

the White Pill

*a
Tale
of
Good
and
Evil*



Michael Malice

the
**White
Pill**

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**Michael
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a Tale of Good and Evil

by

Michael Malice

All I maintain is that on this earth
there are plagues and there are victims,
and it's up to us, so far as possible,
not to join forces with the plagues.

Albert Camus

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*For my parents
who got me out
and on behalf
of all the children
who never did*

Chapter 1

“DOESN’T ANYBODY SMILE IN RUSSIA ANYMORE?”

Ayn Rand was not laughing.

This was no laughing matter. In the fall of 1947, Rand had been summoned to Washington to appear as a friendly witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). She was in a unique position, being the only witness to have come from the Soviet Union. As such, Rand understood that she could offer insight and perspective that even the most informed American would be somewhat ignorant of.

It had been a very long road for Rand to get to Washington, D.C. She had been born in czarist Russia in 1905 as Alice Rosenbaum, a name unknown to everyone in America. Even her native-born husband would spend their fifty years of marriage without ever learning her birth name. To Americans this sort of thinking is so paranoid as to be downright alien: if you can’t trust your husband, who can you trust? But that was precisely the point for Rand. Unlike the people in that congressional room, she had seen firsthand what happens when the country you live in becomes a country where no one can be fully trusted. If, say, a family member would never betray you as long as they had breath in their lungs...well, there were mechanisms to take that breath away, and there were powerful men who knew how to exploit those mechanisms extremely well.

When Alice had entered young adulthood she was increasingly moved by philosophy and the world of ideas. Strong-willed to the point of obstinacy—she was later notorious for arguing with her young protégés until dawn about whether a movie they liked was, in fact, a good one—Alice’s outspoken personality would not serve her well in Lenin’s newfound Soviet Union. Things started getting downright dangerous by the time she was attending Petrograd State University. She had seen herself what happened to outspoken classmates who felt comfortable getting up in class and denouncing what had been going on politically. As a freshman in 1921, Alice watched one student give an anti-Communist speech during student council elections:

Alice never forgot the shock of the day she arrived at school to discover that the arrogant young man had been arrested in the night, and was to be sent to the slow, terrible death of Siberia. She never saw or heard of him again. [...] By the end of that school year, there were no more anti-Communist speeches on campus, and there were no more anti-Communists on the student council. ^[1]

By the spring of 1924 it got even worse, with students being purged all over the Soviet Union simply due to their family’s economic class. “It was done under the slogan of ‘We will not educate our class enemies,’” Rand later wrote. “Thousands of young people were expelled from schools all over the country and were denied an education, in payment for the ‘sins’ of their ancestors.”^[2] As the daughter of a pharmacist, Alice was clearly part of the despised bourgeois class. Between her background and her temperament, her family agreed that she had little future in Russia. She would either be vanished herself, or she would have to do the vanishing.

It was during her university years that Alice had strongly fallen in love with America and published her first two works. The first was a biographical sketch of the actress Pola Negri, while the second was entitled *Hollywood: American Movie City*. Alice was not alone. To Russians, the word “abroad” had come to take on a miraculous meaning. As she later explained it:

The meaning of that word for a Soviet citizen is incommunicable to anyone who has not lived in that country. If you project what you would feel for a combination of Atlantis, the Promised Land and the most glorious civilization on another planet, as imagined by a most benevolent kind of science fiction, you will have a pale approximation. “Abroad,” to a Soviet Russian, is as distant, shining and unattainable as these; yet to any Russian who lifts his head for a moment from the Soviet muck, the concept “abroad” is a psychological necessity, a lifeline and soul preserver.^[iii]

It took until 1926, when Alice was twenty years old, for her to gain permission to go abroad, during one of the brief thaws when Soviet citizens were still allowed to step foot outside of the Soviet Union. The pretense was that Alice was going to visit American relatives, but this was a brazen lie. Everyone understood that she would never return to Russia. At her going away party, one of the older guests pulled Alice aside and asked her to make him a promise. “Tell them that Russia is a huge cemetery and we are all dying slowly,” he said. And so she left her homeland, not with wistful remorse, but with “complete loathing for the whole country, including the czarist period.”^[iv]

