



PERM NEWS

Оксфорд и Пермь

O P A

Oxford Perm Association

Newsletter February 2024



Images: Perm City Administration





300th anniversary

2023 was the year Perm celebrated its 300th anniversary. To prepare for the celebration, roads, streets and facades of the houses in the central districts of Perm had been repaired by August. The process took funding, time and Permians' nerves. Everything seemed to be in 'ruins', blocked, paralysed and messy. But metre after metre, house after house, the outlook of the whole city centre transformed. It is super now! Very neat, modern, harmonious and comfortable.

Besides that, the entire system of public transport was modernised. New buses, electric buses and trams were purchased by the municipal administration. New bus stops were built. A new system of travel cards was introduced, with numerous incentives and discounts for vulnerable social groups. For schoolchildren public transport is now free. All the rest can pay in cash, by card, via QR or on any of several mobile phone apps - anything an individual chooses at a certain moment, which is convenient. This makes it a pleasure to travel round the city now. Although, traffic jams have not disappeared and the daily rush hour is still a torment.

And of course there were numerous events dedicated to the 300th anniversary - cultural, scientific, educational and sporting ones. In our university, an international folk festival was organised which lasted a week.

To recognize the contribution of the Oxford Perm Association in the development of our Faculty of Foreign Languages, and to welcome our first-year students of the English department, we organized a party and an excursion in our university library. A group of senior students introduced the newcomers to the rich collection of modern English novels we have, thanks to our participation in the Oxford Russia seminars on Contemporary English Literature. The fourteen novels were provided by the Oxford Russia Fund under a scheme to offer Russian universities good contemporary English fiction, including novels by Graham Swift, Hilary Mantel, Julian Barnes and Pat Barker. These, in multiple copies for student reading and discussion, were unavailable before 2005. The students shared, in a creative approach, their impressions and understanding of 14 novels in the collection. We hope it was a warm welcoming party for our new students.

On May 24, a Soyuz space rocket with the Perm-300 symbol on the hull was launched from the Baikonur cosmodrome. This historic event was a gift to the Permians in honour of the anniversary of the city. The logo of the 300th anniversary of Perm was placed on the rocket as a sign that the city is making one of the biggest contributions to the Russian space industry.

Volunteer services

Volunteer services are gaining in popularity. Various interest groups attract volunteers of all ages. Assumed to be a prerogative of high school and university students for quite a long time, now volunteering is widely spread among all age groups. A wave of the volunteering activity started about a year ago after lots of male citizens were mobilized or chose to go to the front. Middle-aged and elderly people faced a question of what they can do here, in Perm, to help those who do their military service. Immediately, dozens of groups uniting hundreds of thousands of people appeared. They started making clothes, anti-thermal imaging blankets, candles for trenches, camouflage nets and collecting humanitarian aid - things which are impossible in mass production, as demands and quality requirements change monthly, with completely new military realities, and which need instant 'flexible' response.

This changed senior citizens' attitude to volunteering. They realized how important it is to get out of their personal comfort zone and do what others need. So now they contribute more to the welfare of sick people in hospitals or stray animals in animal shelters, build more things in the courtyards and along the nature trails, plant more trees in the streets, search actively for missing people, etc. Besides, this is a new form of social interaction - amazingly novel for Perm.

Specially protected nature conservation areas in Perm

Perm is a metropolitan city. It occupies 800 sq. km., second only to St. Petersburg and Sochi. 50% of its territory is mixed woods and forests surrounding and connecting 8 city districts scattered on both the banks of the Kama river. There's a strong tendency to care more for these green zones. There are 23 specially protected nature conservation areas in Perm. These are woods and forests with minor rivers, brooks, lakes, 150-year-old coniferous trees, rare plants, birds and animals.

Thirty nature trails have been made in these conservation areas in the last decade. In 2023, several of these trails appeared, and some were reconstructed. The funds were allocated from the state and city budgets, as well as from sponsorship. The nature trails have also become a meaningful result of several voluntary groups' activity. They design, organise and sustain the nature trails. Now, moving along some paths, the residents can immerse themselves in the calm world of wildlife, where nothing betrays the proximity of the city. Other paths, meanwhile, are equipped with educational stands, wooden sculptures and funny objects d'art. Thousands of citizens travel along each of these trails yearly. For some people, these are usual routes for jogging, hiking, Nordic walking, cycling and ski running.

1. Perm is included in the top ten cities in the quality of its public transport. Indicators included in particular: duration of a standard trip, time of waiting at a transport stop, traffic intervals, passenger satisfaction etc. The research was carried out for 218 cities in Russia. Other cities in the top ten besides Perm include Kazan, Tver, Ulan-Ude and Odintsovo.

