

# Questions and answers on the Hollywood blacklists—Part 1

## An interview with film historian Reynold Humphries

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11 March 2009

*Last month the WSWs posted a review of Hollywood's Blacklists: A Political and Cultural History by Reynold Humphries [The anti-communist purge of the American film industry]*

*We explained: "The monograph treats a number of processes and events in some detail: the bitter union struggles in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s; the first round of Hollywood HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] hearings in October 1947, which brought about the blacklist; the committee's hearings in 1951-1953; the 'Anti-Communist Crusade on the Screen' and the consequences of the purges for its victims."*

*We noted that the anti-communist purge of the entertainment industry in the late 1940s and early 1950s—This disgraceful episode, in which the FBI, ultra-right elements, official liberalism and Hollywood executives all played their parts"—had "far-reaching consequences, not only for the film industry, but American society and culture as a whole."*

*Complex questions are bound up with the witch-hunts. As part of an ongoing process of clarifying those questions, a number of WSWs writers on film—David Walsh, Joanne Laurier, Richard Phillips, Hiram Lee, Charles Bogle and Mile Klindo—put together a series of questions for Reynold Humphries, who was generous enough to agree to an interview by e-mail. He answered at length, and we post the questions and answers in two parts, starting today.*

*There are obviously issues on which we do not see eye-to-eye, but we are convinced that a discussion of the historical and artistic matters at stake is critical in clarifying new generations of film artists and others.*

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*WSWS: Could you say something about the immediately pre-war investigations of Hollywood, including the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) 1940 hearings and the 1941 Senate Sub-Committee War Films Hearing? What were their aims and what were their consequences, if any? Could you comment on HUAC's failure to investigate extreme right and fascistic organizations, such as the KKK?*

Reynold Humphries: In 1940, HUAC's chairman was Martin Dies, a conservative Democrat from Texas. A strong opponent of Roosevelt's New Deal (on one occasion Dies suggested the expulsion of all aliens in order to solve unemployment), once he became HUAC chairman in 1938 he turned his attention to investigating such creations of that period as the Federal Theater, which he accused of using taxpayers' money for subversive purposes. As a result, Congress refused to continue to vote funds and the FT ceased to exist.

Two years later, Dies decided to investigate Communism in Hollywood. However, he was uninformed, unlike HUAC in 1947, which took advantage of the covert support of the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover to determine who the Communists were. Thus Dies had no proof and limited himself to

discussing their political opinions with James Cagney (considered to be on the extreme Left, but not a Communist, because of his support for Socialist Upton Sinclair during the campaign for governor of California in 1934), Humphrey Bogart and Fredric March.

Always a genuine radical, March was forced to leave Hollywood for Broadway, along with his wife, by 1950. Dies gave him the following advice when it came to expressing political opinions, contributing to appeals and signing petitions: "Never participate in anything in the future without consulting the American Legion or your local Chamber of Commerce." With hindsight, this is more sinister than ludicrous.

By 1945, Hollywood was being run by a former president of the Chamber of Commerce, Eric Johnston, representative of corporate America. It was he who was responsible for the setting up of the blacklist in November 1947. The American Legion, long a major force of reaction and bigotry, distinguished itself in 1951 by pinning the Medal of Merit on the proud bosom of Generalissimo Franco, despite the fact that he had allowed Hitler and Mussolini to use Spain as a base for launching attacks on American troops.

Much of the material on HUAC and related matters is to be found in various archives and is not available to the general public. However, an indispensable publication, "A Quarter-Century of Un-Americana" (1963), informs us that various racist, fascist and pro-Nazi organisations and individuals rooted for Dies and his Committee: the KKK, the Silver Shirts, the German-American Bund, anti-Semitic evangelist Gerald L.K. Smith. This support for Dies extended across the Atlantic to the Nazi propaganda Ministry headed by Dr. Goebbels, as the Federal Communications Commission wrote on February 11, 1942 (by which time the US was at war).

