

Chapter 4

Hollywood at war

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt ran for reelection in 1940 on an isolationist platform; he promised to keep the United States out of what many called “the European war.” But when Japan bombed the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, public sentiment changed, and the United States entered World War II. Over the next year, FDR established the Bureau of Motion Pictures and a number of additional offices and agencies designed to enlist Hollywood in the war effort. Further enticing Hollywood to collaborate with the US military, the Department of Justice agreed to suspend an ongoing antitrust investigation of the studios, and the Selective Service System declared Hollywood to be

an essential industry, exempting its critical personnel from the draft.

The film studios signed on to help fight the war, using movies and star power to shape public opinion. Even beyond direct government work, Hollywood contributed to the larger war effort by making patriotic films, raising money for war bonds, and entertaining troops. It has been estimated that as much as one-third of Hollywood production during the war directly bolstered America's wartime activities, and, not coincidentally, it was also one of the most profitable stretches in Hollywood's history. The film industry, the moviegoing public, and the country were all in sync for a time.

Hollywood gets political

FDR's fascination with Hollywood and popular media long predated the war. He had ties to Hollywood as far back as his days as governor of New York. After becoming president, FDR regularly invited actors, directors, and studio heads to the White House. He screened several films a week for family and friends. And he transferred his love of film to his son, James, who had an undistinguished career as a Hollywood

producer before serving in the Marines and then in Congress. Not only did FDR love film; he mastered the art of using film and radio to shape public opinion. He became famous for his “fireside chats,” radio addresses that personalized his political agenda and always began with the intimate salutation “My friends.”

The Roosevelt administration also used documentary films in the 1930s to explain its New Deal policies, producing such masterpieces of the genre as *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938). And the New Deal workers’ relief project, the Works Progress Administration, employed many writers, directors, and actors who would go on to have distinguished Hollywood careers, including Orson Welles, Nicholas Ray, and Sidney Lumet. Really showing his media savvy, FDR decided to appoint as the first White House press secretary Stephen Early, the Washington representative for Paramount Pictures’ newsreel service. FDR valued the American film industry, and the relationship went both ways. The president enjoyed broad support in Hollywood, even from right-wing stalwarts like Jack Warner.

FDR’s interest in the media dovetailed with the film industry’s turn toward politics,

and Hollywood was primed for war when the time came. The film community had been far ahead of the country as a whole in calling for intervention in the war, and many of the industry's leaders were already deeply engaged in European politics.

On a business level, wartime hostilities closed off some European markets, which contributed to the studios' diminishing attention to the needs of European audiences. And slowly, the move toward war overrode studios' concerns about alienating ticket buyers with political films, which had been so important to the Production Code's project. Also, in the midst of the Depression, Hollywood artists and intellectuals looked for solutions to social and economic problems in communist, socialist, and fascist ideologies. Others actively opposed the rise of fascist and communist governments in Europe.

It was a time of political extremes in Hollywood, as indeed it was throughout the world. Charlie Chaplin and Orson Welles were some of the most outspoken figures on the Hollywood left, and they both gave antifascist speeches at rallies of the Popular Front, the loose amalgam of left-leaning groups. Excerpts of Chaplin's speeches made their way into his early sound films, and echoes of Welles's politics can be found

in his first feature, *Citizen Kane* (1941), as well as other films he made in the 1940s.

More formally, the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League was founded in 1936 to oppose fascism. The League was a Communist Party front organization, founded at the instigation of the Communist Party USA (which was directly funded by the Soviet Communist Party), and card-carrying Communist screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart chaired the league. But despite its party affiliation, the organization brought together the entire Hollywood spectrum: studio executives and writers, liberals and conservatives, Christians and Jews. Actor James Cagney, director John Ford, and Production Code Administration head Joseph Breen attended the organization's opening gala, which was cohosted by Stewart and Algonquin Roundtable doyenne Dorothy Parker.

The powerful group included studio heads Jack Warner and Carl Laemmle, and it championed labor unions and advocated for racial equality. The organization backed the Loyalists against the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War, and it arranged large-scale protests when Mussolini's son Vittorio and Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl came to Hollywood. Mussolini's son was a producer trying to put together an interna-

tional coproduction deal with Hollywood producer Hal Roach. Riefenstahl came to Los Angeles to meet with Walt Disney while attempting to arrange US distribution for her film about the 1936 Berlin Olympics, *Olympia* (1938).

After the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 created a transitory alliance between the communist Soviet Union and fascist Germany, the Anti-Nazi League was forced to change its name to the Hollywood League for Democratic Action, and it lost its raison d'être. The Anti-Nazi League's heyday may have been brief, but it launched Hollywood into the global politics of the 1930s and prepared the way for active participation in the war. It would also open the door for criticism of Hollywood's politics in the coming decades.

Warner Bros. at war

When the United States finally entered the war, Hollywood sprang into action. Top movie stars lent their talent and celebrity in many ways. Clark Gable and Ronald Reagan voluntarily enlisted. Bob Hope and Shirley Temple signed up with the United Services Organization (USO) to perform for troops. James Cagney, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Melvyn Douglas, and John Garfield

all spoke out against fascism. Some of the most successful studio directors, including Frank Capra, John Ford, John Huston, and William Wyler, joined the military to make documentary films.

