



PERM NEWS

Оксфорд и Пермь

O P A

Oxford Perm Association

Newsletter October 2022



In these troubled times, friends in Perm and Oxford keep in touch as well as they can. The following letters were sent to members of the Oxford Perm Association in September. Apart from the last one, identifying details have been removed.

(1) As for me - me and my family - we feel disturbed and frightened. So many things happened to us during last year. In my life there was 20th September 2021, in our university, [6 people were killed and 34 wounded when a lone student, clearly mad, started shooting in a classroom.] Then this war and now this participation of the ordinary Russian people in the war actions. We are afraid to live a full life and we can't in these circumstances. It seems that something really horrifying is happening around and we can't do anything. Many of us at the department don't want our husbands go fighting without us, we feel this maternal duty to help them and protect them and our children from all this disaster. At the same time we still don't know what and whom to believe. I try not to take any side, I have no real evidence to make judgements. But the government and the situation forces us to participate and take action. I hope all this will finish soon. And we will have a life with freedom. Thank you for holding hands with me, with us.

(2) I feel that we're all in turmoil, and there is a mix of emotions – anxiety, insecurity and sorrow. This war (or, as they call it “special military operation”) better never started. And my heart is torn apart – on the one hand, I consider the right of the inhabitants of Eastern Ukraine to self-determination to be just, although there are many conflicting precedents, from Chechnya to Kosovo. I have no doubt that the vast majority of citizens of the Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine would like to become part of Russia, but the fact that this did not happen according to the Czechoslovak scenario, but according to the Yugoslav one, hurts my soul.

Perhaps I have already written that some of my relatives come from the Donetsk region. My father-in-law's cousin was the Chief Engineering Officer of the AzovStal plant in Mariupol. My wife's paternal family is from Gorlovka. News of casualties and destruction on both sides is not about something far away, but about native places. The

worst thing is that we are mired in this war like a swamp. The stakes are constantly rising and there is a possibility that this conflict will escalate into a full-scale war. At the same time, it seems to me that the West does not understand that Russia is doomed to win this war, because the alternative to this is a nuclear apocalypse.

I think you will be interested to know how the life of an ordinary Russian has changed since the beginning of the special military operation. It hasn't changed much, the most obvious changes are the departure of McDonald's, Pepsi and Coca-Cola, but Russian companies immediately took their market share. I suspect that we will face some other, more serious problems due to sanctions later or we are already facing now, but for an ordinary Russian they are not noticeable. Of course, the saddest thing is that Europe is now closed to us for a long time. On the other hand, this is a good opportunity to get to know East Asia better.

(3) I have a double feeling about what happened on 24th February. On the one hand, it is inevitability of what is happening. I am convinced that many people in different parts of the world have taken many, many steps for the past 30 years, that have resulted in all of this. But this understanding didn't make it any easier for me. It feels like someone's cut me open. Friendship is what matters, really.

(4) Hello friends. I have a habit of travelling the world for more than 20 years. I travelled across Europe, the US, and Asia. Usually, trips are related to internships, study, work, or just tourism. I love road romance, airplanes, hotels, new friends and discoveries. I have always considered myself a man of the world. Until February 24, 2022. Despite all the visas in my international passport, my internal passport sharply reminded of itself. All other statuses and identities were blocked by the fact that I'm Russian.

But I'm lucky. I'm typing these words out of Russia. In the spring, I took my wife and three-year-old son and we moved to Eastern Europe. We are the Russian emigrants about whom there are so many debates now. We do not have a long-term visa yet, but we have friends who help us, and we hope that everything will be fine. I want to share my story. Usually, those who left Motherland write to those who stayed. I want to address those to whom we have come – the collective Europeans. Perhaps my story will help you form an attitude towards people like us.