Her grasp of English being somewhat spotty, the rechristened Ayn Rand made her way to Hollywood, American movie city, to try and make it as a screenwriter. A lack of skill in language would be somewhat mitigated since this was still the era of silent movies, where concept could make up for a lack of dialogue. In September 1926 she bumped into superstar director Cecil B. DeMille as she left his studio after being told there were no job openings. DeMille gave her a ride in his roadster and then gave her a part in *The King of Kings*, his epic film about Jesus.^[v] Sure she was just an extra, but Ayn Rand had officially made it into the movies. It was the first of many odd jobs she would hold in Hollywood.

While shooting the film Rand spotted a young actor with a minor role named Frank O’Connor. For Rand it was love at first sight, but there was one small problem: she was part of the crowd, so there was really no way for him to see her back. Rand carefully watched the steps he took as the scene went on—and then “accidentally” tripped him. “I met a very interesting and funny Russian girl on the set,” he told his brothers that

night. “I couldn’t understand a word she said.”^[vi] O’Connor soon married that very interesting and funny Russian girl.

By the mid-1930s Rand began shopping around her first full-length novel. Originally called *Airtight*, the book she retitled *We the Living* “is as near to an autobiography as I will ever write.”^[vii] Mindful of how to market a book—especially at the heights of the Great Depression—Rand’s angle was a clever one. The novel was:

the *first* story written by a Russian who knows the living conditions of the new Russia and who has actually lived under the Soviets in the period described. My plot and characters are fiction, but the living conditions, the atmosphere, the circumstances which make the incidents of the plot possible, are all true, to the smallest detail. There have been any number of novels dealing with modern Russia, but they have been written either by émigrés who left Russia right after the revolution and had no way of knowing the new conditions, or by Soviet authors who were under the strictest censorship and had no right and no way of telling the whole truth. My book is, as far as I know, the first one by a person who *knows* the facts and also *can tell* them.^[viii]

For the rest of her life, Rand tried to tell everyone—especially Americans—just how bad a totalitarian government could be. Yet it was very much an uphill battle. American intellectuals were either uninterested in hearing what she had to say or flat out dismissed her. The intelligentsia knew better, even the ones who had never been to Russia—*especially* the ones who had never been to Russia. At Macmillan, for example, a young man named Granville Hicks had the job of recommending whether given titles should be published. As a proud member of the Communist Party and editor of the Marxist periodical *New Masses*, for him publishing *We the Living* would be downright heretical.

“I was a good boy,”^[ix] would be the opening line of Hicks’ autobiography. And since he was good it wasn’t much of a stretch that he was right, which logically meant that those who disagreed with him were not just wrong but downright evil. Born in New Hampshire and trained by Harvard, only ever getting as far away from Ohio, Hicks believed he understood what was happening in the Soviet Union better than the woman whose accent was so thick that DeMille had nicknamed her “Caviar.”

Despite employing Hicks, Macmillan ended up publishing *We the Living* in 1936. Ironically enough, Hicks shortly thereafter turned his back on the Soviet Union and, like many others, drifted from communism to democratic socialism to liberalism. He too would testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee, not once but twice. “I insisted that there could be no compromise with Communism,”^[xi] he would eventually (and unambiguously) write.^[xi]

We the Living was not particularly successful. Though it sold out of its first printing run, Macmillan had destroyed the publishing plates, precluding the possibility of a second printing. When Rand tried to place her follow-up novella *Anthem* there the following year, it was rejected. “The author does not understand socialism,”^[xii] read the rejection letter. It would be her 1943 novel *The Fountainhead* that finally put Rand on the map. The theme, as she put it, was “individualism versus collectivism, not in politics, but in man’s soul.”^[xiii]

The Fountainhead’s plot stressed the central importance of integrity for the creative mind, this being Rand’s definition of “selfishness” as embodied in the book’s creator-hero Howard Roark. Counter to this was the selfishness of Peter Keating, the conventional social climber who had no real “self” to speak of, and that of Gail Wynand, Rand’s condemnation of the Nietzschean superman who sought to rule over his fellow, lesser men (“A leash is only a rope with a noose at both ends.”^[xiv]).

