THE SPY LOVE

Boris Pasternak adored the beauty who became his mistress and the muse for Doctor Zhivago. Yet now some believe she was a KGB informer who was under orders to destroy his career. Was Russia's greatest post-war writer betrayed by a calculating lover? Report by Christine Toomey. Pictures: Jeremy Nicholl

Main picture: Olga Ivinskaya in 1947, at the height of her beauty. Left: at Pasternak's funeral in 1960, and (right) KGB archive images. Ivinskaya was imprisoned twice as a result of the liaison

Olga Ivinskaya's grave lies neglected on a shady slope of the cemetery at Peredelkino, formerly a writers' colony on the outskirts of Moscow. Lost among the tumble-down tombs, her final resting place lies far from that of her lover, Boris Pasternak, the great Russian writer, whose muse she was during his most creative years.

Pasternak is buried beside his second wife, Zinaida Nikolayevna, on a hill top on the far side of the cemetery. His grave, marked by a marble headstone engraved with his distinctive profile, is permanently bedecked with flowers left by devotees.

Pasternak and his muse remain in death much as they were in life: separated but inextricably entwined. At the height of their affair, Ivinskaya rented a small dacha across the lake from Pasternak's large family house in Peredelkino. Early each morning, neighbours would see his stooping frame striding across a bridge over Lake Izmalkovo to his lover's "living sorcery of hot embraces".

This passion inspired the writer's best-known works. It was Ivinskaya who was the model for Lara, the heroine of his much-admired novel Doctor Zhivago. It was also Pasternak's love of Ivinskaya that many believe deterred the writer from accepting the Nobel prize for literature awarded him in 1958. To accept the prize for a book banned in the USSR as anti-Soviet propaganda would, he believed, have forced him into exile and left Ivinskaya in danger at the hands of a ruthless regime.

She too paid a price for the liaison. Ostracised by some within polite society as an "adventuress" and "gold-digging whore", she was twice banished to remote gulags. Such devotion and sacrifice made theirs one of the century's most celebrated love affairs.

So it came as a shock when recent allegations surfaced claiming that Ivinskaya was a KGB informer who betrayed Pasternak by colluding with the Soviet authorities to thwart her lover's literary ambitions.

The proof, it was claimed, was damning extracts from a letter Ivinskaya wrote to Nikita Khrushchev, then Soviet leader, while she was imprisoned for the second time in a Siberian labour camp, in 1961. The letter, leaked to the popular Moscow daily newspaper Moskovsky Komsomolets and published late last year, was written by Ivinskaya within months of Pasternak's death. In it she begs for clemency on the grounds that she co-operated with the "state's higher authorities" and did everything in her power to "neutralise" the writer's career while he was alive.

How could such cold and calculating words have been written by a woman in love, Pasternak's supporters demanded to know. Was their love affair a sham? Or was

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the letter leaked, as Ivinskaya's sympathisers contend, as part of a renewed attempt to discredit her?

Throughout her life, Ivinskaya inspired feelings of devotion and jealousy. She was born in the town of Tambov, southeast of Moscow, in 1912, the daughter of a schoolteacher, and was regarded as an outstanding beauty. Her first husband, by whom she had a daughter, Irina, committed suicide in desperation at the attentions of other men that she attracted. She then married his rival, by whom she had a son, Dimitri, but was widowed during the second world war a few years later.

Ivinskaya was a 34-year-old single mother of two when Pasternak first met her in the autumn of 1946. A graduate of literature from Moscow University, she was working at the monthly literary magazine Novy Mir. Pasternak, by then 56, also had two children from two marriages and was still married to his second wife, Zinaida. He was an established and well-loved poet but had virtually abandoned writing and was making his living as a translator. Pasternak had been born into the liberal intelligentsia – his father was a distinguished painter and his mother a concert pianist – and was an early supporter of the Bolshevik revolution. But as Stalin's terror unfolded in the 1930s, he refused to become a sycophant. Instead he planned an epic novel, largely autobiographical, telling the story of one individual unable to come to terms with the revolution.

They met when he was delivering a translated manuscript to the offices of Novy Mir. Both later described the attraction as immediate and profound. In her 1972 autobiography, A Captive of Time, Ivinskaya said, "it was stunning, a miracle... like talking with God".

To the horror of his family and friends and the disapproval of Ivinskaya's mother, the two embarked on an affair that was to last until the poet died. It soon became public knowledge, and after Ivinskaya fell out with her employers at Novy Mir, Pasternak suggested that she become a translator of poetry like him and work as his literary assistant.

