

Reflections on World Politics: Russia - #13

John A. Bernbaum

May 21, 2022

Young Professionals Flee Russia

When the Communist Party successfully took power after the collapse of the Romanov dynasty and the Russian defeat in World War One, there was a mass exodus from Russia. Opponents of the radical new regime fled, mostly to western Europe, especially Paris and Berlin. A similar exodus is underway right now, and it is damaging the future of Russia – a tragic byproduct of the war Putin began, and one with significant repercussions for his country.

Russia's Exodus: The exodus began in 2013, when Putin reclaimed his leadership position as president and increased internal repression against protestors who opposed his re-election. His increased use of force to subdue any opposition had intensified by 2020, and when he manipulated the parliament so it would allow him to stay in power until at least 2036, the exodus swelled in number. But when Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, hundreds of thousands of Russians left the country. Unlike previous exiles who headed west, this current mass exodus is going to neighboring countries. Flights from Russia to Western European cities were eliminated and visas needed for entry by Russians are now strictly controlled because of western sanctions. Unofficial estimates indicate the preferred destination for Russian emigres is Turkey, where more than 100,000 Russians are seeking residence, followed by Georgia, Armenia, and Kazakhstan.

The refugees are generally highly educated, from major urban centers, and politically oriented toward the West. Studies indicate that the largest group of refugees are young IT specialists, whose work for western companies or whose Russian businesses involved ties to the West that are now blocked by sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States. Many of these IT specialists are young males who are also fearful of being drafted into the army to fight a war they do not support. Russian sources indicate that at least 100,000 of these specialists have fled since the invasion took place. Journalists, political activists, democratically minded faculty, and now business executives are also joining the rush to get out of the country because they do not want to live in isolation behind a new “iron curtain.”

The Autocrat's Handbook: Putin is following the same pattern as other autocrats, especially those who feel their position is vulnerable. The internal repression in Russia is now comparable to Stalin's Russia in the 1930s. Autocrats can either severely penalize and imprison dissidents or make it easy for opponents to leave. Putin has chosen the second option, calling them "traitors and scum" and stating that true Russian patriots will understand that the flight of these people, estimated to total 200,000, will help "cleanse" Russian society.

Those who are fleeing make observations like this: "In Russia, you're living inside the fantasy of a few people. They've created an imaginary world and you're forced to be a part of it." Another said, "We were afraid that the borders would be closed the very next day. So, we left everything – our apartment and cars – and jumped on the plane." A third response, echoed by many, is this: "We left not only for the sake of our children, but for ourselves too. I don't want to fight in a senseless war and die for it."

One of Putin's "big lies" is that he is going to make Russia great again, and he aspires to be a major figure in Russian history, comparable to Peter the Great. The absurdity of this statement is plain to see. Why would a leader who wants to make his country great again create an environment in which the "best and brightest" talent in the country become exiles? As Professor Timothy Colton from Harvard University noted, "All too often, Russians end up being made small by rulers who are engrossed in making Russia great."

One important question about these refugees is whether they will completely disconnect from Russia or begin to form information channels to educate the people they left behind about the reality of their life living behind the new "iron curtain." They can tell their former colleagues the truth about what Putin and his national security cronies have done to make Russia a country that no one wants as an ally.

These "Reflections" are circulated approximately once a week. If you want to have your name added to our mailing list, let me know (johnbernbaum@gmail.com); you can unsubscribe at any time. All of these "Reflections" can be found on Dr. Bernbaum's website (www.johnabernbaum.org), along with many other resources.