The novel became a smash hit almost entirely through word of mouth. Rand would often be criticized for her tendency to have her characters spontaneously deliver long, extemporaneous speeches. The climax of her 1957 epic *Atlas Shrugged* has one hero go on for what would be three hours if read aloud. Yet Rand can perhaps be given some leeway because despite her didactic, explicit prose, virtually none of the reviewers of *The Fountainhead* even so much as acknowledged its theme of the individual against the collective. The one major exception was Lorine Pruette from the *New York Times*, to whom Rand sent an awkward letter of gratitude: “If it is not considered unethical for an author to want to meet a reviewer, I would very much like to meet you.”^[xv]

The success of *The Fountainhead* led to Hollywood banging on Rand’s door for the movie rights. She held the line at an astronomical fifty thousand dollars—and got it. When it came time for her to buy a new coat for the winter, Frank put his foot down. “You can buy any kind of coat you

want—provided it’s fur,” he told her. “And any kind of fur you want—provided it’s mink.”^[xvi] Having accomplished her goal of being a best selling author, Rand turned her sights back to the movie industry and what she saw as anti-American propaganda being spread—unknowingly—by Hollywood.

Under the auspices of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPA), Rand authored *Screen Guide for Americans* in 1947. If every film had women presented exclusively as clumsy dimwits, for example, eventually a large segment of the population would get a certain impression even if the filmmakers had not set out to spread misogyny. Similarly, Rand understood that many films could be informed by communist principles even if no one on the crew could find Petrograd on the map. As she saw with the reviews of *The Fountainhead*, American intellectuals could be oblivious to ideas even if they were spelled out explicitly in interminable speeches.

As Rand laid it out:

The purpose of the Communists in Hollywood is not the production of political movies openly advocating Communism. Their purpose is to corrupt our moral premises by corrupting non-political movies—by introducing small, casual bits of propaganda into innocent stories—and to make people absorb the basic principles of Collectivism **by indirection and implication.**^[xvii]

Rand had a simple list of Don’ts that she thought would discourage such a thing from happening. Don’t smear the free enterprise system, industrialists, wealth, American political institutions, independent men, the profit motive or success. Don’t glorify failure, depravity or the collective, or deify “the common man.” Finally, don’t take politics lightly. “Freedom of speech does not imply that it is our duty to provide a knife for the murderer who wants to cut our throat,” Rand insisted. Therefore,

when you make pictures with political themes and implications — *DON’T* hire Communists to write, direct or produce them. You cannot expect Communists to remain “neutral” and not to insert their own ideas into their work. Take them at *their* word, not ours. *They* have declared openly and repeatedly that their first

obligation is to the Communist Party, that their first duty is to spread Party propaganda, and that their work in pictures is only a means to an end, the end being the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. You had better believe them about their own stated intentions. Remember that Hitler, too, had stated openly that his aim was world conquest, but nobody believed him or took it seriously until it was too late.

It was the MPA that supplied friendly witnesses to the HUAC committee, and Rand was more than a little squirmy about being asked to testify. In typical Ayn Rand fashion, she sat down and wrote out her thoughts in order to come to what she would regard as a rational conclusion. To begin with, did the committee have any business to investigate the matter at all? Americans have a right to join any political party that they want, and they have a right to privacy as well. Take a look at the Know Nothing Party. The nativist 19th century party had gotten its nickname because when its members were asked about membership they replied, “I know nothing.”

