

RE: SOURCES

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AN ISOLATIONIST BLACKLIST? LILLIAN GISH AND THE AMERICA FIRST COMMITTEE

As it affected the performing arts community, the Red Scare has been examined in great detail.¹ Taken together, these studies make clear that external political forces influence the hiring decisions of performing-arts organizations. From the 1930s to the 1950s figures affiliated with left-wing causes and groups found their careers stifled either temporarily or permanently because of their political beliefs. Although attention has focused primarily on institutional pressures from outside the industry on leftist artists, we describe an instance of pressure from *within the industry* on an artist whose politics were isolationist rather than progressive. In this research note, we present the case of Lillian Gish, describing how interventionists pressured her to distance herself from the isolationism that she had publicly embraced in the period immediately prior to the entrance of the United States in World War II. The attack on those described as “Nazi sympathizers” and their isolationist brethren during 1940–4 has come to

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be described as the “Brown Scare,”² playing off the more widely known “Red Scares” of 1919–20 and 1947–54.

Lillian Gish is surely one of the most important theatre and film actresses of the twentieth century. She was born Lillian Diana de Guiche in 1873 and died at the age of 99 in 1973. She is perhaps best known for her close connection with director D. W. Griffith, and she appeared in his films *Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance*, and *Broken Blossoms*. During the 1930s and 1940s, she returned to the stage in productions including *Uncle Vanya*, *Camille*, *Hamlet*, and, notably, the Chicago production of *Life with Father* during 1940 and 1941, which ran a record-breaking sixty-six weeks. After the war, she returned to films and received an Academy Award nomination for her supporting role in *Duel in the Sun*. In 1971, she won a special Academy Award, and, in 1984, she received a posthumous Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Film Institute.

In 1917, Gish starred in a series of films that supported American intervention in World War I. Given the perceived unsatisfactory outcome of that war, Gish believed that war was not the answer to national conflict, that America should build an impregnable defense, and that American government should focus on national problems. By 1941, she was determined to do what she could to prevent American involvement in the war raging through Europe. Chicago was the center for those who wished for a noninterventionist American policy, a group that has become known as isolationists, a label given to them by their opponents. Central to that movement was the America First Committee (AFC), founded in June 1940 and headquartered in Chicago with a membership of some eight hundred thousand by the spring of 1941.³ Although the America First Committee is tarred by the infamous and anti-Semitic speech of Charles Lindbergh in Des Moines on 11 September 1941, the organization attempted to include a wide variety of Americans in leadership positions, including John L. Lewis’s daughter Kathryn, Chester Bowles, and the novelist Kathleen Norris.⁴ The America First Committee believed that American involvement in the European war would inevitably lead to economic dislocations and political intolerance, as well as to a high death toll of American military personnel.⁵ Most members supported the Allies in principle, although a few supporters of the Axis joined the organization. With historical hindsight, the America First Committee has been tossed in the proverbial dustbin of history; but, at the time, their arguments seemed cogent to many and the noninterventionist impulse reflected the views of a sizable segment of the American public.

The support for nonintervention was not equally spread throughout the country. While the Midwest was strongly opposed to American involvement, many on the East and West Coasts (and particularly New York and Hollywood) supported some form of active intervention. Within Hollywood and on Broadway, support for isolationism was weak. As war approached, theatrical and cinematic productions, once cautious on the war issue, become more explicitly interventionist.⁶ This was recognized by isolationist groups. By August 1941, North Dakota Senator Gerald Nye asked Americans the question, “Are you ready to send your boys to bleed and die in Europe, to make the world safe for

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Barney Balaban and Adolph Zukor and Joseph Schenck?”⁷ Noting a string of films that implicitly supported American intervention in the fight against the Axis powers, Senator Nye, along with Senator Bennett Champ Clark of Missouri, had the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce investigate “Propaganda in Motion Pictures.”⁸ By the time of the hearings, Gish had distanced herself from the isolationist movement, but it is plausible that the fact that Washington isolationists were turning their attention to the performing arts in ways that opponents claimed were anti-Semitic placed considerable pressure on Gish to distance herself from her former allies.

