

INFORMAL EDUCATION

A South African Experiment

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“COMPLEX COUNTRY” is the apt title of an officially sponsored booklet introducing the Union of South Africa to overseas visitors. In the other dominions, the war and its accompanying problems of rehabilitation have overshadowed domestic difficulties, but in South Africa the ever-present questions of colour, race, and language have by no means been eclipsed; indeed, they have been brought into sharper focus by the war emergency. With an economy built largely on mineral wealth plus cheap Native labour, the Union, before the war, had few industries, so is more likely to be affected by the recent industrial developments than the other dominions.

A realization that education is the most effective weapon against political and economic chaos has focused attention on the educational facilities available in the Army, with a view to extending them into the wider field of adult education.

The education service in the South African forces is similar to the A.E.W.S. on the formal side, but, in addition to the Education Officers assigned to each unit, there is a separate body, the Information Service, with Officers attached to each unit, where all personnel are given at least an hour a week during working-hours for lectures and discussions on current affairs. The unit officer maintains an “Information Centre,” provided with war maps, posters, and bulletin boards for news in the political and rehabilitation fields. Periodicals, ranging from local newspapers to *Esquire*, are available, and, in addition to comfortable lounge furniture, desks are provided for serious study. A generous grant is made for library facilities, and where a library is already in existence the Information Officer takes on the job of modernizing it. He may be approached for advice on any subject, and perhaps could best be described as a “secular chaplain.”

This Information Service is of fairly recent origin, and it was found difficult to

assess results, as it would take some time to cover even a few of the desired subjects in the available hour-a-week. So a novel plan was adopted. Interested personnel of all ranks were released from units to attend a course similar to those arranged for training Information Officers.

As a R.N.Z.A.F. Radar Mechanic, attached R.A.F., attached Union Defence Forces, I was fortunate in being able to attend the third of these courses, and for a fortnight I lived in the N.C.O.'s mess at Durban Fortress, and attended lectures in a class-room situated on the beach. The subjects covered by the course made a formidable list, but, although both temperature and humidity approached the hundred mark and the surf was inviting, the closure always had to be applied to discussion to enable us to break up at 1500 hours daily.

Lectures were given by Information Officers on such subjects as “The Isms,” “Economic Security versus Individual Freedom,” “South African Agriculture,” and “The Housing Problem,” and outside lecturers from University and public life covered “Economics for the Layman,” “South African Industrial Resources,” “The U.S.S.R.,” &c. A journalist criticized “The Press,” a non-European soldier was permitted to put the case of the coloured people with frankness, and the Native problem was dealt with by a schoolmaster, himself a Bantu.

The course was opened with a general knowledge quiz, and on the final day a quiz on the subjects covered by the course served as an informal examination. Two parliamentary debates on the subjects of “Socialism” and “The Colour Bar” were a great success, but a visit to a municipal housing settlement for Natives proved the most enlightening item to the South Africans, as it was demonstrated to many of them for the first time that the African prefers to live as a human being.

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