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Pearl Buck's Humanitarian Vision in War and Peace

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Abstract: Pearl S. Buck, the brilliant author who won the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes in the 1930s for her works on China, spent the first half of her life in China. Raised in eastern China by her missionary parents, she was encouraged to learn, study, and interact with Chinese children and others wherever she lived. A gifted Chinese linguist and historian, she was deeply affected by the deep, negative impact of Western colonialism during China's "century of humiliation." She was also deeply concerned about the plight of the Chinese peasants, their children, and the place of young girls and women in Chinese society and culture. Buck settled in the U.S. in 1934 and quickly became disillusioned with the widespread racial prejudice she discovered there. She became active in the civil rights movement, and when war broke out in China in 1937, she played a leading role in plans to help the Nationalists in their struggle against Japan. Over time, she became worried about Allied war and postwar claims, and was quite critical of what she thought were European efforts to restore their former colonial empires, particularly in Asia. An advocate of global postwar peace, she became a strong supporter of Raphael Lemkin's campaign to convince the U.N. to adopt the Genocide Convention in hopes that this would become a cornerstone in efforts to prevent future international conflicts.

Keywords: Pearl S. Buck; China; humanitarianism; genocide

Eurasia, that vast continental region that encompasses Europe and Asia, was a tablet for many of Pearl S. Buck's works and campaigns for human rights and international efforts to improve the human condition globally. Though she is principally known for her works on China, some scholars, while acknowledging that her novels were principally for an American female audience, gave little attention to her significant body of non-fictional works on a variety of subjects on America and East Asia. I made my first trip to China in the summer of 1985 via the Trans-Siberian Railroad and Mongolia to Beijing.

My own interest in Pearl Buck began while a freshman in college, when I read some of the works of Lin Yutang, one of her proteges in the 1930s. Buck played a key

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role in getting some of his early works published while Lin's *My Country and My People* (1938), like Buck's *Good Earth*, open the world of China to American readers. She did much the same with Edgar Snow and his wife, Helen Foster, who taught in Beijing in the early 1930s. Snow's classic study, *Red Star over China*, which I read in graduate school, is an in-depth study of Mao Zedong's transformation of the Chinese Communist Party in Shaanxi after the Long March in 1934–1935. Buck wrote in a review of Snow's book stated that what Mao was doing in Shaanxi was building "a genuine peasant movement" that has "awakened the common people of China" (Buck 1954, 28–32).

In my first trip to China via the Trans-Siberian in 1986, I wondered if the China of Pearl S. Buck was still there. I was aware that China was on the eve of what would become one of the most dynamic transformations in modern history, and was worried that its pace would erase the world that she had so vividly depicted in many of her works, particularly *The Good Earth*. It became readily apparent when I arrived at the Chinese-Mongol border that summer, and traveled slowly to Beijing, that Pearl Buck's China was still alive and vibrant. Over the next few years, I spent a lot of time traveling in the countryside and, whenever possible, visiting farms and meeting with farmers in the countryside.

Farming was still being done by hand with little mechanization while night soil was still being used on collective farms. Life was still difficult but the farmers seemed to take great pride in the dramatic changes taking place in their country. Peasants proudly showed me their new TV or refrigerators, and, in the case of one head of a collective farm who lived in a cave, the new electric lights that shone brightly inside.

However, Pearl S. Buck's works were not limited to China. Over the years, she expanded her large body of works to include Japan and Korea, and later, India. She was intrigued by the fascinating world of East Asia, in large part because of their shared history, culture, and religion. East Asia was, for Pearl Buck, a key element in the evolution of her global vision, born in cities like Nan-Suzhou, Kuling, Zhenjiang, Nanjing, and Shanghai, but also in the quiet, distant mountains of Kyushu in Japan. Her deep respect and knowledge of the historical, linguistic, and cultural traditions of East Asia provided her with the intellectual values that became the basis of her view of the world once she settled permanently in the U.S. in 1934. East Asia continued to be her intellectual touchstone by which she judged the non-Asian world for the rest of her life.

1 The China Years (1902–1934)

Pearl Buck was raised in the cauldron of revolution and civil war in China from 1902 until her final settlement in the U.S. in 1934. Her brilliant parents, Absalom and Carie,

were well-educated missionaries who insisted that Pearl and her sister, Grace, learn to speak and read Chinese. Moreover, they encouraged them to play with and make Chinese friends. Pearl's intellectual mentor as a child was a Confucian scholar, Mr. Kung, who was hired to teach her Chinese, but quietly opened up the world of Chinese history and literature for her. He also shared with her the story of China's humiliation by the West, and the story of Cixi, the last empress of China (Buck 1954, 28–32). Pearl Buck greatly admired Cixi, and later wrote a historical novel about her, *Imperial Woman*. In her foreword, Buck wrote that Tzu Hsi (Cixi), “was a woman so diverse in her gifts, so contradictory in her behavior, so rich in the many aspects of her personality, that it is difficult to comprehend and convey her whole self.” She added that she tried to write a historical novel that was as accurate as possible and based not only upon her own memories but also those of Chinese friends she knew during her childhood (Buck 1954, Foreword).

It was no accident that Buck admired Cixi. She ruled China as Dowager Empress and regent from 1861 until 1908. This was a perilous time for China and Cixi faced the onslaught of the worst of Western colonial imperialism, including the Boxer Rebellion (1900), which led to the total humiliation of China. Pearl vividly remembered stories about the murder of Western missionaries through her father, Absalom, expressed sympathy for Cixi. The Dowager Empress, he thought, reacting to the actions of “greedy Europeans and Englishmen” who were “gnawing at the shores along the Chinese seas and the rivers,” wanted “to rid herself of all white people and lock the gates of China forever against us. She was scarcely to be blamed, my grave father said, for being angry or for wanting to free China of invaders and the blunders.” How, he asked, would people in the U.S. react if “our own country [...] were fastened upon by strangers and stolen away from us bit by bit, by nagging petty wars and huge indemnities in money and land and railroad rights” (Buck 1954, 33–34).

