

Red Square Short Guide

Red Square by Martin Cruz Smith

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Characters

The principal character in *Red Square* is, of course, Investigator Arkady Renko. The entire narrative is viewed from his perspective. Smith exploits fully the advantage of a series protagonist. Renko brings to the novel the baggage of a personal history acquired in *Gorky Park* (1981) and *Polar Star* (1989). In the first of these he debuted as a Soviet detective with a hard-boiled toughness and integrity who undeterredly pursued his inquiry into a triple murder in Moscow's Gorky Park, despite its impolitic ramifications for highly placed Party members. His reward was an exile to a factory ship in the Bering Sea in *Polar Star*, where his undiminished investigative skills helped to rehabilitate him. In *Red Square*, he has returned to Moscow. The powerful Party apparatus which opposed him in *Gorky Park* is now, in the era of Gorbachev, a much diminished thing, but Renko's investigation into the murder of a police informer stills leads him into conflict with his superiors and requires him to rely once again upon his own initiative and ingenuity.

Significantly, however, he now finds that the major forces seeking to obstruct his investigation are entirely extra-legal — the opportunists seeking to exploit whatever advantage they can find in the new, shifting world.

Whether a Soviet detective, as in the first two novels, or a Russian detective, as in the third, Arkady Renko remains an impressive character, convincing in his nationality, his psychology, his investigative technique, and his ethics.

The other two principal characters in *Red Square* are Irina and Stas, Russian expatriates employed by Radio Liberty in Munich. Irina is the woman Arkady had come to love in *Gorky Park* and had to leave behind in America. She resists him when he reappears in her life in Munich, but he overcomes the resistance in Berlin. Stas, whom Arkady meets for the first time, is more fully realized than the ideal Irina. He is an irreverent, sloppy, good Russian. He too returns to Moscow in the end; while Arkady and Irina join hands on the steps, Stas is inside the White House, broadcasting the message. Peter Schiller ably fulfills his role as the very competent German policeman who, when necessary, will break the rules.

Social Concerns

The action of *Red Square* is precisely dated; it begins on 6 August 1991 and ends on 21 August 1991. It is no coincidence that 18-21 August 1991 was the date of the abortive Russian coup, which threatened to topple the government of Mikhail Gorbachev and which was defeated, in part, by the dramatic resistance of the citizens of Moscow led by Boris Yeltsin. The novel's final scene, in fact, takes place on the steps of the "White House," where Yeltsin and his allies made their stand against the tanks. And the middle sections of the novel transpire in the recently reunited Germany (Munich and Berlin), and the ramifications of that reunion are also featured. Smith is, then, obviously interested in portraying the consequences of the disintegration of the Soviet empire.

These consequences include the declining standard of living in Moscow, the rise of organized crime in Russia (especially of the Chechen Mafia), the predicament of Russian emigres in Germany, the trade in stolen art, and the new work of propaganda institutions like Radio Liberty. As in the two prior Arkady Renko novels, Smith has carefully researched all of these scenes; he knows what the places look and feel like, and he knows how the organizations work. His depictions of these environments have consistently been among the most praised aspects of his fiction.

The movement of the action from Moscow to Munich to Berlin and then back to Moscow allows Smith to explore a wide variety of individual responses to the collapse of Communism. Renko confronts mobsters and money changers, apparatchiks and very competent policemen, old (WWII) opportunists and new opportunists. In Russia and out of Russia, he constantly faces the question of what it means to be Russian. In the end (as in *Gorky Park*), he knows that he has to return to Russia. In the first novel, the return meant abandoning the woman he has come to love and submitting to a Siberian exile. In *Red Square*, he returns with that woman, and the two of them find themselves united on the steps of Moscow's White House at the historical turning point when an assertion of democratic power seems to offer Russia a new, promising future.



Techniques

Unlike *Stallion Gate* (1986), *Red Square* seems content to be a very well-made example of the detective-spy hybrid genre. There are all the traditional desiderata: clues (the prayer-mat with no worn spots, the excess of blood in the car bombing) for the detective and double agents for the spy. The plot contains several surprises, and the questions are all answered in the end (all, that is, except the great question: "What will happen after the people face down the tanks?"). The excellence of the novel lies in its setting, in Smith's scrupulously careful placement of the action in its scenes and its history.

Themes

Red Square is more successful in its treatment of these broader social concerns — the state of Russia and Russians in 1991 — than it is in the treatment of its dramatic themes. For example, the love theme which drives the final two-thirds of the narrative seems conceived as a cinematic sequence of encounters between Arkady and Irina, with conventional obstacles and conventional overcomings, all leading to joined hands on the steps of the White House. The obstacles even include a perfunctory "are you here because you love me, or because your case brought you" complication. The sense of duty with which Irina feels herself to be competing remains one of Renko's virtues. Renko is motivated by a desire to avenge the murders of his informer friend and of his assistant friend, as well as by his professional integrity.

Arkady's unhappy relationship with his Stalinist father also seems stretched more to fit melodrama than character.

