Hollywood honors Elia Kazan

Filmmaker and informer

Part 2 in a series of articles by David Walsh

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This is the second installment of a three-part series on the honoring of director Elia Kazan by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and its implications. The third part is accompanied by conversations with blacklisted screenwriter Walter Bernstein and director Abraham Polonsky.

Anticommunism and the film industry

"Now I have contaminated myself, thought Hendrik. Now there is a stain on my hand that I can never wash off ... Now I have sold myself ... Now I am marked for life ..." -- *Mephisto*, Klaus Mann

At least from the onset of the great economic crisis of the early 1930s, the authorities in the US have been alert to the potential danger represented by motion pictures. They consistently acted to weaken or, if necessary, suppress any radical or socially critical tendencies in filmmaking. One historian has asserted that the Production Code imposed in 1934 was intended both to exclude sexual conduct and violence from the screens and to "use popular entertainment films to reinforce conservative moral and political values." Adherence to the Code, for example, required such changes that MGM dropped plans to film Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, the author's vision of the rise of American fascism. The Production Code Administration insisted that Fritz Lang's anti-lynching film, *Fury* (1936), not include a black victim or any criticism of the Jim Crow South.

House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was formed in May 1938. Under the chairmanship of Rep. Martin Dies (D-Tex.), the committee pioneered many of the techniques later used by Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy: indiscriminate accusations, pressure on witnesses to name former associates, hearings in which being questioned or mentioned became an indication of guilt, guilt by association. The committee was permanently established by the House of Representatives in 1945; two years later a federal appeals court upheld its power to cite uncooperative witnesses for contempt of Congress.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s HUAC and State Senator Jack Tenney's California Joint Fact-finding Committee on Un-American Activities launched attacks on left-wingers in the film industry. Dies spearheaded an attack on the Federal Theatre Project, which succeeded in getting its funds cut off in June 1939. When leading liberal and radical figures in Hollywood attacked his committee's operations, the Texas congressman told the press that the movie industry was a "hotbed of communism." On February 27, 1940 2,500 people gathered at the Philharmonic Auditorium in Los Angeles to protest this outburst.

The following year, Tenney--Dies' California counterpart--announced that he was going to launch an investigation of "Reds in movies." The inquiry was in part a union-busting operation. Walt Disney, whose operations had recently been struck by cartoonists and animators, was particularly anxious to root out radicals. Tenney's hearings proved something of a fiasco.

In the campaign to suppress *Citizen Kane* in 1941, William Randolph Hearst and the gossip columnists who did his dirty work set an important precedent by smearing Orson Welles as a radical and a "red."

The US-USSR alliance during the Second World War led to a temporary suspension of such activities. Interestingly, on the eve of US intervention, an attempt by right-wing, isolationist senators to probe individuals and groups in Hollywood who were urging American entry into the war, including "anti-fascist" and Stalinist elements, was rebuffed by the film studios and unfavorably treated by the press. The film producers retained Wendell Wilkie to represent them before the Senate Subcommittee. In the war years Hollywood even produced a few vaguely or not so vaguely pro-Soviet films, such as *Mission to Moscow* (1943), *The North Star* (1943) and *Song of Russia* (1944).

The witch-hunt began in earnest in the film industry in October 1947 when HUAC held a series of hearings on the subject of "subversives" in the film industry. After several days of testimony from "friendly" witnesses--anticommunist producers, directors, actors--HUAC began its questioning of "unfriendly" witnesses, the group that became known as the Hollywood Ten. These leftist screenwriters and directors--CP members or supporters--refused to cooperate and were cited a few weeks later for contempt of Congress. (Many of them later served one-year prison terms.) In the face of HUAC's determination, backed up by the media, liberal support for the Ten in Hollywood rapidly evaporated.

Film producers meeting November 24-25 at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York adopted a resolution, declaring, "We will not knowingly employ a Communist." The blacklist was officially on, or, rather, unofficially on, since there was no authoritative list of unemployables. As historian Ellen Schrecker puts it, "writers stopped getting calls for work, actors were told they were 'too good for the part.'" A variety of reactionary organizations, including the American Legion, and Hollywood's own network of anticommunists and informers worked closely with the studios to enforce the blacklist. From this point onward, the combined efforts of the government, industry, and right-wing and church groups did not let up until a systematic purging of left-wing and radical elements from the filmmaking ranks had been effected.