Yet for Rand, being a member of the Communist Party wasn't some mere First Amendment issue, akin to being a Republican or Democrat. This was because “membership in the Republican or Democratic Party is an open, public matter. It involves no initiation, no acceptance of an applicant by the party, and no card-bearing. [...] It is a membership which cannot be refused to him and which he is free to abandon any time he chooses.” On the other hand, “[m]embership in the Communist Party is a formal act of joining a formal organization whose aims, by its own admission, include acts of criminal violence.”^[xviii]

Yet Rand went even further in her thinking:

Membership in the Communist Party does not consist merely of sharing the ideas of that Party. That Party is a formal, closed, and secret organization. Joining it involves more than a matter of ideas. It involves an agreement to take orders to commit actions—criminal and treasonable actions.

These rights are based on and pertain to the peaceful activity³⁻¹² of spreading or preaching ideas, of dealing with men by intellectual persuasion. Therefore, one cannot invoke these rights to protect an organization such as the

Communist Party, which not merely preaches, but actually engages in acts of violence, murder, sabotage, and spying in the interests of a foreign government. This takes the Communist Party out of the realm of civil law and puts it into the realm of criminal law. And the fact that Communists are directed and financed by a foreign power puts them into the realm of treason and military law.^[xix]

It is theoretically possible to make the case that “free speech” includes the right to reveal American secrets, whatever they may be, to hostile foreign powers. It is far harder to make the case that this is analogous to, say, joining the Democratic Party or even the Socialist Party. A better analogy would be joining the Ku Klux Klan, another conspiracy dedicated to using force up to and including terrorism against American citizens in order to further one’s desire for control of a population. One might perhaps have the legal right to join the Klan as a “peaceful” member, but to claim that there are no moral issues to be had is a hard pill to swallow.

Rand had been asked to testify specifically about a minor film called *Song of Russia*, among a couple of others. She thought this was missing the point entirely. “If I testify only about *Song of Russia*, which was a bad-plot movie, and years old, and of no importance—if this is the worst Hollywood has done—it amounts to almost a whitewash,” she wrote. “What was much more important was to show the really serious propaganda going on right now and about America—not some musical about Soviet Russia that wouldn’t fool anybody, and that failed very badly at the box office anyways.”^[xx] In other words, because the movie flopped, it couldn’t *really* be considered propaganda because it didn’t even work. Insisting to the contrary would seem paranoid and silly. Smearing wealth is “communist propaganda”? Oh please! Leftist playwright Lillian Hellman spoke for many when she insisted “there has never been a single line or word of Communism in any American picture at any time. There has never or seldom been ideas of any kind.”^[xxi]

Yet even Rand was oblivious to the machinations that went into making the film. Under FDR’s war effort, Hollywood worked closely with Washington to ensure that films met with governmental approval in order not to hinder the fight against the Axis. As such, the assigned government apparatchik had more than a few concerns about the *Song of Russia* script. It simply wouldn’t do to tell the American people that Stalin could not be

trusted. *Song of Russia's* viewers might get the wrong idea, and the “dangerous conclusion that such audiences may reach is that no treaty with Russia is worth more than the paper on which it is written.” In fact, as a later government operative opined, “A study of Russia’s diplomatic history since the last war shows that she perhaps more than any other nation has stood by her diplomatic agreements.”^[xxii]

The government’s advice to the filmmakers was to have the film’s Russian heroine make this point explicitly to the American hero—and, thereby, not just to the American audience but to audiences around the globe: “If Nadya can clear this up in John Meredith’s mind, she will clear it up in the minds of millions of other peoples in the world.” After all, the New Dealer insisted, Stalin wanted peace and had no choice but to make a treaty with Hitler: “Russia embraced the Nazi-Soviet pact only after all her previous efforts at world collective peace had failed.”^[xxiii]

In later years the Soviet Union became notorious for its use of “Potemkin villages,” entirely false communities made for the purpose of deceiving foreign visitors. Here were Potemkin villages on the screen—made not by the Russian government, but by Hollywood creators at the prodding of the American government. *Song of Russia* screenwriter Richard Collins explained his thinking at the time: “We have the right to lie because we are the future—we’re the good guys.”^[xxiv]

