



36 Yalta Boulevard

Olen Steinhauer

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Olen Steinhauer's first two novels, *The Bridge of Sighs* and *The Confession*, launched an acclaimed literary crime series set in post--World War II Eastern Europe. Now he takes his dynamic cast of characters into the shadowy political climate of the 1960s.

State Security Officer Brano Sev's job is to do what his superiors ask, no matter what. Even if that means leaving his post to work the assembly line in a factory, fitting electrical wires into gauges. So when he gets a directive from his old bosses---the intimidating men above him at the Ministry of State Security, collectively known for the address of their headquarters on Yalta Boulevard, a windowless building consisting of blind offices and dark cells---he follows orders.

This time he is to resume his job in State Security and travel to the village of his birth in order to interrogate a potential defector. But when a villager turns up dead shortly after he arrives, Brano is framed for the murder. Again trusting his superiors, he assumes this is part of their plan and allows it to run its course, a decision that leads him into exile in Vienna, where he finally begins to ask questions.

The answers in *36 Yalta Boulevard*, Olen Steinhauer's tour-de-force political thriller, teach Comrade Brano Sev that loyalty to the cause might be the biggest crime of all.

36 Yalta Boulevard Details

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From Reader Review 36 Yalta Boulevard for online ebook

SlowRain says

Brano Sev--mid-ranking officer in the security services of an unnamed Eastern European country during the Cold War--is given an opportunity to regain his position and title with a simple investigation back in his hometown: find out why a man who had recently defected to Austria has returned. What results takes Brano far from his home territory and forces him to reexamine everyone he knows.

This is Olen Steinhauer's third novel in his *Yalta Boulevard Sequence*. Like his previous novel, there is more detail in the plot and characters than there was in his debut. It's a testament to Steinhauer's writing ability that he can take a man like Brano Sev, who is a hardcore believer in socialism and the brutalities needed to enforce it, and still make him sympathetic and understandable. Where lesser authors would have given the Western reader a feel-good tale that appeals to our values, Steinhauer keeps Brano Sev honest and true to his ideals.

The settings are all handled deftly. Whether it is Brano's hometown, the European countryside, Vienna, etc., we have a clear sense of time and place. The plot, too, is sure to entertain fans of the most complex of thrillers.

And, yet, that's where I think it falters. There is just too much plot. Brano is a very interesting character, but we still don't get to know much about him--we only get a taste. He seems as knowable now, as the protagonist of his own novel, as he did when he was just a minor character in the previous ones. I wanted more Brano Sev. I wanted to know more of what he was discovering and struggling with. I wanted more narrative. What this novel delivers is a lot of little events. It's full of twists, coincidences, contrivances, and then more twists--in case we didn't have our fill already. With all the potential for weighty matters to be examined, it comes across as a rather light-weight novel--albeit, with a complicated plot.

Is this novel powerful enough to cause people to reexamine or reinforce their own beliefs? I doubt it. Does it expose anything or educate the reader? Not really. Is it entertaining and enjoyable. For some, yes. I just found it mildly so. Not as well-written as anything John le Carré or Graham Greene has ever done, but about on par with Martin Cruz Smith, and a bit more complicated than an Alan Furst novel. Still, pretty good company for Steinhauer.

Jeffrey says

Super good book. I don't like this five star rating system as three stars are average five stars are perfect and very few books are that way so four stars are above average and not perfect and it doesn't give you much leeway in rating the book it should be at least 8 in a 10 * system. so I would give this a four and a half stars or Nine Stars. It was a little bit slow going during parts as the plot was kind of convoluted. It was hard for the reader to understand exactly what was going on. The end was very good given the perspective of an Eastern European under the sway of a client state in the Eastern Bloc during the Soviet period. the protagonist Brano was an interesting character, a perfect anti-hero. the ending of the story was very well done interesting disappointing and given the behavior and thoughts of branle believable although like I said disappointing. all the characters were very well drawn and the dialogue was top-notch. the milieu of the place and time were well drawn.

Daisy says

Lots of characters and a hard-to-follow plot but that didn't deter me. 1967 Vienna. A likable hero. An ending that leaves you wanting a little more. Nice.

Mardie says

So far I like this one the best of the Steinhauer books I have read. The plot is very convoluted but almost predictable. I like the time period of this work.

Sheri says

Steinhauer is my nominee to succeed John LeCarre. His series of spy thrillers has been a delight to read. I've previously read Bridge of Sighs & The Confession. Both are set largely in Romania and peopled by the secret police who keep communism pure in their unit of the Soviet bloc. The first book was set shortly after WWII; the second was set during the Hungarian uprising (which was put down with Russian tanks). This one -- 36 Yalta Boulevard -- is set during the 1960s when the Berlin Wall is the defining point between East & West in Europe and when unhappy citizens are seeking paths of escape from Romania. Each book has focused on a different member of the secret police staff, and nicely portrays the inherent conflicts between the choices they face: the human thing to do, or what they're ordered to do. I'm now totally hooked and starting the 4th book, set in the 1970s, where the main character from 36 Yalta Boulevard is training a rookie who hasn't become sufficiently hardened to the job yet.

