

Important Faces of the Manhattan Project

There were numerous men and women whose participation helped provide the knowledge, understanding, and political savvy that made the unprecedented, top-secret Manhattan Project come together.

General Leslie Groves

A graduate of West Point, General Leslie Groves was an integral point person during the Manhattan Project. After supervising the building of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., Groves was promoted to the rank of temporary Brigadier General and placed in charge of the Manhattan Engineer Project. Under his direction, the basic research behind the development of the atomic bomb was carried out. Coming on board in September 1942, Groves' job was multi-faceted. Each phase of the project was under his direction, from scientific research to production, from security to planning for the use of the world's first atomic weapon. Groves was in charge of the plants that were constructed at Oak Ridge, Hanford and Los Alamos.



In addition to the construction of each project, Groves played a prominent role in making significant decisions and prioritizing the various methods of isotope separation, acquiring the raw materials the scientists and engineers needed, and in creating the army air force bomber unit which would deliver the finished bombs to their targets. Groves was involved in gathering intelligence on Germany's atomic research program. Additionally, he helped decide which Japanese cities would be chosen as targets.

After the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended the war with Japan, Groves was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. In 1944, Groves was promoted to temporary Major General and continued to direct the Atomic Energy Commission until January 1947.

J. Robert Oppenheimer

One of the most renowned scientific minds of this century, J. Robert Oppenheimer's contributions to the Manhattan Project were, in a word, immense. Known as "the father of the atomic bomb," Oppenheimer was a theoretical physicist. His work on the production of the atomic bomb began at the Radiation Laboratory at Berkeley, where he was asked to take over work on fast neutron calculations.

In the 1930's, like many young intellectuals during that time, Oppenheimer had become a supporter of communist ideas. After inheriting a large sum of money upon his father's death in 1937, Oppenheimer donated to many left-wing efforts including the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War and other anti-fascist activities. He never openly joined the

Communist Party, though he did pass money to liberal causes by way of Party members.

Despite Oppenheimer's political views, in 1942, newly-appointed Manhattan Project director General Leslie Groves hired Oppenheimer to be the Project's scientific director. Groves knew that Oppenheimer would be viewed as a security risk, but he thought Oppenheimer was the best man to direct a diverse team of scientists and a man who would be unaffected by his past political leanings.

Once he became officially involved in the Manhattan Project, Oppenheimer's first act was to host a summer school for bomb theory at his building in Berkeley. The goal of this meeting was to calculate what needed to be done to build the atomic bomb. Los Alamos, New Mexico was the chosen site for a centralized, secret research laboratory. The site, not far from Oppenheimer's ranch, was the site of a private boy's school. Next, Oppenheimer assembled a remarkable group of physicists, whom he referred to as the "luminaries." This group included Enrico Fermi, Richard Feynman, Robert R. Wilson, Victor Weisskopf, Hans Bethe, and Edward Teller.

The research and work done at Oak Ridge, Los Alamos, and Hanford resulted in the first nuclear explosion on July 16, 1945. The site, located near Alamogordo, New Mexico, was named "Trinity" by Oppenheimer. The test was a success, and news of it was rushed to President Harry S. Truman, who then authorized the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.

Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein was a guest professor at Princeton University in January 1933, the time period Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany. Not long after that event, Einstein's work was maligned as "Jewish Physics," and many German scientists attempted to black list his theories and those who taught them. Einstein then renounced his Prussian citizenship and stayed in the U.S., where he was given permanent residency and became an American citizen in 1940. He also retained his Swiss citizenship.

In 1939, Einstein was encouraged to send a letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt urging the study of nuclear fission for military purposes. He wrote this letter due to fears that Nazi Germany would be the first to develop a nuclear weapon. Upon reading this letter, President Roosevelt began investigating the probability of this occurring, and soon after ordered the formation of the Manhattan Project.

