

THE NOBEL PRIZE

by Juri Krotkov

(Simon and Schuster, 348 pp.; \$12.95)

John Romjue

The world in the 1980s stands at the midpoint of "that great spectacle in a hundred acts which is reserved for the next two centuries"—Nietzsche's metaphor of the "ruin" of Christian morality. The historical forces that have transformed the West have played lead roles in that spectacle, but surely no force has marked it more deeply than the march of the progeny of Lenin through the gulags of the twentieth century. Yet from the very motherland of revolution have arisen Christian Constantines of literature. Out of the Third Rome powerful ironies are sounding.

Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn, Nobel laureates of literature in 1958 and 1971, were both self-declared, even fervent, Christians. Both wrote within the frames of a Christian morality, just as had their great mentors, Tolstoi and Dostoevski. But Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn were youth and child of the October Revolution—liberated from the superstitions of the past. Their example is dialectically inexplicable. Why—despite repeated exorcisms by the priests of Lenin—does the spirit of Holy Russia live on in the atheist state's highest literary genius?

This is a phenomenon worth study. Yuri Krotkov, a defector from the gray world of Soviet letters, illuminates it in a recent novel based upon the final chapter in the life of Boris Pasternak. As a recanted informer for the KGB who once believed "that informing was my patriotic duty," the author brings a special sensitivity to the events surrounding the awarding and Pasternak's rejection of the Nobel Prize.

Krotkov highlights the irreconcilable loyalties that led Pasternak to

acquiesce to the regime in this while holding fast to a higher morality. This is a book about the war of the worlds of our time—communism and the yet Christian West, material man and spiritual man—played out in the capacious, torn soul of Boris Pasternak.

Krotkov's fellow Russian and the figures around him are well drawn. Pasternak is nature's child, gifted with "constant poetic vision," his eyes "reflecting nature" as he walks in the forest at Peredelkino. The depictions are sympathetic but true of the women in Pasternak's life—Olga Ivinskaya, his mistress, whose untrammelled passions served to bring him down to earth; Zina, his stalwart but unforgiving wife; and the devoted Nina Tabidze, widow of his friend the Georgian poet Titsian Tabidze. Nina is a constant reminder of the poet whose murder by the Bolsheviks set Pasternak to the writing of *Doctor Zhivago*. Khrushchev, amoral power incarnate, "liberalizer" but Communist first, is a major character; Mikoyan, Brezhnev, and other Kremlin leaders appear in humorous scenes reflecting Khrushchev's profane and lively personality.

Dialogues are the heart of Krotkov's novel, dialogues whose speakers know who they are and where they stand. No inconsequential life-is-absurd antiheroes here, dithering through the mists of relativism to forgetability. There are internal dialogues, too. Krotkov works the richest literary vein—serious human beings who mirror and debate civilization's great issues in a time of profound crisis.

Fedin, first secretary of the Union of Writers, who initiated the hounding of Pasternak after *Zhivago* was published in the West, confronts the writer. "There are two ways of life, two forms of literature...there's no escaping from it....There's a struggle going on in the world, not for life, but to the death. Communism has taken the place of Christianity....Which side are you on, poet Pasternak?"

"I'm on the side of Russia," Pasternak answers ambiguously. Yet, not quite on the side of the Revolution. In the Urals at the socialist construction sites Pasternak saw "how our whole nation was being deliberately and systematically poisoned—a collective psychology. I saw how *organized* mediocrity was held up to the highest good....The people were herded together just as they had been under Peter the

Great. But then Stalin decided to perpetuate it all through fear....The terror set in."

Does Pasternak consider the West superior? There, "money had replaced the power of the state, and the state preserved the power of money." But to Pasternak "the West had one indisputable achievement; it had reduced the power of the state over the individual to a minimum." And the West was still living under the aegis of Christianity.

"The Bolsheviks base their actions on what does *not* prevail in human nature—the ideal of collectivism—Rezo, a Tbilisi history teacher, tells Pasternak. But Pasternak defends the "we" of collectivism and the Communists' ideal of reshaping human nature. "Crushing human nature," Rezo retorts. There is no place for the "I" in a society that mandates equality, he reminds Pasternak, who continues to seek the ideal system that will "combine in a single human creature the ideas of 'I' and 'We.'"

The ideals of "we," equality, and socialist revolution all run aground on the brutal reality of the Soviet system. In a climactic interview with Polikarpov, the head of the Central Committee's Department of Culture, Pasternak affirms that the unequal world has to be reshaped not from the outside, but within the soul of every man. Otherwise, equality becomes "nothing more than a swarm mentality," leading to totalitarianism.

In *Doctor Zhivago*, Pasternak advanced the idea that there had been only one revolution in human history—the coming of Christ. Truth, Krotkov's Pasternak sees, is "nonacceptance of evil and affirmation of good, a testing....It's simple Christianity." But which side would Christ prefer if he revisited the sinful earth, he asks Nina—Communist or capitalist? "Not communist, certainly...Communism lacks a human face," she answers. Pasternak agrees, but thinks Christ would have plenty of work on both sides.

Pasternak belongs to the handful of great writers who, in their commanding moral power, offer and embody to a nation a rival governance. The Soviet regime felt the rivalry acutely. Pasternak was the first major literary figure to publish abroad. "Borders fell away," Krotkov has the poet Mikhail Markov declare. "Pasternak destroyed them in the minds of the Soviet people. He opened up the way to the world." **WV**

Please notify the Worldview subscription department six weeks in advance of your move to insure uninterrupted delivery of the journal.