HUAC and the Red Trilogy of World War II

written by Dan Georgakas | July 7, 2013

ONE OF THE CONCERNS that supposedly brought the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) to Hollywood was that the Communist Party-U.S.A. had quietly infiltrated the film industry. Members of the CP and fellow travelers were charged with having surreptitiously inserted ideological messages into mainstream American cinema. Screenwriters were considered particularly culpable. Among the primary HUAC concerns was what it considered grossly flattering and inaccurate depictions of the Soviet Union. Three films cited as prime examples were *Song of Russia* (1944), *Mission to Moscow* (1943), and The *North Star* (1943). The first two had been made by major studios, Warner Brothers and MGM, and the third by Samuel Goldwyn, an important independent producer who released this particular film through RKO. All three films had considerable artistic input from persons known to be affiliated in some way with the Communist movement.

HUAC was absolutely correct in its assertion that these films totally distorted Soviet realities. The Hollywood dream factories had indeed turned black into white. The process that produced that result, however, was not the leftist conspiracy HUAC charged was at play. Nonetheless, the hows and whys of the making of this red trilogy offer valuable insights into the role of the Communist left in the studio system of the 1940s.

Anyone even slightly knowledgeable about that period of filmmaking understands that the studio chiefs controlled the making of films from start to finish in a process that usually involved years, not months or weeks. The producers approved each film project, hired the artistic personnel, approved original and revised scripts, watched daily takes, supervised editing, and decided on the final cut. Nothing appeared on screen without their knowledge.[1] Unless we assume the producers were incredibly stupid or naïve (they were neither), then some other factor must account for the content of the red trilogy.

That other factor is that the films were conceived shortly after America entered World War II, a period when the Soviet Union was the only major force offering military resistance to the *Wehrmacht.* Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, all of American industry had enlisted in the win-the-war effort. The Hollywood studios were no exception. Even before America entered the war, the Roosevelt administration had urged Hollywood to prepare the American public for the coming conflict by producing films that encouraged a sense of national unity and/or built good will for potential military allies. Fostering national unity meant addressing the regional antagonisms, anti-Semitism, and hostility to the foreign born prevalent in considerable portions of the United States.[2] Building support for military allies mainly meant undoing the negative images of the Soviet Union that had been media staples for over twenty years, but Britain also had its share of detractors, largely but not exclusively among Irish-Americans.[3]

Films designed to address such issues soon became standard Hollywood fare. The most overt effort to deal with xenophobia and regionalism involved the war genre. In one film after another, Americans of various backgrounds discovered their joint democratic values as they battled the Nazi or Japanese war machines. The screenwriters for some of the best of these films were leftists.[4] Studio chiefs had selected those writers precisely because their ideological views were perfectly suited to advance equalitarian scenarios of national unity. In response to the charge that liberals were often dupes of the Communists, screenwriter Philip Dunne, one of the most active liberals in Hollywood, noted, “They [Communists], not we, were fellow travelers.[5] Larry Ceplair and Steve England note in their landmark *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, that even “friendly” HUAC witnesses

such as writer-producer James McGinnis could find no fault in the content of scripts written by Communists during the war.[6]

Films that dealt with foreign nations were mainly designed to show "their values are just like ours." Perhaps the most successful examples of this genre are pro-British, Oscar-winning films such as *How Green Was My Valley* (1941, 20[th] Century-Fox), *Mrs. Miniver* (1942, MGM), and *That Hamilton Woman* (1942, United Artists).[7] The red trilogy aimed to generate empathy with the USSR in the way that these and similar films had done for Great Britain.

All three films in the red trilogy have interesting critical and exhibition histories, but that of *The North Star* is unique. The original critical reception for The *North Star* was generally positive, leading to nominations for no less than six Oscars and a good box office. Nine years later (1952), what had been touted as one of the best motion pictures of the year during wartime was cited by HUAC for promoting subversive ideology. Five years after the HUAC hearings, *The North Star* was purchased by National Telefilm Associates, which transformed the pro-Soviet film of 1943 into an anti-Soviet film released as *Armored Attack* (1957). This metamorphosis was accomplished by eliminating much of the original soundtrack, considerable reediting, and the introduction of newsreel footage of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. As images of the invasion of Hungary filled the screen, the dialog in the original version was replaced by a voiceover that warned of a menace in the East that was every bit as evil as the Nazis. *Armored Attack* mainly played in secondary markets but again turned a profit. When the videocassette era came into existence, the box in which *Armored Attack* was sold was covered with swastikas and hammer-and-sickles with the headline: "the battle of the totalitarians." In 1995, thirty-five years after the release of the altered *North Star,* Sander Vanocur hosted a discussion on the History Channel television network that concluded that although *The North Star* had indeed contained fallacious information about the Soviets, a number of the film's distortions and many of its artistic shortcomings were the result of a classic Hollywood syndrome: the producer altering the original script.[8]

