

# Reds and the Silver Screen



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When a group of influential communists in Hollywood refused to testify in Congress about their efforts to communize America, they were lauded by leftists.

by Steve Byas

The high-school American history textbook *The Americans*, in its coverage of the communist infiltration of the American motion-picture industry in the 1930s and 1940s, had this to say about the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA)'s investigation of that influence: "Hollywood did have a substantial number of Communists, former Communists, and socialists."

But the textbook soft-pedaled the seriousness of it all. "Since the Soviet Union had been a U.S. ally during World War II, Hollywood studios had produced pro-Soviet films. After 1945, when this wartime alliance cooled, some argued that such films proved that subversives were spreading Soviet propaganda."

When HCUA issued subpoenas to some of those suspected of planting pro-Soviet propaganda into American movies, the textbook claims that these men, "known as the Hollywood Ten, decided not to cooperate." Why did they refuse to cooperate? According to *The Americans* narrative, it

was "because they believed that the hearings were unconstitutional."

This resulted in prison terms (for refusing to testify to a congressional committee) and the creation of a "blacklist," or "a list of people whom they in effect condemned for allegedly having a Communist background," which resulted in about 500 actors, writers, producers, and directors having their "careers ruined."

This is typical of the way the history of communists in Hollywood is presented. They were only "alleged" to have been communists, and the only "pro-Soviet" films produced were made during World War II when Joe Stalin was our supposed noble ally. And after all, they did not cooperate, because, you know, communists so highly revere the Constitution of the United States.

And the motion-picture industry itself continues to perpetuate this mythical version of freedom-loving communists as patriotic Americans, dedicated to civil liberties for all. In 1997, upon the 50th anniversary of the HCUA hearings, Billy Crystal and Kevin Spacey were featured in

**Seven Hollywood figures arrive at federal court in D.C. in 1950:** They were there to face charges of contempt of Congress for having refused to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. From left to right are Samuel Ornitz, Ring Lardner, Albert Maltz, Alvah Bessie, Lester Cole, Herbert Biberman, and Edward Dmytryk.

a defense of the Hollywood Ten at the Motion Picture Academy's theater, entitled "Hollywood Remembers the Blacklist." Actress Marsha Hunt recalled that America was "no longer the land of the free" during the time of the Blacklist.

Academia regularly pictures the Hollywood Ten as heroes. In 2015, the University of Southern California even erected a sculpture garden picturing them as victims of the hysteria unleashed during the Cold War.

Media also assumes that the "good guys" in this whole episode were the communists and their fellow travelers. When famed director Elia Kazan (perhaps known best for his film *On the Waterfront*) died in 2003, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* opined that his reputation was "tarnished by his betrayals." Kazan had left the Communist Party, and attempted to mitigate its influence in Hollywood. Yet, the *Inquirer* compared him to German director Leni Riefenstahl, who it said had glorified "the perverted ideals of Naziism." It was Rief-

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enstahl who masterminded the historic film *Triumph of the Will*, which while it is considered a great artistic achievement, was a paean of praise to the National Socialist movement of Adolf Hitler.

In recent years, Hollywood has produced multiple films with the general theme that the Hollywood Ten were not communists, or alternatively, even if they were, they were fighting for the Constitution and liberty, and were victims of a “Red Scare” perpetrated by Americans who were sympathetic to fascism, if not actual fascists. Among the many films that promote some version of this thesis include *The Majestic*, *Guilty by Suspicion*, *The Front*, *Marathon Man*, *The House on Carroll Street*, *Out of the Hollywood Ten*, *Fellow Traveler*, and *The Way We Were*.

In the 1973 movie *The Way We Were*, the character played by Barbra Streisand is a Young Communist League member, heckled in college by some non-communist students, including a character played by Robert Redford. Of course, when the two wind up in Hollywood, the Redford character is a successful screenwriter, but his communist wife, played by Streisand, becomes a victim of the hysteria against

communists. Eventually, Redford’s character comes to realize that Streisand’s character is the heroic person he wishes he could have been, had he not been so caught up in greedily making money.

