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During Cold War, CIA used ‘Doctor Zhivago’ as a tool to undermine Soviet Union



Soviet writer and poet Boris Pasternak near his home in the countryside outside Moscow on Oct. 23, 1958. (HAROLD K. MILKS/ASSOCIATED PRESS)

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A secret package arrived at CIA headquarters in January 1958. Inside were two rolls of film from British intelligence — pictures of the pages of a Russian-language novel titled “Doctor Zhivago.”

The book, by poet Boris Pasternak, had been banned from publication in the Soviet Union. The British were suggesting that the CIA get copies of the novel behind the Iron Curtain. The idea immediately gained traction in Washington.

“This book has great propaganda value,” a CIA memo to all branch chiefs of the agency’s Soviet Russia Division stated, “not only for 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, when a fine literary work by the man acknowledged to be the greatest living Russian writer is not even available in his own country in his own language for his own people to read.”

The memo is one of more than 130 newly declassified CIA documents that detail the agency’s secret involvement in the printing of “Doctor Zhivago” — an audacious plan that helped deliver the book into the hands of Soviet citizens who later passed it friend to friend, allowing it to circulate in Moscow and other cities in the Eastern Bloc. The book’s publication and, later, the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Pasternak triggered one of the great cultural storms of the Cold War.

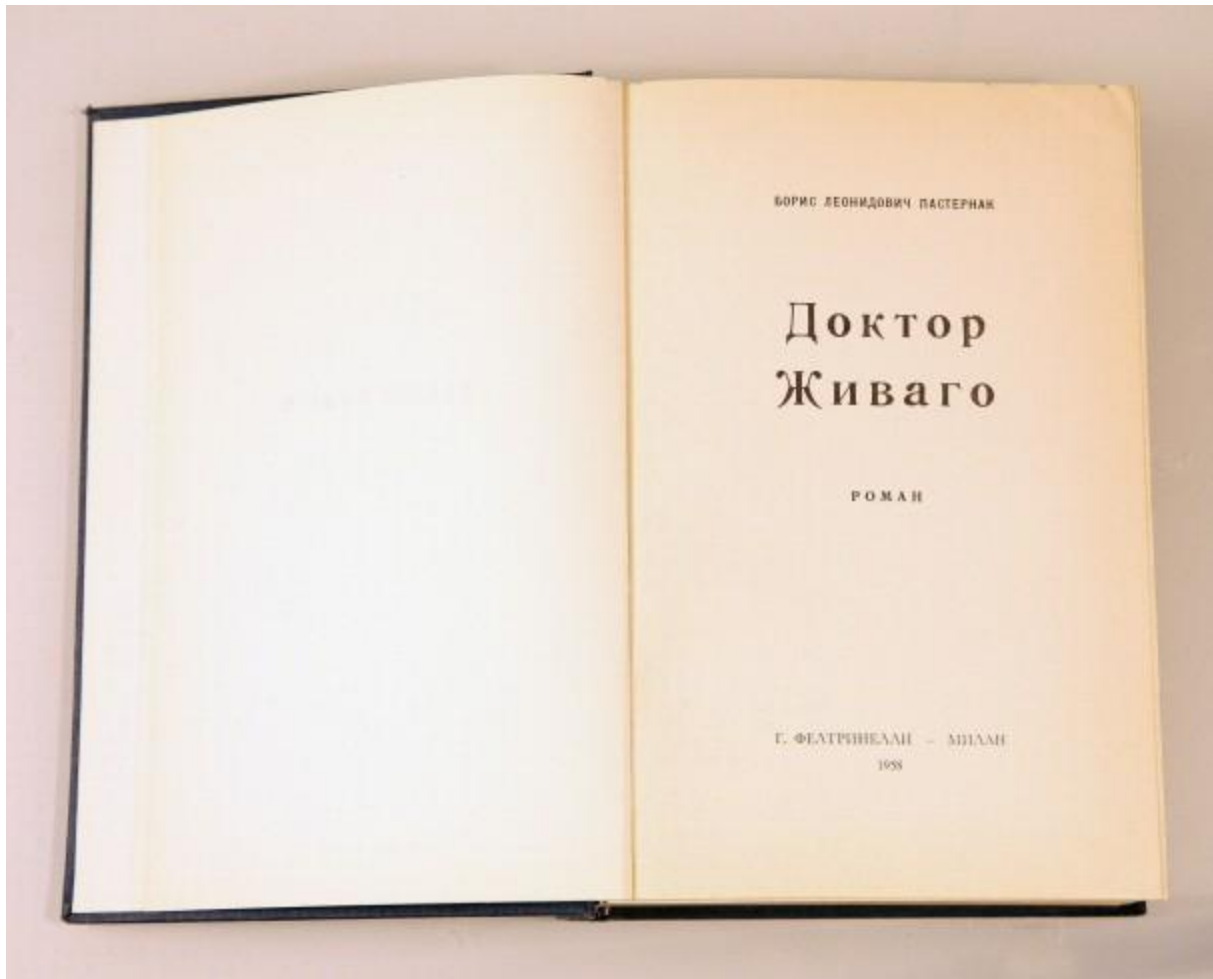
Because of the enduring appeal of the novel and a 1965 film based on it, “Doctor Zhivago” remains a landmark work of fiction. Yet few readers know the trials of its birth and how the novel galvanized a world largely divided between the competing ideologies of two superpowers. The CIA’s role — with its publication of a hardcover Russian-language edition printed in the Netherlands and a miniature, paperback edition printed at CIA headquarters — has long been hidden.

