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THE FUNCTION OF LANGUAGES IN GLOBAL WAR¹

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To say that languages are important in the present emergency is an understatement. In actual combat, they may not play so paramount a role as guns, planes, and tanks, but almost every dispatch from our far-flung battle fronts informs us that their role is of significance—often of absolute significance—to the men who are doing the fighting.

Take for instance the incident of the American unit advancing into Tunisia, that caught a German patrol in the act of laying a mine field across the path of the Allied advance. The Germans put up no resistance and seemed glad enough to be taken prisoners. The first concern of the American commanding officer was to get them to remove the mines they had just laid. But here a major language difficulty arose. None of the Americans, including the commanding officer, spoke any German. The Germans probably understood English, but none of them would admit it. The advance had to be held up until an interpreter arrived on the scene, about two hours later.

Another press release tells the story of an American scouting party in Algeria that had been sent out to reassure the natives after the

¹ Based on an address before a joint meeting of the American Associations of Teachers of French, German, Spanish, Italian, Hebrew, Slavic, and Classical Languages at Columbia University, Saturday, January 16, 1943.

occupation. The name and New York City address of the officer who did the reassuring are specifically mentioned in the news item, because "he was the only member of the party who spoke French." (General Eisenhower, by the way, also had only one member of his immediate staff who could speak French).

At Oran, an American corporal (a former beverage manufacturer) enjoyed the unique distinction of speaking Arabic. This accomplishment enabled him to capture 75 native soldiers and a French officer whom he had found asleep in their barracks. "I told them the situation and promised they would be free in a couple of days," is the way he relates the incident; "They were very friendly."

By way of contrast, a photo release shows us a "perplexed British Tommy" who scratches his head and finds, says the caption, "overabundance of signs no help in determining which way he should head to catch up with the fleeing enemy in Egypt." The signs in question, had he been able to read them, would have told him to go to the right if he wanted to catch the Nazis ("Feldpost"; "Zahnersatzstelle"; "Feldlazarett"; "Armee Nachrichten Lager"); to the left if he preferred Italian company ("Intendenza"; "Commissariato di Movimento"; "Plotone Artieri"; "Sezione Antincendi").

On the Pacific front, our enemies are much

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better linguistically equipped with respect to us than we are with respect to them. Large numbers of Japanese soldiers speak English, which is the predominant foreign language taught in their high schools and colleges, and the only criticism that has been voiced of their command of our language is that "it's too darned perfect." (This came from a sergeant of the Marines who ordered his machine guns to start shooting after he heard the following from the dark bush: "Please do not open fire; we are an American scouting party, returning from a reconnoitering mission.") "No Marine would ever talk that good!" was the sergeant's further comment on the unsuccessful Jap surprise attack.

All of which goes to show that to the individual soldier and to the military unit, knowledge or lack of knowledge of the language of an ally or enemy or the population of an occupied country may spell the difference between life and death, escape and capture, survival and extinction, success and failure. In less stringent military situations, it spells the difference between comfort and discomfort. One Army nurse writes to her father: "My only regret is that I didn't take your advice and study my French. Now I need it!"; while a correspondent from Oran writes: "A really comic sight is one of our boys standing on the street with an English-French dictionary in his hand, talking to a girl and looking up each word as he speaks it."

These are glimpses of actual life from the war fronts. They show what our soldiers are up against. But if we needed any additional confirmation of the importance of languages in global war, we could simply refer to our own President, who found it expedient to address the population of France and French North Africa personally and in French when the American occupation began.

All this leads to an interesting and very practical consideration. What kind of war courses shall be taught in our high schools, colleges, and universities to boys and even girls who will enter the armed services? Shall it be, as some advocate, physics, chemistry, mathematics, and shopwork, with the languages left out? Far be it from us to belittle the role of physics, chemistry, and mathematics in modern warfare. But those sciences demand long hours and high

specialization before they can become effective in actual combat, and they are used only by a fraction, the technically specialized section, of an army. Languages, on the other hand, are of universal use and do not require such high specialization. A language becomes of practical use the minute a word or a phrase or a sentence of it is learned. A mere smattering of physics, chemistry, algebra, or shopwork will prove of little practical use to the parachutist who comes down in French territory or the Ranger who sets foot on hostile soil. But the ability to say: "Which way is Toulon? To the right or to the left?" and to grasp the answer may prove of signal value.

