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How the Film and Television Blacklists Worked¹

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published in a slightly different form in *Film & History Annual For 1999* (CD ROM).

During the Cold War Red Scare the entertainment industry practiced widespread blacklisting of alleged Communists, former communists and communist sympathizers, though formal and official blacklists did not exist. Screen writers and film actors and directors were especially affected, but so too were workers in the fields of television and radio. Because live theater was not as vulnerable to boycotts and picketing as movies and television shows, blacklisting rarely occurred in that medium. The Actors' Equity Association and the Theater League of New York formulated an anti-blacklisting agreement and scrupulously abided by it.

In most cases, often for legal reasons and fear of reprisals from unions, industry officials denied the existence of a formal blacklist. Instead, the entertainment industries relied on lists compiled by such private citizen groups as the American Legion, which

published *Firing Line* and whose Syracuse Post #41 published the newsletter *Spotlight*; The Wage Earners Committee, Aware Inc., and the American Business Consultants, a firm formed by three former FBI agents who published the magazine *Counterattack* and the 1950 booklet *Red Channels*. Private individuals who influenced industry blacklisting decisions included Rabbi Benjamin Schultz, who directed the American Jewish League Against Communism; Laurence A. Johnson, a Syracuse businessman, and Vincent Hartnett, who wrote the introduction to *Red Channels*, assembled and distributed *File 13*, a more comprehensive sequel to *Red Channels*, and formed Aware, Inc. which published a series of bulletins that were distributed to industry executives.¹

These private individuals and citizen groups, in turn, relied on various public documents that identified individuals and alleged Communist and Communist-front organizations. The most frequently cited government sources used for documenting Communist affiliation were Attorney General Tom Clark's letters to the Loyalty Review Board, released in 1947 and 1948, which identified subversive and Communist front organizations; reports from the 1938 Massachusetts House Committee on Un-American Activities; the 1947 and 1948 reports from the California Committee on Un-American Activities chaired by Senator Jack Tenney; and, of course, the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), an on-going Congressional committee that conducted hearings concerning the Hollywood film industry in 1947 and 1951-54, as well as additional hearings concerning the entertainment industry throughout the 1950s.

HUAC's Appendix 9 was another significant government source for documenting

evidence of Communist affiliation. In 1944 J.B. Matthews and Benjamin Mandel prepared Appendix 9 for the Costello subcommittee of HUAC. It was a seven-volume compilation of some two thousand pages listing names of thousands of people who participated in alleged Communist-front organizations between 1930 and 1944. When the full committee learned of the report it ordered Appendix 9 restricted and all existing copies destroyed. Consequently, no copies resided during the Red Scare in the Library of Congress or other public repositories. However, prior to the committee's order, several of the seven thousand printed copies had been distributed to private people or organizations, including the editors of *Red Channels* and such government agencies as the FBI, the State Department and Army and Navy Intelligence. Thus, in most instances people cited for inclusion in Appendix 9 did not have access to it in order even to verify that they were, in fact, listed in the document or to review the source behind the accusation.²

Each new round of Congressional hearings produced additional names of potential blacklistees. As a consequence of the 1947 HUAC hearings the so-called Hollywood Ten, who refused on Constitutional grounds to testify about their political activities and affiliations, were denied employment throughout the industry, as were several of the other unfriendly witnesses whom the committee subpoenaed but never called. Also blacklisted were signers of a Committee for the First Amendment advertisement on behalf of the Hollywood Ten, 208 actors who had bought an ad supporting the unfriendly witnesses and attacking HUAC, and signers of an *amicus*

curae brief submitted to the Supreme Court requesting that it review the case of the Hollywood Ten.

In November 1947, fifty members of the Motion Picture Association of America, the Association of Motion Picture Producers, and the Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers gathered at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York and issued what became known as the Waldorf Statement, deploring the Ten for performing "a disservice to their employers" and impairing "their usefulness to the industry." The statement declared, "We will forthwith discharge or suspend without compensation those [of the Ten] 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 declared under oath that he is not a Communist." The statement also asserts, "We will not knowingly employ a Communist or a member of any party or group which advocates the overthrow of the Government of the United States by force or by any illegal or unconstitutional methods....To this end we will invite the Hollywood talent guilds to work with us to eliminate any subversives; to protect the innocent; and to safeguard free speech and a free screen wherever threatened." Finally, the statement maintained that "Nothing subversive or un-American has appeared on the screen," deplored the absence of a national policy, and called upon Congress to enact legislation "to assist American industry to rid itself of subversive, disloyal elements."³

