

King's Student  
Perspectives

## Asian and Middle Eastern Studies: Arabic and Russian

Tish, 1<sup>st</sup> year

### *Let's take your Russian first - how did you choose Russian?*

*When applying to university I knew that one of my primary passions was languages, and more particularly the Russian language, a passion which had been growing within me for several years.*

*I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to study Russian at school for GCSE and A-level (to study Arabic with a modern language you must have done an A-level in the modern*

*language). I'd been studying*

*Latin at school and took to it quite readily, so when it came to making the choice as to which second language I wanted to study, it was my Latin teacher who originally encouraged me to take Russian as a "challenge". I had some incredibly inspiring Russian teachers, to whom I'll be eternally grateful, who instilled and nurtured within me this passion for Russian and desire to absorb myself into the language and the culture of those who speak it. While visiting Russia I also met some people who I kept in touch with and who have become some of my best friends, constantly inviting me back whenever I'm able to go!*

*Having chosen to study Russian in year 8, it wasn't long before I totally fell in love with the Russian language and culture, and I have not looked back since. It is true that*

*While visiting Russia I met some people who I kept in touch with and who have become some of my best friends, constantly inviting me back whenever I'm able to go!*

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*it's a fairly challenging language to learn, but for me that's part of the attraction of it: seeing all the intricate patterns and links within languages is something that interests me a lot. I think Russian is a fascinating and very rewarding language which allows you to visit parts of the world which might otherwise have not been so accessible to you, and the language skills also allow you to study what (in my view at least!) is some of the richest literature in the world. The course is fairly flexible and can be adapted to fit your own interests to some degree, depending on what you want to study from different periods of history, literature, or film. Whether or not you've studied Russian before, I can't recommend it highly enough!*

## *And why combine Russian with Arabic?*

*The appeal of Arabic arose naturally out of an interest for languages in general. Something that particularly interests me in languages is the psychology behind them: the way that different people think, and how this is affected by language. Languages are like different ways*

*or patterns of thinking. So by learning a different language I feel that*

*I find the language itself very beautiful, both in terms of its structure and internal patterns, and for the physical beauty of the written script.*

*you take on a new way of thinking, and engage with a different mindset. From this, I was attracted to Arabic in particular largely due to how different it is from European languages, as I was drawn to the idea of learning an entirely different mindset, and exploring a very rich and fascinating culture that was previously unfamiliar to me. Apart from that, I find the language itself very beautiful, both in terms of its structure and internal patterns, and for the physical beauty of the written script.*

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## *What are the main challenges?*

*Studying at Cambridge is in itself a challenge, but one that you really need to be willing to accept even when first applying here, and then embrace wholeheartedly in pursuing your studies.*

*From my experience on the AMES course, what has been most challenging is the pace of the course and the speed with which you have to reach an increasingly high level. No matter how hard you work there will always be another potential step up to improve and reach higher. Of course, with your classmates around you all doing the same thing (and many of those doing Arabic without a second language to distract them), this can create quite an intense atmosphere!*

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## *If the course is intense, how do you manage the work-life balance?*

*Despite the intensity of the course and the Cambridge environment (which in itself can be a very positive thing if it pushes you to higher aspirations and to make greater progress), there is, fortunately, opportunity to enjoy life outside of your studies as well!*

*There is always an abundance of other things to get involved with, whether that be sport, theatre, music, etc. For me personally the love of my life outside of languages is art, so there's not much I enjoy more than finding a calm spot somewhere outside to relish the beauty of my surroundings and just draw.*

*Cambridge and the surrounding area is a beautiful place, and sometimes it's nice just to go for a walk to remove yourself from your work for a bit, perhaps to wander through the meadows to Grantchester for a picnic with friends if you're lucky with the weather!*

*There's the bar at King's to wind down in, with regular entertainment provided on different nights of the week, and also different pubs and clubs locally in town.*

*If a busier social scene and nightlife are more your thing, then there's the bar at King's to wind down in, with regular entertainment provided on different nights of the week, and also different pubs and clubs locally in town. There's also a huge range of societies you can join, so really you can devote your spare time to whatever appeals to you most.*

*You begin to get used to the intensity once*

*you've sorted out a good work/life balance, and there are always people around to support you: both friends and classmates all in the same boat with the same pressures as you, and also different members of staff. There is a good system of support in place to help you in different aspects of your life here, from the student*

*welfare networks, counselling service and college nurse, to your college 'parents' allocated to you from higher years to provide advice from their own experience to help you settle in and get by. In addition to this, each person is allocated a Director of Studies (a DoS) who is responsible more particularly for your academic welfare. For me this has been another source of reassurance, as my DoS has always been very kind and helpful, letting me know that I can turn to her if ever I have a problem. It also does me no harm that I get to see her regularly, as she's my main Arabic language teacher as well!*

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## *What about the content of the course? Is it hard?*

