



Victory Square

Olen Steinhauer

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The revolutionary politics and chaotic history of life inside Olen Steinhauer's fictionalized Eastern European country have made his literary crime series, with its two Edgar Award nominations along with other critical acclaim, one of today's most acclaimed. Finally having reached the tumultuous 1980s, the series comes full circle as one of the earliest cases of the People's Militia reemerges to torment all of the inspectors, including Emil Brod, now the chief, who was the original detective on the case. His arrest of one of the country's revolutionary leaders in the late 1940s resulted in the politician's conviction and imprisonment, but Emil was too young in those days to understand what it meant to go up against someone so powerful--and win. Only now, in 1989, when he is days from retirement and spends more time looking over his shoulder than ahead, does he realize that what he did may get him--and others--killed.

Told against the backdrop of the crumbling forty-year-old government--with the leaders who were so new in the series debut, *The Bridge of Sighs*--*Victory Square* is Steinhauer at his best. Once again he masterfully makes crime fiction both personal and political, combining a story of revenge at any cost with a portrait of a country on the brink of collapse.

Victory Square Details

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From Reader Review Victory Square for online ebook

PaulHargreaves says

Superb ending to this great series. Lots of loose ends tied up, surprise reveals.

Now, need to read the lot again!

J says

BEWARE: One man's bookflap summary is another man's spoiler.

Victory Square's "public" story arc involves the overthrow of an Eastern European dictator. That arc, the author explains in an afterword, is loosely based on the fall of Romanian leader Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989.

But several arcs of private individuals are the main focus of the story.

The most obvious arc belongs to first-person narrator Emil Brod, a longtime security investigator who's a couple days away from mundane retirement.

In the space of the next few days, though, Brod has a loved one murdered, does an impromptu murder, and basically goes on an impromptu spree of activities that he'd probably never consider if the nation's life wasn't also going off the tracks.

I love Steinhauer's language.

More than a few passages struck me as profound statements. Here're are couple excerpts. I'd have marked more, but didn't think of it till I was near the book's end:

1)

(interior thought by Brod)

"I won't call it a moral in this scattershot narrative, but it's something like that. *The price of revenge is that everyone around you pays.*"

2)

(interior thought by Brod)

"*Because revenge has nothing to do with due process -- revenge wants to be sharp, and final.*"

3)

(spoken by Brod)

"I suppose it's true of all revolutions. Where there appear to be two or three sides fighting over a country, each side is made up of infinite smaller interests, working to make their money pay off in the end. No one wants to be on the losing side."

4)

(spoken by Brano Sev, a higher-up in Brod's ministry, who disappeared upon his retirement three years before)

"You have to understand that what we had in our country wasn't socialism. It was totalitarianism. I always knew that, but I believed -- foolishly -- that it was just the first step. Marx talked about it. The Dictatorship of the Proletariat. It's supposed to be a transitional phase. You control the economy and adjust it in preparation for pure communism. It looks good on paper," he said smiling. "It really does. But Marx was as naive as I was. *He thought that greed would lose its power when people were faced with the possibility of utopia.* It took me a long time to see the mistake.

"People like ... (insert names of corrupt officials in the book, *they're the reason we'll never see pure communism on this earth. They eat it up from the inside.*"

5)

(spoken to Brod in jail cell by Tabu Bel, an African cellmate who was picked up in Italy for working seasonally as an illegal immigrant)

"Life is full of decisions." He shrugged his thick shoulders. "No reason to regret them once you've made them."

Mal Warwick says

A powerful tale of life in Eastern Europe during the fall of Communism

Some years ago I chanced upon one of Olen Steinhauer's excellent contemporary spy stories, sped through it and read another, and finally, in searching for more of his work, found his five-novel cycle set in a fictional Central European country nestled among Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Austria. (Geographically, the country has to be Slovakia, which only recently gained its independence, but some readers think it more closely resembles Hungary.) Steinhauer's cycle spanned the years from 1948, when the Soviet Empire consolidated its hold on the nations directly to its West, until 1990, when the USSR and the Warsaw Pact collapsed.

Victory Square is the fifth and final novel in Steinhauer's Eastern European cycle, and in some ways it's the best. Steinhauer, an American who has lived for extended periods in several countries in the region, spent months, perhaps years, meticulously researching the fall of Ceausescu's regime in Romania. That history forms the basis of the events that unfold in the novel in 1989-90. Against this background, Steinhauer introduces us to an aging homicide cop, Emil Brod, now Chief of the Militia, whom we met as a young rookie when he joined the Militia's Homicide Squad in the country's capital in 1948. Brod was the protagonist of the first novel in the cycle, *The Bridge of Sighs*, and has popped up throughout. Now just days from retirement, Brod is forced to contend with an unraveling government, a series of shocking murders, a best friend engaged at the very center of the revolutionary movement, and an adoring wife even older than he who wants him to leave the capital early, before the inevitable explosion.

