

VI - 73 E - 10. Agnes Smedley - Battle Hymn of China, Daily Worker,
March 7, 1944.

IN 1932, driving around Hangchow, my car stopped at a bend in the road with a sudden jolt. Soldiers barred the way. Beyond them, his hands tied behind his back, a huddled figure crouched on the grass verge. A sharp crack of a revolver, and the pitiful creature collapsed, dead.

"What does it mean?" I

Out of his personal knowledge and understanding of China, The DEAN OF CANTERBURY reviews Agnes Smedley's deeply moving book

BATTLE HYMN OF CHINA

anxiously asked my American Y.M.C.A. guide.

"Probably suspected of being a Communist," was the casual reply.

Such slender suspicions and such summary executions were too common for excitement. Interest in woodcuts, because a famous revolutionary poet had liked them; or the close-cropped hair of a girl student were considered adequate grounds for suspecting "dangerous thoughts," and for prompt and summary execution.

A fierce, if hidden, warfare was even then harrying China, and has harried her ever since. A warfare independent of, and sometimes waged side by side with, the warfare against Japan. The struggle of an old order deeply entrenched against the upsurge of the new.

AGNES SMEDLEY'S Battle Hymn of China, published by Gollancz, reveals in noon-day blaze what I saw in the dawn. She has marched with the spearhead of the new. I had travelled under the auspices of the old. But no skilled shepherding could hide the sights which have vindicated her subsequent tale.

Agnes Smedley was destined to learn by bitter experience that no fury exceeds the fury of a ruling class whose power and property are threatened.

Its ultimate manifestation horrifies us now in Europe. She saw its earlier forms in the awakening of China, and her pungent pen records her passionate revolt, born of deep love for China's common man.

Take this passage as a guide to the spirit of her book.

A pilot of the Eurasian Aviation Company, giving her his pictures of mass beheadings in Hankow, said: "The 12 men

were naked to the waist and their hands tied behind them. There were ropes around their necks and blood ran from the mouths of some of them. The police and soldiers were eager for the killing. They kicked the prisoners to their knees, pulled their heads forward with a rope. A fat executioner with a big sword chopped off their heads... blood spurted on the crowd.

"Look at this modern city," was her tense reply. "suppose you or I should tell people what we had seen—show these pictures to missionaries, business men, journalists, Y.M.C.A. secretaries. This city, with its paved streets, electric lights..."

"For my part," the pilot replied. "I don't intend to get lynched for a pack of Chinese! I'm leaving this bloody country."

"Chinese are a species of animal to you, aren't they?" she said bitterly.

It was just because the Chinese were not a species of animal to Agnes Smedley, just because she loved them with a burning passion, and because the hardships and vagabondage of her own childhood had sprung from the same bitter founts of cruelty, that she was stimulated and equipped to tell her enthralling and vefacious tale.

It was her sympathy with the Weichow, the world pain which won her to the side of China's struggling masses and which thrust her at length, amidst incredible hardships and sufferings, into the front ranks of China's fighting forces, where the Red Army and the Red guerrillas were grappling—starved and stunted of supplies by their own Chinese Government—hand to hand with the Japanese invaders. Sometimes, alas, even stabbed in

the back by their own Chinese Government troops.

In fact, a double warfare was being staged in China, and the Red Army was forced, in spite of all its struggles and sacrifices for national unity, to fight on two fronts at once—against Fascist Japan as enemy No. 1 and against Chinese Fascists, appeasers who dread the eruption of new democratic forces more than they dread the encroachments of Japan as enemy No. 2.

And it is precisely because the same enemy No. 2 still persists in starving the Red Army and guerrillas, who are as ever bearing the brunt of the fighting, that Agnes Smedley's book is exceptionally timely.

JAPAN, however—to return to the book—was and is enemy No. 1. I knew it twelve years ago. I knew it when I saw Chapei and the Woosung forts still smouldering.

I knew it when I travelled, as few Englishmen have ever travelled, through the heart of China and on into Tibet; when I saw Chinese youth drilling themselves and read anti-Japanese posters in towns 2,000 miles away from the coast.

I knew it, and warned our own Shanghai merchants of it, at a luncheon given me on my return.

And when their spokesman challenged my view and said: "Let Japan discipline China and then we can trade in peace," I could only urge: "Japan has no such genial intentions for England as that. Japan will dominate China, dislodge us from Hongkong, dislodge the Americans from the Philippines, and the Dutch from Borneo, and then Japan will finally assail Australia."

My words, enshrined in an article of that date in the Man-

chester Guardian were met by complete incredulity.

The years have brought their own tragic endorsement, and the *Battle Hymn of China* records the stages.

OUT of an intimate knowledge of Japanese movements in Shanghai, Hankow and Hongkong; and then out of vivid further experience of the Red Army front as it met the Japanese front face to face; or of Red guerilla bands which har-

ried Japan behind her own forward lines, Miss Smedley tells one of the most engrossing stories in the whole world war.

She was even a spectator of the strange drama enacted at Sian, when united China was born. Her own hotel room was assailed and rifled by soldiery who had run amok.

RETURNING in 1932 from Tibet, our small party had halted one hot afternoon at a lovely temple, once the pleasure palace of the concubine of a famous Emperor, the lady whose small feet set the Chinese standard. There we bathed in the warm waters of a lotus pond; and there, within 15 miles of Sian, and at a turning-point in China's history, Agnes Smedley began her book.

Vividly she relates the strange story of the kidnapping of General Chiang Kai-shek; his subsequent release; the patched peace between Government and Red Army; the end of appeasement; and the beginning of real war with Japan.

"The Sian incident may have ended (for the Red Army) in a local defeat, but it was nevertheless a national victory. Slowly and with agonising pain a united China was being born."

