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The October Revolution as the Passion of Christ: Boris Pasternak's Easter Narrative in *Doctor Zhivago* and Its Cultural Contexts

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Abstract: This article offers a new interpretation of Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* in the cultural and historical context of the first half of the 20th century, with an emphasis on the interrelationship between religion and philosophy of history in the text. *Doctor Zhivago* is analysed as a condensed representation of a religious conception of Russian history between 1901 and 1953 and as a cyclical repetition of the Easter narrative. This bipartite narrative consists of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ as symbols of violence and renewal (liberation). The novel cycles through this narrative several times, symbolically connecting the 'Easter' revolution (March 1917) and the Thaw (the spring of 1953). The sources of Pasternak's Easter narrative include the Gospels, Leo Tolstoy's philosophy of history and pre-Christian mythology. The model of cyclical time in the novel brings together the sacred, natural and historical cycles. This concept of a cyclical renewal of life differs from the linear temporality of the Apocalypse as an expectation of the end of history.

Keywords: Orthodox Christianity; philosophy of history; myth; Passion of Christ; Easter; cyclical time; Boris Pasternak; *Doctor Zhivago*; Leo Tolstoy



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1. Introduction

In his contribution to the third volume of *Christianity and the Eastern Slavs* that saw light with UCLA Press in 1995, Lazar Fleishman says: "The question of Boris Pasternak's Christian faith—and first of all in his novel *Doctor Zhivago*—is one of the most painful, complicated and contentious ones in literary scholarship" (Fleishman 1995, p. 288). A quarter of a century later, researchers exploring religious motifs in Pasternak's novel still grapple with paradoxes: "Pasternak thus challenges, complicates and renews the reader's image of Christ, even as he largely affirms the Christ of faith from the four evangelists' accounts" (Givens 2018, p. 204). In my article, I suggest a reading of *Doctor Zhivago* from a new perspective, with emphasis on the interrelationship between religion and philosophy of history throughout the novel. This interrelationship has never been the subject of a separate investigation. My interpretation also places Pasternak's novel in the broader context of historical and religious consciousness in Russian 20th century culture.

On 13 October 1946, Boris Pasternak mentioned in a letter to his cousin Olga Freidenberg that he had started work on a novel. He named his two key aims: "to paint a historical image of Russia over the last forty-five years, and at the same time [...] this work will be an expression of my views on art, on the Gospels, on one's life in history and on much more" (Mossman 1982, pp. 254–55). In the author's characterisation of his own project, the historical and theological topics are inseparable: the history of Russia in the first half of the 20th century was to become material for an interpretation of the Gospels.

Completed in 1955, the novel *Doctor Zhivago* does, indeed, cover the historical period from 1901 to 1948 or 1953,¹ from the first Russian Revolution of 1905 to the Stalinist purges, the Second World War and the first post-war decade. However, most of the events in the novel take place between 1917 and 1922: the central historical points of reference are the

February and October Revolutions of 1917. Already in the first, prose part of the novel, the reader's attention is drawn to numerous theological allusions. The Christian references are especially pronounced in the poetic cycle "The Poems of Yurii Zhivago" with which the novel concludes. The motifs of crucifixion and resurrection are central to the whole cycle; the subject of the last five poems is the Passion of Christ.²

Although the Christian references play a central role in the novel, they elude a simple interpretation. Over time, scholars have reached a degree of agreement in reading the life story of the main character, Yurii Zhivago, as a Gospel narrative, with Zhivago himself appearing in *imitatio Christi*.³ However, as early as in 1974, Thomas F. Rodgers noted an "association of Christ with a mass of incidental persons" in Pasternak's novel, which to him suggested a "mystical association of the revolution with Christ's passion" (Rodgers 1974, pp. 384, 387). This observation has not been developed further in subsequent research; however, as this article will show, it is central to my interpretation of the novel.

The question concerning a possible connection between the Russian Revolution and religious consciousness was raised in Russian philosophy in the first half of the 20th century; for example, in the political theology of Nikolai Berdiaev, Sergei Bulgakov and Semen Frank (Poole 2013). Research on religious representations of the revolution in the Russian literature of the first half of the 20th century focuses primarily on the Apocalypse and the history of apocalyptic sects, on the idea of establishing God's Kingdom on earth (Rosenthal 1980; Bethea 1989; Etkind 1998). In *Doctor Zhivago*, the main biblical source is the Gospels,⁴ on the basis of which Pasternak creates an Easter narrative of crucifixion and resurrection and develops his particular interpretation of the Book of Revelation.

The last poem of the novel ("Garden of Gethsemane") directly connects the fate of Christ with the course of historical time. The last two stanzas, the ones that conclude the whole novel, are based on a comparison between history and parable: "the passing of the ages is like a parable," and it is in the name of its "majesty" that the sacrifice of Christ is made, who will rise on the third day after his death (Pasternak 1958, p. 558).⁵ Thus, the conclusion of the novel emphasises the meaningfulness of history as a "parable" that can be interpreted from a religious perspective. This is the logic that guides my interpretation of the Revolution of 1917 in *Doctor Zhivago* and the general conception of history in the novel.

I open with a short survey of the symbolic meaning of Easter in the cultural and historical context of 1917 in Russia (2). I then analyse Pasternak's interpretation of the Easter narrative as a particular model of cyclical temporality that includes the sacred, the historical and the natural (biological) cycles (3).⁶ The novelist's main sources here include Leo Tolstoy's philosophy of history, the Gospels, and the pre-Christian mythology which his cousin Olga Freidenberg researched in her work on mythopoetics (4). The Easter narrative in *Doctor Zhivago* is not limited to the revolution and the Civil War; it comes to a climax in the epilogue to the novel that depicts the Second World War and the years of the Thaw (5). I will then touch upon the political significance of the text (6). In conclusion, I will present a short summary of the religious model of history in the novel that is constructed as a cyclical repetition of the Easter narrative (7). The cyclicity of time in Pasternak's text is different from the linear model that the expectations of the Second Coming follow. Pasternak's concept of time leads to the understanding of a repeated renewal of life as a cyclical process.

2. Easter in the Cultural and Historical Context of 1917

There existed a Marxist tradition that cast Jesus Christ in the role of a proletarian, with early Christianity foreshadowing the socialist revolution. Friedrich Engels, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky were among the proponents of this interpretation. Anatolii Lunacharskii, who, in October 1917, became Head of the People's Commissariat for Education, expressed the same views in many of his publications and speeches (Bergman 1990). In the first quarter of the 20th century, the great majority of Russians were practicing Orthodox Christians, which made them especially likely to interpret the revolutionary changes in a religious light. The festival of Easter, considered to be "the heart of Orthodox Chris-

tianity" (Bulgakov 1989, p. 285) and the main holiday in the Russian Orthodox calendar (Esaulov 2006, p. 65), acquired a special political significance in the revolutionary era.

Following the Revolution of 1905 in Russia, the State Duma (the nation's first elected parliament) was established, and the freedom of the press was expanded. In 1906, Easter was celebrated on 2 April (15 April according to the modern Gregorian calendar), thus overlapping with the elections to the first State Duma that took place in March–April 1906. Against this background, the liberal press metaphorically connected the festival of Easter with a political resurrection of free Russia (Baran 1993, pp. 295, 333). By a strange coincidence, in 1917 Easter again fell on 2 April (15 April according to the modern calendar), just one month after two momentous events occurred as a consequence of the February Revolution. These were the abdication of Tsar Nikolai II, and the formation of the Provisional Government on 2 March (15 March according to the modern calendar).

The celebration of "the Red Easter of the Revolution" in 1917 became a testimony to "the merging of religious and political consciousness" in Russian society (Kolonitskii 2012, pp. 57, 81). The February Revolution was perceived as a sacral event, as a resurrection of Russia that was sanctified by the Resurrection of Christ. This is evidenced by press publications of the time, archival documents, private correspondence and memoirs, private and official Easter blessings that were sent out, statements by some religious figures, and even Easter cards that in 1917 were decorated with revolutionary symbols (Kolonitskii 2012, pp. 57–86).⁷

It is in this cultural and historical context that we can read Boris Pasternak's poem "The Russian Revolution" (written in 1918).⁸ It opens with an enthusiastic welcome addressed at the revolution that came in the spring: "How good it was to breathe you in March." This revolution is associated not only with the sun, the sound of merry springs and the smell of melting snow, but also with the "catacombs" of early Christians, as well as with "the sacred night" separating "the last days of fasting" from each other. The link between the political events and "the last days of fasting" introduces the motif of Easter, thus emphasising the Christian significance of the February Revolution: "And the Socialism of Christ breathed deep and free" (Pasternak 2004a, pp. 224–25). The second part of the poem refers to the revolutionary events of the final months of 1917, and the atmosphere changes abruptly: now, it is images of violence, blood and death that are in the foreground.

After the October Revolution, and with the start of the Civil War, religious metaphors in the Russian society changed. A typical example of this metaphoric shift is an article by the literary critic and philosopher Razumnik Ivanov-Razumnik, "The Two Russias," dated November 1917. It was published in 1918 in the second issue of *The Scythians*, a collection of literary and critical texts, two issues of which saw light in Petrograd in 1917–1918. The article opens with the author reminiscing about the events of the spring of 1917: "The Russian February Revolution was delivered painlessly and greeted with joy and enthusiasm by the whole nation" (Ivanov-Razumnik 1918, p. 201). However, the topic of the article is the turn that the history of Russia took in October 1917. It is described with the help of a metaphor which is repeated multiple times: the way of the cross as the way of the Russian Revolution and society. Ivanov-Razumnik quotes the Gospel According to St. Luke and concludes: "And everything that is said in the eternal book about the way of the cross—all this can be repeated, word for word, about the Nation's way of the cross leading into the great and terrifying days of the Russian revolution" (Ivanov-Razumnik 1918, p. 204). However, the philosopher concludes by reminding his readers that Calvary is a promise of the resurrection to come, and compares the belief in the victory of the revolution with the Christian faith in the resurrection of Christ.

