

An interview with Larry Ceplair, author of *The Hollywood Motion Picture Blacklist—Seventy-Five Years Later: The biggest consequence ‘was censorship and self-censorship, not officially, but unofficially’*

David Walsh
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Seventy-five years ago this month, the ultra-right House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) opened its infamous hearings in Washington D.C. into “Communist influence” in the film industry.

The hearings led to the indictment—on charges of contempt of Congress for refusing to cooperate with the committee—and the ultimate jailing of the members of the so-called Hollywood Ten, a group of left-wing writers, directors and producers. In the aftermath of the October 1947 hearings, the Hollywood studios initiated a blacklist, first of the Ten themselves (or those of them that were then employed), and ultimately, anyone labeled a “subversive” by HUAC and various anti-communist watchdogs.

Estimates vary, and there was never an official list (the studios, for legal reasons, always denied that any blacklist existed), but approximately 325 screenwriters, actors and directors were banned. The total number of those blacklisted or “graylisted,” partially blocked from working, may have been as high as 500. Among them were some of the most talented and sensitive figures in the film world.

Immense pressure was exerted on individuals under conditions of the Cold War anti-communist hysteria to “name names.” The witch-hunters were implacable. Artists with left-wing histories had the choice of informing on and destroying former friends and comrades or seeing their own lives and careers ruined. This was “Scoundrel Time” in Lillian Hellman’s memorable phrase. Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, which uses the Salem witch trials as a metaphor, captures some of the terror and brutality of the era.

Directly or indirectly, the pressures drove numerous individuals to an early death, by heart attacks, strokes or suicide. Moreover, if one examines the lives and careers of Hollywood performers with an eye to this history, a distinct pattern emerges in sundry cases. X suddenly traveled to England or Europe to appear in or direct films. Y underwent a nervous breakdown in the early 1950s and never recovered his or her equilibrium. Alcoholism overcame Z. Others simply had the artistic or moral stuffing knocked out of them and never did anything challenging again. Many were intimidated into betraying their own best artistic and social instincts. Self-censorship, holding one’s tongue in the interests of self-preservation, became the order of the day.

The full consequences extend far beyond the thousands of personal tragedies. The aim of the HUAC campaign, backed by the FBI and the US state apparatus as a whole, endorsed by the trade unions and official American liberalism, was to purge left-wing ideas and, furthermore, to the greatest extent possible *criminalize* such ideas, to enshrine anti-

communism. A variety of individual ills could be addressed by the movies, but there was to be no suggestion of something fundamentally wrong with American society. The film industry in the US has never recovered to this day.

Sympathy for the blacklist victims should not blind anyone to the disastrous, reactionary character of the policies pursued by the Stalinist Communist Party, which themselves had far-reaching consequences. We have noted before that “the CP and its membership had been profoundly and irretrievably compromised by the crimes of Stalinism.” The Moscow Trials, the GPU murders of left-wing elements in Spain, the Stalin-Hitler Pact and other events left them politically vulnerable. “In a broader intellectual sense, the CP membership had been largely indifferent to theoretical questions and tended to accept Stalinism as a brand of left-wing American radicalism,” we wrote.

The Stalinists’ “Popular Front” policies, which subordinated the working class to the Democratic Party and the Roosevelt administration, rendered the Hollywood left thoroughly unprepared once Washington’s wartime alliance with the Soviet Union ended, “the mask came off and the grisly visage of American imperialism, now the dominant capitalist power, appeared.” The CP had promised “a rebirth of democracy, a New Deal on an even grander and more social democratic scale.” The party’s members and periphery, won on the basis that Communism was “20th-Century Americanism,” found it very difficult, if not impossible, “to stand up to the immense pressures once the tide turned and the Cold War began.”

Larry Ceplair has a lengthy history of writing about the blacklist and related matters. He is the co-author, along with Steven Englund, of *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–60*, first published in 1979, one of the most valuable works on the subject. In addition, he is the author of *Anti-Communism in Twentieth-Century America: A Critical History*, *Dalton Trumbo: Blacklisted Hollywood Radical* and *The Marxist and the Movies: A Biography of Paul Jarrico*. Ceplair is professor emeritus of history at Santa Monica College in California.

In the preface to his new book, *The Hollywood Motion Picture Blacklist: Seventy-Five Years Later*, Ceplair explains that this year marks “the forty-seventh anniversary of my first foray into the archives to write about [the blacklist]. Since then, I have coauthored *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, two biographies of blacklisted screenwriters, dozens of articles and book and film reviews on the subject, conducted many oral histories, and

curated an exhibit at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.”

