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book review of Agnes Smedley's Battle Hymn of China,  
London Times, April, 1944.

# TORTURED CHINA

## AMERICAN WOMAN AT THE FRONT

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MISS AGNES SMEDLEY has written a record of adventure in such matter-of-fact language that one tends sometimes to forget how extraordinary it is. The book\* is autobiographical, but Miss Smedley quickly passes over the early part of her life until she first reaches China in 1928. From that time on her own life is so closely linked with China that she could truly write on her return to the United States: "I had become a part of the vast struggle of China."

Miss Smedley's life in China falls into three parts: the struggle between the Kuomintang and the Communists, the Eighth Route Army, and the war in Central China. In the first stage she no doubt derived considerable protection from those extraterritorial rights which she so much scorned. The second stage, a tale of high adventure, has already been told in her earlier writings and is dealt with only briefly in this book. In the third she was with the armies on the Yangtze front, and was often far behind the enemy lines in the guerrilla lands south and north of the Yangtze.

The main purpose of Miss Smedley's work was the care of the wounded. She met in Hankow the founder of the Chinese Red Cross Medical Corps, Dr. Robert Lim, and from that time was able to coordinate her own work with his. Yet her work was very far from limited to the care of the wounded or to the obtaining of medical supplies. Wherever she went she was asked to address the troops on such matters as the attitude of other countries to China, the supply of munitions to Japan, and every aspect of international affairs. The supply of war materials to the Japanese was naturally a frequent, and embarrassing, subject for discussion. "The Japanese murderers were without a sword. America gave them the sword," said General Li Chung-jen, the victor of Taierhchwang. He once remarked, with understandable cynicism, "Now that the second world war has begun, American business men can sell

\* BATTLE HYMN OF CHINA. By AGNES SMEDLEY. Gollancz. 7s. 6d.

war materials to Europe instead of Japan." Whatever they may have thought of her country, the Chinese fighting men were full of friendship and gratitude that a foreigner should be prepared to sacrifice safety and comfort in order to share their life of incredible hardship.

The standards of living of the new Fourth Army and the guerrilla forces behind the Japanese lines were very low. That of the armies at the front was little better. Miss Smedley suffered not only this but the physical exhaustion of long journeys in all weather and the mental weariness of constant exposure to danger. A characteristic passage reveals something of this:—

A feeling of despair took hold of me. Malaria returned to sap my strength, and together with malnutrition was causing my toe-nails to fall off, my teeth to loosen, my eyes to become inflamed, and a skin rash and hives sometimes made my life a torment. Yet I tried to keep my shame to myself, for all this seemed to prove that I was unable to stand what all Chinese must endure or perish.

Her spirit is indomitable, and only an indomitable spirit could have tried to grapple with the problem of the wounded. Accommodation was almost everywhere primitive, doctors and trained assistants were desperately few, drugs and dressings scarce, and hospital equipment almost non-existent. The mortality among the wounded was terrible. Of 2,600 wounded men who left one battlefield during an offensive only 1,000 lived to reach the first field hospital, two weeks to the rear. Yet Miss Smedley found devotion among the hospital workers in their primitive surroundings and a touching gratitude from the wounded for what was done for them.

It has often been said that, even in occupied China, the Japanese hold only the towns and the lines of communication. This book reveals the actual position in wide tracts on both sides of the Yangtze. It was in November, 1939, that Miss Smedley and a party of some twenty students floated on bamboo rafts down a tributary of the Yangtze into guerrilla land. No Japanese dared enter these areas, except

as part of an armed column. The Chinese were in full local control, but they were to a great extent isolated, and dependent upon their own resources, and were thus exposed to every kind of hardship. Their plain-clothes men, however, passed in and out of the Japanese garrison towns, observed their movements, and enabled the Chinese to take a regular toll of the Japanese and their supplies.

The Chinese did not attempt to minimize the power of the Japanese. Crossings of rivers and roads held by the Japanese were only attempted at night and with the most careful preparation. Miss Smedley took part in a number of such journeys, and the accounts she gives are eloquent of the strain under which they were carried out.

Miss Smedley pointedly proclaimed that she was not a Christian, yet she had two bishops among her close friends. She has been called a Communist by those who believe in capitalism; an individualist, an idealist, a bourgeois democrat, or just a "Smedleyite" by Communists. Her views are certainly very near to those of the Communists. She allows a young Russian to say of the United States, "To think of having to ask a rich man for the right to live," and does not correct him. Her book shows much of the Communist stock-in-trade. The servants of capitalism are described as having cold, cruel faces, and eyes as hard as those of a snake, while the faces of the Communist Eighth Route Army are alight with enthusiasm and interest.

In the struggle between the Government and the Communist armies Miss Smedley takes the side of the Communists, yet she admits the truth of a statement by a Government official that if the Communists were given more money they would not improve the conditions of their troops but merely recruit more, though this was against Government instructions. It is hard to reconcile this and other instances of independence with Chu Teh's statement: "We will persist in our efforts to maintain and strengthen national unity under the leadership of Generalissimo Chiang."