



PERM NEWS

Оксфорд и Пермь

О П А

Oxford Perm Association

Newsletter January 2023



Perm Opera Square in Winter

(1) 6th December 2022

The question that you asked in October (What is happening in your country?) is still ringing in my head, and there is always an echo from Dickens. ‘It was the best of times. It was the worst of times’ – though I feel like changing ‘was’ to ‘is’. I think many of us in Russia may say, write, or feel the same. We are full of contrasting emotions.

Of course there is much pain as families are divided. This pain comes from the fact that what is going on in Ukraine is a civil war. My big extended family are living on both sides of the front line (in the Donetsk region), and we are directly affected by this conflict. Some of my relatives support the Ukrainian forces and some are waiting for the Russian forces to come.

Letters from Russia

The Oxford Perm Association is not a political organisation but it cannot ignore the impact of the war in Ukraine on Russians so the newsletter opens again with some letters from Russians on their responses to the war.

Karen Hewitt writes: None of the three writers in the article below comes from Perm. They are from cities in the extreme north, south and east of Russia who met each other in Perm on various occasions when attending the Seminar on Contemporary English Literature. The Seminar took place annually between 2005 and 2019. All three subsequently visited Oxford as university teachers of English literature and you may have met them here. We are preserving their anonymity.

Moreover this conflict has turned into a religious war which makes it even more complicated, dangerous and 'mediaeval'. It is also from and about our past. I lost my country once, and I can't say that I am eager to lose it again.

But it is 'the best of times' because if we turn to literature, and it's flourishing in Russia, we can notice that some new names have appeared, there is a new generation of poets whose emotional power helps them to put into words and images these times. I like Anna Dolgareva whose poems are full of internal power, throbbing with pain, bursting with energy. It is 'the best of times' because Donetsk is there/here with us, you can just reach out and 'touch it', sending sweets and chocolates to children who are there, and you can help other people who are there.

(2) 22nd October 2022

I no longer work at my university and had to leave Russia. It was a very painful but correct choice. Partial mobilization is announced in Russia, but this is a lie. In fact, mobilization is total. The police and military are grabbing everyone they can catch and sending them to war. My university received call-up papers for employees. As I was told later, not yet for faculty members. But this is temporary. In Russia there are no deferments for school teachers and university professors. Some of my colleagues from other Russian universities have received call-up papers. Some are right at work. I am against the war, I don't want to kill or die, so I quit my job and left the country. But now I know my price. The university officials promised to pay 80,000 rubles (\$1297,65) to the families of mobilized employees. I weigh about 90 kg, so a kilogram of my meat costs about 880 rubles (\$14). A little more expensive than lamb.

I left my home and my beloved work, in which I had invested 18 years of my life. I thought it would be difficult for me to write a letter of resignation. No. The hardest part was telling the students that I would no longer be teaching their classes and then hearing "we'll miss you," "we really enjoyed your lectures," "we're sorry." I wanted to finish the semester online, but I wasn't allowed to do that. However, I do know that I did the right thing, because it was the only option to save my life and freedom. Although it is terribly difficult and very painful, like trying to cut off your arm with a blunt saw. Now I am in Thailand, in the city of Chiang Mai, I have a place to live, money for the first time, I am not dying of fear and hunger, I have the support of my dear people.

24th December

I am definitely looking forward to my flight from Thailand to Istanbul. I have no intention of staying in Turkey. Again, if all goes well, I will start working at the National University of Uzbekistan in Tashkent in January.

You ask me, do I still feel that it is like cutting off my arm with a blunt saw? Sometimes I feel like my psychological wounds are healing, but then they start to bleed again. It will probably stay that way for a long time.

Please don't think I'm depressed and can't cope with my pain. It's not easy for me, sometimes it's extremely difficult. But I have made sure that I can overcome these trials and obstacles and which is more I have a lot of good people helping me. These are my friends, colleagues, students, people who have attended my public lectures or listened to my lectures online. They support me psychologically, help me with money or with finding grants and jobs. But most importantly, they constantly remind me that I am not alone and that they need me. This means that I have done a lot of good things for a lot of people.

Sometimes I wonder if I did the right thing, maybe I should have stayed. But when I read the news from Russia, when I speak with my friends who stayed there, I understand that I'd rather live in exile than in fear of being drafted into the army or going to prison.

11th January 2023

Yesterday I arrived in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) from Istanbul where I flew from Thailand in December. There was huge snowfall in Tashkent. If everything is going well my wife will join me soon. I haven't seen her since early October. It is the longest separation in our life.