So Dies drew a blank and was ridiculed by Hollywood. The same goes for the War Films Hearings, set up at the request of Senators Burton K. Wheeler (of Montana) and Gerald Nye (of North Dakota) to protest against Roosevelt's supposed determination to railroad the US into a war with Germany to support Great Britain. Essentially an isolationist move, the Hearings backfired badly for the Senators. Hollywood rallied behind Roosevelt, as did the press massively. Even the most right-wing commentators, such as Westbrook Pegler, spoke out forcefully against Hitler, and the impression I have on reading the transcript of the Hearings is that things had changed radically since 1939: the overwhelming opinion was one of the danger represented by Hitler.

One must remember that Hollywood was very jittery in 1938 when Warner Brothers announced its film *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, released in April 1939. Hollywood had made a great show of inviting well-known pro-Nazi director Leni Riefenstahl and Mussolini's son in the hope that the latter would agree to co-productions with Hollywood. This produced an early anti-fascist alliance between liberals, radicals and Communists to

denounce such goings-on, but the studios, with the exception of Warner Brothers, were quite happy to dismiss Jews in their service in Germany so that Hollywood productions could be released. Profit was paramount (so to speak).

Although it would be quite wrong to smear all isolationists with the accusation of fascism and anti-Semitism, there is ample evidence to show that Nye in particular deliberately appealed to such elements. His meetings drew supporters of the anti-Semitic priest Father Coughlin and members of the Bund. He had only to mention the names of certain bankers—significantly he always chose Jews—for howls of execration to rise from the assembled guttersnipes.

Left-wing commentator George Seldes (later to be blacklisted, thanks to McCarthy) pointed out nicely that no mention was made of Gentile J.P. Morgan, who was a "good" American in the eyes of isolationists. Which did not prevent Morgan from participating in a failed coup d'état against Roosevelt soon after he came to the White House in 1933. In other words, Nye was wittingly flattering both the basest instincts and reinforcing the fantasy of the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy. I do not remember coming across such anti-Semitism in the speeches of Wheeler, but he was clearly a tacit accomplice of Nye's obscene posturings.

By 1947, the climate had changed radically again, as it did between 1948 and 1951 when HUAC returned to Hollywood. In the weeks following the Hearings of October 1947, when the "Hollywood Ten" were questioned by J. Parnell Thomas (as the Republicans had the majority in Congress, a Republican automatically chaired HUAC, and Thomas had been a member in 1944 when Dies was still chairman), various remarks and incidents show anti-Semitism and fascism as dominant factors.

Thus Pegler (*Los Angeles Examiner*, November 7, 1947) attacked a favorite target, Danny Kaye (a leading liberal and member of the Committee for the First Amendment), who "didn't give exactly his all during the war," then indulged in a spot of anti-Semitism by giving the actor's real Jewish name. On November 10, the *Hollywood Citizen News* published a report of a rally for the Hollywood Ten held in Los Angeles. Organized by one of their lawyers, Robert Kenny, it drew 6,000 people. On the platform was one O. John Rogge, who had been fired by the Attorney General "for releasing without authority a report on fascist activities in the US."

On December 1, the *Los Angeles Times* quoted Representative McDowell (R. PA) to the effect that the sub-committee of HUAC he chaired "had failed to find any Fascist or Fascism in this country worth investigating." Three days later, the *Los Angeles Daily News* reported that Chairman Thomas was "irked" by this statement by McDowell, adding that HUAC would be investigating "assertedly fascistic organizations" and would be calling Gerald L.K. Smith. He was never called.

But let us return to HUAC itself and two of its members, Rep. John Rankin of Mississippi and Robert Stripling, the Committee's Chief Investigator. The former, a Democrat from the Deep South, is still an embarrassment to Cold War warriors and contemporary witch-hunters because of his over-the-top anti-Semitism. Yet he was just more extreme than most. Thus, just as Rankin defended Nazi military leaders after the war on the grounds that they were being persecuted by a "a racial minority" (i.e., Jews), so white supremacist Stripling stepped in before the war to prevent two Nazi secret agents from being deported. (And readers might be interested to learn that an earlier Chief Investigator for HUAC, Edward F. Sullivan, was sentenced to 15 years for wartime sedition, while the next Chief Investigator, J.B. Matthews, was a peddler of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion"; later he edited the newsletter of the John Birch Society.)

The fact that Rankin was a chronic and certifiable paranoiac can be seen from the way he protested about the blood given to soldiers needing urgent transfusions, without distinguishing between Negro and white blood. This, for Rankin, was yet another attempt "to mongrelize this

nation."

