

Privilege Versus Privilege

By Janet Rankin Aiken

When I was a little girl, I heard my parents discussing my great uncle John.

"He had such a temper his own daughters couldn't live with him," said my mother.

"He didn't have a worse temper than other people," said my father. "He was just franker."

Today we are confronted with a major war in Europe. We are told that "civilization" is at stake, that the result well may be a relapse into "barbarism," that we must "liberate" the Germans and the Austrians and the Czechs and the Poles. But just what are civilization and barbarism? Who is fighting whom, in this war? And what liberation can it bring to the world? What are the two opposing D's, Dictatorship and Democracy? What is war about, anyhow, if we dig below the political to the always-underlying economic?

At bottom every war is about the privilege of collecting money or goods from people. There are many ways of doing such collecting, three of which have become traditional. These are taxes, customs duties, and rent. In Danzig the quarrel broke out over customs duties. In Germany Hitler rose to power largely through a fourth method—overcharging for advertising.

Hitler is often called a thug and a racketeer, which means simply that he makes people give him their money by force, through novel and untraditional methods. He isn't greedier than most people, he is just franker about it, and also more adept at thinking up ways and means. Jew-baiting, concentration camps, all the parade of brutality are parts of this frankness. Hitler reminds me of my great uncle John.

The dictator knocks people down and takes it away from them, while the democratic systems pick their pockets. Russia starves its kulaks quick, Texas its sharecroppers lingeringly. But at bottom thuggery

and pickpocketing, dictatorship and democracy as at present administered, devote themselves to the same project—the enrichment of the few at the expense of the many. In the democratic world it is the owner of natural resources, in Germany and Russia it is the "state," who are enriched.

Now democratic privilege has advantages and disadvantages for the common man, by comparison with dictatorial privilege. The former leaves people relatively unharmed from strong arm methods. It is more courteous. It presents a better illusion of freedom and civilization, and by this fact it puts its victims to sleep to be robbed. There is just a chance that the greater frankness of dictatorship may wake people up sooner.

Many people are inclined to favor pickpocketing as a cut above thuggery, and perhaps they are right. Freedom can at least be taught in democratic countries, where also there exists the machinery to destroy privilege by peaceful and orderly means, whereas in the totalitarian states it would almost certainly require a revolution. But will privilege anywhere in the world abdicate without a fight? It is open to question.

The struggle of the present war, then, is between thuggery and pickpocketing as methods of relieving the individual of his cash, which means of the things he produces. Is it better to be robbed democratically than dictatorily? Most people in the democratic countries say yes, and one may respect their prejudice. But the Georgist, knowing that privilege is the real enemy, realizes that the real war, the war against privilege, is scarcely yet joined. And he

keeps himself as aloof as possible from unreal wars, that he may continue to serve as a soldier in the ranks of that greater war.

This European war is a gigantic red herring dragged across the path of straight thinking, and it is important that we stick to the path in spite of this major distraction. This is not a war between social good and social evil. It is a war of methods for accomplishing robbery, a war between rival candidates for the administration of privilege. It is not a producer's war, because there is no such thing.

The producer of wealth, so long as he keeps on producing, has neither time nor inclination to contend with other producers. All he can do is rejoice that wealth is being created, and this is the normal state of man. The pickpocket and the thug alike live by dipping into the stream of production; and racketeers always need protection, because when you are living by the labor of others, some other apostle of the easy life may at any time come and push you out. This is what Stalin has done to the Czar, Mussolini to the Negus, Hitler to the Jews of Germany and the landlords of Czecho-Slovakia. This is what Chamberlain and Daladier are trying to do to Hitler.

Of course you understand that I am writing in symbols. Hitler and Chamberlain are protectors of privilege, symbols of the groups of men among whom the fruits of privilege are spread. The reality is the slow or quick starvation of the common man, the tribute wrung from you and me every week of our lives by privilege. This is what the Georgist fights.