

HOLLYWOOD AND THE SOVIET UNION

The bravery of the defenders of Leningrad caught the imagination of the Allies and became an important symbol of the Soviet will to resist. Contemporary coverage of the events in the British press stressed our nation's solidarity with the Soviet people, something which now seems difficult to believe in the light of what happened after the war.

In the USA, President Roosevelt requested Hollywood to make films that would boost support for the alliance with the Soviet Union. One such film sympathetic to the Soviets was *North Star* (1943) directed by Lewis Milestone from a screenplay by Lillian Hellman and with a score by Aaron Copland. The film opens in a peaceful Ukrainian village on the eve of the German invasion. The villagers quickly organise themselves when they unexpectedly come under attack, but are eventually overwhelmed by the German troops. The sinister purpose of the occupation is to take the blood of the village children and use it for transfusions in a mobile German hospital unit. Although the opening scenes now seem a little corny, the film's portrayal of the everyday life of ordinary Soviet citizens and their strength in the face of adversity is still effective. The people shown are not the super heroes of popular mythology, but can be recognised as fellow human beings by viewers.

However, the West's friendship with the Soviet Union was short lived. Suspicion of Stalin's intentions for the occupied territories became apparent during the negotiations by the three major powers at Yalta in February 1945. On 5 March 1946, Winston Churchill made his first reference to the Iron Curtain and in July 1947, Stalin refused to accept the Marshall Plan, the project that aimed to foster economic recovery in Europe. Simmering tensions that had been briefly set aside during the combined fight against the Nazis surfaced once more and the Cold War had begun.

Anti-communist paranoia was already having an impact in Hollywood. Now the pro-Soviet films of the war looked like blatant communist propaganda and the resurgent right wing began ferreting out any hint of Leftist sympathies. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had been formed in 1937 to investigate subversive activities among

both left-wing and right-wing political groups. In 1947, it was reactivated, determined to purge the country of any communist influences by rooting out people who had been involved in promoting left-wing causes, including those who had been 'prematurely anti-Fascist' in condemning the Nazi regime prior to the outbreak of war. Hollywood was the committee's highest-profile target. So-called friendly witnesses who voluntarily attended the initial hearings 'named names' and gave evidence of what they considered to be communist activity in the industry. Over 320 people who refused to testify when subpoenaed were placed on a blacklist preventing them from working in the entertainment field. Many careers were ruined.

Among the friendly witnesses was leading actor Robert Taylor. During his testimony, he complained that he had appeared in a film entitled *A Song of Russia* (1943) against his better judgement, as the script, he now realised, was pro-communist. The film tells the story of an American orchestra conductor caught up in the German invasion of the Soviet Union and includes a sympathetic depiction of Russian villagers. Taylor also criticised the lyrics of a song used in the film called 'And Russia is Her Name'. This had first been performed by popular tenor Allan Jones at a Hollywood Bowl gala in 1943 that raised funds on behalf of Russian War Relief. The lyricist, Yip Harburg, was subsequently blacklisted in Hollywood.



Original song sheet for 'And Russia is Her Name'