

Gary Cooper, the Red Scare and Golden-Age Hollywood

The movie “High Noon,” great in itself, is all the greater for the backstory Glenn Frankel tells in his new book.



Gary Cooper as Marshal Will Kane in ‘High Noon’ (1952). Photo: Getty Images

By Stefan Kanfer
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In August 2015, the headline for an editorial in this newspaper read: “Gary Cooper in Europe.” On a train from Amsterdam to Paris, an armed jihadi burst into a passenger car. Three young Americans happened to be aboard. The trio rose up as one, subduing the terrorist before he could fire his weapon. These men, said The Wall Street Journal’s editors, represented “an admirable strain in American culture that doesn’t shrink from individual acts of heroism for the larger good. . . . Heroism used to be celebrated in Hollywood, though it rarely is in these cynical days.”

Some 63 years before, that headliner had been the lodestar of “High Noon,” an austere black-and-white western told in real time. It became a surprise box-office smash, earned four Academy

Awards (including one for Cooper for best actor), and a permanent place in the hearts of moviegoers world-wide.

It had not begun that way. In his wide-screen narrative, “High Noon: The Hollywood Blacklist and the Making of an American Classic,” cultural historian Glenn Frankel follows the outrageous fortunes of the film and its creators. Fred Zinnemann was a Viennese émigré whose ideas of the Old West were derived from German potboilers. He had directed two promising newcomers, Marlon Brando (“The Men”) and Montgomery Clift (“The Search”) but was hardly a household name, even in the households of B-picture producers. The screenwriter, Carl Foreman, was better known to the cognoscenti; his credits included several distinguished features, including “Champion” and “Cyrano de Bergerac.” He was also known to another group: fellow members of the Communist Party, an affiliation that was to shape the drama of “High Noon” and blight the career of its writer.

Cooper, the third pillar of this now-classic feature, was 50 when he went before the cameras. He had been a bankable actor for decades, celebrated for his performances not only on screen but in bed. He never took himself seriously in the latter role. After a hot romance with co-star Ingrid Bergman, he recalled: “Ingrid loved me more than any woman in my life loved me. The day after *Saratoga Trunk* ended, I couldn’t get her on the phone.” But as a performer he was polished and professional, aware that he had been a member of cinema royalty—and that age had eroded his status. As Stanley Kramer, the producer of “High Noon,” put it: “Everybody felt he was old and tired.”

Not quite everybody. “Coop” believed that he was right for the role of Marshal Will Kane. So right, Mr. Frankel tells us, that he agreed to take a salary cut. He also volunteered to play without makeup, accenting the creases in his leather-saddle face. The filmmakers found the offers irresistible. With a supporting cast of reliable character actors, and a 22-year-old ingenue named Grace Kelly, filming began in the fall of 1951.

At the same time, another show got under way. The House Committee on Un-American Activities began to probe for Communist influence in Celluloid City. As a shelf of books have indicated, the congressmen pursued ink and air time as avidly as they hunted “subversives.”

They did discover a handful of self-styled commissars in the film colony. Mr. Frankel quotes Stalinist screenwriter John Howard Lawson instructing neophytes: “As a writer try to get five minutes of the Communist doctrine . . . in every script that you write. If you can, make the message come out of the mouth of Gary Cooper or some other important star who is unaware of what he is saying.”

But the scenarists were not an ovine flock. When in their early 20s, the radicals had indeed bought the Workers’ Paradise myth exported from Moscow and joined the American Communist Party. Then disillusion set in. In 1939, the U.S.S.R. invaded a defenseless Finland. This outrage was followed by the pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Members fell away. Contributions dried up. America’s entry into World War II gave the remaining comrades and fellow travelers a new rationale: Weren’t Russia and the U.S. allies in the fight against fascism?

The 1950s did not provide the answer they sought. By then the Soviet Union had acquired its own nuclear arsenal, Korea had turned into a surrogate battleground between Moscow and Washington, and the Cold War had gone glacial. A fear of Red infiltration, unseen since the America of the 1920s, resumed. The federal government required employees to sign a loyalty oath; the private sector followed.

Summoned before the House Un-American Activities Committee, scores of writers, directors, actors and executives made full confessions. When these were deemed insufficient to rescue their livelihoods, they furnished the identities of their fellow radicals. Others, however, declined to name names. They were finished in Hollywood. One of the refuseniks was Carl Foreman.

He had not supplied Gary Cooper, a political conservative, with any pink-stained speeches. He had long since torn up his Party card. That hardly mattered; colleagues drifted away, fearful of guilt by association. There were no new job offers; an industry-wide blacklist had gone into effect. In 1952, a powerful Hollywood labor leader, Mr. Frankel writes, “put out the word that anyone who worked on a movie with Carl would find himself blacklisted.” As the probes wore on, the screenwriter began to see himself as a latter-day Will Kane, the imperiled lawman whose former buddies have given him their backs. After “High Noon” wrapped, Foreman left town just like the sheriff, seeking employment elsewhere.

He found it in the friendlier precincts of Britain. But if Foreman was finished with the blacklist, the blacklist wasn’t finished with him. To sell scripts he used pseudonyms for the next six years. In 1956, along with Michael Wilson, another blacklisted, he wrote “The Bridge on the River Kwai.” The Oscar for best screenplay adaptation went to French novelist Pierre Boulle, who didn’t write or speak English.

Even this failed to satisfy the old-line Communists who attacked Foreman for ideological impurity—after all, his typewriter never stopped, so there must have been something tainted about his success. “Some perhaps were jealous of the fact,” observes Mr. Frankel, that the writer “lived well in London, and that he always seemed to come out ahead financially.” The words “skill” and “proficiency” had no place in the progressives’ lexicon.

Carl Foreman, who died in 1984, had in fact paid a steep price for his walk on the left side. Gary Cooper was back on top; Fred Zinnemann went on to become a world-class director (“The Nun’s Story,” “A Man for All Seasons”). Though Foreman was eventually rehabilitated, he had lost who knows how many film projects, a Hollywood career and a marriage. In the end there was only one true workman’s compensation: Like the character he created, “I discovered that I could be scared and still come through a situation. I actually was the kind of person I thought I was.” The movie “High Noon,” great in itself, is all the greater for the backstory Mr. Frankel tells.

—Mr. Kanfer is the author of
“A Journal of the Plague Years:
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of the Blacklist.” His novel “Hell Money” will be published in the fall.

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