



# Hollywood's Blacklists: A Political and Cultural History

By Reynold Humphries

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*Hollywood's Blacklists* is a history of the political and cultural factors relevant to understanding the why and the how of the various investigations of the alleged Communist infiltration of Hollywood. What was HUAC? What propaganda role did films play during World War II and the Cold War? What values were at stake in the confrontation between Left and Right that saw the former so resoundingly defeated and expelled from Hollywood? Answers to these and other questions are offered via analyses of the motives of the various players and of the tactics deployed by HUAC to reward collaboration and punish dissent.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

Reynold Humphries' *Hollywood's Blacklists* provides a comprehensive examination of the historical and political ramifications of the blacklisting process and of Communism in the motion picture industry. His section on 'The Background' initially sets up just this, making the debate and dispute accessible even to those not au fait with such knowledge. This section is informative, contextual, and details the inception of these antagonisms as originating in 27 October 1947. This date signalled the day in which screenwriter John Howard Lawson was interrogated by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) over his possible affiliations with Communism. The etymology of the term of the 'blacklist' in Humphries's context--which is used as a focal point in the title--is depicted as directly stemming from these actions in October 1947; Humphries summarizes: 'the Ten being charged with and finally convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to answer the Committee's questions. This refusal and the ensuing condemnation resulted in their employers, the various Hollywood studios, dismissing them in a statement making it clear that Hollywood would no longer wittingly hire known Communists in any capacity. Thus was created the blacklist.' (1) This is used as a departure point, in conjunction with its infiltration into and ramifications of the various facets and relationships in the industry, class and race, depression, cold war, 1950s acts of violence against Communist unionists and political change, which are set up here and will be expanded upon in subsequent chapters. Part I, titled 'Drawing up the Battle Lines' is also split into accessible sub-sections. As befits an initial chapter and a point of departure for further analyses, the Introduction to this part comprises many sections; the first is entitled 'The Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt'. This considers his election in 1932 and 'the New Deal', which was to combat the effects of both the 1929 Wall Street Crash and its attendant Depression, and the convergent reactions to these initiatives; those who were against 'the New Deal' perceived it as having distinctly Communistic affiliations. The Introduction then moves on to 'The Negro Question' and examines racism and its relation to Hollywood, using the 1936 film *The Black Legion*--with its attack on the Klu Klux Klan--as a initial point in which to scrutinize the racist tensions inherent within Hollywood. Humphries states that "Red propaganda' meant 'defending the constitutional rights of Negroes" (11) and comments on the 'crucial [...] role of the South' (11). 'The Apostles of Hate and the Question of Anti-Semitism' follows on from and extends the book's investigation into Hollywood and the hatred and persecution against individuals or groups perceived as 'other'. The extensive final sub-section on 'Fascism, Anti-Fascism and the Liberal-Communist Alliance' again returns to '[t]he attraction of fascism for a number of Hollywood stars and studio moguls' (15). This sub-section positions the debate and the previously mentioned disjunctions within history up until the execution of the Rosenbergs in 1953. Chapter One of Part I concentrates on 'Hollywood and the Union Question' and how '[t]he question of unions in general and Hollywood unions in particular is a vast and [recurring] complex matter' (27). Humphries states that '[i]t was the creation of a union that sowed the seeds of the antagonisms, conflicts and trench warfare that characterised the relations not only between studios and employees in Hollywood but also between unions.' (27) These complexities regarding unions are minutely detailed and culminate with the USA's entry into war with Japan in December 1941. Chapter Two--'The War Years, 1939-1945'--then enlarges Humphries' contention that '[i]f Americans were united from 1941 to 1945, films made in the period 1938-40 showed that anti-Fascism brought together film-makers of very different political opinions.' (40) Two controversial films, *Blockade* (1938) and *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* are then examined before moving on to reactions toward Milton Krims's two anti-Communist films: *The Iron Curtain* and *One Minute to Zero*. Also considered are *The Man I Married* (dir. Irving Pichel, 1940), *The Most Dangerous Game* (co-dir. Irving Pichel, 1932), and *Colonel Effingham's Raid* (1945). Additionally, *Three Comrades* (dir. Frank Borzage, 1938), *The Mortal Storm* (dir. Frank Borzage, 1940) and *Four Sons* (1940) are discussed. John Howard

