

Introduction

At a *bon voyage* party for Ayn Rand in January 1926, before she left Russia for the United States, a gentleman approached her and said: “When you get there, tell them that Russia is a huge cemetery and that we are all dying.”¹ For much of her life, Ayn Rand told us.

She did so when, in the 1930s, she gave anti-Soviet speeches to a Hollywood becoming increasingly enamored of the Soviet Union. And she did so in her first novel, *We the Living*, which ripped the leftist veil off the Soviet dictatorship and its hostility to human life. Toward the end of that novel, the heroine—who wants desperately to escape Russia—promises a relative: “I’ll tell them about everything. . . . over there . . . where I’m going . . . I’ll tell them about everything . . . it’s like an S.O.S. . . . And maybe . . . someone . . . somewhere . . . will understand.”²

After achieving success with her next novel, *The Fountainhead*, Rand continued to send out this S.O.S. about the misery of Soviet “life,” hoping that someone, somewhere, would hear it. In October 1947, over twenty years after leaving Russia, she went to Washington, D.C., to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), then investigating Communist infiltration into the motion picture industry—an industry in which she had worked for many years. “My coming here is not a patriotic duty,” she told a reporter in Washington at the time, “so much as it is something I wanted to do, part of what I’m trying to say.”³ Part of what she was “trying to say” was that dictatorship—and at the time, that meant the Soviet Union and Communism most of all—is evil, dangerous, and contrary to the interests and fundamental principles of America.

Unfortunately, and contrary to what they had led her to expect, the HUAC asked Rand solely about the film *Song of Russia* (MGM, 1944).

This book is about *Song of Russia*, and Ayn Rand’s HUAC testimony on it. In part 1 I present a synopsis of *Song of Russia* (chapter 1), then discuss how it was made (chapter 2) and how it was received after its release (chapter 3). In part 2 I look at Rand’s life (chapter 4), discuss her opinion of the HUAC (chapter 5), analyze her HUAC testimony (chapters 6 and 7), and finally, discuss how her testimony was—and continues to be—treated by commentators (chapter 8). There is a brief conclusion.

Why focus on *Song of Russia*, given its quality—it is a mediocre film—and Rand’s opinion of it as obvious propaganda and thus unimportant? Because *Song of Russia* is superb for the case study undertaken in this book. It is a pro-Soviet film, made by a conservative studio head (Louis B. Mayer), starring a conservative actor (Robert Taylor), and written predominantly by members of the U.S. Communist Party. But most of all, it is the film Rand commented on in her HUAC testimony.

Ayn Rand is uniquely qualified as a commentator on Hollywood Communism. She was born in Russia in 1905, witnessed the revolution in 1917, and remained there until 1926. In Russia she heard firsthand what Communists had to say and experienced firsthand what they do when in power. She felt the terror of living under Communism; for example, she was “purged” from the University of Leningrad along with other non-Communist students, genuine victims of a Communist blacklist. In the United States, she lived in Hollywood from September 1926 to November 1934, and again from December 1943 to October 1951, working much of that time as a screenwriter. During her Hollywood periods—and especially the latter—she encountered and fought against Hollywood Communism. Finally, at the time she was called to testify in Washington, she was maturing as an original philosopher, and especially as a moral and political

philosopher. As a result, she had a lot to say that was not said elsewhere, about fundamental issues that went well beyond *Song of Russia*, including the nature and function of the HUAC, whether the hearings violated freedom of speech, the nature and propriety of blacklists, and so on.

An analysis of the making of *Song of Russia*, its nature and reception, and Ayn Rand's comments on it provides us with a focused look at Communism in Hollywood *and* a unique philosopher's views on Hollywood Communism. This case study supports an appraisal quite different from the standard picture of Hollywood Communism, the 1947 HUAC hearings, and how we ought to evaluate the friendly witnesses (including Rand) who cooperated with the HUAC and the unfriendly witnesses (the Hollywood Ten) who did not.

According to this standard picture of the 1947 HUAC hearings—as found, for example, in *Tender Comrades*, a collection of interviews of Hollywood leftists, published fifty years after the these hearings⁴—whatever Ayn Rand's intentions, she collaborated with a Nazi-like government organization in one of the worst periods of American history. In this view, the HUAC was a group of power-hungry fascists who subjected the heroic Hollywood Communists and their sympathizers—who were humane and progressive—to nothing short of an inquisition. This was—as Lillian Hellman dubbed it—Scoundrel Time. Similarly, Norman Mailer calls this period “that squalid time when the witch-hunt was on in Hollywood.” And according to Hollywood leftist Walter Bernstein, the HUAC represented “the closest thing to Nazis holding positions of influence within the United States.”⁵ This was a time—we have heard endlessly—of witch hunts, red-baiting, and anti-Communist paranoia, when snitches named names to save their necks, and innocent victims lost their livelihood, while the HUAC trampled on the First Amendment.