Absalom and Carrie Sydenstricker had been in China since 1880, spoke and read Chinese fluently, and saw the Chinese as their equals, despite the rampant poverty throughout the country. In his brief account of his half century of mission work in China, Absalom noted that the principal targets of the Boxers were missionaries. He considered them martyrs, and wrote that their deaths revealed “a genuine fruit that could stand the severest test” (Spurling 2011, 38). He added that the Western powers and Japan made a mistake by allowing Cixi to remain in power and thought that the young emperor, Guangxu, would have been more inclined to initiate more creative reforms (Sydenstricker 1977, 43).

Pearl Buck had vivid memories of the upheavals, that took place time and again during the incessant waves of revolution and war that swept China over the next three decades. With the exception of the anti-Western protests that broke out in 1919 after the Allies in Paris gave Japan a post-World War I concession in Shandong, the principal antagonists in China were various warring political factions and an

aggressively new, growing Japanese empire. Some of the core ideas that were later to become an integral part of Pearl Buck's global vision were borne during these chaotic and destructive years in China.

But this was only one aspect of Pearl S. Buck's growth as a humanitarian. Another was her concern for the plight of Chinese women and children. Pearl Buck was deeply affected by the fact that four of her sisters and brothers – Maude (1884), Arthur (1890), Edith (1890), and Clyde (1892) – died as infants or young children. This was doubly so for her mother, who was gravely affected by their deaths. Carie, she wrote, drew into herself and became remotely quiet yet remained an important figure in young Pearl's dual childhood worlds. Pearl, sensitive to the impact of these childhood losses, particularly in a family that so valued children, was equally devastated years later when her first child, Carol, was diagnosed as an extremely retarded young child. Driven, like her mother, by the guilt and trauma of Carol's condition, Pearl went to the ends of the earth to seek the best care for her daughter, and later adopted a number of Amerasian children to fill a maternal void in her life.

It is difficult to know if Buck was aware of the widespread eugenic studies and practices in the U.S. and Europe at the time. Eugenicists in the U.S. and Europe argued that individuals with undesirable social traits were a threat to society and categorized people according to them. They also explored biological solutions for those deemed a threat to society, biologically or otherwise. By the 1930s, more than half of the states in the U.S. adopted sterilization policies for “inmates of mental institutions, persons convicted more than once of sex crimes, those deemed to be feeble-minded by IQ tests, ‘moral degenerate persons,’ and epileptics.” In 1927, the Supreme Court upheld a Virginia law that gave the directors of state institutions the right to sterilize handicapped patients who suffered from “an hereditary form of insanity or imbecility” (Friedlander 1995, 4, 8–9).

Pearl Buck's decision to seek care for Carol, who was born in China in 1920 and was later diagnosed to be severely retarded, found some solace in Chinese social ideas that valued “children above all else in life.” The Chinese, she wrote in one of her most personal works, *The Child Who Never Grew* (1950), “love children for their own sakes and beyond. Children mean the continuity of human life, and human life is wonderful and precious” (Buck 1992, 31). She was also heartened by the fact that the Chinese “take any human infirmity for what it is” (Buck 1992, 39), and remembered as a very young child a playmate, who she only knew as Little Cripple. Westerners, she wrote, would have considered such a name cruel while the Chinese simply considered it a name denoting his “twisted leg as part of himself” (Buck 1992, 39). On the other hand, she remembered a moment in Shanghai many years later when two well-dressed American young women walked by Carol, and glancing back, said that she “was nuts.” Pearl Buck was never worried about Chinese acceptance of Carol but

was concerned about how she would be accepted by Westerners if she remained in China (Buck 1992, 57).

Before she took Carol to the U.S. to live in a very special institution that took care of her for the rest of her life, Pearl spent part of a summer traveling with Carol in Japan. She wrote that they traveled throughout Japan by train visiting small villages and towns. “Everywhere we were met with kindness and courtesy and here there was no sign that anyone found my child strange. She was accepted for what she was and most tenderly treated. That brought healing too” (Buck 1992, 61). Buck, who was a very private person, did everything she could to protect Carol from the awful glare of publicity that surrounded her after she received the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes in the 1930s, finally wrote *The Child Who Never Grew* (1950) in hopes that Carol’s story would help other parents learn from her experiences (Buck 1992, 27–29).

Children, particularly those who were disadvantaged or mistreated, were extremely important to Pearl Buck. Her parents, who had adopted a young Chinese girl, Ts’ai Yun (Beautiful Cloud), encouraged her to play with Chinese children. Ts’ai Yun married and had many daughters and a son. Two of them became Pearl’s playmates and close friends, something Pearl wrote about in one of her children’s books – *The Chinese Children Next Door*. For Pearl S. Buck, the plight of Chinese children and women was intertwined. But it would be years before she began to delve more deeply into the tragic plight of some young Chinese trapped in a cycle of abuse.

By the time that she was 18, Pearl was eager to return to the U.S. to attend college. She hoped to start classes in 1909 but had to delay her plans for a year because her parents would not be eligible for a furlough until 1910. Consequently, Carrie decided it was best if Pearl spent the year studying at Miss Jewell’s Day School, a private boarding school in Shanghai. By this time, Pearl had developed her own independent spiritual philosophy and did not feel comfortable around her more doctrinaire classmates. She described the school as a “strange subterranean world of mixed humanity” (Buck 1954, 67). She shocked her roommates when she shared with them her father’s ideas about the evolution of sophisticated Chinese philosophical and religious ideas over several millennia and the contributions of such achievements “to the profound steady movement of mankind toward God” (Buck 1954, 67).

