Book Review: "Leaving Russia: How Putin Forced a Country's Future to Flee" by Jason Corcoran

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Leaving Russia: How Putin Forced a Country's Future to Flee
By JASON CORCORAN
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Jason Corcoran's *Leaving Russia: How Putin Forced a Country's Future to Flee* opens with an epigraph from Monetochka—the indie singer-songwriter Yelizaveta Gyrdymova, who left Russia in 2022 following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and was subsequently designated a "foreign agent" by the state. The lyric chosen, "It was in Russia, which means it was long ago," is a song about the specific texture of a lost urban life: tiled floors, first kisses, the smell of a particular street. It is nostalgia of a precise social register—educated, metropolitan, culturally literate—and its placement as the book's threshold is, whether intentional or not, diagnostic. Before a single argument has been advanced, the emotional frequency has been set, and the implied listener is already someone for whom this kind of loss is legible. Corcoran, an Irish journalist who spent fourteen years based in Moscow as a senior correspondent for Bloomberg News and Dow Jones, brings to the subject an unusual combination of professional embeddedness and personal proximity: a Russian wife, deep social ties to the capital's educated classes, and his own departure from Moscow in the wake of the invasion. What follows is part reportage, part character study, part political inventory. The result is a readable and often illuminating account, but also one whose representational limits are visible from the outset.

Although the book is framed as a study of Russia's post-2022 exodus, its social world is much narrower: metropolitan, internationally mobile, professionally networked, and largely elite.

The book is organised into three parts. Part One, "Exodus," surveys the geography and sociology of Russian emigration after 2022, with chapters dedicated to individual figures: a tech entrepreneur (Oleg Tinkov), an investment banker (Ruben Vardanyan), a filmmaker (Michael Lockshin), and a poisoner turned politician (Andrei Lugovoy), alongside population-level accounts of destinations including Serbia, Georgia, the UAE, Germany, France, and Israel. Part Two, "The Russians Left Behind," turns to those who remained: oligarchs navigating sanctions and the collapse of golden-passport schemes, the imprisoned and martyred opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Kremlin operative Kirill Dmitriev, and others stranded in a Russia they can no longer fully claim. Part Three, "Russia's New Course," examines the institutional reconstruction of Soviet-style governance—the revival of Intervision, the reconstitution of security architecture under new names—and the curious figure of foreign nationals who remain in Russia, some of whom have absorbed and now transmit Kremlin talking points. The book's central argument is best encapsulated in its cover endorsement from Bill Browder, who describes the work as "a powerful window into how Putin has devastated Russia's greatest resource: its people." Corcoran largely accepts this framing. His thesis is that the war has forced a bifurcation of the Russian elite—into those who fled and those who remained—and that this bifurcation constitutes both a moral reckoning and a structural catastrophe for Russia's future. The book also advances an implicit normative position, articulated most clearly in a phrase near the end of the first chapter: that European governments risk endorsing Putin's own logic when they treat all Russian passport-holders as suspect, and that judgment should be reserved for conduct rather than nationality.

Corcoran's method is journalistic rather than academic. He draws on hundreds of interviews conducted across Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, the Balkans, the Baltics, and the South Caucasus, supplemented by fourteen years of reportage for major financial and news outlets. This gives the book a strong documentary quality: its authority rests on access, proximity, and the accumulation of carefully reported cases rather than on conceptual intervention. In this respect, *Leaving Russia* belongs to a wider body of English-language narrative non-fiction on post-Soviet Russia, alongside Anne Applebaum's work on Soviet and post-Soviet political memory (2017, 2020), Oliver Bullough's investigations of money and kleptocracy (2022), and Masha Gessen's accounts of Putinism, dissent, and civic life under authoritarian pressure (2012,

2020). Corcoran's focus is narrower and more sociological: the post-2022 displacement of Russians whose mobility, capital, public visibility, or professional status made departure possible, consequential, and narratable. What is methodologically distinctive, if not unprecedented, is the structural decision to move between macro-level analysis—legislative changes, institutional restructuring, migration statistics—and micro-level portraiture. The chapter on Dmitriev, for instance, reads as a study in cognitive dissonance: a figure of Ukrainian heritage who has become one of the more effective instruments of Kremlin foreign policy. The chapter on Lugovoy is a different kind of portrait, examining the impunity with which agents of state terror operate in plain sight. These juxtapositions are productive; they prevent the book from becoming either a straightforward political history or a collection of human-interest profiles.