(3) 12th January 2023

I agree that everybody nowadays gets very one-sided and ill-informed reporting. When I open the *Guardian* it is like obtaining a totally distorted view.

How it feels at the moment in my city? On the surface life is the same here. All daily routines are the same, but of course we are all deeply affected. People do not talk much about particulars and we all greatly sympathize with ordinary people on both sides, those who are homeless and suffering - Donetsk attacks are terrible! And civilians without electricity all over the Ukraine are in great trouble as well.

I know for sure, that people from Donetsk and Lugansk long to be part of Russia. Any return to the Ukraine is a deadening thought for them. People in Russia support them and want the operation to be finished as soon as possible. Actually every month it looks like there should be some kind of diplomatic agreement at least the start of it - but no. We have nice kids from Donetsk and Lugansk as students here - they are very intelligent, very motivated to study and I should say they are deeply traumatized.

I cannot say that many people here are critical of our President right now. Hostility is not pushed forward by him or by officials, just the opposite. And imagine, we were brought up with the idea that Russia never ever showed aggression, so everything now is abnormal to us, unnatural and forced. Everybody is longing for peace.

My experience of learning Russian

Heather Haslett

I started to learn Russian because I had the opportunity to do so at school in the 1960s, not at an elite private or grammar school, but at a newly opened comprehensive in West Cumbria. Russian was my second foreign language, my first being French. It soon became my favourite language, as I had a very enthusiastic Russian teacher and I enjoyed doing something different. The disadvantage of learning Russian rather than French or German was that there weren't any opportunities for exchanges or visits. Only once did I meet native Russians. This involved my Russian teacher driving us 40 miles to Carlisle in his car, which broke down and was towed home by the headmaster. I wasn't the first to learn Russian in my family. My mother worked hard on the BBC course in the early 1950s. She thought Russia was the country of the future and anything supporting knowledge and mutual friendship was of value. In later life, she was delighted to be able to visit the Soviet Union.

In the 1960s, Russian was relatively popular in schools. This was due to a rare combination of general interest in Russian because of the Space Race, finance for the teaching of languages in state schools, and availability of teachers because National Service men who had taken the special Russian course had left the forces and looked for other jobs. For a child interested in languages, Russian was a greater challenge than French or German and had a touch of exoticism. I always thought a second modern language was more interesting and useful than Latin or Greek. However, to apply for university I had to have Latin GCE which I studied under the trees at home over the summer.

Russian was a relatively uncommon subject at university, and unlike the western European languages, it was very difficult to spend time in the country in the early 1970s. There were about four British Council scholarships to study in Russia for a year, but I didn't have the courage or stamina to apply, particularly as students were not allowed to come home during the year in case they didn't return to Russia. Thus, I went on a month's course with my classmates to Sochi, of all places. The course was formal and thorough. Opportunities to meet "real Russians" were limited to chance acquaintances if you braved the Russian beach, overcrowded with large ladies in underwear instead of bikinis. They were friendly and keen to chat – but cagey about exchanging addresses.

A year later, I had the chance of a second month abroad, awarded not to the best students, but to those who were expected to benefit most. I was delighted, and set off with three of my classmates to Minsk. This time we were accommodated in a student hostel, which was very basic by western standards. Four students shared a small room. Hot water was available only in the kitchen and showers were in the basement past the coal store. We had more contact with native Russians, though they were carefully picked Komsomol members. I tried very hard to speak with them and the tutor who travelled with us commented that at home I seemed shy, but in Russia I was the one who tried hardest to communicate in Russian.

I reached a high enough level of Russian to work as a professional translator and teacher, though my spoken language was never as good as that of my friends who studied French and Spanish. Learning Russian led me to many adventures and interesting experiences in both Russia and the UK.

How I Came to Learn Russian

Della Thompson

Often, when people find out that I know some Russian, they ask why and how, whereas they rarely ask the same about German or even Latin. Even though Russian has been taught in Britain for many years (1), knowledge of this seemingly difficult and opaque language still arouses much curiosity.

If we accept that ‘nothing comes from nothing’ (the Ancient Greek philosophical statement which people of my age quite likely first encountered in Richard Rodgers’ song *Something Good* from the 1965 film *The Sound of Music*), it should be possible to come up with some sort of explanation.

Three conditions seem to me to be needed for one to decide to pursue an activity, these being an interest or need, a trust in some natural ability, and an opportunity.