Warner Bros., however, led the industry in its support for the war. The depression made for strange political alliances, and Jack and Harry Warner's devotion to FDR was certainly one of them. Like MGM head Louis B. Mayer, the Warner brothers had close ties to the Republican Party. But they bucked their party's line throughout the 1930s and 1940s not only to champion FDR's New Deal and war plans but also to contribute to the lionization of FDR himself.



6. Marlene Dietrich performs for US front-

line soldiers. Entertaining troops was one of many ways that Hollywood supported the war effort during World War II.

Warner Bros. eased into its role as the most patriotic studio. The Warner brothers began by insisting that studio employees donate to antifascist causes, and they cut off all studio ties with Germany in 1933, long before the other studios. Then, Warner Bros. began to express its American boosterism and antifascism in films. Starting in 1936, the studio made a number of short films celebrating American history. All of the studios still made shorts that played before features and served as a testing ground for new talent and ideas. In this case, Warner Bros. experimented by showing politically outspoken films to American audiences.

After some success, the studio brought its political agenda to feature films. Continuing to address contemporary politics through historical films, Warner Bros. released *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), which alluded to the author's fight against anti-Semitism in nineteenth-century France. Then the studio tackled ripped-from-the-headlines events in a string of largely successful films endorsing wartime policies, explaining the war to American audiences,

and, under military contracts, educating soldiers.

Warner Bros.' 1939 film *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* changed the playing field for the studios, and it opened the door for political films in Hollywood. It was the first major studio film to take on Nazism, and it had to win over the Production Code Administration and refashion many of the elements of the studio system for a world at war. As director, Warner Bros. chose Ukrainian-born Anatole Litvak, who had made films in Germany before fleeing the Nazis and ending up as a contract director on the Warner Bros. lot. Litvak's signature documentary-like style added authenticity to a politically brave film.

Confessions of a Nazi Spy stays as close to real events as possible, telling the story of a Nazi spy ring in the United States that was thwarted by the FBI. The film hits viewers over the head with its based-on-real-events message. It has a newsreel-style voice-of-god narration, and it uses the real names of the people depicted in the film to suggest that the studio is merely relating and not shaping its story.

But despite its reportage-like presentation, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* still clearly fits the

Hollywood mold. The documentary look is a thin veneer for a time-tested genre formula: the spy thriller narrative that concludes with a courtroom drama. And the cast is made up of familiar faces like those George Sanders and Francis Lederer. One of the studio's biggest stars, Edward G. Robinson, plays the heroic FBI agent, rebranding him as a hard-hitting force for justice, and preparing the ground for Warner Bros.' other stars Bogart and Cagney to move from playing gangsters and lone wolves to taking on new roles as soldiers, resistance fighters, and company men.



7. The first major studio film to take on the Nazis, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (Warner Bros., 1939) tells the true story of a spy ring in the United States. The film mixes documentary-style realism with popular stars such as George Sanders (*right*) and the fa-

miliar courtroom drama genre.

Not only did the genre and star system have to fit a new mold, but the Production Code needed to be rethought for a changing political climate as well. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* ignited internal disagreements within the Production Code Administration (PCA) office. The film represented a move into strongly nationalist politics. What if it offended American politicians or European audiences? What if the political climate changed quickly? The Third Reich took an active interest in policing Hollywood films, and it employed a full-time representative in Hollywood, Georg Gyssling, to ensure that Germany's interests were being served. Gyssling strenuously opposed *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, but in the end PCA head Joseph Breen approved the film, saying that it honestly and fairly represented German politics and the German people.

It is likely that the PCA approved the film in part because the German market was all but closed off to Hollywood by 1939. The PCA helped films achieve fluid international circulation. If politics precluded distribution to a particular country, then the PCA seal was moot anyway. And, unsurprisingly, Germany and the Axis

countries banned *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* after its release.

What is surprising is that the Warner Bros. gamble paid off. The film was a hit with audiences and critics, winning the best film award from the National Board of Review, which had become a critics' rather than a censors' organization by that point. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* also opened the floodgates, leading a wave of political and especially anti-Nazi films in Hollywood. The next year Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (United Artists, 1940) parodied Hitler; Frank Bozage's *The Mortal Storm* (MGM, 1940) explored the rise of Nazism in a small German town; and many films began to plug Nazis into stock villain roles. Deeper into the war, Hollywood produced a cycle of anti-Nazi films, including Edward Dmytryk's *Hitler's Children* (RKO, 1943) and Fritz Lang's *Ministry of Fear* (Paramount, 1944), that examined the details of Hitler's reign as stories came to light.

After the United States entered the war, Warner Bros. showed that Hollywood storytelling was perfectly prepared to humanize politics and imbue history with emotion. Warner Bros. started production on its big-budget patriotic diversion *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) even before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. *Yankee Doodle*

Dandy drew on the lessons of the studio's shorts to construct a biographical musical about Broadway legend George M. Cohan. It uses Cohan's career as a loose framework for stringing together the big patriotic song-and-dance numbers for which Cohan was famous: "You're a Grand Old Flag," "Over There," and "Yankee Doodle Boy." The film whipped audiences into a frenzy around the American flag, which is featured prominently. And Warner Bros. gave the lead role to its top star, James Cagney, lending prominence to the film while also reflecting stars and stripes on Cagney, one of the studio's most precious commodities.

