



“Democrats”

by Cathy Young

Is there anything left to add to the obituaries for the Soviet Union? It’s too bad the Yeltsin people didn’t stick with the original plan of lowering the Soviet flag over the Kremlin at midnight, December 31. There was a Kremlin New Year’s Eve bash scheduled for that night, and I mentally drew a cartoon: Gorby as Cinderella being told by a fairy godmother (a Karl Marx lookalike?), “Remember, Gorby, when the clock strikes twelve, your tuxedo will turn into a baggy Soviet suit and your limousine will become a sputtering Moskvich.”

As might be expected, the American media had a few final gorbasmis,¹ the most rapturous of these being Pete Hamill’s *New York Post* column of December 26, calling Gorby “the single greatest public man on the planet in the second half of the century. No one else even comes close.” (Why only the *second* half?) Stephen F. Cohen, the Gorbophile Sovietologist, haunted the talk shows with knitted brow and worried gaze. He noted that Yeltsin was nothing but an ex-Communist (as opposed to Gorbachev?), as well as an authoritarian who would muzzle the Russian press (so it wasn’t Gorbachev who clamped down on Soviet TV and tried to have an editor fired for publishing a poll?), and that the new rulers in the

¹To ward off accusations of Bidenism, I hasten to add that the term originates with *Newsweek*.

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ex-Soviet Union were after power, not freedom.

In a funny way, Cohen is right, for all the wrong reasons. People with no Communist or Gorbachevite sympathies to whom I spoke in Moscow were bitterly critical of the victorious democrats. Among them were Larissa Piyasheva, the hard-core free-market economist who is trying to privatize Moscow’s trade and service sector as an assistant to Mayor Gavriil Popov, and her acid-tongued husband and fellow economist Boris Pinsker.

“Most of our ‘democrats,’” Pinsker complained, “are essentially hostile to private property and free pricing—they all swear loyalty to the market, but not here and not now—and their one essen-

tial quality is a passionate yearning for power.” His wife, weary of battling “democratic” city leaders determined to block her program and substitute long-term leasing, remarked that all these ex-Communists had probably turned rebels “because they didn’t have a big enough slice of the pie in the old system.”

One might say that these two had an axe to grind; yet what they were saying rang true. It is a fact that the staff of the Moscow city government has doubled under the democrats; and Pinsker is not the only one to note that, at this time of galloping commercialization, the officials’ control over the leasing and selling of real estate gives them vaster opportunities than their Brezhnev-era predecessors ever dreamed of.

Economist Vassily Selyunin, a curmudgeonly admirer of Milton Friedman who can hardly be accused of power lust, having declined a post at Moscow’s city hall, was blunt about the foes of sweeping privatization: “They’re making sure that for the next twenty years, they can take bribes and manhandle leaseholders.” Lowering his voice to a near-whisper—surely not out of fear but perhaps because he didn’t care to hear his own words—he added, “The democrats have turned out to be such damned leeches, they may be bigger thieves than the Communists.”

Piyasheva and others, including the venerable historian and political commentator Leonid Batkin, a co-founder of the Democratic Russia coalition whose support helped Yeltsin and Popov get where they are,



made the point that the new people at the top were not really new; they had all worked within the old system, though mostly in minor roles. St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak was dean of a law school (not that innocent a position), and Popov held a post at the Communist party's central committee before becoming chairman of the economics department at Moscow University. Democrats with a less compromised background were willing to forgive these reformed Communists the sins of the past as long as the unreformed Communists were in power; that may be changing.

Batkin and others spoke of the emergence of a new "party of power," which has a structure in the Democratic Reform Movement founded last spring by Gorbachev's right-hand man Eduard Shevardnadze and joined by Popov, Sobchak, and then-vice presidential candidate Aleksandr Rutskoi. "The DRM," said Batkin, "is a mix of the old Gorbachev nomenklatura—its more progressive wing—and the new people in power. They speak of radical reform, but what unites them is the desire to retain many elements of the old socialist system, mixed with quasi-capitalist features." Lest the Pete Hamills of the world get all choked up, the socialism they have in mind has less to do with protecting the poor than with protecting privilege—a cozy union of the new big business (run by the old nomenklatura) and the new big government (with plenty of old officials in it). For example, Yuri Luzhkov, deputy mayor of Moscow and head of the municipal government—the man who some say really controls the city—headed the Moscow Agro-Industrial Committee of the old, Communist Moscow City Council.

