

"Nazi" Contact Men in America

SOME MONTHS AGO there appeared in *The Freeman* a review of a book which described the involved, inefficient and wasteful methods of merchandising that obtain in Nazi Germany. Along with other handicaps, German business has to be carried on through a horde of non-producers whose only service is to grease the wheels of bureaucracy. These men facilitate the obtaining of governmental action necessary to the carrying on of commerce and manufacture; their stock-in-trade consists in knowing the "higher-ups." The suggestion that the ability to bribe is another valuable skill is entirely gratuitous, for the practice of bribery, being as old as government, is commonly considered a part of it.

The book gave the impression that the need for contact men to make trade possible at all was indigenous to the Nazi system. This is not so; such men come into being wherever and whenever government leaves its appointed field of merely settling quarrels between citizens and becomes an active participant in business itself. The prevailing ideology has nothing to do with their being. They are merely the excrescence of a controlled economy. Rome had these jobbers; so had Spain during its decline from glory in the sixteenth century.

Now that our government has become the main customer for goods, and finds it necessary to restrict private enterprise in order that its own orders be filled, "contact" men have become a feature of our economy. Necessarily their operations are conducted in secrecy, for even if the details of their work are free from moral turpitude there is something unsavory in getting paid for doing no productive good; one doesn't like to advertise that way of making a living. Besides, the value of "contact" work may be lost through publicity; the government officials concerned may not like it.

So, the fix-its who can arrange for a priority order or manipulate a government contract, although their number in Washington is reported to be very large, surround their work with a veil of mystery. Recently the pro-Administration *New York Times* partially removed this veil with a news story; and it editorialized the story, oddly enough, from the point of view of costliness to the taxpayer. That these men are working on a commission basis seemed to be most reprehensible to the writer; they ought to be put on a weekly salary. Well, in Germany, according to the book reviewed, they are so employed.

But the "contact" man is nothing new in our

economy. He is but a variation of our old friend the lobbyist who, by one means or another, wangles from government special privileges for corporations, industries or pressure groups. Labor unions have them; church organizations maintain them; trusts could not exist without them; veterans have found them useful in wheedling bonuses and pensions, and the military pressure group that will burgeon from the present war undoubtedly will work for privileges through "contact" men.



These locusts breed and fatten on privilege. And privilege is the be-all and end-all of the State. And when the State expands its functions, its scope for granting privileges is enlarged. So that more "contact" men are needed. And, of course, labor and capital pay the bill.

Will we get rid of "contact" men? Only when, as and if business is returned to private citizens, and government minds its own business.