

Syllabus for Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and the Politics of Russian Literary Dissent

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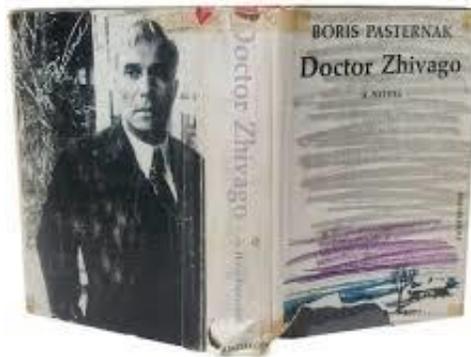
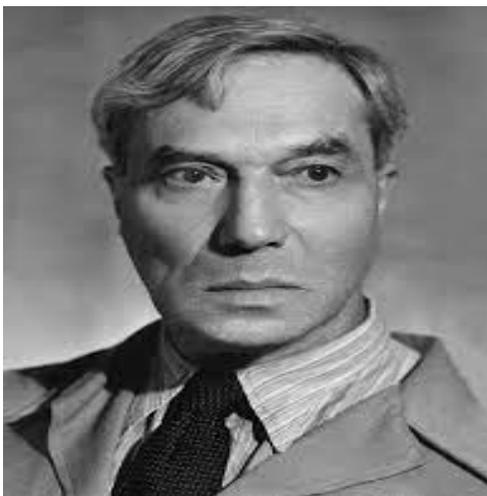
The following should give you a good idea of where each of our meetings will be heading.

There are two translations into English of *Dr. Zhivago*: an older one translated by Max Hayward and Manya Harari (Random House, 1986), and the newer one translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Vintage, 2011). I will be working from the older translation as I prefer it, but I will be referring to the P&V corresponding page numbers as well.

The Zhivago Affair by Finn and Couvee is not required but is a fascinating and detailed study of how and why Pasternak's novel ended up in CIA hands and became a pawn in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the U.S. I will be dipping in and out of it in my discussions of the novel.

I have been asked by several of you how many pages you should be reading a week. Because our class meets for only six weeks, I have had to condense material that would ordinarily take ten weeks to cover. This means that I will be skipping around the novel. Try and read as much as you can before the class begins. For my part, I will try not to get too ahead of you all. Those of you who can't finish the novel before class starts, 100 pages per week should be good.

Each week I will post some ideas to think about for the following week and, upon occasion, some pages from the novel to look at closely.



Week 1: I will be talking today about Pasternak himself and what it meant to be a writer during his time. We will look at what was demanded of so-called official, government sanctioned literature during the time Pasternak came of age as a writer and what non-official literary life

looked like. The novel was written during the Thaw period under Khrushchev and yet Pasternak could not get it published. Why? If this novel reminds you somewhat of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, you are right. This is very much a philosophical novel in the tradition of Tolstoy.

Week II:

We will dive directly into the novel today. Pasternak—a poet—wrote only one novel in his lifetime, *Dr. Zhivago*. Its prose in Russian is the prose of a poet. From the very first page we will see even in English how Pasternak's prose is inflected by his poetic universe. We will be looking at the genesis of Zhivago's philosophy as both doctor and poet, how Pasternak and his hero greeted the Revolution, and the role that Christianity played in Pasternak's literary universe. Can one greet the revolution and yet be profoundly Christian in one's outlook?

Week III

The character of Zhivago. Who is he and what does he believe? Along with Zhivago I will be talking today about private life and the search for the real Russia. Both are key to understanding the novel, and both are key to understanding what is going on in Putin's Russia today. This will lead us into a discussion of why this novel became so dangerous to the authorities. We will also look today at how Tonia, Lara, Evgraf, and Pasha/Strelnikov function in the novel.

Week IV The poetry of Zhivago. The entire novel is a prelude to the poems. Philosophically they are central to what Pasternak was trying to do. We will be moving between the poems and the novel as we put together the philosophical crux of the novel.

Week V Surviving the times in which we live. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 Kremlinologists and historians have asked, "what went wrong?" Was the Soviet Union doomed to fail or was it something else that spelled its end? We will look today at what Zhivago and Pasternak saw as its failure even as early as the 20s and 30s. We will discuss how one survives regimes that attempt to destroy us. I will also take some time today to share with you the joys and headaches of comparing the two translations of *Zhivago*. Even if you don't know Russian, you know enough of the novel now to have a good sense of what word choice might be appropriate to a given situation. Let's see what we come up with.

Week V1 The CIA, an Italian publisher, and the Kremlin. How the CIA and Zhivago became part of the same story. The Nobel prize dilemma and Pasternak's last days.