Perhaps the most absurd myth about the entire Hollywood Blacklist is the association of Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wis.) with it. The way it is usually cast is that McCarthy, from his position as chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, created the Hollywood Blacklist. First of all, since McCarthy was a U.S. senator, it should be obvious to a moderately educated person that he was not going to be a member of any committee in the House of Representatives, much less its chairman. McCarthy took no role in ferreting out communists in motion pictures, or any other private industry, but was rather concerned about Soviet spies inside the U.S. government.

But regardless of these myths about McCarthy, there are some legitimate questions about the issue of communist infiltration of the movie industry, such as why it matters, how it happened, and what was the true story about the Blacklist.

And why would communists be so interested in the content of motion pictures?

## Why Communists Valued Movies

Writing in the communist newspaper *The Daily Worker* in 1925, Will Muezenberg explained the importance of the silver screen to advancing the goal of a communist world. Muezenberg was an agent of the Comintern, created to spread communist ideology and promote Soviet interests around the world. Writing about the motion-picture industry, Muezenberg said, “One of the most pressing tasks confronting the Communist Party in the field of propaganda is the conquest of this supremely important propaganda unit, until now the monopoly of the ruling class. We must wrest it from them and turn it against them.”

Vladimir Lenin himself, the dictator of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), said “the motion picture” was the most important art form for spreading communism to other countries. And his successor, the murderous dictator Joseph Stalin, is reported to have predicted he could convert the whole world to communism if he were given control of the American movie industry.

In 1935, the cultural commissioner of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), V.J. Jerome, planted a branch of the party in Hollywood, and went to work to use the industry to advance the cause. The CPUSA was a totally controlled subsidiary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, but Hollywood Reds used a variety of “front groups,” often in alliance with socialists and New Deal liberals. Some were fellow travelers who differed from card-carrying members of the Communist Party mainly by not actually paying dues, while others were what Lenin termed “useful idiots.” Within three years of its founding, the Hollywood party had 300 members.

Benjamin Gitlow, who was the candidate of the Communist Party for vice president of the United States in 1924 and 1928, later confirmed in his 1940 book, *I Confess*, the slavish devotion of the CPUSA to the Soviet Union: “We were volunteer members of a militarized colonial service, pledged to carry out the decisions of our supreme rulers resident at Moscow.”

Why did communism influence so many in the motion-picture world? Perhaps the example of Joseph Losey offers some explanation. Losey’s efforts as a director in the early 1930s were largely failures. Seeking some meaning to his life, he traveled to



**The right “Left” words:** Paul Jarrico testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Jarrico was a prominent screenwriter who was among those placed on the “Hollywood Blacklist” by studio management, and not hired because of his association with the Communist Party.

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the Soviet Union and was “terribly disillusioned” at first. “I couldn’t see any evidence of anything much working,” Losey said, contradicting Lincoln Steffens’ infamous 1919 comment about his own trip to the Soviet Union, when Steffens opined, “I have been over to the future and it works.”

Losey, on the other hand, said, “I saw extreme poverty, dirt and discomfort.”

But the Soviet government sponsored both theater and film, and those professionals such as Losey were honored by the communist regime. Losey asked Politburo member Otto Kussinen if he could stay in the Soviet Union, and work in “lumbering” for the Soviets. Kussinen demurred, instead encouraging Losey to return to America and put his theater skills to work for the communist cause in the growing American movie industry, which he did.

The Great Depression and its downward pressure on wages naturally provided a fertile recruiting ground for the party. Back-lot workers and stage hands, no doubt happy to have any job at all as the Depression brought business failures and exceptionally high unemployment rates to the country, proved more difficult to enlist than the writers and the actors. John Howard Lawson, a left-wing playwright from New York, came to Hollywood, where he was elected the first president of the Screen Writers Guild.

