



# PERM NEWS

Оксфорд и Пермь

**О П А      Oxford Perm Association**

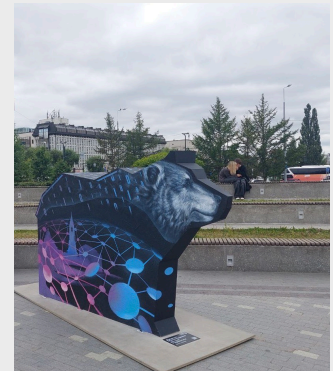
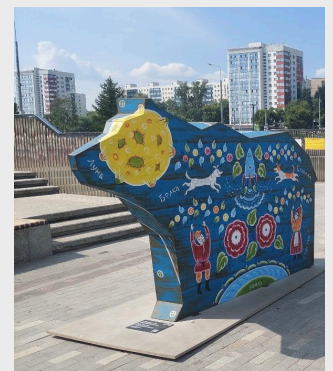
**Newsletter February 2026**

## **Perm outdoor art project**

*Tatiana Grigorieva*

Last summer the PERMM Museum of Contemporary Art displayed an outdoor art project on the Perm Esplanade in front of the regional Legislative Assembly on Lenin Street. Twenty teams of both established artists and young artists created images of bears which tell stories of Perm's cultural and industrial identity: they are visual representations of Perm's identity. Traditionally, a bear is a symbol of Perm and is shown on the city's coat of arms.

The curators defined themes that should guide the artists' work: aviation, space exploration, welding, telecommunications, IT, chemistry, pharmacy, medicine and Komi-Permyak. The PERMM museum held a closed competition where sixty four original design projects were submitted. Twenty of them were selected to appear at the Esplanade. At the end of the outdoor project, the bear figures passed into the ownership of the museum and were displayed on its ground floor.





*Tatiana with her instructor*

I've long dreamed of dancing! Since childhood. Like all girls, I twirled in front of the mirror, imagining myself a ballerina, a great dancer or simply a graceful performer! But first came studies, then work, children, concerns... And suddenly the moment arrived when I realised that it would soon be too late! So I went to the Argentine Tango School. It was interesting, scary, and fun – all at once! After all, I'm over fifty, an associate professor, my friends spend their evenings watching TV and I'm supposed to dance? But I took the risk! And I found myself, like Alice, in the Land of Argentine Tango!

It turns out that in Perm there are a huge number of people for whom this dance has become a part of their life. These people conscientiously attend classes, take lessons, prepare for competitions, championships or performance demonstrations and travel to other cities to take part in dance events and competitions. Our city has about ten schools where experts take classes, organise meetings and host festivals. Sometimes, famous dancers from Argentina are invited to these dance celebrations, giving master classes, chairing competition juries and generously sharing their dance secrets.



Everyone especially loves the ‘milongas’—parties where up to a hundred people gather to dance tango, drink a glass of champagne, socialise, watch others dance, admire the beautiful dresses and learn the latest news from the world of dance. For almost ten years now, tango in Perm has brought together hundreds of participants: teachers, students, experienced dancers and beginners.

### So what is tango?

**Tango is...** freedom! Only here can you pretend (or be?) weak and funny, strong and daring, unafraid to try and make mistakes, be a hard working student or relaxed and chivalrous. No one needs to know who you really are. Details of real life are kept outside: work, everyday problems, politics, the dollar exchange rate or illnesses are all off-limits! Only tango!

**Tango is...** a chance and new possibilities... A chance to change your image, switch off your brain, and tell surprised colleagues or students when you're rushing off: "I can't stay, I'm late for my dancing!" It's a chance to feel young, carefree and light, a chance to learn how to move and enjoy it!

**Tango is...** improvisation and courage! You never know what awaits next. But the beauty of it lies precisely in guessing and playing out the next movement as if it had been rehearsed a hundred times. It is conflict and reconciliation, it is desire and abstinence, it is passion and humility.