Miss Jewell, well aware of Pearl’s discomfort with the school, invited her to work with her at the Door of Hope, “a rescue home for Chinese slave girls who had cruel mistresses” (Buck 1954, 69). The home was supported by the Shanghai municipal government and was designed not only to legally free the “slave girls” but also to teach them useful life skills. What is interesting is how surprised Pearl was after learning of their plight. Miss Jewell asked her to teach the young girls basic “household arts,” something Pearl despised but did quite well. Since Pearl spoke Mandarin, she was able to talk to some of the young women, many of them household

slaves since childhood. She found them eager to learn and she attentively listened to their stories. They usually were from poor and destitute farm families who, in some instances, raised them “to serve in a rich household.” The ones at the Door of Hope were, Pearl wrote, from “evil households.” While some families treated their “bondmaids” well and freed them when they turned 18, those at the Door of Hope came from households where their “bad-tempered mistresses” beat them with whips and burned them with “live coals from pipes and cigarettes.” Some were also “ravished by growing adolescent sons” or “lecherous masters and their menservants” (Buck 1954, 69–70).

The sale of a daughter, she wrote, “was an old system” (Buck 1954, 70) used by “desperate starving families” in the countryside during a famine to buy a little food and even save their daughter’s life. They thought it was better to do this in hopes she would work for a kind family than to let her starve to death. She added that sons were more highly valued than daughters because they were carriers of the family name. She added that there were some “romantic and beautiful love stories in Chinese literature” about the “lovely bondmaid who is the hopefulness of the starving family.” On one level it seems as if Pearl Buck was trying to rationalize the historical nature of female slavery in China, though, in reality, she was shocked by what she learned about it at the Door of Hope. She wrote that after spending time there with Miss Jewell, she spent many nights crying about “such evil in the world.” She knew that there were

Persons, both men and women, who are incurably and wilfully cruel and wicked. But forced to this recognition, I retaliated spiritually by making the fierce resolution that wherever I saw evil and cruelty at work I would devote all I had to delivering its victims. This resolution has stayed with me throughout my life and has provided a conscience for conduct. (Buck 1954, 70)

Pearl remained at Miss Jewell’s Day School through the winter of 1910 and then returned to Zhenjiang to get ready for her departure to Randolph-Macon College (RMC) that fall. She wrote in her memoirs that her mother Carie, who had been married to her father for 30 years, “had developed into an ardent feminist” (Buck 1954, 90). There is no question that her four years at RMC had a profound effect on her own sense of feminine identity. Nothing that Pearl had done or studied prepared her for life among a student body made up principally of young women from societally well-to-do families. Her first year was difficult, and she stood out as something of a country bumpkin. Driven by her extremely keen intellect and adaptable social skills, she transformed herself into a campus leader and admired young scholar. Her tutors, and particularly her bright, well-educated mother, Carie, had prepared her well intellectually for college. When she finished her studies in 1914, she was offered a part-time teaching position at RMC, something she had to give up when she learned that her mother was quite ill and needed her back home in Zhenjiang.

Pearl admitted that she had not spoken a word of Chinese while at RMC and returned to China not only because she missed it but because of her deep, special relationship with her mother. She soon got a position teaching English to high school age boys at a school run by the Presbyterian Mission in Zhenjiang. She balanced this with running the household and taking care of her mother. Since some of her students were married and had families, she found them far more mature than similar male students in the U.S. She taught them English through conversations about topics of interest to them. In the end, she noted, “they taught me far more than I taught them” (qtd. in Spurling 2010, 83), particularly when it came to the dramatic changes that had taken place in China during her time away in the U.S. She was intrigued by the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the new revolutionary ideas of China’s first president, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who she came to admire greatly (Buck 1954, 102–4).

For Pearl Buck, life in China, at least for its average citizen – a peasant – was intimately tied to the soil. Her masterpiece, *The Good Earth*, was about the intimate personal and community interrelationships that were part of agricultural life throughout China for centuries. But since she lived principally in urban settings surrounded by vast farmlands, her interrelationships with farmers *per se* were limited to personal stories from friends or with Chinese tales she read as a child and young adult. This would all change when she married John Lossing Buck in 1917, a missionary agriculturalist whose research took him and his new wife, Pearl S. Buck, into the countryside in remote Nan-Suzhou.

Pearl described Nan-Suzhou as a scattered collection of villages in a “countryside stretched as flat as any desert, broken only by what appeared to be heaps of mud” (Buck 1954, 135). Initially, she was extremely critical of its residents and the landscape, but admitted to never being lonely since she found the Chinese in the villages “delightful” (Buck 1954, 138). She adjusted quickly to the language differences and was “rich in friends.” She wrote that since Lossing was an “agriculturalist,” it was “natural that I accompanied him on his trips into the country.” She did, though, wonder secretly what an American could teach “the Chinese farmers who had been farming for generations on the same land and by the most skilful use of fertilizers and irrigation” (qtd. in Conn 1996, 61). The result were “extraordinary yields” without using modern machinery (Buck 1954, 139).

When they traveled into the countryside, Lossing rode his bicycle while Pearl followed him in a sedan chair (Buck 1954, 143). One of the things she had to get used to was the crowds of people who followed her in some villages that had never seen a blue-eyed white woman. I remember my first experience like this when I visited Qufu, Confucius’ birthplace, in the 1980s. My Chinese colleague warned me that some of the villagers might follow me as I walked down the street. Some of them had never seen a bearded white man and were just curious and meant no harm. This was particularly the case with children who would walk up and ask to touch my beard.

After that experience, I always made certain I had candy for the children. I had similar experiences in Tibet and Mongolia.

