



Dead Meat

by Cathy Young

Moscow

How quickly your world changes after a few days in Moscow. Suddenly, the American presidential campaign, which interests very few people here—and for various obscure reasons, they seem to like Bush—is on the periphery. Instead, you find yourself preoccupied with privatization vouchers, the Communist party trial, soaring prices, the war in Georgia.

Your confusion is compounded each time you turn on the news and see tanks in the streets, helicopters, anti-aircraft guns, rockets, and young men running around with machine guns and other young men carried away on stretchers. This is all happening not in faraway Latin America or Yugoslavia, but in places familiar to many in the audience—cities like Gagry or Sukhumi, once-blooming resort towns where “middle-class” Muscovites would spend summer vacation.

Pavel Felgengauer, a political and military affairs reporter for the *Independent Gazette*, suggests that the nearby horrors might have one salutary effect: anything that scares Russian viewers out of their wits might deter them from rash actions that could lead to ethnic and civil warfare.

Closer to home, the “trial of the century”—the Communist party’s suit to have Yeltsin’s ban on its activities overturned by the Constitutional Court (even though no one knows exactly what constitution its rulings are supposed to be based on, since no new one has been

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adopted since Brezhnev’s 1977 revision)—has entered a lively phase. Few Russians, other than the small group of loonies demonstrating in front of the Lenin Museum, seem to care about the fate of the late CPSU; its former functionaries, with few exceptions, care least of all, having moved to cushy jobs in private firms and joint ventures.

Most people can’t even figure out what is being contested. Ostensibly, the anti-Communist side wants to prove that the CPSU arrogated to itself supreme powers over the state and the economy, but then it shifts focus and says the party’s real crime was to abuse those powers to the detriment of the people. Whatever the accusations, they are all old hat.

It took the Gorbachev flap to revive interest in the case. In late September, subpoenaed as a witness, the former Soviet president refused to appear in court. Gorbachev’s foreign passport, as has been widely reported, was cancelled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the request of the Constitutional Court until he complies with the subpoena. The “democrats,” of course, despise Gorbachev for trying to save the Soviet empire while the Communists hate him for wrecking it. To most, his refusal to testify is yet another manifestation of arrogance.

Gorbachev claims he is being scapegoated, and may have a point. Consider the *Independent Gazette*’s recent interview with Leonid Kravchenko, who as chief of the Soviet State Broadcasting Company presided over the 1991 effort to roll back glasnost in broadcasting. Kravchenko, whose first move at Soviet broadcasting was to pronounce that he was first and foremost a loyal servant to President Gorbachev, now says that he

How much was your advance? Didn’t you have something to gain from testifying against Clarence Thomas?”

Meanwhile, those who might have been brazen enough to ask such questions during a radio or television retrospective have not been given equal time—or, in some cases, any time. “Larry King Live” in effect allowed Sen. Paul Simon the right to determine that show’s guest: David Brock had been approached about being on the show, but Simon said that he would not be paired with the investigative journalist, and so he was not; appearing instead was a former aide to John Sununu, Ed Rogers, who did a pathetic job. At least “Larry King Live” had the pretense of two sides. NBC’s “Today Show” had on a solid phalanx of pro-Hill types—no Thomas supporters allowed.

My favorite Hill story was filed by Felicity Barringer of the *New York Times*, a report on the professor’s October 15 appearance at the Georgetown University Law Center. October 15 was the first anniversary of Thomas’s confirmation by the Senate. Hill chose that day to set up—she was an organizer—a conference at the law school on “Race, Gender, and Power in America.” Having referred in the first several paragraphs to Ms. Hill or Professor Hill, as per the newspaper’s style, Barringer, moving to a discussion of the professor’s speaking style, suddenly called her Dr. Hill.

Now, Ph.D.s are sometimes referred to by the press as Dr. So-and-so, but J.D.s are never doctored. Why the Dr. Hill at this point in the story? Read on. “Dr. Hill,” the rest of the sentence went, “gave her retrospective view of the hearings in the arcane language of the academic doctrines currently fashionable in legal and literary criticism.” Barringer evidently did not want to quote Hill before letting readers know this was Dr. Hill; otherwise the quote would look, well, strange: “Because I and my reality did not comport with what they accepted as their reality,” Hill said, “I and my reality had to be reconstructed by the Senate committee members with assistance from the press and others.”

