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## Oppenheimer, the New York Times and the Cold Wars



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*Oppenheimer* is an impressive, well-produced biopic based on a critical book by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, *American Prometheus*. It tells the story of one of the iconic scientists in American history, who led the project to develop and ultimately deploy the atomic bomb.

Robert Oppenheimer was the son of German-born Jewish parents and raised in the affluent upper west side in Manhattan where works of European art adorned their apartment walls.

In the 1930s and '40s, he was not only anguished by what the German Nazis were doing to Jews in his parents' homeland, but also the threats to physicists, many of whom happened to be Jewish. Hence his initial willingness to develop the bomb before the physicist Werner Heisenberg and his colleagues in Nazi Germany beat the US to the punch.

### **Oppenheimer's Politics**

Oppenheimer's youth was anything that would have naturally drawn him to become close to the American communist movement, and yet for a time he was. He attended private secondary schooling that specialized in the study of ethics, a problematic that remained with him throughout his adult years. Moving on to Harvard, he became intensely interested in theoretical physics, eventually transporting himself to Cambridge University and the University of Göttingen for his doctorate in quantum physics.

Regardless of his privileged life, his native New York City was a haven of left-wing intellectuals and politics, both organic and book-educated. Oppenheimer supported the communist-led Popular Front on the Republican side against the Hitler-backed fascists in the Spanish Civil War, and at home he personally mixed with the CPUSA, his brother having been a member. With his European experience and contacts, he was a logical choice to head the Manhattan Project in 1942 inasmuch as many of the leading atomic physicists at the time were from the continent.

He was also well-chosen because of his status in the scientific community and his deep interest in ideas beyond science and a talent for foreign languages (the Hindu classic *Bhagavad Gita* in Sanskrit was one of his favorite books as was T.S. Eliot's modernist poem *The Waste Land*) that gave him an attractive cosmopolitan aura among fellow scientists and intellectuals, though not all.

Facing the other end of the intellectual spectrum, he was precisely the sort of antithetical figure that the Nazis in Germany and many conservatives in the US deemed a "cosmopolitan" – a codeword for someone who eschewed absolute devotion to the state, commonly associated with the archetypal "wandering Jew" in the warped imagination of antisemites like Hitler and his cronies and fascist offspring.

The film's director and screenwriter Christopher Nolan is English by birth and education, though he holds dual UK-US citizenship. Nolan deftly weaves in the right-wing political backlash in America in the 1940s and '50s with the growing moral tension that Oppenheimer felt about turning the cataclysmic weapon against Japanese civilian targets at a time when the war was practically over. It was the most barbaric single act of warfare ever committed in human history.

## **Fission and Fusion**

The turn to Japan after the defeat of Germany was not only about ending the Asia-Pacific war by using the atomic weapon. From historical accounts and what was evident in Nolan's dialogue between the military commander at Los Alamos, Brigadier General Leslie Groves, and Oppenheimer, it was also clear that the bomb was the opening salvo in the Cold War, ultimately directed against America's then nominal war ally, the Soviet Union.

America's duplicity in turning enemies (Japan and Germany) overnight into friends and friends (Soviet Union) into enemies is symbolically captured in Nolan's "fission" and "fusion" film sequences, essentially the first and second halves of his three-hour epic. The former represented the hurried mobilization of scientific talent in Los Alamos in the effort to develop an atomic weapon ahead of the Germans.

Fusion, the technique adopted to build a vastly more powerful hydrogen bomb, was the film's Cold War phase. The project, led by the hawkish Edward Teller, drove an arms race and the creation of the military-industrial complex. It marked the effort of the Pentagon to achieve nuclear supremacy over the Soviet Union and political and economic hegemony over the rest of the world.

Oppenheimer, an internationalist, objected to the US developing a monopoly over nuclear weaponry, preferring that further atomic research be conducted under the auspices of a UN commission, which had some support in the government at the time. But Truman would have none of it and called Oppenheimer a "crybaby."

And despite his leadership at Los Alamos as "the father of the atomic bomb," Oppenheimer faced the inquisition of the McCarthyites for which he lost his security clearance and his leading status in the field of theoretical physics. He was said to have died a broken man at the age of 62.

The subject of atomic weapons and the Cold War certainly should inspire reflections on contemporary events, as the US is presently involved in a dangerous proxy war in Ukraine with the expressed interest in destroying the Russian political system. Former CIA director and defense secretary under Obama, Leon Panetta bluntly declared, 'It's a proxy war with Russia, whether we say so or not.' Current defense secretary Lloyd Austin repeated the refrain in calling for weakening Russia's military capabilities.

### **The Times' Reviews: Cold War Context MIA**

It is of interest to read what the *New York Times* film reviewers had to say about *Oppenheimer*. Two *Times* reviews, one by Manohla Dargis on July 23 and another

by [Amanda Taub](#) on July 27, ignored the Cold War content of the film in its depiction of the early postwar period, the anti-communist hysteria, and Oppenheimer's personal struggle to survive the reactionary tide.

And they also missed the significance of Oppenheimer's last utterance in the film about an atmospheric and political "chain reaction" that would likely follow the command structure's decision to develop an H-bomb and ever more destructive devices, with its underlying anti-Soviet and careerist motivations and apocalyptic consequences.

Neither Dargis nor Taub pay any attention to what so much worried Oppenheimer, the real possibility of a global Ground Zero and America being and becoming "the destroyer of worlds." This should worry serious journalists today given the ongoing escalation of advanced weaponry being sent to Ukraine, now approaching a tipping point that easily could lead to an exchange of nuclear weapons. This is precisely what Oppenheimer warned against.

Dargis does a light touch review, mainly describing Nolan's cinematic techniques: the pacing, the choice of actors, the use of color and black & white sequences, etc. It's a cursory treatment for such a once-in-a-decade film and with many embedded issues about America's superpower political culture.

Taub's review is hardly better. Her main observation is about Nolan's symbolic use of "fission" and "fusion," which she sees as merely a technical division within the scientific enterprise, not as steps in a political-industrial pathway toward mutually-assured destruction through a constellation of scientific, military, and political power players absorbed in the Cold War.

Summing up, Taub sees the film as "a story of ambition and petty grievances spiraling out of anyone's control." And Nolan's message, she says is that "history is driven by people who make flawed choices."

Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Cold War were not "flawed choices" but deliberate decisions that had great power ambitions coalescing behind them, for which Oppenheimer had a profound sense of guilt. And the idea of "chain reaction" that Oppenheimer (as well as Einstein) employed as metaphor was for Taub merely an expression "of ambition and grievance." This reductionist notion is dangerously short-sighted and naïve given the *Times* major role in legitimating state behavior.

The interesting question is why the "newspaper of record" has written such superficial reviews of this important film, one that is full of controversy and contemporary relevance?

I believe it has to do with the culture of censorship in which it has become fatal to one's career to speak in ways that even modestly question official doctrine.

Ignoring the film's message about the culture of the Cold War that destroyed Oppenheimer draws comparisons to the ways in which mainstream journalists, as well as academics, self-censor about the root causes of the Ukraine crisis. They dare not speak the name of US empire in explaining how this country's endless invasions and interventions since World War II are contextually related to the proxy war in Ukraine. For most people in the world, in fact, the US is the biggest threat to world peace.

In each of America's international transgressions, the *New York Times* has consistently failed to act independently in its coverage and analysis of US foreign policy. It has supported every war. Under such guidelines, even a film review, assuming that any degree of journalistic independence is respected, falls under the sanitizing scrutiny of the editors and their editors' editors in the highest positions of state power.

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