Yankee Doodle Dandy is related through a series of flashbacks illustrating stories that Cohan tells President Roosevelt. The audience watches Cohan from over FDR's shoulder, and we are presumably meant to identify with FDR as we celebrate America. It must have been jarring to have a sitting president impersonated in a major film, and *Yankee Doodle Dandy* opens with a self-conscious discussion of the pitfalls of depicting the current president. After the film's success, Warner Bros. continued to use the device in subsequent films, effectively linking the studio with the commander-in-chief. *Yankee Doodle Dandy* turned out to be a huge box office success, and it won three Oscars, including one

for Cagney. It is still a fondly remembered favorite, just barely squeaking into the American Film Institute's list of the top 100 films at number 100.

But even a year or two after its release, audiences saw films like *Yankee Doodle Dandy* as simplistic propaganda. Years later, Warner Bros. mocked its own creation, as it did many of its other films, with a Bugs Bunny short. In *Yankee Doodle Bugs* (1954), Bugs Bunny recounts for his nephew Clyde how important rabbits were at pivotal moments in colonial American history. Obviously pro-rabbit propaganda, the stories mislead Clyde, who returns from his history exam wearing a dunce cap.

As the war dragged on, it took over more and more of Warner Bros.' resources. The studio made combat films like *Air Force* (1943) and *Objective, Burma!* (1945), which were designed to explain individual battles, missions, or theaters of war to audiences, an important task for a complex war fought on many fronts. These films were both grounded in facts and molded to fit studio genre formulas. Accuracy rarely trumped a dramatic story, and the British government was even moved to complain about how much *Objective, Burma!* centered on American troops instead of other Allied forces. The combat genre almost

always had an allegorical dimension, in which squadrons were invariably made up of soldiers from diverse ethnic, class, and geographical backgrounds, who, like the country itself, came together in the service of democracy.

Warner Bros. also made films under contract for the military. Government contracting was a new business for Hollywood, and the major studio heads agreed to share the wealth. They formed the Research Council of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which assigned government contracts to its members. In addition to the major studios, the Research Council included prominent independent producers Walter Wanger and Walt Disney (Disney would remain a minor, specialized studio until the 1970s).

One of Warner Bros.' contracts was for a series of educational cartoons about the character Private Snafu made between 1943 and 1945. Private Snafu (an acronym for "Situation normal, all fucked up") bumbles his way through military service, revealing the details of his orders to German spies and neglecting to take his malaria pills, among other costly mistakes. So that the severity of the issues was not lost in the humorous shorts, Private Snafu dies in several of the episodes. The soldiers lucky

enough to be assigned to watch Private Snafu shorts were in for a treat. The cast and crew boasted some of the greatest talent in Hollywood, including Looney Tunes director Chuck Jones (a cult favorite today); the voice of Bugs Bunny and just about every major Warner Bros cartoon character, Mel Blanc; and scripts by Theodore Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss).

The Private Snafu series took important lessons for military personnel and turned them into unforgettable confections embodied by a lovable character. It is exactly the kind of personal, emotional power that Hollywood could lend to otherwise dry wartime endeavors. Other standout shorts that achieved a similar effect include Warner Bros.' *You, John Jones!* (1943), in which James Cagney imagines what it would be like to be a Russian, Greek, or Chinese father whose family was being bombed by Axis powers. And in the War Department short *Autobiography of a "Jeep"* (1943), an anthropomorphized jeep narrates its own American dream tale: the military vehicle was born out of scientific ingenuity; it achieved success through grit and hard work; and it ended up in endless photo ops with celebrities and heads of state.

Making films about the vicissitudes of

contemporary politics, however, could be controversial. In 1941, Germany broke its nonaggression pact and invaded the Soviet Union, forcing a delicate alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union. Warner Bros., as it had done before, jumped in first to address this new wartime development, adapting the memoir of former US ambassador to the Soviet Union Joseph E. Davies. *Mission to Moscow* (1943) looks like a natural successor to Warner Bros.' previous films, filtering recent political events through a biographical narrative and documentary-style presentation. The film was distributed with a prologue by Davies, who assures audiences that his only bias is that of a midwestern American educated in the public school system. He goes on to thank "those fine patriotic citizens, the Warner brothers," for telling his story. Helmed by *Yankee Doodle Dandy* director Michael Curtiz, *Mission to Moscow* reprises the impersonation of FDR, who, mostly off camera, instructs Davies to go to Germany and then the Soviet Union to learn all that he can about the Nazis and Soviets.

The film employs the documentary aesthetic that proved so effective in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, especially montage sequences of stock footage from Soviet archives and clips from the Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Davies

tours factories and meets with diplomats while his wife and daughter observe department stores and parties. Through didactic dialogue, they all come to realize that despite the goatees that every actor playing a Soviet man is made to wear, the United States and Soviet Union have more similarities than differences. In the final section of the film, Davies speaks to US politicians and Winston Churchill, making the pragmatic case for a US-Soviet wartime alliance.

Mission to Moscow was less financially and critically successful than many of Warner Bros.' other wartime films, but it did kick off a cycle of films about Russia released over the next two years: *The Boy from Stalingrad* (Columbia, 1943), *The North Star* (RKO, 1943), *Three Russian Girls* (United Artists, 1943), *Song of Russia* (MGM, 1944), and *Counter-Attack* (Columbia, 1945).

These were far from revolutionary films, but after the war they would come under close scrutiny during investigations into potential communist infiltration of Hollywood. Like most of the films made by Hollywood during the war, the Russian cycle brought a human dimension to the geopolitics of World War II. Hollywood's wartime film production brought European and Asian cultures to life for movie audiences, and they explained in moral

terms what Americans were fighting for.