Yet none of the disillusioned radicals I spoke to were giving up on Yeltsin, even though he had held a far higher post under the old Soviet system than anyone else among the new people in power. He is seen as willing to learn and to listen—and as sincere. (One should add that, for all the talk of Yeltsin being less democratic than Gorbachev, some of Yeltsin's more dubious decrees have been overturned by the Russian parliament or by the courts; that never happened to Gorbachev.) It is likely that the radicals cannot afford to criticize Yeltsin, since there seems no alternative to his leadership. And the threat of a new reactionary on-

slaught, though under a more imperial than Communist guise, is still very much on people's minds.

Their fears are embodied in the bizarre persona of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, head of the "Liberal Democratic Party" founded in spring 1990, whose connection to the KGB is not in doubt. At a time when the Soviet regime was hardly hospitable to new parties, the tiny LDP was allowed to hold its first press conference—prominently featured on the very official *Vremya*—at the Kremlin Palace of Congresses. The fortyish, macho Zhirinovskiy ran against Yeltsin in the 1991 race for the Russian presidency, on a platform that included cutting the price of vodka and abolishing all republics to restore the pre-1917 Russian empire—Finland included.

But Zhirinovskiy's act is more complicated, as the name of his party indicates. He denounces Communism and insists that he is a supporter of the free market and civil liberties. A lawyer (who reportedly got in trouble for graft in the early 1980s), he talks about reforming the Russian legal system in accordance with international norms. At a press conference/meeting last December, he spoke in favor of abolishing the death penalty—a surprising statement given the working-class, authoritarian-minded audience to which he appeals.

Fortunately, Zhirinovskiy shifts gears so rapidly that no one can be fooled for more than a few minutes. He declared that if the West continued to support the independence of republics, Russia would retaliate by supporting violent separatist groups in Canada, Spain, and Northern Ireland, and that as president he would restore the ruble to equivalency with the dollar overnight by "selling lots of weapons to whoever wants to buy." Asked about his attitude toward the Jews, he stated that while he was no anti-Semite, it was an unfortunate fact that slanderous articles about him were always signed by Jewish names and that Russian Jews were generally not very loyal to Russia.²

Just how much of a following does he

² What makes this especially piquant is that Zhirinovskiy is widely believed to be of Jewish background; Jewish activists in Moscow told me he had tried to get involved in one of their groups in 1989.

have? He did get seven percent of the vote in last June's election, though at least part of that came from such places as KGB training academies. I did run into two real live Zhirinovskiy voters: a silly, well-intentioned young woman who had fallen for his "liberal democratic" platform, and an intellectual who despised Yeltsin as an ex-Communist and cast a protest vote for Zhirinovskiy.

The movie theater where Zhirinovskiy spoke in December was packed, but judging by audience response most people seemed to be there out of curiosity and for laughs. Zhirinovskiy's swagger indeed borders on self-parody. (On Western ambassadors to the Baltic republics he intends to abolish: "They're going to leave the same way they came." On his opponents looking for dirt: "They can't say I'm an addict. Or a pervert. I have normal sexual relations. I have them a lot, but in a perfectly normal way.")

But that doesn't mean Zhirinovskiy is not scary. His following can be expected to increase if, as seems inevitable, economic hardships outlast the winter. The formal dismantling of the Communist party and the KGB apparently has not affected the sources of his funding. And there is always the military. On December 7, the Moscow evening news showed a Zhirinovskiy-led rally demanding the release of the jailed coup plotters. The rather small rally was accompanied by a Soviet Army marching band. □

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Feel So Bad

by James Bowman

Like most readers of this journal, I believe in free markets. And that goes for the movies too. In return for your six dollars, they will give you all the escapist comedy or inspirational drama or simulated sex and violence that you want, and this is as it should be. Yet all but the most dedicated philistines recognize that there is something more to it than that: there are great films that don't make money and there is meretricious trash that enjoys big commercial success. Sometimes people want things that are not good for them.