The Making of *The North Star*

UNLIKE THE STUDIO HEADS whose producers did most of the work on *Mission to Moscow* and *Song of Russia*, Samuel Goldwyn was famed for his hands-on style of producing. Wanting his pro-Soviet film to be what Hollywood called "a quality picture," he budgeted the film for three million dollars, the most he had ever spent on a single film. A Goldwyn trademark was to hire famous writers to write his screenplays. His first choice for *The North Star* was the celebrated playwright Lillian Hellman who had already written or co-written three successful Goldwyn films: *These Three* (1936), *Dead End* (1937), and *The Little Foxes* (1941), films that had brought seven Oscar nominations. Goldwyn was well aware of Hellman's sympathies for the Soviet Union, but he thought that would only act as a positive spur to her creativity. His first choice for director was William Wyler, who had directed the three Hellman-written hit films, but early on in the film development process, Wyler left Hollywood to join the military.

Wyler's replacement, made with Hellman's agreement, was Lewis Milestone, one of whose assets was that he had been born in Odessa, a factor Goldwyn thought would be helpful in making the film look more authentic.[9] The musical score, which Goldwyn intended to be a major element in the film, was assigned to Aaron Copland, whose leftist credentials included many projects associated with *New Masses* magazine and membership in the leftist Composer's Collective. The chief cinematographer was the legendary left-orientated James Wong Howe.

The title for the film is derived from the name of a fictitious collective farm in the Ukraine. Hellman's script sought to show that collective farming was hugely successful and that collective farmers were passionately loyal to socialist ideals. The actual history of collectivism in the Ukraine, however, was decidedly different from Hellman's utopian scenario. The Ukrainian peasantry had resisted collectivization more vigorously than people of any other part of the nation, going so far as to kill most of their animals rather than turning them over to collective ownership. As punishment for this disobedience, when there was a crop failure and a general collapse of agriculture in the region, Stalin refused to send aid, resulting in famine and impoverishment of the area. Some estimates have put the death toll as high as six million. The Ukraine that was attacked by the Nazis in 1941 was still destitute and not at all loyal to the central government. The Ukrainians often welcomed the Nazis as liberators from what was seen as Russian oppression and would not turn against the Nazis until the Nazis began to treat them as an inferior people. In short, Hellman's image of collectivization ignored the brutalities of forced collectivization and the wretched conditions dominant on many collectives. The Nazi persecution of Jews, a key concern of *North Star*, was not a major factor in the Ukrainian reaction to the Nazis as the region had its own well-entrenched anti-Semitic traditions.

The choice of the Ukraine as the setting of *North Star* was not happenstance. Before there was a proposal for a feature film, Soviet officials had been urging Hellman to write a documentary about their national resistance efforts that was set in the Ukraine rather than in some other region. Hellman surely knew about the resistance to collectivization in the 1930s, but how much she knew about actual events in the Ukraine and their contemporary consequences other than what she got from Russian sources is not clear. Worth noting is that non-Soviet sources were not particularly helpful in this regard. Not even the *New York Times*, America's paper of record, had carried accurate accounts of the Ukrainian famine.[10]

Before beginning her script, Hellman created a 250-page research notebook about the war in the USSR. Approximately half of these pages consisted of press reports from Soviet and non-Soviet sources. These included a month's worth of *Pravda* translated word for word. Hellman had commissioned the translation in order to have a feel for how the USSR was dealing with the war day by day. Her sources carried truthful accounts of how the Nazis had taken blood transfusions to be used for their wounded from Russian and Polish children who were then left without care, resulting in the deaths of thousands. Hellman selected this particular Nazi crime as the centerpiece for her

story. Other reports told about Russian pilots who crashed their stricken aircraft into lines of enemy tanks exactly as Kolya (Dana Andrews) would do in *The North Star*. The newspapers and other documents also contained details about the scorched earth policy the Soviets had imposed upon themselves.

Hellman's script follows the classic three-act Hollywood formula. In the first act, the socialist nature of Soviet collectives is made explicit and the benefits flowing to all concerned attest to the plan's supposed successes. Further enhancing the collective spirit is that the farm's physician Dr. Kurin (Walter Huston) is a world-famous pathologist who has given up a prestigious position in a major medical institution to work "with his people" at the grass roots level. Lincoln Steffens had famously opined of the USSR, "I have seen the future and it works." Hellman's script reaffirmed that sentiment.

