seven members of the panel understood the complex issues of international relations.³⁰ Elihu Root, a widely respected elder statesman, agreed to chair the Jury of Award. Root, a Republican, had served Presidents McKinley, Roosevelt, Taft and Harding. In 1912 he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his many contributions toward world peace. However, in spite of the care taken to select a non-partisan panel, the general perception was that the judges favored the League of Nations and the World Court. It was this perception of a pre-determined outcome that set

²⁷*The New York Times*, 8 July 1923.

²⁸DeBenedetti, 230

²⁹Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 1, 1884-1933* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 343.

³⁰*The New York Times*, 17 September 1923.

nationalistic groups on edge and laid the groundwork for the controversy that would engulf the Bok Peace Prize.³¹

On January 7, 1924, the winner of the Bok Peace Prize competition was announced in *The New York Times*. Again, the headlines were three columns wide and proclaimed, “\$50,000 Bok Peace Plan Announced; Provides For Entry Into World Court, Conditional Help to League of Nations.”³² The full text of the winning plan was also included in the article. The author of the winning plan was Charles Levermore, the retired president of Adelphi College, Garden City, New York. However, in accordance with the conditions of the competition, the Policy Committee and Jury withheld the name of the author of peace plan #1469 until the completion of the nation-wide referendum in February 1924.³³

Plans were immediately set into motion regarding the promised national referendum on the winning plan. Months earlier, the Policy Committee had formed a Co-operating Council composed of a wide variety of organizations to assist the Policy Committee in its work. Ninety-seven national organizations had stepped forward offering their services in advertising the Bok Peace Prize to their constituents and assisting in the referendum.³⁴ This was an amazing offer. The groups that made up the Council were diverse in their make-up. There were business and labor organizations, religious groups, women’s clubs, community service organizations and fraternal orders. According to an article in *The New York Times*, these groups had an estimated membership of between forty and fifty million.³⁵ By December 1923, the Committee announced in *The New York Times*, that “over 4,000 daily and weekly newspa-

³¹DeBenedetti, 229.

³²*The New York Times*, 7 January 1924.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴DeBenedetti, 228.

³⁵*The New York Times*, 20 October 1923.

pers” had agreed to carry the official ballot along with a “digest” of the winning plan.³⁶

The referendum had an extraordinary scope. Every community across the country, no matter the size, received a share of the ballots. State governors and town mayors joined colleges and universities in support of the peace plan referendum. Short of a full-scale national election, nothing like this national referendum for peace had been done before.³⁷

The beginning of the referendum coincided with an upswing in criticism of the winning plan and the Bok Peace Prize competition itself. From the start, there were concerns about the impartiality of the jurors. As individuals, they were above reproach, however, some critics duly noted their political opinions. According to DeBenedetti, suffragist and avowed pro-League advocate, Carrie Chapman Catt, commented favorably on the jury members because they were, “all, or nearly all, in favor of the League of Nations.”³⁸ However, ugly and potentially more dangerous accusations were now being made in higher political circles. Because the selected plan encouraged the United States to join the World Court and cooperate in League matters, the political debate over United States entry into the League of Nations flared up with renewed intensity. Blanche Cook comments that in regard to the chosen plan, “Senate isolationists were outraged and called for an investigation into the un-American and potentially treasonous nature of the Bok Award.”³⁹ As public skepticism of the competition grew, the motives of Bok, Lape, the Policy Committee and the Jury of Award became suspect.

On January 17, 1923, just one week after announcing the winning peace plan, an article in *The New York Times* noted that Missouri Senator James Reed had directed the Senate Special

³⁶*The New York Times*, 9 December 1923.

³⁷DeBenedetti, 240.

³⁸DeBenedetti, 229.

³⁹Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 1*, 344.

Committee on Propaganda to investigate the Bok Peace Prize competition. The Policy Committee was charged with trying to influence both foreign and domestic policies of the United States through the use of propaganda, advertising, money or publicity.⁴⁰ Bok was called before the Committee on January 21, 1924. "The ill-educated immigrant, more than held his own before Moses and Reed," who were, according to DeBenedetti, "two of the Senate's most relentless interrogators."⁴¹ Bok deflected questions regarding funds spent on promoting the Prize, managed to get Reed to refuse to define "propaganda," and even offered another \$100,000 to find a better plan among those submitted.⁴² After the Senators had finished with Bok, the Committee called Esther Lape to testify.

Accompanied by her friend and colleague, Eleanor Roosevelt, Lape appeared before the Senate Committee on January 23, 1924. The primary charge against Lape was that the Bok Peace Prize competition had been rigged. The Senate Committee tried to prove the Policy Committee and the Jury had been packed with known advocates of the League of Nations. *The New York Times* reported that Reed asked Lape if she knew that Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt was a supporter of the League. Lape replied that "from her character, training and education I should say she favored some kind of a League."⁴³

It was at this point in the investigation that the unexpected, perhaps the unthinkable, happened. Reed demanded to know how the Policy Committee was chosen. Lape replied that ER had been chosen first, then, Vanderlip, with the remaining Committee members, as well as the Jury selected by the three women. Senator Reed was completely taken aback. According to Joseph Lash, Reed "was not alone in his outrage at such female presumption."⁴⁴

⁴⁰*New York Times*, 18 January 1924.

⁴¹DeBenedetti, 243.

⁴²DeBenedetti, 243-244.

⁴³*The New York Times*, 24 January 1924.

⁴⁴Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 284.