This was only part of a much larger effort by the American ruling class, after decades of political instability, to settle accounts with radicalism and socialism. Anticommunism became virtually a state religion in the United States in this period. In 1947 President Harry Truman established a loyalty program for federal employees and asked the attorney general to draw up a list of "subversive" organizations. Between March 1947 and December

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1952 some 6.6 million government employees were investigated. During that same period, 1947-52, Congressional committees held 84 hearings into "Communist subversion." HUAC provided data on 60,000 people to employers. At least 15,000 federal employees were fired or forced to resign by government loyalty boards. By one estimate 13.5 million Americans came within the scope of federal, state and private loyalty programs. Approximately 20 percent of the working population had to take an oath or receive clearance as a condition of employment.

There was a general ideological assault on the American population--intended to stigmatize concepts such as Socialism, Marxism and Revolution--to encourage their identification in the popular consciousness with infinite wickedness and social catastrophe and, more generally, to cultivate an atmosphere of stifling conformity. A Communist, according to the official version, was un-American, non-Christian, an alien, a creature from hell.

The assault took a variety of forms. HUAC distributed millions of copies of a pamphlet, "One Hundred Things You Should Know About Communism" ("Where can Communists be found? Everywhere.") A dramatic series, based on the career of FBI informer Herbert Philbrick, *I Led Three Lives*, ran for three years on television. Hollywood churned out a series of "anti-Red" films: for example, *The Red Menace* (1949), *I Married a Communist* (1950), *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), *Walk East on Beacon* (1952), *My Son John* (1952), *Big Jim McClain* (1952) and *Trial* (1952).

The last of the Hollywood Ten went to prison in September 1950. The HUAC inquisitors returned to Hollywood in the spring of 1951. As Ceplair and Englund write in their history of political life in the film industry from 1930 to 1960, the new hearings followed a series of events that strengthened the committee's position: "the conviction of Alger Hiss, the fall of China to the Communists, the first successful atomic explosion by the Soviet Union, the arrest of atomic spy Klaus Fuchs in England, the dawning of Joseph McCarthy's special brand of anti-communism, the passage of the McCarran Internal Security Act, ... the outbreak of the Korean War, the Supreme Court's approval of the Smith Act [under which the Trotskyists had been persecuted in 1941] ... and the arrest of the Rosenbergs."

One hundred and ten men and women were subpoenaed during the second set of HUAC hearings from 1951 to 1953; fifty-eight turned informer. The more prominent ones--31 individuals with at least four film credits--gave an average of 29 names to the committee. Most gave way abjectly. The first witness, actor Larry Parks, "reduced himself nearly to groveling and pleading" in face of the committee's demand for names. In the end, after a certain amount of public soul-searching, he identified 10 individuals. The price of hesitation was high. A headline in the *Los Angeles Examiner* two days later read: LARRY PARKS LOSES $75,000 SCREEN ROLE. Parks's career was more or less finished. The lesson was not lost on most of the others who testified.

Four prominent directors became informers: Frank Tuttle, a dependable journeyman, perhaps best known for *This Gun For Hire* (1942) with Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake; Edward Dmytryk, the "Judas" of the Hollywood Ten, director of *Murder My Sweet* (1944) and *Cornered* (1945); Robert Rossen (*Body and Soul* (1947) and *The Hustler* (1961)), who refused to name names in 1951, capitulated in 1953, and was apparently tortured by the decision the rest of his life; and Kazan.

Of the four and perhaps the entire group of informers, Kazan certainly possessed the greatest stature as an artist and intellectual. His decision to collaborate with the witch-hunters had far-reaching consequences. One "director-victim" told Victor Navasky, for his book *Naming Names*, "If Kazan had refused to cooperate ... he couldn't have derailed the Committee, but he might well have broken the blacklist. He was too important to be ignored." Navasky comments: "Probably no single individual could have broken the blacklist in April 1952, and yet no person was in a better strategic position to try than Kazan, by virtue of his prestige and economic invulnerability, to mount a symbolic campaign against it, and by this example inspire hundreds of fence sitters to come over to the opposition."