The second act gets underway when Kolya, one of the members of the *North Star* collective, is called to active duty in the Soviet air force. Some friends decide to accompany him to Kiev for a brief vacation. Midway in their journey, the Nazis attack the Soviet Union. Kolya hurries on to his unit while the others, at great physical hardship, secure a wagonload of weapons to take back to their collective.

What Hellman saw as the moral center of the script then begins to unfold with the arrival of a medical unit run by Dr. Harden (Erich von Stroheim). On the road to the collective Harden taunts Nazi officers for what he thinks is their stupid persecution of Jews and brags of being trained by great Jewish doctors. Harden makes clear that he believes that there are indeed *ubermensch* (usually rendered in English as a super man) who are superior to other mortals and justifiably defy the conventions their inferiors live by. Naturally, he considers himself an *ubermensch*.

In the final act, the men of *North Star* literally "ride to the rescue" of their women and children on horseback. Dr. Kurin takes part in the attack by killing Dr. Harden with a pistol shot. The counterattack, carried out with great valor and panache, rids *North Star* of Nazis long enough for the heroic Ukrainians to voluntarily put their homes to the torch in support of the government's call to leave the invaders only scorched earth. All the *North Star* survivors now vow to fight on until victory, whatever the cost.

Hellman had spent six weeks in story conferences with Goldwyn and Milestone before leaving Hollywood with what she thought Goldwyn and Milestone accepted as the final shooting script. Two weeks after her return to New York, however, she got back the first fifty pages. Whole sections of dialog had been rewritten by Milestone, who had managed to ideologically sanitize the first act. A short time later, more pages arrived with changes in the rest of the film. The words socialism and communism, which Hellman had inserted in various conversations were totally eliminated. Collective and USSR were each allowed to be used one time only (when the guerilla fighters take an official oath of national allegiance). The only remaining hint that this might be a socialist state is the occasional use of the word comrade. When National Telefilm Associates bought The *North Star* in 1957 and the film was reedited virtually frame by frame, even "comrade" was excised. One NTA executive lamented, "The only thing we couldn't take out—much to our regret—was Dana Andrews running around in his Soviet uniform."[11]

More than dialog had been changed in the vital first act. Goldwyn believed that the American public had to be warmed up to the collectivists with considerable doses of music. He had transformed the collective farmers into folksy peasants, pure of mind, body, and heart, who romp about like so many Kansas cornhuskers attending a masquerade ball in Eastern European costumes. These simple people love their land, their children, their spouses, and their village in the way peasants of pulp fiction always do. They regale the viewer with what is meant to be profound folk

wisdom, observing. for example, that, “The empty white ear rears its head the highest.” Their singing, dancing, and story telling in the revised script fill a third of the film.

Goldwyn also decided to move the mortal confrontation between Kurin and Harden to the climatic counterattack of the third act rather than leaving it at the picture’s center where Hellman had originally situated it. When Hellman saw a rough cut of the film she was aghast at what had been done. Important dialog and scenes had been cut drastically or totally eliminated to make room for scenes less central to her concerns. She insisted that the key scene between Kurin and Harden had to be reshot, rewrote the film’s ending, and generally reshaped the structure to make the relationship between the film’s conflicting acts more reasonable.

Despite Hellman’s rewrite of the rewrite, the Kurin-Harden dichotomy never materializes as the moral center of the film. Goldwyn’s elimination of scenes in midscript that defined Kurin’s character sapped the film of its moral and ideological weight. Putting the Kurin-Harden showdown in the counterattack further obscured the stark contrast of the ideological views they were meant to embody. More generally, Milestone, although well respected for his directing of films such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), was not up to the challenge of giving life to Hellman’s chief characters. The exchanges between the doctors are conversational banter rather than passionate expressions of profoundly contrasting philosophies of life. Even their final confrontation is bungled. Kurin’s shooting of Harden’s Nazi assistant is so mishandled that it verges on comedy, and the verbal exchange between the doctors before Harden fires a fatal bullet has a schoolyard Dare-You quality. What little energy remains in the doctors’ sequences is primarily due to von Stroheim's trademark leers and swagger. The doctors’ struggle remains one of good versus evil, but the rewrites reduced it to a simplistic White Hat-Black Hat dichotomy.

