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DOCTOR ZHIVAGO: RUSSIAN LITERATURE AS A TOOL OF AMERICAN PROPAGANDA DURING THE COLD WAR AND THE ROLE OF THE VATICAN AND FELTRINELLI

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Summary

The goal of my contribution is to underline the role of the novel *Doctor Zhivago* by the Russian author Boris Pasternak during the Cold War. Particularly, I would like to point out how the novel and the Nobel Prize given to its author were used by the US intelligence as a “soft power” weapon against Soviet Union, with the collaboration of two Italians: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli and The Vatican.

Key Words: Doctor Zhivago, Pasternak, Nobel Prize, Feltrinelli, Vatican, CIA, US, URSS, Cold War, Soft power.

During the second term of Eisenhower as President of the US, *Doctor Zhivago*, a novel focused on 1917 Russian Revolution and that was forbidden in the USSR, was used by the CIA to fight the Soviet enemy. The operation, whose result was the assignation of the Nobel Prize to Pasternak, was possible thanks both to the collaboration of the Italian intellectual and publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, who first published Pasternak’s masterpiece in Europe, when it had not yet been released in the Soviet Union, and to the deliberate assistance of the Vatican.^[1]

CIA’s *Doctor Zhivago* project became part of a wider effort by the agency to introduce forbidden novels into the Eastern bloc countries, including books by George Orwell, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov and Ernest Hemingway, to fight the Russian counterpart through literature, seen

as a soft power weapon to destabilize internal societies in the Soviet Bloc.^[2]

The term “soft power” means the ability of a political power to persuade, convince, attract and co-opt, through intangible resources such as “culture, values and the institutions of politics.” The term was coined in the early Nineties by Joseph S. Nye, Jr., who considered the world as a complex mechanism of interdependencies (soft power), through which the United States could improve its international image and strengthen its power.^[3]

The opposite of “soft power” is “hard power”, the traditional way to influence and rule with an active and physical interference.

CIA files, that have been recently declassified and then published in the recent book *The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA, and the Battle Over a Forbidden Book*, highlight the great potential of the novel against Communist propaganda, according to CIA purposes.^[4] The book written by Peter Finn and Petra Couvée underlines the use of the Nobel Prize Boris Pasternak by US Intelligence to spread a negative image of the Russian Revolution. Starting from the reading of the book we could ask what was in particular the role of Italian publisher Feltrinelli and of the Vatican in the CIA operation. If in the book by Finn and Couvée the role of Feltrinelli is pointed out several time, it is not possible to say the same for the role played by the Vatican, that is, instead, of a crucial importance.

Due to this unjustified absence of the Vatican in the above mentioned contribution, my attention will firstly focus on Feltrinelli and then, in a wider way, on the Vatican, as essential components of the plan designed by CIA.

In addition to *The Zhivago Affair*, another book, *The novel* (2007)^[5] by the Russian researcher Ivan Tolstoy, deserves to be mentioned. In this essay, differently from Finn and Couvée, Tolstoy highlights not only the role of the Americans but also of the British intelligence in the plan of CIA who led the Russian writer to win the Nobel Prize for his novel *Doctor Zhivago* in 1958.^[6]

My attention, then, will focus on the double role played by Giangiacomo Feltrinelli and the Vatican, that in the game of the Cold War belonged to the two opposing blocs. While Feltrinelli was a member of the Italian Communist Party, the Vatican was a firm ally of the United States of America. However, Feltrinelli and the Vatican can be considered as the two extreme poles, the beginning of the plan and almost its ending, in which CIA operated in order to make Pasternak a Nobel Laureate. Feltrinelli unconsciously helped CIA to get in touch with Pasternak, while the Vatican disseminated and distributed the book among Russian Catholics.^[7]

It is interesting now to spend a few words on Feltrinelli's figure as an intellectual. Giangiacomo Feltrinelli was not only an engaged party member, but he was a very rich man, a young multimillionaire from an old Italian business dynasty.^[8] His field of expertise as a businessman was publishing, specializing his company in contemporary literature, especially from the Soviet Union. His talent-scout in Moscow, Sergio D'Angelo, an Italian Communist who used to work in that period at “Radio Mosca”, read a brief cultural article in a magazine, that announced the imminent publication of the first novel by the Russian poet Boris Pasternak: *Doctor Zhivago*.^[9]

