

Red Joan: A British spy story skirts some issues

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Red Joan tells the story of Joan Stanley, a retired British librarian in her 80s who is suddenly confronted by Scotland Yard officers and arrested in her suburban living room, accused of having spied for the Soviet Union more than five decades earlier.

The film is adapted from a novel of the same name by Jennie Rooney, which in turn is loosely based on the story of Melita Norwood, arrested in 1999 at the age of 87 and accused of passing classified information to the USSR for four decades. The authorities decided not to charge Norwood, citing her advanced age. She died in 2005 at the age of 93.

The film, directed by Trevor Nunn, formerly the artistic director for the Royal Shakespeare Company and National Theatre in the UK, and, currently, the Theatre Royal Haymarket, utilizes flashbacks in which the elderly Joan (Judi Dench), under interrogation by detectives, begins discussing her youth, which is then depicted on screen. The great bulk of the movie consists of the life of the young Joan (Sophie Cookson), portrayed from her undergraduate days at Cambridge University in 1938 through the immediate postwar years.

Joan, who is studying physics, meets two Russian-born students at Cambridge: Sonya (Tereza Srbova) and Leo (Tom Hughes). Through them she begins attending some student political meetings. This is the period of the Spanish Civil War, and the Stalinist activists of the British Communist Party are vociferously promoting the Popular Front line of support for the liberal bourgeoisie as the key to defeating fascism.

In one revealing and historically quite plausible scene, several of the CP students read aloud, at a campus meeting, excerpts of the fraudulent confessions of Russian Bolsheviks Grigori Zinoviev and Lev

Kamenev, from the first of the infamous Moscow Trials, in 1936. Joan, though attracted by the struggle in Spain and the growing danger of war, resists joining the Stalinists. She sharply questions how the grotesque staged confessions by lifelong revolutionaries to such monstrous crimes could possibly be true. Here and elsewhere, *Red Joan* is factually accurate and grippingly evokes the period leading up to the Second World War.

Joan, a standout student, graduates and goes to work at “Tube Alloys,” the code-named firm that is engaged in a British version of the US Manhattan Project, as the wartime allies pursue, at least for the moment, independent efforts to develop nuclear weapons. In one scene, Labour leader Clement Attlee, the future prime minister—reflecting the tension between the allies as Washington makes its dominance clear after entering the war—voices his concern that “the Yanks will control everything” unless the scientists working under the direction of the British authorities make their own progress.

In a pivotal turning point, Leo, with whom Joan has meanwhile become romantically involved, tries to enlist her in espionage activity. He returns to the subject on numerous occasions. She repeatedly and with increasing vehemence resists his entreaties.

Later, after a number of other plot twists, including another romance, comes the news of the atom bombings of Hiroshima and then of Nagasaki in August 1945. Joan, hearing the reports on the wireless, draws an almost immediate conclusion: the time has come for her to assist the Soviet Union, not because of any ideological adherence to communism or to the Stalinist regime, but because no great power should have a monopoly of the atom bomb.

More than fifty years later, admitting her role in

passing classified information, Joan reads a statement to the assembled media outside her home, explaining and defending her actions by saying that “the horror of another world war” had to be averted.

Her lawyer son Nick (Ben Miles), who is stupefied and enraged by the revelations about his mother, in the end stands by her side, as her attorney, as she reads her statement. The film ends with the information, conveyed on screen, that Joan Stanley was not prosecuted.

Red Joan raises very crucial and complex historical problems. More precisely, it avoids many of them.

Its strength is in conveying Joan’s antiwar feelings and her obvious revulsion at the mass killing of helpless civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Judi Dench, in a small but important role, is enormously effective as the haunted elderly woman who finds the strength to explain and defend herself. Sophie Cookson, in the role of the young Joan, also gives a very capable performance.

Joan’s insistence that knowledge of nuclear weapon should be shared, as she explains it, calls to mind the attitude of both J. Robert Oppenheimer, the theoretical physicist who is among those credited with being “the father of the atomic bomb,” and Albert Einstein, the Nobel Prize-winning genius of modern physics. Both men opposed the use of atomic weapons.

Oppenheimer, recently the subject of John Adams’ opera *Doctor Atomic*, was viciously attacked because of his left-wing background and sympathies, and later lost his security clearance. Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not simply mark the ending of World War II. They were aimed as a warning to the USSR and paved the way for the Cold War, officially inaugurated in Winston Churchill’s Iron Curtain speech of the following year.

Red Joan brings up other issues and deals with them less successfully. The book on which it is based took many liberties with the story of Melita Norwood in turning it into a novel. Norwood was a committed Stalinist whose violation of the Official Secrets Act took place over a period of about four decades. The story was changed to turn Joan Stanley into a patriotic Briton, despite her pacifist feelings—someone seen as more palatable to a liberal audience today.

Norwood mistakenly saw the Stalinist regime as the defender of socialism, rather than its gravedigger. She was a victim of Stalinist miseducation, which

disoriented many thousands of workers (and intellectuals) in Britain, and millions around the world. *Red Joan* evades all of these difficult and complex historical questions by converting the spy into a more sympathetic character, and making the issue one of “mitigating circumstances” in betraying one’s country, rather than forthright internationalist opposition to imperialist war.

This is bound up with the film’s version of British life itself. While Joan’s Communist friends, especially Sonja, are depicted cynically and unsympathetically, the secret service can do no wrong. British imperialism, its hands dripping with blood from generations of colonial rule as well as in the class struggle at home, is portrayed in *Red Joan* as well-mannered and democratic.

Despite these glaring weaknesses, the appearance of *Red Joan* has some significance. Towards the beginning of her interrogation, Joan Stanley comments, “The world was so different then, you have no idea.” Many of her generation, those who have put their left-wing past behind them, would agree with that brief comment. Increasingly, however, millions, young and old alike, are coming to realize that the world is not so different after all, 75 years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Donald Trump announced three months ago that the US would withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with Russia, further igniting a new nuclear arms race. His Democratic Party opponents, far from opposing this, are attacking the fascistic occupant of the White House as soft on Russia! The issues that motivated the fictional Joan Stanley are all too real in the 21st century, and the lessons of the two world wars and the rise of fascism need be studied and assimilated today.



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