The average age of buses in Perm is 2.3 years and of trams 11 years. In other cities, in general, 7.6 and 22 years. In 2023 Perm received 30 brand new very modern trams in accordance with concession agreement. The trams are really beautiful and comfortable, during the New Year holiday they were decorated with festive illumination (see photo on page 1). In 2022 Perm's public transport system was recognized as the best in Russia.

2. The new Mayor of Perm was appointed at the end of August 2023 - Eduard Olegovich Sosnin. Previously he was the Minister of Economic Development and Investment in the Government of Perm Krai. The previous Mayor, Aleksei Demkin (Дёмкин), became one of the Deputy Chairmen of the regional government (in other words, deputy governor).

Mayors in Perm (and almost everywhere in Russia) are not elected any more. The system is as follows: City Duma makes the announcement and any person can apply for the position of the Mayor. A special commission listens to them all and then selects the two 'best' candidates, who present their vision of the city development to the full council (city duma). Duma chooses one from the final two and appoints him/her as the Mayor. The term of service is 5 years.

3. Perm is working on the development of the multifunctional inter-university Campus called 'Parma's Future'. It will be built on the right bank of the Kama, in Kama Valley. Eight Perm Universities will be part of the Campus. It is a very ambitious project. Only ten such Campuses are being built in Russia and it is a federal project. The construction is to be finished in 2027. The rector of Perm State University, Dmitry Krasilnikov, is the Head of the Campus Directorate.

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The Erast Fandorin Mystery Series by Boris Akunin

(translated by Andrew Bromfield)

Book review by *Sally Richards*

Erast Petrovich Fandorin is the compelling hero of a series of historical mystery novels set in late Tsarist Russia and beyond. Fandorin combines the intellect of Sherlock Holmes with the daring and physical prowess, in all respects, of James Bond. Unlike Poirot and other fictional detectives Fandorin ages as the series progresses. We meet him first in 1876 in *The Winter Queen* when he is 20 years old and a new recruit in the Criminal Investigation Department of the Moscow Chief of Police. By the time of the final novel *Not Saying Goodbye*, the Bolsheviks are in power and Fandorin is an enfeebled 64 year old.

Fandorin's expertise and career progress through the series, so there is reason to read the books in order. This is not essential in my view but I strongly recommend starting with *The Winter Queen* which is witty, exciting and an introduction to our hero. The novels are beautifully written and translated, and ingeniously plotted. Akunin reputedly identified the various sub-genres of the classic mystery novel, with each one represented in the Fandorin series. Some are clever pastiche. For example *Murder on the Leviathan* takes place in a closed setting, on a steam ship, and is firmly within the tradition of Agatha Christie. Others go beyond this to create novels which are not only gripping page turners but richly allusive and thought provoking.

Boris Akunin is the pen name of Grigory Chkhartishvili, an author of Georgian and Russian Jewish heritage who is also a philologist and translator from Japanese and English. His pen name (B Akunin) is a mischievous reference to the famous revolutionary anarchist and 'akunin' means 'evil person' in Japanese. Erast Fandorin served for a time in Japan, depicted in *The Diamond Chariot*, where he acquires Masa, his faithful servant and partner in martial arts and in Japanese conversation. Akunin/Chkhartishvili is a prolific author of novels, plays, essays and non-fiction works including a multi-volume history of the Russian State. Akunin chose the late nineteenth to early twentieth century as the setting for his Erast Fandorin series as this was a critical period in the development of modern Russia. His love for the great Russian writers of that era is evident throughout and provides scope for literary detectives to spot the allusions.

The Fandorin series also provides a vehicle for posing and considering vital ethical questions at a time when Russia was standing at a crossroads. In Akunin's view, Russia made all the wrong choices, becoming the birthplace of modern terrorism and other evils. Akunin is interested in the phenomenon of evil as a consequence of the actions of people who are well motivated and even altruistic. For example, in *The State Counsellor* the action constantly shifts between Fandorin, who is now the Deputy for Special Assignments to the Governor General of Moscow, and Green, a Jewish victim of the pogroms now a terrorist/freedom fighter who is physically and intellectually almost Fandorin's counterpart. Fandorin is working within the deeply repressive, often corrupt security apparatus of the state whilst Green is a hardened killer but no stock psychopath. Both characters are aware of the moral dilemmas they face throughout but Fandorin ultimately has a more nuanced view of the people and situations he encounters and more compassion for others, as befits a hero. The series provides a powerful sense of time and place through Imperial Russia's answer to Sherlock Holmes. Akunin's novels are immensely popular in Russia and have sold millions of copies but he is a long term critic of Putin's policies for governing Russia and he emigrated in 2014. In December 2023 the Russian authorities opened a criminal investigation into his activities and placed him on their register of extremists and terrorists. His publishers have been raided and his books withdrawn from sale.

