



The Real Oppenheimer: the Conspiracy, the Treason, the Truth

Was J. Robert Oppenheimer, head of the atomic bomb project at Los Alamos during World War II, a Soviet agent? And why does it matter?

“History is a set of lies agreed upon.” So, supposedly, said Napoleon Bonaparte. Well, the liars have certainly gotten the upper hand since Napoleon’s day. Our “history industry” has been so successful in larding with lies virtually every popular historical source the average person consumes — history books, textbooks, novels, movies, documentaries, Wikipedia — that the quest for truth is a daunting journey through a treacherous and confusing landscape. There are many ways of lying, of course, from outright prevarication to lying by half-truth, lying by omission, lying by context, and, in the case of photography and cinematography, lying by lens.

One of the Big Lies of our past century is that America has been afflicted with recurring bouts of irrational “paranoia” and “hysteria” about the threat posed by communism. The intelligentsia who dominate Hollywood and our academic and media institutions endlessly warn us that this recurrent fear of communism is a dangerous mental condition and a sign of fascist tendencies. Rare is the college (or high school) student who escapes being marinated in numerous textbook entries, films, lectures, and essays on the supposed terrors of the “Red Scare” and McCarthyism.

However, the Orwellian censors and propagandists who send true history down the memory hole and confect “history” out of lies are, apparently, in a panic that the recent upsurge in the anti-communist “derangement” — going hand-in-hand with the still-potent Trump MAGA movement — is signaling the need for renewed artillery barrages against the newly awakened McCarthyite hordes. Enter stage Left, Christopher Nolan’s blockbuster film *Oppenheimer* to fill this desperate need.



FILE-This Oct. 17, 1945 file photo Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer of the New Mexico laboratories of the atomic bomb making project, testifies before the Senate Military Affairs Committee in Washington. The U.S. Department of Energy has declassified documents related to the Cold War hearing on Oppenheimer who directed the Manhattan Project and was later accused of having communist sympathies. The department last week released transcripts of the 1950s hearings on Oppenheimer's security clearance, providing more insight into the previously secret world that surrounded development of the atomic bomb. (AP Photo,File)



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Let us stipulate from the start that, in unison with all the chirping media choir out there, we agree that Nolan is a “brilliant filmmaker” and the subject of his movie, Julius Robert Oppenheimer, was a “brilliant physicist” and a multi-talented polymath. This three-hour Nolan epic is definitely Nolanesque in all its complexity, with quick cuts and confusing jumps back and forth in time, overlaid with an overpowering musical score that is often played at teeth-rattling, bone-jarring decibel levels. *Oppenheimer* self-consciously screams “I am Nolan; gaze in awe upon my innovative artistic brilliance!” According to the usual stable of media reviewers, Nolan’s film is “monumental,” a “towering achievement,” a “compelling epic” — and various other superlative-laced raves. Those are both aesthetic and political opinions. Aesthetic appreciation being largely subjective, this writer would grant that the movie does have its moments and a great many people will be awestruck by Nolan’s over-the-top artistry.

However, this article is not a movie review, at least not in the usual sense. It is not concerned with the production’s artistic merits or lack thereof. It is an attempt at justice to right a terrible wrong — a series of wrongs, actually — at the heart of, and throughout, this thoroughly dishonest film.

Dishonest? How so? For starters, although ostensibly about Oppenheimer and the race for the atom bomb, it quickly becomes apparent that *Oppenheimer* is above all a *political* statement, not merely entertainment. It is a morality tale that serves as a vehicle to portray Oppenheimer as a hero and martyr who was ruthlessly persecuted and falsely charged with being a communist merely for being an independent thinker and for merely *associating* with communists. Even broader, his brother, wife, friends, and colleagues who were communists or fellow travelers are also presented as tragic heroes/martyrs/victims in an era of madness dominated by Senator Joseph McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover. At the same time, all those who show any alarm about putting communists into the center of our super-secret A-bomb project are depicted by Nolan as idiots, knaves, or worse. Particularly despicable are the nasty and dishonest portrayals of anti-communists such as physicist Edward Teller, Atomic Energy Commission Chairman Lewis L. Strauss, and attorney Roger Robb.

Was Oppenheimer a Communist?