Other accounts of Hill’s Georgetown speech left out this remarkable business of “I and my reality.” Perhaps next October Katie Couric can ask Anita—er, Dr. Hill—what she meant. □

never took any steps to curb the media on his own will: Gorbachev made him do it. Publications that once obligingly air-brushed the famous birthmarks out of Gorbachev's photos now miss no opportunity to kick the man. On the other hand, ex-Soviets can be forgiven for gloating when the former General Secretary of the Communist party becomes, as the Moscow daily *Kuranty* put it, *neviyezdnoy*, forbidden to travel outside Soviet borders.

A legal affairs commentator for Radio Russia introduced a discordant note into the general *Schadenfreude*, observing that from the perspective of what Russian liberals call *pravovoye gosudarstvo* (translatable as "a rule-of-law-state"), Gorbachev's tribulations were suspect. First of all, the CPSU trial is not a criminal case, merely a hearing on the constitutionality of Yeltsin's decrees, and it is therefore unclear whether Gorbachev can be compelled to appear as a witness. Second, the Foreign Ministry answers only to the government not to the Constitutional Court, so by what authority did the judges obtain the passport cancellation?

The commentator may have been on to something, though in Russia's current political and judicial disarray it's hard to tell. In any event, the humiliated ex-president, barred from taking a scheduled trip to South Korea, reiterated his refusal to take part in a "politicized trial" and thus invited further retribution, in the form of a 100-ruble fine. The amount of the fine for defying the orders of the Constitutional Court was established a year ago, when 100 rubles actually meant something; today, it won't even buy you a kilo of butter.

Unbowed, the ex-president soon faced a new atrocity: on October 7, a Yeltsin decree deceptively entitled "Measures to Support the Training of Personnel for the Banking and Financial System" deprived Gorbachev's foundation (set up after his ouster) of the properties it had been allotted by an earlier government decree. These properties were transferred to the newly created Financial Academy of the Russian Government, from which the ill-fated foundation can still lease no more than 9,000 square feet—compared to the 31,000 it used to occupy. On October 8, Russian TV viewers were entertained by an angry, media-mobbed Gorbachev brandishing a fist on the steps of the

foundation's main building: the police had prevented him and his staff from entering.

Persistent refusal to comply with Constitutional Court orders is apparently punishable by up to six-months imprisonment. The weekly *Stolitsa* now speculates that Gorbachev's reluctance to testify stems from his fear of losing popularity in the West if his complicity in the party's dirty deeds is revealed—and that he may be gearing up to emigrate.

Other subpoenaed witnesses were more cooperative, perhaps because they had no international reputation to defend. Top Communists such as Gorbachev's former prime minister Nikolai Ryzhkov, reactionary bogeyman Yegor Ligachev, former head of the anti-reform (republic-level) Russian Communist party Ivan Polozkov, and the CPSU's last ideology chief Alexander Dzasokhov took the stand one by one—a remarkably charmless procession of men who'd helped run an empire.

They managed to sound reasonably articulate when questioned by the lawyer for the Communist side—at least

to the extent that they could repeat all the old phrases about the great achievements of the Soviet people under the party's leadership, and maintain with a straight face that the CPSU was nothing more than a political party with no undue influence over the government or the economy. When confronted by opposing lawyers with documented facts of the Politburo's role in ratifying government decisions, approving visits by foreign delegations, and selling the country's gold (even after Article 6, which codified the CPSU's status as a "leading and guiding" force in Soviet society, was dropped from the USSR constitution), they could find nothing better to say than "Well, that was just our traditional way of doing things."

When asked about the decision to suppress news of the Chernobyl disaster, Ryzhkov reared up: "Don't you try to use Chernobyl against me. It's something I feel very deeply about." Moments later, solid evidence was presented that his government had knowingly allowed contaminated meat to be sold to the population, with no greater safety measures than washing off the carcasses. □

