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Lara, Pasternak, and the mystique of Doctor Zhivago

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Recommended Citation

Hayes N. 2020 Apr 6. Lara, Pasternak, and the mystique of Doctor Zhivago [blog]. Avon Hills Salon. <https://avonhillssalon.com/2020/04/06/nick-hayes-on-lara-pasternak-and-the-mystique-of-doctor-zhivago/>.

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Nick Hayes on “Lara, Pasternak, and the Mystique of Doctor Zhivago”

APRIL 6, 2020

THE SECRETS WE KEPT



By Lara Prescott

Knopf. 368 pp.

\$26.95

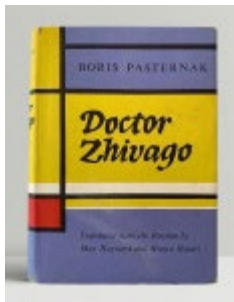
She was here on earth to grasp the meaning of its wild enchantment and to call things by their real name.

Boris Pasternak, Doctor Zhivago

I belong to a generation of men now of a certain age for whom hearing the slightest mention of “Doctor Zhivago” turns on an old LP in our heads and automatically we start to hum the opening tune of “Lara’s Theme” while our imagination transports us across Siberia to join Omar Shariff and Julie Christie in Varykino. We feel for Boris Pasternak’s novel a sense of ownership, not unlike what my neighbors in St. Paul feel toward F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby.”



Boris Pasternak in
Peredelkino



We argue over the translation of every word. Controversies over new translations of the novel have broken up friendships. English readers of my generation know the story from the 1958 translation by Max Hayward and Manya Harari. Hayward and Harari would admit that theirs was a loose translation. They had staked out a higher ground— success in rendering into English the melodic beauty and lyricism of Pasternak’s text as if he had written Doctor Zhivago with a balalaika. I would agree. In 2010, a new translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky appeared. Pevear is a Professor Emeritus of the American University of Paris; Volokhonsky is from St. Petersburg (or Leningrad as the city was known in her day). Together they have collaborated on new translations of Russian classics and have taken the liberty of trashing the translations of Constance Garnett and, of course, Max Hayward.

It’s an old quarrel among translators that pits the advocates of the literal against the advocates of the liberal interpretation. The vast majority of Pasternak’s readers on the English side with Hayward and Harari and their gift for capturing the lyricism of Pasternak’s writing. Pevear and Volokhonsky give us a literal translation that has about as much of the romantic beauty of Pasternak as does a Russian-English dictionary.

You can imagine that I took with skepticism the news of the publication of Lara Prescott’s *The Secrets We Kept*, her novel that depicts Pasternak’s life in the years when he struggled to publish Doctor Zhivago. Warily, I picked up Prescott’s *The Secrets We Kept* at Minneapolis’ Magers & Quinn bookstore. Writers whose agents do not return my phone calls can be intimidating. I, nevertheless, judged her book by its cover. It presents a clever variation of Nathan Alman’s iconic 1914 portrait of the poet Anna Akhmatova. There was a time when virtually every student in the

U.S. who studied Russian language, literature, or history had a print of Alman’s portrait of Akhmatova on their wall. I flipped through the front pages to Chapter 1, read the first three paragraphs and immediately signed up for the ride through the full 300 plus pages.

Prescott places her novel in the defining years of the Cold War, 1949 to 1961, and shifts the setting back and forth, between Washington, D.C. (“West”) and Moscow (“East”). Her eye for the details of the time and place tricks the reader into forgetting that *The Secrets We Kept* is fiction, not history. Numerous other authors of spy fiction, detective novels, and diplomat’s memoirs previously worked over this territory and theme. You would have thought that there was no room left on your favorite bookstore’s shelf marked “Cold War.” What sets Prescott’s novel apart from the rest is that *The Secrets We Kept* is unmistakably a women’s story exclusively told by women. Consider who and what is not in the novel. In Prescott’s account of the early years of the CIA, Allen Dulles has only a small part and no lines in the story. Just one more suit with a corner office and a womanizer with immunity, Dulles exists in the story only as a piece of gossip within the conversation of the “girls” in the CIA’s typist pool.



Pasternak called her his “Muse.” Olga Ivinskaya met Pasternak in 1946 and remained his inspiration and lover until his death in 1958. She was the other woman in the Pasternak story who conveniently lived in a small “dacha,” or the “Little House,” near Pasternak’s house in Peredelkino where he lived with his wife, Zinaida, and son. Ivinskaya was an editor, poet, translator, literary agent, and in later year’s Pasternak’s secretary. In *The Secrets We*

Kept, her character tells the Pasternak story in sections labeled “East.” Ivinskaya’s voice takes the reader into the brutal world of Russian literary politics. She describes Pasternak’s struggle with the Kremlin from its attempts to suppress *Doctor Zhivago* to Pasternak’s triumph as the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958. The award only intensified the Kremlin’s attacks on Pasternak. The Kremlin coerced him into refusing the award, broke his health through a relentless barrage of threats, and precipitated the writer’s fatal heart attack in 1958.

