Chapter 18

HUAC and the Communist Witch Hunt

Director Elia Kazan, the man who named names.

Following Nazi Germany's 1941 attack on the Soviet Union, the United States and the Soviets became allies. Despite this alliance, after World War II a fear of all things Communist swept across America. This period would later become known as the McCarthy Era, after Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy, who insisted that Communists lurked in anonymity all around us. According to McCarthy and his cronies, these individuals sought to overthrow the government and put an end to the American way of life. Such paranoia led to the organization of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), led by J. Parnell Thomas, the purpose of which was to determine Communist affiliations of American citizens. During this dark time in American history, the United States government would, in essence, nullify its own constitution to criminalize political affiliation.

In 1947, the attention of HUAC fell upon Hollywood, which Thomas and his committee believed Communists had infiltrated with the intention of producing motion pictures filled with hidden subtext and propaganda. Even a film as harmless as It's a Wonderful Life (1946) was seen by some as a "Communist film." Mississippi representative John E. Rankin addressed his fellow congressmen by declaring, "Unless people in control of the industry are willing to clean house of Communists, Congress will have to do it for them." Vocal accusations and condemnation of the film industry from paranoid conservatives spawned an atmosphere of uneasiness in Hollywood. Actor Kirk Douglas would later recall:

The red scare had been growing for the last two years . . . Hollywood was conspicuous; we could do the most damage to the country by spreading propaganda, and they wanted to make an example out of us. Already, many people wondered why their telephones had stopped ringing, why there was no work, no parties, why they couldn't reach their agents—people like Edward G. Robinson, John Garfield, Larry Parks. You didn't have to be formally accused of anything—innuendo in the press could ruin you.

Cinematic Firsts

Hollywood's first blacklisted actor was comic Fatty Arbuckle, whose career was effectively ended in 1921 when he was accused of raping and murdering actress Virginia Rappe. Arbuckle was later found to be not guilty.
Behind closed doors, Thomas solicited the assistance of the FBI. On May 13, 1947, Richard B. Hood, head of the FBI’s Los Angeles field office, turned over information to HUAC “with the understanding that under no circumstances will the source of this material be disclosed.” The documents Hood provided the Committee listed the names of fifty-six “possible friendly witnesses” and eighty-nine “possible unfriendly witnesses.”

In October 1947, HUAC subpoenaeed the individuals named by the FBI to testify before them. These individuals were then questioned regarding their possible ties to Communist organizations whom, it was believed, sought to destroy the “American way of life.” If these individuals refused to answer, they could be charged with contempt; if they answered that they had attended Communist meetings, they would be required to provide the names of others; if they answered that they had never been involved with the Communist Party, they would face charges of perjury.

Nineteen of those subpoenaeed were deemed “unfriendly” because they refused to answer questions or spoke out against the unconstitutional nature of the proceedings. One of these witnesses was screenwriter Ring Lardner, Jr. Noted filmmaker Otto Preminger would later write:

Ring Lardner, Jr., was one of the first to be summoned. Lardner was a gifted screenwriter who won an Academy Award in 1942 for the Katharine Hepburn–Spencer Tracy film *Woman of the Year.* He interrupted work with me on the script of *Forever Amber* to go to Washington. His testimony before the congressional committee is full of interruptions. He refused to discuss whether or not he had been a member of the Communist Party. As a descendant of one of the Minutemen at Lexington he didn’t see how he could be labeled un-American. What he tried in vain to read into the record was a statement that the committee was attacking the freedom of American citizens.

The list of nineteen unfriendly witnesses was ultimately whittled down to ten artists who were known collectively as “the Hollywood Ten.” (Bertolt Brecht had fled the country and the other eight unfriendly witnesses were not charged with contempt.) The “ten” individuals were Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner, Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo.

The American public—at least those who were paying attention—was blinded by the committee’s accusations that these ten who would not cooperate were Communists and therefore posed a threat to America. Boycotts and protests were organized and a rash of anti-Hollywood editorials began to appear in newspapers across the country. This reaction worried the studio heads, who met in secrecy at New York City’s Waldorf-Astoria on November 26, 1947. There, the moguls agreed to sacrifice the ten men to appease both the Committee and the public. They fashioned a statement for the Committee, which has since become known as the Waldorf Statement. It read:

Members of the Association of Motion Picture Producers deplore the action of the ten Hollywood men who have been cited for contempt of the House of Representatives. We do not desire to pre-judge their legal rights, but their actions have been a disservice to their employers and have impaired their usefulness to the industry.

