

What were the real issues in the Elia Kazan award controversy?

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The decision by the board of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to honor director Elia Kazan, infamous as an informer in the 1950s, at its annual Oscar awards ceremony March 21 provoked considerable controversy. The board unanimously approved the award, but at least two members, including well-known cinematographer Haskell Wexler, later publicly expressed regret about their votes. Blacklisted writers, directors and actors voiced their anger at the decision. Hundreds of protesters demonstrated outside the ceremony.

Inside the hall, estimates varied widely--from one-half to four-fifths--as to what percentage of the crowd refused to stand and applaud Kazan. The expression of disapproval was without precedent in Hollywood history. The award's presenters, Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro, looked uncomfortable. Kazan appeared briefly on stage and disappeared like a thief in the night. From the point of view of those organizing the honor, the whole business was something of a fiasco.

The Academy's decision in January set off a public discussion about the Hollywood blacklist, McCarthyism, the Communist Party and, more generally, postwar American society. Both because it is their general modus operandi to drop any story once it no longer generates obvious headlines, and perhaps because the historical issues raised produced a certain nervousness, the media have ceased discussing the Kazan question. They have done so, of course, without ever attempting to answer the question that supposedly dominated the entire debate: was this award a legitimate tribute to Kazan's art, or did it represent an attempt to rehabilitate the anticommunist witch-hunt?

One indication of the real nature of the issues in the controversy is provided by the character of the response we received at the *World Socialist Web Site*. The articles on Kazan and the Oscars elicited a considerable volume of e-mail responses, both favorable and unfavorable. It would be fair to say that with a few honorable exceptions, those sympathetic to Kazan expressed crude anticommunism.

A few samples will illustrate the point. One reader observed: "The reason the actors were blacklisted was because of their unrepentant and unashamed continued involvement in a political party that was at that very moment engaged in genocide and an openly stated policy of aggression and hostility on a free world.... Hooray for Elia." Another commented: "Socialism and Communism are no more than intellectual sales jobs bought into by the vulnerable and non self reliant by power hungry liars." A

third wrote, in regard to those at the award ceremony who expressed their disapproval of Kazan's conduct: "They will never understand the post war times, nor do they understand the clandestine nature and butchery of Stalinist communism. Kazan was a great film director, has contributed classic films to the industry and deserved the recognition." Yet another wrote: "The [Communist] party was financed and directed by the Soviet's, whose goal was to overthrow the American gov't, and impose a dictatorship.... Kazan should be considered a hero for his actions."

Some were even more forthright. "I wouldn't just blacklist the active communist bastards exposed by the committee. I would have lined them up against the wall and shot the entire bunch of gutter trash," commented one virulent right-winger. "I wish there were more patriots like Kazan in his day," observed another. "Those blacklisted are lucky they weren't banished or executed for treason."

We are not alleging that this sort of frothing anticommunism is representative of the political views of those who supported the award. Not at all. Scorsese, De Niro, Warren Beatty, Vanessa Redgrave and others would condemn the blacklist and Kazan's role as an informer. But that is not the critical issue. These individuals are blind to the more general significance of the decision to bestow the award on Kazan, to what it says about American society and the present political circumstances.

One would like to think that if any of the liberals who did eventually stand and applaud Kazan at the Academy Awards had cast a glance outside the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion on the afternoon of March 21, it might have given them pause. In addition to the five to seven hundred people who were on hand to protest the award, sixty or so individuals had shown up to support the honor. These elements, claiming adherence to the Ayn Rand Institute, the Young Americans for Freedom and the Jewish Defense League, made no bones about their extreme right-wing views, hailing Kazan and the blacklist and denouncing "commies." All in all, a charming crowd. Earlier in the week the local leader of the JDL had attempted to break up a press conference organized by opponents of the McCarthyite witch-hunt.

Nor is it accidental that the most vocal proponent of the award in Hollywood was Charlton Heston, currently head of the National Rifle Association and long identified with the political Right. It should be noted in passing, however, that even Heston in his arguments in favor of the Kazan honor took pains to criticize the blacklist, suggesting that the primary fault lay with the studio

chiefs who capitulated to external political pressure, rather than with Kazan.