As it turned out, Kazan did not have it in him to do that. In the various attempts at self-justification he has made over the years, he asserts that matters of principle--opposition to the conspiratorial methods of the Communist Party and the crimes of Stalin--impelled him to name names. In his autobiography Kazan denied doing it "for the money." He writes: "It [saving his career in Hollywood] was not the reason. In the end, when I did what I did, it was for my own good reasons and after much thought about my own experiences."

Testimony from his contemporaries suggests otherwise. Lillian Hellman, not the most reliable of witnesses it must be admitted, claimed that Kazan told her, "I earned over $400,000 last year from theater. But [Twentieth Century-Fox president Spyros] Skouras says I'll never make another movie [if I don't cooperate]." Theater producer Kermit Bloomgarden informed Navasky that Kazan "told me he'd been to Washington and met with J. Edgar Hoover and Spyros Skouras and they wanted him to give names.... He said 'I've got to think of my kids.' And I said, 'This too shall pass, and then you'll be an informer in the eyes of your kids, think of that.'" Kazan refers in his autobiography to Skouras's proposing a meeting with Hoover, but never specifies whether or not it took place.

In that same work, the director makes fairly plain his own frame of mind, citing a diary entry from 1952 that described a conversation with Arthur Miller: "I mentioned that Skouras had implied I couldn't work in pictures anymore if I didn't name the other lefties in the Group, then told Art I'd prepared myself for a period of no movie work or money ... But that I didn't feel altogether good about such a decision. That I'd say (to myself) what the hell am I giving all this up for? To defend a secrecy I didn't think right and to defend people who'd already been named or soon would be by someone else? I said I'd hated the Communists for many years and didn't feel right about giving up my career to defend them."

Some gave names to the Committee with obvious reluctance, a few later repudiated their conduct (actor Sterling Hayden, for example), others were deeply troubled by the decision. Kazan obviously had to see himself acting not out of self-interest, but in defense of principle. Two days after his HUAC appearance, Kazan took out an ad--written, he says in his autobiography, by his late first wife--in the *New York Times* justifying his behavior. It is a fairly filthy document.

Kazan's essential claim is that "Communist activities" represent "a dangerous and alien conspiracy" that needs to be exposed. The American people "can solve this problem wisely only if they have the facts about Communism." He asserts that "any American who is in possession of such facts has the obligation to make them known, either to the public or to the appropriate Government agency." This is apparently what Kazan has done by placing the facts about his own life "before the House Committee on Un-American Activities without reserve."

He explains, in his ad, that up until this point he has refrained from telling his story sooner because he has been held back by "a piece of specious reasoning which has silenced many liberals. It goes like this: 'You may hate the Communists, but you must not attack them or expose them, because if you do you are attacking the right to hold unpopular opinions and you are joining the people who attack civil liberties.'"

This argument, he has come to realize, is "a lie. Secrecy serves the Communists. At the other pole, it serves those who are interested in silencing liberal voices. The employment of a lot of good liberals is threatened because they have allowed themselves to become associated with or silenced by the Communists. Liberals must speak out."

Kazan's membership in the Communist Party has given him "Firsthand experience of dictatorship and thought control.... It left me with an abiding

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hatred of Communist philosophy and methods and the conviction that these must be resisted always."

The contention that the Communist Party was nothing more than a GPU conspiracy is gutter political reaction of the McCarthy type. Budd Schulberg, Kazan's co-informer and screenwriter, tried to put a more exalted twist on his own testimony in conversations with Victor Navasky. He claimed that the tragic fate of Soviet artists motivated him and that he acted to block the growth of a totalitarian movement in the US. The informers, he said, were "premature anti-Stalinists."

The genuine anti-Stalinists, as anyone who has studied the history of this century knows, were the Trotskyists, and they did not discover the cause in 1952. Trotsky and his co-thinkers fought for the regeneration of the Soviet regime and the Communist International from 1923 until 1933, when the latter organization's worthlessness from the point of view of social revolution became manifest, and thereafter for political revolution in the USSR and the building of a new socialist international. Their opposition to Stalinism was of a Marxist character, an opposition from the left. They explained that the regime in the Soviet Union had betrayed the October Revolution and that its crimes did not result from the growth of socialism in the USSR, but from its opposite, the growth of tendencies that would lead to the restoration of capitalism. Subsequent events have vindicated that view.