The chief pain, from Agnes Smedley's angle, was the treatment meted out by the reactionary forces surrounding Chiang Kai-shek to the Red Army, which was talking and giving the hardest blows.

Her vivid pen contrasts the two armies and the two areas, for she had lived with both and in both. The new passion for teaching and learning, the classes and studies at the front, the suppression of opium, the effort, despite shameful starvation of supplies, to organise modern medical services, the attack upon corruption, the simple, chaste lives of the Red Army leaders; the new industrial co-operatives which were at once a family and a small self-governing republic, placed the Red Army in a class apart.

Nothing approaching this did she observe in the Government troops.

A new mankind was being born. A new world, too. And in Agnes Smedley's pages we are in at the birth. We look on with reverence and admiration.

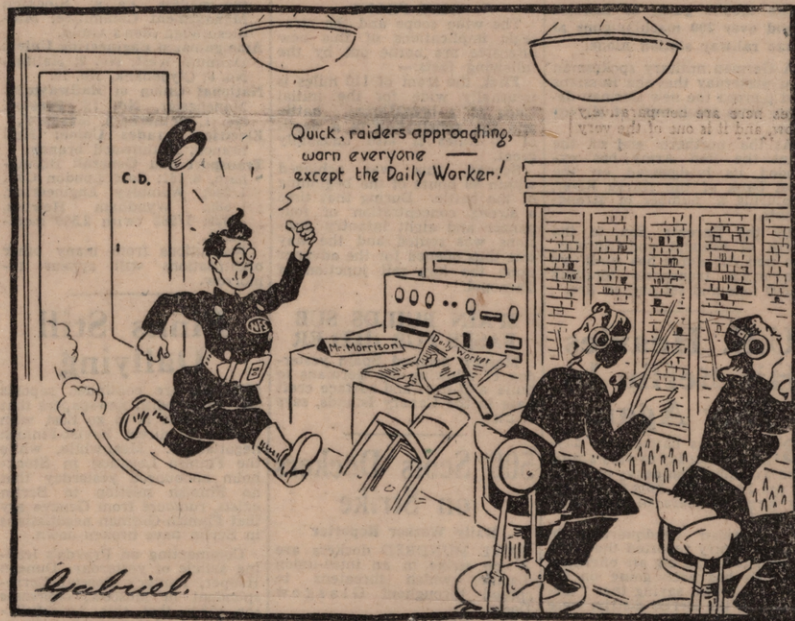
DOES the double warfare still continue? Is China moving along the anti-Socialist path in home affairs, and the more narrowly nationalist path in foreign affairs? Is the Generalissimo uniting the people on an exclusive China-for-the-Chinese policy combined with a continuance of the struggle to suppress the Communists?

It is hard to speak from exact knowledge, but the omens are far from good.

And now comes the refusal by Chiang Kai-shek to permit the printing of an English edition of his recent book, which has already run into 200 editions in China itself. Why? Is the anti-foreign element too pronounced for English ears?

And whence, too, arises the strong criticisms in the book of the Chinese Communists?

It would be tragic indeed if the tide should set towards a nationalist capitalist China, accepting the science and industry of the west, but rejecting its nobler bases as we see them—e.g., in the new Soviet Union.



Gabriel.

THE SHAPE OF BANS TO COME?



A WOODCUT OF THE COMMON PEOPLE OF CHINA.

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"TODAY I saw a Chinese peasant soldier die. The man lay silently on his bed and the only thing he ever said was that his name was Wu and that he was a peasant by occupation. . . . Every line of his face and body was eloquent of anguish. . . ."

"How tragically great the common men of China! Their country has offered them nothing but sorrow and hunger, cold and suffering. Still they offer their lives for it."

"They die by thousands on deserted battlefields. Other thousands stagger to the rear, looking ruefully at their un-cared-for wounds, their eyes searching the mountain paths and the highways, yearning for help that never comes."

In December, 1939, an American woman promised a Chinese officer that she would tell her countrymen the truth about China. A few months later that officer's headquarters was surrounded and destroyed by the Japanese. He had to shoot himself to avoid capture.

With *Battle Hymn of China* (Gollancz, 7s. 6d.), Agnes Smedley has kept her promise. For those who have read her earlier books—"China's Red Army Marches," "Chinese Destinies" and others—her name will be the only recommendation needed.

We hear the story of China's nine years of civil war and of the Japanese onslaught, told by one who was always close to events.

She describes the fall of Hankow, where death was everywhere, and there was destitution "so deep that life itself sometimes seemed a kind of disease."

Her book takes us to the summer of 1941 when she left China. She went everywhere and saw all kinds of people—military chiefs still in the depths of feudalism, European officials and missionaries, Chinese Communist leaders, bankers, guerrillas, traitors, Japanese prisoners, and, above all, the ordinary men and women of China.

She travelled not just as an onlooker recording events, but playing a big part herself in improving the conditions of the wounded and organising medical supplies.

The people in these pages are real flesh and blood, whether they are statesmen and generals or the little 10-year-old orderly whom Agnes Smedley wanted to adopt and who told her after serious discussion with other boys: "We think all men must remain at the front. You can adopt me after final victory."

Another writer might have given a more adequate account of China's political, economic and military problems, and their place in the world scene. But this book seems to be a part of China itself. You put it down feeling that somehow you have shared in China's struggle.

Anyone who is a little weary after four and a half years of war should read how the Chinese have battled on far longer in conditions much harder than we have experienced.

Anyone who feels discouraged by the difficulties of maintaining national unity against the enemy should read of the fight of Communists and other progressive people in China.

Their unity was built across rivers of blood and maintained against savage provocation.