In addition to the lead essay, “Looking Back,” which considers the “pendulum swing of historiography” in relation to the blacklist, the new book includes pieces on “Jewish Anti-Communism” in the US and Hollywood and the ongoing debate over the “Politics and Morality of Cooperative and Uncooperative Witnesses” who testified before HUAC, 1947–1953. There are also studies of writers Dashiell Hammett, Ring Lardner Jr. (neither of whom capitulated to the witch-hunt) and Isobel Lennart (who did).

In “Looking Back,” Ceplair notes that the “right-wing mythologizers,” the defenders of the Hollywood purges, who have come to the fore since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in particular, “are not interested in facts and definitions; they abhor complexity and nuance. The attitudes or motives of Communists are unwelcome intruders in the simplistic and reductionist world of anti-Communism, in which anyone who dared to oppose the policies and acts of the domestic Cold War was to be demonized.”

Continuing, Ceplair asserts that it is, rather, “the anti-Communists who should apologize for J. Edgar Hoover, Martin Dies, Richard Nixon, and Joseph McCarthy. And if assignment of blame is indeed possible, it is the anti-Communists who must be assigned responsibility for the perpetuation of investigations and proscriptions and the ruined lives of the thousands of people caught up in the jaws of the Cold War juggernaut they assembled and operated. This behemoth emboldened a rogues’ gallery of demagogues to inflate, often for their own agendas, the threat posed to national security by domestic Communists.”

Later, he asks, “What had the motion picture blacklist accomplished, aside from barring approximately three hundred people from their chosen vocation, hastening the exit of hundreds of people from the Hollywood Communist Party, altering the content of movies, and creating an informer subculture in Hollywood?”

Larry Ceplair spoke to the WWSWS recently on a video call.

David Walsh: As far as you know, is there going to be any official Hollywood, film industry or Academy recognition of the 75th anniversary of the blacklist?

Larry Ceplair: To the best of my knowledge, no. The industry made a big deal out of it in 2002. There were effusive apologies from the guilds. I don’t think they’re going to do anything more. Film historian Ed Rampell organized various other blacklist anniversaries. But I haven’t heard anything that he’s doing this time. So I assume it’s just going to pass quietly.

DW: Apart from your own book, *The Hollywood Motion Picture Blacklist: Seventy-Five Years Later*, is there any kind of outpouring of new commentary on the events?

LC: I haven’t seen any. One of the reasons is that, as far as I know, Norma Barzman is probably the only blacklist victim still alive. Marsha Hunt died three weeks ago or so. The victims were the force behind the anti-Elia Kazan protest in 1999 and similar events. They’re gone now, and their surviving children don’t seem that interested.

DW: Do you have any sense of how many people in the film industry, and more broadly, are even aware of what took place 75 years ago?

LC: Very few, I think. There are of course historians and history students, but in the general population, including the film population, it’s a very small number who know about this history. And those who do are divided between those who have been supporters of the “unfriendly” witnesses and those who don’t like them. We’re an aging group, you know. In 10 more years there might not be anybody around to carry on this debate.

DW: How did you come upon this subject and why did it affect you? Why did you begin writing about this?

LC: Well, it was somewhat roundabout. I was living in New York at the

time and New York has a lot of repertory movie theaters. I was going to a lot of movies from the ’30s and ’40s. It just struck me that they were so much better than the movies I was seeing, the current movies.

The *auteur* theory was very big in New York at that time, Andrew Sarris in the *Village Voice* and so on. I started reading books about directors, but I quickly realized that directors don’t really know what they’re doing. They do it in some subliminal, instinctive level. They can’t really explain what they’re doing.

I started looking at the writers as a group, and I realized they were the largest group of blacklisted. That’s how I started studying the events themselves. I thought most of the books I read were really superficial and condescending. I was enough of a historian to know that people don’t get prosecuted and proscribed that way unless they had some substance to them.

My co-author Steven Englund’s stepfather had been a member of the Screenwriters Guild for many years. I said, I think we have an interesting story here about the writers and their politicization. That’s how that started, in the mid-1970s.

DW: In the first essay in the new book you discuss the historiography on the blacklist. You point to the leftward shift in the 1960s and 1970s, which expressed hostility to the anti-communist purges, and then the change that took place, the right-wing backlash in the 1990s, especially following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

LC: One of the major events was the opening of the former Soviet archives, and the release of all those records, which revealed the correspondence between the Communist Parties and the Russians. So these right-wingers said, you see, we were right all along. The Communists were agents of a foreign power and they were out to destroy us. The Cold War was important and correct.