Lester Cole was a young radical in 1926 when he heard Lawson speak at a meeting protesting the arrest of two radicals, Niccolò Sacco and Bartholomew Vanzetti, for robbery and murder. Their eventual execution became an important cause of leftists around the world, who insisted they were executed not for robbery and murder, but for being radicals. Cole later joined with Lawson in the formation of the Screen Writers Guild. As writers, actors, and others in the motion-picture industry struggled to “make it,” they could expect help along the way from fellow Communist Party members in obtaining acting roles, screenwriting opportunities, and other jobs in Hollywood.

Once these Reds moved into such key positions, communist ideology could be subtly inserted into screenplays. Max Silver explained to the HCUA in 1951 how it worked. Rather than attempting to make the entire screenplay an advocacy for Marxist-Leninist philosophy, “ordinary John and Mary” movies were made trans-



**Temporary left turn:** Benjamin Gitlow (left) once led the American Communist Party, and is shown here with Joseph Zack Kornfedder. The two became strong ex-communists and anti-communists who participated in anti-communist programs for the American Legion.

mission belts for the cause. According to Kenneth Billingsley, in his book *Hollywood Party*, “Paul Jarrico bragged that the Party smuggled its ideology into all sorts of movies.” In the movie *Tom, Dick, and Harry*, Burgess Meredith was given the line to say, “I don’t believe in every man for himself. I get lonesome.” Some of the screenwriters learned these methods in the Communist Party Writers’ Clinic. Another important role played by wealthier Hollywood actors, directors, and writers was in providing funds for communist efforts, including front groups. One party member, Maurice Rapf, provided the use of his family’s beach house and pool in Malibu for recruiting parties.

By 1935, communist tactics shifted from accusing some on the Left, such as President Franklin Roosevelt, of being fascists, to making common cause with others on the Left in what were called “Popular Front” movements. In this way, many progressives began to support communist goals, not realizing they were “useful idiots,” to use Lenin’s term. In this vein, the party established a Popular Front group known as the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, which was the creation of Otto Katz, a Comintern agent. Studio owners, many of them Jewish, supported the league, even renting them offices. Jack Warner of Warner Brothers said, “Hitler was the enemy.” The league swelled to a

membership of about 5,000. Actor Melvyn Douglas joined the Anti-Nazi League, along with his wife, Helen Gahagan Douglas, an actress herself. He explained that it was “the only organization in California that was speaking out against Hitler.”

Douglas was among those who created the Motion Picture Democratic Committee (MPDC), originally to support Democratic Party candidates in California. Later, Communist Party member Dashiell Hammett became president of the MPDC, and the communists eventually came to dominate the group.

During this heady time, communists went to the defense of the communist-supported Spanish government against the forces of Francisco Franco. Defense of the communist side of the Spanish Civil War became an important Popular Front cause. The movie *The Spanish Earth* was even premiered at the White House for President Roosevelt and 30 guests. Roosevelt told director Joris Ivens (who was a communist) that he appreciated the film’s “values.” Ivens said the movie portrayed taking land away from large landlords and giving it back to the Spanish people.

The Communist Party garnered much mileage out of its opposition to Hitler, but then in 1939, Stalin inked a non-aggression pact with the German dictator, and agreed to divide Poland between them. The day after the pact was announced, Earl Browder, the

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American chief of the party, defended the agreement, arguing the pact was a “wonderful contribution to peace and a victory for the enemies of fascism.”

Almost overnight, the American Communist Party became non-interventionist, even announcing its support for the America First Committee, in an effort to keep America out of any war in Europe. Screenwriter Millard Lampell joined with Pete Seeger, Burl Ives, and Woody Guthrie in the communist folk-singing group The Almanac Singers in singing such lyrics as, “I hate war, and so does Eleanor, and we won’t be safe till everybody’s dead.”

This non-interventionist mood was short-lived, however, and after Hitler launched his invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the party cried out for American intervention. Communist screenwriter and actress Lillian Hellman was emphatic: “The Motherland has been attacked!”