Marxists in the USSR by the tens of thousands paid for their opposition to the bureaucratic dictatorship with their lives. On the other hand, many of the social types who had denounced the Bolshevik-led revolution in 1917, with its perspective of world revolution, flocked to support the Stalin regime in the 1930s, precisely because it had abandoned the path of social revolution. One has only to remember the support given by such respected liberal organs as the *New York Times* and the *Nation* to the infamous Moscow purge trials of the late 1930s.

Kazan, Schulberg and others aligned themselves with the Soviet bureaucracy and the American party during the era of the Popular Front, when the Stalinists were supporters of Roosevelt and held significant positions in the CIO unions. Stalinists or fellow travelers controlled theater companies, publishing houses and a variety of publications. Kazan and many others like him were never by any stretch of the imagination Marxists, but left reformists. Whether the political evolution of these individuals was predetermined, whether some other prospect might have opened up for them if the Communist parties had not been thoroughly Stalinized, is now a moot point.

Schulberg's notion that oppressed Soviet artists would be served by the strengthening of the American state rested on a fundamental political lie: that American "democracy" and Stalinist "totalitarianism" were deadly enemies. This vulgar, false and self-serving notion served to justify a whole host of perfidious deeds during the Cold War. Schulberg never bothered to explain how ceding the struggle against totalitarianism to Joseph McCarthy, John Foster Dulles, Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, the CIA, the FBI and the US military would advance the cause of human liberation.

What were the consequences of McCarthyism within the US? In his *Times* ad, Kazan claimed he valued "free speech, a free press." Under the cover of pursuing the Communist menace, right-wing and corporate interests consolidated their hold over the media, helping establish a conformist, pro-capitalist climate unlike anything that exists in any European country. The paralyzing narrowness of American political life, with its minuscule differences between two big business parties, can be traced back to this period.

However, for all the rubbish that was produced in Hollywood in the 1950s it would not be correct to argue that the immediate impact of the witch-hunt was the artistic collapse of the American film industry. Classical studio directors, whose careers predated the McCarthy era and who had largely remained aloof from the political controversies of the early 1950s, continued to produce serious works for at least another decade. The generations that have come after them, however, have had progressively less to say and have possessed, in general, neither political nor artistic principles.

In any event, I suspect the powers that be had already grasped that another medium had supplanted film as the most powerful and direct influence on the populace: television. Although some blacklisted writers got jobs in the new industry, under assumed names, as a whole, television programs of the 1950s promoted some of the most repressive conceptions ever advanced about the human condition.

Kazan also pledged his commitment to the "rights of labor" in his declaration. However, eliminating radicals from the labor movement and thereby weakening workers' resistance was a top priority of the McCarthyites. While the ruling class was in no position to drive workers back to the economic conditions of the 1930s, it was determined to render the unions politically harmless. The bourgeoisie was prepared to make sizable concessions in the form of wages and improved living conditions if it could ensure the dominance of a pro-capitalist bureaucracy in the labor movement.

Employers worked closely with various state investigative bodies to identify "troublemakers." Unions that refused to purge CP leaders were expelled; in some industries, mass dismissals took place. In the auto industry, UAW leader Walter Reuther took advantage of the Stalinists' unpopularity due to their role as policemen of the no-strike pledge during the war to whip up a pogrom-like atmosphere against left-wingers.

The overall result of this process was the political neutering of the labor movement and, ultimately, the establishment within the unions and factories of a virtual dictatorship presided over by right-wing thugs. This had immense and disastrous consequences for American society. Working people are continuing to pay, in the form of steadily worsening living standards and a variety of other ways, for their failure to organize themselves as an independent political force and their general acceptance of the framework of capitalism. And there have been consequences for humanity as a whole. After all, would it not have been far more difficult for the American state to implement its foreign policy--from its support for bloody dictatorships in Asia, Africa and Latin America, to its decade-long war in Southeast Asia, to its direct role in mass murder in Indonesia, Chile and elsewhere--without the existence of an entirely docile, pro-imperialist AFL-CIO, an organization, in fact, intimately tied to the intelligence and military apparatuses?

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