

'Dr. Zhivago' was used as a Cold War weapon

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The Zhivago Affair, a book by Peter Finn and Petra Couvée, reveals how the CIA used two rolls of film with photographs of *Dr. Zhivago* as part of a propaganda mission to get the novel into the hands of Soviet citizens.

In 2014, declassified documents revealed how the CIA published the story to sow unrest among Soviet citizens. Co-authors Finn and Couvée combed through more than one hundred documents to piece together one of the most startling uses of propaganda during the Cold War.

Finn, a national security editor, and Couvée, a teacher and translator in St. Petersburg, got together to uncover just exactly how extensive the CIA's interest in *Dr. Zhivago* went.

"All these years later, in an age of terror, drones, and targeted killing, the CIA's faith -- and the Soviet Union's faith -- in the power of literature to transform society seems almost quaint," said the authors.

Seeds of dissent

Boris Pasternak, author of *Dr. Zhivago*, was born into an upper class of the Moscow elite in 1890. However, by the 1950s, this class was out of favor with the rest of the Soviet communist culture.

In his novel, Pasternak examined the Bolshevik Revolution with a less than favorable eye and included other aspects that make the book impossible to publish in the Soviet Union at that time.

It even featured a decidedly religious fervor, something entirely out of the scope of Russian culture during the height of communism. As a result, Pasternak could not find an agent or a publisher within the USSR.

On a sunny morning in May 1956, Pasternak emerged from his Moscow dacha and handed a bundle wrapped in newspaper and string to an Italian visitor standing in his garden.

“You are hereby invited to my execution,” he said.

That man standing in his garden was Milanese publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. To his credit, Pasternak was not paranoid. Just twenty years earlier, he’d watched as his neighbor (and fellow writer Boris Pilnyak) was summoned away by the KGB on “urgent business.”

That business turned out to be a bullet to the back of his head.

By handing the love story [*Dr. Zhivago*] over to an Italian publisher, Pasternak was not only risking his freedom, but also his life. He knew that the Soviet authorities would never allow the work to be published since it didn’t conform to official cultural guidelines.

Not only did the book have nothing positive to say about communist Russia, but it also was very clearly not accepting of the socialist revolution.

As a love story, the novel centered on the idea of the individual human consciousness, something that was utterly contrary to the Russia the Bolsheviks had built.

Foreign aid

In post-tsarist Russia, collectivism and sacrifice of the self were the only things that were supposed to matter.

It’s not entirely clear if Soviet officials were completely aware of Feltrinelli’s intent in publishing the work. After all, Feltrinelli was a Marxist to his core, and most of the Soviet ruling party was confident that if he were told to abandon the project for the sake of Italy, he would comply.

However, Feltrinelli wasn’t as pliable as the Russians expected him to be. Halfway through reading the manuscript, the Russian Army invaded Hungary.

“His desire to proceed with Pasternak’s book was only strengthened,” writes Finn and Couvée in their tell-all book.

A year later, the book hit the shelves in Italy. Then, British intelligence officials sent rolls of film to the CIA in 1958 with photographs of the book’s pages. Internal memos from the CIA, reveal that the agency’s Soviet Division launched a mission to translate the novel into Russian and smuggle it under the Iron Curtain.

When the photographed pages arrived at CIA headquarters, Soviet-Russia division leader John Maury said that the book was “the most heretical literary work of a Soviet author since Stalin’s death.”

These documents revealed interesting details about Pasternak’s expectations on publication in the Soviet Union. Pasternak said that authorities in the USSR viewed it as an “irredeemable assault on the 1917 revolution,” making it impossible to be published.



Boris Pasternak received the Nobel Prize for his epic novel, “Dr. Zhivago,” a novel which tells of life in Soviet Russia. The novel was first published in Italy over Soviet protests. The Soviet Literary Gazette called the award a “hostile political act directed against the Soviet State.” (Getty Images).

The CIA quickly recognized that it could be used as a decisive literary weapon.

“This book has great propaganda value,” one document stated. “Not only do its intrinsic message and thought-provoking nature but also for the circumstances of its publication. We have the opportunity to make Soviet citizens wonder what is wrong with their government,” a memo stated.

After publishing a hardback edition of *Dr. Zhivago* in Russian from the Netherlands, the CIA then released a miniature paperback edition from its headquarters.

Interestingly, the organization took pains to ensure that the “hand of the US government” was not to be “shown in any manner,” reveal the documents.

“Pasternak’s humanistic message -- that every person is entitled to a private life and deserves respect as a human being ... poses a fundamental challenge to the Soviet ethic of sacrifice of the individual to the Communist system,” said Maury in a memo to his team.

The CIA also provided elaborate guidelines for its officers on how to encourage western tourists to discuss the novel and its impact on Soviet citizens. Maury and his team hoped that tourists would be able to discuss the underlying themes of freedom and dignity of the individual as well as the overt plight of the loss of self within the communist structure.

Internal memos reveal that the CIA aimed to publish the work in as many foreign editions as possible so that the entire world might read Pasternak’s work.

Spreading the word

Bootlegged copies were smuggled into Brussels and given away at the 1958 World’s Fair, held that year at the Vatican Pavilion, where exiled Russian Catholics had assembled a small library of books aimed at Christians living under repressive regimes.

Within months of the CIA smuggling operation, it was announced that Pasternak would be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Pasternak was forced by authorities to decline the prize.

Subsequently, the Kremlin then spent two years attempting to prosecute Pasternak for the novel.

Following his premature death, Pasternak’s lover and literary assistant Olga Ivinskaya was arrested and interrogated on numerous occasions. She was sentenced to eight years in a Siberian labor camp after Pasternak died.

Given the social implications of *Dr. Zhivago*, it’s not surprising this work will always be of socio-cultural interest. The fact that the CIA published and distributed this work, along with countless others, isn’t new news.

What is of importance and the difference with *Dr. Zhivago* is the declassification of

internal memos. It works very well for American foreign policy to present this story in “its entirety,” at least, according to the CIA.

While pushing the book under the Iron Curtain might have had an altruistic intention, it probably wasn’t in the best interest of Pasternak.

“It was not interested in his destiny, his security, his liberty,” said Couvée. “The Soviets were agreed and uninterested in the freedom of their authors. Even Khrushchev recognized this. The idea that Russian leaders are cultural thugs sits very comfortable with strategists and US foreign policymakers today. The CIA only releases information when it’s useful to them,” she added.

In 1965, *Dr. Zhivago* was made into a movie starring Omar Sharif as the titular character. In 1987, under glasnost, Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev readmitted Pasternak to the Soviet Union, and his book was finally published in Russia.

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