Wartime government agencies

The Hollywood studios did not promote the war unchaperoned. Starting in the 1930s, the Production Code had proven to be a valuable tool for standardizing movie narratives and managing films' moral and political messages. Making movies for wartime required even more risk and complications. Some overseas markets closed, and others became more important. Public opinion about the war shifted quickly, and getting accurate military information out was important. For all of these reasons, plus the Department of Justice's and Selective Service's efforts to help the film industry, Hollywood studios worked willingly with a range of government agencies that oversaw wartime production and distribution.

The Office of Censorship cleared films for import and export, and its staff decided whether films had the potential to be valuable to the enemy. Did they jeopardize national security, show sensitive military installations, or disparage the US military? The office also evaluated depictions of Americans and allies that were sent abroad. The PCA continued to insure that

films were not offensive to political parties or national governments, but the Office of Censorship often overrode the PCA, blocking films that the PCA approved.

In 1942, the Office of Censorship convinced Republic Pictures to shelve *Fu Manchu Strikes Back*, because of its offensive Chinese stereotypes. And in an ironic twist, Frank Capra's frequent screenwriter Robert Riskin found himself working for the Office of Censorship and banning a film for export that he had written, *Meet John Doe* (1941), presumably because it shows Americans ready to embrace socialism and susceptible to crypto-fascist manipulation.

The Office of War Information (OWI) had the broadest mandate to oversee the American film industry. The OWI presided over all domestic and exported US media, including Hollywood, which reported to the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures. Like the PCA, the OWI reviewed ideas, scripts, and rough cuts of films. The OWI, however, was more proactive than the PCA. The OWI not only commented on filmmakers' work; its staff often fed filmmakers war details, script ideas, and even prepared speeches that they hoped would be included in films. The OWI produced a weekly newsreel of its own, but its primary job was to monitor existing film companies. In 1942

the Bureau of Motion Pictures issued *The Government Informational Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*, which expanded on many of the political directives already in the Production Code. The manual cautioned against expressing racism, religious intolerance, and class prejudice, warning that such sentiments “are manifestations of fascism and should be exposed as such.” The OWI wanted to ensure that the United States appeared to be a tolerant democratic society.

The OWI staff turned out to be early fans of the cult classic *Casablanca* (1942). Michael Curtiz directed *Casablanca* for Warner Bros. in between *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and *Mission to Moscow*, and it seemed to capture the country’s mood in a more offhanded way than the two calculated efforts that bookended it. *Casablanca* is the story of American expatriate cafe owner, Rick (Humphrey Bogart), who has to decide whether to help a French resistance fighter, Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), escape to America. As an added complication, Rick is in love with Laszlo’s wife, Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman), and, moreover, like America itself, Rick is trying to remain neutral even as Nazis, French soldiers, embattled North Africans, and European refugees pass through his cafe. But Rick is continually drawn into political disputes, because he

cares about the people involved. It may be the perfect expression of Hollywood's personalization of the war.

The OWI viewed *Casablanca* on October 26, 1942, just before the British invasion of North Africa, and the OWI notes praised the film for showing that individual sentiments, like Rick's love for Ilsa, needed to be subordinated to fight against fascism. The OWI also liked that the film depicts America as a haven for the dispossessed: everyone in Rick's cafe is in search of exit visas to America, the land of freedom. Finally, the OWI praised Rick's brief mention of his own history fighting against fascism in Spain and France. Rick's and America's reasons for getting involved in the war did not start with Pearl Harbor but stem from a long history of fighting for democracy on a global scale. The perceptive film viewers at the OWI recognized the allegorical implications of *Casablanca*, as would most 1940s audiences.

The OWI's purview stopped at the border of Latin America, which belonged to Rockefeller family scion Nelson Rockefeller's Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA). Rockefeller had his fingers in many pies—business, politics, culture—and he would go on to have a long political career as governor

of New York and vice president of the United States. During World War II Latin America became an important export market for Hollywood and an equally important political battleground for the US government discouraging fascist and communist infiltration. With European distribution cut off, Hollywood ramped up production of films for export to Latin America, and Rockefeller was eager to help. In addition to overseeing content like the OWI did, Rockefeller's agency also offered insurance for films made in or for Latin America. Orson Welles traveled to Brazil to make a film under the CIAA terms. But the project fell apart, like so many of Welles's other projects, and eventually some of his footage was released a half century later as *It's All True* (1993).

Rockefeller's most dramatic intervention was made on behalf of the Disney studio. When Walt Disney failed to settle a strike with his animators, Rockefeller stepped in as CIAA head. Rockefeller sent Disney on a diplomatic tour of Latin America, where he showed films and talked to audiences. While Disney was away, a federal mediator negotiated terms for the end of the strike. Once the animators were back in the studio, they set to work making films for Latin American audiences, including *Saludos Amigos* (1942) and *The Three Caballeros*

(1944).

These wartime cultural agencies were controversial from the time of their inception. Was their mandate to insure that media disseminated accurate information about the war, or did they constitute an American propaganda ministry? During the House of Representatives' budget hearings of 1943, Republican members of Congress worried that FDR had created his own personal propaganda agency, which had the potential to be invaluable during future elections. The House cut funding to OWI completely. The Senate agreed to close the OWI's domestic branch and the Motion Picture Bureau, but it restored some funding to the overseas branches, which countered enemy propaganda through the end of the war. After the war, the State Department took over some elements of the wartime agencies, and the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act made it illegal for the US government to propagandize its own citizens.

