

THE UN-CANADIANS

A National Film Board of Canada Release



From the late 1940s through to the early '70s, one million Canadians were investigated by their own government, irretrievably altering their lives. *The Un-Canadians* uncovers some of their stories and documents the workings of a secret government agency, 'The Security Panel,' an organization that, along with the RCMP security service, shaped and monitored the development of a Canadian blacklist during the Cold War. We also see the influence that the United States, and Senator Joe McCarthy's tactics, had on the Government of Canada.

Through in-depth interviews, archival footage and revealing documents, *The Un-Canadians* tracks down the supposed 'subversives' and traces the effect that the blacklist had on their lives. Many had their careers ruined and their family lives destroyed.

Director Len Scher knows how it feels to grow up in one of these families. His father was one of those blacklisted. Scher's attempts to learn why resulted in the publication of the book "The Un-Canadians," upon which this film is based.

Director: Len Scher

Producers: Joanne Muroff Smale, Michael Alder (NFB)

Produced by Joanne Smale Communications Ltd., in co-production with the National Film Board of Canada, developed with the assistance of The Cable Production Fund and Rogers Telefund, and produced in association with Citytv.

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www.nfb.ca

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VHS

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"...a fascinating and instructive portrait of a dark chapter of Canada's history that reveals much that is disturbing."

— John Haslett Cuff,
Globe and Mail



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QUOTES FROM THE FILM

"It hit me as a surprise that [the blacklist] was going on. I had heard of McCarthyism in the States...but I didn't suspect my country was as bad as the United States." — Leo Orenstein, former CBC-TV producer/director blacklisted while employed by CBC.

"You have to experience [the blacklist] to know what it means. You seem to have been dirtied by something. Even after all these years, it is almost too much." — Jan Eisenhardt, fired from Canadair during the blacklist years.

"For years afterwards, [the blacklist] had a major effect on my life." — Ruth Budd, fired from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra.

"They spread about the story that I had been dropped off on the St. Lawrence by a Russian submarine. For years, I had to go around with my birth certificate just to prove I didn't come off a Russian submarine." — Madeleine Parent on the Duplessis years in Quebec.

BACKGROUND

The historical and political context for the blacklisting of ordinary Canadians during the Cold War is complex. As **The Un-Canadians** compellingly illustrates, the activities of our government during this era had a profound impact on the personal lives of many Canadians. And yet the means by which our government chose to wage the Cold War on the domestic front remain difficult to fully understand or accept.

The Cold War emerged out of WW II as a power struggle between the two major victors: the United States and the USSR. While the USSR had been allied with the West during the course of WW II, this alliance was never a comfortable one. In fact, Canada has a long and relatively consistent history of anti-Communist sentiments that pre-date WW II. In the US, anti-communism was in evidence as early as 1919. At that time, the Department of Justice rounded up large numbers of foreign-born radicals: "The traditional targets — foreigners, radicals, and striking workers — were beaten and arrested, and many of the non-citizens among them were deported" (Schrecker, 1994).

In both the US and Canada, the political left — with its vision of a collective good, including fairness in the distribution of wealth and power — actually gained strength through the hard times of the '30s in the face of a faltering capitalist system, and in the battle against Fascism (Zinn, 1980). But following the Second World War, Stalin's communist regime replaced Hitler's fascism as the perceived enemy of western democratic principles and freedoms. Some battles against communism were fought in traditional military terms on the international stage. However, for the US and Canada, this ideological battle was fought on a more abstract level: this was the Cold War. Central to the Cold War was the concern that Soviet-directed activities, such as espionage and sabotage, could occur within our own borders. For Canada, the 'Gouzenko affair' of 1945 marked the official beginning of the Cold War with the uncovering of a communist spy ring operating here at home.

Much of the Cold War was fought on the domestic front in the name of national security; it included activities directed against Canadian and American residents and citizens in a protracted search for the 'enemy within.' But it was a search that went well beyond the identification of perceived Communist security threats, to the targeting of individuals and groups who were viewed as threats to the status quo by the governments of the day. It exploited the historical relationships of Communism to the political left and labour, as well as the long-standing anti-labour and anti-progressive sentiments that existed in certain powerful circles, by casting all three movements in the dragnet.

As Whitaker (1994) states: "The atmosphere surrounding the launching of the Cold War in Canada was brittle and edged with hysteria...People who questioned the

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emergent orthodoxy sometimes fell under police surveillance, lost their government jobs, were purged from their trade unions, or become subject to deportation proceedings. These things did not happen to all dissenters, but when it happened even to a few, free discussion about Canada's options was constricted". Eventually, as we see in **The Un-Canadians**, the dragnet expanded to include people with, at best, remote connections to any particular political agenda.

In Quebec, Premier Maurice Duplessis held the province in the grip of a "Red scare." When, for instance, a poorly constructed bridge collapsed in 1951, he blamed it on communist saboteurs. Under Quebec's infamous "Padlock Act," in force from 1937 to 1957, Red Squads were free to confiscate personal papers and padlock houses for up to a year. Many careers were ruined, and some people served prison terms.

The Cold War search for subversives and the practice of blacklisting occurred in both Canada and the United States, but such activities were handled very differently by the two countries. In the US, the search came to be identified with the House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and Senator Joseph McCarthy, who used his position to launch personal witchhunts. It was a very public, albeit chaotic, process which stands in marked contrast to the quietly clandestine approach adopted by the Canadian government and overseen by a select group of bureaucrats, known as the Security Panel, in cooperation with the RCMP. In fact, the Canadian approach was adopted, at least in part, in order to avoid the political turbulence and fallout associated with McCarthyism. As one of the 'un-Canadians' in the film remarks, "We're not very open about our prejudices — we're not very open about our hostilities — we're intelligent enough to hide them".