[Explore a selection of the CIA documents]

The newly disclosed documents, however, indicate that the operation to publish the book was run by the CIA’s Soviet Russia Division, monitored by CIA Director Allen Dulles and sanctioned by President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Operations Coordinating Board, which reported to the National Security Council at the White House. The OCB, which oversaw covert activities, gave the CIA exclusive control over the novel’s “exploitation.”

The “hand of the United States government” was “not to be shown in any manner,” according to the records.

The documents were provided at the request of the authors for a book, “The Zhivago Affair,” to be published June 17. Although they were redacted to remove the names of officers as well as CIA partner agencies and sources, it was possible to determine what lay behind some of the redactions from other historical records and interviews with current and former U.S. officials. Those officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss material that remained classified.



The title page from a 1958 Russian-language edition of “Doctor Zhivago” that the CIA arranged to have secretly printed in the Netherlands and distributed to Soviet tourists at the 1958 world’s fair in Brussels. (Tim Gressie/Tim Gressie)

A voice from the past

During the Cold War, the CIA loved literature — novels, short stories, poems. Joyce, Hemingway, Eliot. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Nabokov.

Books were weapons, and if a work of literature was unavailable or banned in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe, it could be used as propaganda to challenge the Soviet version of reality. Over the course of the Cold War, as many as 10 million copies of books and magazines were secretly distributed by the agency behind the Iron Curtain as part of a political warfare campaign.

In this light, “Doctor Zhivago” was a golden opportunity for the CIA.

Both epic and autobiographical, Pasternak’s novel revolves around the doctor-poet Yuri Zhivago — his art, loves and losses in the decades surrounding the 1917 Russian Revolution. At times, Zhivago is Pasternak’s alter ego. Both the character and the writer, who was born in 1890, were

from a lost past, the cultured milieu of the Moscow intelligentsia. In Soviet letters, this was a world to be disdained, if summoned at all.

Pasternak knew that the Soviet publishing world would recoil from the alien tone of “Doctor Zhivago,” its overt religiosity, its sprawling indifference to the demands of socialist realism and the obligation to genuflect before the October Revolution.

But Pasternak had long displayed an unusual fearlessness: visiting and giving money to the relatives of people who had been sent to the gulag when the fear of taint scared so many others away, intervening with authorities to ask for mercy for those accused of political crimes, and refusing to sign trumped-up petitions demanding execution for those designated enemies of the state.

“Don’t yell at me,” he said to his peers at one public meeting where he was heckled for asserting that writers should not be given orders. “But if you must yell, at least don’t do it in unison.”