Chapter 5

The blacklist and the Cold War

Hollywood's foray into politics during World War II had major repercussions in the postwar period. It led to standoffs with conservative factions in Congress, fractured the Hollywood community, and prompted the studios to take extreme actions to win back American moviegoers.

HUAC in Hollywood

Even before the United States entered the war, anti-New Deal Republicans in Congress attacked the film studios—singling out Warner Bros.—for pushing

the country toward military intervention. After the war, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, or HUAC, became a standing Congressional committee. Opportunistic members of Congress rode a wave of anticommunism and renewed the offensive against Hollywood. The committee hearings were media spectacles, creating front-page headlines and, in the 1950s, a television media circus as well.

Outspoken anticommunist Senator Joseph McCarthy is often mistakenly thought to have been a member of HUAC, but he had his own Senate committee that investigated alleged communist infiltration of the government. Although McCarthy did not participate in the Hollywood hearings, the vicious personal attacks for political gain that came to be called McCarthyism destroyed many promising Hollywood careers, and it boosted the careers of politicians, including future presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.

At first, HUAC went after the activities of the Anti-Nazi League and looked for communist messages in *Mission to Moscow* and other films from the Soviet cycle. But the committee members soon learned that taking on major party donors like the Hollywood moguls was politically messy, and locating hidden communist messages in

films was not a clear-cut task.

The committee quickly turned to questioning well-known actors and directors, whose celebrity attracted public interest to their cause. During the hearings, writers, directors, actors, and producers took the stand, forever changing their personal and professional lives. It was a period of soul searching, strained friendships, and often dire circumstances. More than a half century later, HUAC testimony continues to reverberate in the film industry and beyond.

One of the first Hollywood representatives to talk to HUAC was Eric Johnston. Johnston assumed the leadership of the MPPDA—by then renamed the Motion Picture Association of America—from Will Hays. Testifying before HUAC, Johnston read a reasonable statement, claiming that there were in fact some communists in Hollywood and that it was their right to hold radical political views as long as they did not advocate the overthrow of the US government. Johnston may have been both technically and morally right. There were communists in Hollywood (three hundred by one count), and the First Amendment gave them the right to voice politically unpopular views. But as Johnston would later learn, these were extreme times, and even basic constitutional rights were in limbo.

HUAC continued to call witnesses from all sides of the issue. On the government's side were "friendly" witnesses, who corroborated HUAC's assertions that communists lurked in the movie industry. Friendly witnesses were largely drawn from the ranks of a Hollywood group called the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals. The organization included conservative anticommunist actors and directors Gary Cooper, Cecil B. DeMille, Clark Gable, Leo McCary, Adolphe Menjou, Ronald Reagan, Ginger Rogers, Barbara Stanwyck, King Vidor, and John Wayne.

Of the friendly witnesses only one, Ayn Rand, affirmed that Hollywood films harbored procommunist messages. Rand was born Alisa Rosenbaum in Russia and immigrated to the United States with her family. She appeared as an extra in Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927) and worked as a screenwriter in Hollywood before achieving bestseller success as a novelist and free market evangelist.

On the stand, Rand wore a gold pin shaped like a dollar sign, just in case her capitalist allegiances were in doubt. And she explained to the committee that MGM's 1944 *Song of Russia* promoted communism

simply by showing happy Soviet citizens. When Representative John McDowell asked her, jokingly, “Doesn’t anybody smile in Russia anymore?” Rand answered humorlessly, “Well, if you ask me literally, pretty much no.”

Rand had hoped to give more extensive testimony, showing that procommunist messages could also be found in William Wyler’s popular postwar drama about American soldiers returning home, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), in addition to films explicitly about Russia. But the committee decided not to take on a commercially successful film and limited her to talking about *Song of Russia*.

If HUAC refused to give Rand the megaphone, she took it herself. In response, Rand wrote a pamphlet called *Screen Guide for Americans*, which was published by the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals and reprinted on the front page of the *New York Times* arts section. The pamphlet taught filmgoers how to identify procommunist messages in films, and it showed lefty screenwriters how to keep their films red, white, and blue.

Other friendly witnesses all agreed that no

communist propaganda had yet appeared in Hollywood films, although they worried about the possibility. HUAC questioned Jack Warner about *Mission to Moscow* more than once. If any Hollywood film was pro-Soviet, it was *Mission to Moscow*, with its unquestioning defense of Soviet premier Joseph Stalin, who personally endorsed the film after its release.

Jack Warner had different explanations for the movie on different occasions. First he blamed it on Washington but then recanted the position that the government had been involved in the film's production. Later, Warner explained that *Mission to Moscow* had been made to have a particular effect at a particular moment in the war just as US ships carried food and arms to Russia, an American ally at the time, but might not have aided the Soviet Union later. For the most part, HUAC went easy on Jack Warner, who was instrumental in encouraging the committee and the FBI to investigate Hollywood.

When identifying communist propaganda in films proved complicated, HUAC switched its focus to hunting communists in the industry, and the committee quickly learned to go after the biggest names it could find. When HUAC subpoenaed American icon Walt Disney as a friendly

witness, he was still stinging from his animators' strike. Before the committee, Disney swiftly brushed aside any suggestion that his studio's films could be tinged with communism, claiming that Russia had sent back Disney cartoons, because "they didn't suit their purposes."

