

## Oppenheimer (film)

Oppenheimer is a 2023 biographical drama film written and directed by Christopher Nolan. Based on the 2005 biography *American Prometheus* by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, the film chronicles the life of American theoretical physicist and polymath J. Robert Oppenheimer. The story predominantly focuses on Oppenheimer's early studies, his direction of the Manhattan Project during World War II, and his eventual fall from grace due to his 1954 security hearing; juxtaposed with this are events surrounding Oppenheimer's relationship with Lewis Strauss, a senior member of the United States Atomic Energy Commission who sees Oppenheimer as a rival. It stars Cillian Murphy as Oppenheimer and Robert Downey Jr. as Strauss, with the remaining ensemble supporting cast including Emily Blunt, Matt Damon, Florence Pugh, Josh Hartnett, Casey Affleck, Rami Malek and Kenneth Branagh.

The film was announced in September 2021 after Universal Pictures won a bidding war for Nolan's screenplay, following Nolan's conflict with longtime distributor Warner Bros. Pictures. Murphy was the first cast member to be signed on, to portray Oppenheimer in October, with others in the main cast joining between November 2021 and April 2022. Pre-production was underway by January 2022, with filming taking place from February to May. Oppenheimer was filmed in a combination of IMAX 65 mm and 65 mm large-format film, including, for the first time in history, sections in IMAX black-and-white film photography. It is Nolan's first film to receive R-rating since *Insomnia* (2002). Like his previous works, Nolan used extensive practical effects and minimal computer-generated imagery.

Oppenheimer premiered at Le Grand Rex in Paris on July 11, 2023, and was theatrically released in the United States and United Kingdom on July 21, 2023, by Universal Pictures. Its simultaneous release with Warner Bros.' *Barbie* led to the "Barbenheimer" phenomenon on social media, which encouraged audiences to see both films as a double feature. The film has grossed over \$412 million worldwide on a \$100 million production budget and received critical acclaim, with particular praise for its cast, screenplay, and visuals.

### Plot

The film is presented as a nonlinear narrative; this summary organizes the events in chronological order for the sake of clarity.

In 1926, 22-year-old doctoral student J. Robert Oppenheimer suffers from homesickness and anxiety while studying under experimental physicist Patrick Blackett at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge. Upset with Blackett, Oppenheimer retaliates by leaving him a poisoned apple, then narrowly prevents visiting scientist Niels Bohr from eating it. Oppenheimer completes his PhD in physics at the University of Göttingen in Germany, where he meets theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg. He returns to the United States, hoping to expand quantum physics research there, and begins teaching at the University of California, Berkeley and the California Institute of Technology. He meets his future wife, Katherine Puening, a biologist and ex-communist. He also has an intermittent affair with Jean Tatlock, a member of the Communist Party USA, until her suicide a few years later.

In 1942, U.S. Army General Leslie Groves recruits Oppenheimer to lead the Manhattan Project to develop an atomic bomb after Oppenheimer assures him he has no communist sympathies. Oppenheimer, who is Jewish, is particularly driven by the Nazis' potentially completing their nuclear weapons program that Heisenberg heads. Oppenheimer assembles a scientific team including Edward Teller and Isidor Isaac Rabi in Los Alamos, New Mexico to secretly create the bomb. Oppenheimer collaborates with scientists Enrico Fermi and David L. Hill, and he and Albert

Einstein discuss how an atomic bomb risks triggering an unstoppable chain reaction that could destroy the world.

After Germany surrenders, several scientists question the bomb's continued importance, even though the war in the Pacific is ongoing. The Trinity test is successfully conducted just before the Potsdam Conference. President Harry S. Truman orders the Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forcing Japan's surrender and thrusting Oppenheimer into the public eye as the "father of the atomic bomb". Haunted by the immense destruction and loss of life, Oppenheimer urges Truman to restrict nuclear weapon development, which the president, calling Oppenheimer a "crybaby", disregards.