Milestone also mishandled the Ukrainian counterattack, opting to shoot it as if it were a U.S. cavalry charge in a routine Western. Considerable suspension of disbelief is needed to believe that the lightly armed Ukrainians on horseback can so easily overcome seasoned Nazi troops inexplicably unable to effectively use the machine guns, tanks, and artillery that would have annihilated any actual attack of this nature. The scorched earth sequence in which the entire set (costing some $260,000) was leveled is far more credible. Enormous quantities of explosives were used and the resulting destruction was so intensive that a number of the actors were mildly injured. One explosive charge that went awry burned the roof of the sound stage and created fires in numerous surrounding structures. Bellowing smoke from the burning *North Star* set hovered over Hollywood for several hours.

Hellman would forever hold Goldwyn responsible for debasing her script and would berate Milestone for what she considered his horrendous misdirection of vital scenes. She had sought to make a film with the same high purpose and quality as her *Watch on the Rhine* (1943). Instead she had gotten a weird genre sandwich whose various parts were grotesquely mismatched. But much as Hellman berated both Goldwyn and Milestone in various press interviews, she was not totally negative about the film. She said she felt the film had said some true things about the Nazis and had been useful in promoting the united front. She did not ask for her name to be removed from the script credits. Nor did she turn down her Oscar nomination for best screenplay.

Unlike Hellman, Sam Goldwyn was delighted with the final version of *The North Star*, a joy greatly enhanced by the film’s six Oscar nominations, and a healthy box office. He insisted that *The North Star* was devoid of propaganda, blithely informing a *New York Sun* reporter, “The first reels are gay and happy. They show the villagers’ life and the villagers are a musical people who like to dance….Much of this story could have been told in pantomime. It has as much action as any Western. Perhaps that is why children like it, although it is a picture planned for adults.”[12]

Critical response also was generally positive. Despite complaints that the collective farm was too idealized, most reviewers considered the film entertaining and informative. Many echoed the sentiments of *New York Post* reviewer Archer Winston, who wrote, "This reviewer is ashamed to admit that he was unable to see any propaganda in *The North Star*, and it was not for lack of looking." [13] Some papers such as the *Dallas Morning News* actually berated Hollywood for being so slow in getting pictures of this kind to the screen.[14] Nearly thirty years later, writing about a screening of *The North Star* at a revival house, noted critic Andrew Sarris expressed similar sentiments: "Seen today, *The North Star* seems like a relatively conventional example of the resistance movie, though a little more bloodthirsty than most."[15] The major dissenting voices were in the Hearst press, where writers were on instructions from Hearst himself to pan the film. This directive got to the New York newspapers a bit late, so readers of the morning editions got a positive review while those of the afternoon editions were told the film was "red propaganda."

The USSR was quite pleased with *The North Star* and chose it as one of the five films it bought in 1944 for screening to its own domestic audience. *Song of Russia* and Hellman's *The Little Foxes* also were selected. The five films purchased the previous year included *Mission to Moscow* and Frank Capra's documentary *Battle for Russia*.[16]

Ultimately, the message of *The North Star* is not much different from other wartime films. "Our" side is heroic and democratic; "their' side is fiendish and dictatorial. The distortions about happy Russian peasants, particularly in the Ukraine are absurd, but no more so than the happy Chinese loyal to the not-so-democratic Chiang Kai-Sheik in films like *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944). Goldwyn was familiar with the film's every detail from start to finish, and the mode of production was like that of all other films in the Goldwyn organization. Rather than an example of Communist infiltration of Hollywood, *The North Star* is an example of how the Hollywood studios served what they thought were the immediate needs of the American government in a time of war.

Hellman can be taken to task for her simplistic views of Soviet realities. She could not possibly have been uninformed about the criticisms of the Soviet regime made by responsible intellectuals even before the infamous purge trials of 1938. On the other hand, Hellman must be credited with trying to offer the American public insights into the fascist mindset. She had sought to dramatize how privileged sectors of society that verbally profess contempt for ignorant authoritarian brutes often serve them just as effectively as the ideologically faithful. Postwar analysis of the Nazi era has stressed the banality of evil and the I-only-obeyed-orders syndrome. Hellman was suggesting that doing nothing against evil means making it much easier for that evil to prevail.

Song of Russia

LOUIS MAYER CHOSE HIS PRODUCTION TEAM for Song of Russia in the same manner he chose production teams for his other films. Joe Pasternak had just produced *Thousands Cheer* (1943) for MGM, a wartime musical that was commercially successful. Paul Jarrico and Richard Collins had written the script.[17] Mayer thought the same trio would be well suited to creating a musical romance set in Russia. He was well aware of the leftist orientation of both Collins and Jarrico, but he thought that would make them all the more enthusiastic for the project in much the manner Goldwyn had thought Hellman's politics made her ideal for *The North Star*. Moreover, director Gregory Ratoff and Pasternak, neither of whom was a radical, would certainly be able to steer the film free of unwanted ideological comment.