Maybe, indeed, they are not good for the rest of us either. We ban certain drugs because we believe that they have an effect upon the social fabric that goes well beyond an individual's taste for powdered suicide. *Rush*, a new film by Lili Fini Zanuck, offers a harrowing portrayal of what drugs can do by contagion, as it were—or, depending on how you look at it, of what happens when you ban them. I confess, however, that if I were dictator I would be much more tempted to ban movies like *Fried Green Tomatoes* and to lock up the sort of people who go to them in order to feel good about themselves and the world.

Boogus uplift is what I object to. It is a kind of drug, and in my darker moods I suspect that it is as dangerous to the social fabric as the kinds of drugs we lock people up for using and selling. In fact it may be more dangerous, because no shame attaches to it. People don't brand themselves as social misfits by shooting up pure sentiment, and the deforming effect it must

have upon their souls is not as obvious as the physical ravages of heroin or cocaine after long use. Yet if you take *Fried Green Tomatoes* in its concentrated, two-hour-and-twenty-minute dose, the spiritual devastation it can wreak makes heroin look like Turkish delight.

Pick your feel-good image and, chances are, *FGT* has got it. You want tough and funny women? You want the good people feeding the hungry poor and helping the disabled while they have a wonderful time fighting off racism, sexism, ageism, sizeism, ableism, menopause, false charges of murder and, at last and unsuccessfully, cancer? You want the bad guy to be a wife-beater? What the hell, make him a Ku Klux Klansman as well, just so that you can be sure that he's *really* bad. Add lots of submissive, 1930s-style black folks and cute children and lovable village eccentrics to give you that warm feeling of folksy Southern authenticity and you've got the Acapulco gold of sentimentality.

This is called laying it on with a trowel, and we should be grateful to Fannie Flagg, who wrote the story, and Jon Avnet, the director and co-author of the screenplay, for making it so easy to spot the fakery. Even such good actresses as Kathy Bates and Jessica Tandy look like fakes in this vehicle. All art is fakery, of course, but great art gives the illusion of reality. *Fried Green Tomatoes* is at the opposite extreme from great art. Let's admit, for the sake of argument, that the things it celebrates as good really are good and that its message (about how "the most important thing in life is friendship") is a true message. If you then proceed, as this film does, to invent characters and a story merely to illustrate that message, you destroy an essential part of the artistic illusion.

In other words, characters before

meaning. If you start with the meaning and then work backwards to the characters which will demonstrate it you are creating sermons and not art. Fannie Flagg may be right about friendship and the empowerment of women and all the rest of the opinions she holds, but she cannot convince me of that just because she is able to invent characters who illustrate the thesis. I could invent characters to prove the thesis that friendship is worthless and that women ought to be chattels, but that does not produce any moral authority for my point of view.

What is true of *Fried Green Tomatoes* is also true of *Grand Canyon*, although the latter is much more subtle about it. By that I mean that its director, Lawrence Kasdan, at least does not feel that he has to persuade us that wife-beating and the KKK are bad and that self-confident women and feeding the starving are good. Instead, as he told the *New York Times*, he wants to raise questions about "what kind of personal values to adhere to in deteriorating cities, and how to cope with constant jeopardy, the fragility of relationships and, for that matter, life." He is defensive about the "pretentiousness" of such questions, but the problem is not that they are pretentious. It is that they are allowed to become more important than the dramatic situation or the characters.

Actually, he is quite successful in conveying a sense of the constant menace just below the surface of upper-middle-class urban life, and the portrait of the producer (supposedly based on Joel Silver) of films of exploitative violence, played by Steve Martin, is amusing. But even though you would certainly do no worse to take Lawrence Kasdan than

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