While the practice of blacklisting Canadians proceeded in a covert fashion, the names of those blacklisted were made quite public to the FBI in the US. According to Whitaker (in Scher, 1992), Canada traded names for external intelligence collected by the Americans, since Canada had no external intelligence agency of its own. Canadian politicians of the time denied knowledge of this practice. Given the secretive nature of the operation, and the direct links between the RCMP and FBI, the politicians may have been telling the truth. The information provided to the FBI and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) allowed them to control the entry of 'subversive' Canadians into the US. For labour leaders, this effectively limited access to their union heads, who were often located in the US (Scher, 1992). For thousands of Canadians like Morris Scher, it effectively halted their travel to the US and subjected them and their families to extraordinary personal humiliation.

This episode in our history, for all of its disgrace and human costs, provides a rich opportunity for the identification of many of the social and political issues that continue to challenge us today.

See "Additional Resources" for sources.

THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

1. The Ideological War: Democratic Values vs. Communism

The underlying premise of the Cold War was the apparent ideological conflict between communism, in both principle and practice, and modern, western democratic forms of government. But the methods used to uncover communist activities on Canada's domestic front seemed to mirror aspects of communist rule itself (e.g. the anti-democratic suspension of individual rights and freedoms; lack of due process; tactics of fear and intimidation, etc.).

Compare and contrast the basic tenets of each system. To what extent are the activities depicted in **The Un-Canadians** representative of democratic principles? To what extent are these principles violated? What are the implications?

2. Individual Rights vs. State Security and the Public Good

Within a democracy, there is an ongoing tension between the rights of individuals and the need to maintain a state of safety and order for the public good. In the film, we see the curtailment of civil liberties and rights now enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, including rights to privacy and freedom of expression. We are told of attempts to silence certain voices in our society, either through fear and intimidation, or through direct forms of censorship such as book banning. The inception of the Padlock Laws in Quebec was perhaps the most blatant violation of rights during the period.

How are we to balance competing interests in a democracy? And, at what point does a democracy cease to be? How can we protect it? Why should we protect it? What are some examples of current issues that represent the tension between individual freedoms and the greater good?

3. The Abuse of Power - the Executive, the Bureaucrats and Law Enforcement

As the film so clearly demonstrates, many innocent people's lives were ruined through this clandestine anti-communist operation. It was a process secretly initiated by the Prime Minister's Office, directed by an appointed panel of bureaucrats (the Security Panel), and implemented by the RCMP, who were responsible for both surveillance and law enforcement. The entire operation was undertaken in the name of 'national security'.

In this context, is there a role for public accountability? Who decides if and when an abuse of power has occurred?

Could it happen again? Can it be prevented? Are there other examples in our recent history?

4. The Identification of Subversives

The blacklisting process and harassment that ensued were premised on the correct identification of subversives. Clearly, the process spun out of control. Guilt was conferred on innocent individuals.

But, who are subversives? How can they be identified? Should 'real' subversives be subjected to the kinds of harassment experienced by those we saw in the film? Which members of our society today are viewed as subversives? Why? How does our society treat them?

5. Stereotyping and Discriminatory Practices

The film presents in bold relief the stereotyping of individuals, and discriminatory employment practices that were inherent to the blacklisting era. These insidious practices served to heighten fear and extend the chill of the Cold War directly into the lives of individuals. They fed upon the demonization of difference and fear of the 'other'.

Discuss these issues with reference to current examples of stereotyping and discrimination.

6. The Impact of Blacklisting on the Individual: Isolation, Alienation, Stigma, Loss of Self-Esteem and Emotional Depression

In addition to the economic impact associated with job loss, individuals suffered greatly in their personal lives, as we see in a number of compelling sequences in the film. Examples range from being ostracized by colleagues, to the expression of suicidal feelings.

Is there any recourse for individuals who have been subject to such injustices? Should there be? Discuss the possibilities.

7. Canada's Sharing of Information with the US

Why would the Canadian Government share information on its citizens with the United States? Do you think that during the Cold War the Government of Canada would be willing to share information with the governments of other countries?

One of the reasons Canada gave names to the US was in exchange for external intelligence. Now that Canada has an intelligence agency (the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service) do you think the country would still be willing to trade security files?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES: STARTING POINTS

The Un-Canadians touches on so many significant issues that range from the personal to the political that the following resources are intended only as an introduction to some aspects of this rich subject area. The list includes both Canadian and American sources.

BOOKS

Borovoy, A. Alan. (1988). *When Freedoms Collide: The Case for our Civil Liberties*. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys.

Fried, Richard. (1990). *Nightmare in Red*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sawatsky, John. (1980). *Men in the Shadows*. Toronto: Doubleday.

Scher, Len. (1992). *The Un-Canadians: True Stories of the Blacklist Era*. Toronto: Lester Publishing.

Schrecker, Ellen. (1994). *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford Books.

Weisbord, Merrily. (1994). *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials, and the Cold War*. Second edition. Montreal: Vehicule Press.

Whitaker, Reginald & Marcuse, Gary. (1994). *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945-1957*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Zinn, Howard. (1980). *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper & Row.

WEB SITES

Each of the following sites contains many valuable links:

Canadian Civil Liberties Association
www.ccla.org

Canadian Security Intelligence Service
<http://www.csis-scrcs.gc.ca>

Royal Canadian Mounted Police
<http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca>

Cold War Hot Links (US)
<http://www.stmartin.edu/~dprice/cold.war.html>

Post World War II (US)
<http://www.hist.unt.edu/09w-amw5.htm>