

A Prose Elegy on the Death of Freedom of Thought

Glenn Corn

Whoever would overthrow the Liberty of a Nation, must begin by subduing the Freedom of Speech.

—Benjamin Franklin

We hear a lot today about cancel culture. Most of us have heard horrible stories about innocent people accused of crimes or unacceptable indiscretions requiring public humiliation and social isolation. Public figures, officials, or even a colleague in the office can be suddenly labeled as guilty by the court of public opinion for some uninvestigated allegation or unsubstantiated suspicion of a misdeed and given no chance to prove their innocence to a rumor-hungry mob that is either not capable of thinking critically or unwilling to take the time to research facts. Judgments passed as quickly as a tweet can be written, or condemnation can be posted. Souls can be crushed. Careers can be ended. Lives can be destroyed. Freedom of thought and expression can be threatened.

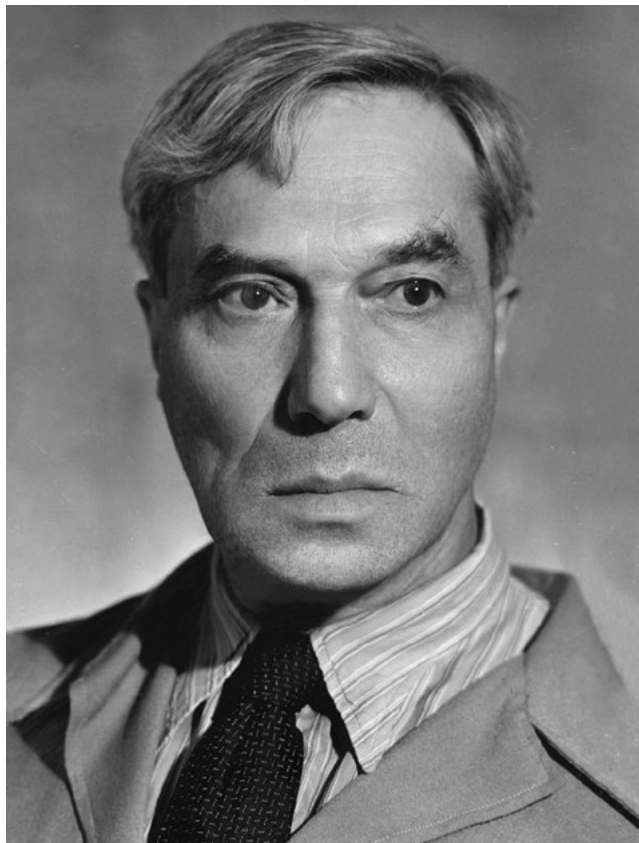
This is a terrible trend in today's America—the phenomenon of character assassination and canceling others—but while this reality may appear to be something new to us, it is not.

While most Americans are probably not very familiar with all of his literary work, many have heard the name Boris Pasternak in connection with the Soviet poet and writer's incredible novel *Doctor Zhivago*, thanks to the award-winning film adaptation of the novel that is considered a classic of American cinema.¹ Some may also remember that Pasternak was the first Soviet writer in history, and the second Russian, to win the

Nobel Prize in Literature after his novel was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and published in the West.²

While *Doctor Zhivago* brought Pasternak fame and honor outside of the Soviet Union, it brought him great misfortune inside of that empire. Prior to writing the novel, Pasternak was lauded by the Communist Party and his fellow writers as a hero and great talent, and, after the death of Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who was known as the “Poet of the Revolution,” it was Pasternak who was selected to take Mayakovsky's esteemed place in the Soviet system. With that prestige came privileges unknown to ordinary Soviet citizens: access to otherwise hard-to-acquire products, the privilege of living in his own home instead of a communal apartment, and other allowances most Soviets could only dream about. And, most importantly for an intellectual like Pasternak, it allowed him to meet with friends and fellow intellectuals and share his thoughts and views on issues most Soviet citizens were too afraid to speak about given the looming threat to freedom of expression emanating from Joseph Stalin's secret police.