The full cycle includes the following:

- + *The Bridge of Sighs* (2003), featuring Emil Brod in 1948
- + *The Confession* (2004), centering on Brod's colleague, Ferenc Kolyesar, taking place in 1956
- + *36 Yalta Boulevard* (2005), featuring Brano Sev, the secret policeman who works in the Homicide + Department and spies on the squad, set in 1966–1967
- + *Liberation Movements* (2006), featuring Brano Sev and Brod's young colleagues, Katja Drdova and Gavra

Noukas, taking place in 1968 and 1975
+ Victory Square (2007)

Together, these five novels constitute a superb introduction to life in Central Europe during the half-century of Soviet domination. Nonfiction couldn't possibly match the depth of feeling that emerges from these works.

Speesh says

What had confused me more than once while reading this and others in the series, is whether the three of them are set in a fictional East European country, or I've just missed - or been too stupid to put two and two together, it's possible - which Eastern European country he's actually set them in. I began piecing clues together like this - The country is, west of Ukraine. It was overrun by the Germans at the start of WWII. "Early on in the occupation, the Germans had enlisted the help of malcontents from our Ukrainian population. These young men had been promised that, once the war was won, the eastern half of our country (including the capital) would be returned to the Ukraine..." What can be confusing, when trying to figure out what's going on, is that the previous two books in this series, had their names changed for the publication outside the USA (if I'm right). So it is a relief to stop having to berate myself that I really should be able to place the people and places. A quick visit to Olen Steinhauer's website and it seems that the novels these reviews were mentioning, '36 Yalta Boulevard' and 'Liberation Movements', I do actually have. It's just I have them as 'The Vienna Assignment' and 'The Istanbul Variations' as they were published in the UK. So, I'm not going mad. Quite. Yet. Still, a name like Brano Sev should stick in the memory, I guess. Even if you think it's a kind of drain cleaner.

Really, anyone who's been alive in 1988 (apart from me, obviously), is surely going to be reading this and say 'Romania!' and the collapse of their version of Communism. Then the pursuit and trial of the husband and wife leaders, Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu.

So, 'Victory Square' seems to be the final in his series of novels about Brano Sev, Emil Brod and the like. 'Victory Square' completes the cycle/circle (or square!), by taking Brod back to looking into, or at least having to deal with the after-effects, of one of his earliest cases. Back in the days where uncertainty about the right of his leaders to lead wasn't filling the air and the whole system he knows nothing else of but, is collapsing around his ears. Steinhauer writes the character of Emil Brod really well indeed, writing subtly, but convincingly, the role of a man, thinking he's too old for this shit, going through the last few days before his retirement. Reaching the end of his (working) life, but facing up to that with the end of the system that sustained him the whole of the life he can remember, means he is in effect going to have to start again, as if his previous life never happened. Imagine that. Add in finding your name on a list of people who are quite clearly being swept away by the new revolutionary broom. Weighty stuff, but made light work by Olen S. There's a weary bleakness you get, almost without noticing how he's doing it. Also, the character of Gavra Noukas, another member of the old regime, but younger and maybe even smarter than Brod (though not Sev), having his world rocked to its foundations by being forced to be an part of the trial of the leaders they once revered. He realises he's being set up, but can't get out of it, even though he's not really forced into it. It's happening almost without him knowing what is happening. I got a distinct impression of how they might be doing this whilst also feeling like they were detached from it all, looking at themselves doing it, because their real selves surely wouldn't dare. Then, at one point, to put it into perspective for us, Emil Brod says "...I didn't think about the hypocrisy of the people who had arranged and run the trial." Hypocrisy because they took part, often willingly in the excesses and crimes they're now putting the two leaders on trial for. They

seem absolved, just because they are doing the accusing. Gavka seems tormented by this hypocrisy too. But more because he can't find any innocent victims anywhere amongst the accusers. 'Who am I to cast the first stone?' Is probably why he has such a hard time at the trial. He had no choice while the regime was functioning and he has no choice now it's falling apart. It is, as Brod puts it, for many people it is the "end of everything", but, there are also other forces and other people behind it all (as is always the case) with other reasons for setting it all in motion and profiting from regime change. And the roots of all that, go back, as said to the early days of Brod's working life and Brano Sev's subtle machinations.

