

The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA, and the Battle Over a Forbidden Book

Peter Finn and Petra Couvée (Pantheon Books, 2014), 368 pp., notes, index, photos.

Reviewed by PJ Neal

Nearly 25 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, memories of the Cold War are beginning to fade in American memory. Bomb shelters built in the shadow of the Cuban Missile Crisis are rusting out across the United States. Russia is rusting out, too, with a GDP today smaller than that of Brazil, and just an eighth that of the United States. There is an International Space Station where there once was a space race, an increasingly unified European economy where the Berlin Wall once stood, and the Fulda Gap is now host to a museum examining the Cold War (€5 admission, closed Mondays during winter).

In *The Zhivago Affair*, Peter Finn, the national security editor for the *Washington Post*, and Petra Couvée, a writer, translator, and professor at Saint Petersburg State University in Russia, take the reader back to the height of the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union were wrestling for geopolitical dominance, and the citizens of both nations faced the specter of nuclear war. While many recent Cold War histories focus on major individuals (*Ike's Bluff*, *Shadow Warrior*) or technological feats (*Project AZORIAN*), Finn and Couvée go in a different direction, examining an innovative effort by the Central Intelligence Agency to use literature—specifically, Boris Pasternak's novel, *Doctor Zhivago*—as a potentially destabilizing influence inside the Soviet Union.

Pasternak was a celebrated Russian writer, known both for his original works and for his translations of Shakespearean classics. Over a nearly 40-year period culminating in the 1950s, Pasternak wrote *Doctor Zhivago*, an original novel set between the early 1900s and World War II. The novel contains a number of complex plot lines and themes, including criticisms of the role of the government in the lives of citizens and criticisms of the October Revolution and its aftermath. It is perhaps unsurprising that, when Pasternak submitted the novel to the Soviet publisher *Novy Mir*, it was rejected for ideological failings: “The spirit of your novel is one of non-acceptance of the socialist revolution. The general tenor of your novel is that the October Revolution, the Civil War, and the social transformation involved did not give the people anything

but suffering, and destroyed the Russian intelligentsia, either physically or morally.” (99)

Recognizing that *Doctor Zhivago* would not be printed in the Soviet Union, Pasternak accepted an offer in June 1956 from Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, an Italian publisher, to publish an Italian language version of the novel. Pasternak supplied Feltrinelli with a copy of the novel in the original Russian, and a year later, in November 1957, the book, now translated, was released to the public in Italy.

British intelligence quickly acquired a copy of the manuscript in the original Russian, photographed the work, and supplied the film to the CIA in January 1958, with the suggestion that the CIA might want to distribute the book in the Soviet Union. Agency leaders quickly recognized the value of the work as a weapon in the ongoing conflict against the Soviet Union. As John Maury, the Soviet Russia Division chief wrote, “Pasternak's humanistic message—that every person is entitled to a private life and deserves respect as a human being, irrespective of the extent of his political loyalty or contribution to the state—poses a fundamental challenge to the Soviet ethic of sacrifice of the individual to the Communist system.” (115)

In the summer of 1958, the CIA contacted the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (BVD) to see whether they could facilitate printing the novel in The Hague. BVD agreed, and the CIA sent them the funds to cover the print run, as well as explicit guidance that there should be no indication of the CIA or the United States's involvement. One thousand copies were published by Mouton Publishers, with 200 being sent to CIA headquarters, 200 to Frankfurt, 100 to Berlin, 100 to Munich, 25 to London, 10 to Paris, and the largest quantity, 365, to Brussels.

Belgium was home to the Brussels Universal and International Exposition in the summer and fall of 1958, the first World's Fair after World War II. Forty-three nations participated in the fair, which was held just outside of Brussels. Both the United States and the Soviet Union built large exhibitions as part of the event, and more than

16,000 Soviet citizens received visas to attend. Sixteen thousand Soviet citizens, outside the Soviet Union and in an allied country, was a tempting opportunity for intelligence officers looking to make contact with individuals from the far side of the Iron Curtain. It also delivered a large number of individuals who might pick up a copy of *Doctor Zhivago* and bring it back with them into the Soviet Union to read and distribute to others.

