

# The Hollywood blacklist - Dan Georgakas



A short account of the blacklisting of dozens of writers and actors from the movie industry in Hollywood amidst the anti-communist hysteria of the late 1940s and 1950s.

The investigation of Hollywood radicals by the House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1947 and 1951 was a continuation of pressures first exerted in the late 1930s and early 1940s by the Dies Committee and State Senator Jack Tenney's California Joint Fact-finding Committee on Un-American Activities. HUAC charged that Communists had established a significant base in the dominant medium of mass culture. Communists were said to be placing subversive messages into Hollywood films and discriminating against unsympathetic colleagues. A further concern was that Communists were in a position to place negative images of the United States in films that would have wide international distribution. Totally ignored in the hysteria generated by HUAC were the realities of the Hollywood studio system of the 1930s and 1940s. That system's outstanding characteristic was the hands-on control by studio bosses who ran their business as a strictly entertainment industry and shared Sam Goldwyn's often quoted sentiment that, "If you want to send a message, use Western Union." When films did have a political edge, studio bosses were personally involved in every phase of production, including the vital final cut. This was decidedly the case with the most notoriously pro-Russian film ever made in Hollywood, *Mission to Moscow* (1943). The film, undertaken by Jack Warner at the request of the Roosevelt administration, combined an all-out assault on American isolationists with a complete acceptance of the Stalinist account of the purges. Warner considered his film to be a patriotic service to the New Deal in the war against fascism.

Evidence of leftist images and dialog Hollywood films was extremely slim. HUAC had to resort to citing the smiling children in *Song of Russia* (1944) and noting that Russian workers shouted "tovarich" (comrade) as American merchant ships that had run the Nazi submarine blockade entered a Soviet port in *Action in the North Atlantic* (1943). Even committee members struggled to keep a straight face when Ginger Rogers complained that her daughter "had been forced" to speak the subversive line "share alike, that's democracy" in a 1943 film scripted by Dalton Trumbo. Contrary to the HUAC contentions, Communist Party policy in

Hollywood had been largely defensive. Film workers were instructed that their primary responsibility was to keep anti-Soviet and anti-Left sentiment out of films, a kind of esthetic Hippocratic Oath to First, Do No Harm. On the positive side of the ledger, radicals were urged to advance a democratic and populist ethos that was totally in accord with the New Deal popular culture. Melvyn Douglas, a leading Hollywood liberal, commented years later that the Communists had been followers of the liberals and not vice versa. Liberalism, not Communism, may, in fact, have been the true target of the HUAC investigators. The Right wished to discourage any Hollywood impulse to make films advocating social change at home or critical of foreign policy. The task of intimidation was focused on the role Communists played as screenwriters. Nearly 60 percent of all individuals called to testify and an equal percent of all those blacklisted were screenwriters. Only 20 percent of those called and 25 percent of those blacklisted were actors.

When the first subpoenas were issued the Hollywood impulse was to fight back. Defense committees were formed and efforts to purge various guilds defeated. Eric Johnston, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, pledged that he would "never be party to anything as un-American as a blacklist. The will to resist was put to the test when some of the first writers called refused to cooperate and tried to read statements condemning the committee in sessions that often turned into shouting matches. The result was bad press for Hollywood and a feeling by producers that their radical writers were vying with the committee for sensational headlines at the industry's expense. On November 24, Congress cited ten screenwriters for contempt. Produces meeting at the Waldorf Astoria hotel days later signaled their capitulation to the investigators by announcing that "no Communists or other subversives will be employed by Hollywood." An appeal by the "Hollywood Ten" was turned down and by mid-1950 most of them had begun to serve one-year terms in prison.

HUAC returned for a second Hollywood round in 1951 but the proceedings were not true investigations. The political views of already known and those called were already known and the people they were asked to name as comrades were also known. The hearings amounted to a kind of ideological exorcism. Witnesses were expected to state that they had been misled or confused in the past and were now regretful. They could prove their sincerity by naming other who had been with them in Communist organizations or at Communist functions.

Response to the hearings took many forms. Many members and sympathizers had never hidden their views but did not accept the right of the HUAC to question their right of political association. Civil libertarians could easily back this view on the basis of the First and Fifth amendments. Others like actor Zero Mostel said they would gladly discuss their own conduct but were prohibited by religious convictions from naming others. Individuals who had only been involved with antifascist groups or had left the Party for ideological reasons did not wish to martyr themselves for a cause they had never embraced or had renounced, but naming names seemed morally wrong. Other ex-Communists such as Budd Schulberg and Elia Kazan felt there was a Communist conspiracy and that it was proper, if not patriotic, to expose it.

