

The first casualty of war, it is said, is truth. Suppression of truth favourable to the enemy and propagation of falsehood are considered indispensable to create the mass psychology necessary for a successful military campaign.

INDIA and China are fortunately not at war with each other. In spite of occasional clashes in Ladakh, and recently in the NEFA area too, the two Governments repudiate warlike intentions and are trying to start negotiations.

Their mutual relations, however, are by no means normal. It would not be an exaggeration to say that an atmosphere of cold war pervades between them. The result is that the process of truth becoming a casualty has started.

It was not long ago that groups of economists and experts in other fields of activities undertook visits to People's China with a view to learning at first hand how the new socialist system was being built there.

Many of those who undertook such visits did not applaud or endorse all that the Chinese Government and people were doing. They had some very critical observations to make on this or that aspect of life in China.

They were, however, impressed with what was being attempted by the leaders of People's China. Many of them also drew conclusions regarding what can, and should be done in India.

All this has stopped. No effort is now being made by our people to learn at first hand what is being done in China. (This is, of course, true of China; they too do not visit our country and try to learn what is being done here). We are all depending on "information" supplied by News Agencies and correspondents who do not hide their bias against People's China.

Most of us, therefore, become gullible enough to swallow all that is said and written in the anti-China press regarding "slave labour in Chinese Communes", "acute famine", "collapse of rural life", etc., etc. Many of us have become so hysterical that those who raise doubts about such "reports" are denounced as "unpatriotic", "Chinese Agents", etc.

Such a distorted image of People's China was carried by the author of "The Wall Has Two Sides" when he set out on his first journey to People's China. As he himself observes,

"As an Englishman resident in America, I have been to China twice, travelling on a British passport. I went first in 1957, taking with me all the assumptions and apprehensions generally prevalent in the United States.

"I expected to find a country of vast impoverishment and dreadful squalor and disease. I prepared myself to see a people embittered by the rigid coercions of a police state... That was the China I expected but it was not the China that I found.

"The discrepancy with what I had been led to expect and what I actually saw was at first bewildering and disturbing. No one can be in China for more than a few hours without sensing an almost tangible vitality and an enormous optimism. I saw in the people a buoyancy and confidence which was utterly unlike my expectations."

The reader will note that his

*"The Wall Has Two Sides", author: Felix Greene, Publishers: Jonathan Cape, London.

first visit to People's China coincided with the visits of several individuals and groups from India. Those Indian visitors, however, were unlike Felix Greene; they were not then moved by the anti-China prejudices with which he had started. There was, therefore, no discrepancy with what they had been led to expect and what they actually saw.

Unfortunately, however, the Tibetan counter-revolution and the border dispute with China have made our people as prejudiced as the Americans and the British. Possibly a little more, since we do not even think it proper to undertake

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such visits to People's China as Greene did.

We do not think it necessary to get first hand information on what is taking place in China before believing all that is written in the imperialist press.

Greene, on the other hand, decided to undertake another visit, and that in the summer of 1960. In between his two visits had taken place many changes in China's external relations, as well as internally.

He was, therefore, naturally anxious to find out all about these changes. Among the points on which he wanted to get the truth was the Communes "about which we had read such dire reports and which were not even heard of when I was there before".

He spent nearly five months in China. He talked with Cabinet Ministers and pedicab drivers, with heads of Government Departments and writers. He had a long talk with the Prime Minister Chou En-lai himself. He visited schools, factories, prisons, hospitals and several Communes.

And the story of all he saw, all he heard from a large number of Chinese as well as a few foreign residents in China, all the impressions and views he formed are set out in this 400-and-odd-page book. Written in lucid style, it is very pleasant to read and gives lots of information on all aspects of the people's life in China.

He has, of course, many critical comments to offer on various aspects of life in China. There is, however, no doubt as to what his general conclusion is. Here it is:

"No one can come away from a visit to China today without being impressed, even overwhelmed, by the experience. It is impossible not to feel while one is there that one is witnessing one of the great episodes of history and that all

our futures are bound to be influenced by it.

"Throughout my stay in China, as during my visit in 1957, I had an extraordinary impression that China was drawing on resources latent within her for a long time and was moving forward very rapidly to a great future".

This is substantiated by description of what he actually saw in cities and villages, in factories and farms, in schools, hospitals and theatres, in courts and prisons, in both rural and urban Communes, etc. Suffice it to point out here his assessment of the Communes and the food situation — two points on which much has been written in our press in a light very unfavourable to China.

On the Communes, he answers three questions which are generally raised about them:

- 1 Were the Communes imposed ruthlessly from above?
- 2 Have there not been disastrous psychological and economic blunders in the Commune movement?
- 3 Have the Communes destroyed family life?

The answers he gives to these questions are, on the whole, favourable.

He does, of course, point out certain mistakes and even "serious breakdowns".

"The Government failed to realise the extent to which the agricultural figures pouring in from the countryside were widely optimistic".

Again, "the rise of the Communes coincided with a sudden astonishing increase in industrial production. This combined to create an enormous strain on an inadequate transportation system. Food grown in one area could not be moved to another because the railways were clogged with freight trains handling industrial shipments.