In 1951, after the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the convictions of contempt of Congress against the Ten, who had argued unsuccessfully that their First Amendment

protections prohibited Congress from asking about their political activities, a new round of Hollywood hearings began and an American Legion list was published. J.B. Matthews, compiler of Appendix 9, wrote "Did the Movies Really Clean House," for *American Legion Magazine*. The article named 66 movie personalities whom Matthews identified as having Communist sympathies. (Seventeen were listed solely because they had signed the *amicus curiae* brief and several others appeared solely because they had signed an advertisement in *Variety* criticizing HUAC.⁴ One result of the article was a meeting between the American Legion and the studio heads, who feared widespread boycotting and demonstrations against movies featuring alleged Communists listed in Legion publications. The studios relied on bank financing of films, and banks were reluctant or outright unwilling to finance films that were certain to be boycotted. Consequently, the studio heads felt pressured to accept the Legion's list of industry personnel cited for Communist affiliations.

With the understanding that access would be limited to top studio executives and the named individuals, the Legion presented the studios with a list of some 300 people, with the proviso that "you check for any factual errors and make such reports to us as you deem proper." According to the Legion the list was almost immediately abused. It quickly became a *de facto* blacklist.⁴ Those listed were given an opportunity to write a letter explaining the charges against them. If they refused to write a letter, they were fired. The letters from those who cooperated were submitted to the American Legion, which passed judgment on their acceptability. Problematic cases were sent to George

Sokolsky, a Hearst newspaper journalist based in New York who possessed sterling anti-Communist credentials and an apparently sincere desire to assist those who truly repented their earlier political errors. Sokolsky either rendered a decision or consulted union leader Roy Brewer and/or actor Ward Bond in Hollywood. Brewer was the first and Bond the second president of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, an anti-Communist organization. Of those who wrote letters, only 30 failed to produce satisfactory explanations. However, individuals who were not currently under contract were never asked to write a letter and were thus not informed of their presence on the American Legion's list or given an opportunity to clear themselves, if they chose to.

Other *de facto* blacklists include HUAC's 1952 and 1953 annual reports, which released 212 names of individuals in the movie industry named by cooperative "friendly" witnesses as having been Communists. Evidence suggests that in having witnesses name the names of associates in Communist-supported activities, HUAC was intentionally trying to create a blacklist by introducing the names into the public record.⁵ Whether or not this was the case, the HUAC listings functioned like a blacklist, as all 212 lost their livelihood in Hollywood by having their contracts either canceled, bought up, or not renewed. Once without a contract, they were unable to get new work in the Hollywood studios under their own names for several years.

Red Channels was the predominant list used by the television and radio industry. Published in 1950 as a special report by *Counterattack* magazine, the booklet, which

was enthusiastically welcomed by Ed Sullivan, among others, listed 151 men and women who the editors claimed were linked with a variety of past or present Communist causes. The editors cited the links in each instance and documented them with citations from the Attorney General's list, HUAC, the California Un-American Activities Committee, American Legion reports, and other government and private sources. Because *Red Channels* began with a disclaimer stating that the listed activities or associations may have been free of subversive intentions and because *Red Channels* purported only to report factual information from the public domain, the publication avoided legal liability for damages suffered by people whom it listed. As Merle Miller documents in *The Judges and the Judged*, *Red Channels* consistently failed to include anti-Communist activities in which the people it had listed also participated, and it made little effort to authenticate the accuracy of the sources it invoked. Among other sources, *Red Channels* relied freely on HUAC's restricted and unreliable Appendix 9.

Once listed in *Red Channels* an individual became "controversial" and therefore undesirable for employment. Even after blacklisted individuals were cleared, industry officials were often leery of hiring them because their reputations remained sullied or because their careers had lost momentum while they were removed from the public eye, and they no longer held popular appeal. Ireene Wicker, star of *The Singing Lady*, a children's television show that ran on ABC from November 1948 to August 1950, is a prime example. *Red Channels* erroneously listed her as having signed a petition on behalf of a Communist candidate because the Communist Party newspaper, *The Daily*