Whatever one's convictions, there was little room for maneuvering once called, yet two out of three who testified were unfriendly or uncooperative. A few, like Lucille Ball, were allowed to pass with garbled and meaningless testimony, but most were pinned down. Fame was no protection. A lifelong non-Communist progressive like Sam Jaffe was blacklisted for refusal to cooperate. Jaffe, who had been nominated for an Oscar for *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) and was famous for roles in *Lost Horizon* (1937) and *Gunga Din* (1939), was reduced to teaching

high school math and living with his sisters. He would eventually make a comeback as Dr. Zorba on the successful *Ben Casey* television series. Lee Grant, nominated for an Oscar for her role in *Detective Story* (1951), was blacklisted for refusing to testify against her first husband, screenwriter Arnold Manoff. Grant would eventually return to Hollywood and win two Oscars, one for acting and another for directing a documentary.

The most defiant Hollywood actor was gravel-voiced Lionel Stander, who had been in comedies directed by Ben Hecht, Frank Capra, and Preston Sturgis. Active in the Salinas Valley lettuce strike, the Tom Mooney case, the Scottsboro defense, guild campaigns, antifascist work, and other left-wing causes, Stander said he had not joined the CP because he was to the left of it. He said he had been blackballed for his politics for over twenty years and that the only "un-Americans" active in Hollywood that he knew of were members of the committee. Blacklisted anew, Stander became a successful Wall Street broker, later starred in European films, and still later returned to American prominence as the chauffeur in *Hart-to-Hart*, one of television's top ten programs during the early 1980s.

Few of those blacklisted would prove as resilient as Stander, Grant, Jaffee, and Mostel. No more than 10 percent would be able to return to careers in Hollywood. Even the biggest names were vulnerable. Larry Parks, fresh from triumphs in two films about Al Johnson, was banned for his brief membership in the CP and did not appear on-screen again until getting a small role in *Freud* (1962). Charles Chaplin, the most famous face in the world, had remained a British citizen and a firm believer in the Popular Front. Although he had never been in the CP, Chaplin was not allowed to reenter the United States following a trip to Europe. He did not return to the United States until 1972, when an apologetic Hollywood honored him with a life achievement award during the Oscar ceremonies. His *A King in New York* (1957) satirizes HUAC. In like manner, Bertolt Brecht, one of many anti-Nazi refugees working in Hollywood, had such a bad taste from his HUAC appearance that he repatriated to East Berlin to become an in-house critic of socialism.

Performers who had already established some kind of name might survive through work on the stage, but those at the beginning of their careers had few options. Technical workers faced an even more difficult time, as there was no alternative industry for them to turn to, and Roy Brewer, head of the Hollywood craft unions, remained fiercely anticommunist. Ronald Reagan, then head of the Screen Actors Guild, kept in touch with the FBI about "disloyal" actors. Dozens of blacklistees lost spouses due to the hearings and even more suffered irreparable financial loss. Mental and physical distress was common. Clifford Odets never again wrote effectively and the deaths of John Garfield, J. Edward Bromberg, Canada Lee, and half a dozen others are linked to their committee appearances.

The group that came to exemplify resistance was the Hollywood Ten and their writing colleagues, many of whom had been in the Party. The Ten consisted of Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner, Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Sam Ornitz, Robert Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo. They had scripted or directed hundreds of Hollywood films. Trumbo was one of the highest paid Hollywood writers and Lawson had been the first president of the Screen Writers Guild. Most of the Ten's best films had dealt with antifascist themes. These included *Hotel Berlin* (1945), *The Master Race* (1941), *Crossfire* (1947), *Sahara* (1943), *Pride of the Marines* (1945), *Destination Tokyo* (1944), and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944). Lardner had scripted the Academy Award-winning *Woman of the Year* (1942), Maltz the well-received *This Gun for Hire* (1942), and

Trumbo the Academy Award nominee *Kitty Foyle* (1940). The Ten also worked on genre film such as Lester Cole's script for *The Invisible Man Returns* (1940)

Scriptwriters had the most options to continue working during the blacklist period. Performers could not change their faces nor could directors wear masks, but writers could use pseudonyms. This proved a profitable strategy for many. Abraham Polonsky, Walter Bernstein, and Arnold Manoff wrote most of the *You Are There* segments, a series of historical events re-created for television with a strong focus on cultural martyrs such as Socrates, Galilee, Joan of Arc, and the Salem witches. Ring Lardner, Jr., and Ian McLellan Hunter wrote *The Adventures of Robin Hood* series. The phenomenon of using phony names and surrogates became the basis of *The Front* (1976), which starred Woody Allen. The film was written by blacklisted Walter Bernstein, produced and directed by blacklisted Martin Ritt, and featured blacklisted actors Zero Mostel, John Randolph, Lloyd Gough, Joshua Shelley, and Herschel Bernardi.

