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 Books in Review

## The Essence of Modern War

A NUMBER OF AMERICANS have sat as students at the feet of the Chinese revolution and learned what their own country failed to teach them: the nature of human society, including feudalism, capitalism and imperialism, and the depths of cruelty to which men will descend to accumulate wealth. One of the best known Americans who has passed through such training is Edgar Snow, whose new book, "People on Our Side,"<sup>1</sup> is dedicated to another, Lieutenant-Colonel Evans F. Carlson of the United States Marines, now lying wounded in San Diego, California. A third is Jack Belden who, while recovering from wounds incurred at Salerno, prepared his second book, "Still Time to Die."<sup>2</sup>

Snow and Belden both came out of the American depression and faced a world that had no use or place for them. Both beat or worked their way to China and other parts of the Far East. Snow remained abroad for twelve years, Belden for nine, most of his time in China. Snow identified himself closely with Chinese revolutionary developments, Belden was drawn to the Chinese battlefields, primarily the nationalist armies, from the first battle of the Japanese invasion of China proper on July 7, 1937. In many ways, Snow and Belden, and a number of others, can be called China's contribution to the world today. It is a fine contribution of which both China and America can be proud.

Belden's first book, "Retreat with Stilwell," remains one of the most valuable war books, and the only one that explains the imperialist reasons for the fall of Burma to the Japanese. His new book, "Still Time to Die," covers eight battles from Chinese, British and American battlefields, with an angry and passionate Epilogue—a testament of his convictions. In addition there is an introductory chapter without which the rest of the book cannot be fully understood.

"Still Time to Die" is not merely about the way men and women act and speak on or near the battlefield, though this is a part of it, in fact the meat of it. As Belden himself says, it is primarily about "the essence of war," about himself in the midst of battle; and it is about this whole sorry scheme of things which we dignify by the name of civilization.

All the chapters are permeated with anguish and torment not only of men and women at war, but of Belden's own spirit. There are moments of grim humor and there are soldiers' conversations that will petrify Aunt Abigail up in Boston but without which war would be prettified. A few of the chapters are good reporting, some are excellent, and still others are superb writing. As teacher, Belden chose Tolstoy—and no better teacher could any man

choose—and Tolstoy's influence hovers over many of the pages. Each chapter is prefaced by quotations from Tolstoy or from General Karl von Clausewitz's "On War," that classic in the philosophy and strategy of war which has influenced all "civilized" armies for the past hundred years.

In all the battlefield accounts, the reader goes right onto the field with the author and sees, hears, smells and feels the confusion, horrifying uncertainty, cruelty and panic of battle. Only one other war book—Voyetekhov's "The Last Days of Sevastopol"—has fully caught this essence of modern war. Of all Belden's chapters, three stand out in this reviewer's mind as marking him as one of our most important future writers. Two of these are among the three Chinese stories, and the other is the American landing at Salerno. The Chinese chapters cover the battle for Hsuehchow, the retreat from Hsuehchow and the battle of the Yellow River in 1938—mere fragments of Belden's vast Chinese experiences.

The retreat of 300,000 Chinese soldiers through encircling Japanese lines around Hsuehchow is a military and literary epic. The author took part in this retreat—which was planned by the cool-headed General Li Chung-jen—and has given us one of the most remarkable pictures yet to come out of this war. The battle of the Yellow River, shortly afterwards, lasted for about a week and in it one gets every detail of men facing what seemed certain destruction, but which turned out otherwise. In the midst of Japanese bombardment and clouds of flying sand, one whole Chinese division is seen in panic, trampling under foot another division of young, green boys who had not yet fought and therefore had not yet learned fear. In the midst of such events, an insane peasant runs rings around a tree, the bodies of raped and murdered Chinese girls lie as the Japanese left them, and a quiet Chinese general bides his time before blowing up the Yellow River dikes to halt the approaching enemy.

The American landing at Salerno, Italy, is the third superb piece of writing. Belden was wounded in this landing. Though helpless on the battlefield, he closely watched the conduct of soldiers about him, and later used his observations in a distillation of "the essence of war" in his introductory chapter.

This introductory chapter is the first analysis of "the essence of war" to be attempted by any American correspondent. Drawing on von Clausewitz's methods of analyzing the factors that play a role on the battlefield, Belden here discusses uncertainty, falsehood, friction, exertion, courage, resolution, brotherhood, loneliness and destruction, all of which are a part of war. He adds sex, emphasizes loneliness, and answers those critics who think he overemphasizes sex.

Belden writes powerfully and fearlessly about Allied leaders—among them the Chiang-Soong-Kung families and their set-up in China—as well as American Senators, politicians, newspaper editors, generals and other imitators and appeasers of fascism in Africa, Italy and the United States. American soldiers, he rightly declares, don't know

<sup>1</sup> People on Our Side, by Edgar Snow. New York: Random House. 324 pages. \$3.50.

<sup>2</sup> Still Time to Die, by Jack Belden. New York: Harper and Brothers. 322 pages. \$3.

why they are fighting, and not one in a hundred has any political convictions whatever—which accounts for widespread neurosis in our armed forces.

