
Following her arrest in October, 1949, Olga Ivinskaya, the mistress of Boris Pasternak, was interrogated by Victor Abakumov, Joseph Stalin's minister of state security. Notorious for placing a bloodstained carpet on his office floor to keep it clean while he tortured his victims, Abakumov warned Ivinskaya to think carefully about the novel Pasternak was passing around "at a time when we have quite enough malcontents and enemies as it is." Her fate and that of her lover would depend on her cooperation, he added, before ordering the guard to take Ivinskaya away.

Seven years later, Pasternak, by then certain that Soviet authorities would not publish a book they deemed to be an assault on the Russian Revolution by a bourgeois individualist, sent the manuscript to Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, an independent Italian publisher with a predilection for progressive books. Published in 1957, Dr. Zhivago became a bestseller in Western Europe and the United States and a weapon in the Cold War. In 1958, Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In The Zhivago Affair, Peter Finn, the National Security Editor for the Washington Post, and Petra Couvée, a writer and translator at Saint Petersburg State University, draw on recently declassified government documents and archives in eight countries in an informative, fascinating, and often moving account of personal courage, espionage and propaganda, and the role of literature in the political struggle for the hearts and minds of people.

Finn and Couvée document the role of the CIA in publishing and disseminating Dr. Zhivago through a host of "front organizations and phony foundations," including Bedford Publishing Company, and in smuggling copies of the novel into the Soviet Union. The Agency, they write, "loved literature," exhibited broad aesthetic tastes, and believed in the power of ideas to erode the authority of the Soviet state with the Russian people and the citizens of "satellite" nations in Eastern Europe.

The impact of the CIA "books program," however, remains unclear. Was it "demonstrably effective," as CIA officials later claimed? Clearly, the Zhivago affair angered and humiliated the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. In fact, Nikita Khrushchev came to regret his role in suppressing publication of Dr. Zhivago and Pasternak's grave became a pilgrimage site for critics of the Kremlin. But did the CIA actually reinforce or change "predispositions toward intellectual and cultural freedom and dissatisfaction with its absence?" Would the Zhivago affair have unfolded in more or less the same way if the CIA had not played any role at all?

Although they acknowledge that exploiting literature and putting writers and their families in harm's way are distasteful, the authors nonetheless indicate that CIA claims about the nobility of their efforts in the face of an authoritarian regime with its own propaganda machine "seem almost quaint," especially in comparison to recent uses of torture, drone strikes, and targeted killing. They do not discuss the more violent operations conducted by the CIA in the 1950s.

The authors do present a balanced, and, in my judgment, appropriately admiring portrait of Boris Pasternak. They leave little doubt that Pasternak understood the consequences of publishing his novel outside the Soviet Union (including loss of status, isolation, and threat of exile in the Gulag, as well as an inability to collect royalties from sales of his book). Although they read into the record the disappointment expressed by some Russian intellectuals, including Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (who "writhed with shame for him") at his contrite letter "voluntarily" rejecting the Novel Prize, Finn and Couvée suggest that many of Pasternak's contemporaries agreed that he had had no viable alternative, short of martyrdom. And that Pasternak remained true to his conviction, communicated to his English relatives in 1948, that he had written a book of "enormous, universal importance, whose destiny cannot be subordinated to my own destiny, or to any question of my well-being."

Pasternak died on May 30, 1960. But he may have gotten the last laugh. The film version of Dr. Zhivago was a box-office blockbuster in 1965. Five years later, Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize. In the 1980s, attitudes toward Pasternak softened; his poems and excerpts from his novel became available to the public. And in 1989, in a brief ceremony, in Stockholm, Yevgeny Pasternak, accepted the gold medal for the Nobel Prize for Literature on behalf of his father.

Year after year, Finn and Couvée emphasize, following the end of the Soviet Union, generations of Russians who love freedom still recite lines from Pasternak's "Hamlet": "Yet the order of the acts is planned/And the end of the way inescapable./I am alone; all drowns in the Pharisees' hypocrisy./To live your life is not as simple as to cross a field." And they renew their faith in
Pasternak's list of the most important things: "land and sky, great passion, creative spirit, life and death."