The Federal government, through its various agencies, far from opposing languages and language study, actively encourages both. Languages, the common ones taught in high school and college and the more obscure and distant ones, are craved by the government. There is a constant call for specialists in languages ranging all the way from French, Spanish, German, and Italian to Fanti, Ewe, Hausa, and Burmese, in all branches of the government service. Only a few days ago an urgent call for translators in Italian, German, and Portuguese by one of the government bureaus appeared in the daily press. Some of my own students have answered the government's call for specialists in French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Roumanian, and Japanese.

Public opinion through the press and the radio clearly indicates its desire for more and better language instruction. One could fill pages with a simple bibliographical account of articles and news items about languages that have been appearing in recent times in our magazines and newspapers.

There is even more unanimous agreement on the role of languages in the postwar world. Whatever the political arrangement may be that will arise out of the present struggle, one thing is certain: international communications of all sorts will be on an infinitely greater scale than ever before. Languages will be needed, urgently needed, by our postwar reconstructors. The rebuilding of war-torn Europe will require a medium, or rather, many media, of communication, and this means languages—the French that most cultured Europeans are acquainted with and use in their travels beyond their own borders, the

German that serves the purposes of a *lingua franca* throughout central Europe, the Italian and Spanish of the Mediterranean world, the Russian of our Soviet allies. It is no exaggeration to say that the language taught by our Hebrew colleagues will step into prominence, not only by reason of Palestinian connections, but also because Hebrew is an easy stepping-stone to another and much more widely spoken tongue—the Arabic that ranges from Casablanca and Dakar to Cairo and Baghdad. Nor is it an exaggeration to state that the ancient and honorable tongues taught by our classical colleagues will be of signal use, practical as well as cultural—Latin because it offers an excellent key and general introduction to all the Romance languages without exception, from Portuguese to Roumanian; Greek because, outside of its mighty influence in the shaping of western civilization, it is so strikingly similar to the modern Greek of our Mediterranean allies that in written form at least the two tongues are easily interchangeable. The economic and commercial relations of the postwar world will far surpass anything that has ever been known. Our economic interchange with the countries of Latin America has been growing by leaps and bounds in recent years, and this time there will be no turning back. The Portuguese of Brazil, the Spanish of Mexico and Cuba and Argentina and Bolivia are tongues that are with us to stay if we wish to profit by postwar opportunities. The tongues of the Far East open up to us new economic worlds, not to conquer or exploit, but to trade with to the benefit of all parties concerned. Touring and traveling for pleasure in the postwar world will exceed anything hitherto seen. The distance-destroying airplane, which is now an engine of death and destruction, will revert to its normal function of peaceful transportation, enabling the person of even limited means to week-end in Europe, in Africa, in the Orient, in South or Central America.

If there is one thing that stands out clearly from the wealth of material that comes to our notice in connection with the linguistic demands of the public and the government and the armed forces, it is that languages are urgently wanted for practical rather than for cultural purposes, temporarily at least. What is wanted is languages, many languages, for purposes of communication, not a few selected languages for grammatical and stylistic correctness and literary values. The government and the people of America want more French, more Spanish, more German, more Italian, than they have ever wanted before. They also want Portuguese, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, modern Greek, Hebrew, even Malay and Pidgin English.

What of the people who would build a Chinese wall of isolationism around a purely English-speaking United States, the people who believe we can win both the war and the peace without an insight into the languages, and therefore the psychologies and points of view of other nations, allied, enemy, and neutral? They, I think, are to be referred to our President and War Leader. "You cannot dig a hole large enough for the American people to crawl into, and then pull in the hole after you" is what Franklin D. Roosevelt told the Congress of the United States in an address on the state of the Nation. The President is right. You can't. The course of prewar technological advance, annihilating time and distance, the course of this global war, which calls our soldiers to every corner of the earth, the course of the coming world-wide peace and world-wide reconstruction, point to one certain outcome. Isolationism is a dead issue. There can never again be isolation for us—political, economic, or linguistic. Whether we like it or not (and we shall get to like it as soon as we become used to it), we must mingle with other peoples, intercommunicate with them, speak their languages if we expect them to speak ours.

