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Frederick V. Field - Review and Comment - November 30, 1943.



REVIEW and COMMENT

CHINA FIGHTS ON

Agnes Smedley, in her new book, has told her countrymen of the faith of a great and valiant people. Reviewed by Frederick V. Field.

BATTLE HYMN OF CHINA, by Agnes Smedley.
Knopf. \$3.50.

LATE on a winter evening in December 1939 in the central part of Hupeh, that province in the middle of China in which is situated the great city of Hankow, Agnes Smedley was talking to Major General Chung Yi. Chung Yi, later killed in battle, commanded a division of the famous Kwangsi Eleventh Group Army. He was one of the progressive leaders of government troops. Leaning across a table lighted by a single candle he told Miss Smedley about his army, about the problems of the war. He asked why it was that the United States was so actively aiding the Japanese invader. "We have our faith," Chung Yi said. "Victory will not be easy, but we will fight until victorious. We have our faith—tell your countrymen. . . ."

At the close of the book Miss Smedley tells us that she had vowed by everything that she believed not to forget these words: "Tell your countrymen." She has fulfilled her pledge. She has written a book which pulses with the blood of the Chinese people. She has faithfully and brilliantly told her countrymen all that Major General Chung Yi and countless other Chinese want us to know.

Battle Hymn of China is an important book for two reasons. The subject, our Chinese ally at war, is of paramount interest to our own war effort. We know relatively little about China, its history, its culture, its economy, society, or political organization. I venture to say that the public at large has less actual information on China than it had on the Soviet Union before the Red Army's glorious exploits began to break down our ignorance and prejudices.

Today we can afford neither ignorance nor a mere casual interest regarding our Far Eastern ally. China is a vast nation whose fate has become inextricably bound with our own by the dictates of coalition warfare. To weld the unity which must be hammered out on the battlefields, between the general staffs and between our respective governments, a firm link must be welded between our people and the Chinese.

There is in the very nature of war against fascism the necessity of a comradeship



Agnes Smedley

among the people of the United Nations based on sympathetic knowledge of each other. In no other way can the war be fought to a successful and speedy conclusion; in no other way can the objects for which we are fighting the war be secured.

BUT in the case of China there is more to it than that. China and her people have officially been lined up against fascism much longer than we have. The invasion of China began in 1931. In 1937 it became a war of national existence involving the entire country. In large areas and among large sections of China's armed and civilian forces the fighting has for many years taken the form of genuine people's war.

China, moreover, is geographically and politically situated in the midst of one of the great colonial regions of the world. Adjacent to China or separated from her only by neighboring waters lie vast colonial empires still claimed, though (except for India) not occupied, by Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France. And nearby are the Philippines. To the scores and hundreds of millions of people who inhabit these colonies the liberation of China through their struggle against Japan has become a symbol of their own emancipation. In important respects, therefore, the

Chinese nation assumes a position of leadership among the anti-fascist coalition. From her Americans have much to learn in shaping our own contribution to the war.

THE Chinese people today desperately need our help. And it is here that Agnes Smedley has done a most important job. Within China there is sharp division which the leaders of the people, persons like Madam Sun Yat-sen, have appealed to us to help overcome. It is not a division between the Kuomintang and the Communists; rather, it is a division between those defeatist, feudal, fascist, or semi-fascist elements in China and the great mass of Chinese people which includes all the Communists and a not inconsiderable section of the official Kuomintang Party itself. Agnes Smedley does not simply reflect or represent the Chinese masses and their progressive leaders; she has identified herself with them.

I have suggested that *Battle Hymn of China* is important for two reasons and one of these, the objective situation of China, I have touched upon. The second reason is Agnes Smedley's virtually unique accomplishment, her literal embodiment of the aspirations of the Chinese people. In this respect the book gives the reader the rather startling impression that Miss Smedley is a Chinese. Certainly her long and intense association with China and her actual participation in the struggles of the Chinese have made her a spokesman for these allies of ours rather than for ourselves. When she speaks of the United States, of American women, or of the Communist Party of this country she is dealing with subjects which are foreign to her. She neither feels them nor understands them. But when she describes a close row of Chinese wounded lying in a filthy hut, or when she reports a conversation with the officer of Chinese troops, or when she tells you about the treacherous intrigues of the CC clique in Chungking she is revealing her own soul. At one place she writes, "I always forgot that I was not a Chinese myself. To me the problems, strength and weakness of China seemed to be those of the whole world." At another point Miss Smedley explains herself and her approach in a few sentences which, because of the clue they give to this book, deserve quotation.

"From the day I set foot on Chinese

soil I began gradually to realize that two paths lay before me. I could protect myself from the flood of abandoned humanity by building around myself a protective wall of coldness and indifference, even of hostility. I could learn to curse and strike out at those who molested me; or I could stand in the middle of the stream of life and let it strike me full force—risking robbery, disease, even death. For a long time I chose the latter way; then experience taught me to vary it by protecting myself to a certain extent. In my last years in China I again changed and took the stream in full force."