Smith delays for several chapters Renko's reading of his father's dying epistle to his son. But if the father-son relationship adds little psychological depth to the novel, it does serve as useful symbol of a larger social shift.

The passing of the father, mourned by his aged comrades-in-arms but not by his son, clearly stands for the passing of the old Stalinist Soviet Union, with its extraordinary heroisms and equally extraordinary barbarisms. Arkady Renko was haunted by his father's orthodoxy and stature in the first novels; he (and all Russians) must now face the new, post-Communist world on his own.

The plot of the novel allows Smith to touch on other themes as well. His interest in science and technology appears in the character of Polina, the Russian forensic scientist who aids Arkady in his investigation. And the plot involving the Berlin show of paintings by a Soviet artist allows Smith to raise questions about art and artistry.



Key Questions

series of Arkady Renko novels, *Red Square* must be judged as part of a larger project as well as upon its own merits. Although the plots and characters of each novel in the series draw upon stereotypes from detective and spy fiction, Smith has, from the beginning demonstrated through his meticulous research and careful re-creation of men?)

As the third installment in Smith's 2. In what respects does Arkady's romantic relationship with Irina move beyond the conventional love affair?

3. What are Polina's roles in the novel? As scientist? As Russian? As woman?
4. Compare Stas and Peter Schiller as Renko's two new male friends.
5. What is the role of Jews in the novel?
6. What is the role of the Muslim Chechens?
7. How successful is Smith's conjunction of detective story and history?
8. Is all the bloodshed necessary?

What is the justification for each death?

Is it required by the plot or the theme?

9. Compare the Arkady Renko series of novels to any other series of detective or spy novels. What aspects of fiction does Smith emphasize? Which ones does he seem to underplay? In what respects does he go beyond the conventions? In what respects is he content to adopt the conventions?

Literary Precedents

The literary precedents of Red Square naturally include those listed for Gorky Park (see separate entry): the police procedurals of McBain, Waugh, and Marric. But because the Renko books depend for their novelty and, to some degree, for their quality, upon the fact that the procedures his police use are Soviet police procedures, Smith has been faced with the special problem of the collapse of the entire Soviet system.

His accommodation of this new reality in his detective story might be compared to John Le Carre's or Len Deighton's similar accommodations of postCold War realities in their spy stories written since 1989.

The peculiar nature of the accommodation in Red Square — making the actual collapse of the Soviet system a central factor in the narrative — points to another category of literary precedent that might prove relevant. Clearly, since Gorky Park is 1981 (and with hints in earlier novels), Smith has dedicated himself to the tradition of the historical novel. Stallion's Gate and the three Renko novels are very carefully researched projects: the historical details are accurate and the historical personages — whether Oppenheimer or Yeltsin — act their proper historical roles.

Related Titles

Gorky Park and Polar Star prepare for Red Square. In Gorky Park, Smith achieved the remarkable feat of making an apparently authentic Moscow detective the hero of an American detective story. The achievement was highly praised and widely read; it was eventually turned into a movie. In Polar Star, Smith chose to transform his unique detective into a series hero, the potential protagonist of an undefined number of novels. Polar Star also returned to a more straightforward, formulaic development of the detective plot. A body turns up in the first chapter; an investigator engages in the process of detection; there are complications — clues and red herrings; and the killer is revealed and disposed of in the penultimate chapter. Polar Star displayed Smith's characteristic virtues.

The context of the action — a Russian factory ship in the Bering Sea — has been carefully researched (including a day on an actual Soviet ship) and is concretely imagined. The technologies seem authentic; Smith again convinces the reader that these are the ways things are done, and this is an impressive achievement. The characters are diverse and plausible. Arkady Renko is, of course, the central figure. Following his successful but unorthodox resolution of the problem in Gorky Park, he has been expelled from the Party, subjected to "psychiatric rehabilitation," exiled to Siberia, and now serves as a seaman on a trawler sailing from Vladivostock. The appearance of a girl's body in the ship's fishing nets leads to Renko's resurrection as an investigator.

In the process of solving the murder, Renko also uncovers matters of smuggling and espionage.

scenes and technologies the ambition to achieve something more than an entertaining escape novel. Although he could not have predicted the dramatic changes in the Soviet Union/Commonwealth of Independent States/Russia, Smith's Renko series has enabled him to provide vivid snapshots of crucial moments (1986, 1989, 1992) in that process. The Renko novels have become popular literature's most detailed and articulate chronicle of the ways that Russian politics and daily life have been altered during these extraordinary years.

Red Square illustrates as well as any of the other novels in the series Smith's strengths as a novelist and an observer.

In addition to the inevitable question of the degree to which Smith has successfully gone beyond the formulaic elements of his spy novel, readers might ask themselves how the novel alters their perceptions of the recent events in the former Soviet Union. Do the experiences of Arkady, Irina, Stash in Moscow and in Munich and Berlin enhance one's understanding of the human dimensions of these events?



1. How does Arkady's relationship with his father symbolize his relationship with the Soviet state? In what ways is the relationship not symbolic?

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