Chris says

Eastern European spy Brano Sev returns for a third installment of this post- WW2 thriller. He can't tell who to trust and has no idea why he is framed for murder and led into exile. He can't get any answers and has to just keep his wits and play along, all the while trying to figure out who is who and what is what. Enjoyed this, but not quite as much as I remember enjoying the first two -- granted it's been a good many years.

Rob Kitchin says

One ingredient of a good spy thriller is a sense of mystery, with the reader and the main protagonist not really sure quite what is happening. Steinhauer manages to maintain this uncertainty to the end of The Vienna Assignment. Just as you think you've got a handle on what is happening and why, the mirrors are shifted and a new view appears. The prose is mostly quite functional, but the plotting is carefully constructed, the shifting ground and mind games well framed and paced, tempting the reader along. The characterization is for the most part good, with Sev in particular a well-penned character, with depth, layers and rich back story. The Cold War sense of place in Vienna is well portrayed and contextualised. My big

gripe is that Sev's home country, in which a large portion of the book takes place, is unnamed and is therefore a bit ephemeral. I'm not really sure why. It makes for an odd balance, where the history and places of Austria and Hungary are a central component, but they are opposed by a generic Iron Curtain country lacking in context. Overall, a solid spy thriller with an interesting protagonist and enough twists and turns to keep you guessing until near the end.

Mal Warwick says

In this, the third novel in Olen Steinhauer's outstanding Central European cycle, we view the world through the eyes of Brano Sev, a World War II partisan fighter turned secret policeman in his unnamed Soviet satellite country. Now, nearing 50, Brano has been working for months on the assembly line at a factory as punishment for an espionage scandal that erupted after he was sent on assignment to Vienna. Without warning, his superiors pull him out of the factory, temporarily reinstate him as a major in the security service, and send him off to his home village, where he is to investigate why a defector has suddenly returned to the village and what he's planning to do. The ensuing complications threaten not just to end Brano's career but possibly his life as well. He flees to Vienna, where his long-held beliefs in the Communist system are challenged from all quarters.

36 Yalta Boulevard — the address is that of the security service headquarters in The Capital — continues the story begun in The Bridge of Sighs and The Confession, which follows the life and work of the five men who make up the homicide department in The Capital's police department. (Brano is the secret service spy in their midst.) The first book is set in 1948, the second in 1956, and 36 Yalta Boulevard in 1966-67. Two later novels — Liberation Movements and Victory Square — carry the tale forward into the 1970s and 1980s, thus traversing the entire half-century history of Communism in Eastern Europe.

Now, nearly a quarter-century after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Empire in Central and Eastern Europe, a new generation is growing up ignorant of the Cold War reality that hung over our lives for as long as most of us over 30 can remember. Olen Steinhauer brings back one important aspect of that reality in these unusually well-crafted books: the life and times of the millions who existed under the varying but always oppressive weight of state socialism — some, like Brano, willingly, even eagerly; others, indifferent or resisting.

Steinhauer has won numerous awards for the novels in this unusually engaging cycle. He deserves more.

(From www.malwarwickonbooks.com)

Eric_W says

Unfortunately, I am again reading/listening to a series out-of-order. Bridge of Sighs was first, followed by The Confession. They began in the 1940's and by the time we reach 36 Yalta Boulevard (the fictitious address of the East European country's --we never are quite sure which, but is typically Soviet Bloc-- spy service, the Ministry of State Security.)

Brano Sev is sent/led/tricked (we're never quite sure which) into going to Austria where he is framed for a murder. Relegated to a factory job by his bosses, he is resurrected for another in his home town where he

accidentally kills one of his handlers - or is he?. Always one to follow orders and assuming he is part of a grand plan, he's soon up to his ears in a nebulous labyrinth of betrayal and deceit, unable to trust anyone, and he begins to question his superiors orders.

In one of the great ironies, Brano really believes in the system, even as it betrays and beats him, and despite his knowledge of its corruption. He retains a child-like faith that's at once simplistic and complicated. It's confusing at times, but that confusion reflects Brano's own.

There are some really good novels out there in the spy genre examining the gray netherworld of human actions where the protagonists stumble their way through a maze that often seems to have no end, and writers like Le Carre, Seymour, Cruz Smith, Furst, and others have fertile ground to display the misty world of human frailty. Add Steinhauer to the list.

Ludlum fans will not be interested.