It is very difficult to emigrate. The first wave of emigration from Russia in March was largely spontaneous, people went nowhere and many returned. Thank God they had homes to return, unlike the Ukrainians. But I'm not talking about whose burden is heavier. I speak for myself. It took me two months in Russia and three months in a new place to collect and submit all the documents for a long-term visa. My friends here and there help us a lot, I have a job in Europe, I speak English, and we had a financial reserve for moving. Even with such wonderful conditions, it was the most difficult period in my life. Huge uncertainty, a lot of pitfalls, endless visits to lawyers, translators, and notaries, to the migration service, and the issue has not yet been fully resolved. Still, I consider myself lucky. In my environment, maybe 2-3 families have such an opportunity to leave Russia, the rest will stay - of the language barrier, lack of money, no work and perspectives, etc. 72% of Russians do not have a passport, they have never been abroad. This is the nuclear electorate of the regime. According to the European Commission, on September 1, the number of valid visas for Russian citizens is 963 000. Less than one million at all! There are official numbers from Rosstat, since the beginning of 2022 year, 97,000 have left Russia for the CIS countries and 23,000 for all other countries of the world. It is less than 0.1% of the Russian population, but in terms of human capital, it is the best percentage!

Fight against the regime? The idea of locking up Russians in Russia so they can change the regime is completely unviable. The Germans could not overthrow Hitler, the Spaniards could not remove Franco for 40 years. Totalitarianism is based on a coercive repressive force; it knows how to cope with internal challenges. Let's take my example. I worked in several human rights organizations, taught political science at the university for 14 years, was an assistant to an opposition municipal deputy for 5 years, ran for elections myself, and was withdrawn. I believe that I have done a lot to promote democratic values in my country, but I am not ready to go to jail or pick up a machine gun for my views. At this stage of life, I'm not ready! I'm not a hero. Like no one is ready in my circle. My weapon is the word. And if you are reading this, it means it works. But for writing, at least, I must be free. In Russia, I would not write. Closing the opposition in a country is like locking an unarmed man in a lion's cage. A miracle will not happen, the lion will not choke.

Border checks? Another idea from the same series. Let's release the Russians, but demand to sign a paper that the person is against the war. The question is: what for? This will not stop real spies and saboteurs. But for ordinary citizens, it can create big problems for returning. My example. I have a mother, sister, niece, many friends and acquaintances in Russia. And I want to be able to see them, at least 1-2 times a year. A natural, human desire to see loved ones. If the condition of departure is the signing of such a paper, then this can be considered a one-way ticket. At least democratic Europe should not close its borders before Russia, but it can stop buying oil. In the first half of 2022, Russia earned 158 billion euros from fuel exports, of which 87.5 billion euros were received from the EU countries. Part of this money is spent on shells and bombs. Don't you think it's time to separate populist solutions from effective ones?

About collective responsibility. I don't believe in collective responsibility. I say this as an experienced teacher. I don't understand how the whole class can be punished if several students have committed a crime. Feelings of guilty can be common - disappointments, regrets, and shared emotions. But responsibility is always individual. Moreover, this is the first war in the history of mankind, which is literally broadcast live, everything is recorded from satellites and posted on the Internet. Many names of those who committed crimes in Bucha are already known. I am sure it will take a year or two and full lists of names will be published. The Russian opposition has presented a list of 6,000 names for international sanctions. Everything is transparent and personalized in the modern world. I feel a deep sense of guilt when people die, I am a pacifist. But I don't think that I should be responsible for the crimes of other people, because we have the passport of one country. Moreover, my three-year-old son, who is definitely innocent, should not be deprived of the European future in these circumstances.

Why Europe? For me, Europe is not geography, it is rather a vector of development. There are only two types of vectors in the world: some are directed to the future; others worship the past. Some take risks, discover, create and inspire. Others suppress, destroy and intimidate. As Brodsky said, a person should not be determined by nationality, but only by his inner qualities and hopes. All my life I communicate and work with those who create and inspire. I hate the destruction that some citizens of my country do. Man is not a tree; he is free to choose his environment. I've made my choice. The question is, is the new environment ready to accept people like me?

Sergei Ponomarev (formerly from Perm State University). Sergei would like to hear from anyone who has opinions or comments on this article. If you send them to Karen, she will pass them on.