## **Hollywood Promotes the Soviet Union**

Hollywood’s communists used the cover of American entrance into the war to promote the supposed glories of the Soviet Union. The top communist in Hollywood, John Howard Lawson, wrote the script for *Action in the North Atlantic* starring Humphrey Bogart. Ronald Radosh describes the last part of the film, after German U-boats attack an American ship, in his book *Red Star Over Hollywood*: “But at the last moment, Soviet planes arrive and save the helpless ship and crew from Nazi dive bombers.” Lillian Hellman’s *North Star* even depicted a collective farm in the Soviet Union, with deliriously happy Soviet peasants. There were many more films with similar pro-Soviet themes.

But nothing could top *Mission to Moscow*, produced by Warner Brothers. Made in 1943, it was based on the 1941 book by Joseph Davies, who had been U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1936 to 1938. Davies was so enamored of Russian communism that he even defended Stalin’s purge trials and

denied that the Soviet Union had invaded Finland. The screenplay was written by Howard Koch, who may have been a party member, but at the very least was a well-known “fellow traveler.”

The tone of the movie was so adulatory of the communist regime that some dubbed it *Submission to Moscow*.

Soviet spy Alger Hiss brought Hollywood communist Dalton Trumbo to the opening of the United Nations in May of 1945, where Trumbo ghostwrote the speech delivered there by Secretary of State Edward Stettinius. Many American liberals naively believed that the wartime alliance between the United States and the USSR would survive in perpetuity, and that the Soviet Union’s desire to turn the entire world “red” had ceased.

As the war in Europe drew to a close, however, the Kremlin directed its American lackeys to return to its previous position that America was the ultimate enemy, and that the “class struggle” should be re-ignited. This was almost a year before Winston Churchill declared in Fulton, Missouri, that an “iron curtain” had descended over

Eastern Europe, which most historians use to mark the launching of the “Cold War.”

The renewed emphasis on the “class struggle” led to an attempt to take over the Hollywood unions in 1946. Herb Sorrell, the communist leader of the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU), called a strike at Warner Brothers. Sorrell was a protégé of Harry Bridges, the militant boss of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union, who was also a secret member of the Communist Party.

Sorrell brought in some toughs from San Francisco in his effort to win control of all the unions in Hollywood, and warned what would happen if anyone stood in his way: “There may be men hurt, there may be men killed before this is over.”

While Sorrell publicly claimed the strike was called over worker grievances, it was really an effort to make Sorrell the union boss for all of the motion-picture businesses. As the *Communist Party’s People’s Daily World* put it, “The prize will be the complete control of the greatest medium of communication in history.” Undoubtedly true, as movies can even manipulate the facts of history. Once someone has seen an historical figure, for example, “say” something on the silver screen, it is almost impossible to persuade the movie-goer that the real-life person did *not* say it. Perception then becomes reality.

As Sorrell predicted, the strike turned



**Don’t cross them:** Once a self-described liberal, Ronald Reagan’s views began to change after his run-ins with communists during a communist-led strike at Warner Brothers. He was warned by an anonymous caller that his face would be destroyed by acid if he persisted in opposing the communists in Hollywood. Here he waits to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947.

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**Where loyalties lie:** Lillian Hellman was a prominent playwright and movie screenwriter. An admirer of Joseph Stalin and a Communist Party member, she was distraught after the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, lamenting that the “motherland” had been invaded.

violent. One studio employee was hospitalized after acid was thrown in his face. According to actor Kirk Douglas, thousands fought in the street with knives, clubs, battery cables, brass knuckles, and chains. Jack Warner responded by telling workers, whether professional or manual laborer, to sneak into the studio lot through a storm drain from the Los Angeles River.

One actor refused to sneak in — Ronald Reagan. Reagan had already butted heads with the communists. While an unabashed liberal at the time, Reagan was no communist. Yet, the previous year, he had joined what was later revealed to be a communist front — the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Professions (HICCASP) at the end of the war, and soon wound up on its board. When a resolution was introduced to oppose communism, one screenwriter opposed it, shouting that if it came to a war between the United States and the Soviet Union, he would volunteer on the Russian side.