**Tango is...** a dance for two: it's important to understand your partner, feel their rhythm, understand and play along at the right moment and turn a mistake into an embellishment. And the ability to pause... How expressive a pause in a dance can be, when the partners are frozen in an embrace, barely breathing. But it's only a lull, and in a second there will be a burst of energy!

**Tango is...** a celebration! This new reality, it turns out, is nearby. You just need to make an effort, force yourself to break free from the rush of everyday life—and you're in another world - the world of TANGO! You come to immerse yourself in this world of beautiful music from another era on a distant continent, to catch familiar words in Spanish, to feel the romance. Jeans and t-shirts are out of place here; everything must be beautiful and elegant! And there are no age restrictions or selection based on ability. Only tango! Just come and dance!



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## Oxford Perm Association News

*Karen Hewitt*

Past event: On Sunday, 9<sup>th</sup> November, we enjoyed a screening of the Soviet film ‘Office Romance’ introduced by Kat Kottonen.

Future event: On Thursday, 9<sup>th</sup> April, at 5 p.m. at the North Oxford Community Centre, Professor Jeremy Morris will give a talk on *What do Russian people really think about the war, Putin and the West?*

The AGM will be held in the North Oxford Community Centre on Wednesday, 11<sup>th</sup> March at 6 p.m. in the Annexe. There will be some important business to discuss, followed by members’ suggestions for future events, and plenty of time for socialising.

As usual, we ask members to contribute some ‘finger food’; the Association will provide drinks. Please email [karen.hewitt@conted.ox.ac.uk](mailto:karen.hewitt@conted.ox.ac.uk) if you can come to the AGM.

We are always grateful to receive letters, stories, comments from friends in Perm. In our Newsletter we will always preserve anonymity for such writers unless they specifically ask us to name them.

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## Russian Language Exchange

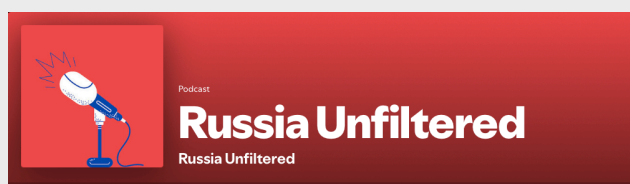
Graham Dane, a member of the Oxford Perm Association, runs the Edinburgh International Russian Language exchange (Эдинбургская международная англо-русскоязычная группа).

**The next Zoom sessions are: Sunday 22 March 10am GMT and Sunday 26 April 10am BST.** Chat to people from other countries. Meet people from your own country. Three 25 minute conversations, half in Russian and half in English. You will be in a group of about three people for each chat. There are usually about 18 people attending and the groups change every 30 minutes.

Meeting link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84247799935?pwd=c0cxTk92YUFCMEt6eitqMkYvdjRrUT09>

Meeting ID: 842 4779 9935 Passcode: 1234

Please join the meeting 5 minutes before the time. Message Graham if you have any questions [grahamdane@yahoo.com](mailto:grahamdane@yahoo.com)



*Russia Unfiltered* is an occasional podcast that launched in 2025. At the time of writing twelve episodes are available. The presenters are three British men who are living full or part-time in Russia. Jonny Tickle is a journalist living in Moscow, James Pearce is a cultural historian in

Yekaterinburg and Jeremy Morris is Professor in the Department of Global Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. For many years Jeremy has undertaken ethnographic research based in the Kaluga Oblast south west of Moscow. The overall theme of the podcast is everyday life in Russia and the discussions between the presenters provide fascinating insights of the kind you can only get from being a Russian speaker in Russia.