Within months of their first meeting, Pasternak declared he had found the model for his heroine. He saw Ivinskaya as a strong but intensely feminine woman who, because of the tragedies she had suffered, symbolised the bright spirit of a victimised Russian people. While continuing to live with his wife, he spent much of each day working alongside Ivinskaya, translating and finally beginning work on Doctor Zhivago.

The relationship soon attracted the attention of the authorities. Stalin had been looking for some time for a way to punish Pasternak for his refusal to sign state condemnations of other writers and to sanction the regime by continuing to work as a high-profile poet. In October 1949 Ivinskaya was arrested, taken to the infamous Lubyanka, KGB headquarters, and told, "It will take six to eight months for us to establish whether you have done anything wrong or not."

At first, Ivinskaya was kept in solitary confinement and subjected to lengthy interrogations about Pasternak. She was then put with 14 other women in a cell so brightly lit that they had to bandage their eyes at night to sleep. After her arrest she found she was pregnant with Pasternak's child. After begging to be allowed to see her lover, she was finally told a meeting had been arranged.

"Trembling with excitement", as she described later, she was led along the Lubyanka's labyrinthine corridors, pushed into a darkened room and a metal door was slammed behind her. "When my eyes got used to the gloom, I could make out a whitewashed floor with pools of water, tables with zinc tops and on them the outlines of motionless bodies covered by sheets of grey tarpaulin," Ivinskaya wrote. "There was the unmistakable sweetish smell of a morgue."

Her interrogators later claimed they had led her to the morgue "by mistake". Soon after she returned to her cell, she gave birth to a stillborn child six or seven ➠

JEREMY NICHOLL/MATRIX/KATZ

months old. While Pasternak hammered on the doors of the Lubyanka and demanded to be given his child, she was convicted of "anti-Soviet agitation" and sentenced to five years' forced labour in a gulag in Mordovia.

During the years Ivinskaya was imprisoned, Pasternak wrote to her regularly and helped look after her young children. By the time she was released in 1953, in an amnesty following Stalin's death, he had completed much of the work on Doctor Zhivago. Despite pleas from his wife not to resume the affair, after her release from the camp the two were said by the poet and close friend Andrei Voznesensky to have been "even more in love than ever".

It was then that Ivinskaya rented the dacha with her children in Peredelkino. In the years that followed, Pasternak continued to spend the nights and weekends with his wife, the model for Zhivago's dutiful spouse Tonya, who kept up appearances for the sake of their son Leonid. Most days were spent with Ivinskaya.

This arrangement suited Pasternak, but Ivinskaya complained frequently about her unsatisfactory life as a mistress. She none the less spent her days typing and editing Pasternak's manuscripts. It was she who took his work to publishers' offices in Moscow. It was she who established contact with the Italian publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, who eventually smuggled the manuscript of Doctor Zhivago to the West and became the first to publish it in 1957.

The book's critical acclaim intensified the regime's displeasure with Pasternak. Soviet publishers had turned it down because it was "anti-Soviet". When Pasternak became the first Soviet writer to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature, Doctor Zhivago was denounced as "the life story of a malignant petty bourgeois". His right to remain in the Soviet Union was challenged.

At first Pasternak wrote to the Swedish Academy announcing how "infinitely grateful, touched, proud, surprised and overwhelmed" he was to be awarded the prize. He then feared he would be forced into exile, leaving Ivinskaya behind. He sent a telegram to Sweden saying he was unable to accept.

Despite this renunciation, Pasternak was thrown out of the Union of Writers, and his hounding at the hands of the authorities began. His dacha and that of Ivinskaya were bugged. He was spat at in the street and abandoned by all but his staunchest allies in the literary world. At his lowest point he considered committing suicide and asked Ivinskaya to take her life with him.

The stress caused by the harassment took its toll on his health. Weakened by cancer and heart disease, Pasternak died in June 1960. He was 70. At his funeral Ivinskaya tucked flowers in her lover's hands and laid herself over him in a final, wrenching farewell.

In a posthumous act of revenge, Ivinskaya was once again arrested by the Soviet authorities. All her papers and letters and the manuscripts Pasternak had left in her care were seized. At a secret trial she was sentenced to eight years' hard labour in a Siberian labour camp on charges of trying to smuggle foreign royalties from Doctor Zhivago into the Soviet Union. Her daughter, Irina, was arrested with her on related charges.