Lest people believe such ravings were limited to racist Southern Democrats, let us turn to Rep. Francis Walter, chairman of HUAC from 1955. A Democrat representing Pennsylvania, he co-authored with another reactionary Democrat, Senator Pat McCarran of Nevada, an Immigration Act designed to maintain "traditional racial balance." When there were protests, Walter dismissed them as "professional Jews shedding crocodile tears for no reason whatsoever."

However, it would be true to say that Southern Democrats on the Committee were the most egregious when it came to pro-fascist and anti-Semitic statements. Thus, both Rankin and fellow Southerner John Wood from Georgia, chairman from 1949 to 1953, hailed the KKK as "100% American." And in 1945, member Wood launched an investigation into "subversion" in the press. One of his criteria for defining subversion was criticism of Spain's fascist leader Franco.

As I show in my book, support for the Spanish Loyalists was the criterion for identifying radicals when HUAC returned to Hollywood in 1951. On August 20, 1955, Mississippi Senator and segregationist James Eastland, then chairman of the Senate Internal Security Committee and owner of a large plantation in a state where laws and intimidation prevented all but 5 percent of Negroes from voting, told a White Citizens Council: "You are not obligated to obey the decisions of any court which is plainly fraudulent." The "court" in question was none other than the Supreme Court, whose decisions are binding on all American citizens and which, under its chief justice, Earl Warren, had just given a ruling to the effect that segregation was unconstitutional. So Eastland was preaching sedition. Unlike the Ten and many other Communists in later years, he was not indicted.

In 1946, 22 members of Yale Law School wrote to President Harry Truman: "There are alarming signs that persecution for opinion, if not curbed, may reach a point never hitherto attained even in the darkest periods of our history. With it, we may expect racial, religious and every other kind of bigotry...." Within a year, Truman's Loyalty Oath produced precisely that.

WSWS: *Do you have any thoughts on the degree to which individuals such as Martin Dies, J. Parnell Thomas and Richard Nixon, for that matter, were motivated by either ideological anti-communism or opportunism, or both? What about J. Edgar Hoover, who features prominently in your book?*

RH: The philosopher Slavoj Zizek has made an interesting remark on McCarthy: the Senator was right about the danger Soviet Communism represented to US financial and political hegemony, but that was not why he made such warnings. What does this mean and imply?

As a good Lacanian, Zizek is making a crucial distinction between the content of a statement and the subjective reasons underpinning the making of said statement, between a statement and the enunciative position of the subject. In other words, we can say that McCarthy was sincere in warning American citizens about Communism, but that he launched his anti-Communist campaign with other implicit aims in mind that suited his various supporters.

These aims would include: preventing any organization of labour by radicals (= Communists, whether they were or not); blaming the Democrats for everything from WWII to the loss of China in order to brand them as incompetents at best and traitors at worst; brand as dissidence, and hence as "Communism," all attempts to defend such civil rights as free speech; drive a wedge between various ethnic and religious communities so as to pre-empt any attempt to present a coherent progressive platform in favor of social change; reinforce the business community so dear to J. Parnell Thomas (who wanted "more business in government and less government in business"). Obviously, the list could be extended, but it is indicative of the climate of the time that liberals went along with this new consensus, as if there were no discrepancy

between what McCarthy said and the reasons why.

Similarly, Hollywood trade unionist Roy Brewer [right-wing official of the International Alliance of Theatrical State Employees—IATSE] opposed Communism, not because it was a threat to democracy, but because it threatened the cozy set-up within the industry that gave power to people like Brewer at the expense of the workers (and here I'm thinking of the studio hands, rather than the well-heeled actors, writers and directors). Significantly, once he left Hollywood, Brewer found a nice job, courtesy of President Ronald Reagan, with whom he had collaborated so effectively from 1947 on (to Reagan's credit, I should point out that in 1946 he was warning about the danger of fascism in America, due to attempts by an extremist Veterans' Association to discriminate in favor of WASP veterans at the expense of Negroes, Catholics and Jews).