Leaving Russia makes its most significant contribution as a work of synthesis and documentation. The scholarly literature on Russian emigration—particularly the post-2022 wave—is still emerging, and academic treatments of the specific mechanisms by which the Putin regime has alienated, expelled, or imprisoned its own professional classes remain relatively sparse outside of policy-adjacent publications. Corcoran compiles into a single, readable volume a record of legal changes, travel restrictions, sanctioned oligarchs, and the strange new cartography of the Russian diaspora that would otherwise require consultation of numerous disparate sources. For researchers working on Russian foreign policy, authoritarian regime consolidation, or the political economy of emigration, the book functions as a useful primary source of documented cases and testimonies. The book will be of particular value to readers in international relations, comparative politics, and area studies, as well as to policy practitioners and journalists seeking a structured overview of the post-invasion elite exodus. It does not claim—and should not be mistaken for— a contribution to the sociology of migration more broadly, or to the political science literature on authoritarian consolidation, though it provides ample empirical material for scholars working in both fields.

The book's central limitation is also, in a sense, its organising principle. Corcoran's Russia is overwhelmingly the Russia of the visible elite: oligarchs, bankers, filmmakers, opposition leaders, entrepreneurs, and internationally recognisable cultural figures. The experiences of Tinkov, Vardanyan, Navalny, Lockshin, and others are genuinely consequential, and the author renders them with care and moral seriousness. But they are not representative of the broader population forced to negotiate the consequences of the war: teachers, engineers, musicians,

service workers, low-income families, draft-age men without exit strategies, and those who left without assets to protect or platforms from which to speak.

This matters empirically, methodologically, and politically. Empirically, non-elite Russian emigration is structured by different pressures: precarious legal status, weak institutional protection, limited mobility, dependence on unstable labour markets, and the impossibility of returning home without risking prosecution, conscription, or social ruin. Methodologically, Corcoran's own embeddedness in Moscow's professional classes is both an asset and a constraint. It gives the book access, intimacy, and authority, but it also defines whose testimony becomes available and whose remains peripheral. Politically, the focus on elite displacement risks reproducing the very hierarchy it seeks to diagnose: Russia's future appears most visible when it is embodied by those who were already visible before they left.

The problem is therefore not one of accuracy, but of scale. *Leaving Russia* gives a detailed account of elite displacement after 2022, while its title and framing invite a broader reading. The book's Russia is made up primarily of people whose departures could be documented, narrated, and recognised: business figures, cultural producers, opposition politicians, internationally mobile professionals. That emphasis gives the book much of its evidentiary strength, but it also narrows the social field through which Russian emigration becomes visible.

Social scientists might also raise legitimate methodological concerns about the book's sourcing. Corcoran is transparent about his social embeddedness in Moscow's professional classes, and this embeddedness is clearly an asset. But it also raises questions about whose testimony was available to him, and whose was not. The book reads, at its richest moments, as an extraordinarily well-sourced compilation of accounts from an educated, English-speaking, often internationally mobile stratum of Russian society. This is not a criticism of the author's reporting; it is a structural observation about the limits of any social network as an epistemic base. The question of whether it is possible to produce a credible portrait of "good Russians" —those who oppose the regime—primarily through the experiences of oligarchs and public intellectuals is one the book does not fully confront. These reservations notwithstanding, the book succeeds on its own terms. It provides a detailed, empathetic, and carefully documented account of a specific and important phenomenon: the dispersal of Russia's professional and creative elite in the wake of the full-scale invasion. A more measured characterisation might be that this is an excellent account of how the war has changed the lives of Russia's most visible

and most networked citizens—which is not a small thing but is not quite the same as an account of how it has changed Russia.

Leaving Russia is a timely, readable, and well-sourced work that will reward readers seeking to understand the human dimensions of Russia's post-2022 fracture. Corcoran writes with evident sympathy for those who have been displaced or persecuted, and with admirable scepticism toward those who have sought to straddle incompatible worlds. His legal and institutional analysis is clear and accurate, and his individual portraits are among the more nuanced available in English-language non-fiction on the subject.

It is, however, a book about the Russian elite rather than about Russians. The suffering it documents is real, but it is the suffering of those who had the most to lose and the most resources to survive losing it. The book would have benefited from a more sustained engagement with the experiences of those who left Russia not with shares to sell or networks to mobilise, but with a suitcase and a one-way ticket to a country that may not have wanted them. Those Russians—unnamed, unknown to the Kremlin-watchers and financial journalists who populate Corcoran's source base—are also Russia's future, and their story remains largely untold.

Recommended to scholars of Russian elite politics, post-Soviet studies, authoritarianism, and emigration after 2022, as well as to general readers interested in a well-reported account of Russia's post-invasion diaspora. The necessary caveat is that the book's "Russia" is overwhelmingly elite. Its title suggests a broad account of national departure, but the narrative is dominated by oligarchs, financiers, cultural producers, opposition figures, and internationally mobile professionals. The result is not a sociology of the Russian exodus after 2022, but a well-reported account of how that exodus looked from its most privileged and visible edge.

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