

Oppenheimer (1 of 2)
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Every August, we are reminded of the momentous news in 1945: Japan devastated by the first Atom bombs deployed in the world. The new film, Oppenheimer, provides the history of that event, showing how it came about and the players in America's secret program.

World War II was coming to an end: Hitler was dead and his Nazi empire conquered. But the conflict continued with the stubborn refusal of the Japanese to surrender. It appeared we would be fighting and losing hundreds more of our men---and theirs---for an unknown time. President Roosevelt (elected for four terms) had never told his Vice President about the secret project to produce the world's first atomic bomb. When he died in office, Truman had to become a quick learner.

The bomb had been developed to beat the Nazis, who were working on the same project. If they had succeeded, the world would have faced a new dark age indeed. We succeeded, and had to decide what to do next. An unsavory but necessary decision was made: to deploy this weapon on two cities in Japan, thinking that nothing else would force the Japanese to surrender. A second reason for its deployment was to deter the Russians from anticipated aggression against Europe.

Germany had made the decision to exterminate their country (and conquered states) of their Jewish minorities: a Nazi obsession. They then drove German and other European Jews, who saw the danger, to flee in the few years before the outbreak of the war. Those Jews included some of Europe's top scientists, including Albert Einstein, and thanks to Hollywood's efforts, most of Germany's top actors and artists. (For a glimpse of the latter, see the film Casablanca and include actress/inventor Hedy Lamar.) The Jews who waited too long or were too poor to flee died in the holocaust: about 6 million of them.

Back to the making of the bomb. Albert Einstein left Germany in 1938, and immediately sought an audience with President Roosevelt. He told him of the Nazi bomb project, and the American secret project was launched. The world's best scientists were recruited and settled in a remote desert location in Los Alamos, New Mexico, where a secret city was built and work begun.

US General Graves headed the project and selected one of the physicists, young and brilliant Robert Oppenheimer, Jewish and American-born, to lead the team. Oppenheimer had never led a project, but was much loved and respected by the rest of his prickly group. What they mostly had in common was that they were Jewish, and realized the stakes if Hitler won the upcoming war.

Many of them had been college students during the Great Depression, a period in which democracy appeared incapable of creating a just society. Across the world, the Soviet Union and Nazis were rivals in propaganda campaigns to offer a brave new world, and they started recruiting (the early 1930s). By the approach of war, many of these recruits had recognized the scam and deserted the communist party.

The recruits to Nazism were less likely to be intellectuals and by the start of the war the FBI rounded them up. (The British neo-Nazis, mostly aristocrats, spent the war years in prison too. For insight into this period, see the Netflix series, Foyle's War.)

A marvelous documentary, The Day After Trinity, is the best source to learn of the bomb's development and introduces us to the team of scientists, their families, and the intelligence officials who kept a keen eye on them. The romance with communism concerned many, but they knew that this group, being largely Jewish, would not be tempted to be recruited by Nazis.

The development of this atom bomb raced ahead to its culmination in the first test in the desert. Named by Oppenheimer, Trinity, was no sure thing: would it create a giant explosion or be a dud, and if it exploded, might it set the world's atmosphere (oxygen) be set on fire, ending life on the planet?

The bomb worked. Oppenheimer made a conflicted decision: the bomb had to be used at least once on real cities.

See Part 2 for the aftermath.

687 words

Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of "How Do You Know That?"
Contact her at Lfarhat102@gmail.com or www.globalthink.net.

.