In *The Zhivago Affair*, Finn and Couvée start their chronicles of the events exactly from D'Angelo's discovery of the book written by the future Nobel Prize, as the prologue of the real affair.^[10] Thanks to Valden Vlademirsky, a colleague from “Radio Moscow”, D'Angelo fails to meet Pasternak in his home in Peredelkino, a colony of Russian writers and poets, established by Maksim Gorki during the period of Stalin, to control the intellectual class.^[11] Pasternak was surely aware of the dangers that he could get in giving the novel to the Italian literary agent, since the book had not been published yet in the Soviet Union. The publication in the USSR, indeed, took place only after 1989.^[12]

It is important to understand now the reason why Pasternak's masterpiece was considered so important both for the Soviet Union and the US.^[13] The novel contained a strong humanistic message that highlighted the importance of individuality and the damage created by the collectivization promoted by the Russian Revolution. And then, would definitely put under a negative light the Revolution of the Bolsheviks in which the same Khrushchev actively participated.^[14]

Despite the recommendations of D'Angelo to safeguard Pasternak, once it arrived in the hands of Feltrinelli the book was translated and published in 1957. There is now an important and essential question: if, as said above, Feltrinelli was an active member of the Italian Communist party, how was it possible that he decided to publish a book that was clearly against the Soviet regime and the very idea of Soviet Revolution? We have to consider some elements. 1957 is a crucial year in the history of international communism. The invasion of Budapest in 1956 had created divisions within the Communist bloc between those who agreed with the intervention of the Red Army in Hungary and others who saw this invasion as the end of the Communist ideals. Iconic was, for example, the French philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre who cut his membership card to the International.^[15] The Italian Communist Party was at that time the largest Communist party in the world outside the Soviet bloc. Its secretary Palmiro Togliatti was very close to the USSR, and due to this reason he did not take distance from the Soviet armed intervention against Imre Nagy, the Hungarian politician who tried to emancipate Hungary from Moscow. But, at the same time, many other members of the Italian party began to break their relations with the CPUS. Among these intellectuals there was also Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, who probably wanted to show that he could be a communist without being dependent on the Soviet communism through the publication of the novel by Pasternak.^[16]

The publication of *Doctor Zhivago* by Feltrinelli offers the opportunity to the CIA to hatch the plot that brought Boris Pasternak to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.^[17] Pasternak's message, as it was said before, focused on the respect of the human being and the right to have a private life. According to the American Intelligence, it posed an essential challenge to the ethics of the individual sacrifice in the Soviet communist system.

The novel tells the partly autobiographical story of a Russian doctor and poet, Yuri Zhivago, during the turbulent decades before, during and after the 1917 revolution. He is already married when he falls in love with another woman, Lara - who is married herself, to a committed Bolshevik - and the plot follows the progress of their doomed relationship, as their lives are caught up in the monumental events of the time.

Shifting our attention on CIA *Doctor Zhivago* plan, we follow the historical events as they can be read in the official documents,^[18] in the book by Peter Finn and Petra Couvée, who for years have dealt with the case, and in the book by Ivan Tolstoy.

The idea of the CIA was not only the assignment of the Nobel Prize to Pasternak, but also the distribution of the novel among Russians. First of all, it is important to underline that, in order to win a Nobel, the manuscript of a candidate writer should be published in its original language. In this particularly case, CIA was able to catch of the forbidden manuscript in its original Cyrillic version, in a flight. As reported by Tolstoy, the plane was forced to stop in Malta for few hours, due to fictional and fake technical controls and CIA had the chance to take photos of each pictures.^[19] The novel was then published, as pictures, without any editing work, just in time for the assignment of the Nobel that year.^[20]

At this point, it is important the role of the Vatican, that is surprisingly not so much underlined in an accurate book such as the one by Finn and Couvée. CIA, indeed, decided to distribute the book during the Brussels Universal and International Exhibition in 1958: the copies were printed in the Russian version, for the first time, by the Dutch BVD and the copies were

distributed to the Soviet visitors at the *Civitas Dei* pavilion, owned by the Vatican authorities, a great ally of the Americans.^[21] Specifically, just behind the Vatican pavilion, hidden by a curtain, CIA and a group of Russian emigrants of Catholic ancestors prepared a sort of clandestine bookshop for the Russian-speaking visitors and completely dedicated to *Doctor Zhivago* that found in this “alternative” and secret pavilion its main center of distribution and dissemination.^[22] It was literally there the place where the Russian version of Pasternak’s book was given directly to Soviet citizens, very often also using a particular “style” of selling or distributing. In many occasions, the book was cut in single pages hidden in the jacket of the interested Soviet visitors.^[23]

