

On the Blacklist: Hollywood Reds and Witch Hunting in the American Motion Picture Industry (1947–1960)

Abstract

At the beginning of the Cold War, the American motion picture industry was struck with a “witch-hunt” that led to establishment of the so-called blacklist. Due to this controversial policy, three hundred “Reds” (actual or perceived members of the U.S. Communist Party) were shut out from work in Hollywood during 1947–1950. The first explanation of this phenomenon can be seen in the bipolarity of the post-war world where the United States took leadership in a crusade against the Soviet Union. One result of this seemingly international crusade was that it also became domestic-followers of the U.S. Communist Party became actual public enemies. A deeper analysis of whole issue, however, requires that other elements must be seriously taken into account. The microcosm of Hollywood, some principles of American thinking and the activities of the Reds themselves provide crucial insights into comprehensively understanding the complexity of blacklisting.

Experience with the Hollywood blacklist included many different aspects. First of all, it was a political battle with the “inquisitors” from the House Committee on Un-American Activities who helped establish the anti-Communist policy in American motion picture industry. However, everyday problems such as how to earn a money, minor social isolation or life in foreign exile became equally important. Finally, the Hollywood Reds also led a long fight against the blacklist. For example, a film titled, “Salt of the Earth” can be seen as a part of this struggle. Another strategy focused on legal battles in court. The famous screenwriter Dalton Trumbo counted on his craftsmanship to help him to get out from under the black market to regular employment in the industry.

The Hollywood blacklist as a phenomenon can also illustrate the complexity of historical memory because interpretation of the past hugely depends on a specific point of view – for example, the perspective of the blacklistedees and inquisitors differed radically. However, a very similar ambivalence also affected historiography which has polarised into two interpretative approaches. In other words, the Reds became both great martyrs as well as fanatical followers of Stalinism. Despite technological progress, even modern Western civilisation in the second half of the 20th Century had its inquisitors, witches and myths.