Interestingly, when Pasternak began to write *Doctor Zhivago*, he understood that the novel could anger some Soviet officials and might not be welcomed by the country's all-powerful censors and Communist Party apparatchiks. He understood that if he put his thoughts on paper and expressed ideas or sentiments that were not welcomed or approved by the authorities, he risked losing his special place in Soviet society and the privileges he enjoyed. While many lesser people might have chosen to suppress the ideas inside and opt to protect the material benefits that his special status gave him,



Boris Pasternak, 1959 (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

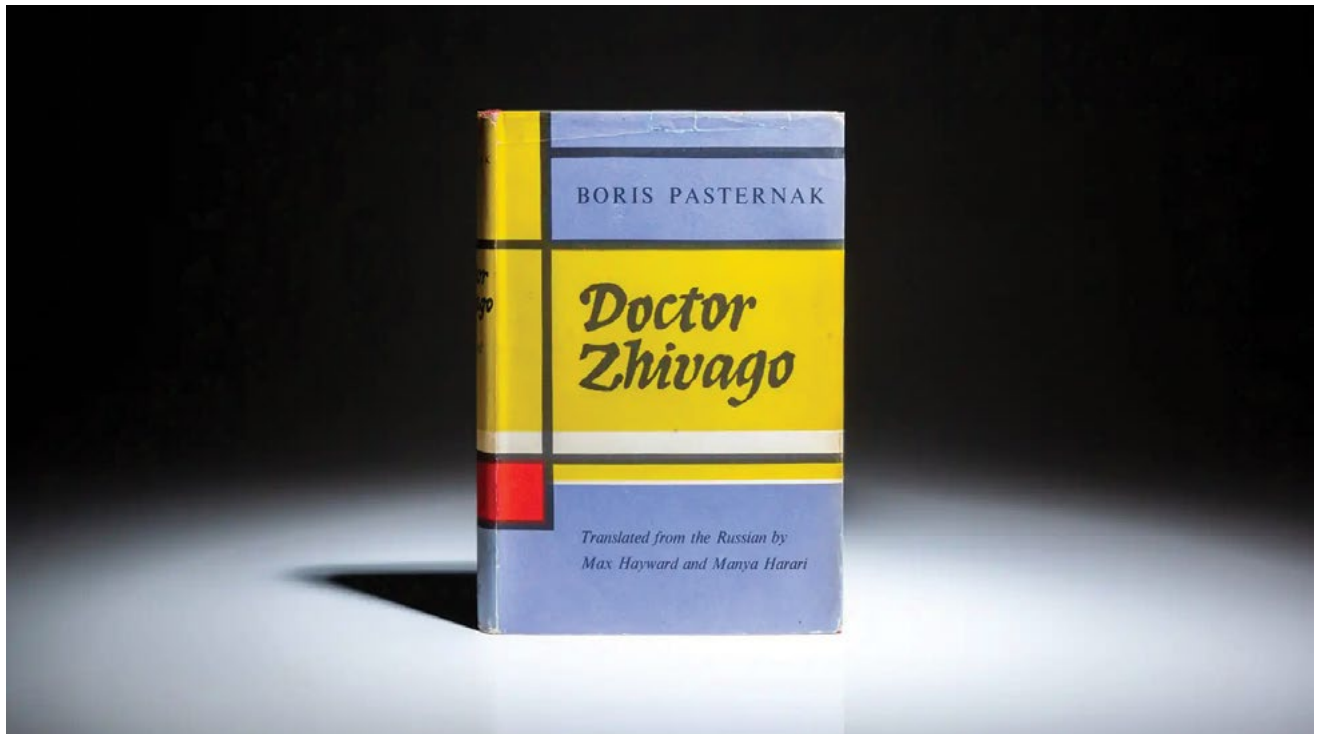
Pasternak, as an artist, could not accept the idea of self-censorship. He understood that he had a story that he needed to tell, a complicated story of life in a time of great trouble and upheaval in Russia set against the backdrop of revolution, civil war, death, destruction, and struggle. Pasternak did not write his novel to criticize or judge anyone—not the communists, not the monarchists, not the “reds” or the “whites.” He wrote it to share his feelings about love and beauty existing even during the most troubled of times. In telling this story, he refused to whitewash the backdrop, the reality of what he had personally experienced during this terrible period in Russian and Soviet history. And because he refused to censor his thoughts or deny himself the right to self-expression, he paid a terrible price.

Long before cancellation was socially prevalent, the completion of Pasternak’s novel resulted in his cancellation. The Soviet authorities and their lackeys in the Union of Soviet Writers did not appreciate Pasternak’s novel and the fact that the writer refused to present “Soviet reality” as something grand and

spectacular. They accused him of writing an anticommunist novel that undermined the image of the USSR. Understanding that the Soviet bureaucracy might never allow his novel to be published in the Soviet Union, Pasternak took a second courageous step and allowed a copy of his manuscript to be smuggled out of the country to Europe, where it was eventually published in France. For his great artistic work, Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, which of course only angered the Soviet authorities, who labeled Pasternak an “enemy of the people” and quickly moved to cancel him in the eyes of his own people.