Gish felt guilty for her active support of World War I, feeling that her actions had the effect of “spreading hatred.”⁹ Long affiliated with the Republican Party, she even attended the 1940 Democratic convention and joked with her friend H. L. Mencken, “Farley [the head of the DNC] has the whole fifth floor [of her hotel]. Why not meet me for dinner in my rooms on the sixth? We will dance on his head.”¹⁰ Such political proclivities, coupled with the encouragement of her newly made Chicago isolationist friends, prompted Lillian Gish to join the America First Committee. During this period, Gish became close friends with Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh and his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Chicago Tribune* publisher Colonel Robert R. McCormick, and General Robert Wood, the head of the America First Committee. Although there were a few other actors and actresses who had—or were believed to have had—similar politics (such as O. Z. Whitehead, Edward Everett Horton, Katharine Cornell, Fred MacMurray, Orson Welles, and Gary Cooper),¹¹ Lillian Gish was certainly the most active among them; and along with fellow thespian Irvin S. Cobb (better known as a writer and humorist), she served on the National Committee of America First—the only actress to do so.¹²

During the spring and summer of 1941, Gish made several speeches on behalf of the America First Committee. She had previously written numerous letters to President Roosevelt urging him not to send American soldiers overseas. By March 1941, she was actively speaking out on behalf of the AFC, including an April 1941 radio address, a debate on intervention with Professor Jerome Kerwin of the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago, and, later, at rallies in Los Angeles and San Francisco.¹³ Gish was one of the most effective attractions for the America First Committee, whose speakers, with the exception of Colonel Lindbergh, lacked celebrity.

Even at the start, friends warned Gish that her public role would cause controversy. Her friend H. L. Mencken, who praised her April radio address, told her on 28 March that “these few lines are simply to say that I am really enthusiastic about that radio speech. I think you are showing an enormous amount of courage in launching it, and I believe you have done a grand job with it. No newspaper will print it in full, and most of them will even refuse to print summaries.”¹⁴ After the address, Mencken suggested that she would be feeling the repercussions of the speech for months to come.¹⁵

Both Gish and her young costar in the Chicago company of *Life with Father*, O. Z. Whitehead (who played Clarence), were pressured not to make political pronouncements. Less prominent than Gish, Whitehead was to give a

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talk to the Chicago chapter of the AFC, subsequently to be published in the *Tribune*, of which he recalls:

That night when I arrived at the theatre, Harry Klein, the manager, called me into his office and said, "Someone told me that you are going to give a talk for The America First Committee tomorrow morning. I feel that Miss Gish's talk has given unfavorable publicity to the play so that I would rather that you did not give one."¹⁶

After Whitehead requested that the newspaper not print his remarks, the night editor insisted on publishing an article under the headline "Actor Gagged." In this instance, Colonel McCormick's powerful *Chicago Tribune* forced the issue and the theatre manager backed down; but this was in the heartland of isolationism and, on the coasts, matters would surely be different. Gish, for her part, told Whitehead that spring that, "if I can save one American life and ruin my career in doing so, I would consider my career well lost."¹⁷ However, that was to change after the end of the run of *Life with Father*, as Gish found that she was not hired in either New York or Hollywood. On 28 August, she had lunch with General Wood¹⁸ and discussed the strains on her career. According to a confidential memo in the files of the America First Committee, based on a conversation with General Wood,

Miss Gish stated that since her active association with the America First Committee, she has been "black-listed" by movie studios in Hollywood and by the legitimate theatre. She has been seeking employment in Hollywood during the past several weeks, and her agent has finally notified her that he can now obtain for her a movie contract which will bring her \$65,000. *This contract, however, has been offered upon the condition that she first resign from the America First Committee and cease all her activities on behalf of the Committee; and upon the further condition that in resigning, she refrain from stating this reason for her resignation.* Miss Gish has not had employment for a long time. She is supporting her Mother and is helping to support her sister.¹⁹

In fact, Lillian Gish had been without work since the closing of *Life with Father* in the spring, a surprising turn of events for such a prominent actress. By 1942 she was working again in *Mr. Sycamore*, a Broadway show,²⁰ and in *Commandos Strike at Dawn*, a Hollywood film. After her resignation from the AFC, she was able to resume her career.