*For me personally the part of the course I've found particularly hard is not the language work but the work for the paper on Russian culture (in the first year for Arabic you take only*

*The only essays I'd written for several years had been in Russian, so I found it strangely difficult to express myself in my own native language to the level I felt was required!*

*language papers if combining with a modern language, so I don't have this problem for Arabic). The reason for this is simply that this paper involves writing essays in English, which I was just not used to, having not taken any essay subjects at A-level. The only essays I'd written for several years had been in Russian, so I found it strangely difficult to express myself in my own native language to the level I felt was required! I did start to wish I'd done A-level English... However, people are different and many find this an easier part of the course compared to the language work. If, like me, you haven't done an A-level in something like English or History then don't be unduly worried: it's certainly an advantage but you'll pick up on the skill anyway through constructive criticism and feedback from your supervisors.*

## *How are you finding the language work?*

*Neither Arabic or Russian are particularly easy languages to learn. With Arabic in particular, it's been very challenging learning both the written form and a spoken dialect form simultaneously from scratch, as the written and spoken language are not the same in Arabic. I've been grateful this year for the excellent grounding my previous Russian teachers and visits to Russia to stay with friends have given me, as it has made the Russian*

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*part of the course much easier and allowed me time to focus more attention on getting to grips with the Arabic. Without this my life would have been an awful lot harder! So one thing I would say is if you want to study Arabic with another language, then it's worth making sure firstly that you have a genuine desire to study these languages and absorb yourself into them so as to maintain motivation in the Cambridge environment, and secondly that you're as confident as possible in the other language.*

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## *What do you enjoy?*

*The challenging aspect of the course shouldn't detract from the rewarding aspect of it. Rather, it should ideally add to it and fuel your passion for what you've chosen to study. I think it's wonderful to delve into the*

*Supervisions offer you the chance to think and engage in discussion about things that are of great interest to you with someone who has a lot more knowledge on the topic than yourself.*

*language and culture of another people, and I'm thoroughly enjoying this course and the opportunity it offers me to do this for two very different and exciting languages, by combining AMES with a modern language.*

*I should also mention another advantage of studying here, which is the supervisions. These should be considered not as something to be scared of, but as something to look forward to, as they offer you the chance to think and engage in discussion about things that are of great interest to you with someone who has a lot more knowledge on the topic than yourself. The interviews in my experience are similar to supervisions (in fact, I*

*honestly really enjoyed my interviews, to my own surprise!), and should be viewed in a similar positive*

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## *What happens in a supervision?*

*Supervisions last for an hour, and each week I have one for Arabic language, one for Russian oral and one for Russian culture. Mine are all held on the faculty sites, although many people receive their supervisions either at their own or other colleges. They are a great strength of the Cambridge system and a brilliant way not only to support the material covered in*

*The supervision is an opportunity to address any problems and direct your study in a way that suits you.*

*language classes and lectures, but also to go further and build on it, with the opportunity to influence the course of your study to some extent according to your own personal needs and interests. For instance, if you have a particular problem, perhaps something you didn't understand in class, or you have a particular interest you would like to look into in more depth, then the supervision is an opportunity to address this and direct your study in a way that suits you.*

*An example of something I particularly enjoyed was the chance to combine my passion for language and culture with my other main passion in life, art, in a Russian*

*culture supervision. The discussion revolved around how the tense and divided relationship of the peasantry and nobility in 19th Century Russia was expressed in art, with detailed analysis of particular paintings in order to examine the issue and develop our own thoughts on the subject, while addressing the question of how art engaged with the idea of a 'national identity' and other social issues in Russia at the time. What interested me most was looking into possible thought processes behind the artists' work, and how this came to be reflected in their practice. For instance we looked at how they divided the space in a painting or employed light in a certain way in order to problematise the act of looking for the viewer, so as to highlight contrasts between those working the land and those who owned it. This supervision is an example of one which really got me thinking and enthused, with a wealth of ideas raised by myself and my supervisor in active discussion about several things which we clearly have in common as a shared passion.*

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## *What else do you like?*

*One should not forget as well the attractive prospect of the year abroad on the horizon in third year! Even if you're combining Arabic with a modern language, you spend at least eight months in an Arabic-speaking country. This is something I'm looking forward to as a chance to more completely immerse myself in a different language and culture, in a part of the world I've never had the opportunity to go to before.*

*As well as this there's plenty of holiday time (a good feature of the incredibly intense Cambridge terms is the longer holidays in between!), in which I intend at any available opportunity to visit my friends in Russia and explore further to parts of Russia I've not been to before, finances allowing!*

## *And King's?*

*King's is the best college (obviously). Of course everyone's college is the best to them, but King's has a really nice relaxed and open-minded atmosphere, with a truly diverse bunch of people who keep life fresh and interesting!*

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### **A note to current King's AMES students**

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying AMES at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details: [undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk](mailto:undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk).