Agnes Smedley is one of the most interesting and compelling, if almost completely unknown, female characters of the twentieth century. Part of the reason for her invisibility no doubt lies in one of the seldom spoken, dirty little secrets about biographies. They are mostly written by men, about men. However, aside from the fact that she was a woman, getting at her life is particularly difficult because of who she was, what she did for a living, and where she spent a vast majority of her time. She was a female author and journalist who traveled the world at a time when most women barely moved beyond their homes. As Janice R. MacKinnon and Stephen R. MacKinnon, her first biographers, pointed out, “even the most ordinary facts about her life, including her birthdate, were a mystery.” As a result, it took them fourteen years to complete the first biography on her. Smedley’s second biographer, Ruth Price, took fifteen years to write her book.

David Mayers, whose past work has expertly explored complex individuals, is the most recent scholar to tackle Smedley. His early work on the former director of the Policy Planning Staff, George Kennan, is an excellent example. Historians have long been fascinated by Kennan; there are hundreds of books and articles on his life. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, four biographies on George Kennan appeared. Each offered a

1 I would like to thank Diane Labrosse for her work in editing this review. Over the last few months, she gently prodded me to think about the larger implications of what I was trying to get it. I believe the work is much stronger because of her interventions.

2 Ruth Price, one of Smedley’s biographers agrees. She characterizes her as one of the most significant American women of the twentieth century. Ruth Price, The Lives of Agnes Smedley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

3 Andrew Kahn and Rebecca Onion, “Is History Written by About Men by Men,” Slate Magazine, January 6, 2016; http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2016/01/popular_history_why_are_so_many_history_books_about_men_by_men.html


5 Price, The Lives of Agnes Smedley.


9 The books include David Mayers, George Kennan and the Dilemmas of US Foreign Policy (London: Oxford University Press, 1988; Walter Hixson, George Kennan, Cold War Iconoclast (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989);
different glimpse into Kennan’s life. It was Mayers’s book, *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of US Foreign Policy*, however, that was the first to be published. Of the four, it is the only one to remain on Amazon’s opening page, when one googles “biography” and “George Kennan.” Its endurance stands as a testimony to its quality.10

After almost a generation of writing about men, in Smedley Mayers appears to have chosen his first female subject.11 It is a tricky thing for a man to write about a woman.12 I say tricky because Smedley’s life was defined, in large part, by the patriarchal world she inhabited. And I believe that much of her life must be understood in this context. Mayers is a diligent and careful scholar, however, and he is clearly sympathetic to his subject. Although he tells us his goal is to focus on only five years of her history, 1937–1941, when she had a front-row seat to two of the twentieth century’s most important events—the early years of the Chinese Civil War and onset of World War Two—his article takes us far beyond this period, as he chronicles her early years of “misery” and “resentment” (234) through her travels first to Russia and Germany where she met and fell in love with Virendranath “Chatto” Chattopadhyaya, who eventually became her common-law husband.

Chattopadhyaya was an Indian revolutionary who advocated the forceful overthrow of the British Raj. He was also a Communist who spent several years in the Soviet Union. He was eventually executed, by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, in 1937. According to Mayers, Chattopadhyaya’s relationship with Smedley, which suffered from several challenges, including his infidelity, forced her to flee from her life with him “into seclusion” as she had become both “overwrought and physically undone.” Eventually, he argues, she was able to recover her “mental-physical balance thanks to psychoanalytic intervention” (237), and the publication of her most famous work, *Daughter of Earth*.13

In that book, Smedley chronicled much of her early life using an alias, Marie Rodgers. Although the book was ostensibly fiction, today most scholars understand that it was autobiographical in nature. Smedley also published six other books and countless articles.14 In her writings, she did not pull any punches. She wrote