Events . . .

AN EDUCATIONAL "LEND-LEASE" PROGRAM PROPOSED

ONE of the most promising of the many proposals for the educational rehabilitation of the countries that have been devastated or otherwise

impoverished by Nazi occupation is a program of "scholarship exchange" recently recommended by the United States Committee on Education Reconstruction.

In brief, this program would bring to America

from the occupied countries thousands of young men and women for a year of resident education and training in American universities and technical schools. The expenses involved would be shared, according to the plan, by the student's home government, the government of the host country, and non-public organizations—including in this country, presumably, the great educational foundations. Students, after the year of residence, would be expected to return to their homelands and "accept such tasks inside the field of reconstruction and rehabilitation" as they would be qualified to undertake.

The program would have outstanding importance, of course, to those countries in which the facilities for higher and technical education have been deliberately destroyed, in whole or in part, by the Nazi overlords—the libraries burned, the laboratories demolished, the faculties scattered or even "liquidated." Reports have it that all this has happened to a greater or less extent in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Greece, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Norway. It seems, too, that Italy will suffer as the Nazis retreat up the peninsula—if the treatment of the University of Naples is a foretaste of what will happen in the university centers of northern Italy. And the same may be true of France before the enemy has been completely conquered.

In any event, if this very practical and practicable program can be carried out, there will be no dearth of students to take advantage of its benefits.—W. C. B.

"BETTER SELECTION OF BETTER TEACHERS"

THE above caption is the title of an unusually significant monograph recently published by the Delta Kappa Gamma Society. This organization is an honor society of women teachers, with a membership of nearly 20,000, representing 46 states and the District of Columbia, and limited to women who have taught for at least five years and who "have rendered some distinctive educational service either locally or nationally."

This large and highly selected group of experienced teachers should be an invaluable source of data for the study of what is, perhaps, the most difficult, the most complicated, and withal the most important series of problems confronting American education, namely, the

initial selection, the preservice and inservice education, and the retention of teachers of all types and on all levels of the educational service. Many investigations have attempted to solve one or more of these problems by analyzing the qualities that characterize teachers whose work has been recognized, by one or more standards, as highly efficient. In so far as the present writer is informed, no prior investigation has dealt with so large a group of teachers whose excellence has been attested by what is, doubtless, the most satisfactory criterion of successful effort: the judgment of one's peers.

The monograph deals first with the selection of teachers, and perhaps its chief value lies in the fact that it gives both the way in which these teachers were selected and, more significantly, their opinions as to the way in which selection should be made. A carefully prepared questionnaire was sent to each member of the society, and 5,749 replies were received. These represented teaching groups as follows: 104 preschool and kindergarten; 1,496 elementary-school (grades 1-6); 559 junior-high-school; 1,443 senior-high-school; 619 university and college (including teachers-college); and 82 special-education. The supervisory and administrative personnel was represented by 1,109 replies. Miscellaneous groups made up the remainder. The largest number of replies (2,065) fell in the age-group, 40-50; the age-group, 30-40, was next with 1,730; and the age-group, 50-60, third, with 1,206.

The classification of the replies to various questions is indicated by the following chapter headings: "Factors That Brought Us into Teaching"; "How Our Members Secured Their First Positions"; "How Were Teachers Chosen for Their Present Positions?"; "Where Did Our Members Receive Their Education?"; "How Can Teacher-Educating Institutions Help?"; "What Factors Should Guide Employers in Teacher Selection?"; "Re-evaluation of Teachers"; and "Teacher Opinion on Needed Changes."

M. Margaret Stroh, professor of English, Wilson Teachers College (Washington, D. C.), and chairman of the committee of the society that prepared the monograph, is the author of Part I, summarized above. Part II, "A Study of Teacher-Educating Institutions," including