Edinburgh International Russian Meetup Group

Robin Carr

About 20 people join the online Meetup on zoom every month, not always the same ones. There are usually more 'Russians' than 'English'. The format is a simple chat between people and in order to make this possible, the attendees of the Meetup are divided into 'breakout rooms' each containing only 3 people, at least one from each language. They chat for a session of half an hour, and are then swapped into another room with different people.

A whole Meetup session is divided into three half-hour sessions with each person assigned to a different room each half hour, with (usually) 3 different people in each session. So, in an entire Meetup each person can expect to have a chat with 6 different people, more or less, according to exact numbers each time. In each breakout session the members chat for about half the time in English and half the time in Russian. The time to change language is announced to all groups half way through each session. They don't have to follow the instruction, of course, but most groups do so. On the whole, the level of English of the Russians is considerably higher than the level of Russian of the English so the amount of time in each language is not strictly half and half, and there is no undue pressure on the English contingent to overtax their Russian.

Quite a lot of the time is spent asking the other people about their life, their work or education or their interests, which can elicit a lot of interesting information. If there are shy people in one's group the objective will be to encourage them to talk in the 'other' language and, of course, they will be fascinated to hear the efforts of the English contingent to tell them about their life in Russian.

Subjects of conversation can be anything: jobs; hobbies and interests; food; shopping; cost of living; holidays; family etc. but it is of course important to be tactful. There is no need to go into politics and the benefit of the exchange would be entirely negated by any attempts to 'score points' or foist one's own political views on the Russian members. The Russians are also extremely tactful and considerate to the English in this respect.

There are quite a few teachers and lecturers on the Russian side with whom it is exceptionally easy to talk. For English students of Russian it is a real treat to take part in what is almost a Russian language seminar. The Russian teachers have all the teacherly instincts of pitching their speech at the level of their English interlocutors. Above all, the atmosphere is exceptionally good-humoured and friendly. For anyone who would like to have an opportunity to give their Russian an airing, or indeed anyone who enjoys meeting and communicating with people who live a world away and yet have so much in common, the Edinburgh Meetup sessions cannot be too highly recommended.

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The dates for the next Meetup sessions are 25th February and 24th March.

Here is the zoom link to join the language exchange

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

The Meeting ID is 842 4779 9935 and the passcode is 1234

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

Past events

Chris Danziger gave a well-attended and lively talk about the Trans-Siberian Railway.

12 members of the Association visited the Ashmolean to look at some of the special collections of Russian art.

Current and Future Events.

The AGM will be held in the Town Hall on Tuesday, 27th February at 6 p.m. After the official business, Marcus Ferrar will give a talk entitled 'Cold War Reporter behind the Iron Curtain'.

A second visit to the Ashmolean to view the Russian art collections will take place on Wednesday, 20th March at 2pm. Two places left for this visit.

We are planning a series of informal screenings of Russian and Soviet films at 6 Rawlinson Road, subject to finding a suitable screen and projector.

We have 10 people ready to revive our Russian discussion group where controversial issues were discussed in some depth. This group used to meet monthly, and individuals would research and present a certain topic.

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

Trans-Siberian Railway Talk

Chris Cowley

Chris Danzinger's illustrated talk focused mainly on the construction of the railway between 1891 and 1904. There is not only one, but several, railways crossing Siberia to the Pacific coast. One route passes through Chinese Manchuria via Harbin (following an agreement with the Chinese government). The standard route skirts the southern point of Lake Baikal and then runs just to the north of the Chinese border before terminating in Vladivostok. In 1991, the Baikal-Amur Mainline was finally completed, which takes a route from Lake Baikal still further north and terminates in Sovetskaya Gavan. There are numerous branch lines off these main routes.

Moscow is considered as the starting point of the Trans-Siberian. However, Chris pointed out that, in the past, Kiev had styled itself as the *start of the longest train journey in the world*. In 1902, the Yaroslavsky Station terminal in Moscow was completed in Art Nouveau style by the German architect Franz Shechtel.

