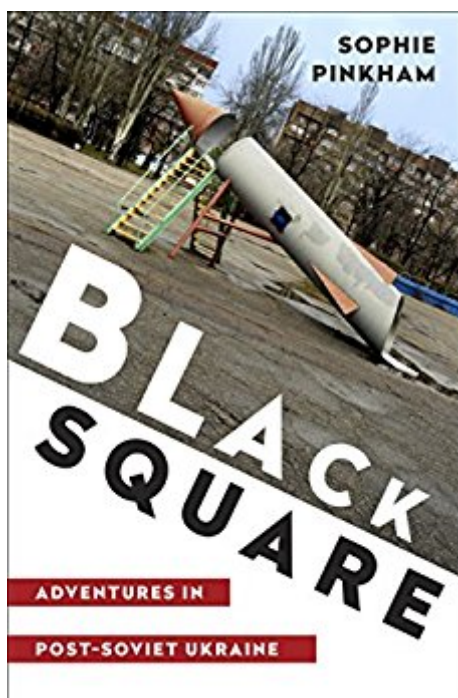


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Black Square: Adventures In Post-Soviet Ukraine



Synopsis

A distinctive writer's fascinating journey into the heart of a troubled region. Ukraine has rebuilt itself over and over again in the last century, plagued by the same conflicts: corruption, poverty, substance abuse, ethnic clashes, and Russian aggression. Sophie Pinkham saw all this and more in the course of ten years working, traveling, and reporting in Ukraine and Russia, over a period that included the Maidan revolution of 2013-14, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the ensuing war in eastern Ukraine. With a keen eye for the dark absurdities of post-Soviet society, Pinkham presents a dynamic account of contemporary Ukrainian life. She meets "among others" a charismatic doctor helping to smooth the transition to democracy even as he struggles with his own drug addiction, a Bolano-esque art gallerist prone to public nudity, and a Russian Jewish clarinetist agitating for Ukrainian liberation. These fascinating personalities, rendered in a bold, original style, deliver an indelible impression of a country on the brink. *Black Square* is necessary reading for anyone who wishes to learn not only the political roots of the current conflict in Ukraine but also the personal stories of the people who live it every day.

Book Information

File Size: 2658 KB

Print Length: 293 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; 1 edition (November 1, 2016)

Publication Date: November 1, 2016

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B01BX7S0S2

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #561,836 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #35

in Books > Travel > Europe > Belarus & Ukraine > General #61 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Russia & Former Soviet Republics > Former Soviet Republics #102 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Travel > Asia > Russia & Former Soviet Republics

Customer Reviews

Full of personal color and written with a photographer's eye for detail, Black Square reads like a long letter from a brilliant friend. As an American, Ms. Pinkham's observer status leads her to frame the events leading up to Euromaidan intelligibly for readers (like me) without a strong background in Eastern European politics; at the same time, her work experience with people at the margins of Ukrainian society gives her credible perspective and access to personalities by turns wry, cynical, hopeful, and almost always sympathetic. In acknowledging the complexity of a political situation in which some actors are doing good things for frightening reasons - and others are explicitly manipulating the flow of information to suit their purposes - it would be easy for the author to yield to a sort of relativistic helplessness. Instead, there's a broad stripe of humanist empathy that runs through the entire book.

Great combo of memoir, travelog, history. Well written

Black Square is gorgeously written and entirely absorbing. It seamlessly weaves together history, politics, and personal experience. The prose is precise, evocative, and elegant in an un-showy way, and the narrative is threaded with warmth and humor and an appreciation for beauty, which only makes the tragedies it describes sharper. Portraits of the author's friends and colleagues as well as those of public figures emerge with clarity and striking depth. I wish everything I read were as particular, intelligent, and engaging as this book.

Sophie Pinkham invites you on an at once moving and amusing journey through Russia and Ukraine and it would be a great shame not to go! Armed with a quick wit and keen perception, the author tackles heavy topics in the history and culture of these countries without ever abandoning her seemingly effortless style. The destinations included are places as disparate as Siberian rehabilitation centers for drug addicts, Ukrainian beach resorts for post-Soviet hippie musicians and, most importantly, the Maidan Square in Kiev, which became the epicenter of the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution. Pinkham manages to remain sincere as she tells a story that is both personal and political. And in doing so, she seems to be able to captivate almost any audience. I highly recommend this book to those who is interested in fiction and travel writing, as well as to those who are interested in the historical and socio-political aspects of the region.

There are not many books on Ukraine. This one provides a lot of interesting information for those

interested in what life is like in Ukraine. The author spent a lot of time there and interacted with a variety of people.

enjoyed it, very recent events

I heartily recommend this book. Since this book is coming at such a troubled time, its relevance to the world we all have to navigate is naturally going to be foregrounded in responses to it--yet what I found myself thinking of as I put it down was the virtuosity with which this book was constructed. In translation, we often think in terms of tradeoffs--"should a particular sentence be rendered in a way that retains the flavor of the original, or one that offers the reader the affordances they need to read it. Sometimes, though, if you're prepared to approach it with the necessary rigor, you don't have to make that decision; you can have both. To my mind, Sophie has achieved the non-fiction equivalent of one of those especially felicitous translations; Black Square functions comfortably on both sides of seeming dichotomies that would fracture a lesser book. This book deals with vast swathes of history (and the first thing anyone thinking about Ukraine has to learn is how large even its remote history looks over it in the present moment) yet does so in service of equipping the reader to understand the present moment in a particular place. Its observations are scholarly and level-headed (particularly welcome in our infamously breathless age,) yet unabashedly personal (her narrative voice is very distinctly her own, and the reader is given just enough autobiographical lived experiences to provide points of coordination to make that voice's acquaintance). Most remarkable of all, this book manages to be both informative and literary. Earlier tonight, I was telling someone about my favorite moment, when Ukrainians we met early in the book and have come to know and love (warts and all) provide their often-surprising reactions to Maidan. Most strikingly, a lesbian feminist declares for the Ukrainian national ideal (in Russian). My interlocutor remarked that I called them "characters" despite the fact that they are real people, because their evocative introductions and development have something of the grace and economy of literary language. And that's the one thing I will say about the politics of this book; it is a book about persons, not the categories into which ideologies sort them (though it discusses that process of sorting with uncommon depth). A Jewish activist tends the wounds of a fellow protestor and notes his Swastika tattoo. Beachgoers in Crimea adopt the trappings of hippie culture, but sing Soviet songs in pursuit of the warmth of familiarity and mutuality that comes with them. Men are driven to go to war by the same emptiness that once drove them to drugs. Handling ideologies unblinkingly and persons tenderly is just what we need in this climate.

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