Denise says

The third book in the *Yalta Boulevard Sequence* takes us into the 1960s and puts State Security Officer Brano Sev (who was, as befits his job, a somewhat shadowy figure in the background in the previous books) front and center. Losing his job after being doublecrossed during a mole hunt in Vienna, he's been reduced to working a mindnumbing assembly line job at a factory when his old superiors come calling with a new task for him: He is to travel back to his home village and keep an eye on a potential defector. Then a villager turns up dead and Brano is framed for the murder - which appears to be exactly what his superiors want. Used to following even the strangest orders without asking questions, Brano runs with it, leading him into exile back in Vienna, where he is left to his own devices to figure out what exactly he is meant to accomplish, how - and why, a question he can no longer avoid asking himself.

A gripping, complex political thriller that keeps you guessing, with taut suspense and unexpected twists galore. I do believe this was the best book in the series so far, and I'm very much looking forward to the next.

Susan Decker says

This is the first novel I have read by Olen Steinhauer, but I plan to read more. His characters are finely drawn and the plot is complicated. This is a very somber, gray work about a current/former? spy for his Eastern European totalitarian government. Although it was interesting and progressed nicely, the one overriding emotion I felt as I read the final sentence of the book is numbness, that life is, in the end, futile, and that, for some, happiness is not possible.

Carmen says

An exciting ride of a book. Brano Sev is in the secret intelligence business. He always does what he is told. Then one day, he is demoted to working in a factory. He doesn't know why. then he is secretly sent to Austria. There he discovers a spy ring, how people are getting out and telling secrets. In the course of this discovery, he falls in love with a young Yugoslav lady. Set before the fall of the wall, it brings all that time

back in a unique way. Most of the books I have read about this time always pit an American or Alli force against a communist agent. This one is more the pyschological side of the Communist agent.

Brad says

Expatriate American author Olen Steinhauer's five part *Iron Curtain* series gets better with every book, every decade he showcases, and every character he focuses on. 36 Yalta Boulevard is no exception.

Brano Sev, the enigmatic *apparatchik* who played supporting roles in The Bridge of Sighs and The Confession, finds himself at the heart of a conspiracy to overthrow his unnamed country while on assignment as *rezident* in Vienna, Austria.

Weaving his way through a sixties Europe populated by the Beatles, Christian sponsored CIA groups, the Austrian secret service, double dealings and betrayals, hash smoke, too much drink and just a hint of free love, Sev remains a loyal party man and devout socialist, fighting for what he believes is right.

Sev's politics (not to mention his advanced age and tenuous health) make him a strange protagonist in a novel of intrigue, but it is refreshing to imagine the Cold War struggle from the other side, and with an agent as loyal to his cause as we expected the agents of our side to be.

It makes an otherwise familiar spy story something entirely entertaining because -- despite the Soviet flavour of Steinhauer's setting and the unique point of view of his protagonist -- Steinhauer's tale is one that we've read before. Sev is that classic Cold War agent trying to root out a nasty Mole in his own organization while being framed as the Mole himself. His boss is helpful and caring; his boss's boss is angry, unreasonable and under suspicion; and there are even the obligatory love entanglements and family ties to corruption that throw Sev's loyalty even deeper into question.

Without the moody setting of Steinhauer's Cold War Europe and Comrade Major Brano Olesky Sev, 36 Yalta Boulevard would have been a pedestrian, though still enjoyable, spy yarn. But Steinhauer's characters and setting elevate the third installment of his Eastern European series into the realm of real excellence.

If you are a nostalgic leftist or just a fan of Cold War spy fiction, Steinhauer's work is well worth a read.

Barbara Barna says

Just finished blitzing through Olen Steinhauer's 5-book crime & espionage series set in a fictional Soviet-bloc country during the Cold War. Each book is set during a different decade (1940s - 1980s) and revolves around a cast of recurring characters working for the Ministry of State Security. Any resemblance to Romania is intentional as Steinhauer began writing as a Fulbright Scholar there. But then he moved to Budapest and there's a heavy Hungarian shade as well.

36 Yalta Boulevard (3rd in the series) gets attention here because early on you realize this book is a huge progression from the previous two and its exciting as a reader to see Steinhauer finding his voice and coming into his own as a writer. You'll nod and smile and concur with the New York Times' comparisons to Le Carre.

Speesh says

Thoroughly enjoyed this one. I've previously read 'The Tourist', which was also excellent, though probably more of a mainstream spy novel.

'The Vienna Assignment' is particularly good because it doesn't do, as in the main character doesn't do, what you probably expect it/him to. At least, that's how I felt anyway.

It's set in Eastern Europe - and, as Vienna and Austria are in Western Europe - Western Europe, in the mid-sixties. It's about spies, about Socialism about suspicion and trust, betrayal and idealism when all the evidence points against it.

Atmospheric, intriguing and thought-provoking. Read it, you won't be disappointed.