Worker, had reported her name among the signatures. Only after her lawyer obtained a court order to identify all 30,000 names on the petition did the editors of *Counterattack* admit that a mistake had been made, although they blamed *The Daily Worker*. Nonetheless, despite newspaper, radio, and television reports of her clearance, Wicker's show was not picked up again. Her agent claimed that the response he repeatedly received was, "What about *Red Channels*? We wouldn't touch her with a ten foot pole."⁶ Other prominent names listed in *Red Channels* include Larry Adler, Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, Howard Duff, Jose Ferrer, John Garfield, Will Geer, Morton Gould, Dashiell Hammett, Lillian Hellman, Judy Holliday, Lena Horne, Langston Hughes, Burl Ives, Gypsy Rose Lee, Philip Loeb, Burgess Meredith, Arthur Miller, Henry Morgan, Zero Mostel, Jean Muir, Dorothy Parker, Edward G. Robinson, Anne Revere, Hazel Scott, Pete Seeger, Artie Shaw, William Shirer, Howard K. Smith, William Sweets, Louis Untermeyer and Orson Welles.

One technique anti-Communist groups used effectively to ensure that the radio and television industries would comply with the blacklists was to threaten boycotts of the sponsoring companies' products when a show featured someone who appeared on one of the lists. Rabbi Schultz used this technique with considerable success. Laurence Johnson, who owned a chain of grocery stores, also employed another effective strategy. He would send letters informing the sponsor of the performer's alleged Communist affiliations and then suggest placing a questionnaire next to the company's products in the grocery store. The proposed questionnaire would ask if consumers

wanted any part of their purchase price to be used to hire "Communist Front talent." The consumer would then mark "Yes" or "No." Fearful of this kind of adverse publicity, the sponsors would then pressure the broadcast company to fire the performer.⁷

People who appeared on a blacklist could become eligible for employment if they were "cleared." Clearance usually involved either providing indisputable evidence that the basis for the blacklisting was incorrect (as in a case of mistaken identity when two people shared the same name) or that the listed individuals repudiated their earlier activities, publicly repented their mistakes, and made some public show of their support of the anti-Communist effort. Those who were called to testify before HUAC were also expected to "name names"--to identify others in the industry who had belonged to Communist-front organizations or participated in Communist-supported activities. Often the clearance process involved the intervention of well-known, anti-Communist intermediaries, such as Hartnett, Sokolsky, Brewer, Bond, Jack Wren, the security officer at the Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn advertising agency, or Daniel T. O'Shea and Alfred Berry, the security officers at CBS. These men claimed they were performing a beneficial service, did so without remuneration, and typically made themselves easily available to listed individuals. Such "clearance men" were known for their strong anti-Communist sentiments, and certification from the clearance men could make listed individuals acceptable to the organizations that had cited them, and thereby render them eligible for re-employment.

The clearance men met with listed people to learn their side of the story and,

where possible, work out a mutually acceptable ritual of atonement. Among those rehabilitated in this way were Edward Dmytryk, one of the Hollywood Ten who, after reversing his 1947 position, atoned by naming 26 names to HUAC in 1951 and convinced Brewer that "the people who had broken with the Party had to be helped, both because it was the right thing to do and because it hurt the Communist Party."⁷ Brewer concurred and signaled Dmytryk's rehabilitation by arranging a favorable article, "What Makes a Hollywood Communist," in *The Saturday Evening Post* (May 17, 1951). The director returned to work shortly thereafter. Brewer likewise arranged for John Garfield to publish an article entitled, "I Was a Sucker for a Left Hook," as part of a rehabilitation process that was cut short by the actor's death. (Garfield's friends maintained that his fatal heart attack resulted from the stress caused by his blacklisting and his efforts to clear himself.) Brewer also arranged for the clearances of Gene Kelly, Jose Ferrer, and John Huston.

Brewer, Sokolsky, and most of the other prominent clearance men pointed out that they, themselves, had never blacklisted anyone, and they regarded their activity as a humanitarian service that gave employment to people who otherwise would not be permitted to work. On the other hand, anyone who failed to meet their personal standards of political correctness was doomed to unemployment. For instance, Brewer turned down one scriptwriter cited by the American Legion. Although the writer had written the requisite letter answering the charges against him, described his anti-Communist activities, and publicly stated anti-Communist sentiments, Brewer claimed

that his letter was not sufficiently penitent or humble. Even after the writer filed a 64-page document with the FBI listing his political activities, Brewer failed to clear him, and he remained out of the film industry from 1951 to 1955.⁸

The clearing process sometimes required listed individuals to hire the organization that blacklisted them to perform an investigation in order to certify that they were, indeed, "clean." Thus, between selling the lists to government agencies and industries and performing security investigations and clearing operations, some people were able to earn a living from the blacklisting practice, although the most prominent clearance men like Brewer, Sokolsky, and Bond performed their work for free. On the other hand, Ken Bierly, a former editor of *Counterattack*, became a public relations consultant who cleared people. He thus earned money by causing people to be blacklisted and then again by clearing them. Among his clients was Judy Holliday who was listed in *Counterattack's Red Channels*.

