

AGNES SMEDLEY: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AN AMERICAN RADICAL

Janice R. and Stephen R. MacKinnon
University of California Press/\$25

Harvey Klehr

Early in 1949 the United States Army released a report about the activities of a Soviet spy apparatus in China and Japan during the 1930s and early 1940s, written by Major-General Charles Willoughby, General MacArthur's chief of intelligence. Headed by Richard Sorge, a German Communist posing as a Nazi journalist, the ring had penetrated the top echelons of the Japanese government before Sorge's capture and execution. Willoughby's report accused Agnes Smedley, a well-known American journalist and a long-time supporter of the Chinese Communists, of being a spy and a key link in the Sorge network. Smedley denied the charges and threatened to sue for libel. Within a week, admit-

ting it had no evidence, the Army retracted the charges and apologized to Smedley.

Interest in the Sorge apparatus has recently been rekindled by the British journalist Chapman Pincher, who charges that Roger Hollis, for nine years the head of the British Security Service, was a Soviet mole. But Pincher's allegation that Agnes Smedley and her circle of Communist friends recruited Hollis during his sojourn in Shanghai in the 1930s is based largely on speculation and hearsay. The new biography of Smedley by Janice and Stephen MacKinnon, on the other hand, indignantly denies not only that Smedley ever spied for the Soviet Union, but less convincingly, that she ever worked for the Communist International. Determined to exonerate her, the MacKinnons refuse to believe that anyone so independent and irascible as Smedley could ever have been a Comintern agent. One of the book's many virtues, however, is that the authors' exhaustive research turned up enough clues to suggest that while Smedley was not a conventional spy, ferreting out military or industrial secrets, she probably did assist a Soviet spy ring in a variety of ways.

Agnes Smedley's identification with the oppressed and disadvantaged came from experience, not the theoretical tracts that inspired so many middle-class radicals. Born in 1892 into poverty in rural Missouri, she suffered through a harsh childhood. Her hard-drinking father barely supported the family. Years of poverty in Colorado mining camps aged and killed her mother. An aunt was a prostitute. Agnes managed just one year of college before financial woes forced her to drop out. While at Tempe Normal School in Arizona, however, she met Ernest Brundin, an intense young Socialist whom she soon married (and soon after divorced).

In 1917 while working for a newspaper in Fresno, California, the center of a thriving community of Sikh farmers, Smedley was drawn into the struggle to overthrow British rule in India. After losing a teaching job because of her membership in the American Socialist party, she set out for New York, where she soon was actively involved

with Indian revolutionaries. In March 1918 she was arrested by federal authorities and indicted under the Espionage Act, accused of attempting to incite rebellion against the Raj. An additional charge against her was disseminating birth control information.

Although she was never prosecuted, Smedley became a prominent figure in the left-wing world as a result of her arrest. Margaret Sanger put her in control of Sanger's journal on birth control. Smedley preferred, however, to move to Berlin, where she continued to work for Indian independence with her common-law husband, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, a leading Indian nationalist. For the next several years they were engrossed in the often fractious world of Indian exiles. Smedley's autobiographical novel *Daughter of the Earth*, published in 1929, solidified her reputation as a militant feminist and radical.

Smedley's feminism was fed by her bitter experiences with men and her own ambivalent attitudes about sex. She and Brundin did not consummate their marriage for eight months. During their brief marriage she underwent two abortions, fearing that a child would interfere with her goal of becoming a journalist. Just before her arrest in New York, an Indian nationalist had raped her, prompting a failed suicide attempt. He continued to spread rumors about her sexual behavior for years, sparking a nervous breakdown in 1922. Chattopadhyaya, ashamed of her reputation and lower-class background, mistreated her. When she went to Moscow in the early 1920s, the Indian Communist M.N. Roy disparaged her political faction by labeling Smedley a British spy and an "evil temptress." The German psychoanalyst from whom she sought help tried to seduce her.

Scornful of convention and aggressively promiscuous, Smedley believed that "love is nothing but sex in action." As the authors put it: "Breaking up marriages became a cause for the rest of her life." In one letter to Margaret Sanger, she advocated using sex as a weapon, calling for "a complete birth strike."

Revolutionaries of the time were no more sympathetic to such views than conventional bourgeois men. When living in Yen'an in 1937, Smedley infuriated Communist women with her advocacy of sexual liberation. She organized dances that sparked anger among women cadres. One night Mao Tse-tung's wife stormed into the apartment of Lily Wu, a close friend of Smedley's, and, discovering her husband, made an embarrassing public scene. The episode culminated with

Mao asking the Central Committee to allow him to obtain a divorce.