The metaphor of the Passion of Christ was also widespread among the poorly educated worker-writers of the revolutionary era. In many of their poems, worker-poets described the fate of the proletariat as martyrdom, crucifixion, and the way of the cross in revolutionary struggle (Steinberg 1994, pp. 221–23). The fact that these images were so popular with such diverse social groups points to a key particularity of Orthodox Christianity: "The Orthodox path of the Christian is *the path of the cross and of struggle*. In other

words, it is the path of patience, of the bearing of sorrows, persecutions for the name of Christ" (Pomazansky 1984, p. 327; italics in the original).

The religious imagery that was commonly used for descriptions of both the February and the October Revolutions constitutes a bipartite Easter narrative: the Passion of Christ and the Resurrection. The religious and historical metaphor of the way of the cross implies hope for a new Easter. Thus, in April 1918 Andrei Belyi wrote his poem "Christ Has Risen," the title of which refers to the traditional Easter greeting in Russia.⁹ The poem first talks about the Passion of Christ, and then about the victims of the revolution who are likened to the crucified Son of God. The whole text can be read as a symbolic message announcing the resurrection of Christ, to which the speaker responds in the third stanza with the following tripartite pronouncement: "It is. It was. It will be" (Belyi 2006, p. 9). This unity of the three tenses reflects the cyclicity of the Orthodox calendar. A repetition of the festival of Easter reminds the reader about the repetitive nature of the revolutionary events in early 20th century Russia with its three revolutions in 1905 and in 1917.

Pasternak was a contemporary of these events, and the responses to them that we have quoted above; his contribution to the cultural discourse of the time was the poem "The Russian Revolution". An understanding of this cultural and historical background is essential for an analysis of the Easter narrative and the cyclical nature of time in *Doctor Zhivago*.

3. The Easter Narrative and the Cyclical Nature of Time in *Doctor Zhivago*: Religion, Nature, History

The cycle "The Poems of Yurii Zhivago", which concludes the novel and emphasises its religious dimension, is made up of twenty-five poems. The subject of seven of them is the Gospel story of the Passion of Christ. These poems provide a symbolic key to an interpretation of the events in the prose part of the novel; therefore, we should consider them in more detail.

In the first poem of the cycle ("Hamlet"), the actor playing Hamlet at the same time identifies with Christ, repeating his prayer from the Gospels: "If it may be, I pray Thee, Abba, Father/Grant it: let this chalice from me pass" (Pasternak 2004d). Jesus, foreseeing his own crucifixion, speaks these words in the Garden of Gethsemane when praying to God the Father. Following the spirit of the Gospels, the last stanza of the poem declares that "there is no turning from the road." The topic of the way of the cross is continued in the third poem, "In Holy Week" (Pasternak 2004d), which describes the Orthodox church service in the days preceding Easter. The poet recreates the Good Friday evening service: the "procession," carrying forth "the Shroud," as well as the ritualistic burial of Christ ("A God is being buried") (Pasternak 2004d). The poem concludes with the message that resurrection will overcome death, i.e., with an announcement of the approaching festival of Easter.

The Easter narrative of the Passion and of the Resurrection, recreated in the first and third poems, is repeated at the end of the poetic cycle (Polivanov 2015, pp. 219, 223). Yurii Zhivago's last five poems take us back to the time of the Gospels. We become witnesses to Jesus's journey from Bethany ("Miracle") and his entry into Jerusalem ("Evil Days"); we hear Mary of Magdalene address him ("Magdalene"). There is a direct intertextual connection between the first and the last poems of the cycle. The last poem ("Garden of Gethsemane") is a return to a scene from the first poem, "Hamlet". Jesus has a premonition about the suffering that awaits him and appeals to his Father with a prayer: "And sweating drops of blood, He prayed to the Father/That from this deathly cup He be exempted" (Pasternak 2004d). The poem concludes with Jesus's words, who is ready to sacrifice himself in the name of the "parable" of history and who announces his own coming Resurrection. Thus, in the cycle "The Poems of Yurii Zhivago", the Easter Narrative is reproduced twice, and this repetition is emphasised through an intertextual reference to the Agony in the Garden. The poetic part of the novel reproduces the cyclical Orthodox calendar, thus symbolising the recurrent nature of the Passion and the Resurrection.

The religious cycle, in turn, is inscribed into the natural cycle of seasons: both Easter narratives are accompanied by poems about spring ("2. March"; "21. The Earth"). They do not share a narrative line, but the natural imagery suggests the passing of a full year ("7. Summer in Town"; "10. Indian Summer"; "12. Autumn"; "14. August"; "15. Winter Night"; "18. The Star of the Nativity") (Sukhikh 2013, p. 569). Nature not only provides a background to the Easter narrative, but becomes its agent in the poem "In Holy Week." Trees in the woods and urban gardens are described as active participants of the sacred passion play. Trees in the forest are "Like solemn worshippers at prayer," trees in the city are straining to "peer through churchyard railings," and gardens "leave their boundary walls" while "a God is being buried" (Pasternak 2004d; Pasternak 1958, p. 525; this translation combines both published versions—S.E.). The end of the poem is astonishing in its inner logic: the last stanza implies a causal relationship between the coming of spring and the Resurrection. Overcoming death will become possible once snow starts to melt:

At midnight man and beast fall dumb
On hearing springtime's revelation:
Once weather clears, then just as soon
Can death itself be overcome
By the power of Resurrection. (Pasternak 2004d)

Spring becomes an integral part of the Easter narrative in Pasternak's reading of it. In the poem "The Earth", the life stories of numerous people enter this narrative, together with the spirit of the spring that fills the homes of Muscovites, so that one can hear "April's casual discussions/With dripping waters of the thaw" (Pasternak 2004d). The subject of these "casual discussions" of April is human suffering, and these lines make us think of the Passion Week: "For April knows thousands of stories/Of human sorrow" (Pasternak 2004d; Pasternak 1958, p. 552; this translation combines both published versions—S.E.). Thus, the story of suffering and hope for renewal, for rebirth, are transferred from Jesus Christ and his lyrical double (for example, in the poem "Hamlet") onto thousands of human stories, all of them different and at the same time united in sorrow.

"The Poems of Yurii Zhivago" do not describe historical events, even though "the war" and "devastation" are briefly mentioned in one of them ("Dawn") as references to the 20th century history (Pasternak 1958, p. 549). Nevertheless, as I have already pointed out above, in the last poem of the cycle ("Garden of Gethsemane") the Easter narrative is directly linked to the "parable" of history, inviting the reader to project religious motifs from the poetic cycle onto the prosaic part of the novel. "The Poems of Yurii Zhivago" are based on three interconnected temporal cycles: the cycle of the death and rebirth of nature, the Orthodox cycle of the Passion and the Resurrection, and the cycle of suffering and joyful renewal in human life. These three cycles are the compositional basis of the prose part of the novel, too, where the course of history is another major theme.

The events of February 1917 find Yurii Zhivago in a military hospital where he is recovering from an injury he received while serving as a military doctor at the front. Spring came early that year: "It was a warm day at the end of February" (Pasternak 1958, p. 125). It is as if nature itself (the warm weather and the change from winter to spring) had some deep connection with the anticipation of political changes: "For several days the weather was variable, uncertain, with a warm, constantly murmuring wind in the night, smelling of damp earth. During those days there came strange reports from G.H.Q. [...]. Telegraphic communications with Petersburg were cut off time and again. Everywhere, at every corner, people were talking politics" (Pasternak 1958, p. 126). For Zhivago, those days brought with them not only recovery, but also a meeting with Lara, who was destined to become the love of his life; this is also when the news of the publication of his first book in Moscow reached him.

At the end of February, nurse Lara was remembering the revolutionary events of 1905 in Moscow that she had witnessed. And just as she was thinking to herself: "And now they were shooting again, but how much more frightening it was now!", patients burst

into the room with the latest news from Petersburg: “The revolution!” (p. 128). Thus, in the novel, the February Revolution is symbolically connected with spring, with momentous events in the heroes’ lives, with recovery, renewal, and at the same time, with a repetition of revolutionary events (1905 and 1917).

These motifs come to a climax in a conversation between the main characters in the summer of 1917, when Zhivago explains to Lara his understanding of the revolution that took place a few months previously:

Freedom! Real freedom [...], freedom, dropped out of the sky, freedom beyond our expectations [...]. And it isn’t as if only people were talking. Stars and trees meet and converse, flowers talk philosophy at night, stone houses hold meetings. It makes you think of the Gospel, doesn’t it? [...] Everyone was revived, reborn, changed, transformed. You might say that everyone has been through two revolutions—his own personal revolution as well as the general one. It seems to me that socialism is the sea, and all these separate streams, these private, individual revolutions, are flowing into it—the sea of life, the sea of spontaneity. (pp. 146–47)

Here, we see, yet again, how the temporalities of natural cycles, human life, and a religious experience merge. A rebirth of nature (the world of trees and flowers) is inseparable from the rebirth and transformation of individuals. Nature is no longer just a passive background; it acquires a voice and becomes an active participant of the events, as in the poem “In Holy Week.” An awakening of nature, a rebirth of the individual, and a reference to the Gospels—these are the motifs which in the novel are connected with the imagery of Easter, even though the festival is not mentioned directly.