As an advisor to the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, Oppenheimer advocates against further nuclear research, especially the hydrogen bomb proposed by Teller. His stance becomes a point of contention amid the tense Cold War with the Soviet Union. AEC Chairman Lewis Strauss resents Oppenheimer for publicly dismissing his concerns regarding the export of radioisotopes and for recommending arms talks with the Soviet Union. He also believes Oppenheimer turned Einstein against him.

At a hearing intended to eliminate Oppenheimer's political influence, Oppenheimer is betrayed by Teller and other colleagues. Strauss exploits Oppenheimer's associations with communists such as Tatlock and Oppenheimer's brother, Frank. Despite Rabi and several other allies testifying in Oppenheimer's defense, Oppenheimer's security clearance is prematurely revoked, damaging his public image and neutralizing his policy influence. At Strauss's later Senate confirmation hearing to become Secretary of Commerce, Hill testifies about Strauss's personal motives in engineering Oppenheimer's downfall. The Senate votes against Strauss's nomination.

In 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson presents Oppenheimer with the Enrico Fermi Award as a gesture of political rehabilitation. It is revealed that Oppenheimer and Einstein's conversation was not about Strauss, but the far-reaching implications of nuclear weapons; Oppenheimer believes he personally started a chain reaction that will destroy the world.

## Development

Following the 2005 publication of the biography *American Prometheus* by Bird and Sherwin, director Sam Mendes had been interested in adapting the book into a film. However, that project never materialized. Over the next 15 years, as the book was optioned by various filmmakers, the authors grew pessimistic about seeing their work adapted to the silver screen. In 2015, J. David Wargo optioned the book, then commissioned and rejected several scripts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Wargo flew to Hollywood to meet with actor James Woods, who set up a meeting with Charles Roven, a producer for various Christopher Nolan films, and in turn, Roven gave a copy of the book to Nolan. Both Wargo and Woods are executive producers of the film.[46]

Even before reading the book, Nolan had already long wanted to make a film about Oppenheimer. [47] In 2019, towards the end of production on Nolan's science-fiction film *Tenet* (2020), star Robert Pattinson gave the director a book of Oppenheimer's speeches. According to Nolan, the speeches showed the physicist "wrestling with the implications ... of what's happened and what [he's] done". Nolan wanted to depict "what it would have been like to be Oppenheimer in those moments" in contrast to *Tenet*, which employs time travel to curb a potential weapon of mass destruction.[48][2]

In December 2020, Warner Bros. Pictures announced plans to give its 2021 films simultaneous releases in theaters and on HBO Max, citing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the film

industry. Nolan, who had partnered with the studio on each one of his films starting with *Insomnia* (2002), was outraged with the decision as he had been a proponent of film theaters.[49] In January 2021, media reports mentioned the possibility that Nolan's next film could be the first not to be financed or distributed by Warner Bros.[50] By mid-2021, the filmmaker had left Warner Bros. and was meeting with other studios to develop his new project.[2] Nolan had previously supported the studio's decision to give *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020) a simultaneous release, stating that he perceived that situation to have been handled properly, but said he had been excluded from any discussions regarding the postponed release of *Tenet*. [51][52]

In September 2021, it was announced that Nolan would write and direct a biographical film set during World War II about Oppenheimer, with Cillian Murphy in negotiations to star.[53][54] Due to his strained relationship with Warner Bros., Nolan approached multiple studios for the project, including Sony Pictures, Universal Pictures, Paramount Pictures, and Apple Studios.[55][56] According to insiders, Paramount was ruled out early in the process in relation to the replacement of CEO and chairman Jim Gianopulos with Brian Robbins, an advocate for increased streaming-service releases.[56] Nolan had connections to Donna Langley, the chairman and chief content officer of the NBCUniversal studio group, who agreed with his stance in favor of traditional film exhibition in movie theaters. As such, Universal agreed to finance and distribute the film, with production set to begin in the first quarter of 2022.[57] The studio also agreed to Nolan's terms, which included a production budget of \$100 million, an equal marketing budget, an exclusive theatrical window ranging from 90–120 days, 20% of the film's first-dollar gross, and a three-week period before and after the film's release in which Universal could not release another new film.