Many blacklisted individuals were willing to testify about their own activities but would not testify about others because they did not want their friends or former associates to suffer blacklisting. Such individuals were not usually considered acceptable for clearance from the blacklists because, it was claimed, they were not properly atoning their mistakes and were inhibiting the anti-Communist efforts of the committees. In 1947, the Hollywood Ten were cited for contempt of Congress when they refused to answer HUAC's questions about their political beliefs, citing their First Amendment Constitutional protections. However, in spring 1950 the Supreme Court

refused to hear their appeal, thereby upholding the contempt convictions and eliminating the First Amendment as a viable recourse for subsequent witnesses. The Ten then served terms in federal prison, ranging from six months to one year.

Suspended pending the resolution of the First Amendment question, the HUAC hearings resumed in 1951. In order to avoid the fate of the Ten, some witnesses called during the 1951-52 hearings chose to refuse to answer by "taking the Fifth Amendment." (In 1951, actor Howard Da Silva became the first person to invoke Fifth Amendment protections in the Hollywood hearings.) However, in 1950 the Supreme Court ruled in *Rogers v. U.S.* that individuals could not invoke the Fifth Amendment if they had already testified about themselves. Therefore, witnesses were unable to explain their own past actions without being compelled to implicate other people. In other words, a witness's price for using a committee hearing as a forum for defending his or her views was either to inform on current or former friends and associates or face a jail sentence. Otherwise witnesses had to invoke the Fifth Amendment from the outset and thereby lose the opportunity to make their case for themselves. "Fifth Amendment Communists," as Senator Joseph McCarthy labeled them, were routinely denied employment within the entertainment industry. Among those who refused to name names were playwright and screenwriter Lillian Hellman, writer-producer Carl Foreman, director Robert Rossen, actor Jose Ferrer, and playwright Arthur Miller who, because he did not invoke a constitutional right, was cited for contempt of Congress, fined five hundred dollars, and given a thirty-day suspended jail sentence in 1956.

The television blacklist came to an end when the blacklisters began to become financially liable for the consequences of their listings. In 1956, Texas humorist John Faulk sued Johnson and Hartnett for libel after *Aware, Inc.*, in a case of mistaken identity, inaccurately publicized his alleged Communist associations. Faulk was blacklisted and his radio and television career destroyed. In 1962, a jury awarded Faulk \$3.5 million dollars. Although the judgment was later reduced to \$550,000, the precedent of making the listing organizations financially responsible did much to end the television and radio blacklists.⁹

The film blacklist ended in 1960 when Kirk Douglas, the star and executive producer of Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*, credited blacklisted writer Dalton Trumbo, of the Hollywood Ten, as the movie's writer, using Trumbo's real name. Ever since his blacklisting in 1947, Trumbo had been submitting scripts under the pseudonym Sam Jackson. President-elect John Kennedy crossed American Legion picket lines to view *Spartacus*, thereby lending the credibility of the nation's highest office to the effort to end blacklisting. *Spartacus* went on to earn \$30 million (equivalent to \$243.5 million in 2005) and become one of the top 120 greatest-earning movies in Hollywood history.¹⁰ Also in 1960, director Otto Preminger publicly announced that Trumbo had written his blockbuster film, *Exodus*.

In 1970 Trumbo, who had vehemently attacked HUAC and blacklisting in his 1949 pamphlet "Time of the Toad," received the Screen Writers Guild's highest honor, The Laurel Award. In his acceptance speech he addressed those who were not yet

born or who were too young to remember the Red Scare. "To them I would say only this: that the blacklist was a time of evil, and that no one on either side who survived it came through untouched by evil....There was bad faith and good, honesty and dishonesty, courage and cowardice, selflessness and opportunism, wisdom and stupidity, good and bad on both sides; and almost every individual involved...combined some or all of these antithetical qualities in his own person, in his own acts....in the final tally we were *all* victims because...each of us felt compelled to say things he did not want to say....none of us--right, left, or center--emerged from that long nightmare without sin."¹⁰