Unfortunately, Nolan’s *Oppenheimer* was doomed to become anti-American propaganda from the start, since he based it on the 2005 book *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin. Both authors have long been associated with the far-left magazine *The Nation* as contributing writers, and Sherwin (now deceased) was a member of the publication’s board of directors. According to David Horowitz, editor of *Front Page* magazine, *The Nation* “supported every Communist dictator in their heyday — Stalin, Mao, Fidel, Ho, even Pol Pot — and on every issue involving conflict between the United States and any of its sworn enemies during the Cold War, invariably tilted towards (and often actively sided with) the enemy side.” Hence, it’s not surprising that the hard-left slant of the Bird-Sherwin book transferred over into the Nolan movie it inspired. However, Nolan and his researchers and script writers had to consciously ignore a vast trove of evidence that contradicts the film’s underlying pro-communist thesis. The evidence consists of both testimony and documents, much of which was available to Bird and Sherwin before they wrote their book (and which they apparently chose to ignore) as well as much more that has been unearthed since.

Nolan doesn’t *completely* deny Oppenheimer’s associations with the Communist Party; he simply passes them off *dishonestly* as innocent, passing flirtations with no bearing on national security. And he takes at face value Oppenheimer’s claim that he absolutely refused to pass A-bomb secrets to Soviet agents when asked, because, Oppenheimer acknowledged, that would be “treason.” Well, any honest



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assessment of the available evidence is devastating to those claims. We provide below a summary of key data points, followed by references to documentation:

- From the KGB archives — a memo to KGB chief Beria extolling the help Robert Oppenheimer is providing to Soviet agents;
- From Soviet spymaster Lieutenant General Pavel Sudoplatov — multiple references to Oppenheimer as a *secret* member of the Communist Party and a key operative;
- From authors Jerrold and Leona Schecter — multiple interviews with former intelligence officers in Moscow who stressed the importance of Oppenheimer’s aid to Soviet A-bomb development in the 1942-1944 period;
- From former top Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) official Paul Crouch — sworn statements before committees of the California legislature and the U.S. Senate testifying that he had attended closed Communist Party meetings in Oppenheimer’s California home;
- From Oppenheimer’s close friend Haakon Chevalier — admission that both he and Oppenheimer were members of a “closed unit” of the Communist Party from 1937 to 1942, while both men were professors at Berkeley;
- From the unpublished memoirs of Gordon Griffiths, an Oppenheimer friend and fellow communist — confirmation that Oppenheimer was a “closet communist,” with Griffiths (then a graduate student at Berkeley) acting as liaison between Oppenheimer and the Communist Party;
- From the FBI files — recordings of top CPUSA officials explaining to comrades that Oppenheimer is now a secret member due to his high-security work for the war effort;
- From multiple Soviet sources, including General Sudoplatov — admissions that Oppenheimer and physicists Enrico Fermi and Leo Szilard helped place Soviet agents in Manhattan Project labs who then transmitted A-bomb secrets to their communist overlords;
- From the Venona transcripts — Soviet intelligence communications intercepted and decrypted by United States Army Signal Intelligence Service;
- From numerous documents and sources — proof that the Los Alamos A-bomb project, which Oppenheimer ran and staffed, was loaded with Soviet agents, from convicted spies Julius Rosenberg, David Greenglass, and Klaus Fuchs to Bruno Pontecorvo, Theodore Hall, Oscar Seborer, and more.

There are many more points that could be added, but in the interest of brevity, we’ll dive right into details. Jerrold and Leona Schecter produced many bombshell documents from the Soviet KGB archives in their book *Sacred Secrets: How Soviet Intelligence Operations Changed American History*, published in 2002. Among the most stunning is a “TOP SECRET URGENT” memo to Lavrenti Beria, the infamous head of Stalin’s NKVD/NKGB (as the KGB was then called), from Beria’s chief of staff, one Officer Kossoi. The document is one of many confirmations that Oppenheimer, like many other influential figures, was not only a *secret* member of the Communist Party USA, but was also cooperating with Soviet intelligence and passing on (and/or enabling others to pass on) critical atom bomb secrets to the Russians. Kossoi informs his master that in accordance with his instructions, “NKGB USSR continues measures for obtaining more complete information on the state of work on the problem of uranium and its development abroad.” The NKGB memo continues, “In 1942 one of the leaders of scientific work on uranium in the USA, professor Oppenheimer (unlisted member of the apparatus of Comrade Browder) informed us about the beginning of work.”



