

DOCTOR ZHIVAGO

Directed by David Lean
Produced by Carlo Ponti
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
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For some apolitical men, a conscientious few, ideas need not have a practical application. They are of intrinsic worth. The advantage to be gained by exploiting an idea is of no concern. These men love ideas for the sake of wisdom, tranquility, and transcendence; Zhivago was such a man.

Bereft of family at a tender age, he was taken in by friends of his late mother's. As he eventually married the girl he regarded as his sister, he didn't leave his family to start his own. Instead his family grew. Along the way he discovered a talent for poetry and became a physician. Life was sweet, and his world was small. But then Yuri Zhivago was swept up in World War I. Right on its heels, the Bolshevik Revolution brought poverty to his family. In his desperation he began pilfering wood to heat his family's apartment. This risk he took to protect and preserve his adopted father, his wife, and his son. Zhivago's half-brother Yevgraf, a Communist official of some importance, shielded Zhivago from punishment for the theft. But he warned Zhivago that he was at risk for an entirely different reason—his poetry had been deemed bourgeois and antithetical to the Revolutionary spirit. Yevgraf urged Zhivago to take his family east, away from the political volatility.

Following a harrowing journey, they arrive at Varykino, where his father-in-law Alexander was once master of a country estate. But Bolshevik domination extends even here; the grand house is shuttered and the authorities have prohibited entrance. With nowhere else to go they take up residence in the gardening shed. Zhivago has never asked much of life. He never complains. And Yuri, when he enters the shed, remarks, with an engaging smile, "Oh, yes—we can manage here." And so a man raised in privilege, highly educated, having already suffered much, finds a way to find joy. This indefatigable gratitude is one of Zhivago's defining characteristics.

Yet now, with the pace of life slowing markedly, Yuri's mind begins to wander. And his gratitude, his quiet satisfaction with his life, his quiet acceptance of his circumstances, begins to slip. Perhaps life had moved too fast before. Or perhaps his unquestioning contentedness with things as they are blinded him to what might be. And now he wonders, for in his years of medical service on behalf of the Russian Army Zhivago came to love an extraordinary woman, the enigmatic Lara. (She has a crippling effect on many men—she's the pivot point of *three* overlapping love triangles.)

Zhivago begins visiting a village near his humble home. Lara is there. And they become lovers. Yuri eventually wrests himself away from Lara, his aching need to be true to his wife winning out over his fervent passion for his mistress. She, with equal strength, accepts his decision. But before Zhivago can return to the bosom of his family, he is conscripted into Red Army medical service. He never sees Tonya again, and she, via a letter, seems to accept Lara as

her rightful successor. Zhivago can barely read it, his guilt and love for Tonya overwhelming him.

In moments such as this, the movie, though filling an expansive canvas, is revealed to be much more intimate than its scale would suggest. It is not an epic, for the protagonist plays *against* the epochal events. He is just passing through, looking for space. Indeed, the spectacle of war and revolution mainly serves to illuminate Yuri Zhivago's character. The handful of times the film provides a perspective apart from Zhivago's it is when characters are discussing Zhivago or when we follow Lara, or when we see what our narrator, Yevgraf, is up to. The framing device of the narrative—Yevgraf relating his memories of Zhivago to Zhivago's purported daughter—merely serves to amplify Zhivago's centrality.

Though the backdrop of war and revolution serves as a catalyst for our protagonist's adventures, *Doctor Zhivago* manages to provide sufficient details of the underlying political struggle to allow the audience to draw only one conclusion about these momentous events. Through the character of Zhivago we are privy to the deprivations and disappointments of communism.