Everything Dies said and did was arguably determined by his inherent Southern racism and opposition to the New Deal. As we know, Southern Democrats and the Republican Party saw eye to eye on this. Nixon saw which way the wind was turning and was interested solely in seizing power. By 1950, he was being wined and dined by the new Hollywood, as unprincipled and opportunist as ever. I am reminded of a remark made after Watergate to the effect that the only surprising thing about Watergate was that people should be surprised: "Nixon's been a walking encyclopedia of malodorous political practices for 25 years," i.e., since his success in prosecuting Alger Hiss and taking a leading role in HUAC.

Hoover is a different kettle of fish. Basically he was a true conservative: any person who questioned the social and economic status quo, be they a civil rights worker, a trade unionist or a Hollywood liberal, was immediately tarred with the brush of dissidence which was but a short step from Communism. He brooked no questioning of his own all-powerful position but was perfectly ready to undermine Truman, and violate the Constitution by communicating to HUAC information illegally obtained.

As the leading expert on the FBI, Athan Theoharis, has shown, Hoover was so obsessed by the fear of radical activities that he forgot the FBI was also in the business of fighting gangsterism and instead concentrated all his energies, and those of his agency, on fighting what he saw as Communism. The paranoid activity of spying on one's neighbors to make sure they were "good Americans" was raised into the noblest of acts in the opening of the anti-Red film *Walk East on Beacon* (a film which Hoover helped to make), where people are encouraged to write to the FBI if they feel John Doe is behaving suspiciously.

Hoover investigated and bugged whomsoever he saw fit, and this pathology, a form of voyeurism (and I would suggest that this dimension of Hoover's character is more pertinent than the eternal gossip concerning his homosexuality and cross-dressing, inasmuch as it was part and parcel of the paranoia of the Cold War), could obviously be given full rein during WWII where there were genuine spies in abundance.

Whatever their motives, both Wheeler and Nye signed a document entitled "A Warning to America" concerning emergency legislation giving ever more power to the FBI. Others who signed included Dashiell Hammett (who went to prison rather than answer questions from HUAC that would have endangered the lives of opponents of Franco in Spain), Ernest Hemingway, Carey McWilliams (a radical who never caved in), Upton Sinclair, Donald Ogden Stewart (blacklisted during the second round of Hearings) and—Eleanor Roosevelt.

WSWS: *The WSWS review of your book raised questions about the nature of the Second World War and the Roosevelt administration and the national-patriotic attitude of Communist Party members and supporters in Hollywood toward the war and the administration, reflected in their film work. Any thoughts on that?*

*While we're at it, what about those in the film world peddling illusions in the Democrats and Obama today?*

RH: As I write in my book about the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Stalin was simply being pragmatic by signing it: he could not deal simultaneously

with the open hostility of the US and Europe (Britain and France happily collaborated with Nazi Germany in the thirties, and the examples of complicity with fascism were there for all to see) and an attack from so powerful a nation as Hitler's Germany. The CPUSA had no such excuses: one could defend Stalin as a good Party member (or as a non-Party member capable of analyzing the situation) and still claim that the anti-fascist struggle had to continue. That would have been an internationalist stance.

Documents held in the Southern California Library for Social Study and Research show the ambiguity of the CPUSA. During the Nazi-Soviet Pact, they denounced Roosevelt as a warmonger acting at the behest of bankers like J.P. Morgan and against the interests of the international working class. By early 1942, they were denouncing Germany's "fascist barbarism" and calling for an all-out war against it. Most liberals, understandably, never forgave the CPUSA for this, which doesn't justify liberal cowardice at the end of the decade.

In other words, the CP in 1941 had to adopt a line that was clearly different from that adopted by Wheeler, Nye and the isolationists generally. The CP's allies, unsurprisingly, were not convinced. So the turnaround in 1941 had to be accompanied by something other than a mea culpa that would have implied that Stalin was wrong too! Thus the CPUSA became super-patriotic. This had two sides, one positive, the other negative. I know you're sceptical about this, David, but I would still insist on the emphasis on the collective in the war movies written by Communists such as Cole, Lawson and Maltz. And in the best films, such as *Sahara*, the collective goes way beyond the war to a political reflection on class and democracy.