We will forthwith discharge or suspend without compensation those in our employ and we will not re-employ any of the ten until such time as he is acquitted or has purged himself of contempt and declares under oath that he is not a Communist.

Film historian and critic William Triplett, among others, have suggested that the studios’ willingness to assist the Committee might have been a ploy to break up the unions. (The primary targets of HUAC were all active members of the Screenwriters Guild, the Directors Guild, and the Screen Actors Guild.) With the drafting of the Waldorf Statement, the blacklist was imposed. The ten artists were terminated immediately and told that their actions violated the “morals clause” that appeared in every standard Hollywood contract of the time. Although the studios would insist that there was no blacklist, no one would publicly hire any of the ten men.

Paul Buhle, author of several books on the blacklist, including *Hide in Plain Sight: The Hollywood Blacklist in Film and Television* and *Blacklisted: The Film Lover’s Guide to the Hollywood Blacklist,* explains the Hollywood climate during this time:
Writers begin losing jobs and controversial films undergo a sharp decline (as does film attendance) in 1947, although many leftwing writers keep writing films until 1950. The anxiety about producing anything that could be taken as critical of business or U.S. global policies has the effect of demolishing the art film project, connected with the independent productions, both considered hugely promising for a historic moment or two.

The HUAC circus then moved into a court of law, where Thomas explained that these ten unfriendly witnesses had engaged in “Communist activities” (although he did not clarify) and insisted that arguments regarding “constitutional rights and the First Amendment” should be disregarded. It was decided that there was sufficient evidence to proceed with a trial. The ten then requested a collective trial, but their request was denied. The ten screen artists found their cases caught in a judicial logjam, during which time some of them found work writing under pseudonyms for drastically decreased wages.

In 1949, after two years of judicial red tape, the trials began. The primary argument for the ten unfriendly witnesses was that their constitutional rights had been violated when they had been asked to reveal their personal beliefs and associations, but the courts decided that HUAC’s fracturing of the witnesses’ constitutional rights was fair. At this point, the ten requested that their case be heard by the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court refused. The ten were sentenced to jail.

Before going to prison, the ten men rushed together a twenty-minute film about their plight, entitled *The Hollywood Ten* (1949). In their study *Inquisition in Hollywood* authors Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund write:

The film, like its makers, was blacklisted. The only distribution network which agreed to handle *The Hollywood Ten* was composed of the wives and friends of the jailed men. Sadie Ornitz, Sylvia Jarrico, Gale Sondergaard, and others carried the film from meeting hall to auditorium to living room. Even this circumscribed distribution discomposed business and government circles. Although the powers did not fear that domestic commercial exhibitors would risk boycott and Red-baiting by allowing *The Hollywood Ten* to be shown on their premises, foreign distribution was another question. *Variety* reported that “the Motion Picture Association of America, the United States State Department, and other groups concerned with U.S. public relations abroad, reportedly are agitated over efforts to give the film wide distribution overseas.” Official and unofficial pressures emanating from the United States Government and American corporations hindered foreign, as well as domestic, play of the film.

Ironically, Dalton Trumbo ran into his old adversary Congressman Thomas during his incarceration at Danbury, Connecticut. Thomas was now an inmate, as well; the Congressman had been imprisoned for padding his office payroll.

In 1951, HUAC—now led by John S. Wood—returned to Hollywood for a second round of hearings. When subpoenas were issued, a number of those subpoenaed left the country for fear of following in the footsteps of the Hollywood Ten. This time HUAC was leaving no stone unturned; among those called to testify were Edward G. Robinson, Gale Sondergaard, and writer Dashiell Hammett, who was jailed for refusing to provide names. Waldo Salt, Larry Parks, and Richard Collins, who had been among the original nineteen unfriendly witnesses, were also called upon again. This time 110 unfriendly witnesses were called to testify. Fearing similar condemnation, fifty-eight admitted to having attended Communist meetings and supplied the Committee with names. (The number of names given by each witness ranged between six and 155.) Many witnesses simply gave the Committee names of people they already knew to have been linked to Communist groups. (Members of the Hollywood Ten were named again and again.) After begging the Committee not to force him to name names, actor Larry Parks broke down and gave up his comrades. Despite this concession Parks’s career was effectively ended.