Reassured that she would be able to speak about ideas and not merely about some minor B-movie, Rand agreed to testify before the committee. Throughout her career, she stressed the primary importance of ideas when it came to what moved nations. She began her testimony by insisting that the committee define exactly what it was that it was supposedly investigating:

Nobody has stated just what they mean by propaganda. Now, I use the term to mean that communist propaganda is anything which gives a good impression of communism as a way of life. Anything that sells people the idea that life in Russia is good and that people are free and happy would be communist propaganda. Am I not correct? I mean, would that be a fair statement to make, that that would be communist propaganda?

Visualize a picture in your own mind as laid in Nazi Germany. If anybody laid a plot just based on a pleasant little romance in Germany and played Wagner

music and said that people are just happy there, would you say that that was propaganda or not, when you know what life in Germany was and what kind of concentration camps they had there? You would not dare to put just a happy love story into Germany, and for every one of the same reasons you should not do it about Russia.

But Rand was talking to politicians, and politicians tend to like ideas even less than they tend to like honesty. Congressman John S. Wood (D-Ga.) was Chairman of the Committee, and he was a bit taken aback after listening to the rest of Rand's testimony: "I gather, then, from your analysis of this picture your personal criticism of it is that it overplayed the conditions that existed in Russia at the time the picture was made, is that correct?" he began. "Do you think, then, that it was to our advantage or to our disadvantage to keep Russia in this war, at the time this picture was made?"

"I ask you," Rand said, "what relation could a lie about Russia have with the war effort?"

"You don't think it would have been of benefit to the American people to have kept them in?"

"I don't believe the American people should ever be told any lies, publicly or privately," Rand insisted. "I don't believe that lies are practical."

Congressman John McDowell (R-Pa.) was also baffled by her testimony. "You paint a very dismal picture of Russia," he pointed out. "Doesn't anybody smile in Russia anymore?"

"Well, if you ask me literally," she replied, "pretty much no."

McDowell was incredulous. "That is a great change from the Russians I have always known, and I have known a lot of them. Don't they do things at all like Americans? Don't they walk across town to visit their mother-in-law or somebody?" In a sense, it was a perfectly natural question. How could her perspective be so different from everything he had seen and heard himself? This wasn't just some man off the street. McDowell was a sitting Congressman, well-read and well-informed, who had an entire staff to keep him abreast of the latest political news. Obviously the newspapers might have been a bit skewed—especially about such a secretive country as the USSR—but surely they couldn't *all* be wrong.

For a woman notorious for long-winded ideological speeches in her novels, Rand's reply to Congressman McDowell might be the most powerful statement she ever produced:

Look, it is very hard to explain. It is almost impossible to convey to a free people what it is like to live in a totalitarian dictatorship. I can tell you a lot of details. I can never completely convince you, because you are free. It is in a way good that you can't even conceive of what it is like. Certainly they have friends and mothers-in-law. They try to live a human life, but you understand it is totally inhuman. Try to imagine what it is like if you are in constant terror from morning until night and at night you are waiting for the doorbell to ring, where you are afraid of anything and everybody, living in a country where human life is nothing, less than nothing, and you know it. You don't know who or when is going to do what to you because you may have friends who spy on you, where there is no law and any rights of any kind. [\[xxv\]](#)

The next Representative—freshman Congressman Richard Nixon of California—had no further questions.

Though Rand was told she'd be allowed to return to discuss broader issues, that never ended up happening. In fact the hearings wrapped up faster than expected, and little came of them at all. As for Rand herself, her testimony had virtually no impact. Despite her unique biography, she was just one person, and one person's perspective is little more than an anecdote. Perhaps she was lying, or exaggerating. Or forgetful? Memory is a tricky thing, after all. Perhaps Rand just had a very bad experience in her Russian days—or perhaps she was simply a straight-up crackpot. Perhaps it was some combination of all those things. Nevertheless, the question remained: was she wrong?