Instead, Disney used the public forum to tell the members of Congress how one malcontent in his studio, Herbert K. Sorrell, who Disney thought was probably a communist, stirred up all of the trouble that led to his animators' strike. Disney told a cautionary tale of Sorrell threatening his business and upsetting his employees, who were now, he was glad to say, back to being "100 percent American." It was a well-dramatized parable about how even a single communist could infiltrate and destroy the most American of institutions—exactly what one would expect from a Disney story. Ironically, when Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein visited Disney's studio in 1941, he praised it as a perfect workers' collective, with everyone laboring toward the same goal.

Ronald Reagan, then head of the Screen Actors Guild, offered testimony that perfectly echoed Disney's. Even before testifying, Reagan had been an active informant for the FBI, alerting the agency to potential

communists in the industry. On the stand, Reagan claimed that a “disruptive element”—he avoided the word communist—had infiltrated the guild and attempted to use unscrupulous tactics to convert other members. Reagan inferred that as much as 10 percent of the guild had such disruptive leanings. Later, Reagan insisted that all guild members take an oath expressing their loyalty to the United States, as did many other businesses at the time. Cecil B. DeMille lobbied for the Directors Guild to adopt a loyalty oath, but his motion failed, and it provoked lifelong feuds. Although Reagan worried about the presence of communists, he assured HUAC that there would never be any left-wing propaganda in Hollywood films.

Conservative Hollywood leaders like Warner, Disney, and Reagan were valuable, but reformed communists were the most prized friendly witnesses. When suspected communists were called before the committee they had to answer two questions. First they were asked, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?” It was not enough to admit membership, however. If a witness admitted Communist Party affiliation, he or she also had to name other members (“name names”). These were often names of people already known to be involved with the

party, but it could still be very troubling to point a finger at a friend and colleague. Some of the famous actors and directors who admitted party affiliation and named names of other communists include actors Lee J. Cobb and Sterling Hayden (who deeply regretted his decision), director Edward Dmytryk, and writer Clifford Odets.

HUAC questioned some of the biggest names in Hollywood, but the committee ran into a public relations disaster when it subpoenaed Lucille Ball, the star of the top-rated television show *I Love Lucy* (1951–1960). Just months before her HUAC testimony, the episode of *I Love Lucy* in which Lucy gives birth drew a larger audience than President Eisenhower's inauguration the following week. If the committee drove everyone's favorite program off the air, it would certainly have made HUAC unpopular. Ball had not been a member of the Communist Party, but, following the lead of her socialist grandfather, in 1936 she filed a form indicating that she intended to register to vote as a communist.

Even this flimsy leftist history was enough to destroy an actor in the anxious climate of the 1950s. But Lucy was special, and HUAC arranged for her to give private testimony in Los Angeles, in which she told her story and named some already well-

known communists. When *I Love Lucy* was filmed later the same day (the show was filmed rather than broadcast live like most others), Ball's costar and husband Desi Arnaz told the studio audience, "The only thing red about [Lucy] is her hair, and even that is not legitimately red." In a brilliant ploy, Arnaz gave the quote to reporters, and he changed the conversation from politics to hair dye. And both HUAC and Lucille Ball retained their popularity.

The most outspoken friendly witness—and still the most controversial—was Elia Kazan. Kazan had been a member of the Communist Party for two years in the 1930s, and he had a brilliant career as a left-leaning theater and film director. When called to testify before HUAC, Kazan did more than admit to his past party membership and identify eight of his former colleagues in the Group Theater as communists; Kazan also launched a campaign to justify his actions. At his own expense, he placed an ad in the *New York Times*, claiming that it was every American's duty to share information they might have about the "dangerous and alien conspiracy" afoot.

Kazan then went on to make *On the Waterfront* (1954), in which Marlon Brando plays a dockworker who informs on his corrupt

friends and relatives. The powerful film makes the ethical case for informing, and it responds to *The Crucible* (1953), a play written by Kazan's old friend and collaborator Arthur Miller. Miller's allegorical play about the Salem witch trials explores how mobs (like those that supported HUAC) can distort reality and be led to a collective evil that no one person might be capable of on their own. In contrast, *On the Waterfront* celebrates whistleblowers who tell the truth for the benefit of society even when it may hurt them personally.



8. In this scene from HUAC friendly witness Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (Columbia Pictures, 1954), Marlon Brando makes the case for informing.

Of course Kazan benefited from his testimony. He went on to create an impressive

body of films after appearing before HUAC, but he did it by supporting a movement that destroyed the careers of his friends and colleagues. And both Kazan's actions and the HUAC investigations remain an open wound in Hollywood. When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awarded Kazan an honorary Oscar in 1999, half of the audience clapped while the other half sat on their hands.

The Hollywood Ten and the blacklist

Many witnesses were not friendly, and the members of the Hollywood community who took the other route, who stood up for their First Amendment rights or who refused to incriminate others, lost the opportunity to work in the film industry; they were blacklisted. For the most part, they did not go on to make more films, and their legacy is their resistance to an unjust crusade rather than a long filmography.