Pearl made friends with some of the inhabitants in some of the remote villages they visited and became “deeply impressed” by the “farmers and their families, who lived in the villages outside of the city wall” of Nan-Suzhou (Buck 1954, 145–46). “They were the ones,” she wrote,

who bore the brunt of life, who made the least money and did the most work. They were the most real, the closest to the earth, to birth and death, to laughter and to weeping. To visit the farm families became my own search for reality, and among them I found the human being as he most nearly is. They were not all good, by any means nor honest and it was inevitable that the very reality of their lives made them sometimes cruel. A farm woman could strangle her own newborn girl baby if she were desperate enough at the thought of another mouth added to the family, but she wept while she did it and the weeping was raw sorrow, not simply at what she did, but far deeper, over the necessity she felt to do it. (Buck 1954, 146)

Pearl was also surprised by the infanticide of newborn girls and the practice of foot binding, which some of her Westernized Chinese friends denied was practiced. Two of her Chinese friends, Madame Chang and Madame Wu, had their feet bound as young girls and were crippled for life (Buck 1954, 146–48). Pearl Buck's three years in Nan-Suzhou were transformative for Pearl S. Buck, and planted the seed for some of her earliest works, particularly *The Good Earth*, which she hoped to capture the essence of what she called “the human being he most nearly is” (Buck 1954, 146).

Her time in Nan-Suzhou also brought to the fore another topic dear to Pearl Buck's heart – the plight of women – not only in China but also globally. In some ways, one could argue, her concern for the plight of women and children in China, the example of her mother's “feminism,” and her growing passion for writing, was finally given voice in some of her modest early writings. Some of her early works were stimulated by the rural field work she did with her husband, while others reflected the revolutionary upheavals she experienced in China in the mid to late 1920s. One of her first short stories “Lao Wang, the Farmer” (1926) reflected the former while “The Revolutionist,” the latter (Conn 1996, 89, 97). She also wrote a pair of interesting works while she and Lossing were at Cornell University doing graduate work in 1924–1925. She submitted a lengthy thesis, “China and the West,” for the Laura L. Messenger Memorial Prize, which she won, and her first short story, “A Chinese Woman Speaks,” was published in *Asia* magazine. It dealt with the marriage of a foot-bound young woman, Kwei-Ian, to a Westernized Chinese physician who told her on her wedding night that “you have been forced into this marriage as much as I have” (Geng 2022, 16–17). She was deeply troubled by his comments since she had spent all of her young life preparing to be a proper Chinese wife. This included

painful foot binding as a young child. When he later asked her if she would be willing to have her feet unbound, she was shocked and puzzled by his request but agreed to do it to please him. He also told her that he would do it himself though the unbinding was as painful as the original binding. This marriage of two worlds and traditions flourished and after the birth of their first child, her husband gently proclaimed that their new son was theirs collectively (Geng 2022, 17).

This was not the case in a similar story that Buck published a few years later – “The First Wife.” Though similar in some ways to “A Chinese Woman Speaks,” the outcome of the story was tragically different. The anonymous First Wife, who also had bound feet, married a Western-educated Chinese man who was embarrassed by her lack of formal education. He insisted she attend a foreign school which she did with limited success. She told her husband that she found it impossible to be “a new woman” and preferred to stay at home taking care of their two children and his parents. When she learned that he planned to divorce her and keep the children, she told him that she had nowhere to go. He was dismissive of her concerns and told her that he would take care of her financially. Devastated at having lost everything, she committed suicide (Geng 2022, 19–20).

2 American Interlude (1932)

Buck’s interest in the two dimensions of these conflicts between different cultures, particularly when it came to the traditional role of some women in China, was a reflection of her own frustrations about the roles and powers of American women, particularly between 1932 and 1934, when she divided her time between the U.S. and China. She found that some Chinese intellectuals frowned upon her negative views of some aspects of Chinese life, particularly when it came to the depiction of “certain peculiarities and defects” in the Pulitzer Prize winning *The Good Earth* (1932). She wrote, in response to their comments that “China’s intellectuals cannot seem to grasp is that they ought to be proud of their common people, that the common people are China’s strength and glory” (Buck 1954, 278–81).

Buck’s sensitivity to the plight of the “common people” in China spilled over into the U.S. during her furlough year in 1932. She became extremely critical and disillusioned with the deeply ingrained racial prejudices there, first towards people of color and later Asian Americans. Though born in the South, she probably saw very few people of color in rural West Virginia during her infrequent vacations there. This would have not been the case in Lynchburg, Virginia, in the heart of the Confederacy, though, in her defense, she admits that she was seldom off campus, at least until her senior year. She wrote that she first learned of the

plight of people of color at an exhibition of Black paintings in New York in 1932. Later, she wrote,

It was a blow from which I could not recover. To me America had always been the heavenly country, the land where all was clean and kind and free. I had seen white men cruel to dark people in other places, but those white men had not been Americans, and so I had somehow from childhood supposed that no Americans were cruel to people whose only difference was that they were dark-skinned. And I had known so well the horrors and dangers of racial prejudice! Had I not, because I was white, suffered it even in my own childhood? Yet what broke my heart was not that I had suffered any of these things, but that my own people could commit such offenses against others, and that these others were their fellow citizens. (Buck 1954, 274–75)

These comments underscored the universality of the evolving humanitarian perspectives of Pearl S. Buck, which grew from her diverse views of the lives of China's peasants and that of its intellectuals. The duality of her life and such views were a permanent fixture of her moral compass, and would expand considerably throughout the rest of her life as a renowned author and aggressive social activist.

3 The Global War (1937–1945)

Pearl S. Buck was also well versed in exposing and critiquing the crimes and social upheavals of war, something she had observed and suffered in China. The outbreak of war in China in 1937, in Europe in 1939, and in the U.S. in 1941, stirred her into action. The first hint of her concerns about the war in China can be found in a brief talk she gave at the Nobel Hall banquet in Stockholm on December 10, 1938 (her Nobel Prize lecture two days later was “The Chinese Novel.”) She told her audience about the shared Chinese and American “love of freedom”:

[...] And more today than ever, this is true, now when China's whole being is engaged in the greatest of all struggles, the struggle for freedom, I have never admired China more than I do now, when I see here uniting as she has never before, against the enemy who threatens her freedom. With this determination for freedom, which is in so profound a sense the essential quality of her nature, I know that she is *unconquerable*. (Buck 1938, 14)¹

Buck was extremely critical of U.S. ties to Japan during the early years of the war in China. She also wrote several historical novels about the war such as *The Patriot* (1939). Her goal was to use her writing and public speeches to inform the American

¹ Pearl Banquet Speech, Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1938, p. 1; Pearl Buck Nobel Lecture, Nobel Lecture, December 12, 1938, p. 14.

public about the plight of the Chinese. In the spring of 1939, she gave a radio talk for the American Committee for Non-Participation in Japanese Aggression that questioned American neutrality, particularly when it came to continued U.S. business with Japan. She said much the same in a short story for the *Saturday Evening Post* (Conn 1996, 222–23, 269).