Pasternak felt no need to tailor his art to the political demands of the state. To sacrifice his novel, he believed, would be a sin against his own genius. As a result, the Soviet literary establishment refused to touch “Doctor Zhivago.”

Fortunately for Pasternak, a Milan publisher had received a copy of the manuscript from an Italian literary scout working in Moscow. In June 1956, Pasternak signed a contract with the publisher, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, who would resist all efforts by the Kremlin and the Italian Communist Party to suppress the book.

In November 1957, an Italian-language edition of “Doctor Zhivago” was released.

CIA saw a weapon

In Washington, Soviet experts quickly saw why Moscow loathed “Doctor Zhivago.”

In a memo in July 1958, John Maury, the Soviet Russia Division chief, wrote that the book was a clear threat to the worldview the Kremlin was determined to present.

“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,” he wrote.

In an internal memo shortly after the appearance of the novel in Italy, CIA staff members recommended that “Doctor Zhivago” “be published in a maximum number of foreign editions, for maximum free world distribution and acclaim and consideration for such honor as the Nobel prize.”

While the CIA hoped Pasternak's novel would draw global attention, including from the Swedish Academy, there was no indication that the agency's motive for printing a Russian-language edition was to help Pasternak win the prize, something that has been a matter of speculation for some decades.



Giant stars hanging over broad promenades added a bright touch to the Brussels Universal and International Exposition in 1958. (Associated Press)



Prince Rainier III of Monaco, holding his glasses and looking skyward, and Princess Grace, with a bouquet, at the Vatican pavilion at the Brussels exposition. (Associated Press)

As its main target for distribution, the agency selected the first postwar world's fair, the 1958 Brussels Universal and International Exposition. Forty-three nations were participating at the 500-acre site just northwest of central Brussels.

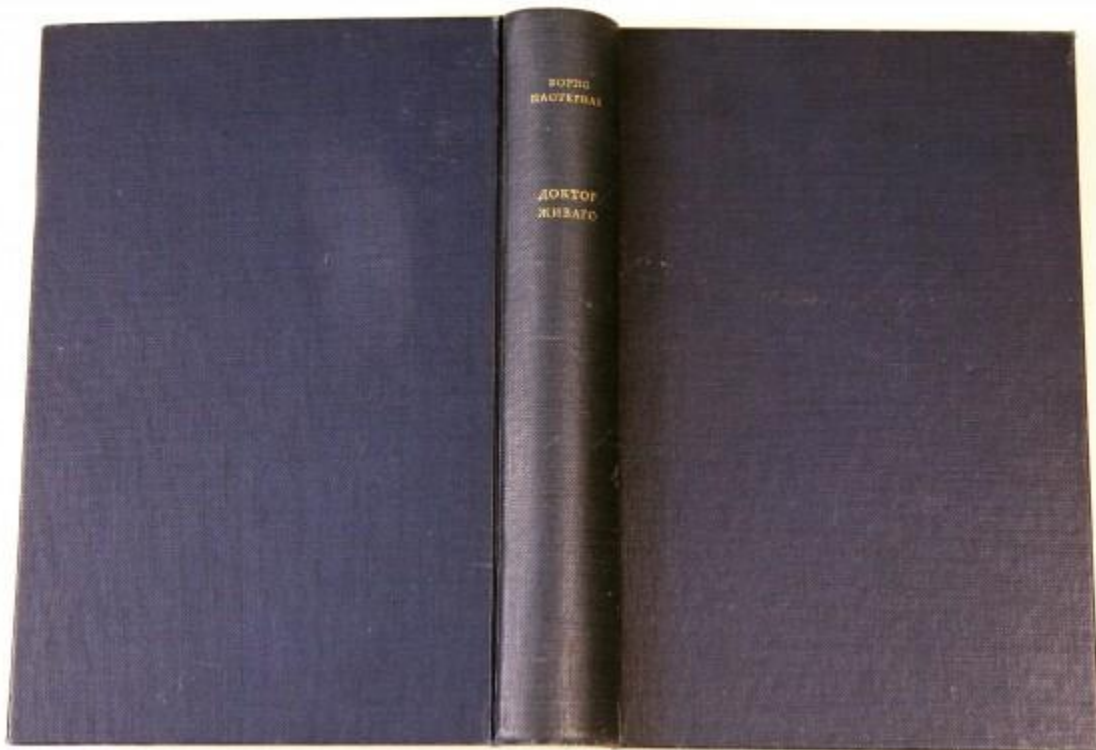
Both the United States and the Soviet Union had built huge pavilions to showcase their competing ways of life. What was especially interesting to the CIA: The fair offered one of those

rare occasions when large numbers of Soviet citizens traveled to an event in the West. Belgium had issued 16,000 visas to Soviet visitors.