Other blacklisted writers found work in Mexico and Europe. Notable among these are Hugo Butler, who wrote scripts for Luis Bunuel in Mexico City, and Jules Dassin, who scored box-office hits with his French-made *Rififi* (1954) and the Greek-made *Never on Sunday* (1960). A few writers worked behind the scenes in Hollywood in an effort to wear down the blacklist. One of Trumbo's pseudonyms, Robert Rich, won an Academy Award for *The Brave One* (1956), and as the decade drew to an end Hollywood insiders became aware that Nathan E. Douglas, the Academy Award writer of *The Defiant Ones* (1958), really blacklisted Nedrick Young. In 1960 Otto Preminger officially broke the blacklist by crediting Trumbo for scripting *Exodus*. It was then revealed that Michael Wilson had written the blockbuster *The Bridge on River Kwai* (1957) and had completed a script that would become *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).

Another consequence of the investigations was a series of anticommunist films: *The Red Menace* (1949), *I Married a Communist* (1950), *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), *Walk East on Beacon* (1952), *My Son John* (1952), *Big Jim McClain* (1952), and *Trial* (1955). A labor leader modeled on Harry Bridges was the main villain in *I Married a Communist*, Hawaiian Communists were exposed by a two-fisted John Wayne in *Big Jim McClain*, and Communist defense efforts for a Mexican American were depicted as insincere political and mercenary opportunism in *Trial*. All of the films took it as a given that Communists were de facto agents of the USSR. *On the Waterfront* (1954) had no Communist characters but its emphasis on the need to testify before federal investigating committees was widely interpreted as a reference to HUAC. Scriptwriter Budd Schulberg has repeatedly denied that connection but director Elia Kazan has stated that for him the parallel was explicit. Kazan also directed *Viva Zapata!* (1952), in which the visionary revolutionary anarchist Zapata is favorably contrasted with a Communist-style bureaucratic revolutionary. [There were few explicitly anti-anticommunist films in this period; one was *Storm Center*.]

The Hollywood Left began to revive in the late-1960s and, unlike the student New Left, the new Hollywood rebels, although not connected with the CP, felt warmly toward their predecessors and occasionally worked with them on joint projects. Films with radical bite began to appear with some regularity in the 1970s and 1980s. Ring Lardner, Jr., scripted *M\*A\*S\*H\** (1970), a satire on the Korean War that became the basis for one of the most popular of all television series. Labor themes were addressed in *The Molly Maguires* (1970), *Norma Rae* (1979), *Silkwood* (1983), and *Matewan* (1987). The Rosenberg case was reviewed in *Daniel* (1983) and John Reed celebrated in *Reds* (1982), a film that incorporated

interviews with real-life radicals such as Scott Nearing. Nuclear power was attacked in *The China Syndrome* (1979) and the Vietnam War critiqued in *Go Tell the Spartacus* (1978), *Coming Home* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Capitalism itself was indicted in *Wall Street* (1987) and Latin American intervention assailed in *Missing* (1982), *Under Fire* (1983), *El Salvador* (1986), and *Latitio* (1986). The blacklist itself was the subject of *The Way We Were* (1973), which starred Barbra Streisand as a totally sympathetic Communist married to a liberal screenwriter.

The new Hollywood activists were not immune from career threats. Jane Fonda, famous for her opposition to the Vietnam War, was forced from some shooting locations by irate Vietnam veterans. Ed Asner, president of the Screen Actors Guild and a supporter of medical aid to left-wing rebels in El Salvador, had his *Lou Grant* television show canceled after an active protest campaign by right-wing groups. Vanessa Redgrave, a member of a Trotskyist group in England and a vocal opponent of Israel, had contracts aborted and projects threatened with boycotts by Zionist groups. Liberals Robert Redford, Jack Lemmon, and Gregory Peck were criticized for participation in film festivals held in Cuba. While such pressures were not nearly as destabilizing as the blacklist-period tensions had been, awareness of the dangers associated with political activism had its effect on how filmmakers addressed political issues, the kind of film projects undertaken for production, and the particular personnel chosen for given projects.

What the blacklist entailed and its effect on Hollywood has generated a large body of writing by those directly involved. Lillian Hellman's *Scoundrel Time* (1976) and Dalton Trumbo's *The Time of the Toad* (1949) are classics of this genre. Hellman and writers such as Lester Cole and Walter Bernstein have been unforgiving of those who cooperated. In similar fashion, Elia Kazan insists in his autobiography, *A Life* (1988), that he did no wrong in being a friendly witness even though he writes movingly about the traumatic effect the testimony had on his life and that of others who were called before HUAC. Individuals such as Albert Maltz and Jules Dassin have commented on the terrible cost of broken relationships and upended careers with varying degrees of forgiveness for the "friendlies." Dalton Trumbo has been the most generous in this regard by rendering his final judgment that "we were all victims."

*from: Buhle, Buhle, and Georgakas, ed., Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992)