Though she continued to speak out for enhanced rights for women and African Americans, her principal focus now was on American support and aid for China. In the summer of 1940, she led, in league with Eleanor Roosevelt, the Book of Hope campaign which asked 1,000 women, whose names would be included in a Book of Hope, to donate \$1,000 apiece for aid to China. That fall, she and her second husband, Richard Walsh, founded the China Emergency Relief Committee (CERC), whose goal was to raise \$1 million in six months. The funds would be used to build two medical training centers in those parts of China not under Japanese control. In the spring of 1941, Buck became chairperson of United China Relief, which joined with CERC and other Chinese relief organizations to help raise \$5 million for humanitarian aid in China. *Asia*, the magazine that she co-owned and published with her husband, now became a voice for writers from Asia in an effort to educate American readers about the diversity and conflicts in that part of the world (Conn 1996, 243).

Pearl continued to write about the war in China and soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, published *Dragon Seed: The Story of China at War* about the conflict there, particularly Japanese crimes. Buck also became a vociferous opponent of Franklin Roosevelt's program to round up and put Japanese Americans in remote internment camps throughout the U.S. On April 15, 1942, she spoke at a Japanese-American Committee for Democracy rally in New York and argued that a democratic country like the U.S. did not send its citizens to concentration camps because of their race. A few weeks later she sent Eleanor Roosevelt a letter expressing the same ideas. When the government later began to release some of the Japanese internees from the camps, Buck testified before the California legislature's Slater Committee, which was trying to keep those from California from returning to the state. She noted the contributions of Asian-Americans to U.S. society and argued against such policies (String 1983, 262–65).

One of her worries throughout the war was that the defeat of Germany and Japan would lead to the restoration of white racist Allied colonies in Asia and Africa. She wrote incessantly about the "need for racial justice at home and overseas" (Conn 1996, 269). In a note to Dorothy Thompson, an influential American journalist in late 1942, Buck wrote that the war was "fast becoming a tool in the hands of those who want neither freedom nor equality in the world" (Conn 1996, 269). Buck was extremely critical of President Roosevelt's decision not to speak out in support of India's independence. In a speech on December 10, 1942, at the annual Nobel Prize dinner in New York, she told the gathered Nobel laureates that the war had already

“ceased to be a fight for freedom” and had become “not even a war to save civilization, but only a war to save European civilization” (Conn 1996, 270).

Several months later, Buck wrote an article in the *New York Times*, “The Freedom to be Free,” that chastised the Allies, particularly the U.S. and Great Britain, for failing to embrace Franklin Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms, which he shared with Congress in early 1941 – freedom of speech and worship, freedom from want, and freedom of fear – as key war aims (“FDR” 1941). She criticized the president for failing to stand up to Winston Churchill and their collective decision not to accept Chiang Kai-shek’s requests that China be treated as a co-equal ally. She quoted R.H. Tawney, a prominent British historian who fought in World War I, who wrote that “either war is a crusade nor it is a crime. There is no halfway house.”² She concluded her article by stating that “to declare that this war is for freedom is to call for a form of world cooperation which alone can maintain that freedom – a cooperation of all peoples who must first be free” (Buck 1943, 4, 37).

H. I. Brock, a prominent *Times* columnist, responded to Buck’s article and applauded her central theme – that the United Nations was “falling far short of the aims when it should – and must be directed.” He defined her use of Tawney’s quote as a “powerful appeal to the humanitarian imagination.” But her arguments that all peoples and their leaders wanted such freedoms was misguided. This word “meant nothing” to the Germans, the Italians, the French, and the Russians. In Asia, a part of the world which had produced great civilizations, has never enjoyed the freedoms that the Americans enjoy. Brock considered the current war one of “survival” for “ourselves” (Brock 1943, 18).

He thought her ideas about transforming the war “into a crusade for something else – however desirable – is leading many peoples, idealists like herself, into a state of confusion and mistrust” (Brock 1943, 36). Regardless, the points she raises must be considered by Allied leaders to ensure the elimination of fear of the Nazis and the Japanese. Brock was uncertain whether to call the war a crusade or a crime. But this was not a “crime of our own making” (Brock 1943, 36), and to translate it into a crusade might weaken the common cause of the United Nations and the subsequent will to win the war (Brock 1943, 36).

A few weeks later, Eleanor Roosevelt asked Pearl Buck to spend the night at the White House and give a speech the next day in honor of the retirement of Mary Jane McLeon, a prominent African leader, adviser to President Roosevelt, and the president of Bethune-Cookman College. This gave Buck and Mrs. Roosevelt time to discuss

2 Buck mistakenly referred to Tawney as R. N. Tawpey; Buck took Tawney’s quote out of context. It ended by stating “If right is the Allies’ goal, then right must be the Allies’ limit. For that they are bound to fight: they are free to fight for nothing else.” See Alexander Meiklejohn, “Out of Revolution,” *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine* (December 1938): 1–2.

the situation in China, particularly in light of the evolution of democracy. Buck told her it was improbable unless the U.S. pressured Chiang Kai-shek to deal with the country's corruption and inefficiency. Buck later wrote a report for Mrs. Roosevelt prior to her trip to visit those parts of China still under Nationalist rule. Buck warned her that a civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists would follow the defeat of the Japanese. Only the Communists, she wrote, had any ties to the peasants and she thought there were some things to admire about their work in the countryside *vis a vis* "Chiang's murderous purges." She also suggested she find some time to meet Zhou En-lai. She voiced similar reservations about Chiang Kai-shek in an article in *Time*, "A Warning about China" (Conn 1996, 272–73).