The first group of unfriendly witnesses is known as the Hollywood Ten. In 1947, HUAC called before the committee eleven witnesses who indicated that they would refuse to answer questions. When playwright Bertolt Brecht returned to his native Germany, ten unfriendly witnesses

were left: Alvah Bessie, Herbert J. Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo. This group revealed the anti-Semitic zeal that drove Mississippi congressman John Rankin and other HUAC members. Six of the Hollywood Ten were Jewish, and three of the remaining four had recently completed *Crossfire* (1947), a cinematic condemnation of anti-Semitism. Personal prejudice mixed with political anxieties to make a potent combination.

Progressive Hollywood celebrities rallied to the defense of the Ten. John Huston, William Wyler, Danny Kaye, Lauren Bacall, Humphrey Bogart, and others formed the Committee for the First Amendment. They flew to Washington and marched to protect the constitutional rights of the Ten. But when the witnesses spoke before HUAC, they did more than just refuse to answer questions; they were belligerent and alienated some of their most ardent defenders. HUAC found them to be in contempt of Congress, and studio leadership quickly distanced themselves from the Ten.

Executives met with Eric Johnston at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York and released what became known as the

Waldorf Statement. The new statement contradicted Johnston's earlier defense of freedom of speech and thought. It said that the studios would "not knowingly hire a communist," and with that the blacklist began, banning anyone suspected of subversive affiliations from working in Hollywood. It gave the studios broad latitude to dismiss employees regardless of contracts or collective agreements with talent guilds. Many moguls, like Jack Warner, truly feared communist infiltration. But the anticommunist hysteria also increased the studios' power over their employees.

Two members of the Ten, John Howard Lawson and Dalton Trumbo, appealed their contempt conviction in court, convinced that the Supreme Court would have to uphold their constitutional rights. But the US District Court of Appeals in Washington, DC, upheld the contempt charge. The Lawson-Trumbo decision referenced the high stakes of the political atmosphere, as if that somehow put the Constitution on hiatus. "No one can doubt in these chaotic times," the decision read, "that the destiny of all nations hangs in the balance in the current ideological struggle between communist-thinking and democratic-thinking peoples of the world." It went on, like the 1915 Mutual decision had, to give Hollywood special status as an opinion maker. The court

described movies as “a potent medium of propaganda,” and the decision warned that Hollywood “plays a critically prominent role in the molding of public opinion.” Hollywood filmmakers’ free speech rights were once again deferred. The Supreme Court, newly stacked with conservative justices, declined to hear the case, and the members of the Hollywood Ten each served six months to a year in prison.

With the Supreme Court’s tacit endorsement, the blacklist was in full force, and it destroyed the careers of a generation of talented writers, actors, directors, and producers. Blacklisted director Joseph Losey moved to England, and director Jules Dassin moved to France. They were the lucky ones who found work outside of Hollywood. Screenwriter Lester Cole worked in a warehouse, and screenwriter Sidney Buchman operated a parking garage. Other stories ended in tragedy. Television star Philip Loeb committed suicide after being blacklisted, and rising star John Garfield died of a heart attack brought on in part by the stress of being blacklisted.

The blacklist was not a published list of names. Hollywood trade papers tried to compile lists of communists, and a 1950 book, *Red Channels*, attempted to identify communists in the broadcast industry.

Many people named in these lists were called before HUAC and stopped working. But the blacklist was more insidious. Studios distanced themselves from writers, actors, and directors based on reputations. Appearing as an unfriendly witness before HUAC would certainly destroy someone's reputation. But whispers about connections and affiliations were also enough to damage careers.

Some writers were able to continue working through fronts, nonblacklisted writers who sold scripts for them. Fronts took a big risk associating with blacklisted writers, and the ruse could be difficult to keep up in the small company town of Los Angeles. Martin Ritt's 1976 film *The Front*, starring Woody Allen, perfectly dramatized both the appeal and dangers of the situation. The front in the film, played by Allen, enjoys fame, money, and success on the work of the blacklistees until coming under HUAC scrutiny himself.

One of the most successful writers to use fronts and pseudonyms was Hollywood Ten member Dalton Trumbo. Trumbo had been a highly regarded writer before the blacklist. His HUAC defiance had serious ramifications, and he spent time in jail, ran out of money, and moved to Mexico at one point. But Trumbo was dedicated

to his craft. He kept writing, and he sold scripts through many fronts, accepting far less in payment than he would have using his own name and selling to producers directly.

Eventually, Trumbo's covert writing became an open secret. At the 1956 Academy Awards, the screenwriting Oscar went to Robert Rich for *The Brave One*. When no one came to the stage to accept the award, everyone in the industry seemed to know that Trumbo was the real author. Trumbo even suggested as much in a television interview the next day. Four years later, and thirteen years after his HUAC testimony, Trumbo became the first blacklisted writer to receive screen credit. His name appeared in the credits of two films that year, *Spartacus* and *Exodus*. Dalton Trumbo broke the Hollywood blacklist, but the blacklist itself never officially ended. Many blacklisted writers, actors, and directors never worked in the industry again.

Cold War films

In the 1950s, Hollywood fought communism onscreen and off. Shortly after the MPAA issued the Waldorf Statement in 1947, all of the studios set to work producing explicitly anticommunist

films. These were rarely big-budget, star-studded movies, but they served a number of political and commercial ends. They demonstrated the studios' commitment to fighting communism just as Hollywood was coming under attack as a haven for left-leaning artists. The anticommunist cycle also connected with American Cold War anxieties, and the films in the cycle were generally successful at the box office and occasionally on the awards circuit.

