

Oppenheimer: A drama about “the father of the atomic bomb”

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27 July 2023

Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer*, a film biography of physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967) was heavily marketed in the weeks leading up to its opening in theaters July 21. Many audience members might be forgiven if they thought they would be attending another technospecial effects extravaganza from the director of three large-scale *Batman* movies.

Whatever misunderstandings might have initially occurred, the ongoing box office success of *Oppenheimer* suggests that viewers are being drawn by something more than spectacle. The film is visually striking, shot with IMAX cameras for an immersive experience, but *Oppenheimer* is a serious and appropriately disturbing film about nuclear weapons and nuclear war. It is intended to leave viewers shaken, and it succeeds in that.

The film’s genuine weaknesses are not so much the failings of the individual writer-director. They reveal more general problems bound up with understanding the Second World War and mid-20th century political realities.

Nolan has undoubtedly tapped into powerful fears about the dangers and terrors of nuclear Armageddon, fears that perhaps have never been greater since the late 1950s and early 1960s, the era that generated films such as *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), *On the Beach* (1959), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) and *Fail Safe* (1964). The Biden administration and its NATO allies continue to blithely insist they will not be “deterred” by the threat of nuclear conflict, and its possibility is openly discussed in US newspapers and television programs.

That *Oppenheimer* has gained a wide audience speaks to a different sentiment in the general population, one deeply appalled by the possibility of the use of atomic bombs. One can criticize Nolan’s film from a number of points of view, but no objective observer could argue that it doesn’t encourage and deepen that mood. The commitment of an outstanding cast, including Cillian Murphy, Matt Damon, Robert Downey Jr., Emily Blunt, Florence Pugh, Kenneth Branagh, Gary Oldman, Rami Malek and others, to what is clearly an anti-war project should be applauded.

The opening sequence gives us a glimpse of the theoretical scientific paradoxes the young physicist Oppenheimer (Murphy) is wrestling with. Raindrops in a pond, spreading in ripples. Particles and waves. Flashes of light across the dark sky. A massive fireball erupting, punctuated by tiny glittering stars. Possibly the sun, possibly the atomic blasts to come. These images recur throughout the film, each time echoing a transition in Oppenheimer’s life.

Nolan immediately places the revolutionary theories of Oppenheimer’s youth in their time, a period of innovative experimentation in art, literature and music, as well as science. While the film engages the audience in an engrossing story, it is never linear. There are essentially three interwoven threads: Oppenheimer’s life and career in the late 1930s and early 1940s, leading to his role in the development of the atomic bomb at Los Alamos, New Mexico between 1943 and 1945; the 1954 Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) hearing that strips Oppenheimer of his security clearance, ending his career with the US government; and the 1958

downfall of Lewis Strauss (Downey Jr.), Oppenheimer’s nemesis.

Nolan’s film is based on the 2005 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin. Bird and Sherwin are credited as co-writers of the film’s script.

The narrative unfolds through the 1954 anti-communist witch-hunt conducted by the AEC, bending the story’s time frame through the strands of this vicious interrogation. The main thread is depicted from Oppenheimer’s point of view. In fact, Nolan wrote the screenplay in the first person, surprising most of the actors involved.

In 1942, while a professor of the emerging field of quantum mechanics at the University of California at Berkeley, and someone with left-wing views and connections, Oppenheimer is recruited by Gen. Leslie Groves (Damon) to organize a top-secret military installation for the development of an atomic bomb, known as the Manhattan Project.

Oppenheimer is naively forthright about his and his colleagues’ links to left causes, his support for the Spanish Republicans in the 1930s and his close “fellow traveling” with the American Communist Party (close enough so that debates persist as to whether Oppenheimer was ever a party member—his brother and sister-in-law, wife and lover all certainly were). In any case, Groves insists that Oppenheimer is essential to the project and he is granted the necessary security clearance.

Convinced that the Nazis are 18 months ahead of the US and Britain in the development of this weapon of mass destruction, Oppenheimer and Groves assemble an international team of top scientists and engineers to build what becomes a town of thousands in the “middle of nowhere” in New Mexico. It is here that Oppenheimer emerges as the “father of the atomic bomb.”

One eminent physicist who declines to participate is Niels Bohr (Branagh). “You are the man who gave them the power to destroy themselves, and the world is not prepared,” says Bohr.

Oppenheimer becomes a confident, highly respected leader and organizer of the project. Along with nearly all his colleagues, he is convinced the bomb will be used against Germany to end the war in Europe. However, with the Soviet advance against Berlin and Hitler’s suicide at the end of April 1945, Germany surrenders. Fully invested in the development of the bomb, Oppenheimer becomes an enthusiastic advocate for dropping it on Japan. In fact, he favors targeting a big city, for maximum casualties, in the vain hope that one bomb will end all wars forever.

