

VI - 73 D - 48. Max Lerner, "On Educating the Army" - book review of Battle
Hymn of China by Agnes Smedley - PM Tuesday, September 21, 1943.

OPINION

On Educating The Army

I read in yesterday's PM the eye-witness stories of how the American boys fought at Salerno. They are doing well, these privates and sergeants from Dayton and Brooklyn, from Crab Orchard and Harpersville and all the other American places. They have emerged from the fiery furnace to say that the German makes a good soldier, but is not as hot as he is cracked up to be. They will have even more trials to go through. How well have we prepared them?

Our greatest success with them has been a technical one, in teaching the young bodies new skills and hardships, in channeling their native toughness to the best effect, in training hand and nerve and eye; our greatest failure with them has been a social one, in teaching them about their world and their faith—the things that cannot be found in the Army manual, and are too intangible to be reduced to rule and rote.

What Makes Them Tick

I am not saying that our soldiers and sailors and fliers lack sustaining roots. They have them. They have home, gang, girl, college, union, community; they are moved by two primary drives. One is not to let down the folks at home, to do them proud. The second is their instinct of workmanship: They have a job to get over with, and they want to do it quickly and well.

But they will need more before they are wholly through, these youngsters. The soldiers in a great army must have a belief in themselves and their world. They need a knowledge of what enemies threaten their world, and (above all) they must understand what the enemy principle is. They need a belief in the superiority of their world to others, a confidence about its chances for growth and about their own opportunities in it.

Do our boys have this? I don't think so. I have seen enough of them to know that in many cases those who brought them up did, in sheer human terms, a first-rate job. But also I have had enough letters from soldiers to know what a terrible waste of human impulses there is in the Army, what a terrible frustration of social energies. The boys who have the bursting idealism that makes young manhood the golden yet perilous age—these boys are most suspect. Their light is quenched in a sea of apathy.

Ideas Are Equipment

A friend of mine is raising money for the wholly laudable project of putting a little kit of fishing equipment into every soldier's knapsack when he is shipped abroad. I venture the guess that even greater is the need of ideas for the knapsack.

The armies of our Allies are better equipped with these than our own Army.

Maurice Hindus, who has seen the Red Armyman at close range, is impressed with its training in morale. As the Russians sweep the Germans before them day after day, let us remember that they fight out of a vast hatred, a deep conviction, a great hope. Agnes Smedley has told us in her current book, *Battle Hymn of China* (Knopf), how hungry the Chinese soldiers are for the nourishment of ideas. And Reinhold Niebuhr has just come back from England saying that the British do these things far better than we.

Confusion of Ideas

Why do our Army leaders hang back? Surely not because there is no problem to be met. The boys in the ranks are riddled with confusions. An army always reflects a society, and many of the soldiers carry over with them from their local communities poisonous hatreds of Negroes and Jews and labor and the Administration, the sediment of Christian Front and American First brews. Many of them are not certain whether the enemy they must fight is fascism or liberalism.

The need to be met is great enough. But there has been a reluctance until just recently, about meeting it. The fact is that the Army leaders have thought of education as trimming and decoration, rather than as an inseparable part of a good soldier's training. They have felt that all a soldier needs to know is how to shoot straight and the rest is sissy stuff.

And not only sissy stuff, but risky stuff as well. For just as education is said to spoil a good field hand in farming, so (their fears ran) it might spoil a good soldier, unsettle him, put dangerous thoughts into his head.

I am glad that the Army has finally

changed its mind about this. The report from Washington is that under Gen. Osborne, Col. Spaulding, and Herbert Agar, a new program is being launched of discussion groups at the camps. I hope the same thing happens at the Naval training stations, which need it even more badly than the Army camps. Agar is a heaven-sent man for the job, because he has a basic belief in the ordinary fellow's ability to form his own opinions when given the facts.

It is also reported from the colleges that the Army is working with American educators and historians in preparing study-pamphlets for the soldiers, for use in the period between the battle field and demobilization. Everything will depend on the courage with which these are prepared and taught. The Army's own opinion polls show that the soldier is thinking more and more in terms of the postwar world, of America's position in it, and of his own place in the American economy.

He is terribly anxious—he is terribly skeptical, and he won't tolerate any evasions and any easy answers.

—MAX LERNER.

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