Perm Seminars

During the previous academic year when it became obvious that there would be no visits between Oxford and Perm in the near future, the OPA, together with Perm university, began to look at ways of maintaining links by collaborating online. The result was the setting up of online seminars and discussions in English led by various members of the OPA. These are partly for Perm students to improve their English, and partly to raise questions about British society and culture. Participants include students on International Relations courses, teachers of English and students on other courses who have a good level of English. The teachers from Perm invite their students to join and help moderate the sessions.

An account from Graham Dane of his seminars.

The three zoom sessions in English I have done have been very varied. The first was meant to be a practice but turned into quite a long discussion of several topics, but mostly international affairs and British politics. The Russian participants were half a dozen advanced students and their level of English was excellent. The students (all men) each had their own computer and were in various locations. The nearest we got to anything controversial was discussing the possible effect on policy on Ukraine of a change of Prime Minister and I said there would be no change in policy.

The second seminar was on the topic of secondary education as that is my area of expertise and once again the participants (all women this time) were on individual computers, mainly in their own homes, including Prof Svetlana Polyakova. The discussion was more focused and the participants were all trainee teachers or qualified teachers. The objective was to give them a chance to contribute to a seminar using semi-specialist vocabulary.

The third webinar was very different in style as the students were all together in a classroom- about 24 people. I appeared to them on a screen at the front of the class. My presentation was on the topic of British elections. (As an aside, I remember saying the Head of State was not elected and that the next one would be Prince Charles.) The sound quality was not perfect but we got by. Prof Konstantin Klochko was in the room to chair proceedings and designate who was to put questions. Individual participation was less than in the previous two sessions. I had been expecting students with separate computers (although some sharing of computers would also have been fine) and my lesson plan involved breakout groups with questions to be tackled: none of that happened. You have to be prepared to be flexible. Jessica Vlasova was kind enough to listen in and say what things had worked well, and I did the same for her on another occasion.

As the main idea is to provide opportunities for discussion in English there is flexibility in the exact coverage. The topics were suggested by the Russian professors but there was also enthusiasm for a suggestion of my own (on Robert Burns) so do have a chat if you are offering to run a webinar. Pre-meetings on zoom are easy to set up, and voice calls on WhatsApp are also straightforward as long as you remember the time difference. Plans were agreed in June to do more webinars but no dates were set so we are now awaiting concrete suggestions. This is obviously an extra complication for Perm colleagues but we are happy to help. Ideas for less formal sessions involving small groups of students have not yet been taken forward.

A Farewell to Perm?

Marcus Ferrar

Four years ago I visited Perm under the splendid exchange programme organised by Karen Hewitt and Perm State University. I discovered a new part of the world, rode on the Trans-Siberian express, met dozens of interesting and pleasant people – and marvelled at the world-class Perm Ballet.

Those were blessed days. Alas, since the 24th February this rich human experience has been cast into the mud. How can I travel to Russia in the foreseeable future? Will I ever sit again in animated conversation with guests from Perm around our dining table in Oxford? How can I communicate at distance with those I got to know? Could they express themselves sincerely? Would I like what they said? Can I again envisage a coming together of minds?

The prospects could not be worse just now. On road signs around Oxford, Perm has been excised from the list of twinned towns. It feels like a return to the Cold War, which I experienced as a foreign correspondent in Eastern Europe. But even during that time I felt the hostility was unnatural, that people really wanted to get on with each other, that cooperation and friendship would one day naturally re-emerge.

As they did. I remember the exhilaration of visiting Russia several times in the Gorbachev and Yeltsin periods. All barriers had gone. My personal values and understanding still tell me this is how it should be, and can be. Good times can return.