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“Comrade Browder,” of course, is a reference to Earl Browder, who was then the leader of the CPUSA. At the request of Soviet agent Gregory Kheifetz and Browder, says the NKGB memo, Oppenheimer “provided cooperation in access to the research for several of our tested sources including a relative of Comrade Browder.”

Another NKGB memo to Beria’s deputy, Vsevelod Merkulov, mentions Oppenheimer’s NKGB codename as CHESTER (later he will also be known as STAR) and notes that Oppenheimer has been instructed to stop paying Communist Party dues and sever all relations with Party members. Henceforth, his Soviet contacts will be run through secret NKVD channels.

One of Oppenheimer’s contacts was Elizabeth Zarubina, an NKVD captain and wife of Vasily Zarubin, then the top Soviet intelligence officer in the United States. She was instructed to get close to Oppenheimer’s wife, Katherine. This she did. Contrary to her portrayal in Nolan’s film, Katherine “Kitty” Oppenheimer had herself been a Communist Party member and a longtime fellow traveler and activist, not merely a “parlor pink” college student who had flirted with Marxism and then grown disenchanted with the movement. According to Sudoplatov, the Schecters, and other sources, Zarubina was instrumental in getting Oppenheimer to bring Klaus Fuchs and other Soviet “moles” into the atomic program, not only at Los Alamos, but also the related facilities at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Hanford, Washington, as well as the Chicago laboratory and the Canadian laboratory at Chalk River, Ontario.

“Another route was from the mole who worked with Fermi and Pontecorvo,” writes Sudoplatov in *Special Tasks: The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness, published in 1994*. “The mole in Tennessee was connected with the illegal station at the Santa Fe drugstore, from which material was sent by courier to Mexico. These unidentified young moles, along with the Los Alamos mole, were junior scientists or administrators who copied vital documents to which they were allowed access by Oppenheimer, Fermi, and Szilard, who were knowingly part of the scheme.”

Such a charge from Pavel Sudoplatov is no small thing. He was no “right-wing McCarthyite.” As he states in his memoirs, he was the head of the KGB’s Administration for Special Tasks, a position that made him “responsible for sabotage, kidnapping, and assassination of our enemies beyond the country’s borders.” He also disclosed that he headed “the Soviet espionage effort to obtain the secrets of the atomic bomb from America and Great Britain. I set up a network of illegals who convinced Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi, Leo Szilard ... and other scientists in America and Great Britain to share atomic secrets with us.”

As mentioned above, there is also Paul Crouch, who was not your garden-variety communist. He was a representative in Moscow of the CPUSA and the Young Communist League at meetings of the executive committee of the Communist International (Comintern) and Young Communist International. During his 17 years of service to the Soviet Union, he was an honorary officer of the Red Army and the head of the Communist Party’s National Department for Infiltration of the Armed Forces in the United States. He was also a member of the editorial staff of the communist newspaper *Daily Worker* and a district organizer for the Communist Party in California, Virginia, New York, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Utah. During his testimony before the U.S. Senate, he was asked by Senator McCarthy, “Is there any doubt in your mind that Oppenheimer was a member of the Communist party?” Crouch replied, “No, sir, none whatever. I met him in a closed meeting of the Communist party in a house which was subsequently found to have been his residence at the time.”

Predictably, the “mainstream” press smothered Crouch’s testimony and then joined with the official communist press in viciously attacking him. It is a familiar pattern. Every defector from the Communist



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Party or the Soviet Union has been subjected to similar smear campaigns: Whitaker Chambers, Elizabeth Bentley, Bella Dodd, Louis Budenz, Benjamin Gitlow, Igor Gouzenko, Joseph Kornfeder, Victor Kravchenko, Yuri Bezmenov, and Anatoliy Golitsyn, to name a few. However, documents and testimony revealed decades later have proven the defectors, not their detractors, to have been right and truthful. Nonetheless, as we see in *Oppenheimer*, the left-wing smear artists continue apace with nary a *mea culpa* or an admission that they were horribly wrong. Alger Hiss, Harry Dexter White, Lauchlin Curie, Laurence Duggan, and many other high-placed operatives in FDR's administration were proven to have been Soviet agents.