One of the issues that arose at this time was the question of the Congressional repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act of May 6, 1882, which restricted the migration of Chinese workers to the U.S. for ten years. The Scott Act six years later made it impossible for anyone from China to come to the U.S. In 1943, Pearl and her husband Richard created a Citizens Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion. Pearl emerged as the committee's principal spokesperson and testified before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. She told the committee that repealing the act was a matter of common decency, particularly since China was a wartime ally. Though the act was repealed it was more of a diplomatic gesture than one about American acceptance of China and its people as co-equal allies.

Later that year, she published *The Promise*, the third of her novels to deal with the Sino-Japanese War (the others were *The Patriot* and *Dragon Seed*), which dealt with China's unsuccessful alliance with the British in Burma. The underlying theme, based on Pearl's research, was British colonial duplicity when it came to support of its Chinese allies. Personally, she was particularly critical of Winston Churchill and, like her close friend, Lin Yutang, his relationship with President Roosevelt. Churchill, a strong supporter of the British empire, prompted Buck to write in *What America Means to Me* in 1943, and argued that "[i]f we want victory in war we must practice democracy in our race relations" (Stirling 1983, 210). She had similar things to say about India, a nation of almost 400 million people, and its aspirations to be free of British rule. She also insisted that China be assured a seat in postwar peace negotiations (Stirling 1983, 202, 210; Kuo 1943, 5).

By the summer of 1944, it seemed as though the war in Europe would be over within a year. That fall, Buck became involved with the Society for the Prevention of World War III as a member of its advisory board. In the midst of Allied discussions about how to deal with a defeated Germany, the Society supported a plan by Henry Morgenthau, Roosevelt's Secretary of the Treasury, that postwar Germany be transformed into a "primarily pastoral community" too weak to threaten Europe in the future (Crowe 2019, 19).

4 Pearl Buck, Raphael Lemkin, and the Genocide Convention

That fall, Raphael Lemkin, a Russian-born, Polish-educated refugee published a voluminous study – *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* – an almost 700 page analysis, backed by a very large collection of documents on Nazi Germany's harsh occupation policies throughout the war. In Chapter 9, Lemkin coined and defined a new term – *genocide* – which he described as the “destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group” (Lemkin 1944a, 79). Such a crime, he wrote, did not mean the “immediate destruction of a nation” (Lemkin 1944a, 79) or its people, with the exception of mass killings, but a

coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. This would be achieved by pursuing a plan whose objectives would be the “disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals who belong to such groups. (Lemkin 1944a, 79)

Lemkin's book was well received by the press and scholarly reviews, which led to his appointment as a senior adviser to the War Department's War Crimes Office (WCO) in June 1945 and to Robert Jackson's team helping prepare for the Nuremberg IMT trial in Germany that fall. Lemkin's concept of genocide received a lot of attention because it seemed to describe the most heinous of Nazi crimes – the mass murder of Jews, Roma, the handicapped, and others deemed threats to Hitler's vision of creating a pure Aryan Europe. But since it was an extremely new legal concept without any sort of precedents in international law, it was decided to adopt genocide as a sub-charge in the Nuremberg indictment.

Lemkin worked for the WCO and Jackson's team in 1945 and 1946 in helping identify alleged German war criminals and doing research for the Nuremberg and Tokyo IMT trials. Once the trial was over in the fall of 1946, he remained with the WCO and advised the U.S. team of prosecutors at the subsequent U.S. war crimes trials in Nuremberg.

The New York Times wrote quite a few articles and editorials during this period supporting Lemkin's ideas about genocide. By 1946, Lemkin began to think about approaching the U.N. about the prospect of adopting an international convention that would declare genocide an international legal crime. In the fall of 1946, he was able to convince the U.N. General Assembly to discuss this question and on December 11, it unanimously adopted a resolution that declared “genocide is a denial of the right of existence of entire human groups” and added that the “punishment of the

crime of genocide is a matter of international concern.” It was also a “crime under international law which the civilized world condemns” and asked its Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to “draw up a draft convention on the crime of genocide” for presentation to the General Assembly at its next session in 1947 (United Nations 1946, 34–37).

In the spring of 1947, Lemkin helped write a preliminary draft of the convention. That summer, he approached Pearl Buck about writing a draft “manifesto” that he could use that fall to help convince U.N. delegates to adopt a proposal to study and draft convention for the General Assembly’s consideration. In his memoirs, he wrote that Pearl S. Buck was the key figure in helping organize “an appeal by leading intellectuals of the world to the 1947 [General] Assembly, calling for the adoption of the convention (Lemkin 1944b, 237). Buck readily agreed to write the manifesto. Her initial draft stated that

We, the undersigned, men and women of many countries, various in our occupations, now join together with single heart and mind to urge the peoples and governments of the United Nations to act with speed and energy on the draft convention for the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide. This convention, already upon the agenda of the General Assembly, must not be delayed. The people of the world are still stunned and shocked, mentally and morally, by the recent genocide in Germany under Hitler. Yet this was but one example of what has repeatedly taken place in history among other groups. The strong, the ruthless, the arrogant, can continue also, unless and until the principles of human decency are transferred into international attitude, statements, and laws, providing for the effective protection of the weak, the innocent, and the helpless against the strong and the ruthless. Life in our world is enriched by the diversity of cultures and ideas which proceed from variety in racial, national, and religious groups, even as a community is the better for a variety of its citizens. The destruction of variety would be an intolerable loss to mankind, and there is not a guarantee, moreover, that the surviving groups would be the best ones. Homicide in a community is punished by law, but genocide in the world community is still allowed, condoned, and sometimes rewarded. Yet genocide is a threat greater than war, for it is perpetuated in peace as well as war, it is contagious, spreading from one community to another, catching at fanatic fringes of the population and spread like forest fire, through fear [...] The concept of the prevention of genocide envisages human groups in their organic entirety including physical existence, biological continuity, and the basic elements of spiritual life. The protection of the spirit is as important as the protection of the body. (Harris 1871, 84)

