

AFD Ep 409 Links and Notes - Agnes Smedley [Bill/Rachel] - Recording Jan 23 2022

This episode we're talking about the 20th century American journalist and spy for India, the Soviet Union, and Communist China, Agnes Smedley. Smedley, born in Missouri in 1892, grew up in a mining family during the Colorado Labor Wars of 1903-1904. The Colorado Labor Wars were a series of strikes conducted by the Western Federation of Miners, under the leadership of Big Bill Haywood. These strikes were met with great violence by the mine owners, who hired detective agencies such as the [Pinkertons](#), Baldwin-Felts, and Thiel agencies. The state government also sided with the mine owners, sending the National Guard to end strikes. The WFM countered with violence of their own, leading to one of the most violent periods in American labor history. When she was 19, she went to a teacher training college in Arizona, where she was introduced to Socialist activists, who brought her to San Francisco and from there she made her way to New York, where she got involved in the movement for contraceptive access alongside figures such as Margaret Sanger. In 1914, when Smedley was 22, World War I broke out although the US did not join until 1917. She became (or was already before the war) involved in an interesting angle of activism in the United States against the Allied war effort, which doesn't receive much attention these days relative to German and Irish activism and American draft resistance: She joined US-based activists in the Indian independence movement against the British Empire, financed by the German Empire's spy networks to disrupt British military and economic power by forcing them to shift attention away from the European front. This was known as the Hindu-German Conspiracy. Smedley coordinated news media agitation content for the Indian independence movement in the US, including while some of their leaders were hiding in Mexico, as the US authorities started cracking down on these efforts. This activism brought attention from both US and British intelligence. She was finally arrested by US Navy Intelligence for her activities in the spring of 1918, but charges were dropped after the end of the war later that year. Smedley went into self-imposed exile in the new German Republic, linking up with Indian communists and nationalists of various religious and ethnic identities based in Germany. These figures were either already prominent in the movement or would become prominent later. She remained in Germany for almost a decade before publishing a popular autobiographical novel entitled "Daughter of Earth." Smedley then moved to Shanghai to work as a foreign correspondent for the famous liberal German newspaper Frankfurter Zeitung for a couple years. (Later she would also work for the Guardian and ended up staying in China for over a decade.) Smedley was involved until around 1936 with Soviet espionage activities in China and Japan. She provided foreign audiences with a narrative on the Communist Long March of 1934, although she was not a participant. She reported on the growing conflict with Japan and the military responses of the various Chinese factions vying for power, eventually traveling with two of the Communist armies participating in the United Front national liberation campaigns against Japan. In 1941, Smedley returned to the United States and specifically to the nation's capital to promote the interests of Chinese Communists specifically but also broadly the United Front against Japan during the war. She spent the rest of the 1940s, mostly in upstate New York, under military and FBI surveillance, with growing pressure as the Second Red Scare got under way. In particular, General Douglas MacArthur, who was obsessed with Red China, wanted to take her down. She once again exiled herself in 1949, this time to the UK, where she died the following year at age 58, having lived to see the final victory of the Red Army in mainland China. All told, including one posthumous work, she published six books, including her novel, collections of essays and news articles, and long-form non-fiction on the Chinese Red Army. These books were often critical in promoting understanding of the Chinese Communists to outsiders.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnes_Smedley

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colorado_Labor_Wars

Other links:

- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Agnes-Smedley> [This article amusingly contends repeatedly that she was not a spy or intelligence asset and was always an innocent player caught up in bigger plots she was unaware of.]
 - *From 1919 to 1928 she lived in Berlin with the Indian nationalist leader Virendranath Chattopadhyaya. She taught English at the University of Berlin, did graduate work in Asian studies there, wrote articles for several periodicals, and helped establish Germany's first public birth-control clinic. She began psychoanalysis in an attempt to combat depression, and, as a form of therapy, she began writing the autobiographical novel Daughter of Earth (1929). [The Wikipedia article implies she had been seeking treatment for depression for nearly 20 years.]*
 - *In 1936 she began a journey to reach communist-controlled northern China. She was in Xi'an (Sian) in December 1936 and made English-language broadcasts on the brief capture of Chiang Kai-shek by rebellious Manchurian troops. Early in 1937 she reached Mao Zedong's headquarters in Yan'an. She underwent great hardships to travel with the Eighth Route Army (the Red Army) during the Sino-Japanese War and in 1938 published China Fights Back: An American Woman with the Eighth Route Army, on her experiences in Shanxi province. In Hankou she worked with the Chinese Red Cross Medical Corps, collected supplies for the Red Army, and served as a publicist for the communists until the city fell in 1938. She then traveled through central China with the New Fourth Army, a communist guerrilla force in Japanese-controlled areas, filing reports from time to time with the Manchester Guardian.*
 - *Smedley's ashes were interred in the National Revolutionary Martyrs Memorial Park in Beijing.*
- Three of her personal letters are in the Duke University Libraries Archive: <https://archives.lib.duke.edu/catalog/smedleyagnes> One of them is a sweeping personal attack and denunciation of a fellow American who had been in Shanghai around the same time but had instead (apparently) supported and fraternized with the occupying Japanese during the war and afterward became an ardent propagandist against the Chinese Communists upon her return to the US.
- https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/venona/dece_smedley.html I am a bit wary of the salacious details spelled out here because it doesn't offer citations and some basic details like what year she died seem off. Discussion of her espionage activities (beginning at NYU and UC Berkeley) and a photo of Chinese communists holding a banner reading "Welcome Miss Agnes Smedley / Our Great Friend!"
 - *At New York University circa 1912, Smedley befriended a group of students from India who were agitators in their country's nationalist movement. She soon joined the Friends of Freedom for India, a secretive organization closely monitored by the U.S. government. Smedley offered to hide the group's codes, contact information, and correspondence in her room to keep their activities from possible government detection.*
 - *Though Smedley eventually moved away from New York, the Indian nationalist cause remained close to her heart. In 1918, while she was a student at the University of California, Smedley was arrested in the company of Salindranath Ghose, a prominent Indian nationalist, and charged with aiding and abetting espionage. She was indicted for fraud on charges of having helped the Friends of Freedom for India establish themselves in the U.S. as a legitimate government-in-exile, but she was never tried.*
 - *Soon after the indictment Smedley left the U.S. for Berlin. She became involved with the Communist faction of the Indian nationalist movement in Germany and*