The story line of *Song of Russia* is simple. John Meredith (Robert Taylor[18]), an American conductor who is a specialist in the music of Tchaikovsky, is on a concert tour of the USSR on the

eve of World War II. He soon meets Nadya Stepanova (Susan Peters), a wholesome young woman pianist of peasant origins who is from a small village. They fall in love in scenes that show a prosperous and happy Russia with values virtually indistinguishable from those of Main Street U.S.A. The two lovers constantly observe how similar their two nations really are. The distortions of Soviet daily life in these seemingly apolitical scenes are numerous.[19]

John and Nadya eventually go to her village, which is incredibly prosperous, modern, and joyful. After some superficial concerns about whether two people from different cultures, however similar in values, can be happy, they decide to marry. This marriage features gross misrepresentations of the USSR that are not found in either *The North Star* or *Mission to Moscow*. Namely, the wedding is not a civil ceremony but a traditional ritual in a twin-domed Russian Orthodox Church. The elaborate Orthodox services are followed by a feast that even includes chocolate cake. Viewers are left with the impression that the Russian Orthodox Church functions as freely as any church in America. No mention is made that the state religion of the USSR was atheism and that there had been a vigorous atheistic campaign in the 1930s that included a fierce persecution of many religious leaders and the wholesale destruction of churches or conversion of church buildings to secular uses.

The marital bliss of the loving couple is cut short by the German invasion of the USSR. Nadya decides to stay in the village to fight while John leaves to finish his concert tour, persuaded that the Russian love of music must be nurtured even in this terrible time. As the Nazis swiftly advance through Russia, John and the viewer become aware of the terrible suffering war brings to the Russian people. In due course John makes his way back to Nadya's village, which has been reduced to rubble. Many are dead, but Nadya has survived. Even as John and Nadya embrace, the strafing of a Nazi aircraft kills yet another young boy. An Orthodox priest is soon seen making the sign of the cross over the corpse.

John wants to stay in the village and fight at the side of his wife, but a village elder tells him, "You must go back to your country and tell them what you have seen.…That is the greatest thing you can do." He informs Nadya she must go with her husband to tell the Americans that the Germans will never conquer Russia. Later as John and Nadya are about to perform in a Tchaikovsky program at a concert hall in New York, we again hear the elder as a voiceover, "We feel you fighting side by side with us, all soldiers in the same army, fighting to bring new light to our children, for that great day when the whole world will ring with a new song of freedom; for you will bring our countries close together, in the fight for all humanity."

These final scenes of *Song of Russia* underscore that the film's purpose was not celebration of the Soviet Union but to rally American aid for a beleaguered ally. When the necessity to build support for aid to the Soviet Union became a national priority, the available story options were limited. The producers felt commonalities, not differences, needed to be stressed. Any criticism, however valid, had to be avoided as any criticism might harm the wobbly alliance. Such is the nature of any film made in the midst of a war, especially when the outcome of the war remains uncertain.

Mission to Moscow

OF THE THREE FILMS in the red trilogy, *Mission to Moscow* is justly the most infamous and the most problematic. Unlike the two films already discussed, *Mission* didn't simply remain blind to the crimes of Stalin, it justified them! Moreover, one of the crimes celebrated, the purge trials of 1938, went to the very essence of governance in the USSR. Even if one had believed that a Soviet alliance was essential for winning the war, there was no need to spotlight the purges in a feature film, much less support the absurd charge that the purged Bolsheviks were actually paid agents of the German

and Japanese governments.[20] The scenes in which *Mission to Moscow* affirm that the charges were true would seem to confirm the HUAC suspicion that filmmakers involved with the Communist Party had succeeded in inserting explicitly Stalinist propaganda into a film from a major studio. A look at the production history of the film, however, shows that is not a valid conclusion.

Mission to Moscow was based on a book of the same title written by Joseph Davies, the American Ambassador to the USSR from 1936-1938. In his book, Davies argued that an alliance with the USSR was essential for what seemed an inevitable conflict with Nazi Germany. Selections from the book appeared as a lead article in the *New York Times Magazine* just a week after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The book hit the stands two weeks later. Despite its hefty length of 638 pages, *Mission to Moscow* sold some 700,000 copies in hardcover and soon became one of the first titles to be issued in the new paperback formats that cost twenty-five cents each, making the book very affordable to the general public. *Mission to Moscow* eventually would be translated into 13 foreign languages, including Braille editions in two languages.

