Leaders in SHAPE: Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon)

Speaker: Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon)

Chair: Aditi Lahiri FBA

As part of the Leaders in SHAPE series, former journalist and diplomatic correspondent and Master of Peterhouse College, Cambridge, Bridget Kendall joins Aditi Lahiri *to discuss her life, career and passion for language learning. to discuss her life, career and passion for language learning.*

This talk is available to watch on YouTube

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Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:01:13] Good afternoon and welcome to the British Academy event. The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We are an independent fellowship of world leading scholars, a funding body that supports new research nationally and internationally, and a forum for debate and engagement.

Today's event forms part of the series *Leaders in SHAPE*, where we meet the most influential figures within and beyond academia who are shaping the fields of social sciences, humanities and the arts. Previous speakers have included Gary Young, Judith Butler, Claudia Hammond, and today it gives me enormous pleasure to welcome Bridget Kendall to our virtual stage for the latest event in the series.

Bridget is the Master of Peterhouse College, Cambridge, and host of *The Forum*. *The Forum* is BBC World Service's weekly discussion programme to highlight new ideas and research. Prior to taking up her role at Cambridge, Bridget had a distinguished career at the BBC as a journalist and diplomatic correspondent. Bridget is a recognised authority on Russia and East West relations. She was awarded an MBE in the 1994 New Year's Honours list for her services to broadcasting, and was elected an Honorary Fellow of the British Academy in 2020.

Today, we are going to discuss Bridget's life, career, and passion for language learning, before taking a selection of audience questions. If you would like to ask a question, please use the Q&A tab at the bottom of your screen. Bridget, may I begin by extending my grateful thanks on behalf of the Academy and myself. Thank you so much for joining us.

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:03:13] Thank you.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:03:14] On the one hand, it is rather a daunting experience to be interviewing you, and on the other hand, it's a joy and immense pleasure to have you with us. Thanks so much for coming. Can I begin by going back? I was wondering if you could look back to your teenage years and your decision to study modern languages at the University of Oxford. Why languages? Why Russian?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:03:42] Well, I was very lucky in that I went to a school where you could start Russian at the age of 14. I'd been studying French and Latin, and you could choose another language, and I was very enticed by the idea of Russian because although it's also European, it has a different script. It's a different family, and of course a very different history, and at that time, contemporary politics. It was the height of the Cold War so it felt like a very exotic choice, a bit mysterious, and of course it's got a great literature.

I found when I began studying it that it didn't disappoint, and I quite soon realised that the way the grammar is constructed and various aspects of the language, it made me realise that languages can affect the way you think, and this is a very interesting idea. So that was one reason that I wanted to study languages. I started with French and Russian and then opted for Russian full-time, partly because I was desperate to try and get to the Soviet

Union. In those days it wasn't easy and I thought I'd stand a better chance if I was just focusing on Russian.

The other reason that I studied modern languages was advice from my father, who was a mathematician, but he gave good advice. I was wondering about doing English. I loved literature generally. I was thinking about going to art school. I had all sorts of ideas, the way you do when you are a teenager.

He said, "Study a hard language because your application will always stand out when you apply for things to come. People will say, "Oh, look, she studied Russian. I wonder what she's like. Let's call her in for an interview." And he was completely right. It opened doors for me along the way in all sorts of extraordinary ways. I'm sure I wouldn't have ended up a BBC correspondent if I hadn't spoken Russian. So that was good advice early on.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:05:23] Oh, yes, learning languages, we'll come back to that in a minute, but you also spent two years in Russia with the British Council scholarships in 1970.

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:05:34] That's right. I was. I went one year as an undergraduate. They were rather rare scholarships for undergraduates. There were about a dozen of us from the UK. I was desperate to get one of these scholarships because at that time in the mid-1970s, it was almost impossible to get there for an extended length of time, and you couldn't get a job there, and I was lucky enough to get one, was sent to a provincial town, which I was pleased about because that was even more different from ordinary life in the UK.

In fact, it was a bit like being on the moon. It was so far divorced from anything I'd seen before it. It really made me, brought me up short, actually, about how lucky I'd been where I'd been born and brought up in the UK, and not everyone had the same chances.

Then also looking at this extraordinary world, the Soviet Union — this political and social experiment with socialism which went wrong. The ideal was taken to extremes and it was distorted, and instead of being a society with equality for all, it was a society with Communist Party privilege. And instead of having collective responsibility, it seemed like there was no accountability and no one took care of things in the common spaces, on the stairwells, or in the public parks or wherever.

People were very much more focused on their private world. That was where they could still control their lives and try and keep them and their families on an even keel.
But it really challenged my assumptions. I mean, I think probably more than most language journeys, I ended up in a place which was so unlike anything that I could have imagined. And I realised I had lots of good lessons early on.

I realised you couldn't judge people on appearances. I think as a rather, I don't know, perhaps typical teenager. I'd look at the way people were dressed and think, "oh I might like you or not like you," and I realised in the Soviet Union that the more smartly and beautifully someone was dressed, actually the less you should trust them because where did they get those clothes from? And people who looked a bit shabby and didn't have, or didn't obviously have much, this was a pretty good sign of people who might be interesting to find out about and talk to.