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11 But not his last. He has a new article coming out on Robert and Marion Merriman in a volume on the international relations edited by Gaynor Johnson. See David Mayers, “Quixotic Calling: Robert and Marion Merriman in the Spanish Civil War” in Gaynor Johnson, ed., *Locating the Transatlantic in Twentieth Century Politics, Diplomacy and Culture: Essays in Honour of Professor Alan Dobson* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming). His next monograph, titled *Americans abroad in 1933–1941*, which he is still writing, will also feature a number of female characters including: Smedley, Marion Merriman, who kept the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (ALB) idea going after the Spanish Civil War; Salarie Kea, a Black nurse who actually served with the ALB; Helen Keller, who traveled to Japan in 1937; Gertrude Stein, who became apostate for Vichy France; Mildred Fish-Harnack, who worked in Germany’s anti-Nazi resistance; Josephine Baker, who worked in counterintelligence for Free France; Virginia Hall, who ran operations for both the British Special Operations Executive and the Office of Strategic Services during World War Two; and Anna Louise Strong, who spent a great deal of time in the USSR.


honestly, in a way only a few women have dared, about her rape, her all-consuming love affairs with men and women, her disdain for marriage, and her two abortions. According to Price, “no part of her life was too private” for public scrutiny.15

It was a different time. Today we seem to spend hours curating our lives on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Well maybe not Twitter anymore. There we bury our secrets and our shame, behind filters and special lighting. I doubt our fascination with our own images is something that Smedley would have understood or appreciated.

Like Smedley and her first biographers, Mayers does not shy away from the most complicated moments of her life. He spends most of his article on her time in China, where she first landed in 1928. He suggests that her initial experiences, which included witnessing “the casual cruelty and debasement suffered by women as concubines and slaves, or cripples with bound feet—‘golden lilies’—not to mention female infanticide,” went on to define her work in the country (237-238). He notes that throughout her life she was a strong advocate of women’s rights. She went to great lengths to try and ensure that women could control their own bodies and, as a result, their own lives. Integral to this was of course the issue of reproductive rights. One wonders how Smedley would have reacted to the current state of reproductive health care of women in the United States, or indeed the province I live in, in Canada. I imagine she would have been on the front lines of our struggle as well.

Then as now, however, being on the front line comes with consequences. Her role as an outspoken advocate for women’s rights, together with the relationships she was able to forge with the Chinese Communists, her career as a female journalist working in a warzone, and the work she did for Comintern under the direction of Richard Sorge, dramatically impacted her life. Sorge was a notorious and successful Soviet military intelligence asset, who is best known for his work in Japan in 1940 and 1941.16 He was eventually arrested for espionage and executed by the Japanese government in 1944. Sorge and Smedley were lovers for a brief period, until Sorge moved on to another woman, Ursula Kuczynski, or as she is better known today, “Agent Sonya.”17 While Sorge’s relationship with Smedley was short lived, it had a lasting impact because it ensured that she lived her life in China, under almost “constant surveillance, punctuated by death threats from shadowy sources, probably the Japanese secret services” (239). None of this was easy.

When she was forced out of China in the spring of 1941, she returned to the United States, landing in California where, according to Mayers, she wallowed “in vapid culture and extravagance and [was] enthralled by the mirage of isolationism” (248). Less than nine years later she died in England from complications after stomach surgery. Yet, for all her world travels, she never really found a home. Mayers astutely points out that she was a perpetual wanderer who “occupied an ‘inside-outside’ position” everywhere she went (234).

Occupying an “inside-outside position” is extraordinarily difficult. It is the position of one who never belongs. Although Smedley spent the bulk of her life trying to find her place, I would suggest that neither her sex, nor her gender, allowed her to do so. Mayers recognizes how difficult this must have been. He writes,

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16 Born in Azerbaijan, Sorge spent most of his early life in Germany where he became a Communist. He was later recruited by the Soviets. In 1929 he joined the GRU, or the Soviet military intelligence Division. See Matthews Owen, Impeccable Spy: Richard Sorge, Stalin’s Master Spy (New York; Bloomsbury, 2020).
17 Ben Macintyre, Agent Sonya: Moscow’s Most Daring Wartime Spy (Toronto: Signal, 2020)
that “loneliness and feelings of worthlessness plagued her,” and she was able to numb her “despair” by intensive work and occasional alcoholic binges” (235). He also adds, “[s]he sought to live affirmatively even when fending off emotional torments” (235-236).