Each episode poses a particular question or theme, but with a wide-ranging lens that encompasses everyday life, history, popular culture and more. The question for the first episode, “Is it OK to like Russia?”, is non-controversial for Russophiles. But it provides a vehicle for the presenters to introduce themselves, to explain how they came to live and work in Russia and to reflect generally on cancel culture in the context of war and specifically in relation to the removal of Russian cultural symbols, such as Pushkin, from Ukrainian cities. The questions/themes in subsequent episodes range far and wide from: “Is Moscow Still the World’s Most Liveable City?” to “How Russia’s State Controls Everyday Life” and “Russia’s Wartime Cost of Living Crisis”. In the episode on “Why Russia Experts get Russia Wrong” the presenters pinpoint the main characteristics of unreliable ‘experts’. Typically they are non-Russian speaking, or with only limited Russian, and post frequently on social media but with publications/blogs on Russia dating only from 2022. With a proliferation of media outlets now eager to report on the Russia/Ukraine war, it is easy for ignorance to go unchecked and rewarded.

Another problem, highlighted in this podcast, is that the Western media, and their audiences, rely on limited and often outdated tropes and stereotypes about Russia. Living in Russia forces you to constantly update your perspective and to engage with the nuances of a large and complex country. The presenters are advocates for observational methods and for immersion in the field, by journalists and academics, to gain access to social settings and informants beyond the metropolitan elites. Class divisions in Russia are profound and Russian commentators, whether in Russia or in exile, tend to be drawn from the highly educated elite in Moscow and other big cities, not from the towns and villages of rural Russia.

The multicultural nature of Russia, with its diverse languages, faiths and rituals, the result of centuries of imperial absorption is explored in the episode “Is Russia Really a Multicultural Miracle?” This deliberately simplistic question provides the starting point for an illuminating discussion of various aspects of culture, traditional, state sponsored and contemporary, within the Russian Federation. The influence of the culture of the internet is also very important in Russia, as it is throughout the world. Even Jeremy Morris’ elderly village dwelling interlocutors are keen watchers of Korean film. There are inevitable gaps in coverage. In particular I would have welcomed more discussion of the position of minority ethnic groupings within Russia - potentially a vast topic and perhaps one for a future episode. In the meantime, I have learned that Dagestan, the Caucasian republic which has provided so many of the Russian troops killed or injured in the war in Ukraine, is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the world.

The first episode of this year looking back on 2025 and forward to 2026 was more entertaining than many New Year reviews. The presenters started by looking at the most interesting happenings in the year past that would likely be new to their viewers. These included political developments in the regions, such as the introduction of ultra-conservative traditional policies in the Vologda Oblast, the expansion of the Russian wine and craft beer industries and the growth in domestic tourism since 2022. Their predictions ranging from the certainty that United Russia will win the up-coming elections, the real possibility of an accelerating housing crisis and the unlikely prediction that Vladimir Putin will announce that he won't seek re-election in 2030.

The most recent episode, "How we Actually Learned Russian", will resonate with anyone who is learning Russian themselves. It was surprising to discover that only one of them, Jonny Tickle, had studied Russian at university and he claims to have been a poor student who applied himself to learning the language only when he moved to Russia. As readers will understand there doesn't seem to be any way to learn Russian without application to the task, even for people who are living there. The trio provided useful tips and resources for learners and emphasised the benefits of learning foreign languages. They agreed that the lack of teaching of English grammar puts British people at a significant disadvantage when learning other languages.

I have found this an interesting and entertaining source of information about all kinds of aspect of daily life in Russia currently and more generally. Of course there are topics that are tiptoed around, though to a lesser extent than I would have expected. Listeners will inevitably have their own views of each presenter, but as a team they work well together and offer different perspectives. Sometimes the presentation feels somewhat over didactic - 'mansplaining' is occasionally evident. The all male line up is a limitation, as they acknowledged in the episode on "Russian Men and Modern Masculinity in Crisis". Unless they are able to add women to the team, an episode on Russian Women is not planned. I am though still hopeful that they will manage to cover a topic that was flagged for its potential in an early episode. "Enjoying Doing Nothing" sounds like an interesting and contemporary angle on a Chekhovian theme.

*Russia Unfiltered* is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/@RussiaUnfiltered1> or can be listened to as a podcast.

