



# Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams

*Charles King*

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**"Rich and riveting, complex and compelling, powerful and poetic."—Peter M. Gianotti, *Newsday***

In Odessa, the greatest port on the Black Sea, a dream of cosmopolitan freedom inspired geniuses and innovators, from the writers Alexander Pushkin and Isaac Babel to Zionist activist Vladimir Jabotinsky and immunologist Ilya Mechnikov. Yet here too was death on a staggering scale, as World War II brought the mass murder of Jews carried out by the city's Romanian occupiers. Odessa is an elegy for the vibrant, multicultural tapestry of which a thriving Jewish population formed an essential part, as well as a celebration of the survival of Odessa's dream in a diaspora reaching all the way to Brighton Beach.

## Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams Details

Date : Published August 13th 2012 by W. W. Norton Company (first published February 28th 2011)

ISBN : 9780393342369

Author : Charles King

Format : Paperback 336 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Cultural, Russia, Ukraine, Geography, Cities, War, World War II

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# From Reader Review **Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams** for online ebook

## **Lauren Albert says**

The book suffers from a split personality. King seems to have started out writing a comprehensive history of Odessa but at some point it turned into the history of Jewish Odessa. Now, that story is absolutely essential to the overall history but the book seems imbalanced for its strong focus on that—particularly during World War II. I think it would have been a better book had King just written a book on Jewish Odessa—there is more than enough there to write a whole book.

With that said, I found the book interesting. I hadn't known that Odessa was such a young city—founded by Catherine the Great in the 1790s. I also thought it an interesting fact that a Richelieu—having escaped from France--had been the leader of the city in its early days.

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## **Andrei says**

Charles King writes well and is obviously highly knowledgeable about his subject. Though it is getting a bit frustrating that in the last years he has produced only introductory-level works on Caucasus, the Black Sea and now Odessa and very little substantial original research. He is too inclined to anecdotes and is unable to grasp social and economic history, which is detrimental to writing histories of human communities.

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## **Kathleen McRae says**

Well written and very enjoyable book on the Black Sea port city of Odessa. It was created as a model of enlightenment by Catherine the Great and was to be the Russian Empire's gateway to the Middle East. It built itself as a city of many nationalities and religions and became a place for cultures to merge and clash. It was home to one of the most vibrant Jewish communities in Europe and its decimation of its Jews is a different one from most of Europe.

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## **Dariusz P?ochocki says**

Per?a Morza Czarnego, która zrodzi?a Babla i wychowa?a Trockiego. Koniecznie "nada" si?gn?? po to dobro. Czasem mo?e troch? za mocno po ?ebkach, ale i tak urocza podró? po historii miasta. Szczególnie dobrze opisano histori? wojenn? miasta, troch? gorzej czasy radzieckie.

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## **Valentina Tkachenko says**

Very quick read (finished it in one day) and a good introduction to the history of Odessa. Not very detailed, though. I wish that it had been longer, or narrower in scope. Much of the early history is told through "great men" and then the book morphs into a history of Jewish Odessa. A very important topic, and crucial to understanding the city, but not the only story worth exploring in a book which claims to tell the whole history of the city.

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### **Alvin says**

As history this is a bit spotty, but it's a reasonably entertaining read.

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### **Matthew J. says**

A darned fascinating read about a unique city. Odessa isn't like other European cities. It doesn't have a deep history. It's about the same age as Washington D.C. It wasn't built on the ruins of some ancient Greek or Roman settlement. It didn't exist in the Middle Ages. A city of merchants, cut-throats, artists, revolutionaries, and complicated ethnic conflicts, its history features some stunning highs, and some gut-wrenching lows. What was at one point a marvelous mix of peoples from around the world, talking, trading, eating, and singing together, turned into an Orwellian nightmare of neighbor turning in neighbor, friend turning on friend, and everyone...EVERYONE turning on the Jews. Author Charles King refers to what happened in Odessa as a forgotten part of the Holocaust, and he's right. Nobody ever talks about it, least of all Odessans. It was later re-framed by the Soviets as a heroic resistance by the 'workers,' but it was a wholesale slaughter of Jewish people, and a near total removal of them from the fabric of a city that once held so many. The book is definitely a must read for History buffs. It connects to the American Revolution, Catherine the Great, World War I and World War II, art, science, literature, theater, and film-making. There are compelling characters from throughout the city's life. Like so many history books, it's a lesson in what might have been (had better choices been made), and a warning of what could always happen again (if the same mistakes are made).

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### **Meg - A Bookish Affair says**

"Odessa" is a nonfiction book by Charles King, a professor and historian who focuses on eastern Europe. Odessa is a gorgeous city on the coast of Ukraine that has belonged to different countries at different times. Because of its location, it is an incredibly desirable place strategically! This book is the history of this wonderfully interesting city that will appeal to my fellow history lovers.

What initially drew me to this book is the fact that several years ago in 2011 I visited Ukraine and had a chance to go to Odessa. After being in cities like Kyiv, Odessa is incredibly different. It has a very interesting history. It was basically a planned city by Catherine the Great, one of my favorite historical figures to read about. The city was to act as a haven for Russian royalty. It sits on the Black Sea, which means that it was coveted by many other people throughout its history.