Man has an intrinsic desire for fairness, even from an early age. The Bolsheviks, at least the high-minded among them, attempted to secure fairness. They are children who never grew up, who think that life can be made fair. Zhivago tells Yevgraf, when Yevgraf has followed him home after pilfering firewood, that he approves of the Party's ideals, but not necessarily its methods. Indeed, Zhivago remarks, rooting out "the tumors of injustice" is a messy operation. Someone has to keep the patient alive. He's simply naïve. He does not realize how nasty things will get. And he has not learned any lessons. He knows the authorities lied about typhus and starvation. And he knows they've taken his house without compensation, leaving him to manage as best he can in one room with his father-in-law, wife, and son. Interestingly, when he confronts his greedy, envious 'comrades' from downstairs as they are stealing his possessions, he only really gets angry when someone tries to take his cherished balalaika. Zhivago is a man not bound by possessions. But those things that have intrinsic worth he will never let go of. Men such as he can be dominated physically, but their spirits are all but impregnable.

These Bolsheviks are not content merely to strip a man of his stuff. They demand unflinching obedience and submission of the will. So Zhivago is a subtle danger to them.

Zhivago's schooling continues. On the very long train ride east, where he and his family are denied a ride in comfort that would have once been their due, he passes a village destroyed by the brooding Strelnikov, a Soviet Army strongman who epitomizes the best and worst of the revolution. Despite his seething anger he is a true patriot. And he is a man who suffered much both before and during the war to launch the revolution. But he is cold, a man who has willed himself to feel nothing, perhaps to dull the pain of (his wife) Lara's betrayal, or perhaps to quell a conscience which revolts at his misdeeds. The village Strelnikov torched was accused of harboring partisans, the counter-revolutionaries in the White Guard. When confronted by Zhivago's information that they destroyed the wrong village, Strelnikov doesn't care; revolution is messy, and he will be excused because his ends are noble. The village is burned, "the point made."

Zhivago's bold reply: "Your point, their village."

Strelnikov admonishes Zhivago for baring his soul in poetry. This kind of thing is no longer acceptable since all Russians are supposed to work for a common goal. They mustn't waste their time chasing dreams. Strelnikov demands to know what Zhivago will do once he reaches Varykino. Zhivago answers, "Just live." Our hero now realizes that they will never leave him alone.

After a year of raising crops and resigning himself to the life of a peasant, and having renewed his acquaintance with Lara in the most intimate manner, Zhivago is conscripted. He is held against his will for two years serving a cause he finds, increasingly, reprehensible. The commandant commends Zhivago for his service and wants to see him returned to his family. The political officer, however, refuses. They argue vociferously and the commandant reminds the political officer that even though they rule jointly, the commandant could order the political officer to be shot and the troops would do it. The political officer replies that the men who do that will be punished. There is no escape for them. Indeed, these men have given strength to the political movement by killing its opponents. And it is the men of the political movement who will decide their fate, now that their enemies are vanquished. These soldiers have made themselves slaves of their new political masters. So now they cannot exercise the freedom to govern themselves as they would like. They have inadvertently stripped themselves of self-rule. Thus, they must go along with the political officer's edict. Otherwise, before long, they will all be destroyed.

Deserting the army, Zhivago returns to Lara, and they are approached by Komarovsky. To Zhivago's surprise, Komarovsky is now an important member of the government. Zhivago, perplexed, says, "The Bolsheviks trust you?" Komarovsky replies, "They trust no one. They've found me useful." And so Zhivago sees that even the Bolsheviks are not idealists. They willingly lay down their ideals before the god of expediency. Their goal has become one of simply maintaining power, and without reservation they are using a despicable man who is hostile to their beliefs—the cursed Komarovsky. Their cold ideology, shorn of 'impractical' morality, has left them marooned on an island of perpetual mistrust. No one is safe from their abuse of power, whether on the island (Strelnikov) or off (Zhivago).

Thus, for Zhivago, the last delusion has been stripped away.

The fundamental problem is that people will not voluntarily cede what they have, at least not in quantities sufficient to result in true equality. Their wealth must be taken by force of law, the law (or what passes for it) propped up by terror and brute strength, but undermined by chicanery, favoritism, and inconstancy. Then the people or entity that does the taking must maintain this hard-won equality. But since they have that power over the populace, there is still no equality; they decide what to take and from who to take it, but no one can take anything from them.