Lawson and Lester Cole's work are then looked at among and alongside others. The final chapter of Part I is indicative of a subversive new order and is titled 'Hollywood Strikes, the Right Strikes Back'. This title refers to the aggressive strikes relating to Warner Brothers in 1945-6 and the consequent right-wing backlash within the industry which reverberated outwards. Part II, titled, "From the Hot War to the Cold War" shifts the focus and moves the argument along. Chapter Four concentrates specifically on "The Hearings of 1947" and the events in Washington in October of that year which served to "usher in a period of fear, betrayal and a concerted attack on civil liberties" (77). This is sub-divided into "Opening Remarks," "The Hearings," and "The Aftermath" which ends with the fact that these [h]earings and extreme changes had taken place nationally and internationally between 1947 and 1950'(101). The consequences of the Hearings are being discussed in the following chapter, "None Shall Escape: The Hearings of 1951-1953." "The Anti-Communist Crusade on the Screen" opens with and then continues a thorough consideration of the symbolic status of director Edward Dmytryk and writer and director Elia Kazan as well as their testimonies. The final main chapter--"Life (and Death) on the Blacklist"-- includes multiple films and mentions the 1987 documentary, *Legacy of the Blacklist* in addition to remarking on those who died while on the blacklist. Finally, the Conclusion, is a culmination of the previous chapters, including a wide-ranging and large bibliography. It links the arguments of the book to today by embedding contemporary [2008] American events and politics. Humphries's book is insightful and innovative in its approach. The author's readings of films as presented in Hollywood's Blacklists testify to his admirable critical acumen and encourage readers to explore further the historical period along the lines staked out in his book. Owing to the interdisciplinary character of his interpretations, Humphries's book will be useful to readers interested in contemporary film studies and to those interested in American cultural studies. Kate Watson, Postgraduate Tutor, School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University. Kate Watson on Reynold Humphries' Hollywood's Blacklists A", *European Journal of American Studies*, Reviews 2008, [Online], article 6, put online Dec. 01, 2008. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/document3533.html>. Consulted on Apr. 08, 2010. -- Kate Watson *European Journal of American Studies* Hollywood's Blacklists is an elegant study of the florid anti-Communist repression of the American film industry as this affected the lives of the victims and the content of Hollywood films. But it is also living history, a history that comes back to haunt us in a time when the "terrorist" is inserted into the role of Satan in the wake of communism's collapse. Because the persecutory beast was never put down then, it arises anew, and we see all the same themes replayed in different costumes and sets. Reynold Humphries has not only, then, written a fine history, but also a cautionary tale for a new epoch of reactionary repression. Joel Kovel, author of *Red-Hunting in the Promised Land* -- Joel Kovel, author of *Red-Hunting in the Promised Land* Humphries's book is insightful and innovative in its approach. 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Black *American Studies Journal* The finest overview currently in print, of the blacklist era... He also provides one of the best explanations this reviewer has read of the tactics the Hollywood Ten used at 1947 hearings and how their behavior before the House Un-American Activities Committee led many of their supporters to abandon them. The endnotes are excellent. Summing Up: Essential. All readers. -- M. D. Whitlatch, Buena Vista University *Choice* The finest overview currently in print of the blacklist era. -- M. D. Whitlatch, Buena Vista University *Choice* Reynold Humphries' *Hollywood's Blacklists* provides a comprehensive examination of the historical and political ramifications of the blacklisting process and of Communism in the motion picture industry. His section on 'The Background' initially sets up just this, making the debate and dispute

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About the Author

Reynold Humphries is Formerly Professor of Film Studies at the University of Lille

## **Users Review**

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