Now the history of the February Revolution is added to this tripartite temporality (natural, individual, and religious). The political event is perceived as a harmonious component in the life of nature and each individual person; it becomes a metaphor of internal transformations and a re-awakening of nature. The philosophy of history that the novel conveys suggests that the revolution is experienced by each individual in a different way. This comes to the fore at two key moments in the text. Early in the novel, Nikolai Vedeniapin explains that, in his opinion, the modern understanding of the concept of history begins with Christ, and that the Gospels provided a philosophical grounding for it. Then, in the spring of 1917, when serving at the front a few months before the revolution, Yurii Zhivago and his friend Mikhail Gordon discuss Christianity, having abolished the idea of “a nation” and replaced it with “the mystery of the individual” (p. 122). The protagonist’s perception of the February Revolution reflects this understanding of the nature of things: a ‘collective’ political event brings together a multitude of individuals rather than a nation. All these individuals are seized by the spirit of revival that has come with the spring, but for each of them it is a different experience. Yurii Zhivago’s reflections lead us to the Christian understanding of socialism that was expressed by Pasternak in his 1918 poem “The Russian Revolution”: “And the Socialism of Christ breathed deep and free” (Pasternak 2004a, p. 224). There are a multitude of individually experienced revolutions, just as there are a multitude of forms of individual suffering in Yurii Zhivago’s poem “The Earth” about the days preceding Easter: “For April knows thousands of stories/Of human sorrow” (Pasternak 2004d; Pasternak 1958, p. 552; this translation combines both published versions—S.E.). This logic of unity connects the experience of suffering and rebirth that corresponds to the Passion and the Resurrection in the Easter narrative.

We should remember that in Pasternak’s poem “The Russian Revolution” (written in 1918), the February Revolution, which ended on 2 March 1917, is symbolically connected with the last days of Lent and with the month of March. Zhivago’s poem “In Holy Week” is set at the same point in the annual cycle, and the poem immediately preceding it is called simply “March.” The connection between Easter and March which is emphasised in Yurii Zhivago’s poetic cycle is not obvious from the Russian Orthodox perspective: for Easter to be celebrated so early, it would need to be according to the Julian calendar style. The earliest date that Easter could fall on according to the Gregorian (Russian Orthodox)

calendar is 4 April (Polivanov 2015, p. 219). I see this special role of the month of March in Yurii Zhivago's poems as a thread that links Pasternak's poem "The Russian Revolution," the actual dates of the February Revolution as a historical event, and its depiction in the prose part of the novel.

The February Revolution in the novel is symbolically connected with spring, with a rebirth of life and a blooming of nature, whereas the October Revolution is a manifestation of the power of winter. When Yurii Zhivago buys the special issue of a newspaper announcing the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Moscow is caught in a mighty snowstorm: "the snow thickened and the wind turned into a blizzard" (p. 192). However, again, the narrator stresses the unity of nature, human beings and history: "There was something in common between the disturbances in the moral and in the physical world [...]. Here and there resounded the last salvos of islands of resistance" (p. 192). The crushing force of the events that followed the revolution and brought with them a collapse of the habitual order of life is the elementary force of the early winter that followed the late October days: it was "dark, hungry, and cold" (p. 195). More than that, in the narrator's memory, three winters merged into an image of post-revolutionary Russia, into one terrible winter: "There were three of them, one after the other, three such terrible winters, and not all that now seems to have happened in 1917 and 1918 really happened then—some of it may have been later. These three successive winters have merged into one and it is difficult to tell them apart" (p. 195).

Winter and snowstorms are associated in the novel not only with the October Revolution, but also with death. The novel opens with the funeral of the 10-year-old Yurii Zhivago's mother on the eve of the festival of the Protection of the Holy Virgin, i.e., on 13 October. The boy spends the night after the funeral with his uncle in a monastery. He is woken by the sound of a raging snowstorm: "Outside there was [...] nothing but the blizzard, the air smoking with snow" (p. 4). There is a suggestion of a white (funeral) shroud that turns snow into a symbol of death: "Turning over and over in the sky, length after length of whiteness unwound over the earth and shrouded it" (p. 4). And the only counterbalance to the unruly elements is the uncle talking about Christ to console the crying boy. Pasternak was free to pick any day for the funeral of his protagonist's mother, and it is significant that both key events of the novel (the death of the mother and the revolution) take place in October. This autumn month is not immediately associated with snow, but in both cases the author introduces a snowstorm which becomes all the more significant for happening in autumn rather than in winter.

Snow is likened to a shroud on at least one more occasion in the novel. It happens in the twelfth section ("The Rowan Tree"). By this time, Yurii Zhivago is a prisoner of war, serving as a doctor in a unit of red partisans. At the centre of this part of the novel is the inhuman violence which, as the narrator emphasises again and again, is perpetrated by all participants of the conflict—red revolutionaries and white anti-revolutionaries alike. Here, too, an early winter welcomes the protagonist to the kingdom of snow falling "with a convulsive, insane haste," covering "in a moment the broad expanse of the earth [...]" with a white shroud" (p. 359–60; translation modified—S.E.).

The twelfth section of the novel is where the Gospel motifs of the Passion of Christ are concentrated: eleven conspirators are discovered and shot in a partisan unit. This event, which has a key symbolic importance in the novel, also takes place in late autumn, when the trees in the woods have already lost all their leaves. The clearing where the men are shot is a slightly elevated piece of land with "prehistoric" boulders; it reminds Yurii Zhivago of a place specially designated for sacrificial rituals and invites associations with Calvary (p. 353). Before the execution, one of the condemned conspirators throws an accusation at the partisan Sivobliui, who was both an instigator of the conspiracy and a traitor: "Judas! Christ-killer!" (p. 355). Following the same logic of the Gospels, the anarchist Vdovichenko's last words are a proud statement of faith: "We die as martyrs for our ideals at the dawn of the world revolution. [...] Long live world anarchy!" (p. 355).¹⁰

More than that: one of the ‘executed’ men actually ‘rises from the dead’—the young Terentii Galuzin, left for dead, eventually came to and managed to escape.

The partisan Vdovichenko was not a conspirator, but his influence in the unit was a threat to the authority of the commander, and he, too, ends up being shot. The blinding snowstorm erupts just as another character of the novel, the partisan Svirid, is reflecting on the fate of the executed men. Snow and blizzard in the novel are not only symbols of suffering and death; they also symbolise the October Revolution. According to the Gospels, there are but three days between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection of Christ. However, set against the calendar cycle of nature, the two parts of the Easter narrative are associated with two seasons: the season of snow in autumn and winter, and the season of rebirth in spring and summer. The Christian worldview becomes one with the myth of nature dying and coming back to life.

This image of the revolution as a snowstorm, the execution of the condemned men, and the blizzard in the *twelfth* section of the novel (“The Rowan Tree”) are intertextually connected with Aleksandr Blok’s poem “The Twelve” (written and published in 1918). It is well known that in this poem, revolutionary violence is presented as part of the devastation waged by a snowstorm, and the text concludes with the image of Jesus Christ appearing from the blizzard. Out of numerous interpretations of this mystical image, I would like to single out the one offered by the artist Vasilii Masiutin in his introduction to an edition of the poem which he illustrated for a publication by the Russian émigré publishing house “Neva” in Berlin in 1922. This interpretation did not win broad recognition, but it is an example of a reading by a contemporary; it also bears an astonishing similarity to the conception of time in *Doctor Zhivago*.

Masiutin believed that contemporary readers arguing about whether or not Blok’s poem expressed his sympathy with the October Revolution were wrong. According to him, the poem is not an evaluation of the revolution; rather, it is concerned with the power of “the inevitable” and “the predetermined” (Blok 1922, p. 1). He sees in the title not only a reference to the twelve apostles, but also a recognition of the ineluctable flow of time: twelve months in a year, twelve hours in a day, twelve hours in a night. The passing of time is a sequence of light and darkness, winter and spring, hopelessness and salvation. According to Masiutin, the end of the poem is a double procession to Calvary—not only of Christ, but also of the red guards who are shooting at him, and who will become victims of the revolution in their turn. However, the logic of the Gospels and of the number twelve suggests that the way of the cross is also a promise of hope: “A spring morning of the Resurrection will come after the dark snowy night” (Blok 1922, p. 2). We can see here, just as in the novel *Doctor Zhivago*, a correlation of the Orthodox calendar and the natural time. For Blok, as for Pasternak, the motif of the Passion of Christ from the Easter narrative corresponds to a snowy, cold winter, i.e., the death of nature.

Masiutin’s interpretation shows that in the cultural and historical context of the revolution, a contemporary of Blok could respond to the poem “The Twelve” in the way that the novel *Doctor Zhivago* with its natural and religious symbolism suggests. Jean-Luc Moreau expressed a similar opinion in one of his essays: “Where Blok ends, Pasternak begins”; Christ “completes in the poems of *Doctor Zhivago* the cycle of his Passion begun in ‘The Twelve’” (Moreau 1970, p. 238). This argument also assumes that the religious and mythological symbolism of the Russian Revolution associates the beginning of the Passion of Christ with a snowstorm.¹¹

The observations offered above are supported by the fact that throughout the novel, a juxtaposition of winter and spring is presented as the cycle of suffering and rebirth. In the revolutionary winter of 1917, Yurii Zhivago falls ill with typhoid fever and spends two weeks between life and death. Delirious, he sees himself writing a poem about the three days that passed between the Deposition in the Tomb and the Resurrection. This is a history of struggle, on one side of which is “hell,” “dissolution” and “death,” and on the other is “the spring and Mary Magdalene and life” (p. 207). The poet’s recovery starts with his telling himself, in his delirium: “Time to wake up and to get up. Time to arise, time

for the resurrection” (p. 207). This is how the spring of the resurrection is symbolically juxtaposed to the illness of the revolutionary winter. The spring of 1918 brings with it change and a sense of happiness for Yurii Zhivago. After his recovery, he and his family decide to leave Moscow for Ural. At this point, the motif of Easter appears in the novel: the packing for the journey passes for “a spring cleaning for Easter” (p. 209). However, again, a cyclical change of seasons brings together the historical, the natural, the psychological and the religious dimensions.