In my case, I was taken at eleven to visit the local grammar school which I would be starting that September. During the interview the headmaster proudly announced that a certain member of staff, a Polish émigré called Mr Wolkowinski, taught Russian as well as French, and he then turned to me and asked if I would be interested in learning it. To my parents’ surprise I responded with a solemn ‘Yes, I would’, prompted perhaps by an early recognition that I was interested in and could do languages, as well as by a wish to be agreeable and by the sheer exotic appeal of the idea.

A few months later when I started secondary school, Russian was not offered straight away. First, Latin had to be negotiated for one term after which those of us who could cope with the case system were steered towards German and the others towards French. It was not until we were fourteen that Russian finally appeared on the curriculum as an ‘O’ level choice. We had to select four optional subjects, one from each of four columns. Sadly, Russian was in the same column as music, but sensing that I had more linguistic than musical talent, I decided on Russian. Like music, it was complicated, it offered the chance to express oneself differently from normal, and it required the production of strange and interesting sounds!

That summer, 1967, as we were being amalgamated with the neighbouring secondary modern into a new comprehensive school and about to start Russian, Mr Wolkowinski left. His replacement was a young Cambridge graduate who was keen to adopt the new audiovisual method of teaching languages. Our traditional cosy, familiar way of learning, from textbooks with orderly chapters set out with short texts, vocabulary lists, grammar sections, and written exercises, and with very little speaking, was replaced by a new system, featuring large workbooks with pictures, ruled lines for us to practise neat Cyrillic script, audio material, and interminable sessions of trying in vain to pronounce *ы* as in *ты*, and *ь* as in *тетрадь*. The humiliation was compounded by being allocated Russian names which we were supposed to find fun and by which we were required to address each other in the classroom, including our teacher, Павел. We were unimpressed and I am embarrassed to confess that some of us actually complained about the poor man because we weren’t progressing in the expected way.

Soon after this, while we were still in our first year of learning Russian, Павел resigned for personal reasons, I hope not influenced by our rebellion, and the small class was transferred for the remainder of the academic year to Spanish, the speciality of our new Head of Languages. He assured us that Spanish would be much more useful to us in later life than Russian, citing the current and projected numbers of Spanish speakers in the world. Indeed, looking at today's figures, he was right about that but he ignored the fact that one doesn't necessarily choose a language in order to be able to communicate with the greatest possible number of people on the planet.

It would have been convenient for the school if we'd all stuck with Spanish, but some of us stubbornly wished to return to the strange alphabet, unfamiliar sounds, and complicated grammar of Russian. It took parental lobbying to get the school to find a new teacher and reinstate Russian, most of which lobbying was based on the argument, current at the time, that an important advantage of comprehensive education was that one larger school could offer a wider variety of subjects than two smaller ones.

So it was that a handful of us returned to Russian in September 1968 with teacher number three, the newly appointed Mr Harrison who, much to our collective relief, presented us with a traditional textbook and no hint of uninvited fun. With no further time to waste on trying to perfect our pronunciation of ы, ь, and unaspirated consonants, it was now a gallop to 'O' level in two years at the end of the lower sixth.

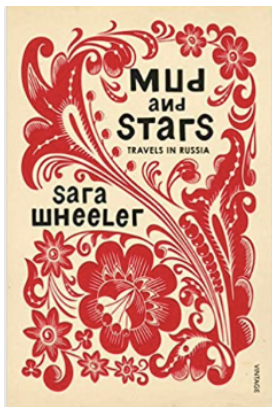
In August of that year (1970), after we'd sat the exam, the school took us on a trip to Moscow and Leningrad, with an itinerary and happy memories pretty much identical to those described by Chris Cowley in her article in *Perm News* of January 2021. It was my first visit of many to the former Soviet Union and cemented my fascination with everything Russian. However, one distressing aspect was that after two years of diligent study I could hardly understand or utter a word of the language when confronted with it in real life!

Back at school, as a group of three or four, we worked towards 'A' level the following year, continuing to wrestle with verbs of motion, aspects, participles, gerunds, and declining numerals. Reading set literary texts was especially demanding but probably only increased the determination to try to reach a standard at which pleasure might eventually outweigh effort. After leaving school I was delighted to continue with Russian at university, and later, during my long career as a lexicographer, I was able to use it as Editor of the Oxford Russian dictionaries.