The results of the operation was double: first of all, it permitted to laureate Pasternak as Nobel Prize; secondly, it allowed the indirect distribution of the book also in the Soviet Union where its publication was forbidden by the Communist authorities.^[24] Pasternak achieved the Nobel Prize for Literature in October 1958, but he was forced by the Soviet authorities into renouncing it. Though he was vilified in the Soviet press, from then on, thousands of people turned out for his funeral when he died at the age of Seventy, two years later.^[25]

After seven years, the rudeness of the Nobel falls with the awarding of the Prize to the author of the novel “The Quiet Don”, Michail Aleksandrovič Šolochov, a writer seen by the Soviet leadership as an organic intellectual.^[26]

Doctor Zhivago sold millions of copies worldwide, and in 1965 an Oscar-winning film version was released. But it was not published in the Soviet Union until 1989, during the *perestroika* reforms developed by Mikhail Gorbachev. The USSR collapsed two years later. Probably the dissemination of the work of Pasternak helped create a breach in the Soviet bloc that ultimately led to the implosion of its system in 1989.

^[1]Barghoorn F.C., “The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy”, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1960, 24.

^[2]Reisch A. A., “Hot Books in the Cold War: The CIA-Funded Secret Western Book Distribution Program Behind the Iron Curtain”, Central European University Press, Budapest, 2013, 74.

^[3]Nye J., “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics”, Public Affairs, New York, 2004, 11.

^[4]Finn P., Couvée P., “The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA, and the Battle Over a Forbidden Book”, Pantheon Books, New York, 2014.

^[5]Carey J., “The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA, and the Battle over a Forbidden Book by Peter Finn and Petra Couvée”, «The Sunday Times», 22 June 2014, 5.

^[6]Saunders F.S., “The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters”, The New Press, New York, 2001, 37.

[7]Hixson W. L., “Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War”, St. Martin’s Griffin, New York, 1998, 18.

[8]Feltrinelli C., “Feltrinelli: A Story of Riches, Revolution and Violent Death”, Harcourt, New York, 36.

[9]Pasternak B., “Doctor Zhivago”, Pantheon Books, New York, 2001, 1958.

[10]D’Angelo S., “Delo Pasternaka: Vospominaniya Ochevidtsa”, Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, Moscow, 2007, 25.

[11] Kemp-Walsh A., “Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia 1928-39”, Macmillan, London, 1991, 49.

[12]Berghahn V. R., “America and the Intellectual Cold War in Europe”, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2001, 63.

[13]Mancosu P., “Inside the Zhivago Storm: The Editorial Adventures of Pasternak’s Masterpiece”, Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Milan, 2013, 37.

[14]Garrand J., Garrand C., “Inside the Soviet Writer’s Union”, The Free Press, New York, 1990, 70-90.

[15]De Grand A., “The Italian Left in the Twentieth Century: A History of the Socialist and Communist Parties”, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989, 58.

[16]Urban J. B., “Moscow and the Italian Communist Party: From Togliatti to Berlinguer”, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1986.

[17]Caute D., “Politics and the Novel During the Cold War”, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, 2010, 71.

[18]Cf. *Literature in the Ussr*, General Records of the Department of State, 1955-1959, in The National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

Cf. *Censorship in the Ussr*, General Records of the Department of State, 1955-1959, in The National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

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Cf. *Doctor Zhivago manuscript*, Biblioteca Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Milano.

Cf. *Pasternak-Feltrinelli correspondance*, Biblioteca Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Milano.

[19]Franceschini E., “Missione dottor Zhivago, un Nobel voluto dalla Cia”, «Repubblica.it», 25 gennaio 2007.

[20]Cf. Finn and Couvéé, “The Zhivago Affair”, op. cit., 42.

[21]Masey J., Conway L. M., “Cold War Confrontation: U.S. Exhibitions and Their Role in the Cultural Cold War”, Lars Müller Publishers, Zurich, 2008, 34-71.

[22] PluvingeG., “Expo 58: Between Utopia and Reality”, Lannoo, Tielt, Belgium 2008.

[23]Ibid., 41.

[24]Conquest R., “Courage of Genius: The Pasternak Affair”, Collins and Harvill Press, London, 1961, 74.

[25]Finn and Couvée, op. cit., 227-254.

[26]Šolochov M. A., “And Quiet Flows the Don”, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1934.

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