

Reflections on *Oppenheimer*, the War in Ukraine, and Democracy in America

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Abstract: *The recent popularity of the film Oppenheimer has revived the discussion of the making and use of the atomic bomb against Japan in 1945. Meanwhile, Russia's war against Ukraine since February 2022 and ongoing threats to democracy in the United States have made the use of nuclear weapons an urgent issue once again. In this timely context, the author draws on his research expertise to comment on the dangers of false narratives around nuclear weapons in light of recent events.*

Editor's Note: *These reflections are published as a companion to an earlier interview with the author, updated and reprinted [here](#), and to a new commentary about the film's (non)release in Japan available [here](#).*

Oppenheimer

Christopher Nolan's new film, *Oppenheimer*, based heavily on Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin's biography of Oppenheimer, *American Prometheus: Tragedy and Triumph of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, is gaining tremendous box office success not only in the United States, but also around the world. It is a powerful film, depicting the moral ambiguity that faced

Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb, and many scientists and policymakers. The film is an artistic creation, not a documentary. Therefore, while following central elements of the historical record, many inaccuracies creep into it. I will not go into the intricacies of the Manhattan project that are not depicted in the film but that have been discussed by specialists, such as the importance of Oak Ridge and Hanford as major sites for development of the bomb. I would not fault director Christopher Nolan, for not accurately covering every detail of the Manhattan Project. To convey a story in film, one must often sacrifice details.

But I would like to say that there are two omissions in the film that lead to misleading conclusions, perhaps contrary to the director's intention. First, despite Oppenheimer's moral ambiguity, the film, to me at least, defends the making the bomb as a righteous, perhaps inevitable, decision. The film risks perpetuating the myth that it was the atomic bombs that ended the war. For instance, Dennis Overbye in his insightful interview with Christopher Nolan in *The New York Times* (July 30, 2023), asserts flatly that, "The subsequent bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended the war against Japan."

This assertion is repeated many times in other reviews and commentaries. But, as I described in my earlier APJF interview, the film totally overlooks the background of the American decision to use the bomb. There existed, in fact,

multiple crucial alternatives to the use of the atomic bomb available to Truman and in fact proposed by influential policymakers: these were welcoming Soviet entry into the war and redefining of the terms of “unconditional surrender.” In fact, these two alternatives were suggested in Secretary of War Stimson’s draft of the Potsdam Declaration.

After the successful detonation of the atomic bomb at the Trinity site, Truman consciously excluded the Soviet Union from the discussion of the Potsdam ultimatum, and deleted the passage that promised the retention of monarchy in Japan. That started a deadly race between Truman and Stalin. Would Truman drop the atomic bombs on Japan before the Soviets entered the war? Or would the Soviets enter the war against Japan before Japan’s surrender?

Let me briefly explain the background.

In February 1945, at the Yalta Conference, Stalin succeeded in gaining Roosevelt’s offer of rewards for his promise to enter the war against Japan. These rewards included Manchurian ports and railways, return of South Sakhalin to the Soviet Union, and handing over of the Kurils to the Soviet Union. Stalin’s interest lay in establishing Soviet strategic outposts in China and securing a passage to the Pacific Ocean by acquiring the Kurils. In order to acquire the territories promised by Roosevelt, the Soviet Union would have to enter the war against Japan. But war against Japan would violate the neutrality pact with Japan. To solve this dilemma Stalin hoped to be invited to join the joint ultimatum against Japan as the Potsdam Conference. The United States had promised to place the joint ultimatum at the forthcoming Potsdam Conference.

But the successful detonation of the atomic bomb in New Mexico changed the situation. Truman completely excluded the Soviet Union from the discussion of the ultimatum.

Betrayed by the United States, and convinced that the United States was determined to end the war before the Soviets entered the war, Stalin hastily moved up the date of attack against Japan by 48 hours and managed to join the war in the nick of time. As I argued in the interview, if one compares the impact of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet entry into the war, then the surprise attack of the Soviet forces in Manchuria and Korea, at a time when Japan continued to count on Moscow’s mediation to end the war, had greater influence on Japanese policymakers’ decision to surrender.

How much did Oppenheimer know about the political discussion at the highest level of the Truman administration? Did Groves know? I don’t know the answer, but I suspect that Oppenheimer was excluded from political decisions, and likely knew little about the race between the atomic bomb and the Soviet entry into the war. The film briefly covered the interim committee’s discussion on the use of the atomic bomb on Japan. Oppenheimer was the participant in this meeting. This needs to be elaborated. Some scientists involved in the Manhattan project became concerned about the use of the atomic bombs on Japan, which they understood to be on the brink of defeat following the US firebombing and destruction of 67 major Japanese cities. It is known that 155 Los Alamos scientists signed a petition calling for a demonstration of the bomb on an island before its use against Japan. But the Scientific Advisory Committee, headed by Oppenheimer, rejected this petition, and Oppenheimer refused to sign it. In other words, Oppenheimer may have felt qualms about bombing Japan, but he also at a minimum felt it impossible to support the petition. According to Kai Bird/Martin Sherwin’s biography, “Anne Wilson, Oppenheimer’s secretary remembers a series of meetings with Army air Force officers: ‘They were picking targets,’ Oppenheimer knew the names of the Japanese cities on the list of potential targets—and the knowledge

was clearly sobering. ‘Robert got very still and ruminative, during the two-week period,’ Wilson recalled, ‘partly because he knew what was about to happen, and partly because he knew what it meant.’” (*American Prometheus*, pp. 313-314) This decision must have weighed heavily on Oppenheimer’s conscience.