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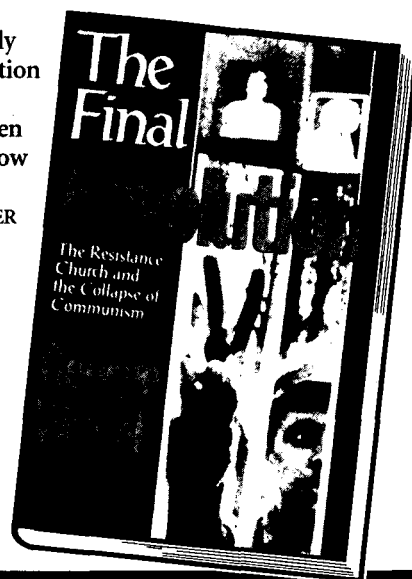
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Heroes of Our Time

by James Bowman

Probably the only people in the world who loved it when Sinead O'Connor tore up a photograph of the Pope on "Saturday Night Live" were a few florid-faced, bowler-hatted sots in the back rows of Orange Lodges in Belfast and me. This is not because I am such a very bad Catholic but because her gesture was a perfect example of the way in which the Hollywood mind works.

As Michael Medved says in his new book *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*¹:

The old struggle between art and commerce has tilted decisively in the direction of art as the movie business takes itself more seriously with each passing year; today, even the heads of major studios assert that making significant statements—not crafting entertainment—is the essence of what they do.

It's enough to make a cat laugh, this pretension to intellectual seriousness on the part of a bunch of people who regularly confuse images and gestures and bogus professions of compassion with thought. That's why I found it wonderfully appropriate when this no-talent baldie with even less inside her head than on top of it tried to form her infant lips into a protest against—what was it? child abuse, I think—by blaming it all on the Pope.

Sam Goldwyn used to say, if you want to send a message, go see Western Union. Nowadays popular culture is shot through with messages, most of them worthless even as morality or politics, let

alone as art. You can even have a message, like Miss O'Connor's tuneless ditty, from which all possibility of entertainment has been purged, so long as it is passionate and sincere enough.

Her badge of authenticity in Hollywood is that, like most of the other rich people there, she claims to have suffered at the hands of some authority figure. But she also gets bonus points because, as an Irish colleen and thus one of the world's few bona fide white oppressees, she can claim the Pope (or the Queen, if the mood strikes her) as her nemesis instead of having to make do with George Bush and Ronald Reagan like everyone else.

Michael Medved's book goes some way toward explaining where Hollywood's self-importance and moral earnestness come from, and I want to return to what is right and wrong with his explanation in a moment. But first let us look at a couple of recent pictures that illustrate Hollywood's transformation into America's biggest Western Union office.

Stephen Frears's film, *Hero*, has several messages. The three most important are:

- (1) Everybody's a hero if you can catch him at the right moment.
- (2) Don't believe what you see on television.
- (3) We should all be nicer to one another.

If that sounds to you like serious thought, you'd better stop reading now before your brain overheats. Number one is an illustration of Medved's point that Hollywood loves to trash heroes: if everybody's a hero then nobody is one. It doesn't really matter that it was the petty thief, Bernie LaPlante (Dustin Hoffman), rather than the charismatic John Bubber (Andy Garcia) who pulled the survivors

out of a crashed airplane. The hero business is all a charade, got up by the media, anyway—though some kind of putative hero to deliver Message No. 3 may be useful.

Here is where Western Union suddenly becomes very knowing and sophisticated. It is to the credit of the great image factories on the Pacific that they are occasionally willing to take on the fakery of images—on television if not in the movies themselves. Like *Network* a few years ago, *Hero* shows us unscrupulous and heartless image-makers willing to do anything to bump up the ratings. But it is really less self-criticism than self-congratulation for these *artistes* who sit atop the big Hollywood studios to look down with scorn upon the ratings-ridden television executives as if to say that *they* are too refined for such crass commercialism.

Moreover, such films represent the people as really pathetic dupes, deceived with ease into believing the most incredible nonsense. In *Hero*, the deception about the identity of the hero is as nothing compared to the preposterousness of the sheep-like following he obtains for proclaiming Message No. 3. This banality only goes to show how quickly the motorbikes of these highly refined and artistic messenger boys run out of gas. If, when you get to the payoff, that's all you've got left, you really ought to get out of the message business altogether.

The *Public Eye*, by Howard Franklin, is a bit more successful as a film. Joe Pesci plays a tabloid photographer called "The Great Bernzini" (or Bernzi) in New York in 1942 who is caught between the two halves of the artist's schizoid personality, between being a participant and an observer. Bernzi is at first so completely the observ-

¹HarperCollins, 386 pages, \$20.

James Bowman, *The American Spectator's* movie critic, is the American editor of the Times Literary Supplement.