Although there is, of course, no documentary evidence for the blacklist threat, there is no reason to doubt this account. In Miss Gish's telling, "I just resigned," declining both to give a reason for her resignation and to state whether she had changed her political opinion. Although the *New York Times* printed a rumor that she had been the victim of discrimination, Gish denied that publicly and further declined to be a witness before Senator Nye's committee on Hollywood propaganda, claiming "I have nothing to tell the Senate committee,

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and I know nothing of any discrimination against me.”²¹ Be that as it may, we do, in fact, know that, elsewhere, pressure was brought to bear on supporters of the America First Committee to resign their positions.²²

The evidence clearly points to pressure on Lillian Gish to separate herself from an organization that many in the performing arts found anathema to their beliefs, even prior to Charles Lindbergh’s infamous speech. This should not be surprising, of course, insofar as any group erects boundaries in order to separate itself from those whom that group considers to hold deviant views. The difference in the case of Lillian Gish, however, is that the pressure came from *inside* the arts community, rather than, as later in the decade, from the *outside*. The reality was that few theatrical figures were supporters of the isolationist movement, in contrast to many more who had connections to the Communist Party of America.

Our preliminary investigation uncovers key questions for further examination of the repercussions of personal politics on the careers of performance artists: questions that will be explored and answered by theatre historians. In the case of Lillian Gish, how did she counteract an offstage, politically suspect persona? After her separation from the America First Committee, did she demonstrate allegiance to the political preferences of her peers? Given the pressures to conform to dominant political perspectives within and outside a community, how do performers construct a politically acceptable identity? Moreover, what is sacrificed by that pursuit, both for artists and for the arts in which they are engaged? From wherever political threats derive, the high visibility of performing artists make them inviting targets for those who demand that the perceived legitimacy of one’s politics serves as a marker of one’s moral virtue.

ENDNOTES

1. Elizabeth Cooper, “*Dances about Spain: Censorship at the Federal Theatre Project*,” *Theatre Research International* 29.3 (2004): 232–46; Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Nancy Lynn Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers’ Wars* (New York: Knopf, 1982); Ronald Radosh and Allis Radosh, *Red Star over Hollywood: The Film Colony’s Long Romance with the Left* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2005).

2. Leo Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 178–224. Few isolationists were sympathetic to Nazi ideology, but they were opposed to American intervention in European battles. See Justus D. Doenecke and John E. Wilz, *From Isolation to War 1931–1941* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1991).

3. Wayne Cole, *America First: The Battle against Intervention 1940–1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953), 30.

4. Ruth Sarles, *A Story of America First: The Men and Women Who Opposed U.S. Intervention in World War II* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 24, 184.

5. Cole, 8–10.

6. Phillip Gianos, *Politics and Politicians in American Film* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 115.

7. Charles Affron, *Lillian Gish: Her Legend, Her Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 291.

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8. Cole, 140–41; Saverio Giovacchini, *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 114.
9. Lillian Gish, “Address to AFC Rally (and on Radio)”, 1 April 1940, in Lillian Gish papers, New York Public Library, Performing Arts Library [hereafter, Gish papers], 4.
10. Cited in Affron, 287.
11. On these points, see Affron, 291; and Cole, 248.
12. Cole, 248.
13. Stuart Oderman, *Lillian Gish: A Life on Stage and Screen* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 250.
14. Gish papers, H. L. Mencken file, Box 26, Folder 1, n.p.
15. Ibid.
16. O. Z. Whitehead, “Lillian,” *George Spelvin’s Theatre Book* 1.1 (Spring 1978): 1–95, at 39.
17. Cited in Whitehead, 37.
18. Gish papers, Datebook 1941, Box 42, Folder 2.
19. Memo dictated by Richard A. Moore, 28 August 1941. America First Committee papers, Hoover Institute, Stanford University, Box 287; emphasis added.
20. However, this Ketti Frings play, produced by the Theatre Guild, ran only nineteen performances; see www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=1239.
21. “Lillian Gish Quits America First Group,” *New York Times*, 2 September 1941, 15.
22. “New Rochelle Voters’ Unit Head Quits in Favor of America First,” *New York Times*, October 8, 1941, 18.