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THE BOOK-SHELF

WITH THE EMBATTLED PEOPLE OF CHINA

A Review by FRED A UTLEY

No other book gives so vivid, intimate and moving a picture of the war in China as this latest work by Agnes Smedley.¹ She, alone among western writers, lived for years among the soldiers and peasants of China, and herself both nursed them and fought for their needs against the indifference of the foreigner and the callousness of many of their own countrymen. A sensitive woman, whose writings have at times a touch of poetry, but imbued with a western energy which no difficulties can dismay, she has written a book unique in its portrayal of the sufferings and the heroism, the filth, weariness, cruelty and privation of people of China.

For a few months in Hankow in 1938 this reviewer saw Agnes Smedley striving with unflagging zeal to help on the work of Doctors Robert Lim and Lou Chi-teh and their handful of collaborators, to build up a medical service for the Chinese armies.

This book, however, is far more than a moving account of the plight of China's wounded soldiers. Except for short intervals in Hankow and Chungking, Agnes Smedley spent most of the first four years of the war with the armies of China. The core of this book is the account of her experiences among the guerrilla forces south of the Yangtze, and among the other armies with which she worked as a member of the Chinese Red Cross Medical Corps after the fall of Hankow. Although, as before, she is continually on fire with compassion for suffering and indignation against injustice, in recent years she has become more mellow and far less inclined to see good only on the extreme left.

Some of the characters she describes with understanding and compassion in this book are neither Communists nor revolutionaries. Among them are Kwangsi generals, a Catholic nun, a Norwegian missionary doctor, and even a former appeaser of Japan, Chang Tze-chung, "whose conscience hounded him across every battlefield of China."

In general *BATTLE HYMN OF CHINA* gives a more complete picture of China at war than Edgar Snow's *The Battle for Asia* because Agnes Smedley does not overstress the role of the Chinese Communists in China's war of liberation, and because she journeyed among the warriors of many Chinese armies, including the excellently trained and led Kwangsi troops and the backward neglected Szechwanese. Everywhere she sees men and women as suffering and striving human beings, not as mass movements. She is still inclined not only to condemn outright, but on occasion

also to make unsubstantiated charges against those with whom she disagrees politically, or hates for their venality, or treachery, or cruelty. But on the whole she pulls her punches in this book. Although she is disheartened by the growth of reactionary forces which she sees in a China too long left to fight alone, she finds some gracious words to say even of Madame Chiang, and she never once attacks the Generalissimo.

On the other hand, one has the impression that she runs away from some of the conclusions, or fears, which her experience and her intelligence suggest to her. In one revealing passage she writes as follows after a night in which she cannot sleep for remembering the cruelty and injustice she has witnessed: "The fantasies returned and again I awoke. And always fear was with me—fear of China, fear of human beings."

But in her waking hours Agnes pushes away her doubts and fears and continues to ascribe the world's sufferings to wicked or corrupt, or weak and self-seeking, individuals.

Most people would have recoiled in despair from the ocean of misery which Agnes Smedley saw in China, or have hardened their hearts in self-protection. But her undying impulse is to struggle and to save, however great the odds. She can note that certain individuals or movements which once strove for the good of the "common man" degenerated when they themselves rose out of the depth or obtained power. But this never leads her to despair of human progress.

The reader of Agnes Smedley's former books on China had to discount her political bias and her romanticism. But in this book she has not only confined herself in the main to the descriptive writing in which she excels, but she has tempered her judgments in the light of her greater experience, and because the events of the past few years have clearly shocked her out of her former unquestioning belief that the Communists are always right. Not that Agnes ever was, or could have been, a member of the Communist Party. Although she herself would indignantly deny it, the wellsprings of her courage, self-sacrifice and love for suffering humanity are far nearer to Christianity than to Communism. Hers is indeed the great courage of one who has no spiritual backing for her belief in a better world and no belief in a reward not of this earth, who yet continues to trust in the innate goodness of men and the possibility of justice and peace on earth.

¹*BATTLE HYMN OF CHINA* by Agnes Smedley. 8vo., 528 pp., illus., map. index, New York, Alfred A. Knopf. \$3.50