Jack Warner decided a film version of the book could serve as a Warner Brothers contribution to the war effort and perhaps turn a handsome profit. He was sure the Roosevelt administration strongly approved of the book's sentiments and signed a contract with Davies in July of 1941. Most unusual for the time was the provision in the contract that Davies would have final approval of the script. Warner erroneously thought this was merely a formality and that like other authors, Davies would just sign off on the professional script the Warners organization would generate. Such was not the case. For openers, Davies insisted that Erskine Caldwell, the left-oriented author of novels like *Tobacco Road*, be assigned to write the script even though Caldwell had little experience as a scriptwriter. The resulting script, which followed the book closely, was so poor that a year later Davies agreed to pass the project on to future blacklistee Howard Koch, who would soon win an Oscar as co-scripter of *Casablanca* (1943). Koch began rewrites in late August of 1942.

The general line of the film follows Davies in his duties in the USSR where he gathers great respect for Russia's industrial potential. He even has a meeting with Stalin himself. He then returns to the United States where he vigorously debates isolationists and passionately pleads for an alliance with the Soviet Union. Much of the film involves alternating shots of Davies talking with various officials with shots of Soviet industry and later of the Soviet Union at war.[21] Like Caldwell, Koch followed the book closely. He just wrote better dialog and knew how to put the narrative into a cinematic format.

The scenes regarding the Purge trials were not central to the film's purpose of building support for aid to the USSR. Producer Robert Buckner was against including the trials at all and in any case, thought it was a huge error to present the accused as truly guilty.[22] He reports that it was Davies who insisted on featuring the trial and endorsing the verdict.[23] What seems an absurd judgment today had a certain logic. Davies feared that if the United States did not give full support to Stalin, there might be a second Hitler-Stalin Pact or at least some accommodation that would put the United States at great military disadvantage. He fully understood that the Bolsheviks purged by Stalin were indeed a domestic political opposition. but he could conceive of how these seasoned Bolsheviks disgruntled with Stalin's leadership might see cooperating with the Germans as the only means of overthrowing him. Under those circumstances, they might agree to take the USSR out of the war in the same manner Lenin had taken Russia out of World War I. Given that possibility, if Stalin wanted to present his political foes as paid agents of a foreign power, Davies was willing to accommodate him. Warners, in turn, was contractually compelled to accommodate Davies. A scene of a supposed meeting between Trotsky and Hitler is reported to have been deleted only at the last minute.[24]

The positive portrait of Stalin followed similar logic. The somewhat megalomaniacal Davies seems

to have been genuinely impressed with Stalin at their sole meeting, but the hagiographic portrait in the film of Stalin as wise old Uncle Joe sucking on a pipe is not unlike the hagiography of Churchill in the same film or the presentation of Roosevelt only as a voice. Such honorific treatments of political leaders were standard in the Hollywood biopix tradition. Far more serious was the statement at the end of the film that Finland had not been invaded by the Soviet Union. Such a denial was not critical to the narrative, but Davies insisted it was necessary.[25] Rather than being influenced by members of the CPUSA on such matters, Davies took the extraordinary liberty of actually showing the script to Soviet Ambassador Maxim Litvinov. An example of just how controlling Davies had become over the script was that only two weeks before its scheduled release, he insisted on having a new scene added that showed his wife and Mrs. Molotov shopping together in a cosmetic shop. Davies also dictated some of the dialog spoken by Churchill.

Given the veto power Davies had over the script, the contributions of Howard Koch and director Michael Curtiz had minimal effect on the content of the script. Ronald and Allis Radosh, authors of *Red Star Over Hollywood* contend a major, hidden influence on the film was the leftist Jay Leyda, whose is credited as the film's technical advisor.[26] Thom Anderson, famed for the meticulous scholarship he brings to his film writing, has pointed out that the three changes they credit to Leyda are not in the final cut.[27] He further notes that the attention of the Radoshes to detail leaves much to be desired as they thought the renowned Walter Huston, the star of the film, had played Stalin! Huston had played Davies and is in almost every scene with dialog.[28]

Koch and Buckner have both denied that Leyda had any influence on the script's content. His major task was to select the Soviet newsreel footage to be incorporated into the narrative. Even this contribution was far from absolute as Leyda was excluded from the final editing choices that were made by the usual collaboration of director, producer, and editor. Casting further doubt on Leyda having a hand in the decision regarding the trial or the depiction of Stalin is that Leyda was generally thought to be sympathetic to the views of Leon Trotsky. Leyda had worked with Sergei Eisenstein on films made in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, but Eisenstein can hardly be counted a supporter of Stalin.