Had a glimpse of this high politics been included in the film, then this would have made the moral ambiguity of the US use of the atomic bombs more powerful.

The second omission in the film is footage showing the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the film, the Manhattan project ends with the explosion at the Trinity site. This was the climax of the film, and it was superbly done. But Nolan left out what happened afterwards, in Hiroshima on August 6 and in Nagasaki on August 9. Had some fragments of footage of the destruction and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki been included in the film, it would have underscored the tragedy, and made Oppenheimer’s moral ambiguity even more compelling. In fact, the actual use of the bomb, rather than its creation, must have weighed heavily on his conscience. This led to his statement, when he met Truman later (depicted in the film): “Mr President, I feel there is blood on my hands.” Incidentally, Truman was angered by his words, in my opinion, more perhaps because his own conscience was bothered by the use of the bombs than because he thought Oppenheimer was a cry baby to question his decision.

I do not diligently follow all Japanese news. So I do not know if and when this film will be released in Japan, or how it will be reviewed. But the publicity stunt combining Oppenheimer and Barbie, advertising the two blockbuster films as *Barbenheimer*, is outrageously in bad taste, trivializing the tragedy of the atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and equating the enormity of the tragedy with a

Barbie fad. Ironically, few in the audience know that original Barbie dolls were made and patented in Japan.

Nevertheless, this is a powerful film that everyone should see. I hope viewers will come away with a greater understanding of Oppenheimer’s fear that the bomb he helped to create might destroy the world, and that as long as nuclear weapons are not eliminated, we will live with this fear.

The War in Ukraine

Putin’s war in Ukraine has revived the nuclear issue as an urgent issue. Vladimir Putin often engages in saber-rattling, threatening the use of nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden and the Western alliance have been careful in their military aid to the Ukrainians, as to limit the Ukrainian military operations and not to provoke Putin to enlarge the war into a world war, which would undoubtedly involve nuclear weapons.

At the 78th anniversary of atomic bombing on Hiroshima this year, Mayor Kazumi Matsui called nuclear deterrence a “folly,” calling for the total abolition of nuclear weapons. Mayor of Nagasaki Mr. Shiro Suzuki also criticized nuclear deterrence. Although I fully endorse their hope for the total abolition of nuclear weapons, along with Matsui’s call for the Japanese government to sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, I must confess that I am puzzled by Mr. Matsui’s reference to nuclear deterrence as “folly.” Fear of nuclear war must deter Putin from using nuclear weapons, and the fear world war has deterred the United States and NATO allies from escalating the war into Russia and limited Western military aid to Ukraine. In my view, nuclear deterrence has so far limited the war within Ukraine. Although I share both mayors’ fear that as long as nuclear weapons exist there is always the danger of nuclear war, I cannot

dismiss nuclear deterrence as “folly.”

In a way, the world we now live in is more dangerous than during the Cold War. There were numerous wars during the Cold War, but they never escalated to nuclear war. Despite mutual suspicions between the superpowers, both sides shared the fear of a nuclear war. But I am not sure that current world leaders, especially autocratic leaders, including Putin, share this fear. Certainly, former President Donald Trump did not have that fear. The contemporary world is more chaotic, confusing, divided, and most dangerously unpredictable. Although I dream of a world without nuclear weapons, we will not be able to reach it for a long time. Our challenge is what to do in the meantime.

In addition to the nuclear issue, the war in Ukraine has raised the question of atrocities committed against civilians. We have been outraged by Russian atrocities committed in Bucha and artillery bombardments targeting civilians. It is a justifiable outrage, but this outrage must lead to the reflection that we, Japanese and Americans, also committed atrocities targeting civilians in the past, including the Pacific War and subsequent wars. This is not whataboutism to condone Russian atrocities and war crimes, but rather to reflect on our own history so that we will renew our determination never to commit similar atrocities. For this I recommend the following book, Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn Young, *Bombing Civilians: A Twentieth-Century History* (New York: New Press, 2009).

Democracy in America

American democracy is seriously being questioned, and threatened, by anti-democratic forces, namely Donald Trump and his MAGA Republican Party. Aside from such domestic issues as abortion rights, gun control, and voter rights, and a series of indictments against the former President, the outcome of the next election will have serious consequences for the nuclear issue and the international system. If Trump is elected, I fear that together with Putin, he will drastically transform the international system in a direction more unstable and dangerous. This man has no compunction about destroying the world for the sake of his own personal power. The outside world should be wary about the outcome of the next American election.

References

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