While Ivan Bunin was forced into external exile by the Soviet system, Pasternak was forced into spiritual exile, stuck inside of the USSR. The once-lauded Soviet writer and poet was placed under surveillance, ostracized, and very sadly, quickly shunned by many of those who earlier called themselves his friends and rushed to benefit from his previous privileged status. After his cancellation by the Soviet Union, Pasternak lived the remaining few years of his life in obscurity, isolated and alone, unable to publish any more of his work, and surviving primarily by translating foreign literary works into Russian. While he was not executed in the basement of the infamous KGB headquarters in Central Moscow or shipped off to the Gulag, spiritually he was executed, and according to many who knew him, he died a broken man who had been abandoned by

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Cover of *Doctor Zhivago* (Photo courtesy of First Edition Rare Books)

his friends and his country only because he dared to express himself in writing.

Of course, as is often the case, after Pasternak was canceled, the most senior official in the Soviet Union's hierarchy, Communist Party General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, decided to actually read *Doctor Zhivago*. His conclusion? Khrushchev found nothing in the novel he considered to be anti-Soviet and, instead, is said to have opined that Pasternak had written a great novel. But by the time Khrushchev read Pasternak's novel, it was too late to undo the damage done to Pasternak and to Soviet society.

Fortunately, you may be thinking, that type of horrible behavior and treatment of a great figure could never happen in the United States. The Soviet Union—Russia, maybe—but not in the United States. Yet, sadly, America has its own terrible example of cancellation from the same period of history. As Pasternak was destroyed in the USSR, an American scientist and thinker, Dr. Robert Oppenheimer, was forced to suffer his own public and personal humiliation at the hands of jealous and petty individuals who did not appreciate the fact that Oppenheimer dared to have his own ideas and was courageous enough to express them.

Oppenheimer entered the 1950s as a hero in the eyes of the American public. He was a brilliant scientist and capable organizer who was credited with driving the scientific aspects of research on the Manhattan Project, which led to the United States as the first country in the world to create an atomic bomb. At the time, during the Second World War, being the first to attain such a capability was an incredibly significant achievement given the threat the world faced from Nazi Germany of reversing the course of the war and imposing fascist ideology on others. And even after the Nazis were defeated, having an atomic capability forced the expansionist Stalin to think twice about trying to force Soviet rule on other countries. But like Pasternak, Oppenheimer would pay a significant price for saying what he believed and not conforming to the views of others—as we like to say today, “for speaking truth to power.”

In Oppenheimer's case, he did not agree with the views of a powerful Washington insider, German-born American political philosopher Lewis Strauss. Oppenheimer refused to go along with Strauss's views on important issues related to nuclear and scientific policy, and as a result, Strauss exploited his influence within the U.S. government to organize a vicious

character assassination of Oppenheimer that resulted in the “father of the atomic bomb” having his security clearances stripped and labeled a Soviet spy. Much like Pasternak, Oppenheimer was canceled by his detractors. Oppenheimer had his rights violated by Strauss’s allies inside of the U.S. government and was the target of a fabricated case against him that called into question Oppenheimer’s loyalty to the United States and his suitability.

While some who were aware of Strauss’s manipulation of the system and his lies about Oppenheimer eventually had the courage to speak up, it was only after the brilliant scientist’s clearances were revoked and his role in any future discussion of nuclear policy in the United States was ended. Long after Oppenheimer had passed away, in the 1990s, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service opened the archives of the Soviet-era intelligence service and revealed that the Soviets had never recruited Oppenheimer, nor had he shared sensitive information with Moscow. This information was soon verified by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which also announced that it had never collected any information that supported the allegation that Oppenheimer had betrayed the United States. Like Pasternak, Oppenheimer’s name was eventually cleared in the court of public opinion, but only after incredible moral and spiritual damage had been done to Oppenheimer and the United States.

Sadly, the blockbuster film about Oppenheimer’s life and personal struggle was released at a time when too many Americans are having to suffer from the phenomenon that is commonly referred to as cancel culture.³ In recent years, too many Americans have been targeted by political opponents, jealous competitors, or just overly emotional and poorly educated individuals or groups who are quick to pass judgment and condemn others without taking the time to collect and research facts and demand credible evidence of wrongdoing by the target of accusations. We know from the cases of Pasternak and Oppenheimer that character assassination is not a new weapon for the human species, but today, technology has made it possible to disseminate lies or distortions to large audiences with little real effort. The quality of U.S. education is declining, and with it, the ability of Americans to think critically. This has led to a dangerously high number of people having the characters assailed,



J. Robert Oppenheimer, 1944 (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Department of Energy)

reputations damaged, and professional and personal lives ruined. This trend is not only unfair to those unjustly targeted, but it is also extremely unhealthy given the fear it is creating among a large portion of the population, leaving too many Americans afraid to express their views or feelings freely.