At the same time, the CP played down the material needs and the very nature of social relations on the workplace in the name of the war effort: strikes were strictly verboten. Even more dubious—it is, after all, possible to ask for a collective sacrifice in the name of the struggle against fascism, provided the proletariat is not alone in making it (sounds familiar in 2009, doesn't it?... )—was the way the CP applauded the persecution/prosecution of Trotskyists who "threatened" the war effort through strikes. Within a short time, the CP was to be treated in an identical fashion, an indication of the Party's blindness towards its own objective political place in US society: claiming to be revolutionary but yearning to be accepted.

I would be careful about comparing Hollywood's Democrats in 2008 and Communists in 1942, if only because Roosevelt was right to prosecute the war against Japan and Germany. Obama is clearly going to go on perpetrating the war crimes of Bush. However, I suspect there is a parallel, but not perhaps where you see it: this would lie in an overarching need to believe in something, causing people to close their eyes to anything contradicting this. That is a religious position. Similarly, we must not lose from sight that Communists everywhere still believed that Stalin was pursuing the gains of the Bolshevik Revolution.

The ambiguity of the CPUSA during WWII finds a sort of equivalent in Hollywood today (allowing for the fact that there are crucial differences, as I have just pointed out). Thus, George Clooney can make a film such as *Syriana* and give the financial support necessary for Steven Soderbergh to alternate the *Ocean's Eleven* franchise and a remarkably committed movie on the suffering and alienation endured by working-class America today, *The Bubble*. Yet Clooney is in favor of the "historic compromise" of the SAG. When all's said and done, Hollywood's supporters of Obama are just too much in love with fame and fortune to see the truth.

Take the case of Spielberg. Three years ago, he came out with one of the most extraordinary movies of the decade, *Munich*. It was reported that he had started to make his film on Lincoln and had yet another project lined up right after. What has happened? The Lincoln movie has been postponed (despite this being the bicentenary of his birth!), and all Spielberg has done is yet another *Indiana Jones* movie (for his less progressive chum George Lucas).

Now, he's going to give us his version of *Tintin*, whose creator was a right-wing apologist of imperialism. Incidentally, I find it revealing and disturbing that Indiana Jones should be up against Communists in the latest saga, despite the fact that Communists were not active in South America in the 1950s, whereas many former Nazis had found refuge there, courtesy of the US government. Just what is Spielberg up to? What pressures have been exerted on him, both in Hollywood and without, to return to a safely conservative position and join the other sheep in the fold?

Meanwhile, the Oscar Jamboree has come and gone. Why did Sean Penn win and not Mickey Rourke? Because Hollywood needs to show it's less reactionary than those Californians still in thrall to homophobia, but also because Van Sant is gay: let's all be tolerant! Whereas poor old Mickey, trying to make a comeback like his wrestler, made some regrettable racist remarks about African-Americans some years back that provoked a violent reaction from Spike Lee. Enter Sean, exit Mickey.

By refusing the Oscars to Richard Jenkins and Melissa Leo, Hollywood shows again its indifference to independent movies, especially genuinely inventive and progressive ones like *The Visitors* and *Frozen River*, both of which are infinitely superior to most mainstream products. But the most interesting decision was to reject *Waltz with Bashir* in favor of the Japanese movie. The latter just happens (from what I've read) to be a metaphysic musing on life and death. Like *Benjamin Button*. What a coincidence...! The Israeli film, on the other hand, is even more outspoken than *Munich*: Israel's war crimes against the Palestinians are exposed to public view, and in a movie from Israel, no less!

Mind you, the cinema has given us great works of art on "life and death" in the past: Michael Powell's *A Matter of Life and Death*, Ozu's *Voyage to Tokyo*, Peter Weir's *Fearless* and, especially, Hitchcock's sublime *Vertigo*. I would like to quote the remark the WSWS posted from an Ohio autoworker on February 23: "I have a friend who has cancer. His medication costs \$5,500 a month. Where is he going to be able to find an insurance policy to cover him when General Motors cuts his health care? He might as well drop dead." That's another take on "life and death," but one that won't make it to the silver screen as conceived by Hollywood. *Frozen River*, however, comes close to it, despite the (deliberate?) misreading of the film by Halle Berry (see Hiram Lee's article posted February 24— The 81st Annual Academy Awards: Lifeless for the most part).

*To be continued*



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