

# LETTERS

## Disputing Your Critic's Review of *Oppenheimer*

The review of *Oppenheimer* [Cineaste, Winter 2023] contains only one error, but the misstatement is crucial to the understanding of Oppenheimer's place in history. The reviewer offers the opinion that the bombings were unnecessary, that "the claim that the atomic bombs saved a million American lives...was a postwar invention" and that the war was about to end anyway, in light of the Soviet invasion.

The figure of a million American casualties was no postwar invention. It was the Army intelligence estimate of the cost of the invasion, and subsequent research discovered that it was far too low. The Japanese had twice as many troops and five times as many aircraft than we anticipated. The Army submitted the estimate because it was reluctant to invade in light of the anticipated casualties. The Navy was opposed to invasion as well. It is one of the great "what ifs" of history whether Truman would have invaded in 1945 if Japan had not surrendered.

Japan was defeated, but contrary to the movie quote, she was by no means beaten. The Japanese had mobilized the entire adult civilian population into militia whose duties would have included combat. At Saipan, the only island with a substantial civilian population we invaded, about two-thirds of the 20,000 civilians committed suicide rather than surrender; the Japanese government widely publicized this and encouraged the population of the home islands to take the same course when the Americans invaded. Between starvation, illness, and the chaos of war, the civilian population would have melted away.

I should also mention that between 400,000 and 600,000 Asian civilians, primarily in China and the Philippines, were dying each month due to slave labor, hostages being killed, war-related starvation, and other causes, each month under the Japanese occupation, a figure that was bound to continue until the war ended. Either the review should have addressed this important question at length, or it should have avoided the topic altogether. As written, the review does a disservice to history.

Neil Albert  
Ephrata, PA

### Matthew Evangelista replies:

Neil Albert objects to this line in my review: "The claim that the atomic bombs saved a million American soldiers' lives by ending the war quickly was a postwar invention to justify their use. Most historians agree that the Soviet entry into the war in August played more of a role in shocking the Japan-

ese into giving up than the atomic bombings did." A movie review cannot include the documentation required in any historical study, so I welcome the opportunity to provide more detail. My reference was to the February 1947 article in *Harper's Magazine*, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," by former Secretary of War Henry Stimson that popularized the figure of one million. Its ghostwriter, McGeorge Bundy, told his biographer, Kai Bird (also the coauthor of *American Prometheus* on which Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* script was based) that Bundy "had asked the War Department for any casualty estimates given to Stimson in the summer of 1945, but he never got them. Instead, he and Stimson simply agreed to use the nice round figure of one million casualties" (Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p. 93).

There is an extensive literature on the actual estimates of how many lives would be lost in a U.S. invasion of mainland Japan, with major contributions by historians Barton Bernstein and Alex Wellerstein, and summarized nicely here: <https://inkstickmedia.com/what-oppenheimer-misses-about-the-decision-to-drop-the-bomb>. In a meeting on 18 July 1945 with Stimson, President Harry Truman, and two other officials, General George C. Marshall presented the plan for an invasion on 1 November 1945. His analysts based their casualty estimates on previous fighting in the Japanese islands "from 1 March 1944 through 1 May 1945" which "shows 13,742 U.S. killed compared to 320,165 Japanese killed, or a ratio of 22:1." The Joint Chiefs of Staff informed Truman, regarding the planned invasion, that there was "reason to believe that the first 30 days in Kyushu should not exceed the price we have paid for Luzon"—less than 31,000 casualties (killed, wounded, or missing).

It is indeed the case, as Mr. Albert writes, that there were other higher casualty figures estimated in various studies, but Truman never saw them. Rather than the half a million American soldiers whose lives the president later claimed to have saved, or the one million figure in the Stimson article, Truman received estimates in the tens of thousands at that July meeting where, according to the *Oppenheimer* movie, Truman made the difficult decision to use nuclear weapons against Japan. In fact, the latest historical research, summarized in the same essay cited above, explains that the leaders assumed that the bomb would be used, and that an invasion would go forward. Truman could have blocked the decision, but he did not make it.

On the role of the Soviet entry into the war, most historians now agree with the pathbreaking work of Tsuyoshi Hasegawa in *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan*. From research in U.S., Soviet, and

Japanese archives, he argues that the Soviet invasion of Manchuria (agreed in a secret protocol at the Yalta conference in February 1945) was more important than the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in shocking the Japanese into surrender (a summary version is here: <https://apjjf.org/-tsuyoshi-hasegawa/2501/article.html>). Many historians argue that, had the U.S. loosened the terms of "unconditional surrender" to allow the Japanese emperor to remain in power (as he did anyhow), Japan might have surrendered without either an invasion or the atomic bombings.

The history of the development and use of the atomic bombs and their relation to the end of the Pacific War is a fascinating and complicated one. The *Oppenheimer* movie conveys some of it accurately, repeats some discredited conventional versions, and invents some scenes and events entirely. But it is only a movie after all.

### The Importance of Critics

"Eunuchs," "Parasites," "Dog-in-the-Manger": these are familiar pejoratives for critics. "Cretin" and "Vermin" are but two of the withering slurs cast on the breed by Vladimir and Estragon. Critics have been subjected to such venom since the beginning of time by artists and audiences alike, but the rarer they become (now) the more intense it would seem is the animus. We live in an anti-hierarchical age. There exists among movie reviewers (fortunately) nothing like the make or break power exerted by Bosley Crowther in his twenty-seven-year reign as film critic at *The New York Times*. (Theater critics are another matter.) *Cineaste* recently felt impelled to publish a defense of critics ("Are Film Critics Just Party Poopers?", Summer 2023), reminding us that the takedown of popular films (or elevation of esoteric ones), when warranted, is a service we can't afford to lose. I concur.

Once there was a mutually agreed-upon consensus of great films; now there's no such thing as the canon (see the shift in the *Sight and Sound* poll between 2012 and 2022). There's simply too much from too many countries and sources, but for this very reason, critics are more important than ever. Susan Sontag to the contrary, cinema is not only a long way from being in its death throes but proliferating like lava into every available nook and cranny. The democratizing has come in the wake of print outlets disappearing and the takeover of the Internet, where there are now, along with excellent professional critics (perhaps more and better than ever), self-appointed reviewers—basically fans or enthusiasts who pride themselves on not being legitimate or sponsored "critics," but rather spokesmen for the People.

*Letters continued on page 35*

CINEASTE, Spring 2024 3