Immediately upon its release, *Mission to Moscow* was assailed as a gross distortion of reality in a statement initiated by prominent intellectuals such as John Dewey, Alfred Kazin, Edmund Wilson, Dwight Macdonald, A. Philip Randolph, Norman Thomas, and James T. Farrell.[29] Non-political reviewers were equally negative. Their general assessment was that the acting was wooden, the individual scenes overly clogged with boring talking heads, and the quasi-documentary style unconvincing. Although Warner Brothers spent an extraordinary half million dollars on publicity for the film, *Mission to Moscow* was a box office flop that would never recover its costs. Years later, at the HUAC hearings, a defensive Jack Warner would argue that the film had not been made with profit in mind but as a contribution to the war effort. He testified that, "The picture was made when our country was fighting for its existence, with Russia as one of our allies….If making *Mission to Moscow* was subversive activity, then the American Liberty ships that carried food and guns to the Russian sites, and the American vessels which conveyed them were likewise engaged in subversive activities."[30]

Not Guilty As Charged

THE MAJOR CHARGE brought against the films of the red trilogy was that they were evidence of a Communist conspiracy aimed at subverting America's entertainment industry. The production history of the films shows this is not true. Communists did not initiate any of the projects, and Communists did not control the final content of any of the films. The films were originated by

Hollywood studio bosses in response to the American government's call to construct favorable public opinion on behalf of giving military assistance to the Soviet Union. Driving the content of the films and giving them unique urgency was that these particular films were conceived at a time when the Nazis were winning the war. German divisions were on the outskirts of Moscow and Leningrad and the decisive Battle of Stalingrad had not yet taken place. The films advanced rather than opposed the war policy of the American government

When the studio chiefs chose key personnel for the making of the three films, they consciously opted for screenwriters associated with the Communist movement. They could do this without any ideological qualms as the screenwriters would be working within the structures that applied to all studio productions. The studio chiefs knew the reds were stalwart opponents of fascism and were acutely aware of the terrible human and material costs of the war in the USSR. Moreover, the reds were quite happy to advance a positive view of a Soviet Union where they thought the virtues of a planned economy were now evident. Further fueling their political view was the belief that the joint war effort could pave the way for harmonious post-war relations between the United States and the USSR. Like their coworkers, the reds thought that if supporting the USSR at this crucial historical moment meant overlooking various problems, they should do so. They felt this was no different than refraining at this particular historical moment from putting a cinematic spotlight on racism in the United States or the evils of the colonial empires run by allies such as Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

The genuine political problem raised by the red trilogy is not a question of subversion but the nature of films consciously conceived as propaganda on behalf of a problematic ally. How much behavior that would be criticized in peacetime is it proper to overlook in the midst of war? What are the long-term consequences for all involved of falsifying reality as was done regarding freedom of religion, the Ukrainian famine, forced collectivization, the purge trials, and the realities of daily life in the USSR? Those are basic issues for anyone involved in mass media. Genuine art always speaks truth to power however inconvenient the time and place. Propaganda always serves existing power. Not coincidently, the same studio chiefs responsible for the propagandistic pro-Soviet films of the mid-1940s would be responsible for the propagandistic anti-Communist films of the 1950s. Each time they felt they were serving national policy. Filmmakers unwilling or unable to totally remold their political perspectives in that manner would be forbidden to work in Hollywood until yet another new political wind took hold.

Footnotes

1. A famous exception to that rule came in a comedy titled *No Time to Marry* (1938). Lionel Stander was asked to whistle a tune as he waited for an elevator. He whistled *The Internationale* as a gag, but the director and subsequent editors didn't recognize the tune, and it made its way into the film. Capitalism survived. Stander has the distinction of being twice blacklisted. See his interview in Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle (editors), *Tender Comrades,* NY: St. Martins Press, 1997, pp. 607-625.
2. General discussion of this topic is found in Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies,* New York: Free Press, 1987. Worth noting is that in the late 1930s right-wing radio ministers such as Father Coughlin had millions of listeners for broadcasts filled with scorn for the foreign born, Jews, and trade unionists.
3. A detailed look at the comparable situation in radio is found in Howard Blue, *Words at War,* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002. There is discussion of specific scripts and the advice regarding scripts from the Roosevelt administration.
4. Examples often cited are *A Guy Named Joe* (1943), *Sahara* (1943), *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*

(1944, *Objective Burma* (1945) *Action in the North Atlantic* (1943), and *Pride of the Marines* (1945).