In light of who the Hollywood Communists actually were, who and what they in fact supported, and what really happened at the 1947 HUAC hearings and after, the standard picture is utter nonsense.

This case study should aid in correcting the false picture that has been painted of that era and of the Communists who worked in Hollywood in the 1940s. A proper understanding of this period in American history begins with Kenneth Billingsley's *Hollywood Party*,⁶ but much more needs to be said.

In 1944, George Orwell complained:

England is lacking . . . in what one might call [Soviet] concentration-camp literature. The special world created by secret police forces, censorship of opinion, torture and frame-up trials is, of course, known about and to some extent disapproved of, but it has made very little emotional impact. One result of this is that there exists in England almost no literature of disillusionment about the Soviet Union.⁷

This captures well another reason for writing this book. Sixty years after Orwell wrote these lines, the same can be said of the Left in the United States, and certainly of Hollywood and the movies it makes. There is disapproval of the former Soviet Union and a grudging admittance that, well, yes, the Soviets did violate human rights. But the disapproval is perfunctory, and certainly not passionate. The “never again” attitude properly surrounding the Holocaust, which has contributed to the appearance of so many films on the Nazis and the horrors they committed, is nowhere in evidence if one looks at Hollywood's history of (not) presenting the Soviet Union and Communist atrocities. Instead of “never again” (and the implication: “never forget”), the attitude is, “Let's put this behind us.”⁸

It is my hope that this book will help to open Hollywood's eyes to its unconscionable neglect to tell the truth about the Soviet Union—to do what *Song of Russia* claimed to do, but did not. In Europe—where Communism has always been taken more seriously than in the United States—the film industries are beginning to make movies that accurately portray the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (for example, the 1994 Russian film *Burnt by the Sun*, and the 1999 French film *East-West*). Meanwhile, Hollywood remains reactionary; the industry dares say nothing that might suggest the truth: that what the Hollywood Communists supported for all those years was a monstrous evil.

Finally, I want to defend Ayn Rand and her much-maligned HUAC testimony. It hardly seems possible, but in reaction to her attempts to tell Americans about the horrors of the Soviet Union—in her HUAC testimony and elsewhere—she has received ridicule and scorn, and she has received it from people whose *raison d'être*, politically, is a supposed concern for the suffering of humanity. This book makes clear that Rand's HUAC testimony and her evaluation of the HUAC hearings are correct.

A woman writer, confined to the infamous Siberian gulag, Kolyma, wrote on the back of an envelope:

<poem>In honor of the slain one stays silent
Or talks at the top of one's voice.⁹</poem>

In the fifty years since the HUAC hearings, the Hollywood Communists and their sympathizers have remained silent about those slain in the Soviet Union they supported; but their silence has nothing to do with honor. They have, however, been complaining vigorously and loudly about the supposedly brutal treatment they received in the 1940s and after for their devotion to the Soviet Union. In honor of the slain, and out of disgust for the Hollywood Communists and their undeserved status as victims, Ayn Rand “talked at the top of her voice.” But she died over twenty years ago. I wrote this book to help to ensure that her voice will continue to be heard, and so that what the Hollywood Communists did—what they supported—will not be forgotten.

Notes

<notes>1. Quoted in Leonard Peikoff's foreword to the sixtieth anniversary edition of Ayn Rand, *We the Living* (New York: Signet, 1996; original ed., Macmillan, 1936; rev. ed., Random House, 1959), v.

2. Rand, *We the Living*, 451 (ellipses in original).

3. Mary McGrory, “Ayn Rand, Russian-Born Authoress, Says She's Glorifying Capitalist in New Novel,” *Washington Star*, November 2, 1947.

4. Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, eds., *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997).

5. Lillian Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976); Mailer's quote is from his cover blurb for *Tender Comrades*; Bernstein's is found in McGilligan and Buhle, *Tender Comrades*, 48.

6. Kenneth Lloyd Billingsley, *Hollywood Party: How Communism Seduced the American Film Industry in the 1930s and 1940s* (Rocklin, CA: Prima, 1998).

7. George Orwell, "Arthur Koestler" (typescript dated September 11, 1944), in George Orwell, *Essays*, selected and introduced by John Carey (New York: Everyman Library, 2002), 739.

8. On this attitude among revisionist historians of American Communism, see John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *In Denial: Historians, Communism and Espionage* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), 85–87.

9. Vitaly Shentalinsky, *Arrested Voices: Resurrecting the Disappeared Writers of the Soviet Regime*, trans. John Crowfoot (New York: Free Press, 1996), 284.</notes>