This cyclical conception of time in the novel manifests itself also in the fact that an exhausting illness with delirium returns one more time in Yurii Zhivago’s life, in the thirteenth section of the novel. After his arrival in the Ural town of Iuriatin in early spring, Zhivago’s recovery becomes his rebirth. This rebirth symbolically corresponds to the transition from winter to spring, and at the same time—from bloodshed to peace. The text emphasises the connection between the change of seasons and the course of the Civil War, the coming of peace: “The winter had just gone [...]. The Whites had recently gone, left the town, surrendering it to the Reds. The bombardment, bloodshed, and wartime anxieties had ceased. This too was disturbing, and put one on one’s guard, like the going of the winter and the lengthening of the spring days” (p. 376; translation slightly modified—S.E.). Thus, we have established that the cyclical model of time in the novel includes the closely interrelated cycles of death and rebirth of nature, the Passion and the Resurrection of Christ, suffering and rebirth in the lives of individuals, violence and peace, destruction and resurrection in the course of history. The question we can ask now concerns the narrative devices used in the novel in order to justify this view of the cycle of historical events and their connection with the Easter narrative.

In the beginning of *Doctor Zhivago*, when Nikolai Vedeniapin reflects on how history in its modern sense started with Christ, the narrator remarks that all that happens in the world simultaneously occurs in what “some called the Kingdom of God, others history” (p. 13). Here, the meaningfulness of history is explained through its connection with the sacred. Towards the end of the book, when Yurii Zhivago contemplates the nature of history, he explains it through the logic of the world of plants: “He reflected again that he conceived of history, of what is called the course of history, not in the accepted way but by analogy with the vegetable kingdom” (p. 453). In this natural life, the dying in a snowy winter is juxtaposed with the rebirth that spring will bring with it: “In winter, under the snow, the leafless branches of a wood are thin and poor [...]. But in only a few days in spring the forest is transformed, it reaches the clouds” (p. 453). What is special about trees in a forest is that they grow, but a human being, unable to observe the process of growth, always perceives it as static at any given moment. This mysterious growth becomes a symbol of history in the novel: “And such also is the immobility to our eyes of the eternally growing, ceaselessly changing history, the life of society moving invisibly in its incessant transformations” (p. 453). Here, the forest becomes a symbol of history; in Yurii Zhivago’s poem “In Holy Week”, it is a participant of a sacred passion play, with trees “like solemn worshippers at prayer” (Pasternak 2004d).¹²

Zhivago’s reflections on the similarity between history and the plant kingdom are not just abstract deliberations; they are connected with the history of the Russian Revolution. Thus, he remembers the summer of 1917 as a time when nature, history and God were in a harmonious agreement: “the revolution had been a god come down to earth from heaven, the god of that summer” (p. 454; translation slightly modified—S.E.). In the novel, the natural, religious and historical images of the world merge into one. During the Civil War, when people lose their human face and reality itself feels unreal, the protagonist makes a paradoxical observation: “only nature had remained true to history” (pp. 378–79).¹³ Nature retains a sense of habitual, meaningful existence; its calendar cycle promises the arrival of spring, and with it a historical rebirth.¹⁴ This coming together of nature and history is a manifestation of the belief in a “shared unity of life” [*vseedinstvo zhizni*] which is evocative of the “philosophy of life”, as developed by Arthur Schopenhauer and Henri Bergson, among others (Briukhanova 2010, p. 214).¹⁵

In his reflections on history as if it were the plant kingdom, Yurii Zhivago follows Leo Tolstoy's philosophy of history as it is expressed in *War and Peace*: "Tolstoy thought of it in just this way, but he did not spell it out so clearly. He denied that history was set in motion by Napoleon or any other ruler or general, but he did not develop his idea to its logical conclusion. No single man makes history. History cannot be seen, just as one cannot see grass growing. Wars and revolutions, kings and Robespierres, are history's organic agents, its yeast" (p. 454). In order to explain the significance of this direct reference to the Russian classic, I will allow myself a slight digression to talk about Tolstoy's philosophy of history.

4. The Sources of *Doctor Zhivago*: *War and Peace* and Myth

Here, I am interested in the influence of *War and Peace* not so much on the genre and the system of characters in *Doctor Zhivago* (see, e.g., [Polivanov 2015](#)) as on the religious philosophy of history in it. Taking my lead from the research on Tolstoy written by Gary Saul Morson, Donna Tussing Orwin, and Christian Münch, I will focus on four key aspects of the image of the world in *Doctor Zhivago* that can be traced back to *War and Peace*.

(1) The first aspect is the unity of nature, history, religion and human life that I analysed above. The same idea of unity is at the base of the philosophical conception of *War and Peace*. On the one hand, Tolstoy depicts "the unity of the self and nature"; on the other hand, political history in the novel is "a part of God's will", and simultaneously "a mysterious force of nature" ([Tussing Orwin 1993](#), p. 100). The history of humanity in *War and Peace* is connected with the images of river and water ([Tussing Orwin 1993](#), pp. 101–2). Water is also one of the central symbols in the novel *Doctor Zhivago*: socialism is likened to a sea which is made up of the multiple streams; the imagery of water, melting snow and creeks play an important role in the poems "March" and "In Holy Week."

(2) The second aspect is a paradoxical reconciliation of chance and determinism in a unified conception of history. Scholars of Pasternak's work have noticed on more than one occasion that the lives of the characters in *Doctor Zhivago* are determined by coincidences and accidents, although at the same time the novel is driven by the belief that everything is pre-determined ([Shcheglov 1991](#); [Lavrov 1993](#); [Sukhikh 2013](#)). In the beginning of the third volume of *War and Peace*, Tolstoy writes: "Man lives consciously for himself, but is an unconscious instrument in the attainment of the historic, universal, aims of humanity" ([Tolstoy 1952](#), p. 343). According to Tolstoy, history is subject to divine logic, but "the principles governing human events are incomprehensible to the human mind" and are only open to God ([Morson 1987](#), p. 92). Individuals perceive themselves as free agents and cannot foresee the future; their reasoning sees the course of events as accidental (*ibid.*). Thus, Tolstoy combines a belief in a higher logic of the course of history with a non-teleological vision of it: one cannot hope to describe history by assuming a linear progression towards a goal that is known to humans.¹⁶

Following this logic, Tolstoy recognises a higher meaning of such catastrophic events as war—a meaning that is hidden from humans. Thus, for example, his narrator makes the following remark concerning the bloody Battle of Borodino: "and that terrible work which was not done by the will of a man but at the will of Him who governs men and worlds continued" ([Tolstoy 1952](#), p. 467). In the life of Tolstoy's heroes, joy follows sorrow, and Pierre Bezukhov, when taken prisoner of war by the French troops, has an epiphany: "Life is God. Everything changes and moves and that movement is God. [...] To love life is to love God. Harder and more blessed than all else is to love this life in one's sufferings, in innocent sufferings." ([Tolstoy 1952](#), p. 608).

This love of life, despite historical catastrophes, defines the spirit of the novel *Doctor Zhivago* and its heroes, caught unawares by the Russian Revolution. All of the philosophical, symbolic content of the novel leads the reader to the conclusion that the October Revolution, despite all its tragic consequences, was inevitable, just as the Passion of Christ was inevitable in the Gospels ([Rogers 1974](#), p. 389). A version of the epigraph to the novel has been preserved in Pasternak's archive—a line from Paul Verlaine: "Aime tes croix et

tes plaies/Il est sain que tu les aies" ("Love your crosses and your wounds/For he is holy who has them") (Pasternak 2004c, p. 645).¹⁷

The inevitability of revolution is determined not by the will of humans to transform life, but by a higher logic of life itself, a logic which is beyond human comprehension. This is what Yuri Zhivago tries to explain to the commander of red partisans Liberius Mikulitsyn: "Reshaping life! People who can say that have never understood a thing about life—they have never felt its breath, its heartbeat—however much they have seen or done. [...] But life is never a material, a substance to be molded. If you want to know, life is the principle of self-renewal, it is constantly renewing and remaking and changing and transfiguring itself, it is infinitely beyond your or my obtuse theories about it" (p. 338). This idea of predetermination is also central to the poem "Hamlet," where Christ obeys the will of the Father, and the actor must play his part in a play that had been written without his involvement: "But alas, there is no turning from the road/The order of the action has been settled" (Pasternak 2004d). Considered together, the different episodes of the novel embody the same understanding of existence that we find in *War and Peace*: "Everything changes and moves and that movement is God" (Tolstoy 1952, p. 608).

(3) The third aspect is the cyclical nature of life and history that I analysed above with reference to *Doctor Zhivago*. The course of events in *War and Peace* is also based on the concept of "an unending circular motion": "The equilibrium and family happiness established at the end of *War and Peace* is no more the goal of life than the state of motion" (Tussing Orwin 1993, p. 107). For example, the life of Pierre Bezukhov is cyclical in that he experiences recurrent periods of spiritual crisis. Searching for a way out of them, Bezukhov becomes fascinated with freemasonry, social reforms, a plan to assassinate Napoleon and, finally, he experiences a religious revelation when taken prisoner by the French troops. In the epilogue of the novel, we understand that his involvement with a secret political society is yet another such infatuation, yet another cycle in Pierre's life, and the young Nikolenka who admires him so much will follow in the footsteps of his father, Andrei Bolkonsky, whose dream had been to become a hero in the war against Napoleon.