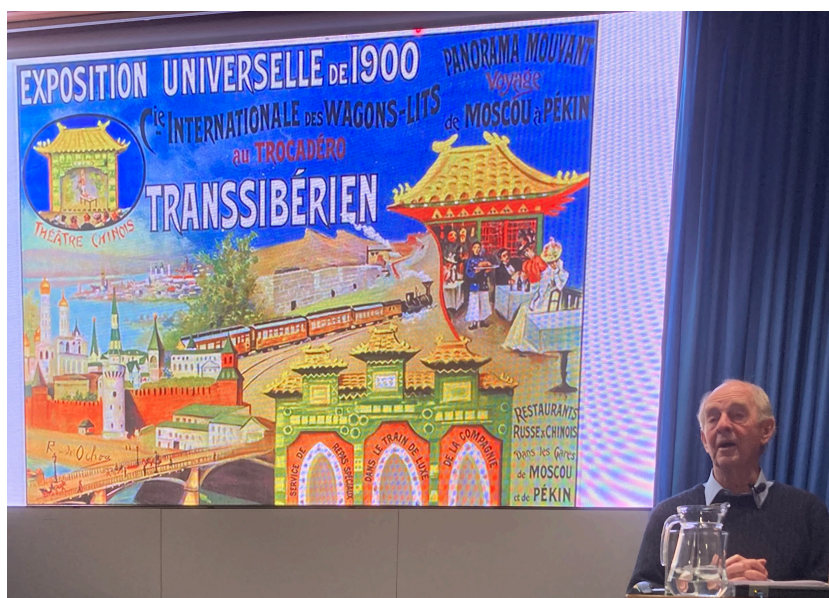
Chris highlighted the considerable contribution to the building project from other countries. Sergius Witte, the Russian Prime Minister, originally from the Netherlands, was largely responsible for driving the project through. Hawksworth Engines, steel for the rails and even wood for railway sleepers was imported from England (as, surprisingly, wood from the Russian forests was not suitable). In addition to prisoners (who were offered a reduction in their sentences to work on the railway), labour was brought in from Turkey, the Balkans and from China. The stone bridges in Western Siberia were built by Italian masons. As elsewhere in Russia, the gauge was 5', arguably in order to deter invaders. In consequence, trains in Russia are larger than anywhere else in the world.

The conquest of 'Siberia' (a rather ambiguous area historically) began in the reign of Ivan the Terrible, and was driven on by the discovery of natural resources in the Urals and beyond: iron ore; copper; topaz; malachite and later coal and oil. In the 18th century, the population was around 1.5 million, mostly nomadic tribes. In the 19th century, peasant settlers were incentivised by release from serfdom and a gift of land once they crossed the Urals. The population was further boosted by prisoners and military outposts. Nowadays the population is over 33 million. Sadly, the indigenous peoples have not fared well following the arrival of so many European Russians, and these cultures have been diluted to only a few percent of the population.

The technical challenges in building the railway were huge – and the cost enormous. Temperatures could fall to -50C in winter and the ground was frozen for 8 months of the year. When it thawed, the ground became a muddy swamp. Dense forest had to be cleared from wide areas before any construction could begin. In many areas, supplies had to be brought in by horse-drawn carts for hundreds of miles. During construction, speed was prioritised over cost with, for example, thinner rails and less bedding under them. Consequently, when the railway opened, subsidence was a common problem and trains had to travel at very slow speeds – 13mph for passenger trains and 8mph for freight! There were frequent derailments. Today, the trains run at 55mph and are admirably punctual.

The railway opened in 1901 when only the route round Lake Baikal was incomplete. Passengers were ferried across the lake on steamers. The 1900 Paris Exhibition had a pavilion featuring the railway which generated a great deal of interest. The pavilion showcased luxurious carriages which led to disappointment for travellers when confronted by the realities of conditions on the railway!

Today there are three trains a day in each direction. The line is fully electrified, although diesel trains still run on the branch lines. Steam trains were discontinued in 1987. The railway runs at a loss of 40% but brings huge benefits to the country as a whole. 80% of trains carry freight. 95% of passenger tickets are for shorter journeys rather than 'end-to-end'.



Chris finished his talk by highlighting what a huge logistical and engineering challenge the building of the Trans-Siberian railway was. Despite that, it was completed in 13 years. He compared this to HS2 which, if it were to progress at its current rate for the distance of the Trans-Siberian, would be completed around the year 2400! Many members of the audience have fond memories of the Trans-Siberian railway, but we all learned something new in the course of Chris' fascinating talk.

Chris Danzinger's talk on the Trans-Siberian railway at Rewley House in December. Image: David Scroggie