The Bok Peace Prize had been organized, managed and operated by women. The significance of this was not lost on critics of the Prize. Blanche Wiesen Cook comments that some of the criticism ER, Lape and Vanderlip endured was the same criticism that women always encountered when crossing the line into the masculine sphere.⁴⁵

The Senate hearings into the Bok Peace Prize dampened public enthusiasm for the project. In an effort to bolster interest in the referendum, the Policy Committee announced the name of the winning peace plan author.⁴⁶ In addition to being the former president of Adelphi College, Charles H. Levermore was a long-time pacifist. Levermore's background did nothing to inspire confidence in the competition or the referendum. Due to close on March 15, the referendum limped along hampered by public skepticism and political criticism. The return of ballots was a disappointment. In addition to the nine million ballots distributed directly to the public, ballots were also published in a wide variety of periodicals having a combined readership of over thirty million. Of the 610,558 ballots returned, 87 percent were cast in favor of the Levermore plan.⁴⁷

In spite of the controversy and disappointing referendum result, Edward Bok and Eleanor Roosevelt had each been a part of something of great importance. Each one gained something of value by their participation in the Bok Peace Prize. Edward Bok wanted to open a dialogue among his fellow Americans regarding world peace. In 1923, the United States was still trying to come to grips with its newfound position in world affairs. Even though the Great War had thrust the United States onto the world stage, most Americans did not perceive America as a world power. The outpouring of peace plans renewed and stimulated the national

⁴⁵Cook, *Without Precedent*, 112.

⁴⁶DeBenedetti, 244.

⁴⁷Maurine H. Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: A Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 13.

debate on the issues of peace and the United States' place in international relations. According to DeBenedetti, in spite of everything, Bok's "faith in the pacific world-mindedness of the American people," was unshaken.⁴⁸ Bok accomplished what he set out to do. Never before had Americans, from all walks of life, taken the time to consider what a real and lasting peace meant or to consider the world beyond our borders.

The dialogue that began in July 1923 was still going strong in February 1924. Letters to the Editor, commentaries and op-ed pieces filled newspapers and popular journals for months. Everyone had an opinion on the benefit of the Bok Peace Prize. Some people, like Anna Liebert, who wrote a letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, suggested that America did not need a new peace plan because the League of Nations was already in place and perhaps we should give the League a try.⁴⁹ Others saw the Bok Peace Prize as nothing more than a ploy to drag the United States into the League of Nations. Anti-League Progressive, Oswald Garrison Villard called the Peace Prize the "Great Bok Humbug." Villard went on to say that the competition was, "a deliberate attempt" to get Americans to vote, "in favor of the League without knowing it."⁵⁰ For Bok, a person's political stance was less important than the discussion that was taking place among his fellow citizens. As Edward Bok wrote in regard to the Peace Prize, "the American people have had time to think, and they have thought, and the national voice is being heard."⁵¹

The Bok Peace Prize also helped Eleanor Roosevelt to find her place in the peace process. During the 1920s, Roosevelt embraced the quest for world peace. During this period, she continually worked toward America's entry into the League of Nations and

⁴⁸DeBenedetti, 247.

⁴⁹*The New York Times*, 5 July 1923.

⁵⁰DeBenedetti, 241.

⁵¹Lape, xv.

World Court.⁵² For ER the experience with the Bok Peace Prize competition was an education in the issues and politics of international affairs.⁵³ Even after the Bok competition officially ended and her work for the Committee was over, ER continued to work for peace. Historian Allida Black observes that, “ER’s ability to see the complex relationships between war and peace,” would often put her, “in an uncomfortable position politically and personally.”⁵⁴ Roosevelt’s work for the Bok Peace Prize was her “first specifically ‘un-American’ activity,” and, “resulted in the first document entered into her voluminous FBI file,” according to Blanche Wiesen Cook.⁵⁵

Eleanor Roosevelt, whatever the criticism, would never back away from her work for international peace. Her work for the Bok Peace Prize was one of her earliest national endeavors, yet ER is remarkably silent about her work for the Policy Committee. In her 1949 autobiography, *This I Remember*, she mentions the Bok Peace Prize almost in passing. She briefly notes that, “at Mr. Bok’s request, I helped her [Esther Lape] to organize the committee and this work.”⁵⁶ Her modesty is deceiving; during the 1920s, ER was active in a number of women’s peace organizations. She wrote numerous articles and columns regarding peace throughout her long public career. As the decade of the Twenties wore on, Eleanor Roosevelt became increasingly focused on international peace movements. According to Cook, ER would become one of the “most prominent antiwar women in the United States.”⁵⁷

⁵²Allida M. Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 137.

⁵³Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 284.

⁵⁴Black, 139.

⁵⁵Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 1*, 345.

⁵⁶Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 23-24.

⁵⁷Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 1*, 364.

According to Joseph Lash, Eleanor Roosevelt, “had her own vision of a better world and was attracted to the people who shared that vision.”⁵⁸ Her work for the Bok Peace Prize was a part of that vision for a better world. She would work tirelessly for the cause of international peace for the rest of her life, always keeping in mind the role of the individual’s responsibility in the peace process. In 1938, as the world moved toward a second world war, she wrote, “if peace is going to come about in the world, the way to start is by getting a better understanding between individuals.” She would go on to say, “from this germ a better understanding between groups of people will grow.”⁵⁹ ER would spend the rest of her life working toward peaceful solutions to the world’s troubles. She would be named a delegate to the first United Nations General Assembly in 1946 and go on to be the “moving spirit” behind the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.⁶⁰ These are among the crowning achievements in Eleanor Roosevelt’s lifelong commitment to world peace.

⁵⁸Joseph P. Lash, *Love, Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982), 104.

⁵⁹Eleanor Roosevelt, “This Troubled World,” *What I Hope to Leave Behind*, 482.

⁶⁰Beasley, 165-167.