The U.N. adoption of a Genocide Convention would reassure a world

[d]ivided by wars, misunderstandings, and uncertainties of the right of all human beings to live safely within the groups to which they have been born and to which they spiritually belong, and that the violation of this right, which is genocide, shall be held an international crime. (Harris 1871, 85)

Buck told Lemkin to make whatever changes he thought best. He made very few (Buck, n.d.; Harris 1871, 84–85).³

Lemkin was so impressed by Buck's heartfelt manifesto and support that he asked her to help him reach out to prominent international figures and urge them to sign the manifesto. On September 3, 1947, Buck, Lemkin, and François Mauriac, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1952, sent wires to Count Folke Bernadotte, Princess Juliana of The Netherlands, Paal Berg, former chief justice of the Norwegian Supreme Court, Sigrid Undset, the 1928 Nobel Laureate in Literature, Gabriela Mistral, the 1945 Laureate in Literature, and Refling Hagen, a prominent Norwegian writer, to sign the manifesto (Mauriac et al., n.d.).

On September 29, Buck sent a letter to the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship noting that a "small group of well-known and respected persons" was preparing an "international manifesto" that would ask the General Assembly to adopt the Genocide Convention. Such a manifesto would be incomplete without "a distinguished Russian name" and hoped that Constantin Semenov, a Soviet novelist, would agree to sign the manifesto. She never got a response (Harris 1971, 85–86).

Buck followed this up with letters to Wang Shih-chieh, a member of the Sixth Committee, and Liu Chieh, China's Oxford-educated chairman of Subcommittee 2. Wang thanked her on October 3 for her wire and wrote that China's U.N. delegation would give "active support" to the "sound principles" in the draft convention (Wang 1947). Twelve days later, Buck wrote Liu Chieh and told him how delighted she was that he was chairing Subcommittee 2. She hoped that someone from the Chinese delegation would become chair because China had a "high and fine record in regard to the treatment of human groups." She suggested some changes in Article I, particularly the deletion of the word "political" (Buck 1947; Harris 1971, 87), and thought the section in Article VIII on "extradition" should not "apply to nationals in any country." She also proposed eliminating Article X from the draft (Harris 1971, 87), and hoped that Article XII would be changed to ensure that the Sixth Committee, and not the Security Council, would oversee "measures for the suppression and prevention of genocide." This, "we" think, would ensure that any such action "would be nonpolitical. It would be cultural and preparatory, let us say" (Harris 1971, 87). Pearl S. Buck was a brilliant person but knew very little about international criminal law. It is apparent that Raphael Lemkin wrote those portions of the letter about changes to the draft convention.

She told Liu that she knew his committee's members would be sensitive to the fact that "the peoples of the countries they represent look to the United Nations for great constructive measures" (Harris 1971, 87). This was particularly true when it

3 The manifesto can also be found in Theodore F. Harris in consultation with Pearl S. Buck, *Pearl S. Buck, Her Philosophy as Expressed in Her Letters*, vol. 2 (New York: John Day, 1971), 84–85.

came to the “great principles of human justice” such as the prevention of genocide (Harris 1971, 87). She also referred to an October 11 letter to *The New York Times* signed by 26 very prominent international figures such as Gabriela Mistral, Lin Yutang, Edouard Herriot, Aldous Huxley, François Mauriac, Fonseca Chamier, Sigrid Undset, Count Bernadotte, and Buck. It underscored the historical destruction of human groups by “tyrannical governments” as well as those “blinded” by racial hatred and religious and nationalistic “intolerance.” The letter’s authors stated that the Genocide Convention provided a way to make safe “a diversity of cultures, races, nationalities and creeds.” Admittedly, the convention may not stop such crimes immediately, but would introduce an “era of progress and tolerance.” The letter ended by urging the U.N. adoption of the Genocide Convention as an “international Magna Charta for life and culture” (“The Crime of Genocide” 1947, 56).

Liu Chieh wrote Buck two weeks later and thanked her for the letter and a recent telegram she sent him about the adoption of the convention. He told her that since genocide was a new legal concept, the Sixth Committee had to prepare, quite carefully, a “detailed definition of the crime itself so that nations or groups who would seek its perpetration, can find no legal loophole by which to justify their acts.” She was correct, he added, that China was in the “vanguard” of nations who wanted a viable Genocide Convention. His subcommittee, he wrote, had recommended that an “interim body” be set up to deal with the “pressing problems” of international crimes, which had to be discussed between the 1947 and 1948 U.N. General Assembly sessions. This would include completing the draft of the Genocide Convention for the Third Session in 1948. He assured her that “we” the Sixth Committee would do everything possible to complete the work on the draft convention in a thorough, deliberate manner (Liu 1947).

Lemkin wrote to Buck on November 16, 1947, and updated her on the progress of the draft convention. He noted that her manifesto had been filed with the Secretariat’s office and that it was now an official U.N. document distributed not only to all U.N. delegations but also to governments and organizations throughout the world (Harris 1971, 88–90; United Nations n.d., 475–77, 569–71). Buck responded on November 24 and told Lemkin that she was pleased with their earlier press conference and would do all that she could to continue supporting Lemkin. She was planning an article on groups that might be affected by genocide and hoped to publish it in a popular magazine. She was afraid, though, that some editors might be hesitant to print it (Buck 1947).

On December 8, she sent out a group letter to 23 prominent politicians and intellectuals, 13 of whom were from Latin America. She wrote that she had been in contact with them in the past and wanted to give them an update on the progress of the convention. The U.N.’s Sixth Committee or Legal Committee asked its Subcommittee 2 to study the Secretariat’s draft and, after its review, it was returned to the

Sixth Committee with the recommendation that it prepare a new draft of the Genocide Convention. Unfortunately, when this idea was presented to the General Assembly, several countries proposed a resolution that, if passed, would have made the “idea of a convention questionable.” Fortunately, she added, Cuba, Panama, and Egypt presented a counter resolution, which “reaffirmed the Subcommittee’s original recommendation” about preparing a new draft. This proposal was passed by a “large majority” in the General Assembly (Harris 1971, 88–90; United Nations 1948, 509–23).