However, other members of the Hollywood Ten vehemently disagreed with Trumbo's characterization. Albert Maltz asserted in an interview with Victor Navasky some two-and-a-half years later, "There is currently a thesis which declares that everyone during the years of the blacklist was equally a "victim." This is factual nonsense and represents a bewildering moral position... If an informer in the French underground who sent a friend to the torture chambers of the Gestapo was equally a victim, then there can be no right or wrong in life that I understand. . . . [Trumbo] does not speak for me or many others. Let it be noted, however, that his ethic of "equal victims" has been ecstatically embraced by all who cooperated with the Committee on Un-American Activities."¹¹

Trumbo, who placed the full blame on HUAC itself, replied that he never claimed everyone was *equally* victimized but that even those who informed had been placed in

untenable positions from which they suffered. He subsequently wrote to Maltz, "Whatever their faults, those sixty-odd unwilling witnesses were ordinarily decent people put to a test which you and I have declared to be immoral, illegal, and impermissible. They failed the test and became informers. Had they not been put to the test, they would not have informed. They were like us, victims of an ordeal that should not be imposed on anybody, and of the Committee which imposed it."¹¹

Notes

1. For a more comprehensive discussion of the Red Scare, see my encyclopedia of American Cold War-related literature, film, television, performing arts, fine arts, sports, and popular culture, *Cold War Culture* (New York: Facts on File, 1998).

Other resources for and discussions of the Congressional hearings about domestic communism and their impact on the entertainment industry include Eric Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities: 1938-1968* (New York: Viking, 1971); William F. Buckley, Jr., *The Committee and Its Critics* (New York: Putnam, 1962); William F. Buckley, Jr., *McCarthy and His Enemies: The Record and Its Meaning* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1954); John Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, vols 1 and vol 2 (1956; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1971); Victor Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980); Robert Vaughn, *Only Victims* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972); and Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2nd ed., 1996).

2. Merle Miller, *The Judges and the Judged* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Co., 1952; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1971) 149-161.

3. John Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, vol. 1 (The Fund for the Republic, Inc., 1956), 121.

4. Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, vol 1, 22. Although Though the declared purpose of the 1947 HUAC hearings was to investigate whether Communist agents had succeeded in implanting Communist messages and values in Hollywood films, no significant evidence appeared to support this claim, and HUAC introduced no subsequent legislation to address it.

Ring Lardner, Jr., one of Ten and an acknowledged Communist Party member, elaborated on why the Party did not attempt to insert overt messages into films. In his response to a *New York Times* article claiming that party theorist and fellow Hollywood Ten member John Henry Lawson "used to give his colleagues tips on how to get the Party viewpoint across in his dialogue," Lardner responded in a letter to the editor that Lawson "regarded anything of that sort as a puerile approach to the politicization of screen writing." According to Lardner, Lawson believed a more effective and more meaningful way to make revolutionary films required both the interdependence of form and content and the deeper exploration of human character, especially within groups of people whose characters typically were not well developed in the movies. (*New York*

Times, August 26, 1977, p. 20)

Because of HUAC's inability to locate Communist influence in Hollywood films in these hearings, subsequent hearings changed their focus to the prestige, position and money that the Communist Party acquired in Hollywood. This change in strategy came at the suggestion of HUAC's research director Raphael Nixon. (Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, vol. 1, 93-95. See also Dorothy B. Jones, *Communism in the Movies: A Study of Film Content* in Cogley, pp. 196-304. Jones served as chief of the film reviewing and analysis section of the Office of War Information during World War II.)

5. Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, vol. 1, 124.

6. Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, vol. 1, 125-126.

7. Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, vol. 1, 97-100. See especially discussion of the testimony of Larry Parks.

8. John Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, vol 2 (The Fund for the Republic, Inc. 1956; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1971), 34. In 1954, ABC offered Wicker a Sunday morning slot for a new children's show, but it lasted only one year.

9. Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, vol. 2, 109-110.

10. Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, vol 1, 83.

11. Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting* vol 1., 146-149.

12. Faulk describes his ordeal in his book *Fear on Trial* (1964), which Lamont Johnson made into a 1975 film starring William Devane and George C. Scott.

13. "Screen Source presents: The Top Grossing Movies of All Time." Available online. URL: http://www.amug.org/~scrnsrc/top_grossing_movies_adj.html

14. Quoted in Victor Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980) 387-388.

15. Navasky, 389-390.

16. Navasky, 399.