Among the more recently released files from the FBI archives is an entry that reads:

In December, 1942, Julius Robert Oppenheimer was the subject of a discussion between Steve Nelson and Bernadette Doyle, organizational secretary of the Communist Party for Alameda County, California. At this time, Steve Nelson stated that Dr. Hannah Peters had been to visit him and she had stated that Dr. Oppenheimer because of his employment in a special project, could not be active in the party.... Bernadette Doyle answered Nelson by saying that she believes the matter should be taken up with the State Committee regarding the "two Oppys" [Robert and his wife, Kitty] inasmuch as they were regularly registered and everyone knew they were Communist Party members.

"Everyone knew they were Communist Party members." So said Communist Party official Bernadette Doyle. In his 2002 book *Brotherhood of the Bomb*, Gregg Herken brought out additional documents and admissions by Oppenheimer's comrades relative to "Oppy's" Party activity and affiliations. Herken, who is curator and historian at the Smithsonian Institution, has updated this information on his website, www.brotherhoodofthebomb.com, providing many previously unpublished statements from Haakon Chevalier, Gordon Griffiths, and others.

As noted above, Gordon Griffiths was a Communist Party comrade with Oppenheimer at the University of California at Berkeley, where "Oppy" was a physics professor before joining the Manhattan Project. In an excerpt of his unpublished memoirs that is available on Herken's website, Griffiths argues that Oppenheimer's Communist Party membership should be defended, not denied. "His defenders have always stoutly denied that he was ever actually a member of the Communist Party, and have sought to explain away his association with leftist causes with the assertion that he was naïve," writes Griffiths, noting that "A great deal of energy was spent by well-intentioned liberals who felt that this was the only way to defend his case." "But the time has come," he says, "to set the record straight, and put the question as it should have been put: not whether he had or had not been a member of the Communist Party, but whether such membership should, in itself, constitute an impediment to his service in a position of trust."

Griffiths died in 2001, but his position is being adopted by others who see the evidence piling up against their denials and now want to shift the argument. That is the tack that Nolan and his script writers have taken. In the confusing cascade of characters and jumble of jump cuts we have admissions, denials, and deceptive explanations that, in aggregate, seem to be intended simply to muddy the waters around the whole issue of his relationship to the Communist Party and Soviet espionage. In addition, one of the most dishonest and ideologically skewed aspects of the film is Nolan's heavy-handed treatment of everyone who suggests that Oppenheimer's associations make him a security risk. The Army security officers, the FBI agents, and the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) officials are presented as dimwitted



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knuckle-draggers, flag-waving chauvinists, and evil, venal connivers in contrast to the sophisticated, erudite, and high-minded liberals of Team Oppy.

This contrast is approvingly noted in a review by David Sims for *The Atlantic*. He says of Nolan:

In painstaking detail, he depicts the humiliating 1954 hearings that stripped Oppenheimer of his security clearance and dredged up both his past associations with Communists and his overactive love life. A more daring element, told in black and white, follows the former Atomic Energy Commission chair Lewis Strauss (a tremendous Robert Downey Jr.) as he undergoes a Senate confirmation hearing for a Cabinet post, digging through the politician's tense relationship and eventual enmity with Oppenheimer.

The majority of the story, shown in color and centered on Oppenheimer, fizzes with energy and possibility; the Strauss-centric sequences are slow, seething, and obsessed with the past, representative of the conservatism and paranoia that calcified around the atomic society Oppenheimer helped to create.

Sims is one of the very few reviewers who has even mentioned this glaring bias. The notion that viewers are likely to take away is, "Yeh, Oppy may have been kind of, sort of, a communist, but so what? The real problem was those vicious right-wingers who see a communist under every bed." And it's difficult to believe that that reaction is not precisely what the filmmaker intends.

But, what about Lewis Strauss, who is so brutally savaged by Nolan. Like Oppenheimer, Strauss was a Jew, but a religious, observant Jew, not an atheist communist like Oppy. While Oppenheimer was born into wealth, Strauss was born poor and built his own multi-million-dollar fortune, which he liberally distributed in philanthropy. Both men were members of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), but Strauss's anti-communism put him on the outs with the CFR elite, who came to Oppenheimer's defense.

Poor Oppy. He was *humiliated* and *crushed* by the hearings over his security clearance! What about the millions of Russians, Finns, Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians who were *truly* crushed by the mass-murdering Stalin regime that Oppy and his comrades served? Stalin's victims were tortured and executed or sent to the Gulag; Oppy was put on the covers of *TIME* and *Life* and feted at the White House and the salons of the great and good. Don't weep for him, and don't waste your money on this mendacious propaganda.



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