After first attempting to arrange a secret printing of the novel through a small New York publisher, the CIA contacted the Dutch intelligence service, the BVD. Agency officials had been following reports of the possible publication of "Doctor Zhivago" in Russian by an academic publishing house in The Hague and asked whether it would be possible to obtain an early run of copies.

The two intelligence agencies were close. CIA subsidies in 1958 paid for about 50 of the BVD's 691 staff members, and new Dutch employees were trained in Washington. Joop van der Wilden, a BVD officer, was dispatched to the U.S. Embassy at The Hague to discuss the issue with Walter Cini, a CIA officer stationed there, according to interviews with former Dutch intelligence officials.

Cini told him it would be a rush job, but the CIA was willing to provide the manuscript and pay well for a small print run of "Doctor Zhivago." He emphasized that there should be no trace of involvement by the U.S. or any other intelligence agency.



The blue linen cover of the 1958 Russian-language edition of "Doctor Zhivago." (Tim Gressie/Tim Gressie)

In early September 1958, the first Russian-language edition of "Doctor Zhivago" rolled off the printing press, bound in the signature blue linen cover of Mouton Publishers of The Hague.

The books, wrapped in brown paper and dated Sept. 6, were packed into the back of a large American station wagon and taken to Cini's home. Two hundred copies were sent to headquarters in Washington. Most of the remaining books were sent to CIA stations or assets in Western Europe — 200 to Frankfurt, 100 to Berlin, 100 to Munich, 25 to London and 10 to Paris. The largest package, 365 books, was sent to Brussels.

"Doctor Zhivago" could not be handed out at the U.S. pavilion at the world's fair, but the CIA had an ally nearby: the Vatican.

The Vatican pavilion was called Civitas Dei, the City of God, and Russian emigre Catholics had set up a small library "somewhat hidden" behind a curtain just off the pavilion's Chapel of Silence, a place to reflect on the suppression of Christian communities around the world.

There, the CIA-sponsored edition of "Doctor Zhivago" was pressed into the hands of Soviet citizens. Soon the book's blue linen covers were 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.

The CIA was quite pleased with itself. "This phase can be considered completed successfully," read a Sept. 10, 1958, memo.

In the Soviet Union, meanwhile, word of the novel's appearance quickly reached Pasternak. That month, he wrote to a friend in Paris, "Is it true that Doctor Zhivago appeared in the original? It seems that visitors to the exhibition in Brussels have seen it."



Children view a statue of Pope Pius XII at the Vatican pavilion at the world's fair in Brussels. (Associated Press)

Contractual problems

There was only one problem: The CIA had anticipated that the Dutch publisher would sign a contract with Feltrinelli, Pasternak's Milan publisher, and that the books handed out in Brussels would be seen as part of that print run.

The contract was never signed, and the Russian-language edition printed in The Hague was illegal. The Italian publisher, who held the rights to "Doctor Zhivago," was furious when he learned about the distribution of the novel in Brussels. The furor sparked press interest and rumors, never confirmed, of involvement by the CIA.

The spies in Washington watched the coverage with some dismay, and on Nov. 15, 1958, the CIA was first linked to the printing by the National Review Bulletin, a newsletter supplement for subscribers to the National Review, the conservative magazine founded by William F. Buckley Jr.