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## **Russia Against Napoleon by Dominic Lieven**

Book review by *Jonathan Saunders*



According to the author, his book is the first history of Russia's role in its wars against Napoleon to have been written by a Western historian. By weaving in social elements drawn from his research of Russian regimental records and his own family's role during the period, it makes for a stimulating and entertaining read. One reviewer described it as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* from a historian's point of view.

Dominic Lieven can certainly boast the credentials for writing such an ambitious work. He stems from Baltic-German nobility that did service for the rulers of Russia for several centuries and became implanted within the Russian aristocracy. Although no Marxist, Lieven has none of the hallmarks of the disgruntled White emigré, nor parades the anti-Russian prejudices of many Western historians. In the introduction he delivers his pitch: why Russia's story has suffered at the hands of its own

historians, including Tolstoy. They concentrate on the abandonment of Moscow by the Russians before turning retreat into glorious victory by decimating Napoleon's army in a humiliating French dash back across Western Russia. For various reasons Russian historians have not given the same attention to the following 15 months which ended with the triumphant entry of Russian troops into Paris on 31 March 1814.

Lieven then outlines what he considers the notable military achievements of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Russia's tsars. After Peter the Great had established Russian dominance in Europe's North East, the century ended with striking victories for Catherine the Great's generals against the Ottoman Empire. This was possible thanks to Peter's removing the challenge of the old, armed Streltsy and replacing them with a new nobility that owed their rise and wealth to the tsar. Without them the Russian army could not have developed. Not only were they tax collectors for the tsar on their estates; they also provided most of the officer corps, generals and administrators who ran the army. Finally, they often had to relinquish some of their fittest serfs who were obliged to sign up for the army for 25 years conscription. Many never returned home again.

Lieven describes the unique social relations existing in the Russian army. Former peasants, far away from home, looked to the regiment to recreate those family ties. If the technology at their disposal was inferior to that of their enemies, this was more than made up by strong regimental bonds, including the predominantly bachelor officer class. Religious fervour was supplied by the regiment's Orthodox priest. By 1814 the Russian infantry had a formidable reputation – as steady in orderly retreat as they were courageous in attack. As for the cavalry, they were in a class of their own. With an inexhaustible supply of horses from the steppe-lands and burgeoning stud farms near military encampments, the Russians had an edge over the French, above all after Napoleon's disastrous retreat from Moscow in 1812 led to the loss of 175,000 horses.

Brought up in his grandmother, Catherine's, court with a Swiss tutor, Tsar Alexander was schooled in the arts and philosophy of the Enlightenment. Being both the son and grandson of murdered tsars, he naturally kept a watchful eye on his opponents. Nonetheless, Lieven contends that it was Alexander's strategic will that kept the Austro-Prussian-Russian coalition together until Napoleon's final defeat. To do this he had to have an army that could operate more than 1500 miles from the Russian heartlands and keep it supplied with food, equipment and pay. To have created the logistical teams to do all this, against a background of scepticism at home and in the army at what was viewed as not in Russia's best interests, was Alexander's greatest achievement. This provided peace in Russia during the last eleven years of his reign, only finally shattered by the brutal Anglo French invasion of Crimea a generation later.

There are parallels with the current conflict in Ukraine. The invasion of Russia in 1812 was a by-product of France's ongoing struggle for world supremacy with England: continuing Russian trade with England had flouted Napoleon's Continental Blockade on the English. After Napoleon's defeat and based on his record, Alexander thought it only a matter of time before Bonaparte would again be leading his armies across Europe. Hence the need to be rid of him. Similarly, Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a by-product of the USA's desire for world hegemony with Russia still viewed as a serious rival. By encouraging Ukraine's nationalists, the USA has sought further to encircle Russia with hostile neighbours. Ukraine's refusal to back away from NATO pushed Putin to the brink in 2022. Russia will continue its war against Ukraine (and NATO) until there is a regime in Kiev that assures peaceful relations with Moscow. Putin has promised to write his memoirs some day. It will undoubtedly mention Alexander I as one of his mentors.