This isn't a spy novel, in the traditional sense. It's more - and also less - than that. More interesting than just an examination of, or an allegory of, the collapse of Communism and a lot less action than a le Carre, or 'Bond' or (certainly) 'Bourne'. I think it's quite possible that different readers will get a lot of different things from the same book. By focussing in on the seemingly mundane, the stark reality and forcedly dull dreams of the people, he is of course, illuminating the big problems and faults in the system that has otherwise provided everything the people need. Except the people who have decided what the people need, aren't the 'people' themselves. A person in a Olen Steinhauer novel, might appear to be dull and lead a dull life, but they dream of being a free dull person in the west and deciding just how dull their life is, for themselves.

Thought provoking and interesting, with many hours of after-contemplation. Always the sign of a really good book, I find.

Kimberley says

This was a very enlightening historical fiction . It hauntingly reminds the reader of the revolutionary events that occurred in Romania . It is a long and suspenseful read with espionage, nationalism and victory. The reader should have a greater appreciation for what freedoms Western nations enjoy.

Scottnshana says

Loosely based on the revolution against and subsequent execution of the Ceaucescus in Romania, this is the final installment of Steinhauer's thriller series that takes place in his unnamed Eastern Bloc nation. I like his fallible characters--old guys with old guy problems who are having a hard time letting go of the old system while trying to find some justice in it. I also think that the time the author spent in the region on a Fulbright scholarship is clear here as he mentions details that one only gets from sitting down at the kitchen table with people who lived in that system over vodka shots and pickles. I think that only a Westerner--and I was one of them in 1989 who watched everything falling down behind the Iron Curtain without realizing how uncomfortable and scary that was (and dangerous) for the average guy in the middle of it--could have conveyed all the emotion, shock, and free-falling anxiety that was happening on the ground in places like Bucharest, Brno, and Belgrade to a Western audience via his objective perspective and superlative native-language narrative. To be fair, Steinhauer's not the only one, but I would put him in a category with Martin Cruz-Smith and Alan Furst. He's that good and I think he has ended his series nicely with "Victory Square".

Jim says

I have now finished the Yalta Boulevard Sequence. Olen Steinhauer continues to intrigue me with his writing. It is not always easy to keep track of things, but I plow on and then the last 50 pages I can't put down. Emil Brod and Brano Sev become the characters that I will always think of when I think of Eastern Europe. Steinhauer has helped me understand that communist period between 1948 and 1989. His fictitious country resembles mostly Romania but you can take your pick. Anyone making this sojourn should start with "The Bridge of Sighs" and work through each decade.

Darwin8u says

In Steinhauer's 'almost brilliant' conclusion to his Yalta Boulevard Sequence (Bridge of Sighs, The Confession, 36 Yalta Boulevard, Liberation Movements, & Victory Square), Steinhauer examines the collapse of the moral and social order (both for a nation and individuals) when a former Eastern Block nation finally rejects its totalitarian regime and leader. 'Victory Square' is stronger and more graceful in its first half, but still manages to close out the series well.

Taken together, the five Yalta Boulevard novels are brilliant in their ability to communicate the narrative arc of East European totalitarianism in both the brutality, but also in the humanity of those individuals seeking to support and destroy its order. If you are going to read one of these novels, invest the time to read them all. While I could arm-chair quarterback my little issues with each novel, the series is definitely worth it. For me, it was similar to how I felt watching the entire HBO series 'the Wire'.

Each Yalta Blvd novel gave a unique perspective that together painted an amazing picture of a place, time and people. Even Steinhauer's conceit of using a fake country seems, in the end, to have been well played. It allowed his novels to grab interesting pieces of Hungarian, Romanian, Yugoslavian history and blend as needed. It is amazing how much good fiction can teach us.

SlowRain says

During the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, a Militia chief is investigating a seemingly simple heart attack of a State Security officer. But events take a turn when it's discovered the dead man was reviewing the chief's very first investigation at the start of his career 40 years ago.

This is book five in Steinhauer's *Yalta Boulevard Sequence*, and, like the others, it takes place in his fictional, Eastern European country which he describes as "the intersection of Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, and Romania". Even if you read the other novels out of sequence, which I don't really recommend, this one must be read last because of spoilers and poignancy. It provides a nice conclusion for all the other characters in the previous novels, even if the story itself is rushed and unsatisfying.

And, that's the problem. I think Steinhauer was getting tired of his little world that he had created and was feeling restless and wanted to move on to something else. It shows in the plot, which seems complicated at first, but quickly descends into run-of-the-mill thriller territory. It's a little sad that the author who gave us

Ferenc Kolyeszar's story in *The Confession* and the enigmatic Brano Sev, especially in *36 Yalta Boulevard*, couldn't carry the momentum through to the return of Emil Brod in this novel. For all the tragedy and thematic elements that this story could have delved into, it stays safely in generic territory.