So is this really “a farewell to Perm”? I doubt whether I shall ever return: my life has moved on over the past four years. But Perm has shaped my life for the better, and I will never forget what we built together in terms of friendship and insights. I remain a committee member of the Oxford Perm Association, dedicated to this cause. As such, I would be delighted if readers in Perm would frankly share their experiences with me. Let’s start building a better future. I can be reached on marcus@ferrar.org.uk or Telegram. www.marcusferrar.org

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Review

Russia 1985-1999: Trauma Zone

Sally Richards

Trauma Zone is a seven part series of hour long films streamed on BBC iPlayer since 13th October. It records the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath, focusing primarily on Russia. The films are made entirely from thousands of hours of previously unseen footage stored in the BBC Archives. Adam Curtis is one of the most interesting and thoughtful current documentary makers, so I started watching with high expectations and considerable curiosity. To meet the copy deadline, this review reflects only the first four films covering the period 1985-1994.

Unusually there is no voice-over, instead white subtitles label the content on screen and provide translation of spoken and written language. There is also no music, unless integral to the original footage. The result is an immersive experience which highlights not only the viewpoints of ordinary Soviet and Russian citizens but also the quite extraordinary scenes captured by film crews whose work is revealed at last. In each film we shift constantly between national events and scenes from the provinces. The latter are given a location and their distance from Moscow.

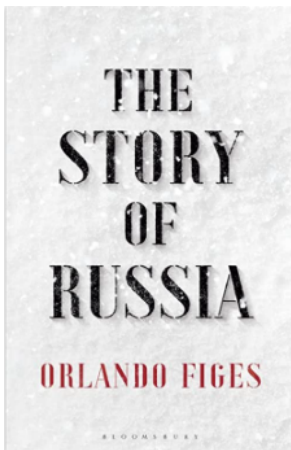
Curtis has an overarching theme for the series - the collapse of communism and the collapse of democracy. The aims and failed strategies of political leaders - Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Gaidar and others are presented but, in true Curtis style, in ways that are seldom predictable and always thought provoking. Each film tells a story through the juxtaposition of several unrelated 'mini-stories', leaving the viewer to ponder their connection and significance as the episode unfolds.

The context for the first film is the rise of Gorbachev and his conviction that reform was needed, but with little idea of how to accomplish this. The film features the production line at the huge Lada car factory in Tolyatti and shows the mass thefts from the plant after control was handed to the managers. Boris Berezovsky's role in this provides the first indication of the rise of the oligarchs. We see an exuberant pop-culture in Moscow and Leningrad and a young woman embarking on sex work at Moscow's Kosmos hotel. There is the unfolding trial of a woman accused of stealing a suitcase. We learn that she has a responsible job at a local hospital but had 'had a drink'. Then there is the extraordinary sacrificial heroism of the scientists and workers at the Chernobyl nuclear plant, as we see men crawling through the structures in an effort to find and isolate the nuclear core. Footage from a cake factory in Leningrad provides light relief but also more evidence of dilapidation and safety failings.

The following films document the deepening chaos: Intensification 90 - Gorbachev's failed attempt to rescue central planning with computerisation, the failed coup of August 1991 and the disastrous economic shock treatment of Yegor Gaidar. The scenes of defenders confronting the tanks outside the White House are yet more vivid and frightening than the powerful shots I remember from TV news at that time. But again it is the voices of ordinary Russians that provide the most interesting insights. There is the taxi driver having to jack up his vehicle and manually reset the clock if he exceeded the permitted mileage, the older woman making an arduous winter journey to collect potatoes from her sister in a bleak provincial village, and the precocious child begging from passing vehicles. Amidst the resignation there is also resilience, defiance and exuberance. We see striking miners dancing in Donetsk and dancing rebels in Chechnya, poignant scenes in light of future events. The chaos extends to the newly independent states where fighting was filmed at close quarters in Abkhazia, Moldova and Tajikistan. It affects animal life too, with pitiful shots of the few remaining primates at the research centre in Sukhumi, Abkhazia and circus tigers without food in Moscow. The committee given the task of deciding words for the new national anthem tries and fails to select a winner from the c. 60,000 entries submitted by the public. Apparently none of the entries fit the prescribed tune! An episode from a woman's prison provides some unexpected relief from the darkness. A young woman imprisoned for killing her violent husband in self-defence is released early from prison. We leave her laying flowers on his grave, her ambivalence obvious as she struggles to make sense of what has happened to her.