Invalided home for a few months, Belden's clear, observant eyes saw the main political developments on the American home front. He was amazed at the loud, bold, repellent manifestations here of that fascism which we are supposed to be fighting in Europe and the Far East. In his Epilogue he declares war on this growing menace. American business men, bankers, politicians and some generals, he states, are no different from their prototypes in other countries, "and they do not give two cents for the people." To all such men in every country his book is a fierce, angry challenge.

In his new book, Edgar Snow gives a swift, comprehensive account of the "people on our side"—that is, the progressive democratic forces—in India, Russia and China, with brief glimpses at the Outer Mongols, the Burmese and a few others. These he balances against the forces that are trying to twist this war into an instrument for their continued wealth and power. It is a warm, human book on the whole, sometimes written with great tenderness. The sixty-one short, graphic chapters are packed with fact and information or with deeply moving stories of individuals. The facts are wrapped up in a flowing style that is easy to follow. In addition, Snow has a sparkling wit, a quiet charm, and makes devastating use of satire and irony.

The British, who are such decent people in their own country, are pictured as donning the trappings of colonialism in India and practising the same super-racism preached by Hitler. In the analysis of the conflict between the British and the Indian National Congress, Gandhi is called a "stubborn and honorable old saint" without the slightest knowledge of fascism. One Indian opponent of Gandhi is quoted as admitting that "India has had its back straightened by Gandhi."

The Indian caste system, with its inhuman untouchability, comes in for a well deserved trouncing, yet Snow likens it to the British treatment of Indians in their own country, and to the American caste system with regard to the Negro. He was denied entrance to a restaurant in Bombay because his guest was an Indian, but remarks that he could have taken his dog inside if his dog had not been in Connecticut.

All the clever tricks used by the British to divide the Indians among themselves and to keep the country industrially backward are frankly discussed, and we get precious pictures of fat, diamond-bedecked Princes, quislings of the British, who refuse to allow their peasants to learn to read and write lest they all become lawyers! In a conversation with Jawaharlal Nehru, the Jefferson of Asia and one of the few great living men—now serving his eighth term in a British prison—we get a revealing picture of British mentality, even of such advanced men as Sir Stafford Cripps. Nehru is speaking:

He [Cripps] amazed me. Apparently he never believed me when I said in the past that we wanted complete independence. Now when it came down to it and he saw we were in earnest he was hurt and surprised when I spoke of matters formerly taken for granted between us. "You don't mean you really want to break away from us entirely, do you?" he asked me. Think of it! After all I've said and written, and after all Cripps himself has written!

But the major part of this book is a study of almost every aspect of Soviet Russia, where Snow spent seven months in 1943. Here we learn not only about soldiers and officers, workers and great industrial plants, but also about the price of food, family budgets, the black market, co-operative farms, future five-year plans, women fliers and housewives, marriage and divorce, new national plans for education, the Polish and Baltic and other historical problems, with a comprehensive comparison of the Soviet and American Constitutions included. Snow refutes certain American wishful thinking: that Russia is abandoning socialism and is going back to the exploitation of man by man. Representatives of the Mongolian People's Republic discussed with him their plans for a future independent federated state of all Mongols.

The account of the battle for Stalingrad that broke the back of the Nazis is the finest and most exhaustive yet to appear in English. We see captive Rumanian and Nazi soldiers, generals and marshals and read official Nazi orders to destroy all Slavs. Some conception of Russia's sacrifices and the depth of her grief are indicated in statistics of Red Army losses: six million men killed or missing in battle; three million incapacitated for life; six to seven million wounded. Apart from these sixteen millions, there remain the millions of unarmed civilian women, children and aged who were slaughtered or driven into slavery in Germany. The names of great cities wholly or partly destroyed are given and compared with American cities. Snow says that the Nazis would have poisoned the very earth of Russia had they been able to.

These figures will never move the American mind as do the stories of women and children who miraculously escaped death at Nazi hands. Often the women and children did not wish to remember, but when they did speak, the stories they tell take one to the end of the night. In writing them, Snow's words become tender and caressing. One such story is of an emaciated little girl of eleven who looked forty.

Snow once watched the burial of hundreds of young Red Army soldiers in a mass grave. He suddenly breaks off the account to relate a dream he had the night before. This dream is pure lyrical poetry. Other passages are of equal beauty, and one sometimes regrets that this writer has been forced to earn his bread as a journalist.

The Russians are beyond tears, and Snow writes powerfully of their faith and conviction that they are waging a war of human liberation. Even behind the Nazi steel wall, they believe they will find Germans who will help them. They have never forgotten that before the Revolution they also had their pogromists and their "Black Hundreds."

Fewer than fifty pages in the volume are devoted to China, but they are packed with the most up-to-date information. The democratic upheaval of the first two years of China's war of liberation has since given way to the present reaction, chaos and war-profiteering in which Snow says the highest officials of the government, and their offspring, participate. Of Generalissimo Chiang's feudal-absolutist book, "China's Destiny," he writes:

The Generalissimo himself now officially ranks as the foremost banker of China. With his immensely rich brother-in-law and sister-in-law, Dr. and Mme. H. H. Kung, and their children, and the wealthy Mme. Chiang Soong Mei-ling, and her brothers,