So now those who redistribute are the rulers.

Indeed, the old corrupt political powers have merely been supplanted by new corrupt political powers; and these are also moneyed powers, since the wealth that was taken is never returned in full to the people. And the frustrated masses, having no motivation to work apart from inertia, fear, or blind patriotism, manage to navigate through the shoals of life without contributing anything meaningful. The sheer impossibility of this damned ideology finds expression in Yevgraf, strangely enough. In the first minutes of *Doctor Zhivago* he faults a

young engineer for his irritated eagerness, saying that his is an impatient generation, that great changes had already occurred: "There were children in those days that lived off human flesh; did you know that?," Yevgraf asks. Near the movie's conclusion, Yevgraf comments that Lara disappeared in a labor camp, and the records were deliberately 'lost.' "That was quite common in those days."

And as the truth of this brutish system of despair and injustice is revealed to us, the determination of the irrepressible Zhivago shines more brightly. His example should buoy us all. Recall Lara, overwhelmed with sadness at the cruel machinations that would soon drive her and her great love apart, lamenting, "Oh, Lord—this is an awful time to be alive!" But Zhivago, with kindness and courage, says, "No."

As always he will embrace hope, and will live as best he can. Nevertheless, he is soon parted from Lara, and this brings us to the movie's dénouement.

Doctor Zhivago lacks a true climax, but the film does not suffer markedly for it. At first resisting the entreaties of the aggrandizing Komarovsky, Zhivago, after that precious interlude ensconced in the Varykino mansion with Lara, consents to allow Lara and her daughter to leave the country. She is at risk, being the widow of the just-executed Strelnikov. Zhivago's last grand gesture is handing the balalaika to Lara, indicating that he will not be joining them. (A few minutes of screen time later, Zhivago is dead.)

If there is a climax to the movie it is in the scene where Lara and her old tormentor Komarovsky trade barbs in the train compartment, and she tells him that she is carrying Zhivago's child. This surprise further illuminates Yuri's character, cementing his identity as the suffering secular saint. Thus, when Zhivago proffered the balalaika to Lara, he was acknowledging that his legacy goes with her.

In addition, this is the grand culmination of Lara and Yuri's love—the creation of new life. The climax confirms that this sweeping film is ultimately about Yuri Zhivago, and more particularly, Yuri Zhivago's relationship with Lara, in a time of tumult far too common to history. Love overcomes the cruel machinations of fate.

Thus we can add to an assessment of the protagonist's qualities. He is selfless. He will not put Lara and his unborn child at risk just so he won't be lonely. Moreover, he will not abandon his beloved country, despite its inexplicable embrace of perpetual revolution. He is a Russian, and will remain in Russia emanating good will, composing poetry and savoring his memories.

A few bare minutes of screen time separate the climax from the film's ironic conclusion. The girl is not convinced that Zhivago is her father, but is intrigued by what Yevgraf has related to her. Are we convinced? If not, we soon will be, and in a manner that rewards the audience for its careful attention. We are told early in the film that Yuri's mother was an expert balalaika player. But young Yuri, when encouraged to play, insists that he cannot. And it seems he never tried. This we know, but Yevgraf, the dam operator/boyfriend, and the girl do not.

Yevgraf observes the girl gently sling a balalaika over her shoulder. He is curious.

"Tonya...can you play the balalaika?"

"Can she play?" She's an artist!"

"An artist? Who taught you?"

"No one taught her."

"Ah...then it's a gift."

This balalaika is different. Presumably, the red one that belonged to Zhivago's mother is long gone. But this young woman, the daughter of Zhivago, can play very well. The talent that belonged to her grandmother now belongs to her. True to his character, Yuri Zhivago's estate was not one of property, but one of spirit.