The tragedy for everyone in the stories of Pasternak and Oppenheimer is that after they were subjected to character assassination, they could no longer continue to contribute more of the amazing things they had produced earlier in their lives. The world was denied their original ideas and unique perspectives. Unfortunately, this tragedy continues today. How many original thoughts or concepts are stifled by the oppressive environment that is created when people are too afraid to speak their minds or risk putting their thoughts down in writing and sharing them? Intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically, what is the cost on our society and future when ideas are suppressed and free speech crushed, not by some all-powerful secret police but

by an aggressive group of fellow citizens who refuse to accept that everyone has a right to think for themselves and disagree with their beliefs? How many young people today sit in college classes and subject themselves to self-censorship for fear of ostracism or sideline by their professors, teachers, and fellow students who feel that they have a right to express their own views but will not tolerate anyone expressing contrarian views? How competitive will the United States remain as a country if we continue to dissuade creativity and alternative expression?

Oppenheimer and his colleagues in the Manhattan Project beat their German competitors in the race to develop the atomic bomb not because they were smarter or better educated but because they were operating in a country that, at the time, encouraged the free exchange of ideas and promoted creativity and innovation. Diversity of thought, freedom of expression, and the encouragement of innovative thinking were key elements in the story of America's success, and these traditions are critical to the future of our country. Repression of thought and the silencing of voices is a far greater threat to our country today than the threat posed by any foreign nation. Too many people in the United States today think that they have the right to shout down or silence those who share views that they do not agree with, and they are allowed to get away with this type of uncivil behavior. Too many use the same tactics used by Oppenheimer's and Pasternak's opponents to silence alternative views.

During my career serving the United States, I spent many years working in countries where citizens who dared to openly express views that were not accepted by their governments could have serious consequences. Those who wrote anything that was not considered acceptable by a regime could face a tragic fate. In these countries, people were intellectually and spiritually terrorized by their government. However, in today's America, it is not the government that is terrorizing its citizens; the citizens themselves are the source of their own terror. Citizens are attacking each other and stifling free speech and artistic expression through a form of mob censorship. They are denying each other a key element of liberty that was once highly valued by Americans, a freedom Americans fought for and sacrificed their lives to defend.

Maybe, before we rush to judge someone accused of some indiscretion in the news or targeted with unsubstantiated allegations in social media, we should take the time to investigate the source of the allegations, collect facts, and control the temptation to join others who criticize and judge. If we do that, maybe the future Oppenheimers and Pasternaks will never have to suffer unjust and unwarranted humiliation and belittlement. And, next time anyone of us sees another trying to silence, marginalize, or sideline someone for the simple crime of thinking differently than the crowd, we should remember the following quote by Benjamin Franklin: "They who give up essential Liberty, to obtain a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety."⁴ ■

Notes

Epigraph. Benjamin Franklin, "Silence Dogood, no. 8, 9 July 1722," Founders Online, accessed 12 December 2023, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-01-02-0015>, first published in *The New-England Courant*, 9 July 1722.

1. Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Manya Harari and Max Hayward (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991); *Doctor Zhivago*, directed by David Lean, screenplay by Robert Bolt (Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1965).

2. The first Russian writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature was Ivan Bunin, another incredibly talented Russian-born writer who was forced to flee Soviet Russia during the Russian Civil War because of his well-placed disgust for the Bolsheviks and the threat they presented to freedom of speech and expression.

3. *Oppenheimer*, directed by Christopher Nolan (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2023). *Oppenheimer* is a major biographical feature film that explores events in the life of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the American theoretical physicist credited with his role during World War II for providing the scientific direction and oversight of the process that resulted in the development of the atomic bomb, the use of which many assert led directly to the final capitulation of Japan.

4. Benjamin Franklin, "Pennsylvania Assembly: Reply to the Governor, 11 November 1755," Founders Online, accessed 12 December 2023, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-06-02-0107>, first published in *Votes and Proceedings of the House of Representatives, 1755–1756* (Philadelphia, 1756), 19–21.