DW: We are the most vehement opponents of Stalinism, but to identify the Communist Party as nothing more than a GPU conspiracy was McCarthyite rubbish. Thousands of people joined the Party, not to support Stalin and the gulags, but to fight racism, anti-Semitism, fascism, capitalism. They were wrong in the party they joined, and their defense of Stalinism discredited and often destroyed them. But some of the most talented people found themselves in that organization.

LC: I agree. The notion that somehow or other, if people hadn’t joined the Communist Party, something would have happened differently in the Soviet Union is just illogical nonsense.

DW: As we noted years ago in writing about Elia Kazan, informers like Kazan never bothered to explain how ceding the struggle against totalitarianism to McCarthy, John Foster Dulles, Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, the CIA, the FBI and the US military “would advance the cause of human liberation.”

LC: That is because they cannot. Their post-facto explanations are flimsy rationalizations of their primal reason for informing: keeping their jobs. The explanations of the unfriendly witnesses are more substantive. I first learned of them, and got some of my inspiration, as a number of us did, from watching *Hollywood on Trial* [1976], which I still think is by far the best documentary on the subject. Around the same time that Steven and I started working, Nancy Schwartz started preparing her book on *The Hollywood Writers’ Wars*. Victor Navasky had also done something on the Hollywood Ten in articles in the *New York Times*, as a sort of prelude to his book, *Naming Names*.

We were not the first, but I think we were among the first cohort to start working seriously on this. No one had gone back to the ’30s and ’40s. That’s what the new group did.

DW: Could you explain a little about the Dies Committee, later the House Un-American Activities Committee, and how it was set up?

LC: Originally, the committee was the brainchild of a congressman from New York. Samuel Dickstein was Jewish and he wanted to investigate the proliferation of fascist groups in the United States in the mid-30s.

Dickstein wanted to investigate these as agents of a foreign power, etc. The committee was originally called the Special Committee on Un-American Activities. Dickstein wasn't named chairman, that went to John W. McCormack, a Democrat from Massachusetts.

McCormack began to shift the committee from looking at fascism, to looking at all "subversive groups." Martin Dies, a right-wing Democrat from Texas, became chairman in 1938, and then it became purely an anti-communist committee. Dies did not seek re-election in 1944. At that point, John Rankin, the Democrat from Mississippi, became the main influence over the committee. When the Republicans won control of Congress in 1946, John Parnell Thomas from New Jersey became chairman.

So Dies was around for about six or seven years and didn't really make a dent. He tried twice to come out to Hollywood during the late 1930s and early 1940s to conduct investigations, but he found no support at that time. On these occasions the studio owners didn't support him. There was no Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, established in 1944, to support him.

DW: Presumably during the war years these failures had something to do with the alliance with the Soviet Union and the policy of the Roosevelt administration.

LC: That obviously dampened anti-Soviet talk, but it never went away. It always remained a subtext. And groups like the National Association of Manufacturers, the Chamber of Commerce, big businessmen, Southern Democrats, they were just waiting for the war to end so they could launch, or relaunch, the Red Scare.

DW: John Rankin was one of the filthiest of the HUAC figures, an out-and-out fascist, a defender of the Ku Klux Klan.

LC: Rankin was a virulent anti-Semite and racist, anti-communist, a man simply without any moral scruple whatsoever. He was important because he was the one who pushed for HUAC to be made permanent and for it to take up the Hollywood investigations again. So a significant but horrible figure politically.

J. Edgar Hoover, of course, is one of the most important figures of the Cold War. He's a spider at the center of this vast web that grew so significantly and became so powerful.

HUAC had its own investigators. They had two investigators who came out to Hollywood on a pretty regular basis and made contact with the anti-communists there. But they kept pushing Hoover for more and he kept saying, no, no, because he just despised the HUAC people. Hoover thought they were latecomers to the game and not very serious. He thought the committee was detracting from the effort, like Joe McCarthy, who he thought was making the anti-communism issue ridiculous, bringing it into disrepute. Finally, in September 1947, Hoover agreed to give them names without, however, handing over the full files.

DW: We have written about the fact that there was a significant change in the situation in the US in 1947-48: "The American political and media establishment's anticommunist campaign had shifted into full gear."