- (1) For a history of Russian teaching in Britain, see James Muckle's *The Russian Language in Britain: A Historical Survey of Learners and Teachers* (Bramcote Press 2008, out of print)

Mud and Stars: Travels in Russia by Sara Wheeler, Vintage (2020)

Book review by Sally Richards



Russia was the first foreign country the eleven year old Sara Wheeler visited. This book draws on recent journeys, within the last decade or so, through provincial Russia. The title *Mud and Stars*, from a passage in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, reflects Wheeler's view of Russia outside Moscow and St Petersburg. It is a country in which the lives of the populace are 'consumed with the generally dreadful business of being Russian' under governments which do not promote personal liberty and flourishing. And yet this same country has produced a rich and broad culture with a literature that speaks profoundly to the human condition.

Writers from Russia's Golden Age guide Wheeler's travel itineraries and the structure of the book. Each chapter focuses on a particular author or authors. Wheeler is a travel writer, not a literary scholar, but she manages for the most part to avoid producing well-worn accounts of famous authors - perhaps an easier task with Leskov, Goncharov or Fet than Tolstoy or Chekhov. For the general reader, a thoughtful and intelligent lover of literature may be a more accessible and engaging companion than the scholar.

Wheeler mostly avoids Moscow and St Petersburg preferring to visit her chosen authors in their rural contexts - a less familiar lens through which to view them. So we see Dostoevsky, not in the Siberian prison camp or the St Petersburg cityscape, but in Staraya Russa, the spa town near Novgorod, which provided the setting for *The Brothers Karamazov*. Turgenev is in Spasskoye-Lutovinovo, his ancestral estate south of Tula and the landscape of his best known works, not in Paris or Baden Baden.

Journeys in Russia often involve strange sights and surprising encounters, evidenced by travellers through the ages. *Mud and Stars* recreates this intriguing aspect of Russia making it ideally suited to the armchair traveller - the only mode available to most of us in current circumstances. We get a sense of the people Wheeler met - she mostly used home stays and local guides. Visiting the Caucasus in search of Lermontov, with her family in tow, their guide and host was Tanya who ran 'a hippie Orthodox hostel' in Krasnaya Polyana, a town of 'unremittingly horrible concrete homogeneity'. The construction of facilities for the Sochi Winter Olympics had resulted only in the destruction of nature and vernacular architecture and the exploitation of migrant workers. More remote and isolated were the friendly couple Wheeler stayed with in Anadyr in Chukotka, who become for her contemporary Oblomovs, with nothing to do but watch television. One wonders what they made of their guest. Each chapter has interesting digressions more or less linked to the author in hand and reflecting Wheeler's own passions. These include reports on her forays into Russian cookery, guided by Princess Alexandra Kropotkin's *The Best of Russian Cooking*, on her addiction to performances of Russian song and an extended portrait of her heroine Constance Garnett.

Wheeler's prose is a joy to read and, as a linguist, she is attentive to pronunciation and meanings in Russian. She set about learning Russian in preparation for this project and reports her often slow progress and the hilarious lessons with her teacher. Any student of Russian will recognise her short lived euphoria after discovering that Russian has only one past tense.

The author refers to personal trauma that interrupted the writing of this book but she found balm for the soul in the Russian classics and, one suspects, in her adventures. I thoroughly recommend *Mud and Stars* to readers who hope to return to Russia, or visit for the first time, and to anyone wanting to know more about writers of the Golden Age.

Association News

Past Events

On Sunday, 20th November, we heard a talk from Rosamund Bartlett on *A New Look at Russia's Silver Age: The Arrival of Modernism in 1890s Moscow and St. Petersburg*. It was fresh material for Rosamund and enormously enjoyable for her audience. [Read Marcus Ferrar's account of the talk on page 10]

Current and Future Events

We plan a special walk around Oxford devoted to Oxford's Russian connections, with Nina Kruglikova who is an official guide. We hope to invite another speaker, either on cultural aspects of Russia, or on the current political situation. Most seminars at Perm State University were in abeyance last term, but we expect to continue them in the coming term, especially with PSU's International Relations students. We will be having an AGM in March. Ideas for future activities are welcome.

Newsletter

Articles, including book reviews, are always welcome. Articles should be sent as email attachments and can be up to about 800 words. Shorter articles are always welcome. Individual permission for publication is required for photos which include recognisable people. Past newsletters can be seen at www.oxfordperm.org. The editor is grateful to Marcus Ferrar for proofreading this issue.

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Russian and English online language exchange

Graham Dane

There are a number of language exchanges, language cafés and similar arrangements in towns all round the country and many of these went online on some way during the pandemic. One I came across was a 'tandem' arrangement for Spanish which had originally met in a cafe in Edinburgh but now runs on Zoom.

