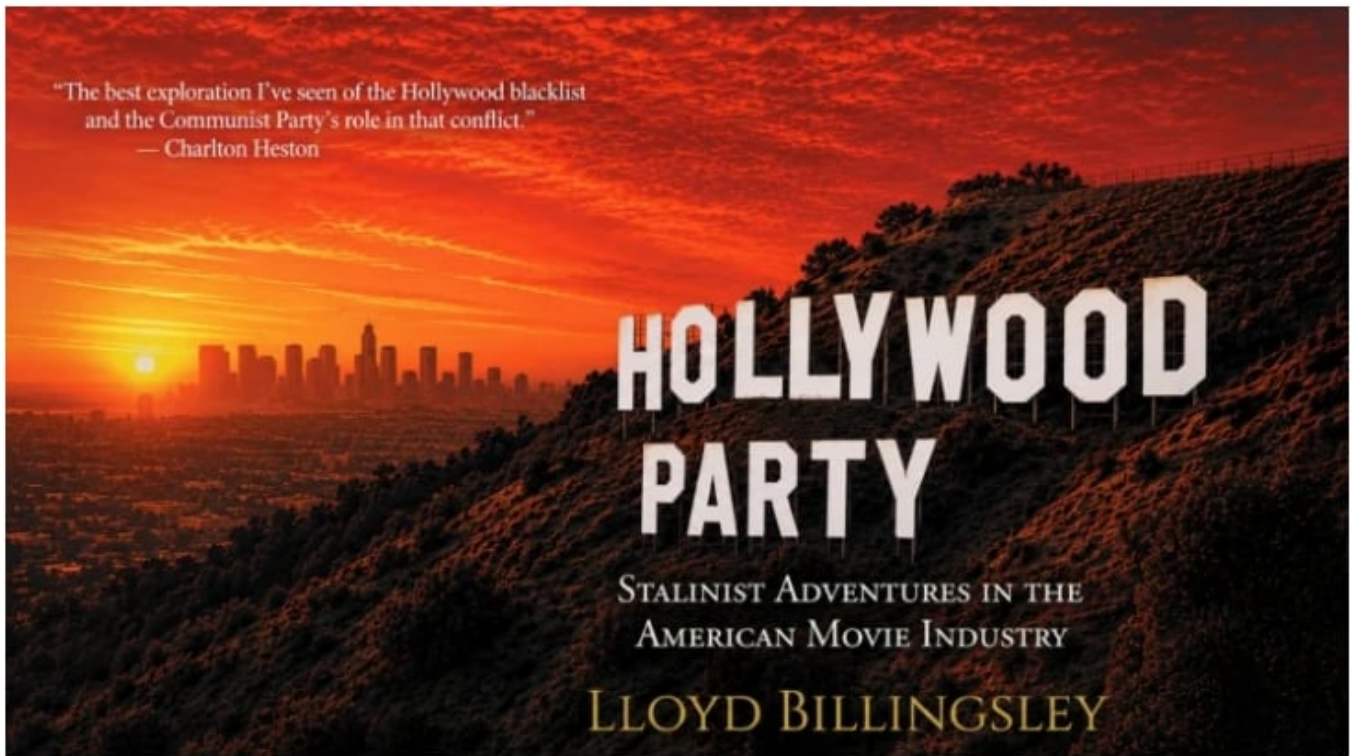


Commies on the Coast

By Bruce Bawer

Lloyd Billingsley's new book tells the real story behind the Blacklist.

Hardly anybody is still alive today who has personal memories of the Hollywood Blacklist of the immediate post-World War II period, let alone of the rabid Communist agitation that took place in the film colony before and during the war. But all of us have lived through an era, now decades long, during which the Blacklist has been repeatedly condemned and its so-called victims celebrated. As Lloyd Billingsley writes in his richly informative new book, [*Hollywood Party: Stalinist Adventures in the American Movie Industry*](#), it took scarcely any time at all after the Blacklist collapsed in 1960 for a new narrative to shape itself: omitting from the story the subversive deeds of the Communist Party, the Hollywood establishment – along with the news media, the publishing industry, and academia – recast the Blacklist as the work of evil “inquisitors” who persecuted “noble idealists.” This tale was told in any number of books with titles like *Hollywood on Trial*, *Inquisition in Eden*, and *A Journal of the Plague Years*.



But even more effective were the movies. *The Front* (1976) starred Woody Allen as a restaurant cashier who agrees to put his name on scripts by several blacklisted TV and movie writers. Significantly, as Billingsley puts it, *The Front* “joins the action in the early 1950s, long after the major events had passed”; in other words, we don’t see the Communist writers at Party meetings, taking orders from the Kremlin; we don’t see them cheering Moscow-choreographed violence intended to cow the studio heads; and we don’t see them plotting ruthlessly, in those wartime and prewar years, to destroy the careers of their non-Communist colleagues.

