

Ukraine Reborn (2 of 2)
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Ukraine was in the news before most of us knew it was Ukraine. The nuclear disaster of Chernobyl was a Russian disaster, one that probably added to the pileup of bad governance that finally brought down the Soviet Union.

The first good leader that Russia had since Khrushchev (he revealed the horrors of Stalin and helped save the world from a nuclear war with the US) was Gorbachev, who unfortunately took the blame over the collapse of the USSR. He never had enough time to carry out the reforms he introduced. We never realized that he was Ukrainian, not Russian.

There was a wonderful Netflix interview with Gorbachev in his retirement in his home town, where he was much loved by the townspeople. It is well worth watching.

After Gorbachev died, the news was filled with the rebirth of Ukraine, continuing its long struggle for independence from Russia. The new young republic suffered from its long heritage of corrupt government and leaders who betrayed the public.

One leader, Victor Yanukovich, promised that Ukraine would apply for membership in the European Union, but then reneged, and fled to Putin's Russia. A new president was elected, but corruption remained.

Finally, the fever broke. A young TV producer and star of a weekly satire show, played the role of a high school political science teacher who, in a fit of anger, condemned the corruption and hypocrisy of the current government. In the show, his students recorded his rant and, to everyone's surprise, he was elected president. Then fantasy became reality. He was elected president!

No lying propaganda could have provided us with that weekly program, made available to us by Netflix. That program, complete with subtitles, couldn't have been a better introduction to one of today's most remarkable heroes, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is now playing in real life David to Putin's Goliath.

He has united his country from its prior chaos, transformed its corruption into patriotism and sacrifice, and demonstrated to the world what an honorable state should be. The contrast between his Ukraine and Putin's Russia could not be more glaring. In addition, imagine this historic nasty bastion of antisemitism electing its first Jewish president, one loved by most Ukrainians now. How Ukraine has changed!

Zelenskyy was also a player in the drama of our corrupt president, Donald Trump, trying to extort Zelenskyy into backing up his lies about his political rival, Joe Biden. That Trump abuse of power led to his first of two Impeachments and Trump's eternal hatred of him.

Fact and fiction are also meeting in some recent novels. For those of you who like to read political thrillers, meet Martin Cruz Smith. a writer who has written a series of novels with a hero as remarkable as Zelenskyy: Arkady Renko, a Moscow police detective who isn't corrupt. Renko is the narrator of each story, and is delightful: sarcastic, romantic, educated, and a rare bird indeed. He is also not a drunk.

Martin Cruz Smith began this series in 1981, with the international thriller Gorky Park, just as the Soviet Union crashed. Renko takes us through the past almost half century, to the current book, Independence Square, with Renko visiting Ukraine. The reader gets much more than fiction from reading Cruz Smith; his books present encounters with the panoply of ethnicities that comprised the former Soviet Union. This book gives us Ukrainians and another group of persecuted minorities: Tatars, the inhabitants of the Crimea, which Putin illegally grabbed.

In addition to Cruz Smith's Russian series, he has several other fascinating independent books. One of the best is December 6. In this book, we follow another unusual hero, an American who grew up in Japan as a street kid, the child of missionaries, living on the edge of Tokyo's criminal world. The book follows his frenzied attempt, on December 6, 1941, to deter Japan from its ill-fated attack on Pearl Harbor, which started their war with the United States.

Good fiction can educate as well, if not better, than textbooks.
You will like having Arkady Renko and Martin Cruz Smith in your life.

678 words

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