Under constant pressure to accelerate the development of the bomb, Oppenheimer and his associates select July 16, 1945 as the date for the first test, code-named Trinity, in part so that President Harry Truman can threaten Soviet leader Joseph Stalin with its power at the Potsdam conference scheduled to begin the following day.

To a certain extent, the dramatization of the Trinity test becomes something of an unsatisfying substitute for depicting the actual bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and its consequences. It is, however, a chilling

scene.

The eerie score by young Swedish composer Ludwig Göransson, which propels the interlaced stories, leads to an extremely tense moment of utter silence as the flash from the massive detonation arrives before the sound. This becomes the stuff of nightmares. The authors of *American Prometheus* write, “They knew that after Trinity, the gadget had become a weapon, and weapons were controlled by the military.” Oppenheimer’s mood begins to change.

A disturbing percussion thrums below the surface until it becomes the stomping of hundreds of feet in celebration at Los Alamos of the incineration of tens of thousands of people in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Oppenheimer ascends a podium where he gives a halting speech, “The world will remember this day...” his voice trailing off. He callously remarks that whatever success the bomb may have had, “I’m sure the Japanese didn’t like it.” The crowd cheers.

Soon, however, the scene’s mood changes. In another artistic decision, Nolan has, to his credit, chosen to represent the horror of the bombing through Oppenheimer’s visions of the peeling skin, the charred bodies, the tens of thousands of dead in Japan. The celebration in Los Alamos becomes a writhing mass of weeping and vomiting men and women. According to Kai Bird, there is much truth to this depiction of the scene that night in New Mexico.

Within a week of the bombing of Nagasaki, Oppenheimer delivers a letter to Secretary of War Henry Stimson expressing his wish to see nuclear weapons banned. In October 1945, a well-known encounter between Oppenheimer and Truman (Gary Oldman) takes place in the Oval Office. Seeking to convince the president that the arms race must be halted for good, Oppenheimer says, “I feel I have blood on my hands.” Truman tosses him out, declaring, “I don’t ever want to see that cry-baby scientist ever again.”

Oppenheimer is now the most renowned and revered scientist in America. But the Cold War has already begun by the end of World War II, the wartime alliance with the USSR is over and so is the temporary amnesty for scientists and artists with former or enduring Stalinist sympathies. Oppenheimer’s political past and those of his associates and relations suddenly come under renewed scrutiny. He falls afoul of the most right-wing elements in the American ruling elite, those pushing for “rollback” against the Soviet Union and China, including the preemptive use of nuclear weapons. The vile Edward Teller (Benny Safdie), by now an advocate of developing the far more powerful hydrogen bomb (H-bomb), becomes one of his opponents.

The scenes of the 1954 closed AEC hearing, which resulted in Oppenheimer’s security clearance being removed and his political disgrace in the eyes of American bourgeois public opinion, are unnerving in themselves. Nolan paints the government interrogators as authoritarian and unprincipled demagogues. The entire process undermines the official presentation of America in the 1950s as the “leader of the free world.” On the contrary, the American state is depicted as infested with quasi- or would-be fascists.

The three government prosecutors grill Oppenheimer, his wife and colleagues, both friends and enemies, in a vicious McCarthyite witch-hunt, bullying, intimidating, tripping him up. We learn that the FBI has had a file on Oppenheimer since 1938, tapping his phone and his conversations, following him and his associates at meetings and social functions. When his lawyer (Macon Blair) requests access to the records, he is denied. The government figure directing this kangaroo court from behind the scenes is the reactionary Strauss, in his capacity as commissioner of the Atomic Energy Commission.

Nolan’s film is clearly hostile to the McCarthyite witch-hunts of scientists accused of disloyalty and spying for the Soviet Union, and by implication, of the similar witch-hunts of Hollywood directors, writers and actors, who also fell victim to the rabid anti-communism of the 1950s.

Despite the efforts of J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI and Strauss of the AEC, Oppenheimer was never accused of spying for the Soviet Union. At the time, along with millions of others in the US, he viewed the Soviet Union as ally. The American Stalinists promoted the war and the US-Soviet alliance in the interests of Kremlin policy.

Nolan is to be commended for treating many of the weighty historical issues contained in Robert Oppenheimer’s life with sincerity and urgency. Moreover, the scenes of left-wing intellectual life in the 1930s and 40s are treated honestly, in detail, without a hint of anti-communism. The unhappiness and death of Pugh’s Jean Tatlock is especially moving.