Well, this is exactly what Miss Smedley has done. She has taken the full stream of Chinese life in its overwhelming force. All of the impact of China upon this extraordinary personality is not revealed in the one volume under review. Agnes Smedley has written other memorable volumes: *Chinese Destinies*, *China's Red Army Marches*, and *China Fights Back*. Together with the present book her literary works constitute the most complete saga now available to us in English of the Chinese people's movement. The fourth volume of the series, *Battle Hymn of China*, is to my mind the warmest in the characterization of the Chinese people and at the same time the most profound in its understanding. Perhaps this is to be expected, for in this latest volume Miss Smedley is writing about a valiant people whose very existence has been threatened and who in their effort to defend themselves have been forced to put to the final test of survival every aspect of their society. Agnes Smedley has viewed the scene as a whole and in much of its myriad of detail. This is not a fragmentary treatment of the Chinese people in battle; rather, it is a sharing of their actual experience.

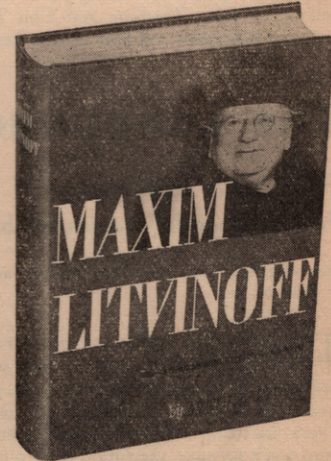
THE author is extraordinarily, in fact uniquely, equipped for the job she has undertaken. With but brief intervals in the United States or in the Soviet Union she has been in China since 1929. She has seen eight years of civil war and five of national defense against the fascist invader. Formally her assignment started out to be correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, a relationship which ended with Hitler's seizure of power; from 1938 she was special correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*. I did not read her dispatches in these newspapers, but if they reflected a tenth of the life she led in China, particularly during the later period, they must become a part of the documentation of the history of a people's war. For whatever formal assignment Agnes Smedley may have had, the task she set for herself was to find out how China was fighting the war and in doing this she became so completely immersed in the battle that she herself was also doing the fighting. I want that remark to be taken literally, for this woman was as much a part of China's fighting

forces as the American nurses on Bataan and Corregidor were a part of ours. As a field representative of the Chinese Red Cross Medical Corps Miss Smedley lived for months on end with the desperately fighting armies, succoring their wounded, crying to the far horizons for medical aid, lecturing to troops, to officers corps, to political training institutes. She founded the first delousing stations, which are a pre-condition to the elemental health of the soldiers. She raised hell in Chungking, or wherever else it was necessary in order to get some attention paid to the most primitive needs of the men at the front. At a period when an American was as likely as not to be spat upon by any decent thinking citizen of China because of our policy of supplying the enemy with the very bombs and planes and shells which were killing the Chinese, Agnes Smedley was explaining to all who would listen—and there were many thousands who sought the privilege of hearing her speak—that most Americans were opposed to appeasement.

I have read a number of reviews of *Battle Hymn of China* and in several I have noticed the criticism that Miss Smedley intrudes too much of herself in this account of our fighting ally. Perhaps that is so. It is true that the book is autobiographical; indeed, the first section is wholly so and is not at all concerned with China. But as I have noted earlier, the author and China are two things, one a personality and the other a conglomerate people, which cannot be separated. Therefore, I think, there is little to be said for this line of criticism.

Another complaint about the book is that Miss Smedley is prone to making political howlers. Granted she does this when writing of something foreign to her, like the position of women in the Soviet Union (she is upset because women do not make speeches at Red Square celebrations), or like the policy of the US Communist Party before June 1941 (it is incomprehensible and reprehensible to her). But such points constitute no more than a passing remark here and there, at most a sentence or two. The book is not concerned with these subjects. The book is on China, on the Chinese people fighting for survival, and here she is almost always on sure ground. Sure ground? Yes, in terms of people, of human motivation, of mass suffering, of unbelievable hardship, of such filth and disease and negligence as stretches the imagination, of corruption and treachery in high places, of rotten political chicanery, of individual and group bravery, of one of the greatest examples in history of broadminded political leadership on the part of those who lead the Eighth Route and new Fourth Armies. These are the qualities that make the book important—more than important, something that we ourselves must absorb in order the better to participate in the war of the United Nations. Of all times, it is *now*

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that we must remember our sense of proportion in judging a contribution of this sort.

Assuredly, *Battle Hymn of China* is no definitive political guide to the maze of Chinese society. We do not pick it up for that type of guidance. We read it to become acquainted with what kind of man the Chinese soldier is as he faces the problems, both military and political—and also biological—which to most people would long since have proved insuperable. This is not to say that there isn't much of political value in what Agnes Smedley recounts. Anyone whose political thinking on China has been sharpened by reading the brilliant analyses of Mao Tse-tung and Chu Teh and their colleagues will find in Miss Smed-

ley's book much concrete documentation. Page after page contains detailed accounts of the great fissure in China of which I spoke early in this review, the split between those willing and anxious to accept all the democratic consequences of winning China's nationhood and those exploiting the war for their own private benefit and, wittingly or unwittingly, for the benefit of the Axis. The whole volume, as a matter of fact, is a series of case studies of this fissure and of the crying need for national unity. Maybe Agnes Smedley is not a political writer, but I challenge any one to show me a book containing more ammunition for political thinking.

