

The Red Scare and McCarthy Trials

In 1950, Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* as a parallel between the Salem Witch trials and the current events that were spreading throughout the United States at the time. A similar “witch-hunt” was happening in the United States—and this time, the accused were those who were a part of the Communist Party or were Communist sympathizers.

Shortly after the end of World War I, a “Red Scare” took hold of the nation. Named after the red flag of the USSR (now Russia), the “Reds” were seen as a threat to the democracy of the United States. Fear, paranoia, and hysteria gripped the nation, and many innocent people were questioned and then jailed for expressing any view which was seen as anti-Democratic or anti-American.



In June of 1940, Congress passed the Alien Registration Act, which required anyone who was not a legal resident of the United States to file a statement of their occupational and personal status, which included a record of their political beliefs. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which was established in 1938, had the job of investigating those who were suspected of overthrowing or threatening the democracy of the US. As the Alien Registration Act gathered the information, the HUAC began hunting down those who were believed to be a threat to American beliefs.

The HUAC established that Communist beliefs were being spread via mass media. At this time, movies were becoming more liberal, and therefore, were believed to be a threat; many felt that Hollywood was attempting to propagandize Communist beliefs. In September of 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee subpoenaed nineteen witnesses (most of whom were actors, directors, and writers) who had previously refused comment, claiming their Fifth Amendment rights. Eleven of the 17 were called to testify; only one actually spoke on the stand—the remaining ten refused to speak and were labeled the “Hollywood Ten.”

After these infamous ten refused to speak, executives from the movie industry met to decide how to best handle the bad press. They decided to suspend all ten without pay. Although the initial intention was to save their box office reputation, what eventually resulted was a decade-long blacklist. Hundreds of people who worked in the industry were told to point the finger naming those who had any affiliation with the Communist party. As a result, over 200 people lost their jobs and were unable to find anyone who would hire them. The Communist witch-hunt ruined the careers of hundreds, and ruined the reputation of hundreds more.

In February of 1950, a Republican senator from Wisconsin named Joseph McCarthy claimed to have a list of over 200 card-carrying members of the Communist party. By 1951, a new flourish of accusations began and a new wave were subpoenaed to “name names”—to snitch on those who were Communists or believed to be Communist sympathizers. Later, the terms *McCarthy Trials* and *McCarthyism* were coined, which described the anti-Communist movement and trials of the 1950s.

Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* in 1953, after witnessing first-hand the modern witch-hunt that had taken place in the United States. Miller wrote the controversial play as an allegory, a play which represents something much deeper. In this case, the story is about the Salem witch trials of the 1690s, but warns of history repeating these tragic events in the 1950s.