The cycles in the life of Tolstoy's heroes are mirrored in the cycles of nature, with spring playing a key role, just as in Pasternak's text, bringing with it associations of a revival and a spiritual rebirth of characters. A tree that dies in the autumn and comes back to life in the spring is a symbol of history for Pasternak and a symbol of life for Tolstoy, when Andrei Bolkonsky compares himself to an old oak that is born again with the coming of spring.

(4) A combination of the vitality of nature and sacrality of religion in Tolstoy's image of the world leads us to the fourth important aspect—Tolstoy's striving for a "holistic awareness" that would help comprehend the unity of existence by bringing together seemingly contradictory principles, such as faith and reason (Münch 2014, p. 324). This synthesis of different interpretations of the world is at the basis of the novel *Doctor Zhivago*: nature and faith, the physician Zhivago's interests in the natural sciences and in religion, Orthodox Christianity and mythology.¹⁸

The Christian component in Pasternak's novel is connected with the tradition of the Russian Orthodox church; citations from Orthodox liturgy abound in the text (Raevesky-Hughes 1995, p. 318).¹⁹ At the same time, the novel has many elements of folklore and fairy-tales (Lavrov 1993), and its images of nature evoke the myths of plants dying and coming back to life. Pasternak brings together religion and myth in a unified image of the world, a single Easter narrative.

We can find a possible origin of this synthesis of opposites in the writings of Pasternak's cousin Olga Freidenberg, who worked on mythopoeics. Many comments made by Pasternak as he was working on *Doctor Zhivago* are known to us from his extensive correspondence with Olga Freidenberg. In February 1947, Pasternak responded to an outline of Freidenberg's talk "The Origins of Greek Lyrics" that she had sent to him following her presentation at the University of Leningrad. In her talk, Freidenberg discussed the transformation of myth into poetic metaphor. Pasternak noted that Freidenberg's analysis

was very similar to what he was looking to convey in his novel. He was excited: “Three pages of your summary—it’s a thing of bottomless depth and a real breakthrough, akin to the Communist Manifesto or the Apostolic Letters” (Mossman 1982, p. 267). What is remarkable here is not just the mention of the Bible in one sentence with the Manifesto by Marx and Engels, but also the obvious congruence of thought of Pasternak and Freidenberg. They were engaged in an intellectual and creative dialogue: Freidenberg was sending her scholarly texts to her cousin, and “many thoughts and plot moves” were suggested to Pasternak in the course of their discussions (Bykov 2007, p. 50).

Freidenberg’s works on mythopoetics include some writings on the Gospels. In 1930, she completed her article “The Entry into Jerusalem on a Donkey,” where she suggested a connection between the image of the donkey in the Gospels and the Sumerian god of fertility. In the same year, she published in the Soviet journal *The Atheist* (!) an article entitled “The Gospels as a Version of the Greek Novel,” particularly interesting when read in conjunction with *Doctor Zhivago*. Importantly, the article is based on Freidenberg’s doctoral dissertation *The Origins of the Greek Novel* that she defended in 1924 (Braginskaia 2018, p. 96) and which is mentioned more than once in her correspondence with Pasternak. In the autumn of 1924, Pasternak asked his cousin for a copy of *The Golden Bough* by Sir James George Frazer (Mossman 1982, p. 72)—a famous comparative study of mythology and religion.

In her 1930 article, Freidenberg, just like Frazer, reads the story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ with reference to a myth about a god of trees and plants that dies and is reborn. She claims the erotic elements of the ancient Greek novel share mythological roots with the evangelical motif of resurrection, because in agrarian mythology the act of fertilisation and the emergence of seedlings from the soil are interpreted as a resurrection.²⁰ Freidenberg illustrates her thesis with observations on links between spring and resurrection in the Christian tradition. Without identifying her source, she makes a reference to “one of the church fathers” and quotes *Octavius*, an early writing in defence of Christianity by Marcus Minucius Felix (Braginskaia 2018, p. 96): “See, therefore, how for our consolation all nature suggests a future resurrection. [...] We must wait also for the spring-time of the body” (Freidenberg 1930, p. 147). Thus, in Olga Freidenberg’s publications, we find an analysis of the connection between Christianity and myth that was creatively realised in the Easter narrative of *Doctor Zhivago*. Pasternak also transferred this religious and mythological narrative onto his understanding of history as the plant kingdom that dies in the autumn and comes back to life in the spring, similarly to Christ going through death and resurrection.

In 1930–1931, Pasternak wrote the second and third parts of his short novel *Safe Conduct*. It is in the second part of the text that his famous comparison of the Bible with “the notebook of humankind” can be found (Pasternak 2004b, p. 207). Pasternak explains his understanding of the similarity by saying that “each new generation interprets and describes its own reality with the help of the Bible” (Bodin 1976, p. 3). In addition to the obvious parallel with *Doctor Zhivago*, we can note here that the key concept which in Pasternak’s opinion best describes the connection between the Bible and various eras in the history of humankind is “a legend.” He says: “I understood that the history of culture is a chain of equations in images, pairwise connecting the next unknown with something that is known, and this known element, the one thing that remains consistent throughout the sequence, is a legend that is the foundation of a tradition, while the unknown element, the one that is always new, is the present moment of the current culture” (Pasternak 2004b, p. 207). The concept of a legend is close to the idea of myth turned metaphor, i.e., to mythopoetics—Olga Freidenberg’s subject of research. If we read Freidenberg’s article on the Gospels (published in 1930) together with the passage I have just quoted from Pasternak’s *Safe Conduct* (published in 1931), we can derive a tripartite model: the myth—the Bible—the legend. The Gospels absorb elements of pre-Christian mythology and, in turn, become a source of legends, such legends functioning as interpretative models

across historical eras. The same legend being actualised in different historical periods is yet another aspect of Pasternak's concept of cyclical time.

5. The Easter Narrative of History from 1917 to the Thaw

There is a famous episode in the eleventh part of *Doctor Zhivago*: Yuri Zhivago discovers a red partisan that has been killed, and a wounded White Guard, who both wore a charm with the text of Psalm 90 around their necks. The psalm was believed to have the power to protect against bullets, and the episode stresses the fact that all the participants of the Civil War were victims seeking the protection of the same God. More than that, this motif of shared suffering connects the Civil War and the repressions of the 1930s: "decades later prisoners were to sew [the text of the psalm] into their clothes and mutter its words in jail when they were summoned at night for interrogation" (p. 335). One of the novel's central motifs is the suffering that the post-revolutionary era brought with it. Zhivago's nemesis, the revolutionary fighter Strelnikov, used to passing ruthless verdicts at the court-martial, talks to Zhivago while expecting to be arrested and executed by his own comrades in arms. He calls himself a "martyr," explaining that the revolutionaries had risen against the world of "dirt," "misery" and "degradation of human beings," but ended up becoming tragic victims of history, in their turn (p. 459; translation modified—S.E.).

Historical events in the novel are organised cyclically: the pre-revolutionary era of servitude, poverty and humiliation, against which the revolutionaries rebelled, ends with the jubilation of the February Revolution and the welcoming of Easter. The October Revolution brings with it the Civil War, as a new turn in the spiral of national suffering. This is followed by the relief of the 1920s, and the beginning of the NEP (New Economic Policy) is associated in the novel with the coming of spring, the sun, and the domes of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. History, nature and religion merge again in a symbolic unity: "The doctor and Vasia arrived in Moscow in the spring of 1922 at the beginning of the NEP. The weather was fine and warm. Sunshine glancing off the golden domes of the Church of the Saviour played on the square below" (p. 473). The Easter narrative of "The Poems of Yuri Zhivago" presents the reader with a certain interpretative key that can help decipher various episodes of the novel connected with the theme of spring. Thus, the images of spring and cathedral domes in Moscow in the early NEP era are associated with Easter, without the festival being named directly.

The repressions of the 1930s represent the next stage in the cyclical history of the Passion. Lara is arrested after Zhivago's death; his two friends, Mikhail Gordon and Innokentii Dudorov, spend time in labour camps. As with the October Revolution, the northern labour camp appears in the novel as a symbol opposed to that of spring. It is a kingdom of white snow: "A wilderness of snow. [...] An open snow field with a post in the middle and a notice on it saying: 'GULAG 92 Y.N. 90'—that's all there was" (p. 506). Unlike the camps, the Second World War in the novel is symbolically connected with the summer and with the approaching victory: the one war episode is set in "the summer of 1943, after the breakthrough on the Kursk bulge and the liberation of Orel" (p. 504). Major Dudorov explains to his comrade-in-arms Gordon how he understands the historical significance of the war. According to Dudorov, after the repressions of the 1930s, "the war came as a breath of fresh air, a purifying storm, a breath of deliverance" (p. 507). The people who had been tempered by the adversities, the people who became "the moral elite of the generation," threw themselves into a meaningful battle "with abandon," pursuing a higher, real goal (p. 508; translation modified—S.E.).