A high-profile international campaign was waged to secure her release. Irina was set free after two years but Ivinskaya was left to languish for another two years, at first in a "truly fearful camp" in Siberia, and after that at a "bedlam for unpersons" at Potma, in Mordovia.

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It was during the first year of Ivinskaya's detention that she wrote to Khrushchev begging to be released. The letter, dated March 10, 1961, is mostly concerned with refuting the charges of smuggled royalties from Doctor Zhivago. But in certain passages, Ivinskaya says she did her best to prevent the writer from having contact with foreigners: "I was instructed by comrades from our highly placed organisations to prevent meetings between Pasternak and foreign representatives and to replace him at such meetings... My order was very difficult. But I managed to bar a lot of unnecessary meetings. For that I am imprisoned and accused. Yet everything I did was positive and necessary for the party. She went on to assure Khrushchev: "I did everything within my power to neutralise him."

Ivinskaya then writes that she managed to delay publication of Doctor Zhivago in the West by ensuring that she carefully controlled all contacts with the Italian publisher Feltrinelli and his emissary Sergio d'Angelo: "I was given the name of d'Angelo by the Central Committee and through this d'Angelo I postponed the publication of the novel in Italy for one year and a half."

Ivinskaya's plea for clemency was initially rebuffed and her letter was filed away in KGB archives. Under Leonid Brezhnev her sentence was reduced, and she was released from the camp in 1964.

By this time Doctor Zhivago was an international bestseller. Its adaptation for the screen in David Lean's 1965 film, starring Omar Sharif as Zhivago and Julie Christie as Lara, was a huge success. Ivinskaya shared in little of this glory. The book remained banned in the Soviet Union until 1987. In spite of the royalties, a proportion of which she received along with Pasternak's wife and children, her life was a struggle.

Her health had been ruined by the rigours of the camp. Her looks had gone. She turned increasingly to alcohol. Irina emigrated to live in France. So Ivinskaya, left with only her son, Dimitri, to support her, moved into a tiny one-bedroom apartment in Moscow. She began a lengthy court battle in the early 1970s for the return of the letters and papers confiscated by the KGB. After being scrutinised for material that could be used to incriminate her, they had been handed over for storage in Moscow's State Archives for Literature and Art, where they were said to be available for scholarly research, although Ivinskaya disputed that this was true. The documents included the original handwritten manuscript of Doctor Zhivago and Pasternak's last play, The Blind Beauty. There were also 15 poems in his distinctive flowing script and love letters to Ivinskaya.

After several years, some of Pasternak's love letters were finally released to Ivinskaya. To help support herself and her son, she sold some to the Museum of Literature in Tbilisi, Georgia. Despite being formally "rehabilitated" under Mikhail Gorbachev in 1988, she encountered one bureaucratic hurdle after another as she tried to get the rest of the papers back.

In a final act of defiance before her death, she wrote an open letter to Boris Yeltsin in April 1994 about the government's refusal to release the rest of the documents: "The state should be ashamed that the Pasternak archives, which were stolen, are still being kept secret and that former bureaucrats are freely walking our land without being punished, while the victims of the totalitarian regime are being insulted... I am 82 years old. I do not want to leave this life so spat upon and insulted." The following year, in September 1995, she died.

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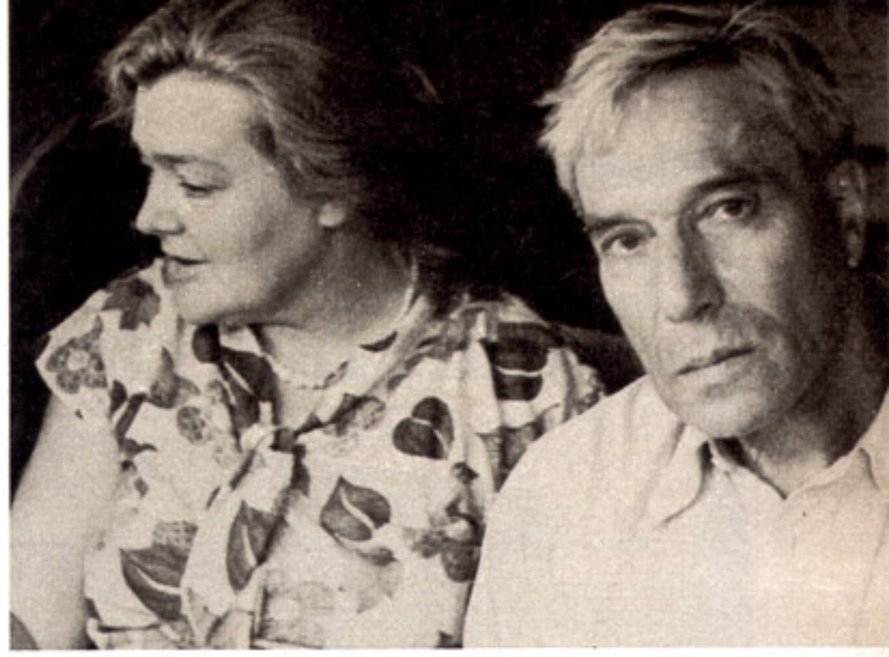
The struggle for Ivinskaya's papers was taken up by Irina, who had become a university lecturer living in Paris, and Dimitri, who, like Ivinskaya, became a translator of poetry. It was on the eve of a key stage in this fight that Ivinskaya's letter to Khrushchev was published last November. Her children see it as an attempt to discredit her and influence the outcome of the court case.