Since the United States government was adamant that US involvement in the publication and distribution of the novel not be seen, the CIA turned to an unlikely partner to help distribute the books in Brussels: the Vatican. Like the United States, USSR, and other nations, the Holy See had a pavilion in Brussels, and as part of their display, there was a small library run by Russian émigré Catholics with books, articles, and pamphlets related to the government suppression of Christianity. This library served as a distribution point for *Doctor Zhivago*, and a very effective one at that: “[T]he book’s blue linen covers were found littering the fairgrounds. Some who got the novel were ripping off the cover, dividing the pages, and stuffing them in their pockets to make the book easier to hide.”^a One news report at the time said that Russian émigrés surrounded a caravan of Soviet busses, throwing copies of the book into their open windows.

The CIA, like any successful publisher, recognized when it had a hit on its hands. Following the successful distribution of the first thousand Russian-language copies of *Doctor Zhivago*, the agency decided to fund a second print run, including 7,000 copies for individuals who would take them into the Soviet Union and leave them for others to discover, and 2,000 copies that would be distributed at the Vienna Youth Festival later that year. The Agency stamped each of these copies as coming from the Société d’Edition et d’Impression Mondiale, a nonexistent French publisher. Further deception was provided by a Russian émigré group that quickly claimed credit for their distribution.

In writing *The Zhivago Affair*, Finn and Couvée drew on the records in government archives in eight countries, more than a dozen interviews, extensive secondary research, and the use of a large number of recently declassified CIA records.^b Couvée was the first writer to uncover the connection between the BVD and *Doctor Zhivago*, writing about it in 1999. Her experience as a researcher and translator shines through in the 60 pages of notes and references that accompany the text. Finn, who first wrote about the potential CIA connection in 2007, has been

with the *Washington Post* for nearly 20 years, including working as the bureau chief in Moscow, and reporting on national security affairs from around the world since 2001. He has a clear understanding of intelligence operations, Soviet culture, and society, and brings an engaging element to the writing.

In addition to its historical significance of shedding light on a relatively unknown Cold War intelligence effort, *The Zhivago Affair* is also an excellent story with a wide cast of characters acting in front of a global backdrop. As the authors write, “There was something of the caper about the Zhivago operation and, more generally, the books program. Émigrés, priests, athletes, students, businessmen, tourists, soldiers, musicians, and diplomats—they all carried books across the iron curtain and into the Soviet Union. Books were sent to Russian prisoners of war in Afghanistan, foisted on Russian truck drivers in Iran, and offered to Russian sailors in the Canary Islands, as well being pressed into the hands of visitors to the Vatican pavilion in Brussels and the World Youth Festival in Vienna.” (263) It was an multinational effort unlike any other in recent history.

As a result of the CIA’s tremendous success, the United States went on to distribute nearly 10 million books and other publications across the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, including at least 165,000 annually during the final years of the Cold War. One historical review of these efforts lauded them, saying the programs were “demonstrably effective in reaching directly significant segments of the professional and technical elite, and, through them, their colleagues in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with material that can inferentially be said to influence attitudes and reinforce predispositions toward intellectual and cultural freedom, and dissatisfaction with its absence.”^c

At the height of the Cold War, the pen proved mightier than the sword.



a. [Title redacted], Commercial Staff to The Record, “Status of AE-DINOSAUR as of 9 September 1958,” Memorandum, 10 September 1958, Reference AR 70-14.

b. This collection can be accessed online at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/collection/doctor-zhivago>.

c. Erin R. Mahan and Edward C. Keefer, eds., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union*, January 1969–October 1970 (US Government Printing Office, 2006), 463.