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The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, The CIA, And The Battle Over A Forbidden Book



Synopsis

The story of a forbidden book that became a symbol of freedom and rebellion in the battle between East and West. 1956. Boris Pasternak presses a manuscript into the hands of an Italian publishing scout with these words: "This is Doctor Zhivago. May it make its way around the world."

Pasternak knew his novel would never be published in the Soviet Union as the authorities regarded it as seditious, so, instead, he allowed it to be published in translation all over the world - a highly dangerous act. 1958. The life of this extraordinary book enters the realms of the spy novel. The CIA, recognising that the Cold War was primarily an ideological battle, published Doctor Zhivago in Russian and smuggled it into the Soviet Union. It was immediately snapped up on the black market. Pasternak was later forced to renounce the Nobel Prize in Literature, igniting worldwide political scandal. With first access to previously classified CIA files, The Zhivago Affair gives an irresistible portrait of Pasternak, and takes us deep into the Cold War, back to a time when literature had the power to shake the world. A Spectator and Sunday Times Book of the Year

Book Information

File Size: 5536 KB

Print Length: 368 pages

Publisher: Vintage Digital (June 19, 2014)

Publication Date: June 19, 2014

Language: English

ASIN: B00IJZZGPC

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #1,022,600 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #112

in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > European > Eastern

#175 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Russia & Former Soviet Republics > Former

Soviet Republics #688 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > Russian

Customer Reviews

Boris Pasternak was a famous and beloved Russian poet until he wrote Dr. Zhivago. Then he

became infamous and reviled as an enemy of the Soviet Union. That sums up over 90% of this book. The CIA's successful scheme to publish the book in Russian and smuggle it into the USSR constitutes about 5%. It's a decent book on its own merits, just not the one advertised. The first few chapters describe Pasternak's upbringing and his poetry, for which he was famous in Russia. He gave very popular readings, and was nominated for a Nobel Prize starting in the late 1940s. The book then covers the years he spent writing *Dr. Zhivago*. Although married, he began a love affair which continued for the rest of his life, and this woman became a model for Lara in the novel. He apparently both expected the Soviet government to refuse to publish the book and was bewildered by its decision. Much of the rest of the book concerns the somewhat ineffective Kremlin efforts to suppress the novel and to repudiate Pasternak. His lover was imprisoned on account of his work, twice, he had to renounce his Nobel Prize, and he lost his livelihood as a writer. Yet the authorities chose not to deport him, or send him to prison. I was surprised at how much access he had to Western Europeans and Americans, and at how often he offered to placate the bureaucrats but then managed to infuriate them in the process. The authors have done commendable research. Their portrait of Pasternak is surprisingly unflattering. Regardless of his literary standing, he seems to have been self-absorbed, over-wrought, unfaithful, incredibly naive, and reckless about the comfort and freedom of those around him.

This interesting book tells the story of how the novel *Dr Zhivago* came into being and was published and spread around the world. The author, Boris Pasternak, was well-known as a poet who lived through the Stalinist terror and somehow survived, despite mostly refusing to kowtow to the regime. He was never a political figure but behaved for the most part in a principled way. He worked on his novel, which was a distillation of his feelings about the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Communist regime and life and love in general, for many years. It was not an avowedly political work but unlikely to be acceptable to the regime, even after the death of Stalin, because it took a skeptical and individualistic approach to the revolution and placed personal freedom above loyalty to the proletariat, the state and all the tenets of Communism. We also learn a lot about Pasternak's two difficult marriages and his love affairs. He basically supported two households, remaining with his cantankerous wife while maintaining long relationship with another much younger woman, both obviously being aware of the other. In 1956, an Italian publishing representative visited Pasternak in his writers' village near Moscow and left carrying the manuscript of *Dr Zhivago*. Pasternak handed over the book with the words, "This is *Dr Zhivago*. May it make its way around the world." It was published by Giagiacomo Feltrinelli, an Italian communist with a eye for the commercial opportunity

who resisted all pressure to suppress it. (His interesting and sad story is also told in these pages.

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