A writer using the pseudonym Quincy observed with approval that copies of “Doctor Zhivago” had been quietly shipped to the Vatican pavilion in Brussels: “That quaint workshop of amateur subversion, the Central Intelligence Agency, may be exorbitantly expensive but from time to time it produces some noteworthy goodies. This summer, for instance, [the] CIA forgot its feud with some of our allies and turned on our enemies — and mirabile dictu, succeeded most nobly. . . . In Moscow these books were passed from hand to hand as avidly as a copy of Fanny Hill in a college dormitory.”

The CIA concluded that the printing was, in the end, “fully worth trouble in view obvious effect on Soviets,” according to a Nov. 5, 1958, cable sent by Dulles, the director. The agency’s efforts, after all, had been re-energized by the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Pasternak the previous month.

The Kremlin treated the award as an anti-Soviet provocation, vilified the author, and forced Pasternak to turn it down.

The CIA provided elaborate guidelines for its officers on how to encourage Western tourists to talk about literature and “Doctor Zhivago” with Soviet citizens they might meet.

“We feel that Dr. Zhivago is an excellent springboard for conversations with Soviets on the general theme of ‘Communism versus Freedom of Expression,’ ” Maury wrote in a memo in April 1959. “Travelers should be prepared to discuss with their Soviet contacts not only the basic theme of the book itself — a cry for the freedom and dignity of the individual — but also the plight of the individual in the communist society.”



The miniature paperback edition of “Doctor Zhivago” that the CIA printed at its headquarters in 1959. (Courtesy of the CIA)

Clandestine edition

Prompted by the attacks on Pasternak in Moscow and the international publicity surrounding the campaign to demonize him, the CIA’s Soviet Russia Division began to firm up plans for a miniature paperback edition. In a memo to the acting deputy director for plans, the chief of the division, Maury, said he believed there was “tremendous demand on the part of students and intellectuals to obtain copies of this book.”

Officials at the agency reviewed all the difficulties with the Mouton edition published in the Netherlands and argued against any outside involvement in a new printing. “In view of the security, legal and technical problems involved, it is recommended that a black miniature edition of Dr. Zhivago be published at headquarters using the first Feltrinelli text and attributing it to a fictitious publisher.”

The agency already had its own press in Washington to print miniature books, and over the course of the Cold War it had printed a small library of literature — each book designed to fit “inside a man’s suit or trouser pocket.”

By July 1959, at least 9,000 copies of a miniature edition of "Doctor Zhivago" had been printed "in a one and two volume series," the latter presumably to make it not so thick and easier to split up and hide. The CIA attempted to create the illusion that this edition of the novel was published in Paris by a fictitious entity, the Société d'Édition et d'Impression Mondiale. A Russian emigre group also claimed it was behind the publication.

CIA records state that the miniature books were passed out by "agents who [had] contact with Soviet tourists and officials in the West." Two thousand copies of this edition were also set aside for dissemination to Soviet and Eastern European students at the 1959 World Festival of Youth and Students for Peace and Friendship, which was to be held in Vienna.

There was a significant effort to distribute books in Vienna — about 30,000 in 14 languages, including "1984," "Animal Farm," "The God That Failed" and "Doctor Zhivago." Apart from a Russian edition, plans also called for "Doctor Zhivago" to be distributed in Polish, German, Czech, Hungarian and Chinese at the festival.

The New York Times reported that some members of the Soviet delegation to the Vienna festival "evinced a great curiosity about Mr. Pasternak's novel, which is available here." Occasionally it was not only available, but unavoidable. When a Soviet convoy of buses arrived in sweltering Vienna, crowds of Russian emigres swarmed them and tossed copies of the CIA's miniature edition through the open windows.

On another occasion, a Soviet visitor to the youth festival recalled returning to his bus and finding the cabin covered with pocket editions of "Doctor Zhivago."

"None of us, of course, had read the book but we feared it," he wrote in an article many years later.

Soviet students were watched by the KGB, who fooled no one when these intelligence operatives described themselves as "researchers" at the festival. The Soviet "researchers" proved more tolerant than might have been expected.

"Take it, read it," they said, "but by no means bring it home."

Adapted from "The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA and the Battle Over a Forbidden Book," by Peter Finn and Petra Couvée. Couvée is a writer and translator who teaches at Saint Petersburg State University in Russia.