entered into a common-law marriage with Virendranath Chattoopadhyaya, a Communist Indian nationalist leader. During their relationship Smedley traveled frequently between Moscow and Berlin under the aliases Mrs. Petroikas and Alice Bird, presumably to pass information between Soviet authorities and the Communist Party, to which she belonged.

- *In 1928, Smedley left for Shanghai, China by way of Moscow. Agents there assigned her to keep tabs on the British-trained and British-directed police in Shanghai and to support the Communist cause there.*
- *Smedley began a professional and romantic relationship with Richard Sorge, a Russian-born spy for the Soviets based in Shanghai. Through Japanese and German contacts Smedley provided, Sorge collected detailed information on Japanese and German military intentions and capabilities. Before Sorge was executed in Tokyo for espionage in 1944, he wrote that his espionage activities were made possible only with Smedley's assistance. He referred to her, however, by a code name.*
- *During World War II Smedley lived intermittently in the U.S. and served as an advisor to the U.S. general Joseph Stilwell, who was the military advisor to Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of non-Communist China. Smedley used her position to recommend that Stilwell secretly send a limited amount of U.S. military supplies to the Chinese Communists in the event that they could help the U.S. against a potential Japanese attack. Stilwell agreed to Smedley's request.*
- Here is an April 2021 article on Smedley from the Chinese Communist Party's "Global Times" tabloid which represents a Chinese nationalist perspective within the party (not to be confused with Nationalist China in Taiwan). The item was published (along with a 6 minute video featuring photos, newsreels, and re-enactments) as part of a centennial series on 100 foreign figures who helped deliver the success of the Chinese Communist Party from 1921 onward: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1221316.shtml>
 - *Ms. Smedley felt at home in Yan'an [with the Eighth Route Army of the CCP]. She was quite popular: staying with officials and soldiers in her Red Army uniform at daytime, and teaching soldiers to dance to phonograph music at night. She was eager to contribute to the Chinese revolution. She wrote letters to invite foreign editors and journalists to Yan'an, and facilitated interviews with Mao Zedong by foreigners including Owen Lattimore, editor of U.S. journal Pacific Affairs. Such interviews further broke the media blockade against the Red Army. She also wrote joint letters with Mao Zedong to U.S. President Roosevelt and with Zhu De to President of the Indian National Congress Nehru, asking them to send medical workers to China. As a result, renowned physicians such as Norman Bethune and Dwarkanath Kotnis made their way to China.*
- <https://openthemagazine.com/columns/guest-column/red-shadow-behind-subhas-chandra-bose/>
- <https://www.mapsofindia.com/on-this-day/17th-november-1928-lala-lajpat-rai-indian-nationalist-passed-away> *Smedley later wrote about her first encounter with Lajpat Rai in her autobiography (quoted by Puri): "He [Rai] was a teacher and a wise man... He introduced me to the movement for the freedom of his people and showed me that it was not only an historic movement of itself, but it was part of an international struggle for emancipation."*
- Discussion points
 - It's interesting how the Britannica article and the NOVA feature both diminish Smedley, but from opposite viewpoints: The Britannica article made it seem like Smedley naively happened to get involved in clandestine activities (e.g. Hindu-German Conspiracy, Russian intelligence gathering), while the NOVA

feature paints her as a woman with no formal education who used her auto-didactist ways and romantic connections to become a prodigious lady spy. The CCP tabloid seemed to give her the most fair and even-handed portrayal.

- Birth control activism
- Journalism
- Stilwell