The case has been long and complicated. Before Ivinskaya died she obtained a ruling from a Moscow city court that the papers should be returned to her. The State Archive for Literature and Art refused to hand the documents over, however, saying they were part of Russia's national heritage. The matter went to the Supreme Court, which at first found in favour of the archive and then, on appeal, reversed the decision and ordered that



Ivinskaya and Pasternak in the 1950s. They spent most days together, writing poetry and finishing his novel

the papers be released to Ivinskaya, as long as there was no objection from any of Pasternak's heirs.

Fearing they were about to lose custody of the documents, the archive authorities contacted Pasternak's family and encouraged them to oppose the ruling. "It has been my life's work to safeguard these documents," said Natalya Volkova, director of the state archive for more than 30 years. "I can't bear the thought of these papers passing into the hands of people who have no real feeling for them." Volkova is convinced the papers would be put up for auction and sold abroad if returned to Ivinskaya's children. Two years ago, after her death, her son and daughter put a collection of Pasternak's love letters to their mother up for auction at Christie's, at a starting bid of £500,000. They found no takers. Irina insists she and her brother now have no intention of allowing either these letters or the disputed documents to be sold abroad. She says the family wants to set up an Ivinskaya Foundation in Moscow, where the papers can be displayed.

Pasternak's only surviving son, Yevgeny, now 73, has refused to become enmeshed in this legal row: "My father warned me before he died not to get involved in material things concerning Madame Ivinskaya and I have respected that." He said his father had always tried to protect his family from "the more scandalous" side of his life. "My father's dying wish was that all his papers be destroyed so that they would not weigh heavy on our lives. But no one could bring themselves to do that."

Volkova found the widow of Pasternak's youngest son, Leonid, more sympathetic. Natalya Pasternak claims she was summoned four years ago to the Central Office of the State Archives, which co-ordinates all state archives, including the sealed records of the former KGB: "I was told if I contested the return of the documents that I would be shown material from KGB files showing that Ivinskaya's relationship with Pasternak had not been what it seemed... something proving Ivinskaya was a spy." She said she was not surprised: "We all thought she was an adventuress. Everyone was sure she was spying on Pasternak. But we never had any proof."

Shortly after Natalya Pasternak agreed to contest the case, Ivinskaya died. "I was told by the state archives that they would not now show me the material they had promised and that we should leave her memory in peace. Everyone expected that the court case would be lain to rest." When Ivinskaya's son and daughter made it clear they would continue to fight for their mother's stolen papers, Natalya Pasternak lodged an appeal with a Moscow court to block the return of the documents.

A hearing of this appeal was due last November. Ivinskaya's letter to Khrushchev was leaked to the press several days before. Natalya Dardykina, the art critic of Moskovsky Komsomolets, who wrote the article carrying extracts from the letter, said it had been leaked to her by "very authoritative people who knew Ivinskaya closely and who decided it was up to the public to make their own mind up about what sort of woman she was".

Irina, now 58, is convinced this proves that the publication of the letter was part of a conspiracy by the ⟶

authorities against her mother. "The publication of this letter was simply aimed at sullying my mother's reputation. It was an ignoble and malicious act. It is a lie to say that my mother spied on Pasternak. She loved him deeply."