The difficulties with the film arise in part from the director’s decision to tell much of his story through the eyes of his protagonist, so that the audience is encouraged to think and feel as the onscreen, fictional Oppenheimer does. Nolan’s decision to write his screenplay in the first person (from Oppenheimer’s point of view) reflects this. Aside from the 1958 events surrounding Strauss, presented in black-and-white, Oppenheimer is in virtually every scene.

A tougher, more objective view of the scientist-politician is necessary. The working class cannot adopt Oppenheimer as one of its heroes. Although he held sincerely left-wing views in the late 1930s, Oppenheimer became a significant figure in the American military-intelligence apparatus. That the “left” in America by and large, including prominently the Communist Party, cheered on the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that Oppenheimer could more or less seamlessly pass from pro-Roosevelt Popular Frontism to direct participation in the war machine, none of that excuses his role.

By the early 1950s, while Oppenheimer, according to *American Prometheus*, “did not advocate the use of atomic weapons in Korea,” he did argue “that there was an ‘obvious need’ for small, tactical nuclear weapons that could be used on a battlefield. ... Oppenheimer’s preference for tactical nuclear weapons as an antidote to genocidal warfare had unintended consequences. By ‘bringing the battle back to the battlefield,’ he was also making it more likely that nuclear weapons would actually be used.”

Nolan’s generally approving attitude toward Oppenheimer’s role on the Manhattan Project, at least until after the Nazi surrender in May 1945, stems from a misconception about the Second World War: the pretense, as the WSWS has commented, “that a united and democratic America was at war against some unfathomable foreign evil.”

While millions “went into combat motivated by the desire to defeat Hitler and fascism, World War II, in its social and economic essence, remained an imperialist war, a struggle between great power blocs for the division and re-division of the world.” American capitalism, with its great industrial strength and reserves, “could afford Roosevelt’s reformist experiments in the 1930s, but that did not make the war aims of the American ruling elite or its plans for the postwar world any less predatory or criminal.”

This was demonstrated in part by the brutal, bloody manner through which the US and its allies prosecuted the war, in the horrific firebombing of Dresden, Germany and of Tokyo and other Japanese cities in 1945, which led to hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, as well of course as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Oppenheimer’s emotional as well as intellectual response to his work on the Manhattan Project gnawed at him increasingly after the war, but he never apologized or expressed regret. The dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan was a war crime in which he fully participated. He did have blood on his hands.

The historian Gabriel Jackson has aptly argued that “the use of the atom bomb showed that a psychologically very normal and democratically elected chief executive could use the weapon just as the Nazi dictator would have used it. In this way, the United States—for anyone concerned with moral distinctions in the different types of government—blurred the

difference between fascism and democracy.”

Only one political tendency denounced the war as an imperialist slaughter and struggle for global domination. The issue of the *Militant*, the publication of what was then the Trotskyist movement in the US, the Socialist Workers Party, following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, carried the headline, “THERE IS NO PEACE! Only World Socialism can save Mankind from Atomic Destruction In Another Imperialist War! Workers of America! You Must Take Power Into Your Own Hands!”

Marking the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, the *World Socialist Web Site* quoted Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon from August 22, 1945:

In two calculated blows, with two atomic bombs, American imperialism killed or injured half a million human beings. The young and the old, the child in the cradle and the aged and infirm, the newly married, the well and the sick, men, women and children—they all had to die in two blows because of a quarrel between the imperialists of Wall Street and a similar gang in Japan... What an unspeakable atrocity! What a shame has come to America, the America that once placed in New York harbor a Statue of Liberty enlightening the world. Now the world recoils in horror from her name. ...

Long ago the revolutionary Marxists said that the alternative facing humanity was either socialism or a new barbarism, that capitalism threatens to go down in ruins and drag civilization with it. But in the light of what has been developed in this war and is projected for the future, I think we can say now that the alternative can be made even more precise: The alternative facing mankind is socialism or annihilation!...

Christopher Nolan has said that scientists today working on artificial intelligence are currently having their “Oppenheimer moment.” But the planet’s entire population has been living for over 75 years under the shadow of Oppenheimer’s legacy. Nolan is keenly aware of this, and although he eschews didacticism, the conclusion of the film, which he terms “a cautionary tale,” is quite pointed in its message.

The film returns to a recurring, enigmatic encounter between Albert Einstein and Oppenheimer at Princeton University after the war. As the conversation is ultimately revealed, Oppenheimer refers to his consulting Einstein about an early fear of his group of scientists, that a chain reaction, once ignited, might spread uncontrollably through the atmosphere.

He tells the great scientist, an advocate of peace and socialism: “When I came to you with those calculations, we thought we might start a chain reaction that might destroy the entire world. ... I believe we did.”

Nolan and *Oppenheimer* deserve credit for exposing the horrors of nuclear weapons and the threat they represent to humanity in capitalism’s death agony.



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