By the end of the 1920s Smedley's stormy relationship with Chattopadhyaya had ended. He joined the German Communist party and later disappeared in Stalin's purges. She turned her attention to China, where her initial interest was the Indian community. She traveled there via Russia in late 1928 with journalistic credentials from the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, hoping to build links between the Indian and Chinese nationalist movements. Her passion for work among the deeply factionalized Indians ended rather abruptly, however, after she discovered the severed head of a Sikh in her wastebasket. Her enthusiasm was then stirred by the discovery of a new and more exciting radical nationalist movement—the Chinese Communists.

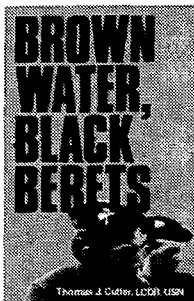
For the next two decades Smedley's dispatches and articles from China engendered sympathy and support for the Communist cause, which she portrayed as savior of the nation. Although she befriended non-Communists as well, and sometimes mildly criticized Communist positions or advocated alliances with other forces, Smedley never wavered in her sympathy for the Party. Yet, despite working closely with Communists in Germany, India, and the United States, Smedley apparently never joined any of the Communist parties. She did apply for membership in the Chinese Communist party in 1937 but was turned down, possibly because of her inability to accept discipline or perhaps because she was more valuable as a sympathizer.

Aside from a brief trip to the United States and Russia in 1933-1934, Smedley remained in Asia until 1941. In China she managed to pop up at key moments. At the time of Chiang Kai-shek's kidnapping in 1936 by two of his generals, Smedley did daily radio broadcasts that cemented her reputation as a dangerous radical. She was one of a handful of foreigners present at the Chinese Communists' headquarters in Yen'an in 1937. For eighteen months, from 1938 to 1940, she traveled with the Communist New Fourth Army as a war correspondent while it fought the Japanese.

Back in the United States in 1941, Smedley devoted herself to building support for the Chinese war effort. An advocate of Kuomintang-Communist cooperation, she worked with conservatives like Walter Judd and J. B. Powell, distanced herself from more open Communist spokesmen like Anna Louise Strong, and was mildly critical of the Soviet Union. The uneasy American consensus on China broke

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apart, however, after the recall of General Joseph Stilwell, a bitter critic of Chiang. Smedley, increasingly identified with the Communists, became the object of harsh attacks by Chiang's American supporters. As the Chinese Communists advanced militarily at the end of the 1940s, the polemics heated up, culminating in the charges of the Willoughby report.

Increasingly isolated, in financial straits and with few friends, Smedley decided to return to China. A Chinese Communist emissary gave her \$2000 for the trip, but in Great Britain, her first stop, a hemorrhaging ulcer sent her to the hospital. She died in 1950 after an unsuccessful operation. The following year her ashes were interred in Peking; she left her estate to Marshall Zhu De, whose biography she had been writing.

Smedley's activities in China remain a matter of deep dispute. Many of her closest friends there were Communists, and a number were Comintern agents or Soviet spies—Gerhart Eisler, Arthur Ewerts, and the spy chief Sorge himself, with whom she had a torrid love affair. The MacKinnons admit that Smedley must have known they were Comintern agents, but that she herself “was a freelance revolutionary operating on a global scale” who did not work for the Comintern because “a Comintern or CP member she was not” and unaffiliated radicals did not work for the Communist International.

The argument is not only circular but implausible. Although Smedley was not a formal member of a Communist party, she clearly regarded herself as a soldier in the same army. Moreover, the authors provide enough detail about Smedley's activities in the early 1930s to cast doubt on their own conclusions. She was deeply involved in several Comintern projects before 1934. Although Richard Sorge avoided contact with most other radicals in China, he got in touch with Smedley immediately after arriving in Shanghai. And “it was through Smedley that Sorge found most of the Asian contacts who gave him significant information” during the next few years, including Ozaki Hotsumi, who became his principal Japanese source. When the Soviets sent Otto Braun to China in the early 1930s to supervise Comintern policy, Smedley helped put him in touch with the Jiangxi soviet where Mao's forces had established a base.