She says the conditions under which her mother wrote to Khrushchev explained the contents. "Pasternak had just died. She was getting older. Her property had been confiscated. Her daughter was imprisoned with her. How do you think she felt in that camp in Siberia? It was 40° below freezing. I do not think it is possible to use a letter of a person sent from prison camp, an appeal for pardon, as proof of one's collaboration with the KGB. Such letters were written by thousands of prisoners. I wrote such letters on the request of other people. There was a special box for such letters in the camp. I must say that the letters were never satisfied."

Yevgeny Pasternak has also condemned the publication of the letter as an "insulting and disgusting" attempt to sensationalise a desperate woman's last-ditch effort to save herself. "People have forgotten that in the Soviet times of terror every third or fourth person had some contact with the KGB," he commented. "It was not unusual."

It is uncertain what effect publication of the letter will have on the legal battle over Pasternak's papers. Last November the court case was adjourned. At a hearing in January it was delayed again, and the court has since demanded a full classification of all the disputed documents, an estimate of their worth and further evidence from Ivinskaya's family proving that the papers are rightfully theirs. It is clear the case will drag on for many more months, if not years.

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The letter's publication has re-ignited a heated debate about what sort of woman Ivinskaya was and whether she was capable of the deception and betrayal of which she is accused.

"She was a woman full of passion and emotion. She was a bohemian, someone outside the laws of ordinary lives, and people resented her because of that," recalled Voznesensky, now vice-president of Russia's Pen Club, who lives in a large house beside Pasternak's former dacha in Peredelkino. "They have called her everything, a spy, a thief, a whore," he said, remembering the many evenings he spent with the couple at Ivinskaya's cottage. "She could be manipulative. She was like a chess player with people's lives. Maybe she played with the KGB too," he said. "But whatever she did, I believe Pasternak knew it and he loved her in spite of it."

Nadya Filatova, widow of the poet and satirical writer Leonid Likhodeev, both of whom knew Pasternak and Ivinskaya, believes some in Moscow's literary circles still resented Ivinskaya. "Ivinskaya was not an ascetic like Pasternak's circle of friends. She was a vulgar and extravagant woman with expensive tastes in clothes and shoes. The rest of the intelligentsia did not like her. She seemed like a shark against his gentle nature."

Filatova believes that it was Ivinskaya who persuaded Pasternak to turn down the Nobel prize. She stressed that for many people this was far more indicative than her letter to Khrushchev that she was in the pocket of the authorities. "The state was desperate for Pasternak to renounce that prize and she managed to get him to do that." Many like Filatova do not believe Pasternak would have been forced into exile if he had accepted the award. "He was manipulated and the situation played into the hands of the state."

Filatova argues that the fact that Ivinskaya was arrested means little: "It was one of the basic principles of the secret services in those days to arrest their agents at times to keep them on a short leash. But if Ivinskaya carried out instructions for the KGB, I do not believe it was of her own free will but out of fear for her own safety and that of her children."

Others are less generous. "I don't know if Pasternak really loved Ivinskaya or not. It has entered into legend now and legends are always full of nice, sweet details. Life is drier and less interesting," Natalya Pasternak observed sourly, as she reflected on her father-in-law's past. "All I know is that I was told there was more documentation proving Ivinskaya worked for the KGB and I am frustrated that I have not been allowed access to it. But I believe the truth will come out slowly. Maybe we will discover that all this talk about losing a baby in prison was nonsense too."

Those who knew Ivinskaya best are tormented by such talk. Elena Solovieva, a 37-year-old publisher who lived with Ivinskaya for nine years, believes the debate has become "too inflamed with emotion and female jealousies".

Sitting in the cramped living room of the Moscow apartment he once shared with her, Dimitri looked tired at the end of a long conversation about his mother. Casting his eyes at the numerous photographs showing Pasternak with his arms around Ivinskaya, he said his mother would always be painted as a villain among those who revere Pasternak.

"During the Soviet era, Pasternak was hailed by many as a pure genius and my mother was vilified as an evil anti-Soviet influence. Now everything has been turned on its head and Pasternak is acclaimed as a fighter against the Soviet regime and my mother is portrayed as a Soviet agent."

Dimitri believed Pasternak would be "horrified" at the way his muse is being denounced as a spy. "It makes a fool of him to imply he did not really know what sort of woman he had at his side."

But Pasternak was only too aware of the price of fame. In a poem he wrote attributed to Yuri Zhivago, the author presciently observed:

It is not seemly to be famous
Celebrity does not exalt
There is no need to hoard your writings
And preserve them in a vault ■