Ivinskaya paid a price for her loyalty to Pasternak. In 1949, the NKVD (a predecessor to the KGB) charged her as “an accomplice to a spy” and in 1950 sentenced her to the Gulag. She was released in 1953 after Stalin’s death. Her crime was her refusal to provide or fake evidence of anti-Soviet material in Pasternak’s writing. Ivinskaya unfolds the story of the brutalized life of a woman in the Gulag. After Pasternak’s death, the Soviet authorities in 1960 sentenced her a second time. This time, her children Mitya and Ira were sentenced with her. They were released in 1964. Despite a few glitches in the relationship, Ivinskaya always spoke with deep affection and pride for her

"Borya." Yet, Pasternak emerges in *The Secrets We Kept* as a rather weak and vacillating character. Prescott's Pasternak was no Yury Zhivago. The opposite is true for Prescott's Ivinskaya. As she declares in her last statement at the end of the novel, I have become Lara.

The sections of Prescott's novel labeled "West" center on what the CIA calls "The Pasternak Affair." In the mid-1950s, the CIA launched a plot to publish Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. The CIA recognized that the Cold War was above all else an ideological battle of freedom versus totalitarianism. The circulation of Pasternak's novel in Russia and Eastern Europe would bring the ideological struggle to the doorsteps of the Soviet Empire. Toward this goal, the CIA assembled an unusual cast of characters including Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, an affluent Italian publisher and Lamborghini communist, and the onetime American communist and CIA friendly publisher, Felix Morrow. Both Feltrinelli and Morrow had a habit of going rogue.

The plot was simple: In Moscow, Feltrinelli obtained a copy of Pasternak's manuscript, translated it into Italian, and published it. After Feltrinelli's publication, translations of *Doctor Zhivago* appeared in virtually every European language which made the novel an international bestseller. The Vatican allowed the CIA to place copies of the Russian version of *Doctor Zhivago* inside the Vatican's Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World Fair for Russian visitors to pick up. The copies moved quickly from Brussels to Moscow. Copies in English, Russian, and East European languages soon turned *Doctor Zhivago* into an international bestseller.

Since the publication of Peter Finn and Petra Couvee's *The Pasternak Affair* (Pantheon, 2016), the story of the CIA's hand in the publishing of *Doctor Zhivago* is old news. Prescott appropriates the story as a stage to tell another, lesser-known tale. Her protagonist Sally Forrester unfolds the secrets the "girls" of the CIA's typist pool kept. They had been heroes. In the Cold War, they were.

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Leftovers from the OSS. Where they'd been legends during the war, they'd become relics relegated to the typing pool or the records department or some desk in some corner with nothing to do.

Don't take seriously Forrester's official job as a part-time receptionist. In the jargon of the CIA, she is a "swallow," a seductive femme fatale. She takes pride in her ability to manipulate and draw information from men. "These men thought they were using me," she tells us, "but it was always the reverse, my power was making them think it wasn't." She plays a crucial role in "The Pasternak Affair." The "swallow" exposes a double agent who would have preempted and

uspended the operation. Forrester’s co-worker in the typist pool, Irina Drozdova, a Russian immigrant, also plays a role in the Pasternak story. Dressed as a nun in the traditional habit, Irina piously welcomes Russian visitors into the Vatican Pavilion at the Brussels World Fair and graciously passes out over three hundred copies of the Russian version of Doctor Zhivago. Drozdova and Forrester comprise a love story within the story. The “Agency” banned homosexuals from its ranks. A mole exposed Drozdova and Forrester, triggering their abrupt termination at the CIA.

Not every CIA operation in the Cold War warrants our condemnation. “The Pasternak Affair” did some good. What is more, the story has a moral. Both the CIA and the KGB understood something that eludes today’s partisans of cultural wars – the power of literature. Our universities might reflect on this as they threaten to ax English Departments. What gave the poetry and prose of an aging Russian poet with a heart condition such power? Pasternak put the answer in his portrait of Lara: She had the courage, he writes, “to call things by their real names.” Russians take poetry seriously. “Only in Russia is poetry respected,” Pasternak’s contemporary, the poet Osip Mandelstam had said, “here it gets people killed.” The KGB took Pasternak’s poetry so seriously that it drove him to the grave.



Pasternak’s House in
Peredelkino

“Dommuzejpasternak”;

Photo credit to the
Pasternak Museum.

P.S. Here’s a sample of Pasternak’s poetry at its best. Pasternak’s “Zhivago” is ultimately a voice of nostalgia for the end of what Russians call “byt’,” or a “way of life.” Listen for this voice in one of Pasternak’s poems – “The Earth” from the “Poems of Yury Zhivago” at the end of the novel. The poem speaks to that moment between the end of winter and the beginning of spring. . .

Зачем же плачет дал и тумане,

Игорько пакнет перегной?

На то вед и моё приэванье,

Чтоб не скучали расстояния,

Чтобы за городской гранью

Земле не тосковать одной.

Для этого весной ранней

Со мною сходятся друзья

И наши вечера-прощанье

Пирушки наши – завещания

Чтоб тайная струя страданья

Согрела холод бытия.

That is why the horizon weeps in the fog

And bitter is the scent of the land,

And I am called to see

that the distances do not feel lonely,

and beyond the edge of the towns,

the land does not mourn alone.

That is why in the early spring,

My friends and I gather,

and our evenings are farewells,

and our parties are testimonies

So that the secret stream of suffering

Warms the cold of life.

The translation is mine

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Nick Hayes

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