There is also the curious story of Smedley's relationship with Earl Browder, who set up an important Comintern apparatus in Shanghai in the late 1920s. According to the authors, Browder, the future leader of the

American Communist party, tried to recruit Smedley into the Party in New York in 1920. This encounter is highly unlikely, however; Browder was imprisoned in Leavenworth Penitentiary until November 1920 and did not become active in Party affairs until 1921, by which time Smedley was in Germany. Smedley did encounter him in Moscow in the early 1920s; in a letter to a friend she mocked his pretensions and behavior. The MacKinnons believe “it is doubtful that she would have seen much of him in Shanghai” when he was doing his Comintern work. Yet, later in their book, they note that in 1935 Smedley wrote several times to Browder appealing to him to send someone from America to edit a new pro-Communist journal being established in Shanghai. Browder responded by sending Grace Granich, his own secretary. It is likely that Smedley knew about Browder's “internationalist” work in China and had done what she could to advance it. Would she have written to Browder only on the basis of an unpleasant encounter in Moscow more than ten years earlier? And why would he dispatch his own secretary half-way around the world to aid an “unaffiliated” radical?

The MacKinnons sometimes write as though the Communist International were a philanthropic organization. They note that the League Against Imperialism was founded in 1927; “its initial financing was provided by the Comintern, which thereafter deliberately refrained from exercising direct control over the organization, so as to avoid tainting it as Moscow-dominated.” The Comintern, however, was rarely so generous; it set up front groups to advance its interests. And it used Communists, pro-Communists, quasi-Communists, and fellow-travelers as the situation demanded. One of the League's functionaries, Louis Gibarti, identified by the MacKinnons as a “labor organizer,” was one of the Comintern's most experienced operatives.

Comintern agents did not limit their activities to uncovering military secrets. Journalists with access to political information and gossip, contacts with scholars and intellectuals, and outlets to the public were valuable commodities for the Comintern. Smedley may not have been a conventional spy, but she clearly facilitated the work of a Comintern apparatus that later turned into a spy ring. The Soviet Union had no compunction about using dedicated revolutionaries to advance its own interests; many revolutionaries were more than willing to serve. If Smedley was disappointed by the course of the Russian Revolution, that did not prevent her from aiding Communists who duplicated its horrors. □

THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF THE ARAB-ZIONIST CONFLICT

Michael J. Cohen/University of California Press/\$18.95

Micah Morrison

Michael J. Cohen has provided a balanced and mercifully brief corrective to ahistorical views of the Arab-Israeli dispute in his new book, *The Origins and Evolution of the Arab-Zionist Conflict*, a bare-bones account of how the bitch sisters of Arab nationalism and Zionism were born, grew, and struggled in the tumultuous first half of the twentieth century. He covers all the main points of the subject from 1914 to 1948, offering the book “as a guide for students of the Middle East and for the intelligent non-specialist.”

Brevity is the soul of the book. The author, a professor of history at Bar Ilan University in Israel, has examined much of the period at greater length in his other works, *Churchill and the Jews*, *Palestine and the Great Powers*, and *Palestine: Retreat from the Mandate*. In his latest work, the historian's necessary absorption with detail and color gives way to a need for compression. Partisan wranglers undoubtedly will charge him with over-simplification.

Cohen begins by sketching the intellectual and political atmosphere among Arabs and Jews prior to 1914. The playwright and journalist Theodor Herzl makes a pallid appearance in these pages—sad fate for such a vivid megalomaniac. He puts in motion the

Zionist movement, and vanishes. Nascent pan-Arab nationalism surfaces in the form of the writer Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, an opponent of Ottoman rule.

Ottoman power crumbled as the First World War swept over Europe and the Near East. Cohen examines the tangled web of ambiguous assurances and declarations the British passed on at this time to such key figures as the sharif Husayn of Mecca, leader of the Hashemite clan and great-grandfather of the current ruler of Jordan, and Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann. Next, Britain's problems administering the mandate, its attempts between 1920 and 1945 both to contain the growing conflict between Arabs and Jews and to find avenues of compromise, while attending to its imperial interests, are handled in under forty pages. The final section deals with the period from 1945 to 1948, when an exhausted England, pressed by war losses, a decolonizing mood at home, and escalating tensions in Palestine, finally detached itself from the area. The book is rounded off by selections from key diplomatic documents concerning various plans for the region and some suggestions for further reading.

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Although the book is for the most part written in clear if somewhat pedestrian prose, the author misleads when he strives for too much simplicity. At one point he writes that “the