There will inevitably be comparisons between this work and that of Svetlana Alexievich. Viewers will decide for themselves which they prefer. Personally, having found *Secondhand Time* a frustrating read, I fully recommend this as a really engaging and effective exploration of a critical period in recent Soviet/Russian history. There is plenty here to intrigue those who were in Russia at that time and equally those who have never visited, but want to know more about this vast and complex country and the many threads leading to our present times. I can only hope that there is footage in the archives of the years since 1999 and that Adam Curtis has been commissioned to tell this story.

The films are also a reminder that all history is contemporary history. Chaos provides opportunities for individuals to make fortunes, as the oligarchs soon discovered. Watching the sufferings of a nation where untested economic theories were implemented with seemingly no concern about their practical implementation or consequences feels alarmingly contemporary.



Review: Orlando Figes talk

Anne Harrap

On 8th October Blackwells held an event at which Stephen Smith, Emeritus Fellow of All Souls College Oxford, talked to Orlando Figes, former Professor of History at Birkbeck College, London, about his new book *The Story of Russia*.

Both agreed that much contemporary coverage of Russia in the media is 'profoundly unhistoric' and that Russia is held together by ideas rooted in the past which are constantly being reconfigured and repurposed to suit the present needs.

Figes looks at the political, military and social history of Russia, relates anecdotes and also engages seriously with literature, music, the visual arts and films. The main theme of his book is the dual influence on power in Russia of the religious and the patrimonial.

1. The Religious

In the 10th century Prince Vladimir I, converted by missionaries from Byzantium, adopted Christianity as the official religion of Russia, whence developed an idea of Holy Russia as utopia, the messianic land where Christ will come again, Moscow as the bastion of Christian faith, and the Tsar as God's representative. Inherent notions of sacrifice and transcendence transmogrified in the Communist era into revolutionary feeling, became entwined with patriotism in WWII and may still play out today in motivation to serve. Recent media propaganda in relation to the war in Ukraine has appealed to the specialness of Russia. Russians feel their life has a spiritual reality, a deeper meaning compared with that lived in the West. Another factor is the idea of peaceful expansion, the big family of nations in the Russian empire, supposedly 'embraced' rather than taken by conquest and genocide as happened in America.

The Church itself presents a mixed picture. Peter the Great abolished the patriarchy and transformed the church into a fairly supine arm of the state but there have been moments when the younger priesthood wanted the church to play a genuine spiritual role and help parishioners in their daily lives. Generally speaking the church has been the handmaiden of the state and advocate of quite violent policies. But it can also be on the radical extreme wing. As a special church, the third Rome, with a holy mission, it has its own agenda in wanting to reconquer the disparate elements of orthodoxy lost in the breakup of the Soviet Union.

2. Patrimonial

There are two different views of Russian history, that of the Kievan Rus and that of the Mongol Rus. Russians tend to feel that the Mongols left no lasting trace in the culture of their country and that a western looking intelligentsia existed before their arrival. But Figes argues that this is not the case. Muscovy was the creation of the Mongols. They missed the Renaissance and the scientific revolution. They ruled Russia for 250 years between the 13th and 15th centuries and embedded a culture of despotism through their patrimonial concept of owning not only land but the people and chattels associated with it. In a continuation of this tradition, we could say that Putin 'owns' the oligarchs he has enriched and so can also destroy them.

Pre-Mongol, the Boyars, if they left the service of a prince, could take their property with them and this could potentially have formed a counterweight to the monarchy. In fact the system that developed was unlike western feudalism in that there was no reciprocity of responsibilities and duties. Power was arbitrary - landlords over serfs and the monarch over the aristocrats who were servitors and could be sent anywhere in the country. Rebellions were caused by the weakness of society as much as by poverty, often led not by serfs but by aristocrats wanting a better deal from the Crown. Only in 1760s did Catherine the Great allow the latter to own land and not till the 19th century did they start to invest in relationships of patronage with their parish. The lateness of these developments meant there was no energy for political and social change. There was no coming together of different sections of society as in the three estates in France. Late 19th century and early 20th century reform attempts were scotched by contingencies which led to rebounding repression and renewal of autocracy. The cult of Stalin was built on the monarchical tradition and in WWII became entwined with the idea of sacrifice for Holy Mother Russia. The weakness of national identity meant he became the symbol of Russia itself. One could argue that Putin has taken on this same role.