And there is the more general context in which the Kazan award emerged. The announcement of the Academy board's decision, after all, came less than three months after the *New York Times* declared itself in favor of "Rethinking McCarthyism," to borrow part of a headline from a commentary that appeared in its October 18 Sunday edition. The collapse of the Soviet Union has certainly encouraged the American establishment to make ever more brazen efforts to defend its postwar policies, and, at the same time, justify its present rightward political lurch.

Taking advantage of prevailing political confusion and a generally low level of historical knowledge, countless academic and media types have rushed into print in recent years arguing that history has vindicated American conduct of the Cold War. It doesn't seem unreasonable to argue that the attempt to whitewash Kazan's contemptible conduct could only have taken place under these specific political circumstances.

Whatever the motives of the board members, there is little doubt that their decision January 7 gave an unmistakable signal to the mass media. The defenders of the witch-hunt wasted no time in setting to work. It would be tedious to cite the great number of pieces that appeared. The arguments, with slightly different emphases depending on whether the particular writer was a "liberal" or a "conservative," proceeded along the following general lines.

Commentators justified the American state's persecution of left-wing elements and Kazan's collaboration with that operation on the grounds that Communist Party members were no more than Stalin's operatives, representatives of totalitarianism and subverters of democracy. They were no better than Nazis, ran the argument, and who would object if an individual had ratted on Nazis? Kazan's motive, to expose this conspiracy, was legitimate and honorable, even if his methods were not. Of course, the House Un-American Activities Committee and McCarthy were distasteful, but politics is "rough stuff" and, anyway, the Communist Party represented such a threat and operated in such secrecy that ordinary methods of political struggle would not have done the trick. References in the commentaries to Kazan's filmmaking, for the most part, came as an afterthought. (Underlying these positions is the thesis, which many of these pundits take for granted, that the October Revolution of 1917 was an illegitimate event, a ghastly tragedy, which now has been overcome with the return of Russia to the path of "normal" development, i.e., capitalist market relations.)

It will be necessary to return to these issues at greater length at another time, but this much might be said here. Contrary to the views of Kazan's supporters, the Communist Party represented a political tendency with a significant following in the American workers' movement, many of whose members had been inspired to join its ranks by the Russian Revolution and the highest ideals articulated by mankind: social equality, justice, an end to oppression of all kinds. Tragically for them and the working class as a whole, the Communist Party by the time of the blacklist had been destroyed as a vehicle of progressive social change. It was a Stalinist party, with a cynical and treacherous leadership, loyal to

the twists and turns of the bureaucracy in Moscow. Nonetheless, many of its members were involved in the great social struggles of the day.

The comparison between CP members and Nazis is reactionary and deceitful. How many fascist writers in Hollywood were able to produce works that resonated within wide layers of the American population? If the Party had simply represented dictatorship and butchery, its supporters could never have found broad public support. The Stalinist degeneration of the CP does not eradicate the historic fact that the latter played a significant role in the political, social and cultural transformation of masses of people in the US. It should be recalled, furthermore, that the real American proto-fascists--Dies, Thomas, Rankin, McCarthy--were leaders of the witch-hunt.

All the blather of liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. about Kazan's principled stand against Soviet totalitarianism cannot conceal a critical political fact: the heyday of American anticommunism did not coincide with the high point of Stalinist terror. American liberals in large numbers endorsed the Soviet regime during the late 1930s, the period of mass purges that saw the virtual extermination of socialist workers and intellectuals in the USSR. The murder of old Bolsheviks and Left Oppositionists did not unduly disturb respectable middle class opinion in the US. At a later period many of these same liberals changed camps and made common cause with the McCarthyites to drive their radical political opponents out of the labor movement, the universities and the entertainment industry and make the world safe for American corporate interests.

Of course, none of those who complacently assert that history has vindicated the anticommunist purge care to look too closely at the consequences of the collapse of the USSR. There is no peacetime precedent for the lowering of living standards, life expectancy and the cultural level now being endured by the former Soviet population. This is not to mention the serious dangers represented by the growth of extreme Russian nationalist and fascist elements, feeding off the generalized economic and political disaster.

In the final analysis, why were the Hollywood leftists persecuted? Because they were followers of Stalin? No, because their left-wing politics, despite their loyalty to a Stalinist party, placed them in opposition to the Cold War political and cultural consensus of the American establishment.

Anyone who wants to delude him or herself and imagine that the Kazan award was no more than a legitimate tribute to his artistic achievement is, of course, free to do so, but the responses of the various segments of American public opinion and the issues that emerged revealed the highly political character of the event.



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