

OPINION

‘Oppenheimer’ and the Shadow of Stalin

Aug. 4, 2023, 2:00 p.m. ET



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With its depth of historical re-creation, its cast of famous figures given tantalizingly brief appearances, its scientific, political and sociological threads running away in multiple directions, a movie like Christopher Nolan’s “Oppenheimer” doubles as an encouragement to read more deeply into the history it portrays.

My newsroom colleague Amanda Taub offered [a reading list](#) recently, starting with the movie's source material, Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin's "American Prometheus," and widening to books like Richard Rhodes's "The Making of the Atomic Bomb," John Hersey's "Hiroshima" and even "Copenhagen," a play by Michael Frayn depicting a visit paid in 1941 by the German physicist Werner Heisenberg to the Danish scientist Niels Bohr, under the shadow of the possible (but ultimately stillborn) Nazi pursuit of the atomic bomb.

From this initial list one could go further into the riddles of J. Robert Oppenheimer himself — for instance, into another Oppenheimer biography, by Ray Monk, preferred by some Oppenheads of my acquaintance — or expand into the fascinating terrain of early-20th century physics or the endless debates about our decision to use the bomb.

But I have a different suggested reading, focusing on one of the figures whose offstage malevolence shapes the events of "Oppenheimer": not Adolf Hitler, the threat so often cited to justify the pursuit of awful weapons, but Joseph Stalin, the man who had spies inside the Manhattan Project and who, unlike Hitler, soon had an A-bomb of his own.

The book is "Stalin's War: A New History of World War II," by Sean McMeekin of Bard College. The subtitle is slightly misleading: It's less a history of the conflict than a narrowly, even polemically focused portrait of the Soviet dictator's decisions and depredations in the war, in the service of an argument that we should see Stalin, as much or even more than Hitler, as the central figure in the global conflagration, an instigator and manipulator and ultimate victor.

The reason to read McMeekin after watching "Oppenheimer" is that his book provides a corrective to the movie's final act, in which the spirit of a simplifying anti-anti-communism prevails over the political complexity that Nolan carries off for most of the film. (Mild historical spoilers to follow.)

Having developed the bomb, the movie's Oppenheimer tries to prevent a nuclear arms race and tangles with Cold Warriors who make hay out of his ties to communists and fellow travelers. Then, out of a combination of political and personal resentments, one of those Cold Warriors, Robert Downey Jr.'s Lewis Strauss, manages to get Oppenheimer's security clearance revoked in a kangaroo-court proceeding.

I have conservative friends, loyal to Nolan's image as a Tory filmmaker, who think that the movie isn't simply on Oppenheimer's side in this controversy, that it lets both Oppenheimer's own actions and Strauss's arguments make the case that he really was vainglorious, politically naïve, hopelessly blithe about the communist infiltration of his project and more.

I agree with them that the movie gives the historically informed viewer plenty of material that points to this more nuanced conclusion. But as a straightforward text, "Oppenheimer" sheds a lot of that complexity as it builds to its ending, becoming more and more a story of simple martyrdom — in which a flawed genius is unjustly persecuted by "know-nothing, anti-intellectual, xenophobic demagogues," as Bird, the Oppenheimer co-biographer, [wrote](#) for Times Opinion earlier this summer.

So the point of reading McMeekin's book is to give early Cold War anti-communism its due. What were all those hawks on about, with their fears about Soviet espionage and the influence of communist sympathizers, their desire to have the bomb as a potential weapon against our then-ally Stalin, their dismissive attitude toward Oppenheimer's vision of nuclear power as something shared and tamed by international cooperation?

Just this, "Stalin's War" suggests: They saw Stalin clearly. The Soviet leader had always been as predatory as Hitler, invading the same number of countries as Nazi Germany in 1939 and 1940, encouraging fascist aggression against the Western democracies while building his own brutal empire under the cover of neutrality. (That encouragement extended to Japanese as well as German aggression: McMeekin argues that Stalin's diplomacy with Tokyo in 1941 helped pushed Japan toward its war in the Pacific.)

Nor was Stalin any kind of naïve, unsuspecting victim of Hitler's [Barbarossa onslaught](#), as some historical clichés would have it. McMeekin makes an extended case that Stalin was preparing to attack Nazi Germany when Hitler attacked him, that the two dictators were basically in a race to see who could mobilize to betray the other first — and that the initial Soviet debacle in 1941 happened in part because Stalin was also pushing his military toward an offensive alignment, and they were caught in a "mid-mobilization limbo."

Once the German invasion made him an ally first of Britain and then of the United States, the book argues, Stalin consistently had his way with a naïve Franklin Roosevelt and a frustrated but weakened Winston Churchill in their

negotiations over military strategy and postwar dispositions. And these Soviet machinations benefited from the same mixture of philo-communism among New Deal liberals and outright Soviet espionage that shaped Oppenheimer's milieu. The result was a postwar arrangement that gave communism a vast new empire in Eastern Europe and soon enough East Asia, all undergirded by a deep, rapacious cynicism that made the Cold War inevitable.

As I said, McMeekin's account is polemical, written as a corrective to other histories and open to counterarguments in turn. I don't think he quite succeeds in displacing Hitler's pride of place as the evil protagonist of 1939-45, and many of the choices that Western nations made in temporarily allying with Stalin seem retrospectively inevitable. It's not surprising that the British and the French in 1939 would fear the dictator with troops on the French border more than the dictator poised to swallow the Baltic States, or that America would prefer a resilient Soviet Union to an all-conquering Nazi Germany in 1941.

McMeekin has a fascinating argument that the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939 opened the possibility of a war of the liberal West against both totalitarianisms, with Britain and an as-yet-unconquered France bombing the Baku oil fields in the Soviet Union and thereby undermining both the Soviet and Nazi war machines. I'm not persuaded, however, that this counterfactual would have ended well for the democracies.

But the necessity of an alignment with Stalin against Hitler, like the necessity of hiring a bunch of scientists with communist connections in the same period — if that's what it took to forge atomic weapons in a short span of time — has to coexist with a recognition that the world looked quite different as the German and then Japanese defeats became inevitable. By war's end, our pivot toward an intense suspicion of everything that Stalin touched was both imperative and arguably (and I do think McMeekin makes a strong argument) insufficient, coming later than it should have for both American interests and for Stalin's conquered peoples.

The necessity of that pivot doesn't prove that Oppenheimer the man was treated justly. But what happened to him happened for reasons distinct from simple yahoo-ism and xenophobia. And any viewer of "Oppenheimer" the movie would be wise to hold the malignancy of Stalin, the scale of his success at both conquest and manipulation, in mind while watching its complex hero's complex fate unfold.