"On-the-spot shortages were common. Deliveries, even those for exports, were delayed for weeks at a time. Statistical surveys broke down. No uniform system of estimating, or even of measuring, grain yields had yet been established. Storage capacity was inadequate for the unprecedented harvest."

He, however, points out that the main thing a visitor is impressed with is not that mistakes were committed and breakdowns did occur, but that the people put their shoulders to the wheel and proceeded to rectify the mistakes and repair the breakdowns.

"Before long, the practical quality of the Chinese people reasserted itself, and they began, with cooler heads to tackle stubborn agricultural problems which do not easily yield to sudden onslaughts. Mistakes were remedied. Hours of work were normalised. Collectivised vegetables plots, pigs, chickens, fruit trees

were returned to their original owners. Bicycles were 'decommunisted'. Undoubtedly new problems will arise and adjustments will continue to be made".

What about the widely reported food scarcity and famine? There is no doubt that 1960 and 1961 were very difficult for the people of China.

"While I was travelling in China during 1960, I saw many signs both of the excessive rainfall and the extreme drought which had afflicted that country during the first half of the year. In some areas there had been no rain for more than 200 days; in others there were disastrous summer typhoons — eighteen hit the North-east coast alone."

It was, therefore, natural that there should be food scarcity already in the latter half of 1960 when he was in China. He says,

"visible signs of the upswing of living standards (with the exception of food, which was in short supply in 1960 because of recent poor harvest), struck me forcibly after the absence of three years".

He explains how, in regard to other aspects of people's life, like clothes, bicycles, clocks and radios and even personal savings in cash, etc. there was marked improvement. At the same time, "while I was still in China, these norms (of food rationing) were considerably reduced because of the accumulative effects of the poor 1959-60 harvest."

But here again, he was highly impressed with the strenuous efforts being made by the people to overcome the difficulties. "From June 1960 onwards, when already it was clear that China would be facing a period of acute food shortage, the city people were being urged to plant vegetables on every available plot of ground. Outside my hotel a rough corner or yard covered with brick and rubble was tackled one afternoon by a group of youngsters who in a few hours had transformed it into a neat vegetable garden.

"Medical students and nurses from the hospital just opposite the Hsin-Chiao hotel dug up and planted another small area. The vegetables, when they started to grow in this plot, seemed pretty sickly until one day a group of medical students doused them with anti-bug powder and before I left it was a fairly thriving plot of Chinese cabbage.

"In all the cities I visited, even small strips of earth that sometimes run between the road and pavement were being dug and planted with vegetables. In some towns temporary pipes with taps at intervals were laid as an aid to these efforts. The vegetable plots were all in the open and unguarded; the vegetables could easily have been stolen at night. One man at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me he and his wife had planted onions in their window-boxes instead of flowers."

It was this organised effort of the Chinese people in the villages (and the cities) that led to the

organisation of the Communes. Far from any imposition from above, the Commune movement arose, developed and is functioning on the basis of the widest possible discussion among and participation by the common people.

"I am convinced," Greene says, "that the key to much of what is taking place in China is group discussion and cooperation. Without an appreciation of this element, it is impossible, I believe, for us to comprehend the power of the mass movements which have swept the country during the past decade — and which will, I feel certain, continue to do so. By whatever name one wishes to speak of it (the Chinese call it democracy), an outstanding feature of life in China today is mass participation by means of mass meetings and group discussions...."

"This is a technique of education and persuasion developed in the early days of the Chinese Communist Party and is closely connected with Mao Tse-tung's theories of leadership. Every traveller like myself soon becomes conscious that China is a country where discussions, talks, meetings, debates, take place everywhere on every conceivable subject. The Times once referred to China's Government as 'Government by endless conversation'."

Hardly the picture of a slave labour camp where it is for a small elite of the Communist Party to order and for the people to obey!

On the significance of the Commune as a mass movement and as a technique for solving China's fundamental problems, the author has something to say which will be read in India with interest.

"The Commune movement appears to have tackled this (rural unemployment and under-employment) problem directly. Surplus labour in the country has found employment without migration to the cities. A survey taken in China in 1959, the first year after the Communes, indicated that peasant working days had risen to 300 per year.

"This tremendous increase from the figure of 161 days only two years earlier reflects the results of establishing small rural industrial plants in the Commune and of the use of labour surplus for agricultural capital construction (soil conservation, afforestation, dams, irrigation).

"China thus appears to be approaching what no other underdeveloped country has yet achieved — a solution to the riddle of rural under-employment. I was informed, and I believe correctly, that today in a number of areas there is actually labour shortage — astonishing as this may seem for a country of such enormous population."

How one wishes that our sociologists, economists, administrators and politicians were able to go to China and learn from the achievements registered as well as the mistakes committed by them in tackling the very same problems which we are trying to solve through our own Community Development movement!

How one wishes, again, that the sociologists, economists, administrators and politicians of China were able to come to India and learn from both the achievements made, and the mistakes committed, by us in this very basic task! Such an exchange of experience of the two countries is unfortunately now precluded because of the strained political relations between them.