Pasternak, Boris Leonidovich (1890-1960)

• Pasternak, Boris Leonidovich was one of the foremost literary figures in the USSR.

• He was born on February 10, 1890, into a cultivated Jewish family in Moscow and was educated at the universities of Moscow and of Marburg, Germany.

• Pasternak studied music during his youth but later turned to writing poetry.

• His first collection of poems *The Twin in the Clouds* (1914) was followed by other collections, including *Over the Barriers* (1917; trans. 1923), *My Sister, Life* (1922), and *Second Birth* (1932).

• Although the influence of the late 19th-century symbolist tradition, with its emphasis on mysticism, aesthetics, and impressionism is evident in his work, the poems reveal strong modernistic tendencies, particularly in unusual associations of images and in a philosophical approach to nature and history.

• These works established Pasternak as the outstanding Soviet poet. Communist critics, however, reproached him because his poetry did not follow the preferred patterns of socialist realism, and after 1932 only two collections, *On Early Trains* (1943) and *The Terrestrial Expanse* (1945), were published.

• He earned his living from his notable translations of the works of Shakespeare, Goethe and other English and German poets.

• Pasternak's only novel, *Doctor Zhivago* (completed in 1956; trans. 1958), was rejected by Soviet publishers because of its critical approach to Soviet communism, but it won international acclaim when it first appeared in the West in 1957. It was translated into 18 languages.

• When Pasternak died in 1960, his death was announced in the Soviet Union after a 36 hour delay in the following brief statement on the back page of the journal *Literature & Life*:

  "the board of the Literary fund of the USSR today announces the death of Boris Pasternak, who was a member of the fund. The death took place on May 30th in his 71st year after a severe and long illness."

Under any circumstances, when a moderately famous writer died in the USSR, an obituary signed by 30-40 colleague writers would paper in literary papers, and a state funeral would be organized. Pasternak's funeral took place on June 2; the authorities ignored it, and no representatives of the Writers' Union or any other organization were present. Ignoring the official displeasure, about 1500 Russians, who have learned about the funeral by word of mouth, made up for the absence of a formal delegation.

• The critic, Valentin Asmus, said about Pasternak at the funeral: "There were few to equal him in purity and honesty of his convictions. He took Tolstoy's view point, and never believed in resisting evil with force. And that was his mistake. He was a true democrat at heart. He followed sincerely the highest ideals of art and had the ability to express humanity in its highest terms. As long as Russian poetry lives on this earth, Pasternak's name will be among the great."
The novel, *Doctor Zhivago*, presents a panoramic view of Russian society at the time of the 1917 Revolution.

The protagonist, Dr. Zhivago, is an intellectual whose sincerity, religious convictions, and independence of spirit conflict with the theory and practice of the Soviet regime.

Pasternak won and accepted the 1958 Nobel Prize in literature but was denounced by various Soviet Communist groups as a traitor. In contrast, Edmund Willson wrote in his review of *Doctor Zhivago* in the New Yorker: "*Doctor Zhivago* will, I believe, come to stand as one of the greatest events in man's literary and moral history. Nobody could have written it in a totalitarian state and turned it loose on the world who did not have the courage of a genius."

Announcing publicly his unwillingness to enter exile, he rejected the prize.

Pasternak died on May 30, 1960, near Moscow.

*Doctor Zhivago* was finally published in the USSR in 1987 when, due to a newly initiated "openness" ('glasnost') policy by the party leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Pasternak was officially rehabilitated. Among his other works are the collection of short stories *Airy Paths* (1925), the autobiographies *Safe Conduct* (1931; trans. 1958) and *I Remember* (1957; trans. 1959), and the unfinished play *The Blind Beauty* (1969; trans. 1969).