When Reagan rose in support of the resolution, he was denounced as a “fascist” and “capitalist scum.” After the group voted down another resolution in support of the free enterprise system, he resigned from the organization.

Now, he refused to sneak in through a storm drain, so Warner Brothers arranged for a bus for Reagan and others to use in crossing the picket line. He was advised to lie down on the floor as they entered through the gate of the studio, but Reagan

refused to do that, too, riding in sitting straight up. He was the only one.

Reagan also angered Sorrell when the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), of which Reagan was a board member, refused to support the strike. While shooting *Night Unto Night*, Reagan was called to the phone. He was threatened that if he continued to oppose the CSU strike, they would destroy his face with acid. After that, Reagan hired guards to watch his children, and began carrying a gun.

### Congress Investigates Hollywood Reds

Eventually the CSU strike was broken, but the intensity of the struggle turned many in Hollywood against the communists who were behind it. Also taking note of the violence were members of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. As the Cold War intensified, the role of communists in the motion-picture industry became a matter of concern to many in Congress.

With the Soviets installing communist-led regimes across eastern Europe, many in Congress became concerned about the role the motion-picture industry was playing in support of a hostile foreign power. Some evidently hoped to shed some light on these activities among the actors, directors, and writers of the industry, whose first loyalty was to a totalitarian system.

Using subpoena power, HCUA launched its investigation in September 1947, first with “friendly” witnesses, such

as Reagan and Robert Taylor, who testified that communists were a major force in Hollywood. Gary Cooper said that he had “turned down quite a few scripts because I thought they were tinged with Communistic ideas.”

Finally, 19 “unfriendly” witnesses were called, all of whom were either members of the Communist Party, or fellow travelers. The list included Herbert Biberman, Lewis Milestone, Robert Rossen, Dalton Trumbo, Adrian Scott, Waldo Salt, Samuel Ornitz, Albert Maltz, John Howard Lawson, Gordon Kahn, Howard Koch, Richard Collins, Bertolt Brecht, Lester Cole, Larry Parks, Irving Pichel, Edward Dmytryk, Alvah Bessie, and Ring Lardner, Jr. The committee eventually heard from only 10 of them, thus the name, “the Hollywood Ten.”

Despite there being nothing illegal about being a member of the Communist Party, it was party doctrine at the time for membership to be kept secret. Trumbo and Lardner insisted that if they answered any of the committee’s questions, it would imply legitimacy to the proceedings. They decided they would plead the Fifth Amendment and argue that the committee was violating their freedom of speech by even asking about their political affiliations.

The witnesses immediately took a combative tone, with the Hollywood party chief, John Howard Lawson, leading off. Lawson submitted a written statement that accused the committee of getting information from “Gestapo agents.” In his statement, Lawson said that he believed in “the free exchange of ideas.” The committee refused to read the statement into the record. Lawson only answered questions about his name and his membership in the Screen Actors Guild, mixing in remarks about how the committee was using “Hitler techniques.”

The next witness was Trumbo. He also refused to answer questions, and as he was being hustled out of the hearing, he yelled to the media, “This is the beginning of an American concentration camp.” The other witnesses behaved similarly. One witness, Bertolt Brecht, left the country the next day to live out the rest of his life in Communist East Germany.

When it was all over, the committee gave a formal report to Congress, which voted to cite the unresponsive witnesses for contempt of Congress, a crime for which they were sent to prison. Then, at

a meeting at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City, Hollywood producers took the advice of their chief counsel, former Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, and fired those members of the Hollywood Ten presently under contract. This was followed by the “Blacklist,” an agreement among studio management not to use writers, actors, and directors who were members of the Communist Party.

In the years since, a certain mythology has developed about the Hollywood Ten and the Blacklist. As the history text *The Americans* saw it, the Ten refused to cooperate because they considered the hearings “unconstitutional,” and they were being targeted for being “suspected” communists.