5. Larry Ceplair and Steve England, *The Inquisitions in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community:1930-60,* Urbana: Illinois University Press, 2003 paper edition of 1979 original, p. 151. This quote occurs in a chapter that deals with Communist-liberal relations in considerable detail.
6. *Ibid,* page 181.
7. *How Green Was My Valley,* an homage to Welsh coal miners, garnered ten Oscar nominations and won in five categories. *Mrs. Miniver,* a celebration of English gallantry at the time of Dunkirk, had twelve Oscar nominations and six wins. *The Hamilton Woman,* an account of the heroism of Lord Nelson, had four nominations and one win.
8. I was one of the participants in that show.
9. Milestone is characterized in Leonard Maltin's *Movie Encyclopedia,* NY: Dutton, 1994, p. 605, as a skilled craftsman who could artfully utilize the technical and aesthetic tricks of the trade in a style marked by visual flamboyance. On the other hand, later in his career, he was often just a journeyman director content to get the picture done as quickly and cheaply as possible. His reputation was based on his early films such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *The Front Page* (1931), and *Rain* (1932). Thereafter, most of his films were standard Hollywood fare with the possible exceptions of *The General Dies at Dawn* (1936) and *A Walk in the Sun* (1945). After working mainly in television in the 1950s, Milestone directed *Ocean's Eleven* (1960) and replaced Carol Reed on the remake of *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962).
10. Walter Duranty, the *Times* correspondent in Moscow, later would be accused of deliberately obscuring the facts in the Ukraine.
11. The NTA changes are outlined in an AP press release of Oct. 29, 1957 that is in a file on Lillian Hellman in the performing arts library of the New York Public library.
12. *New York Sun,* October 25, 1943, Amusement pages.
13. *New York Post,* November 8, 1943, p. 46.
14. John Rosenfeld, "Russians in War Too Hollywood Discovers," *Dallas Morning News,* January 23, 1944, Section Four, p. 1.
15. Andrew Sarris, "Revivals," *The Village Voice,* February 2, 1976, p 119. Even at this late date, the issue of the Ukrainian famine is not raised, most likely because it was still not broad public knowledge.
16. The other films selected by the USSR for its domestic audience in 1943 and 1944 were: *Bambi, Sun Fuehrer, The Old Mill, The Hurricane,* and *Charlie's Aunt.*
17. Jarrico ultimately wrote most of the script. He certainly was well aware that the USSR deplored religion and secularized or destroyed numerous Christian churches.
18. Taylor, who would be a friendly witness for HUAC and had strongly conservative views, obviously would not have taken a lead role in a film he considered a leftist work of art.
19. Robert Mayhew, "MGM's Potemkin Church Religion in *Song of Russia*' *American Communist History,* Vol. 1, No. 1, June 2002, pp. 91-103, offers a succinct critique of the film's fallacious images about religion in the USSR. Robert Mayhew, *Ayn Rand and Song of Russia: Communism and Anti-Communism in Hollywood* , Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005, offers a comprehensive account of the making of this film, its historical errors, and its reception. Ayn Rand's critique of the film was not particularly detailed or specific, but it strongly reflected her anti-Soviet views.
20. In the documentary *Battle of Russia* made for the government's Why We Fight Series, Frank Capra had omitted mention of the Purge and other actions that he decried. He considered this "sin of omission" excusable due the needs of the war and extraordinary bravery of the Russian people.
21. At the last moment, footage from the Battle of Stalingrad was inserted, an unscripted inclusion only made possible by the war's rapidly changing dynamics.

22. David Culbert, *Mission to Moscow,* Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1980, page 252-256. This volume contains the script of *Mission to Moscow,* excellent commentary by Culbert, and excerpts from the HUAC hearings. The volume is distinguished by correspondence initiated by Culbert to determine just who was responsible for various aspects of the film. Most important are the comments of Robert Buckner, the producer.
23. *Ibid.* In the book *Mission to Moscow,* Davies had expressed mixed feelings about the guilt of the defendants. His insistence that the film take a different line seems to be yet another reflection of his inordinate fears about displeasing the Soviets.
24. *Ibid,* p.29.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Ronald Radosh and Allis Radosh, *Red Star Over Hollywood: The Film Colony's Long Romance with the Left,* San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2005. Leyda's supposed role in *Mission to Moscow* is discussed on pp. 98-107.
27. "Afterword" in Frank Krutnik, et. al. (editors), "*Un-American" Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era,* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, Press, 2007, p. 271.
28. Radosh, *Red Star,* p. 96. asserts "prominent actor Walter Houston " portrayed Stalin. On page 100, the authors further assert Davies was angry at Houston for not using the proper makeup to physically evoke his Stalin character. One error of this kind might be attributed to poor editing, but two strong assertions about a character in almost half the scenes suggests the Radoshes are more interested in the film's politics than its actual structure, content, and production history..
29. Culbert, *Mission,* pp. 257-60 contains the full statement and the names of all the originators of the statement.
30. Appendix to Culbert, p. 266.