This time, a few “friendly” witnesses gave up names, as well. Actor Lloyd Bridges was allowed to offer his testimony in private. Actor Sterling Hayden gave up names to protect himself. The most famous of these stool pigeons is director Elia Kazan. Kazan supporters, such as actor Rip Torn, have suggested that the director had no choice. However, Kazan has admitted that his testifying was a conscious decision and something he felt needed to be done. Kazan told author Jeff Young:
I thought, nobody knows the truth about any of this. The Party was getting all kinds of money out of Hollywood and out of the theater. Communists were in a lot of organizations—unseen, unrecognized, unbeknownst to anybody. I thought, if I don’t talk, nobody will know about it.

In the 1974 book Kazan on Kazan, however, the filmmaker confessed a darker reason for selling out his colleagues: revenge for his having been kicked out of the Communist Party. “I’ve never denied that there was a personal element in it, which is that I was very angry, humiliated and disturbed—furious, I guess—at the way they booted me out of the Party.”

The 324 individuals named to the Committee were blacklisted immediately. In his book Hollywood Babylon, avant-garde director and author Kenneth Anger concludes: “The public was not amused. For it, politics and Hollywood just didn’t mix. The Red Hunt did nothing to improve the quality of American films or American life.”

Several blacklisted artists went to work in Europe. Others continued to find work with the use of pseudonyms. In 1956, a screenwriter named “Robert Rich” won the Best Screenplay Oscar for The Brave One (1955). However, Rich didn’t attend the ceremony to pick up his statuette. It was later revealed that “Robert Rich” was actually Dalton Trumbo. (The Academy finally sent Trumbo his statuette in 1975.)

Otto Preminger led the charge for the dismissal of the blacklist in 1959. He would later write:

For years after it was discredited, McCarthyism remained a blight on the industry. In 1959, I hired Dalton Trumbo to write the screenplay for Exodus. One of the “Hollywood Ten,” he was making a meager living by working at low fees under assumed names. He and Michael Wilson, who collaborated on several scripts during their exile, received between $1,000 and $1,500 for an entire screenplay. United Artists financed and distributed Exodus. I made a luncheon date with its president and chairman, Arthur Krim and Robert Benjamin. I told them: “Trumbo has done a first-rate job on this script. You people are always saying that the blacklist is fiction, so I will give him the credit he deserves. I shall use his real name as author of the script.”

Trumbo’s being credited on the film effectively led to the end of the blacklist. However, the finest years of many of these artists’ careers were taken away from them while our nation went mad with a naive fear of something it didn’t fully understand.

Although we now know that most (if not all) of the so-called Hollywood Ten did attend Communist group meetings, does this make them any less American? Before invoking any preconceived notions of what being a member of a Communist group means, ponder this: future U.S. President Ronald Reagan later admitted having not only attended meetings with Dalton Trumbo, but also serving on this group’s board of directors! Making this all the more interesting is Reagan’s claim that it was his own fear of “neo-fascism” which led him to join this group in the first place. In a 1960 letter to Playboy mogul Hugh Hefner, Reagan wrote:

Following World War II my interest in liberalism and my fear of “neo-fascism” led to my serving on the board of directors of an organization later exposed as a “communist front”; namely the “Hollywood Independent Citizens Commission of the Arts, Sciences and Professions.” Incidentally (Dalton) Trumbo was also on that board.

Today the blacklist is a thing of the past. Most of those who were blacklisted are now deceased. Nevertheless, the saga ofHUAC, the Hollywood Ten, and the blacklist remains one of the most embarrassing incidents in the history of the United States. Its ramifications reach far beyond the film industry. The House Un-American Activities Committee’s complete disregard for the Constitution weakened its
powers and demonstrated, for all the world to see, our government's willingness to suspend its own laws when it sees fit. This period also caused studios to discontinue producing "message" and art films, thus stunting the artistic growth of the film industry.

This terrible period must be seen not simply as archaic history, but as an example from which we as a society must learn. Unfortunately, the film industry may not be as far removed from these events as we would like to believe. Witness the near blacklisting of liberal actors who vocally opposed the war in Iraq in 2003. (Petitions were circulated requesting the firing of actor Martin Sheen from the television series "The West Wing" and actress Janeane Garofolo actually lost a number of jobs because of her antiwar stance.) Can America learn from its mistakes or is it doomed to repeat them? Only time will tell.