



DRAMA · ROMANCE · WAR

Doctor Zhivago

1965 · Directed by David Lean

Historical Epic

Melodrama

Classical Hollywood

A Moscow doctor who writes poetry is pulled through war, revolution and civil war across Russia. Along the way his life crosses repeatedly with a young woman he cannot forget. David Lean's wide-screen romance sets private longing against the upheaval of a nation.

DIRECTOR	David Lean
YEAR	1965
RUNTIME	3h 20m (200 min)
COUNTRY	UK
GENRES	Drama, Romance, War
CAST	Omar Sharif, Julie Christie, Geraldine Chaplin, Rod Steiger, Alec Guinness
MUSIC	Maurice Jarre
IMDB	7.9 / 10 (86,506 votes)
ROTTEN TOMATOES	82% (critics)
METACRITIC	69 / 100
TMDB SCORE	7.6 / 10 (1,323 votes)
WHERE TO WATCH	Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home, Spectrum On Demand Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.



Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 David Lean's grand-scale follow-up to *Lawrence of Arabia*

Lean reunited much of his *Lawrence* team: cinematographer Freddie Young, designer John Box, composer Maurice Jarre, Omar Sharif and Alec Guinness. It is the clearest example of the 1960s roadshow epic turned toward romance.

2 History seen through one private love story

Instead of generals and battles, the film follows a poet-doctor and a woman at the margins of events. It shows how an epic can make the personal feel as large as the political.

3 A film built to be seen large

Shot in 70mm with huge sets, frozen landscapes and a famous score, it rewards attention to image and music. Its ten Oscar nominations and five wins underline how fully the craft was recognised.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining late-period roadshow epic, and one of the last great Hollywood-financed spectacles made on a classical, hand-built scale, before location realism and smaller New Hollywood films shifted tastes.



WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch how Lean uses vast landscapes, weather and crowds to make a private feeling seem as large as history.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How often the frame places small figures against enormous spaces, such as snow, trains, streets and rooms, and how a close-up then breaks that distance.
- Recurring objects and sounds, especially the balalaika-coloured score, which attach themselves to particular people and memories.
- The contrast between Omar Sharif's quiet, watchful performance and the louder, more physical performances around him, such as Rod Steiger's.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

Can one person's inner life stay untouched by the events of his time, or does history decide what he is allowed to feel and keep?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Industry:** MGM released it as a long, big-budget roadshow attraction, with an intermission, in the wake of Lawrence of Arabia and Ben-Hur. Studios were betting heavily on spectacle to hold audiences against television.
- **Technology:** It was photographed in a large-format 65mm process and shown in 70mm, giving a very wide, detailed frame suited to landscapes, crowds and interiors alike.
- **Source:** Boris Pasternak's novel was published abroad in 1957 and banned in the Soviet Union. The film adapted a book that was famous partly because of that suppression.
- **Director's moment:** Lean had moved from intimate British dramas to epics with The Bridge on the River Kwai and Lawrence of Arabia. Here he applied that scale to a love story.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

Lawrence of Arabia (1962)

Lean's immediate epic, with the same cinematographer, designer, composer and several of the same actors. It established the visual and musical approach reused here.





FILM

Gone with the Wind (1939)

The great earlier model of a romance played out against civil war, loss and a changing society on a vast Technicolor scale.



TRADITION

Roadshow epic

Long, high-budget studio spectacles with overtures and intermissions, which Hollywood used in the 1950s and 60s to fight television.



THIS FILM

Doctor Zhivago (1965)

NEW AT THE TIME *It brought the roadshow epic's scale to an intimate romance, building a whole revolutionary Russia in Spain because the novel's own country was off limits.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

A Western epic of the mid-1960s, adapted from a novel banned in the USSR, made at the height of the Cold War with Soviet locations unavailable.

- **Cold War backdrop:** Boris Pasternak's novel was banned in the Soviet Union. It was first published in Italy in 1957 and won the Nobel Prize in 1958. Pasternak was pressured to refuse the prize. The film arrived in a tense East-West climate.
- **Filming without Russia:** The Soviet Union was not open to a Western production like this. Moscow and the Russian landscape were rebuilt mainly in Spain, with snow scenes shot in Finland and Canada. Russia was shown as the West imagined it.
- **Money and producers:** Carlo Ponti produced it for MGM, a big-budget international venture. Robert Bolt wrote the screenplay. A British director, Italian producer and American studio reflect the era's transatlantic co-productions.
- **Audience and reception:** Audiences in the West knew the Revolution mainly through Cold War attitudes. Critics were often cool, but the public response was very large. The film was still unavailable to Soviet viewers for decades.



WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Unhurried and episodic over about three hours twenty minutes, with an intermission built in. It moves across years and places rather than building one tight plot.
- **Style:** Classical, lush studio epic: sweeping wide shots, painterly colour, a prominent orchestral score and a heightened, romantic tone.
- **Performance:** British and international actors play Russians in English, without attempts at heavy accents. Lead performances are restrained and soulful, supporting ones more theatrical.
- **Format:** Colour, widescreen at roughly 2.20:1. It plays best on the largest screen available.
- **Language:** English-language, so no subtitles. Some names and political factions are explained only lightly, so brief background on 1917 helps.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

13+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings range from PG (GB) and U (FR) to PG-13 (US) and 16 (DE); 13 suits the war violence, emotional weight and 200-minute length.

Official ratings: US PG-13 · UK PG · Germany 16 · France U

- **Good for:** Teens interested in history will find sweeping landscapes, a famous Maurice Jarre score, and a big epic about love, art and survival during the Russian Revolution.
- **May unsettle, war violence:** Battles, shootings and crowd violence appear at several points. They are not especially graphic but can be sudden and harsh.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Adult romantic and sexual themes are handled discreetly, with nothing explicit shown, but they matter to the story.
- **May unsettle, hardship and loss:** Cold, hunger, displacement and bereavement run through much of the film, giving it a bleak and sorrowful tone.
- **May unsettle, pace:** At 200 minutes with an intermission, and a dense, slow-building story, it can test the patience of younger viewers.
- **Explain first:** The film is set around the First World War and the 1917 Russian Revolution, when the old Tsarist order collapsed and a civil war followed.
- **Explain first:** Many characters are caught between the opposing sides, Reds and Whites, so it helps to know that neither is presented as simply good.

Talk about it after: *How do the characters try to hold on to what matters to them when history and politics keep disrupting their lives?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film can be read as a study of private feeling under historical pressure: poetry, love and conscience survive in a person but cannot be protected from a revolution that treats individuals as raw material.

THEMES

- **Private life against history:** Revolution repeatedly invades homes, marriages and bodies. The film asks what remains personal when ideology claims everything.
- **Love and loyalty:** Zhivago's devotion to his wife and his love for Lara are both real. The film treats the conflict as tragic rather than as a simple moral lesson.
- **The poet as witness:** Zhivago observes rather than fights. His poetry becomes the one way to hold on to experience when politics demands conformity.
- **Idealism hardening into force:** Strelnikov and Komarovskiy show two kinds of power, one ideological and one opportunistic. Both treat people as instruments.
- **Memory and inheritance:** The framing story suggests that what a life leaves behind may be a child, a poem or a story passed on.

Key scenes

The Moscow demonstration

Lean shows the Revolution's violence entering Zhivago's world with a charge of cavalry on a peaceful crowd, seen from a window. It sets his role as observer and shows political events turning personal.

The train journey east

The crowded cattle-car journey turns a nation's upheaval into physical, claustrophobic experience. It also introduces Strelnikov as a figure of cold authority.

The frozen house at Varykino

The ice-covered house is the film's emotional centre, a fragile shelter for love and writing in a hostile landscape. Design and Jarre's music carry the feeling.



The final street sighting

Zhivago's last pursuit crystallises the film's romantic fatalism: desire, timing and history fail to meet, and the moment is imagined with great economy of image.

Filmmaking

- **Cinematography:** Freddie Young's large-format images contrast warm interiors with white, empty exteriors. Ice, frost and yellow summer fields work as emotional colour as well as scenery.
- **Production design:** John Box's team built Moscow streets outside Madrid and the Varykino house as a world of frost. The scale makes a reconstructed Russia feel lived in.
- **Music:** Maurice Jarre's score, built around Lara's Theme and balalaika colour, ties romance to Russia. The melody recurs as memory, so the audience hears longing before it is spoken.
- **Screenplay and structure:** Robert Bolt condensed a sprawling novel into a sequence of encounters and framed it as a half-brother's search for a lost child. The result favours clear emotional spine over the book's digressions.
- **Performance:** Omar Sharif's eyes and Julie Christie's stillness carry much of the romance. Rod Steiger and Tom Courtenay supply opposed forms of worldly force.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

The story is told by Yevgraf Zhivago, a Soviet general, who in the 1940s or 50s is looking for the child of his late half-brother Yuri. He recounts Yuri's life as an orphan raised by a wealthy Moscow family, trained as a doctor and gifted as a poet. Yuri marries Tonya, the daughter of that family.

Lara Antipova, a young woman exploited by the older lawyer Komarovsky, shoots him at a party and becomes tied to Yuri's life. She marries the idealistic Pasha, who becomes the revolutionary commander Strelnikov. Yuri meets her again as a nurse during the First World War.

After the Revolution, Yuri's family loses its house and travels east by train. Yuri is forced to serve as doctor to partisans, then escapes and finds Lara in Yuriatin. They begin an affair, and Yuri writes poems in an empty house at Varykino.

Komarovsky warns Yuri that he is in danger and takes Lara away. Yuri stays behind, then returns to Moscow, broken. Years later he sees Lara from a tram, tries to reach her and dies of a heart attack in the street.