The Sixth Committee, she continued, would begin discussions about a new draft in early February and it was extremely important that they urge their governments to send their comments to the General Secretary as soon as possible. She included a copy of the October 13, 1947, resolution by Panama’s National Assembly that called for the U.N. General Assembly to approve, during its current session, the convention “on the crime of genocide which makes the extermination of political, social, national, racial, religious and other groups punishable by international actions” (United Nations 1947, 407).

Lemkin excitedly wrote Buck on December 26 that her letters were beginning to “show results” and noted that Costa Rica’s parliament had recently passed a resolution endorsing the convention. On January 8, 1948, Buck wrote Costa Rica’s president, Francisco Fonseca Chamier and told him that his country’s resolution played a leading role in the “movement of ideas which will bring blessings to humanity.” She added that she would take the “necessary steps” to assure that his country’s resolution would become an official U. N. document which would greatly assist the ECOSOC when beginning its discussions about the draft convention in February. She also asked President Chamier about the best way to communicate with other parliaments, especially those in Latin America. She was aware that there was a forthcoming conference of Latin American countries in Bogotá in March and hoped the delegates adopt the convention “in favor of a genocide convention.” She noted that Cuba, Egypt, and Panama sponsored a “genocide resolution” on December 11, 1947, which was “practically saved at the present Assembly through the intellectual enthusiasm of the Latin American countries.” She added that she was very proud of the “great humanitarian leadership” of these nations in the General Assembly, particularly in light of the “political strife” in other delegations (Harris 1971, 90–91; United Nations 1948, 522–23).

Buck’s letters underscore the important role she played in helping Lemkin put together a coalition of Latin American and other small U.N. member countries across the globe who supported the adoption of a Genocide Convention. Buck’s international reputation as a Nobel Laureate and staunch supporter of human and civil rights opened many important doors for Raphael Lemkin. This is the reason that Lemkin asked her to write a series of articles for prominent newspapers in the U.K.

and Scandinavia. On January 22, 1948, she wrote two distinct letters to the editors of Denmark's *Politiken* and the *Manchester Guardian*.

On January 22, 1948, Buck sent her "Letter to Denmark" to Niels Hasager, the editor of *Politiken* (*The Politic*) and hoped "it would be suitable for publication in your distinguished paper." Hasager published Buck's letter a few days later, which included a manifesto that had been signed by supporters from around the world (Harris 1971, 91–92). She began by mentioning her deep affection for Denmark and her admiration for the "human common sense" of the Danish people during the war, an allusion to the successful Danish national effort to send over 7200 Danish Jews to Sweden and safety in the fall of 1943. This gallant effort, she wrote, made Denmark a "leader in all humanitarian affairs." She added that she was pleased that Denmark had a representative on the ECOSOC Council, which would soon begin to discuss a new draft of the Genocide Convention. She went into some detail about the history and concept of the crime of genocide and the "legalistic objections" it faced, particularly from those who sought to "delay the action against genocide by making it part of the Nuremberg Principles or of some future international criminal code" (Harris 1971, 93).

She noted that Finn Seyersted, Norway's delegate to the General Assembly, told the delegates that the "Nuremberg Principles had to do with war, but that genocide is a danger even in times of peace" (Harris 1971, 92–93).⁴ In the past, Buck argued, genocidal crimes were often considered "an affair private to the nation" where they took place. The perpetrators of such crimes were occasionally prominent figures like Enver Pasha, one of the architects of the Armenian genocide, who was assassinated in an act of "anarchical, single-handed justice" (Harris 1971, 93). It was now time for acts of "human justice" that declared that individuals or groups who committed acts of genocide be found guilty of an international crime. Swift action should now be taken to deal with such crimes via the Genocide Convention, something she hoped Denmark would support (Harris 1971, 93).

In her letter to the *Guardian*, one of Britain's more liberal newspapers, Buck took a different tone than she did in her letter to *Politiken*. Part of the reason was that she knew that the British government and the British delegation to the U.N. had serious reservations about the viability of the Genocide Convention. Buck, aware that Sir Hartley Shawcross, the head of the British delegation and the chief British prosecutor and Nuremberg, voiced initial support for the convention in 1946, noted such reservations and those who thought it best to rely on the Nuremberg Principles or the

⁴ Seyersted's actual statement, in response to those who wanted to link it to the Nuremberg Charter, was "Why should we complicate genocide, on which there is such a positive unanimity, by linking it with other and more controversial subjects? The Nürnberg Charter deals only with questions of war, but genocide is a problem of peace as well as war." United Nations, E/621, p. 520.

drafting of “an international criminal code” to deal with genocidal crimes. She also pointed to the widespread support of the Genocide Convention internationally, particularly in the U.S. Interestingly, she added a paragraph on sources about the convention available in the U.K. and ended by noting the country’s “humanitarian intervention” during the Armenian genocide in World War I. What she did not mention were her fears about the postwar restoration of colonial empires in Asia and Africa but hoped that “Britain will lead again in this new humanitarian intervention, to prevent and punish genocide” (Harris 1971, 94–96).

There is no question that Pearl S. Buck's enthusiastic support of the Genocide Convention is one of the pinnacles of her evolution as one of the world's foremost human rights activists. Yet, one could argue, her work with and for Lemkin was only the beginning of what was almost another 25 years of work and actions that expanded the fruits of her humanitarian works and vision, both large and small. Its global dimensions are reflected in her various novels and related works on humanitarian issues globally. This would include her work for displaced and abandoned children, particularly in Asia, and her support of the restoration of a democratically oriented Japan.

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