On November 7, 2013, Dr. Charles King, a professor of international affairs and government at Georgetown University, gave a lecture at REEEC about the Ukrainian city of Odessa as part of the New Directions in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies series. The title of the lecture was the same as the title of his book, *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams*.

Throughout its short history, Odessa has been known for its diverse inhabitants from many different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. At least during part of this history, these cultures and ethnicities managed to coexist peacefully. This mixture of cultures, within the same neighborhoods and even families, equaled, said King, “more than the sum of [its] parts.”

Odessa, as we know it today, was born when its territory was annexed to the Russian Empire. It is a younger city than Washington, D.C., founded in 1794 with the help of a general under Catherine the Great, José de Ribas, from Naples. In the 1820s, Russia’s great poet Aleksandr Pushkin lived there during his exile and most likely had an affair with Lise Vorontsova, the wife of the governor-general of New Russia. According to King, Pushkin likely doodled Lise’s portrait in the margins of his notebook, where he wrote Evgeny Onegin. The governor-general, probably suspecting Pushkin was up to no good, ordered him to write an official report about Odessa’s locust infestation. Pushkin never wrote that report.

Some years later, the iconic American writer Mark Twain visited Odessa and, after gazing into the distance from the Odessa Steps, remarked that it reminded him of America.

Though all of these facts make for an interesting narrative, they comprise only a small part of Odessa’s history.

The story of Odessa that King wanted to tell began when he showed the audience a picture of an old, dilapidated building on an Odessa street corner. King remarked that the old building is symbolic of Odessa’s mystery. The building, originally an old synagogue, changed into a worker’s club during Soviet times. Today, it houses the city’s archives. The enigma of Odessa, King stated, was that it fluctuated drastically between a comfortable coexistence among diverse cultures and ethnicities on the one hand, and massive violence between them on the other.

The shift, from peaceful coexistence between the Jews and other Odessans to unthinkable violence, comprised a large portion of King’s lecture. Odessa was not only a very important port for the Russian Empire’s grain trade, but also a place with its own myths and literary culture, in which its Jewish population exercised considerable influence. It was a population that included Isaac Babel (author of *Red Calvary*) and Vladimir Jabotinsky, a revisionist Zionist who was the founder of Odessa’s Jewish Self-Defense Organization and writer of *The Five*.

Despite the fact that Odessa was a place of flowering Russian, Yiddish and several other cultures, pogroms against the Jews started in the 1820s and continued into the twentieth century. King compared the scale of violence surrounding these pogroms to a mini-civil war, as many Jews violently fought back. Sadly, these pogroms were neither the last
nor the worst catastrophe to befall the city's Jewish population. The Romanian occupation of Odessa during World War II brought even more anti-Semitic violence and devastating losses. Jews were moved into ghettos and murdered on a massive scale. In one instance, a Soviet-perpetrated explosion of a Romanian military headquarters in 1941 precipitated the mass murder of 20,000-30,000 Jews. Just a week separated this event from the better-known tragedy of Babi Yar in Kiev. When the Soviet army conducted a census of the Odessan population in 1944, they were only able to find 48 Jews. Though Jews returned to Odessa after the war, until this day, no more than 12 percent of the city's population has been Jewish. As a result of these tragic losses, Odessa, as King put it, is actually a city "that devoured itself."

Fortunately, the story of Odessa is not yet finished and does not have to end with complete destruction. King decided to end both his book and lecture in Brighton Beach, New York, a place where "Odessa has recreated itself." Its inhabitants even call it "Little Odessa." King concluded that his book is less about Odessa's rise and fall, and more about how "cosmopolitanism" (meaning peaceful coexistence of many cultures) "takes work" and is a "project, not a virtue in itself."

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