Lara later vanishes into the purges. Yevgraf meets a young woman who plays the balalaika and finds that she is Yuri and Lara's daughter. He leaves her with the evidence of her heritage.

BEHIND THE FILM

■ **Russia built in Spain:** The novel was banned in the Soviet Union, so Lean could not film there. A huge American Eastern Bloc aid response was constructed as a party with approval from American materials. Robert Bolt's leadman Omar Sharif, who had dropped through last year's Oscar race as Lara played Zhivago, Julie Christie, Rod Steiger and Tom Courtenay, and even the novel's author Boris Pasternak, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958, were gathered eastwards, not published in the Soviet Union until the late 1980s. Adapted by the Sound of Music won. Doctor Zhivago won five Oscars, including Adapted Screenplay, Cinematography and Original Score.

| LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

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The great earlier model of a romance played out against civil war, loss and a changing society on a vast Technicolor scale.



TRADITION

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THIS FILM

Doctor Zhivago (1965)

FILM

Reds (1981)

Warren Beatty's epic also weaves a love story through the Russian Revolution, though from a more explicitly political viewpoint.



FILM

Ryan's Daughter (1970)

Lean's own next epic again set a doomed romance against a vast landscape and a political crisis, with Maurice Jarre composing.



FILM

The English Patient (1996)

A late example of the wartime epic romance with exotic landscapes, memory and a fatal love triangle, in the Lean manner.



Reception and reputation

Many critics were cool or negative, finding it overlong, glossy and too conventional compared with the novel. Audiences responded very differently: it became a major commercial success and a long-running roadshow attraction for MGM, helped by the popularity of Maurice Jarre's score.

Its reputation has risen as its craft, especially Freddie Young's cinematography and the design, has been appreciated. Critics still debate its simplified politics and romantic gloss, but it is now widely seen as one of the great epic romances.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 10 nominations, 5 wins (Adapted Screenplay, Cinematography in colour, Art Direction in colour, Costume Design in colour, Original Score). Other nominations: Picture, Director, Supporting Actor (Tom Courtenay), Film Editing, Sound.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Cold War symbol:** The film arrived with the novel's Cold War notoriety. Pasternak's book was smuggled out of the USSR, won him the 1958 Nobel Prize (which he was pressured to decline), and was not published in the Soviet Union until 1988. The story was long read as a political statement.
- **Song standard:** Maurice Jarre's "Lara's Theme" was given lyrics as "Somewhere, My Love" and became a pop and easy-listening staple. The Ray Conniff Singers had a hit with it in 1966, and it was widely recorded and played on the radio, often by people who had not seen the film.
- **Zhivago look:** The fur hats, long coats and snowbound costumes are often credited with feeding a late-1960s and 1970s taste for Russian-inspired fashion. The "Zhivago" label became shorthand for that romantic, wintry style.
- **Star images:** Omar Sharif's brooding poet-doctor and Julie Christie's Lara became defining images of the 1960s screen romance. The film made Sharif an international star after *Lawrence of Arabia*. The frozen, ice-covered Varykino house also became a lasting image of lost love.

Its lasting influence

It became the template for the sweeping historical romance in which a love story is staged against war and revolution. Lara's Theme also became one of cinema's best-known melodies, and its image of wintry Russia shaped later screen depictions of the Revolution.



WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Lawrence of Arabia (1962)

Lean's masterpiece of scale and landscape, made by the same core team. It shows the grand style before it was applied to romance.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Jules and Jim (1962)

Another love story spanning years of war and change, but intimate, playful and handheld where Zhivago is monumental. A useful contrast in how film treats romance and history.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Ben-Hur (1959)

Another MGM roadshow epic made at the height of the studio spectacle, with similar ambitions of scale, music and prestige.

SEE WHAT INFLUENCED IT

Gone with the Wind (1939)

The earlier classic of romance against national upheaval, which helps clarify what Lean inherited and what he changed.

FOLLOW THE IDEA

October (1928) **COMING SOON**

Eisenstein's Soviet account of the same revolution, built on montage and collective heroes. It offers the opposing view of events that Zhivago sees from the margins.

FULL CAST AND CREW



David Lean
DIRECTOR



Omar Sharif
ACTOR
as Dr. Yuri Zhivago



Julie Christie
ACTOR
as Lara Antipova



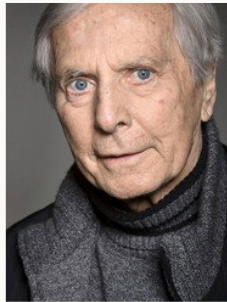
Geraldine Chaplin
ACTOR
as Tonya Gromeko



Rod Steiger
ACTOR
as Viktor Komarovsky



Alec Guinness
ACTOR
as Gen. Yevgraf
Zhivago



Maurice Jarre
COMPOSER

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