In this book King talks about many of the people who had a hand in making Odessa what it is today. It's a fascinating story even if you have never been to Odessa. I actually wish that I had read this book before I went to Odessa so I had a little bit more of a background as to what I would see. This book will appeal to

history lovers and those who especially loved eastern European history.

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### **Katia N says**

Well written book. But when i feel that the first part of the book is really well researched, this feeling is fading after the chapter on the Second World War. The book creates an impression, partly intentionally i think, that the city's life was very uneventful and not distinctive after the War. While i do not know much about Odessa of this period i would not agree and wish i could find out more from this book.

3.5 stars

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### **Donna says**

I read this because I've been nibbling on 'The Complete Works of Isaac Babel' for a couple of years now. He has such a distinctive voice, one I have never come across before. Could it be the translation? Could it be Odessa? This is a fascinating history of a city from founding to now. The chapter on Pushkin was especially spirited. I found out there is a lot more to Isaac Babel than Odessa and a lot more to Odessa than a baby carriage going down a long flight of stairs.

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### **Barry says**

I devoured every scrap. Magnificent.

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### **Louise says**

This is not a conventional history, but the city as presented here, is not a conventional city. Author Charles King explains how unique Odessa is by fulfilling the promise of his subtitle. While providing an historical backdrop he mainly writes of the "genius" and "dreams" of Odessa through the personalities who built, influenced and otherwise defined this unusual city. The later chapters focus on "... and Death" as he describes the city's role in persecuting Jews before and during WWII.

Field Marshall Potemkin won this land for his queen/consort, Catherine the Great. Left somewhat to its own devices the city grew into a freewheeling international port, a magnet for traders, adventurers and artists, dreamers and geniuses. Anti-Semitism existed, but was not as extreme as other places so a thriving Jewish community (over 1/3 of the population prior to the pogroms) put down roots.

King brings to life the motley crew that graced Odessa's inception which includes: Potemkin, himself, an interesting champion, considering his role in the court of Catherine the Great and his legacy of "Potemkin Villages"; John Paul Jones, a hero of the American Revolution was ironically unable to translate his success on behalf of for democracy for North America to success on behalf of Russia's autocracy; Jose de Ribas, born in Naples of Spanish/Irish heritage, who served as Odessa's founding father; Armand Richelieu from a famous French family who led the city in its early development and through plague outbreaks; Mikhail

Vorontsov who appears as a banal aristocrat in Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad* (1912) and whose wife, Lise, a great-niece of Potemkin, had an affair (in Odessa) with the dreamer/genius Alexander Pushkin.

Later history includes the eccentric Nobel Laureate Ilya Mechnikov and a host of writers and entertainers. Considering the size of the city's Jewish population and the persecution it suffered, it is not surprising that prominent members of the Zionist movement were from Odessa.

The "and Death" part of the book describes the different attempts to rid the city/region of one of its largest ethnic groups, the Jews. The WWII round of persecutions at the hand of the Romanians (who occupied the city for the Axis powers) was every bit as grim (if not more so) than the more famous persecutions by Nazi Germany. It appears that freewheeling Odessans, while not particularly anti-Semitic, used the situation to personal advantage, for instance exposing neighbors for a financial goal. Those who protested or assisted Jews in hiding or in escape were the exception. King gives the staggering statistics with heart-wrenching human stories that live through bureaucratic documentations.

When you come to the end, with a trip to "Odessa in America" (Brighton Beach), you feel a need to visit the original and climb the Potemkin Stairs.

Most, but not all, of the book is engrossing at the page turning level. I recommend it for anyone interested in the Ukraine, Odessa or the region in general.

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### **Lupo says**

Se qualcuno è interessato all'argomento, come me, è un libro in generale consigliabile. Si riesce ad avere un quadro abbastanza chiaro della storia della città. King, però, qua e là cade nel gossip o in un'esposizione un po' confusa con date che a volte non tornano.

In questa confusione è aiutato da una traduzione mediocre, a volte pessima, e dall'assenza totale di un curatore dell'edizione italiana.

Nota aggiunta nel settembre 2014: la storia di Odessa è molto istruttiva per capire l'attuale situazione ucraina. Odessa è una città russa per storia (non troppo lunga: 200 e poco più anni) e popolazione, finita in Ucraina per meri motivi amministrativi dell'Unione Sovietica.

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### **Perlie says**

A great book that captures the history and spirit of Odessa, and its inhabitants. King's writing is stylish and engrossing. Highly recommend!

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### **Filip Olšovský says**

Wonderfully researched, written in an excellent style but lacking a bit of a balance. As someone already pointed out, somewhere in the middle King switches from the history of Odessa to the history of Jewish Odessa and then almost completely ignores the period between 1945 and 1991. The chapters on the foundation of the city are great and the book is able to hold one's attention the whole time but had the author

spent more time on its second half, it could have been THE book about Odessa.

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