Between 1942 and 1953, Hollywood released dozens of film about the “red menace” of communism, including William Wellman's *Iron Curtain* (1948); *The Red Menace* (1949); *The Red Danube* (1949); *Conspirator* (1949), starring Elizabeth Taylor and Robert Taylor; *My Son John* (1952), directed by outspoken Hollywood conservative Leo McCary; *Red Snow* (1952); and *The Steel Fist* (1952). By 1953, director Samuel Fuller's noir crime film *Pickup on South Street* showed, communist spies had replaced gangsters as generic Hollywood villains.

Other films took up Cold War themes and the blacklist more metaphorically. *Force of Evil* (1948), directed by Abraham Polonsky and starring John Garfield shortly before they were blacklisted, used number running as a metaphor for capitalism. The

opening shot of Wall Street solidified the metaphor. The film presents a dark view of a world in which the only choices are between different corrupt institutions. The Production Code Administration—always worried about strong political films—insisted that the film have a moral center, which is provided ambiguously through a voice-over. The PCA also rejected the screenplay's framing device of telling the story through witness-stand flashbacks, because in 1948 that would have brought HUAC too clearly to mind for audiences, just as the filmmakers had intended.

A cycle of westerns, always a highly allegorical genre, took up the politics of informing and mob rule, although today it is possible to watch many of these films without noticing any reference to the blacklist at all. In Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) a posse forces an outlaw to identify a tavern owner, played by Joan Crawford, as a conspirator, even though most of the townspeople know she is innocent.

The Gary Cooper western *High Noon* (1952) also addressed Hollywood's response to HUAC. If there were political debates on the set of *High Noon*, they must have been heated. Cooper had been a friendly witness before HUAC and was a founder of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of

American Ideals. Other actors in the film, Lloyd Bridges and Howard Chamberlain, were later blacklisted. Screenwriter Carl Forman was also slated to be blacklisted, but apparently Gary Cooper successfully fought to keep him employed by the studio until after the film was over. Producer Stanley Kramer was an outspoken liberal, yet he chose to feature a theme song by reactionary Republican Tex Ritter.

With the full political spectrum represented both in front of and behind the camera, one might expect *High Noon* to be a film with mixed messages, and indeed it is an allegory open to multiple readings. In the film, Cooper plays the lone marshal of a western town, trying to protect it from three villains. The key line of the film comes when Cooper enters the church and asks for help, only to be met with excuses from everyone in the community. In a 1950s western, a marshal asking for help was a major genre twist, a sign of weakness in the lone hero. The most common reading of the film, and the one that prevailed at the time, is that Cooper represents a subpoenaed witness left to fend for himself against the HUAC villains. But in another interpretation, the villains could stand in for communists, with Cooper as the defender of American values. The meaning may have been up for debate, but the film

was clearly seen as a Cold War allegory, and John Wayne called it the “most un-American movie” he had ever seen. Wayne responded by making *Big Jim McLain* (1952), which glamorized HUAC investigators.

Westerns had always been canvases for ritually working through American transformations. In the 1950s, science fiction films also seemed to absorb the anticommunist anxieties of the period, with popular cycles of alien invasion films and giant insect infestations. Director Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) quintessentially exploited one of the most frightening (to their opponents) aspects of communists: they look like everyone else. Communists are only different on the inside, and even your neighbor or boss or child could be a communist. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* plays on this fear, and in the film aliens grow pod people to replace townspeople with identical doubles who take orders from the aliens.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, anticommunist fears became the subject of parody. In the musical *Silk Stockings* (1957), Fred Astaire woos Soviet functionary Cyd Charisse, and everyone succumbs to the excesses of Parisian nightlife. In Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), paranoid general Jack D. Ripper, played by former re-

luctant friendly witness Sterling Hayden, worries about communists neutralizing his virility through fluoridation. And Cold War cultural diplomacy reached the level of high farce in Billy Wilder's *One, Two, Three* (1961), in which James Cagney graduated from playing 1930s gangsters and World War II soldiers to starring as a Coca-Cola executive-diplomat in Cold War West Berlin.

During this period, Charlie Chaplin shed his Little Tramp character and became a politically engaged filmmaker for the sound era, making some of his funniest and most trenchant films. He also had the last word in Hollywood's standoff with HUAC. In 1940, *The Great Dictator* lampooned Hitler as a setup for a humanistic call for peace delivered at the film's climax. In *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), Chaplin plays a Bluebeard character, serially marrying and murdering women across Europe. Just when he seems morally reprehensible, Verdoux turns the tables, explaining that, compared to the mass murderers leading the world's nations, his killing spree makes him an amateur.

In his penultimate film, *A King in New York* (1957), Chaplin finally gets to act out the HUAC testimony that he avoided in real life. HUAC subpoenaed Chaplin several

times, but he never took the stand. Chaplin did, however, have continued friction with the FBI, and when promoting his film *Lime-light* abroad in 1952, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service insisted that Chaplin be interviewed before returning to the United States. Chaplin refused the interview and stayed out of the country for two decades.

In *A King in New York*, Chaplin plays a deposed monarch living in New York. The king is mistakenly suspected of being a communist, because of his associations, and he is summoned to appear before HUAC. On the way to the committee room, Chaplin gets his finger caught in a hose, which is still attached to him as he raises his hand to take the oath before the committee. When someone connects the other end of the hose to a water faucet, Chaplin inadvertently drenches the committee members, and his view of HUAC becomes clear: they are all wet.