FREDERICK V. FIELD.

The Language Men Speak

From Spain to the siege of Sevastopol. Norman Rosten's "The Fourth Decade" reviewed by Joy Davidman.

THE FOURTH DECADE, by Norman Rosten. Farrar & Rinehart. \$2.00.

THE little critics continue to moan in the little magazines. Poetry's a frail butterfly, they tell you, and its wings have got broken by the iron realities of this war. There isn't any American war poetry, there can't be any; the little critics refuse to discover it. All the true poets—whom you may identify by their consistent refusal to write anything comprehensible—must continue to stifle in the unventilated closets of their own souls.

And meanwhile, of course, the great poetry of this war is being written. It looks at heroes; it sings on piercing trumpets, and it does not ask the critics' permission first. Such a book as Norman Rosten's *Fourth Decade* is all the answer our defeatist critics need. Here is verse written, like the Declaration of Independence, out of "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind" rather than out of the contemplation of the poet's navel. Norman Rosten is speaking to human beings of their own struggles and achievements; he speaks in the language that men speak, and it is a language that burns and freezes with fiery beauty and with icy rage. You will not find here the self-pitying whine which neurotics from Eliot to Delmore Schwartz have attempted to establish as the sole business of verse.

But you will find Spain, and the volunteers coming across the Pyrenees on foot in the cold and surreptitious dawn. You will find Sevastopol, holding the Nazis back till its bricks and the bodies of its children were confounded in one red ruin.

*This was not Paris, the open city.
This was a closed city and men fought
for it.*

*They pulled the sky down over their
heads.
Honor blazed in their eyes like suns.*

*For eight months the body held.
This is the last day of the eighth
month.
This is the day the heartbeat stopped.*

When verse is as good as that it becomes an absolute, and you cannot measure it with yardstick, you can only feel it go through your heart like a knife. There is much in *The Fourth Decade* which is as good as that, particularly in the last section, "Siege," which tells the story of Sevastopol. Norman Rosten has not contented himself with the empty lip-service which declares that the Russians are so brave, the Nazis so brutal, the whole thing so terrible, yes—and goes on its way without the faintest conception of what terror and bravery really mean. Rosten brings you face to face with the individual men; with Piotr Barkanov, torn to pieces between the Nazi tanks; with Luzenko, the grower of vines, and the nameless sailor drowning at sunset in the Black Sea, and the nameless lovers in the bombed hospital; with twenty-five soldiers trapped in the cellar of the armory when the Nazis held the city over their heads. He is not afraid that horrible things will destroy his flowerlike verses, he dares to show you a schoolgirl with her hair in two long braids, tied to a bed for the pleasure of the Nazi officers. Yet, from these innumerable tragedies, a single sharp beauty is created—the beauty of the unbroken spirit of a fighting people. It is good to see poetry saying again what so much poetry has forgotten to say in the last twenty years: that there is only one final beauty, to be on your feet, and only one ultimate ugliness, to fall to your knees.

The heroic mood of "Siege" is almost

equaled by the earlier group of poems on the Spanish Republic and the International Brigades, and here Rosten has opportunities at times for another mood—that of savage irony, which he handles brilliantly. The escapists waltzing to Strauss on the ice at Radio City, the renegade liberals who "left no forwarding address"—they serve as a black background to the tragedy of Spain. And there is bigger prey:

*Generalissimo Francisco,
the man of God, the pope's choice,
voted most likely to succeed. . . .*

*Approach, friend, and be recognized!
Greetings! We rejoice with you!
The State Department on this occasion
of your victory takes your bloody hand
in most fraternal greetings. . . .*

*We assume the German and Italian
troops
will leave as quietly as possible.
Let everything take place quietly.
Let the political prisoners be shot
quietly
and the bleeding be as internal as
possible. . . .*

This has not lost its bitter relevance in the years since the betrayal of the Spanish Republic. Nor has the extraordinary news-reel-in-three-acts of the League of Nations, in which swift flashes of historic moments build up to Munich and the final catastrophe—"We walk to the exits, into the burning world." Wherever there is a positive emotion to be expressed, whether it be rage or love, Rosten is at his best. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the opening section of the book is its weakest; for here Rosten is merely tilting at paper windmills. Rotary clubs, literary teas, and radio soap operas—all the more commonplace sillinesses of the thirties—are obviously not quite such exciting material for poetry as the siege of Sevastopol, and Rosten's humorous attack on them has been influenced rather too much by the later trivialities of Fearing. Nevertheless there are moments which give you the authentic "cauld grue" of horror:

*Down, down the decade comes;
all the king's horses
and all the king's men
will not put it together again.*

The Fourth Decade is a delight for its own sake. And it is equally valuable as a symptom of the healthy morale of the American people that such poetry should appear just now, that Norman Rosten should be able to reach millions over the radio with the *Ballad of Bataan* while defeatist poets must live by taking in one another's washing. With the radio poetry resumes its long-lost character as one of the vocal arts; it sheds the affectations of the slim pale-mauve volumes and regains di-