In counterpoint to the autocracy of the state was the fact that, historically, village communities were self-governed by customary law and left to their own devices by landlords as long as dues were paid. The Mir was the basic unit of Russian governance, egalitarian and democratic, creating what 19th century intellectuals felt was a primitive socialism, predating anything similar in western societies. In relation to the Russian intelligentsia, who have had their aims and been suppressed, Figes feels that, in trying to understand the country, the West has given too much weight to this very small section of society, that they see themselves reflected in this group and vice versa. Russian historiography is largely written by state actors, conservatives, not the intelligentsia.

After taking questions, Figes rounded up by saying:

'The West has imagined that Russia would become more like itself, but this has not happened. It is a very different country with a different history. However, in the wake of the war in Ukraine, younger generations in Russia may seek to 'decolonise' their history and look at it in a different light. The world does seem to be moving away from democracy; forms of policy are not predictable and contingencies can move things on to a different track very quickly.'

Newsletter

After many years of devoted service, David Roulston has resigned as Newsletter Editor. We thank him most warmly for all he has done in finding contributors, editing articles, and establishing for us all a particularly attractive Newsletter. We are also delighted to tell you that Jessica Vlasova who manages our website has agreed to become the new Newsletter Editor, and that Marcus Ferrar has agreed to proof-read and assist the editor. This is Jessica's first issue of the Perm Newsletter.

Past Events

On 14th July we held our annual Garden Party (see photo on page 1). Among the 42 people who came were six Russian guests, and five Ukrainian refugee guests. It was a very harmonious occasion, an oasis in a difficult year.

On 16th July, Oxford Botanic Garden celebrated its 400th anniversary- a year late because of Covid. For political reasons, the Director of the Perm Botanic Garden, Sergei Shumikhin, was unable to attend, but Nina Kruglikova and Mark Davies, both members of the OPA and the Friends of the Oxford Botanic Garden, represented Perm at the Twin Cities celebration.

On 22nd September we were finally able to thank Mark Davies for his talk on Lewis Carroll and his work on the Oxford and Water photographic exhibition for Perm by inviting him to dinner.

Current and Future Events

The seminars in Perm State University are getting started again with the new term. They are directed mostly at the students of International Relations, and will explore such matters as British ideas of democracy, immigration, elections, and so forth. We have 5 or 6 brave volunteers from the OPA who hope to bring enlightenment to Perm students, despite the disruptive situations in both our countries.

At our committee meeting in September we agreed to arrange a speaker on the Russia-Ukraine War (difficult because events are moving so fast), and to invite Rosamund Bartlett again to talk about aspects of Russian culture.

We also plan a special walk around Oxford devoted to Oxford's Russian connections, with Nina Kruglikova who is an official guide.

Newsletter

Jessica Vlasova

Articles, including book reviews, etc. are always welcome. Articles should be sent as email attachments in docx or pages format and can include up to two jpg images. Individual permission for publication is required for photos which include recognisable people. Past newsletters can be seen at <https://www.oxfordperm.org/past-newsletters>. The editor is grateful to Marcus Ferrar for proofreading this issue of Perm News.

How we left Russia

The author of this story came on one of the Perm teachers' visits to Oxford some years ago. In February at the beginning of the war, he sent a letter to the OPA member who was his guest in Perm. Here is an edited extract of how he crossed the Russia - Kazakhstan border in September.

We left on Sunday and headed to Verkhniy Lars on the Russia–Georgia border, because most of our friends who are abroad live in Georgia, and we could stay there for 360 days without a residence permit. There is also Turkey, where we know some people.