Here, history is perceived again as a force of nature (a storm, fresh air); at the same time, the war makes the Christian symbolism more prominent. Dudorov shares with Gordon the story of the "martyrdom" of his bride Christina Orletsova (p. 508). Christina, who was with the partisans, "got inside the German lines and blew it [a fortified building—S.E.] up, and was taken alive and hanged" (p. 505). On the one hand, this fate is evocative of the famous story of the Soviet partisan Zoia Kosmodemianskaia, executed by the Nazis (Mukhina 2019). On the other hand, the young woman's name literally means 'a follower of

Christ': she was the daughter of a priest who had fallen victim to the Stalinist repressions. Moreover, in his conversation with Dudorov, Gordon adds: "They say the Church has canonized her" (p. 505). Thus, the partisan Christina embodies the concept of martyrdom as *imitatio Christi*, which is one of the foundations of the Orthodox culture.²¹

This interpretation of the Great Patriotic War as a spiritual rebirth in *Doctor Zhivago* should be considered in the cultural and historical context of the Soviet Union of the 1940s. During the war, the Soviet government stopped persecution of the Orthodox church, whereby the turning point was the year 1943, when the 'war episode' in the novel is set. In September 1943, Stalin had a meeting with three Metropolitan Archbishops of the Russian Orthodox church; four days later, a new Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' was elected—for the first time since 1925.²² By placing the only war episode in the novel in 1943, with a reference to the Orthodox church and the story of the partisan-martyr Christina, Pasternak made the war into an element of his religious interpretation of Russian history.

The execution of Christina, similarly to the crucifixion of Christ, represents the first part of the Easter narrative. In the logic of this narrative, the Passion must be followed by a resurrection. At first glance, the motif of Easter seems to be absent from the war episode of the novel; nevertheless, *Doctor Zhivago* is a text in which the symbolic meaning of many events can be decoded with reference to the Easter narrative. Dudorov says that, despite Christina's death, witnessing the heroic self-sacrifice of the war generation fills him "with happiness" (p. 508). The feeling of happiness in the novel is frequently accompanied by the symbolism of spring and Easter. Dudorov's reflections are also an anticipation of victory, the approach of which is signalled by the mention of the breakthrough on the Kursk bulge (1943) in the opening passages of the war episode. I think that this episode contains a coded reference to a fact of which Pasternak's contemporaries were mostly certainly conscious: the Orthodox Easter of 1945 fell on 6 May. It almost coincided with the day on which the victory of the Soviet Union in the Second World War was celebrated (9 May), thus imparting upon the victory the status of a sacral event. The Soviet government allowed Easter services, and to a certain extent the situation of 1917 was repeated, when the February Revolution and Easter merged into one in the consciousness of the contemporaries.²³

The action of the last chapter of the "Epilogue" is set at a moment in time which is imprecise in the extreme: "Five or ten years later" (p. 518). In other words, it is the summer of 1948 or 1953. This indeterminacy is surprising, considering the significant difference between "the year when Stalinist postwar repressions were coming into high gear, and the year of Stalin's death" (Polivanov 2015, p. 142). I would argue that the content of the chapter partly resolves the problem of the precise dating. The chapter in which we meet Gordon and Dudorov one autumn evening reading Yurii Zhivago's poems consists of four paragraphs. The third paragraph is just one sentence describing the atmosphere of the post-war years. The starting point is the Easter feeling of the victory of 1945 that is implied in the previous chapter: "Although victory had not brought the relief and freedom that were expected at the end of the war, nevertheless the portents of freedom filled the air throughout the postwar period, and they alone defined its historical significance" (p. 519). It is worth noticing that here "the postwar period" is referred to retrospectively, as something that is already in the past, and the focus is on their "historical significance," i.e., a macro-perspective on history as a change of eras. The concluding paragraph recreates a completely different atmosphere: "To the two old friends, as they sat by the window, it seemed that this freedom of the soul was already there, as if that very evening the future had tangibly moved into the streets below them, that they themselves had entered it and were now part of it" (p. 519). The transition from the anticipation of freedom to the experience of freedom is perceived as a transition from one historical era to another, to "the future." Unlike the "postwar period," this new era is not over yet; it is just beginning.

Thus, based on the content of this last chapter, it seems appropriate to assume it is set in 1953. These two passages describe a transition from the "postwar period" to the Thaw with its feeling of a new freedom; it is the closest the characters of the novel were

to the actual time in which the author lived. Therefore, why did Pasternak introduce this indeterminacy into the chronology; why did he speak of “five or ten years”? The writer hoped to have *Doctor Zhivago* published in the USSR and offered the novel to the magazines *Znamia* and *Novyi mir*. With this in mind, it made sense not to make the link between the epilogue and the year of Stalin’s death too obvious.

The epilogue sets the reader a riddle while at the same time hinting at a solution. The novel concludes with the “music of happiness” of the now much older heroes: they feel a “sentimental tenderness and peace” when “[t]hinking of this holy city [Moscow] and of the entire earth” (p. 519; translation modified—S.E.). The happiness that the heroes feel can be a sign of the new era of freedom following the death of Stalin in 1953. However, the motif of a “holy city” that continues the religious symbolism of the war episode signals the presence of yet another element in the epilogue. The epilogue ends with a phrase that links the prose part of the novel with “The Poems of Yurii Zhivago” the heroes read: “And the book they held seemed to know all that, to confirm and encourage their feeling” (p. 519; translation modified—S.E.). This phrase suggests that the clue to understanding the characters’ feelings is to be found in Zhivago’s poems. More than that—the poems written by Zhivago, who died in 1929, acquire a great symbolic significance: this book “seems to know” everything about the atmosphere of 1953.

It is worth remembering that the first three poems recreate the Easter narrative of the Passion and the Resurrection, with the poems “March” and “In Holy Week” connecting Easter with March.²⁴ In my analysis so far, I have looked into the special role of March within the context of the February Revolution that ended on 2 March 1917. However, if Zhivago’s poems give us a clue to understanding Gordon’s and Dudorov’s feelings at the end of the epilogue, could it be that March is somehow connected with 1953? Stalin died on 5 March 1953, and this event was perceived as a symbolic starting point of the political reforms in the country.

On 7 March 1953 Pasternak wrote a letter to Varlam Shalamov, or rather—to Shalamov’s wife, Galina Gudzh’, with the request to pass it on to her husband. In this letter, he unexpectedly prefaces his response to the death of Stalin with reminiscences about the February Revolution: “When the February Revolution broke out, I was in a god-forsaken provincial town, on the Kama river, at some plant. [...] This last tragic event also found me outside of Moscow, in the winter woods, and the state of my health will not allow me to travel to the city one of these days to say good-bye. [...] All the words are full to the brim with significance, with truth. And it is quiet in the woods” (Pasternak 2005, p. 721). The context does not make it clear what these “words” that became “full to the brim with significance” are; the phrase remains mysterious. It is possible that Pasternak meant the “words” of his novel; at the time, he was working on *Doctor Zhivago*, which he also mentions in his letter.²⁵

Even though Pasternak speaks of “winter woods” in the letter (apparently a reference to the actual weather conditions at the time), it is worth noting that the political turning point coincided with the arrival of spring—just as in 1917. The event of 1953 is attributed a great significance, which is, however, not explained, and the mention of this significance is structurally close to the image of the woods. In *Doctor Zhivago*, a forest appears as a symbol of history and at the same time as a participant of the Easter narrative in the poem “In Holy Week”. The fact that in the same poem March is linked to the festival of Easter reminds us that, in 1953, the Russian Orthodox Lent started on 16 February, and that the same year Easter fell on 5 April. In 1917, exactly one month passed between the end of the February Revolution and Easter (2 March–2 April); in 1953, exactly one month separated the death of Stalin and Easter (5 March–5 April). I think Pasternak was aware of all these parallels when, in his letter, he linked Stalin’s death with his memories of the February Revolution.

In the summer of 1917, Zhivago recognises the significance of the February Revolution that had ended just a few months previously, in March: “Freedom! Real freedom, not just talk about it, freedom, dropped out of the sky, freedom beyond our expectations” (p. 146). Gordon and Dudorov have a similar feeling at the end of the “Epilogue” in

the summer of 1953: “To the two old friends, as they sat by the window, it seemed that this freedom of the soul was already there” (p. 519). The expression “freedom of the soul” at the end of the novel evokes the connection between the February Revolution and individual experience: “Everyone was revived, reborn, changed, transformed” (p. 146). Moreover, Yuri Zhivago emphasises the accidental character of the February Revolution, and in the novel the accidental is predetermined: it is “freedom, dropped out of the sky, freedom beyond our expectations, freedom by accident, through a misunderstanding” (p. 146).²⁶ The key events in Pasternak’s novel, of which Stalin’s death is one (without being mentioned directly), obey not the plans of human beings, but the higher natural and religious logic of life itself. Thus, in the context of the novel, the February Revolution and Stalin’s death are connected with each other through the triple semantics of the beginning of spring, a political renewal, and the approaching festival of Easter.²⁷ The death of Stalin as a harbinger of the resurrection of Russia²⁸ acquires a sacral significance in Pasternak’s religious concept of history.

On 14 March 1953, Pasternak wrote a letter to the Chairman of the Soviet Writers’ Union, Aleksandr Fadeev. The letter was evasive, with some ambiguous formulations (Bykov 2007, pp. 531–32), but I am particularly interested in two sentences that refer to Moscow saying good-bye to Stalin: “And this second city, a city within a city, a city of wreaths that has been erected on the square! As if the whole plant kingdom came to pay its respects, as if all of it showed up for the funeral” (Pasternak 2005, p. 723). Just like in the novel *Doctor Zhivago*, nature here is not a passive background, but an active participant of events: it has come to attend the funeral. More than that: the expression “plant kingdom” (*rastitel’noye tsarstvo*) connects Pasternak’s letter with the novel.²⁹ I have already suggested that in *Doctor Zhivago* the plant kingdom is a metaphor for history: Zhivago “reflected again that he conceived of history, of what is called the course of history, not in the accepted way but by analogy with the vegetable kingdom” (p. 453). Pasternak’s words from his letter to Fadeev can be understood with reference to this metaphor: not only Stalin himself, but the whole era, is being seen off by the plant kingdom of Russian history.