If you've read the first four books, I'd still suggest you read this one, but I think he topped out with the second book.

Carl says

Oddly satisfying, strangely disappointing....

After getting to know the various members of the Homicide dept. of the Militia of the unnamed Eastern European Soviet Bloc country after WWII, it was satisfying to see how they all ended up after the Iron Curtain fell. This was especially true of Emil Brod, the almost retired main protagonist of this concluding 5th book of the series as well as the newbie in the first book set in the late 1940's.

OTOH, the first three books had the tension of police procedurals which kept running up against the Ministry of State Security (yes, very reminiscent of the earlier (and better) Arkady Renko books by Martin Cruz Smith). In fact two of the characters seem to wear both hats, adding to the confusion/tension.

This book is quite different: the police procedural quickly devolves into a grand political scheme, reaching back to Brod's first case/arrest in Book 1. Much is directly taken from the fall of the Ceausescu in Romania and his impromptu trial. Plenty of action; but to me not up to the level of the first three books.

Denise says

It's December 1989 and all over Eastern Europe communist regimes are crumbling. The unnamed country of this sequence of novels too is about to face upheaval, with revolution brewing, people rising up, and various factions banding together to topple the government. Meanwhile Emil Brod, now Chief of the People's Militia and about to retire, must face the ghosts of his past as a case from 40 years ago comes back to haunt him with far greater implications than he can at first grasp.

Everything comes full circle in this excellent conclusion to the series. Each and every book in it is brilliant, but I do believe this one was the best of them all.

Linda says

Great wrap for the series. Steinhauer did an excellent job.

Sheri says

The 5th & final installment in Steinhauer's series about spies & secret policy in Romania. The series started in the late 1940's after WWII, and each book picks up about 8-10 years after the prior one. In this final novel, Steinhauer tells about the collapse of communism in Romania in 1989 after perestroika and glasnost have

already led to the demise of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the USSR into separate nations. This is the best of the 5 novels, and some of Steinhauer's best characters from the 4 prior books appear again here, illustrating pretty poignantly the human collateral damage entailed by the fall of communism and the arrival of something we Americans are happy to call democracy, but doesn't actually sound that appetizing. Loved this book, and sorry to see the series end.

Kevin says

Steinhauer wraps up his People's Militia Series with this engrossing tale of revenge in the midst of the revolutionary events of 1989.

It is not the sleek razor edged thriller *Liberation Movements*, but is a fascinating conclusion to this under-appreciated series.

David says

It's taken me a couple of days of mourning before I could review the last of Olen Steinhauer's Yalta books, *Victory Square*. I have enjoyed all five books very much, but all good things must come to an end, and that makes me a bit sad.

Endings are a theme in *Victory Square*; careers end, lives end, governments end. In several ways, *Victory Square* brings the story started in *Bridge of Sighs* full circle. Emil Brod, the hero of *Bridge of Sighs*, returns as the hero of *Victory Square*. In the first book, he was at the very beginning of his career; here, he is a few days from retirement. Likewise, the anonymous Eastern Bloc country he lives in (which I thought was Poland, but the author's notes at the end of this book say it is based on Romania) was in its infancy in *Bridge of Sighs*; here, it is about to fall.

I can't say too much about the plot without spoiling the fun, but suffice to say that Brod's first case comes back to haunt him in a big way, and he must call upon the help of his current and past coworkers and friends in order to survive and strike back. But Brod and his compatriots aren't the young, healthy men they once were, and age is as much a villain in this novel as are the men Brod is trying to stop.

Steinhauer learned a lesson about narrative structure from the previous installment in the series, *Liberation Movements*. I took issue with how Steinhauer switched from third person to first person in that book. In this, he sticks with first person: although there are two point of view characters, Brod and Gavra Noukas, we learn everything through the filter of Brod's after-the-fact account. Sure, there are some things it's hard to believe that Gavra "told" Brod, but it works a lot better overall than the structure of *Liberation Movements*.

The pacing and tension is, as always, top-notch. At no point in the book are you sure what will happen next. Because it is a first-person story, you know Brod lives at least long enough to write all of this down; nevertheless, I found myself wondering if Brod was going to survive. Part of the reason for my uncertainty is due to a trick Steinhauer pulled in his other first-person installment in this series, *The Confession*. In that book, another character steps in at the end to tell the reader what happened to the narrator after he wrote his confession. I thought that *Victory Square* might end similarly; whether or not it does is something you'll have to find out for yourself.

Olen Steinhauer had earned a place on my “must read” list with his Milo Weaver series, and Victory Square only served to further cement his position. As sad as I am that there will be no more new Yalta books (nor, apparently, any new Milo Weaver novels), I eagerly await the next story Steinhauer publishes.