But there is no doubt that Hollywood was riddled with communists — communists who were loyal to a hostile, foreign power. Despite this, membership in the Communist Party was not illegal.

And despite all of the supposed concern about the Constitution and free speech, and the “free exchange of ideas,” it is quite clear that the communists were opposed to the Constitution and to free speech — unless they were the ones doing the talking.

In strategy sessions before the hearings, those under subpoena by Congress were asked by their lawyer if they believed in free speech for fascists. Lawson was adamant: “The answer is that you [communists] do *not* believe in freedom of speech for fascists,” adding that what communists have to say is true, “whereas what fascists say is a lie.” When one considers that the communists define “fascist” very broadly, basically as anyone who opposes communism, this exposes the hypocrisy of the Hollywood communists who claimed to believe in “free speech.” After all, to the communists not only were Hitler and Benito Mussolini examples of fascists, but so were many prominent Democrats. They even charged that President Harry Truman was leading a fascist takeover of the United States.

Their disregard for a “free exchange of ideas” was demonstrated in how they treated some of their own members who dared to question any of the party line. Albert Maltz, later one of the “unfriendly” witnesses called by HCUA, was a writer who mixed left-wing ideas in his novels, plays, and short stories. But when he wrote in February 1946 that “writers must be judged by their work and not by



**John Howard Lawson** was considered the top “Red” or communist in Hollywood. A prominent screenwriter, he refused to answer the questions of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, “taking the Fifth” when asked if he was a member of the Communist Party.

the committees they join,” in response to being told that membership in communist or allied groups was more important than talent, he was forced to publicly recant.

The communists insisted on changes in scripts if a businessman was shown in a positive light. When they did not like a writer, they would spread rumors that he was sympathetic to Hitler, a virtual Blacklist in an industry dominated by Jews. As Billingsley said in *Hollywood Party*, “In Hollywood proper, the Party’s machinery also proved valuable in blacklisting non-Communists.... Party writers would circulate rumors that certain actors, such as Adolphe Menjou, were sympathetic to Hitler, an effective smear with Jewish producers, who would quickly put out the word to other producers. Such actors found themselves out of favor but never knew what hit them.” The Goldstone Agency (run by communists) regularly passed over non-communist writers in favor of communist ones. Writers were expelled from the Communist Party if they failed to promote communism in their scripts. The party even told members not to read certain books.

And the communist union the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU) had its own Blacklist of sorts, telling members to boycott films of certain actors, including Robert Montgomery, John Wayne, Lucille Ball, Van Johnson, Clark Gable, Maureen O’Hara, Bette Davis, and Barbara Stanwyck.

Despite this blatant hypocrisy, it is typical today for academia, the media, and the

movie industry to express outrage at the Blacklist in Hollywood, while simultaneously praising the Hollywood Ten and such actions as the decision of Mozilla Firefox to fire CEO Brendan Eich, just because he had contributed money to the Proposition Eight campaign in California, an effort to define marriage as between one man and one woman.

Of course, today the U.S. Communist Party is a shell of its former self, so there are probably few in the motion-picture industry who actually carry party cards. But leftist causes are certainly favored in the pictures. For example, George Clooney’s *Good Night and Good Luck*, a 2005 movie, glamorized a communist, Annie Lee Moss. While Clooney has actually admitted that he knew Moss was a communist, those who saw the movie were not told that. And what about movies that are not made? While multitudes of movies have rightly chronicled the horrors of the Hitler era in Nazi Germany, no pictures have been produced documenting the crimes of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. On the contrary, Warren Beatty even won an Oscar for his 1981 movie *Reds*, which heaped praise on a Lenin apologist, John Reed.

It has been said that Hollywood created an image of the American Old West that never was, but always will be. Perception is reality, and the silver screen is a powerful tool in shaping that perception. Unfortunately, the silver screen is still dotted by lots of red and pink. ■