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BOOKS

## Reimagining the True-Life Intrigue Behind ‘Doctor Zhivago’

*In ‘The Secrets We Kept,’ first-time novelist Lara Prescott uses fiction to fill in the blanks in real-life events—inspired by a trove of CIA documents*

By Caryn James  
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To most people, “Doctor Zhivago” means Julie Christie as Lara and Omar Sharif as Yuri in the swoonily romantic 1965 film. Fewer people know the true story of passion, espionage and propaganda behind the publication of the Boris Pasternak novel on which the movie is based.

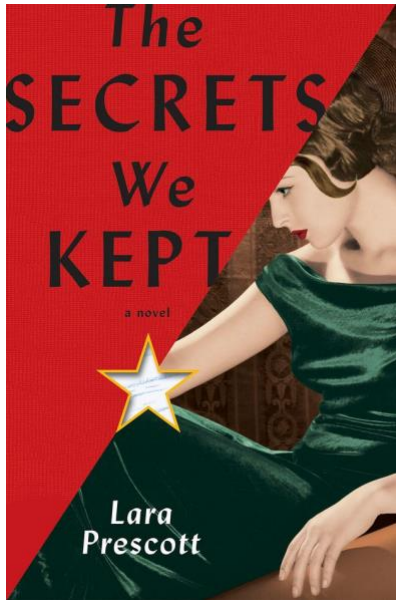
The tale is reimagined in “The Secrets We Kept,” in which first-time novelist Lara Prescott uses fiction to fill in the blanks in the real-life events. Inspired by a trove of CIA documents about the original novel’s publication, Ms. Prescott crafts a cloak-and-dagger story that moves between Pasternak and his lover, Olga Ivinskaya, and undercover female CIA agents helping to smuggle the book into the Soviet Union in a propaganda campaign.

The novel comes out in the U.S. on Sept. 3. Knopf paid close to \$2 million to publish it, according to a person familiar with the deal, and the book has been sold in 30 countries. The production company The Ink Factory has bought the film rights.

The spark for Ms. Prescott’s novel came after she learned about declassified CIA documents that formed the basis of a 2014 nonfiction book called “The Zhivago Affair” by Peter Finn and Petra Couvée. Earlier histories had written that in the 1950s, Ivinskaya tried fruitlessly to get the Soviet authorities to allow publication of “Zhivago,” which they considered subversive. But the CIA documents reveal that the agency printed and smuggled it into the U.S.S.R., surreptitiously handing copies to Soviet tourists visiting the Vatican Pavilion at the Brussels World’s Fair.



‘Doctor Zhivago,’ the 1965 epic romance starring Julie Christie as Lara and Omar Sharif as Yuri, was based on the Boris Pasternak novel. PHOTO: EVERETT COLLECTION



Ms. Prescott, a 37-year-old former political consultant for candidates including Rahm Emanuel, read the CIA documents, which have been posted online. “Working in political campaigns inspired my interest in how people use words and attempt to change the hearts and minds of citizens,” Ms. Prescott says. “The CIA was playing this very long game through soft propaganda,” hoping that getting “Zhivago” into Russian readers’ hands and exposing Soviet censorship might “spark future dissent,” she says.

She had long been captivated by the Zhivago story, watching the movie and reading the novel countless times growing up in Greensburg, Pa. Her movie-loving parents, an internist and office manager, even named her after Lara. “My mom is certainly taking credit. She’s like, ‘It’s fate,’” Ms. Prescott says of her current Zhivago-related success. “I don’t know about that, but there was something about planting that seed.”

Much of the book is told from women’s perspectives, with Olga narrating her own story. Pasternak created an idealized Lara, inspired by Olga, but Ms. Prescott wanted to create a flawed, believable character.

“With the movie, you’re thinking of this pure soul, this beautiful woman, Julie Christie,” Ms. Prescott says. In Pasternak’s novel, Lara is “just too good for this world. But looking at a muse from a male perspective is very different than trying to think of how it was to be that woman.”



“Secrets” moves back and forth between sections labeled East and West. On one side are Boris and especially Olga, whose story includes her forced march to the Gulag and years in prison. In the West are two invented female agents, and a group of all-seeing women CIA typists—sparked by Ms. Prescott’s reading of the agency documents. “I was wondering who typed these documents, who knows these secrets behind the redactions?” she says.

The characters in the East are historical, and Ms. Prescott says she mostly adhered to facts in telling the story of Ivinskaya and Pasternak, whose love affair was the model for Lara and Yuri’s in “Zhivago.” Using Ivinskaya’s autobiography, Pasternak’s letters and other historical sources, “I tried to use their own words as much as possible,” Ms. Prescott says, although she imagines more intimate scenes.

The major characters in the West are all invented. Sally is a femme fatale who began working with the wartime OSS, a predecessor to the CIA. Irina, born in the U.S. to Russian parents, disguises herself as a nun to hand out copies of “Zhivago” in Brussels. The characters were “inspired by real life spies, or the roles that women might have filled during that time,” Ms. Prescott says.

First-time novelist Lara Prescott tells much of ‘The Secrets We Kept’ from women’s perspectives. PHOTO: TREVOR PAULHUS

Using books as political weapons might seem out-of-touch today, but Ms. Prescott sees a connection to the present. “Words are so powerful, even if it’s not books. Tweets and social media are now the tools of propaganda throughout the world,” she says. “The delivery might have changed, but it’s the same attempt to change people’s minds.”