Let us come back to Yuri Zhivago’s poem “March,” which is to be read in connection with the end of the February Revolution and the death of Stalin. One word that is most applicable to the state of nature described in the poem (even though it is not used in the text) is ‘thaw.’ The Russian word for Thaw (*ottepel’*) refers to the warm weather (*teplaiia pogoda*) in the winter or else in the early spring, when snow and ice start melting. March is the first month of spring, and the poem’s imagery conveys a sense of snow melting, of ice in the sun: “the snow is wasting,” there is “the thrumming of melting icicles,” “cathectic icicles hanging on to gables,” “the chattering of rills that never sleep” (Pasternak 1958, pp. 523–24; translation modified—S.E.). We are, yet again, dealing here with a situation when a key symbol is not named directly, but is instead encoded in images of the novel.

The word ‘thaw’ became a political symbol following the publication of Il’ia Erenburg’s eponymous short novel in the spring of 1954, before Pasternak completed his work on the novel. In the writings of Pasternak, the images of spring and thaw acquired a political significance as early as in 1918, in the poem “The Russian Revolution.” There, the speaker feels the “ice-breaking breath” of the revolution, hears “the dripping of melting snow,” sees the sun reflected in brooks, and speaks to the Russian Revolution directly: “How good it was to breathe you in March” (Pasternak 2004a, p. 224). After Erenburg’s opportune choice of the title for his short novel made the word ‘thaw’ a metaphor for the liberalisation of the society, everything fell into place for Pasternak. To quote his own letter to Shalamov, “all the words filled to the brim with significance.”

Interestingly, the joyful arrival of spring at the end of Erenburg’s *The Thaw* is accompanied by the image of willow: “First of all—the winter is over. [...] Second—willow trees are burgeoning”; “a girl is carrying a willow branch” (Erenburg 1954, pp. 138, 141). In Orthodox Christianity, the willow, which blooms before other trees in the spring, is the symbol of Palm Sunday, the festival celebrating Christ’s entry into Jerusalem the week before Easter. Even though there are no religious motifs in Erenburg’s short novel, the

image of a willow tree is associated not only with the spring, but also with the approaching Orthodox Easter.³⁰ Yurii Zhivago's poem "The Earth," which is also connected with the Easter narrative, features a willow tree.³¹ Thus, *The Thaw* by Erenburg and *Doctor Zhivago* echo each other not because there is a causal relationship between the two texts, but because they share a cultural and historical context.

6. Doctor Zhivago and Politics

Before we move on to a general conclusion, a few words on the political dimension of the novel are in order. Immediately upon publication, *Doctor Zhivago* was rejected not only by the official Soviet critical establishment, but also by the right-Russian émigré groups "who felt nostalgic for the pre-revolutionary Russia" (Fleishman 2009, p. 289). Dmitrii Pronin's review in the Russian-language American newspaper *Russian Life* (7–8 January 1959) is representative of this reaction. Pronin suspected Pasternak of collusion with the Soviet government. In the reviewer's opinion, this would explain the negative portrayal of Tsarist Russia and the White Guard's crimes in the Civil War, whose cruelty rivalled that of the Red Army (Fleishman 2009, pp. 291–96). This response is not surprising, considering Pasternak's complex political views that could not be reduced to any particular ideology.

Rejecting monarchy, the novel's protagonist enthusiastically welcomed the February Revolution. He also saw the October Revolution as historically inevitable, even though with time he grew disillusioned with its results (Polivanov 2015, pp. 142–48).³² The novel's key ideals—freedom and the value of individual life—echo the declared principles of the February Revolution with its assertion of the primacy of the democratic world order.

Writing about Pasternak's life, Lazar Fleishman speaks of the writer's hopes for "a transformation of the Soviet regime that would direct it to a more humanist and democratic path of development" (Fleishman 2006, pp. 685, 704). The novel's treatment of the 'resurrection' of Russia in the spring of 1917 as a metaphor of liberation was common in the cultural context of the February Revolution. The changes that the spring of 1953 brought with it could be seen as a 'resurrection' in the sense of a return to the ideals of the February Revolution, suggesting that it might be possible for Russia to choose democracy.

It is worth noting that Pasternak's vision of the future of Russia was different from that of another Soviet Nobel Prize winner, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn,³³ as is evidenced by the latter's article "Reflections on the February Revolution" (written in 1980–1983). The same historical event that Pasternak sees as sacral acquires demonic features in Solzhenitsyn's interpretation: it is a "fatal night" that destroyed Russian history (Solzhenitsyn 1995, p. 482). According to Solzhenitsyn, the February Revolution prevented the monarchy from going into battle against what was to become the October Revolution (ibid., p. 484). The exiled writer was also convinced that the spring of 1917 brought with it a catastrophic "loss of the national consciousness" (ibid., p. 503).

Pasternak's protagonist sees the same events completely differently. For him, the individual comes before the nation. He and his friend Mikhail Gordon believe that Christianity has replaced the idea of "a nation" with "the mystery of the individual" (p. 122). I think Yurii Zhivago (and Boris Pasternak) would not be sympathetic to the political programme proposed by Solzhenitsyn in his 1990 article "Rebuilding Russia." The country, writes Solzhenitsyn, should become democratic, but the model best suited to its needs is to be found in the pre-revolutionary institutions of local self-government such as *mir* (peasant communities) and *zemstvo* (elective assemblies) (Solzhenitsyn 1995, p. 585). Solzhenitsyn's "extremely conservative programme for national regeneration" and his "concern with preserving Russian values" (Rowley 1997, p. 328) would not have appealed to Pasternak's heroes, convinced as they were that there is no room for nations in the Christian world.

7. Conclusions

We can now present a short summary. "The Poems of Yurii Zhivago" play the role of a symbolic clue that helps decipher the events of the prose part of the novel. *Doctor Zhivago* retells the history of Russia as a religious parable modelled on the Gospel story of the life

of Christ. This parable is founded on the idea of a cyclical movement of history, akin to the principle at the basis of both the natural calendar and the Orthodox religious practices. In the Russian history of the years 1901–1955, periods of suffering, martyrdom, and political and military violence were followed by years of renovation, liberation and rebirth. In the novel *Doctor Zhivago*, this bipartite Easter narrative passes through several cycles: (1) pre-revolutionary Russia and the February Revolution; (2) the October Revolution with the Civil War, followed by the relief brought by the NEP period; (3) the repressions of the 1930s and the Second World War (the way it is interpreted in the novel); and (4) the post-war years and the Thaw.³⁴ In the second part of each cycle, the reader can discern echoes of the hopes for political progress that Boris Pasternak nourished at the time. For example, the writer was inspired by his meetings with Anatolii Lunacharskii and Lev Kamenev, both of whom occupied senior positions in the Communist Party and rejected revolutionary terror (Fleishman 2006, p. 642). For some time in 1933–1934, Pasternak felt sympathetic to the Soviet power, when he thought he detected signs of the government moving towards liberal reforms (ibid., p. 685).

At the same time, *Doctor Zhivago* depicts several annual micro-cycles (the temporary relief of suffering that spring brings with it) and the grand historical macro-cycle from the Passion of the October Revolution to the Resurrection of 1953. The end of the novel marks a symbolic return of the Russian history to the March of 1917, to the Easter days of the February Revolution. It seems reasonable to conclude that the dominant motifs of the two springs in the novel (the spring of 1917 and that of 1953) correspond to the two Easters in “Yurii Zhivago’s Poems.”

According to the overarching symbolic logic of the novel and the philosophy of history it expresses, the happy conclusion of *Doctor Zhivago* in the epilogue is not the final point of a linear progression, but just another loop in the cyclical structure of time. It is not by chance that the narrator chooses to use the verb “seem”: “To the two old friends, as they sat by the window, it seemed that this freedom of the soul was already there” (p. 519).

The revolutionary Strelnikov is one character in the novel who believes in the linear model of time—like a “straight line into a better future” (Betha 1989, p. 251). He interprets the events of the Civil War as the Last Judgement, i.e., with reference to the apocalyptic narrative of the Second Coming. Fighting for a better future goes hand in hand with an apocalyptic sense of the end of history, as when Strelnikov tells Zhivago: “These are apocalyptic times, my dear sir, this is the Last Judgement. This is a time for angels with flaming swords and winged beasts from the abyss” (p. 252).

At the same time, it is obvious that the Book of Revelation is the gravitational centre of Yurii Zhivago’s worldview, of his reflections on death and ways to overcome it. Unlike Strelnikov, Zhivago suggests an alternative reading of the Apocalypse, where the linearity of time can be overcome. In a conversation with the gravely ill Anna Ivanovna, Zhivago questions a literal understanding of the resurrection that the Book of Revelation promises to the dead: “Resurrection. In the crude form in which it is preached to console the weak, it is alien to me. I have always understood Christ’s words about the living and the dead in a different sense. Where could you find room for all these hordes of people accumulated over thousands of years? The universe isn’t big enough for them; God, the good, and meaningful purpose would be crowded out” (p. 67). According to Zhivago, the triumph of resurrection that St John the Divine promises to the followers of the true religion is not a dream of the future, but the essence of life itself in its cycle of dying and being born anew: “But all the time, life, one, immense, identical throughout its innumerable combinations and transformations, fills the universe and is continually reborn. You are anxious about whether you will rise from the dead or not, but you rose from the dead when you were born and you didn’t notice it” (pp. 67–68).