## The genesis of a Russian historian

*Christopher Danziger*

I have been lecturing and writing about Russian history for much of my life, and I am often asked what prompted this interest. I suspect the answer is disappointingly ordinary.



*The statue to Ivan the Terrible in Oryol*

My grandmother, Elizabeth, was born in Orel, now Oryol, in western Russia, about 300 miles south-west of Moscow. Oryol made the news recently when it elected to erect a statue of Ivan the Terrible, not as was sometimes reported, as a celebration of tyrannical autocracy, but because he founded the city in 1566. Elizabeth's father was of Baltic German stock, and his father had been emancipated from serfdom in 1812.

The son had moved east to make his fortune, and after a spell in Arkhangelsk, had set up business in Oryol, where he became wealthy by importing iron ploughs to communities which had previously used wooden ones. He married a woman from Oryol whose surname suggests Jewish origins, but brought up his family as devout Russian Orthodox Christians. My grandmother, the eldest of nine siblings, was an outstanding scholar who was awarded the Tsar's medal for the best student in the oblast in 1902.

Oryol was the terminus of a railway line that ran from Riga into the interior, carrying a lucrative trade in primary products to the coast. One of the businessmen who plied this line was my paternal grandfather, whose family had set up, in Riga in 1866, what was initially a dyeing and laundry business, and later evolved into a textile factory. His father's family were Jewish industrialists from Brandenburg who had converted to Lutheranism in the 1850s. My grandfather's first wife, from the well-known German manufacturing family Knoll, had recently died, so he may have been on the look out for a suitable replacement when this accomplished young woman from Oryol came to his notice. They married in 1908 and Elizabeth (and eventually, all her siblings) moved to Riga.

My grandfather's family prospered and surrounded themselves with the trappings they thought appropriate to the seriously rich. I grew up (I'll explain why in a moment) with all those things around me, each one improbably exotic and possessing a story of its own. Although she became increasingly Europeanised, my grandmother's Russian taste influenced many of those purchases.

After the First World War, Latvia morphed from a province of Imperial Russia into an independent state. It was a providential but temporary escape. In 1940 it was one of the states offered up to Russia by Hitler as bait for the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact which bought him freedom from Germany's age old fear of a war on two fronts. That meant that in Latvia it was open season on Germans, especially wealthy industrialists like my father's family. They had made provision for this eventuality for months, in some cases for years, and although of course they could not save the factory or their properties, they managed to salvage themselves and most of their most prized possessions.



*The mother-of-pearl faced golden ormolu clock made by Japy Freres of the Jura.*

After the war, my father's family and my grandmother's family scattered all round the world. Most ended up in Germany, but my grandmother eventually emigrated to New York. The precious items were vulnerable to the diaspora, but a large proportion have ended up in my possession, items selected for a grand villa now incongruously housed in a humble Oxford suburb.

For my father's family, for all the years after the war, Riga remained the land of lost content which cannot come again. Most of the refugees were too old to make successful re-starts to their lives. But their memories of the glory days were unendingly vivid. In the background of the Anglo-Saxon world in which I grew up, the Russo-German-Baltic world always loomed large. When life dictated that I should become an academic historian, what more natural than that I should begin in that region.

From the continuous advance and retreat of people and states, inevitably I moved from the Baltic Sea to a wider study of Russia. That meant starting with the traditional episodes of Russian interaction with western Europe, and then discovering the amazing patchwork of Russian history of which even well informed people have so little knowledge. It has been a fruitful source of research. I developed that interest through many visits to Russia, which sadly, in the current political climate, have been put on hold.



*Schwitten Palace, home of the best man at my father's wedding, Prince Lieven*

In that part of the world, someone with a family history like mine, which takes in serfdom and Tsarist-era princes, the Hanseatic League and the Pale of Settlement, the German diaspora and the Russian heartlands, the Bolshevik Revolution and the Nazi war machine, is far from unique. In the Anglo-Saxon world in which I have lived all my life it is a curiosity. It has been the gateway to a complex web of connections, which has occupied much of my working life.