In addition to the HUAC hearings into "Communist influence" in Hollywood in the autumn of 1947 and the eventual conviction and sentencing of the Hollywood Ten, throughout 1948 "the Communist Party leadership in New York City faced prosecution under the Smith Act, which outlawed conspiring to advocate forcible overthrow of the government; in August 1948 congressional hearings (presided over by Richard Nixon) began into accusations that former State Department official Alger Hiss had spied for the Soviet Union; the following summer, indicating the general climate, a right-wing mob broke up a Paul Robeson concert in Peekskill, New York."

LC: You can see the sprouts beginning to come up in 1946, but the major turning point came in March 1947, with the announcement of the Truman Doctrine. And the institution of loyalty investigations of all federal employees.

DW: Could you explain what happened in May 1947 when HUAC came to Hollywood and held closed-door hearings?

LC: A HUAC subcommittee came out with Parnell Thomas. They held closed-door hearings at the Biltmore Hotel and most of the witnesses were of the "friendly" variety. Studio head Jack Warner was one of them. Most of the rest were members of the Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals.

So almost all the information they were getting could be used to issue subpoenas. They also used the trip, I think, to try to intimidate the Motion Picture Association of America, the studio heads, to get them to cooperate. They were saying, you guys really have a problem here. And if you don't do something about it, we will.

Eric Johnson, president of the association, and the producers took the same position they had 10 years earlier, which was, "We have the situation under control. We don't need this sort of thing." But this time around, HUAC wasn't buying it. And so they go back to Washington with a lot of names.

DW: In September 1947, 43 friendly and unfriendly—i.e., left-wing—witnesses were issued subpoenas to appear in October in Washington before HUAC. There were originally 19 unfriendly witnesses, including German playwright Bertolt Brecht, and that was whittled down to 11 or 10, if you exclude Brecht (who left the country). Why were those 10 (or 11) actually called, do you think?

LC: You know, no one really knows. I asked that question to many people, including Albert Maltz, Lester Cole, two of the Ten. And there doesn't seem to be any single rhyme or reason to it. All were male, mostly writers, a significant number were Jewish, almost no one had a war record, which I think is important. The committee didn't want to be seen persecuting war heroes. Three of them weren't Communists at all. Howard Koch, Lewis Milestone, Irving Pichel, none of whom was called. Although Koch ended up being blacklisted anyway.

DW: Like Marsha Hunt, whom we wrote about a few weeks ago. She seems to have just been a principled liberal, never close to the Communist Party. What about the Committee for the First Amendment, the group of prominent Hollywood liberals, who opposed HUAC?

LC: That committee was started by director William Wyler and screenwriter Phillip Dunne, both solid liberals. The Hollywood liberals very much disliked what HUAC was trying to do. But they didn't want to defend the 19 directly; their goal was to bring HUAC into disrepute.

For one thing, they knew that most of the 19 were Communists. They knew that the 19 were probably going to take a position in the hearings that was different from what they wanted to do. The 19 weren't going to be forthright First Amendment defenders. So Wyler, Dunne and company tried to draw a line. They would defend the principle, but not the person, which I think is an impossible line to draw.

Most of them were sincere, naive liberals. Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall are good examples of that. I give them credit for what they initially tried to do.

The Committee for the First Amendment made two national radio broadcasts. They had this well-publicized trip to Washington D.C. They were ineffective. For example, Richard Nixon, when he heard they were coming, immediately flew back to California so he wouldn't have to confront them or deal with them.

DW: Did they do anything in Washington aside from attending the hearings in October 1947?

LC: No. They tried to meet with HUAC and present them with petitions, but they didn't have any success. And, of course, as soon as they got back to Hollywood, the studio bosses called them in and said, stop this. And they did. Humphrey Bogart wrote his famous column for *Photoplay* in 1948, "I'm No Communist," which was horrible.

DW: Yes, whether he wrote it or his agent wrote it, somebody wrote it anyway. But it was a horrible article.

LC: It shows the atmosphere of fear there was at that time. I think a few scenes in *The Way We Were* [Sidney Pollack, 1973] capture that well.

DW: This is something we have written about a number of times—how prepared do you think the Hollywood left was for what hit it?

LC: After May 1947, they began to think that something big was coming and they began to have a series of meetings, preparing the ground of what might be coming. So I don't think they were entirely unprepared, but I think when they received the subpoenas, they were shocked. That was a step beyond what they thought was going to happen.

They were not organized in any real sense. They were in the Communist Party. They were in groups like the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Professions. But it was only after they got the subpoenas that they put together a defense committee.

DW: What was the role of the liberals, the ACLU, organizations like that?