We took turns driving without stopping. By Monday night Volgograd was behind us and we entered Kalmykia before dusk. On the way we kept tracking the situation in Verkhniy Lars, it just kept getting worse, many people had to pay 50,000 rubles each [about £750] to get through, armed vehicles arrived, news of summonses, the traffic jam kept getting worse, and in North Ossetia there were a lot of checkpoints which were difficult to get through. We stopped for about an hour, searched chats and news about checkpoints on the border with Kazakhstan and decided to go to Kazakhstan. But we didn't scour enough, because we chose the worst of the options — the Karaozek-Kotyaevka checkpoint.

At night we drove through Astrakhan and Krasny Yar. We got to a 10-15 kms traffic jam of trucks and cars at around 1 am. The local Kalmyks/Kazakhs came up to us and offered to take us to the middle of the traffic jam for 30,000 roubles. Without thinking, we decided to accept their offer but within an hour we had advanced only 10 meters and decided to finally get some sleep.

The next day we made no progress before lunch. More locals came up and offered to buy a place 500 m away from the bridge. The bridge was a bottle neck and chaos with everyone trying to get through without queuing, someone had their window broken, someone else was fighting, etc. At the entrance to the bridge the traffic police were on duty and let the cars enter the bridge gradually, so there was peace and quiet, and the traffic was more predictable.

We paid more to locals to escort us, and then our mood improved. We got acquainted with the guys in front of us: D.Z. from Novorossiysk, driving a Polo alone, and a guy and a girl from St. Petersburg, driving a Mercedes. We went through traffic another 100 meters, and then waited as the checkpoint stopped letting us through because the buffer zone was full.

On Tuesday we began to move further forward in the traffic jam, the tension was building up, the locals from the side of the road trying to squeeze in (to sell places later). Again we stopped. We got some sleep. Then Marat, a man about 10 cars ahead of us, started making a list of all the cars by license plate number, called all the drivers and said that we should cooperate. There was one showdown, but all seemed to agree. Overnight we drove up to the bridge itself and waited.

On Wednesday morning the traffic started again, gradually everyone drove to the bridge, stopped in a traffic jam, there was a little more than 2 km to the checkpoint, just before the checkpoint was the village of Karaozek, where there was a store. Everyone's mood improved and no one thought of turning back. These two kilometres were moving little by little, but steadily, everything was going according to plan. By Thursday morning we reached the checkpoint, everybody fell asleep. D.Z. had a hard time as he was alone .

About everyday life. We washed our faces with water and wet wipes, and food was sold by the locals; a food truck came a couple of times, and they cooked pilaf right in the field and sold it to everybody. I ate what seemed to be the tastiest shawarma of my life. And there was a lot of tension, military cars cruising by, columns of traffic police cars, a black Toyota which I think was the FSB, and a Russian Post van (oh my God, bringing summonses!? Of course not, it was just for the post office in Karaozek). When we were in front of the bridge, two military trucks arrived. Anyway, everyone thought they were about to start handing out summonses and mobilisations here too. In general, at times it was quite uncomfortable. But reading the news helped restore motivation to move towards the border.

So, we got to the checkpoint on Thursday morning, the guys in front of us passed through without any problems. I got through passport control and back to the car to be checked by the border officer and we were eventually let into the buffer zone which was completely empty. We reached the bridge over the river along which the border runs, at the entrance there was another checkpoint with Russian soldiers, they just took a coupon from the checkpoint and let us through. At the exit from the bridge, the same checkpoint with Kazakhs, they gave us a coupon, which we had to give at the Kazakh checkpoint. There we had our passports stamped for entry into Kazakhstan, the car was inspected once again, the process took about 30-40 minutes and then we crossed into Kazakhstan.

There we exchanged some tenge, bought car insurance and drove towards Atyrau - the nearest major city. We drove 280 km over an unpaved road with holes. We arrived exhausted on the outskirts of Atyrau where we slept for 5 hours. In the morning we drove to Aktau. On the way we were stopped and fined twice by the traffic police. We got to Aktau at about 5pm on Thursday, exchanged more rubles for tenge, bought a SIM card and checked in. And then another story begins, one that has no conclusion yet!