Thus, Strelnikov and Zhivago embody not only two different understandings of time—linear and cyclical—but also two corresponding interpretations of the Book of Revelation. In the novel’s parable of history, the emotional collapse and suicide of revolutionary

Strelnikov is juxtaposed with Gordon's and Dudorov's repeated returns to Yurii Zhivago's poems that explain to them the meaning of the new era.

In my introduction, I pointed out that a religious interpretation of the revolution in Russian literature often includes references to the Apocalypse and the apocalyptic (millenarian) sect (Etkind 1998, p. 20). Understood thus, the Apocalypse is linked with the linear teleological model, the final point of which is the general salvation at the end of history, the Last Judgement. In *Doctor Zhivago*, the cyclical repetition of the Easter narrative creates an alternative conception of history that is not linear but cyclical, and whose narrative model is not the Second Coming, but the Gospel story of the Passion and the Resurrection of Christ. Thus, when talking about connections between a philosophy of history and religion in Russian culture, I suggest distinguishing between the Easter and apocalyptic narratives. These two narrative models can be in a complementary relationship with each other, but they have different foundations.

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Notes

- ¹ These start and end dates of the novel's action are based on precise references in the text and on the age of the characters (Sukhikh 2013, pp. 536–37, 564). The year in which the last scene is set cannot be determined with absolute certainty, because the narrator places the episode "five or ten years" after the action of the previous section (Pasternak 1958, p. 518). In this article, I argue that the final scene takes place in 1953.
- ² "Miracle," "Evil Days," "Magdalene I" and "Magdalene II", "Garden of Gethsemane".
- ³ This observation is made, either in passing or as part of a more detailed argumentation, in most works on *Doctor Zhivago*. I will mention here by way of example just John Givens's monograph on the image of Christ in Russian literature, in which one chapter is dedicated to Pasternak's novel and the figure of Yurii Zhivago (Givens 2018, pp. 177–204).
- ⁴ Not by chance do some scholars call the novel "the Gospel of Boris Pasternak" (Leiderman 2010, p. 801; Sukhikh 2013, p. 534).
- ⁵ Throughout the text, references to the translation of Pasternak's novel are given by page numbers only.
- ⁶ Ivan Esaulov points out the central role of Easter in *Doctor Zhivago*, the structure of which is based on "the Orthodox yearly cycle" (Esaulov 2006, p. 73). However, Esaulov does not make a connection between this temporal cycle and depictions of history and nature in the novel. In his book on the image of Christ in Russian literature, John Givens twice makes a passing reference to Pasternak's magnum opus as an "Easter novel" (Givens 2018, pp. 178, 180).
- ⁷ Boris Kolonitskii cites several sources from the spring of 1917, the authors of which spoke of the "resurrection" (*voskresenie/voskreshenie*) of Russia or of the Russian people. Without implying a particular political system, this emotionally charged metaphor was associated with the idea of liberation—a rejection of the chains of oppression. The idea of a "resurrection" postulated not only a return to a previous era, but also a transformation. Historical evidence from the time includes, for example, an Easter card printed in 1917 that bore the following inscription: "Christ has risen. Long live the republic!" (Kolonitskii 2012, pp. 79, 82, 83).
- ⁸ An authoritative Russian source dates this poem to 1918; it was first published in 1989 (Pasternak 2004a, pp. 225, 455).
- ⁹ Despite the presence of some apocalyptic motifs in the poem, its overall religious imagery is contained by the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection (Etkind 1998, p. 397).
- ¹⁰ As Thomas F. Rogers noted, the eleventh section of the novel also features the Gospel motifs of Judas's betrayal and the Last Supper (Rogers 1974, pp. 385–86). There is one more similar reference in a speech held before new recruits, who are told they are about to make their first steps on the way of the cross that "stretches out before [them]" for the salvation of the motherland (p. 322).
- ¹¹ I should point out that Christmas does feature in the novel, but associations with it are not always positive. For example, Anna Ivanovna, in whose family Yurii Zhivago grew up, dies at Christmas. Thus, in the text, the Christmas festival is secondary to the Easter narrative.
- ¹² In this connection, it is also important to remember that, as a child, Yurii Zhivago often imagined the world around him as a forest, with God as a "keeper of the forest" (p. 87).
- ¹³ Early in the novel, Nikolai Vedeniapin makes the frequently quoted comment that "man does not live in nature but in history" (p. 10; translation modified—S.E.). In the general context of the novel, this statement can be interpreted as a reference to people's living not *just* in nature, but in nature which is at the same time history, i.e., in history.

David Bethea pointed out that the transformation of “brute history into Christian History” in the text is related to “the seasonal cycle, the cycle that [...] is epitomized by the natural and religious connotations of Easter” (Bethea 1989, p. 251).

The 20th century philosophy of life was partly grounded in the teachings of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (Briukhanova 2010, p. 13). Pasternak studied philosophy at the universities of Moscow and Marburg, and his writings show the influence of Schelling (Gasparov 1992, p. 101; Smirnov 1996, pp. 60–61).

Hence, the ambivalent attitude of Tolstoy (and Pasternak) to Hegel’s teleological philosophy of history (for a discussion of Tolstoy and Hegel see Klimova 2017). Scholars are split on how this is reflected in *Doctor Zhivago*. Igor Smirnov reads the novel as a refutation of Hegel’s philosophy (Smirnov 1996, p. 193), whereas Barry Scherr finds evidence in the text of its author’s having been influenced by Hegel’s *Early Theological Writings* (*Hegels Theologische Jugendschriften*) that first saw light in Germany in 1907 (Scherr 1991).

In the authoritative Russian source used here, the original French text by Verlaine seems to have been reprinted with a typo (“saint”).

The links between Christian and mythological motifs in the imagery of the forest and the garden in *Doctor Zhivago* are analysed in Anna Skoropadskaia (2006) doctoral dissertation.

In the late 1940s, Pasternak often attended Orthodox church services in Moscow and in Peredelkino (a suburb of Moscow, where Pasternak had a country house), and studied the Bible and liturgical literature in Church Slavonic (Fleishman 1995).

In my opinion, Freidenberg’s analysis of the similarity between the ancient erotic novel and the Gospels may well be the origin of the paradox that John Givens formulated thus when discussing *Zhivago*: “After all, how can a man who loves and abandons three women and the five children he sired with them be anything like Christ?” (Givens 2018, p. 201).

This tradition originated with the first Russian saints (“passion-bearers,” as they are referred to in Orthodox sources), the princely martyrs Boris and Gleb, who were murdered in 1015. For an exploration of the theological and cultural aspects of this tradition, see Dirk Uffelmann (2010) monograph.

Lazar Fleishman suggested that the growth of Pasternak’s interest in Christianity could be related to the rehabilitation of the religion that inspired hope for changes in the country (Fleishman 1995).

The famous Soviet Victory Parade on the Red Square in Moscow took place on 24 June 1945, on the day of the Orthodox festival of Holy Trinity (the fiftieth day after Easter).

There are no obvious religious motifs in the poem “March,” but the ones immediately preceding and following it are “Hamlet” and “In Holy Week”, the second of which also mentions March.

Yurii Zhivago’s poem “March” was written in 1946. In April 1954, it was among the ten poems printed in the magazine *Znamia* under the title “Poems from the Prose Novel *Doctor Zhivago*”. Il’ia Erenburg’s short novel *The Thaw* appeared in the next issue of the same journal.

The question of the extent to which this understanding of the February Revolution reflects the actual historical circumstances of the event is beyond the scope of this article.

Pasternak was particularly productive in the summer and autumn of 1953; he felt inspired and worked on the novel with enthusiasm (Bykov 2007, p. 712). In September 1953, he wrote in a letter to the Zhuravlevs that in the preceding summer months he had experienced that “fruitful bliss” of creativity that he had known only once before, when working on the poetry collection “My Sister, Life. The Summer of 1917” (Pasternak 2005, p. 746; Bykov 2007, p. 712). Most of the poems that were included in that collection had been written following the February Revolution, in the summer of 1917.

In the novel, this notion of a ‘resurrection’ is programmatically connected with the more general idea of a liberation, just as it was in the texts and historical artifacts from the spring of 1917 that were analysed by Boris Kolonitskii (2012, pp. 79, 82).

Ivanova (2001) and Bykov (2007) both noted references to some motifs from *Doctor Zhivago* in the letter.

The Thaw was printed in the fifth (May) issue of the magazine *Znamia* in 1954, shortly after Easter that was celebrated relatively late that year—on 25 April.

In 1946, one of the working titles of the novel was *Boys and Girls*—a slightly modified quotation from Aleksandr Blok’s poem “Willow Branches,” from which Pasternak also intended to borrow an epigraph to his novel (Pasternak 2004c, p. 645). Blok’s poem describes children carrying home candles and willow branches on the eve of Palm Sunday.

The protagonist’s ambivalent attitude to the October Revolution reflects Pasternak’s own ambiguous feelings towards Vladimir Lenin. His “condemnation” of Lenin immediately following the October Revolution gave way to an understanding of the “tragically irresolvable contradictions inherent in the revolution” (Fleishman 2006, p. 641).

Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1958; Solzhenitsyn received his in 1970. The two writers are often discussed in the same context due to the important role they played in the formation of the social and political consciousness of the Russian intelligentsia (Sergeeva-Kliatis 2018).

Naturally, these cycles are not identical, although in their core they repeat the same symbolic model of the Easter narrative. *Doctor Zhivago* was not Pasternak’s first work that featured Easter motifs. The protagonist of the epic poem *Lieutenant Schmidt* (published in a serialised form in 1926–1927) stands at the head of the sailors’ uprising on the cruiser *Ochakov*. Sentenced to death, Schmidt welcomes his fate in the spirit of Christ, on the threshold of a new historic era (Bodin 1976, pp. 2–3).

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