No, *The Front* depicts these traitors only as victims. In its closing credits, we’re not only told that it was written by Walter Bernstein, directed by Martin Ritt, and starred (among others) Zero Mostel, Herschel Bernardi, and Lloyd Gough, but also that they all were blacklisted. I was 19 when *The Front* came out, but already knew better than to idolize Communists; yet when I saw the movie in a Manhattan theater, the people around me lustily applauded – some of them leaping to their feet – throughout the closing credits.

During the half-century since *The Front*, Hollywood has memorialized the Blacklist in any number of movies and TV dramas. The slant is always the same. So are the deliberate omissions. In *Hollywood Party*, Billingsley tells the full story, which involves charting the ups and downs of an alphabet soup of Soviet front groups and telling innumerable anecdotes in which patriots like Ronald Reagan and Olivia de Havilland take on Stalinists like Will Geer (later the beloved Grandpa Walton on *The Waltons*) and Lionel Stander ("the Party's 'model actor,'" later the gravel-voiced chauffeur on *Hart to Hart*). To try to recount all the specifics in the space of a review would be impossible; better to focus on a representative sampling of the very many fascinating stories, details, and quotations that Billingsley serves up.

For instance, Billingsley writes that while the Communist community in Hollywood shrank to almost nothing after the newly installed Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev publicly revealed the extent of Stalin's villainy, a few true believers remained. Writers Lillian Hellman (*The Little Foxes*) and Bertolt Brecht (*Hangmen Also Die!*) and singer Paul Robeson (*Show Boat*) "shrugged off the Khrushchev revelations," reports Billingsley, while novelist Howard Fast's resignation from the Party left Dalton Trumbo (who had adapted Fast's *Spartacus* for the big screen) "deeply annoyed." Ella Winter, wife of Communist screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart, shifted her loyalty from Stalin to Mao Tse-Tung.

And Hellman's fealty to Moscow outlasted pretty much everybody else's: "In 1969, after the Soviets crushed the Prague Spring, Hellman attacked novelist Anatoli Kuznetzov for fleeing the USSR and seeking asylum in England." When Kuznetzov tried to explain to Hellman that her beloved Kremlin had murdered tens of millions, put innocents on trial, and committed opponents to mental institutions, Hellman apparently chose not to reply. And pretty much nobody minded her stalwart Stalinism: until her death in 1984, she was treated almost universally as a

free-speech icon.

After the Blacklist was over, in fact, the politically sane denizens of the Dream Factory were quick to forgive the machinations of the diehard Communists among them and even to help put their careers back together. Actor Jeff Corey, for example, later remembered the kindness of John Wayne and Pat Boone, both famous conservatives. By contrast, the distinguished director Elia Kazan (*Gentleman's Agreement*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *East of Eden*, *Splendor in the Grass*, *On the Waterfront*), was treated in Tinseltown like the worst kind of criminal because he'd committed what the film community came to regard as the ultimate offense, "naming names": in other words, having flirted with Communism and recognized its utter depravity, he decided to tell the House Un-American Activities Committee which film-industry *machers* had been secret servants of Stalin. Living until 2003, Kazan was denied one major lifetime-achievement award after another: when he was short-listed for recognition by the American Film Institute, producer Gail Ann Hurd exclaimed: "we can't give this award to a man who named names!" Finally, in 1999, in response to an appeal by Karl Malden, whom Kazan had cast in *On the Waterfront*, the Motion Picture Academy agreed to pay tribute to him – a decision that enraged many of Hollywood's veteran Reds.

As Charlton Heston commented, "It was a return to Stalinism." And Kazan is far from the only heretic who has been punished in this post-Blacklist era. Indeed, while the original Blacklist lasted barely a decade, the period since it ended has gone on for more than half-century, and has been a time during which, as Billingsley reminds us, Hollywood has released scores of movies about the Nazis but hardly any about "Stalin's forced famine in Ukraine, the Moscow trials, the Nazi-Soviet Pact," or for that matter about any aspect of Soviet Communism. It is telling that the very best movie yet made about life behind the Iron Curtain, *The Lives of*

Others (2006), is from Germany. After 9/11, I might add, virtually all the Hollywood films about Afghanistan and Iraq were anti-American.

Yes, Billingsley credits Spielberg's *Bridge of Spies* (2015) for showing "footage of the Berlin Wall under construction and border guards gunning down those fleeing to freedom"; he also praises other movies, including *The Secret Ways* (1961), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), and *American Rhapsody* (2001), for including brief glimpses of life under Communism. But nothing on his list remotely compares to *The Lives of Others*. He points out that while a sympathetic film biography of Reagan (which, though excellent, was critically savaged) didn't come along until 2024, *Trumbo* (2015) lauded the devout, richly rewarded Stalinist – who survived the Blacklist very comfortably, thanks to fronts like the one played by Woody Allen – as a free-speech martyr. It's all lies, lies, lies, and Billingsley exposes them valiantly one by one. But don't expect this terrific, truth-telling tome to be made into a major-studio movie anytime soon.

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