Mayers pays particular attention to Smedley’s emotional life. In addition to the language noted above, in his article he refers to her “depression,” her attempts to regain “emotional equilibrium,” and her “inherent unsettledness” (249). Given this, it might then have been worthwhile to have explored some of the insights offered by those who study the history of emotions. Although this is a relatively new methodological approach in the history of US foreign relations, as historian Frank Costigliola points out, it does allow “us to delve deeper into the thoughts, motivations and behaviors of historical actors.”

And here I also wondered if a second methodological intervention might also have been equally illuminating. A gendered analysis, together with some of the insights from the history of “emotions,” may have produced a different portrayal of Smedley. As Joan Scott has repeatedly argued, the history of women has so much more potential than simply recounting their lives. “Gender,” as an analytical category, can and should be used to “unearth how unequal relationships of power are developed around gender-infused ideologies and concepts.” It was precisely Smedley’s lack of power in her career, in her relationships, in the countless injustices she witnessed and experienced, that also explains the women she was.

By examining Smedley through both lenses, it might have been possible to open a space large enough to acknowledge that “depression” is often an easy substitute for a far more complex emotion in women: ‘Anger.’ As Mayer’s illustrates throughout his article, during her short life Smedley had a lot to be angry about. Yet the word ‘anger’ does not appear in the article’s descriptions of this twentieth-century American radical, whom foreign service officer John Paton Davies once described as a cross between Upton Sinclair, Calamity Jane, and the Wobblies. Instead, all the of the emotional descriptions seem to point to Smedley’s mental fragility, which is reinforced by Mayers’s careful documentation of her physical health crises.

Yet Smedley was anything but fragile. She traveled around the world and back, alone. She worked in conditions and faced challenges that few of us can imagine. Yes, she faced chronic health issues. Given her lifestyle, however, this was hardly surprising. Thus, the reasons for this focus on Smedley’s physical problems and her mental health remain somewhat curious, as are the characterizations of her in terms that denote weakness or depression.

That said, it is important to note that Mayers is not alone in focusing in on Smedley’s mental and physical health. And there may well have been a biological component to her “depression.” As Mayers points out,

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19 One scholar who has done so is Saara Jäntti, Possible Subversions: The Narrative Constructions of Identity in Agnes Smedley’s Daughter of the Earth (VDM Verlag, 2008).
21 Davies understood the role that anger played in Smedley’s life, or at least her early life. He noted in his memoirs that she had grown up “in poverty, bitterness and anger.” John Paton Davies, China Hand: An Autobiography (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 27
22 Price, 36.
23 Price, 14, 16.
over the course of Smedley’s life, she endured several medical treatments, including electric shock (235) to find a cure for what she, and others, believed ailed her. She also wrote extensively about her emotions and her “nervous attacks.” But emotions are both biological and discursive; and historians, of all sexes, have not always challenged our gendered constructions of women’s emotions. Thus, my objective here is simply to prod, gently, the way women’s emotions have traditionally been understood.

To my mind, another approach would be, as Costigliola suggests, not to “simply point to the presence” of an emotion, but rather to explore how our understanding of emotions have been “influenced” by both “cultural norms [and] power” relationships. I would also respectfully add gender. What then might a gendered approach to Smedley’s emotional life have unearthed? Perhaps a very different Agnes Smedley; a women defined by both her strength and her rage, instead of her fragility and depression.

Upon reflection, however, I wonder if I am asking for too much. When I went on a search for secondary sources to support my argument, I was shocked by the lack of scholarship in this area. In the end it took an undergraduate student to point out the obvious: “the history of woman’s rage is a long, tired, and tediously unheard, one.” It should not be. Smedley’s rage—our rage—must be acknowledged both in the past, and in the present. Being a woman in a man’s world is extraordinarily difficult. It is particularly difficult for women today and it was particularly difficult for Smedley, a woman of such complexity that historians are still trying to capture her.

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24 Smedley in Janice and Stephen R. MacKinnon, 79, 104
25 Costigliola, 369.
27 I would argue that this also applies to our friends, colleagues, mothers, sisters, aunts, and girlfriends—many of whom I would argue are also angry—because is not that the lie that lives at the heart of all biography, that we attempt to explore the lives of others in the off chance it will provide insight into our own.