LC: Nonexistent. They didn't do anything of import. The ACLU has a very dicey record during these years in terms of defending communists. There were a large number of liberal anti-communists, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., for example, who made no effort to try and get due process for the Communists.

DW: What role did the unions play?

LC: The biggest union in Hollywood was the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees [IATSE], and it was anti-communist through and through. Roy Brewer, their international representative in Hollywood, was probably the most zealous anti-communist I've ever heard about or met. He went to his grave [in 2006] believing there was still a Communist conspiracy in the United States.

The only union that might have been supportive was the Conference of Studio Unions. But they were caught up in a huge jurisdictional strike confrontation with IATSE and the producers that basically broke their backs. So they really were no help. The [writers, directors and actors] guilds kind of stood back, taking the position that "we don't have a Communist problem," but not supporting the 19.

DW: Obviously, the purging of Hollywood of left-wing forces and the purging of the unions are associated processes. What do you think were some of the broader social and cultural consequences of the blacklist?

LC: I think the biggest one was censorship and self-censorship, not officially, but unofficially. The studios, which always were wary about doing films with a strong social content, became utterly opposed to them. Those who kept their jobs didn't want to do anything to call attention to themselves.

So I think they began to seriously censor themselves. There was a trend of social commentary movies after World War II for a number of reasons. People were hyped by the successful fight against fascism. Many of them had made documentaries during the war. They wanted to come back and do that sort of thing in America.

As a result of that and other processes, there were more social problem films made between 1945 and 1947 than ever before. They were a significant portion of the output. They almost disappear after that. Insofar as you think film is important in creating a dialog, a way of thinking about things, it became a much narrower media form.

The blacklisted writers published a few novels with small publishers, and they published a few periodicals, so they weren't completely silenced. But they couldn't write movie scripts under their own names. I think it had a significant dampening effect on '50s' culture.

DW: Left-wing thought was essentially criminalized. The most interesting artists in Hollywood were not necessarily CP members, although there was a group of writers and also directors such as Abe Polonsky and Joseph Losey. But I agree, the movies made between 1945 and 1951 are the most interesting movies made in Hollywood's history.

Not all of them explicitly political, often they couldn't be, but there's a strong element of opposition, of criticism, along with great texture and

depth. From Orson Welles and John Huston, for example, left figures but not associated with the Communist Party.

There were Max Ophuls' *Caught* and *The Reckless Moment*, Edgar Ulmer's *Ruthless*, Huston's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Welles' *The Stranger* and *The Lady From Shanghai*, Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce*, *Flamingo Road* and *The Breaking Point*, Abe Polonsky's *Force of Evil*, Raoul Walsh's *White Heat*, Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* and *Criss Cross*, Anthony Mann's *Raw Deal* and a hundred lesser-known films. This kind of filmmaking was essentially made impossible. It became almost impossible to make films about contemporary American life. So you went and made Westerns and so on.

LC: Whereas in the '50s, you had almost 50 explicitly anti-communist movies. They didn't do very well, but there they were. I can count on the fingers of one hand the movies that really spoke to opposition. Perhaps *Bad Day at Black Rock* with Spencer Tracy, and *Storm Center* with Bette Davis, as a librarian who gets fired for having the wrong books, and *Broken Arrow*. Not many more.

It became too dangerous to express any criticism of the United States. Sixteenth-century Dutch artists painted landscapes because it was politically dangerous to do anything else.

DW: What is your purpose in continuing to write about these issues?

LC: Because I think the First Amendment is in a very precarious condition. It's been under attack in the United States almost from the very beginning and it's under attack especially today. I think it's incredibly important for people to understand that.

We have a Bill of Rights, but it doesn't mean much unless people are vigilant and defend it. Otherwise, it's just a piece of paper, I think. Vigilance, critical thinking are just crucial. I don't think we have enough of that right now.

DW: Do you plan to continue this work?

LC: I think this is my last hurrah in regard to the blacklist. I don't think I have anything else to say.

DW: How would you define your own politics?

LC: I would say I'm a democratic socialist. I think we need a socialist form of government. But I believe strongly that we have to reach it through some sort of democratic process. You mentioned that you were a Trotskyist. Leon Trotsky is one of my great, great heroes.

DW: So you've read some of his works.

LC: I've read everything that's in translation. *Permanent Revolution* and *Literature and Revolution* are great books. I think the way Trotsky acted in 1917, during the revolution, was genius. I don't think there could have been a Bolshevik revolution without Trotsky. And his commentaries on fascism, during the 1930s, were brilliant.



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