

The Columbus Dispatch

Women's roles, 'Doctor Zhivago' novel central to Cold War caper 'The Secrets We Kept'

By Nancy Gilson

At the height of the Cold War — when Americans fumed at the success of the Russian satellite Sputnik and, in general, sought ways to discredit the Communist way of life — a group of young women labored quietly in the typing pool at the Central Intelligence Agency.

They were taken for granted and often referred to by sexist nicknames or told to fetch coffee but in Lara Prescott's story, they were integral to a scheme that would embarrass the Soviets and further the ideals of democracy: the publication and distribution of Boris Pasternak's banned masterpiece, "Doctor Zhivago," in his home country.

In her debut novel, Prescott (her parents named her for Zhivago's muse and lover) weaves together real-life characters, including Pasternak and his mistress, with fictional ladies of the typing pool who were called upon to perform espionage duties. She has achieved a page-turner that is at once a spy thriller, historical fiction and heartfelt romance.

The novel alternates smoothly between sections labeled "East" and "West," with the former focusing on Pasternak and his lover/muse Olga Ivinskaya, the inspiration for Lara in "Doctor Zhivago," and the latter following the escapades of the typists, especially two of them, both fictional.

Sally Forrester is a brassy redhead who has been elevated from the secretarial pool to perform clandestine duties as a spy. Irina Drozdova is the daughter of a Russian immigrant who begins as a typist but clearly, because of her heritage and ability to blend into the background, is perfect for covert activities.

Into the mix, Prescott inserts real figures involved in the Zhivago project, including CIA leadership such as the director, Allen Dulles, and the publisher responsible for the book's first publication in Italian, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli.

She explains why the Soviets so vehemently suppressed Pasternak's novel and why the Americans were so keen to have it read: "Back then we believed books could be weapons — that literature could change the course of history ... The (Agency's) goal: to emphasize how the Soviet system did not allow free thought — how the Red State hindered, censored, and persecuted even its finest artists. The tactic: to get cultural materials into the hands of Soviet citizens by any means."

The critical roles played by the women in the typing pool to advance the project, as well as the hardships endured by Olga — who was an important poet and writer herself and was sent to the Gulag for her association with Pasternak — combine to give "The Secrets We Kept" a feminist theme.

Prescott's title, of course, works on various levels, including the real piece of history at the novel's core. Most readers, if they haven't read "Doctor Zhivago," likely have seen the movie but might be unaware of the machinations that brought the story to worldwide attention.

"The Secrets We Kept" is a way to learn that history and enjoy a thumping good story.