The thing that most amazed me about this group was that participants came from all over the world - UK, Spain, Argentina, Bolivia, USA etc. Participants are limited to 25 as the organiser has to be able to quickly divide them into conversational groups of about three, containing at least one native speaker of each language. Conversations last up to 30 minutes and switch language half way through; the groups are then reshuffled and the process repeated twice more. This is the model we are following for the new Edinburgh International Russian Meetup Group.

Anyone who can sustain a conversation in both languages is very welcome to join. It's not necessary to speak the other language to a high level as the other two people in your group will keep it going. There are no rules except "Be kind to each other" - none are needed for the Spanish group. To the consternation of language teachers there are no set topics, homework or other guidelines and it is completely up to individuals what they talk about. As you will usually be meeting someone from another country it is rare that conversation does not flow.

There was a pilot session with six people in December (three from the UK and three from Perm). The next session on Sunday 22 January had twenty two people and received positive feedback from several people. The next session will be on Sunday 26 February 10.00 - 11.30. We anticipate having around one meetup per month. We would especially welcome more English speakers.

Please register on the Meetup website at this link if you are interested

<https://www.meetup.com/meetup-group-ed-russ-eng/>

Feel free to email me if you have any questions. I look forward to seeing you online.

grahamdane@yahoo.com

English Discussion club

Svetlana Polyakova

In March 2022 on the initiative of our friends and colleagues from the Oxford Perm Association and in collaboration with the Faculty of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures at Perm State University, an English Discussion Club for English language teachers of Perm State University and Perm with Jessica Vlasova was organized. Meetings are held on a regular basis once every two weeks. Since the very first meeting of our club, we have discussed a variety of topics related to different levels of education in Russia and England, the life of students and teachers in our countries, the possibility of employment after university and many other topics. The club provides an opportunity to maintain the level of English, develop methodological competencies and in our opinion we all have been involved into a fascinating opportunity of a live people-to-people dialogue with the representatives from Oxford in English. Svetlana Polyakova and Konstantin Klochko are the Perm coordinators of the English Discussion Club.

The Moscow merchants who dynamised Russian culture Marcus Ferrar

In the late 19th century, Russian culture shook itself free from hidebound conservatism and flourished to such an extent that by 1910 it was taking Europe by storm. Rosamund Bartlett, one of Britain's leading authorities on Russian culture, calls this "Russia's Silver Age".

In an inspiring and wide-ranging talk to the Oxford Perm Association, she brought to life artists such as Ilya Repin, Valentin Serov, Mikhail Vrubel, Konstantin Korovin, Lev Kekushev, Isaac Levitan, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Feodor Chaliapin and Anton Chekhov, all of whom in one way or another revolutionised Russian art.

Behind them, as philanthropists, were notable members of the merchant class, who had tended to be deeply conservative in their social attitudes and 'Old Believers' in their Orthodox religion. Now some of them who had grown rich in the latter half of the 19th century thanks to Alexander II's liberalising economic reforms took a new radical direction.



With the immense wealth they accumulated in particular from textile industries and railways, the merchants decided to fund innovative art produced by artists who were breaking free from the shackles of convention. Not only did these remarkable merchant philanthropists dynamise Russian culture at home, but they made it known abroad and invigorated Russian tastes further through massive imports of French Impressionists.

Prominent among them were Savva Mamontov, Pavel Tretyakov, Sergei Shchukin and the brothers Mikhail and Ivan Morozov. Russia's second largest city was a more congenial place for them to deploy their philanthropy than the capital of St. Petersburg where the Tsars, the land-owning nobles and the military ensured cultural tastes remained ultra-conservative.

Chekhov rashly arranged to premiere his revolutionary play *The Seagull* in St. Petersburg but the reaction of the first night audience was so hostile that he fled straight back to Moscow on the night-sleeper train. There the radical Moscow Art Theatre created by Konstantin Stanislavski (also from a merchant family) put it on to great acclaim, and followed up by staging *Uncle Vanya*. Now these plays are celebrated around the world.

When state theatres shied away from staging Rimsky-Korsakov's reworking of the Mussorgsky opera *Boris Godunov* – because it featured the murder of an heir to the throne – the Moscow Private Opera founded by Mamontov gave it performances. Such was its success that the state Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg eventually relented and staged it with the great bass (and dynamic actor) Feodor Chaliapin.

We were privileged that Rosamund presented this burgeoning of Russian culture with such erudition and attractive illustrations. She ended her talk with impresario Sergei Diaghilev, who was born and brought up in Perm, just entering the scene. That's tantalising. Could there be more to come?