Another thing that I realised was that Soviet citizens were just as worthy of a good life as anybody in the UK, it's just they happened to be born into this country, and actually in some ways they were much less complacent than us in Western societies. They had to navigate a world where you had to be careful who you spoke to. You had to read between the lines. And that brought me up short too, because I think I'd gone there thinking, "Oh, these poor people who live in communism," and I realised I had a lot to learn from them.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:08:07] So they really challenged your assumptions these few years? And then you went on to go into the BBC World Service as a trainee in 1983. Why did you choose journalism?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:08:20] Well, I'd gone on to do postgraduate studies. I'd gone back to Moscow for another year trying to get into the archives. They didn't allow me into very many, so I set about trying to meet as many people as I could who might have had private access to the writer that I was working on, Andrei Platonov, who died in the early 1950s, so there were some people around who knew him, including his widow and his children.

I therefore met an enormous number of people, and I realised this was a society, 1981 to 1982, on the cusp of change because everyone knew that the longstanding Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, was about to die and something would have to be different afterwards.

I think most people thought that it was going to be much, much worse. They looked back at Soviet history and thought about the 1930s. The father of a friend of mine even took me aside and said, "When Brezhnev goes, you know, it could be very bad here. They could close everything down. And you young students, you and my daughter, you should stay in touch because it may be the only way in the West that people are able to find out what happens to us here." So he was speaking a little bit, having remembered what happened to his family in the Stalin era.

It sent shivers down my spine, but of course, none of us realised that it was going to be the other way round. There were a couple of elderly leaders who followed Brezhnev, but then along came Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 and started reforms. It's interesting. Nobody saw that coming in Moscow. But it set me thinking that perhaps the life as an academic wasn't for me; that I wanted to follow this place close-up in the here and now, and the BBC seemed a logical place to go.

They were interested in Russian speakers, and also my time in the Soviet Union made me very aware of the pernicious impact of propaganda, of distorted information, and of not having the right information, so it felt like the BBC World Service was a very laudable and good place to be. It's all about trying to give people information, balanced and fair information around the world, so I felt very comfortable applying, and it was a wonderful place to be.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:10:16] So did you finally get to the archives or were you just not able to do that?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:10:20] I saw a couple, I think, and otherwise, no, I didn't have access. This was a common problem in those days. You'd apply to go, and your first hurdle was that you had to get to Moscow.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:10:32] I had similar problems too. So you think in terms of studying languages, this really has served you in your career as a journalist?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:10:46] Oh, definitely. I mean, when I applied to the BBC, I think they probably had in their mind, ah, she'll be useful for the Russian service which broadcasts back into the Soviet Union in Russian, but I thought, well, I don't want to just spend my time doing that. Apart from anything else, I thought that might make it harder for me to go back and visit in Russia because they were very suspicious of the BBC. For a good reason, actually.

The way things turned out, I was asked to join News and Current Affairs, and within two weeks I found myself outputting a daily programme about news. It was absolutely terrifying because it wasn't just about Russia, it was all about Turkish politics and Indonesia and all sorts of things I knew nothing about.

I remember I subscribed to the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and used to read it late at night to try and bone up on Asian politics. I felt very inadequate. But after about a couple of weeks of barely being able to sleep at night because I was doing this terrifying thing, you're live on air with this programme, I decided I loved it actually, and that maybe I could do it and I've never looked back.

Then the next thing that happened was that within two years of joining, the Soviet Union dramatically changed with the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev, who wasted no time in making clear he was going to do new things, including having summit meetings with the American president. And the BBC began to say, "Well, Bridget, you speak Russian. Why don't you go to Reykjavik? See if you can meet some Russians and get interviews with them."

So I went to a lot of those superpower summits of the 1980s that led to the end of the Cold War, as well as spending more and more time in Russia because I'd come back and say to my editors, you know, the really interesting story isn't the international relations story about arms control. The really interesting story is what's happening in Russia – what Gorbachev is doing in Russia. So they kept saying, "Okay, go back and make another programme."

Then in 1989, they said, "Bridget, maybe you should apply to go there full time. I think we're going to need to enlarge the bureau, and it might be very useful to have someone who speaks fluent Russian." So I ended up as a Moscow correspondent.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:12:46] So you were the BBC's Moscow correspondent in 1989, weren't you?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:12:50] Yes, I was one of them. I wasn't the only one. We had two bureaus, one for radio, and one for TV, and I was on the radio one which also got enlarged. But it was an incredible time to be there, I must say, when I arrived in 1989. It's hard to believe this now because our sense of the trajectory is that the Soviet Union, the reforms unfolded and gradually everything fell apart, and then in the end it collapsed. But there were zigs and zags, and in 1989 there were signs that there was beginning to be a backlash to Gorbachev's reforms and that he was in a weakened position, and in fact, he changed his governance and brought in some very conservative people the year after.

There was a tit-for-tat spat with Britain where we kicked out, Britain, kicked out a lot of Soviet spies. This was from information from Gordievsky, who was the double agent for Britain. And

in retaliation, the Russians, the Soviets, kicked out lots of British diplomats and journalists, actually. So when I arrived, it felt like a little chill had started again, and I thought maybe my challenge would be to have to explain to a BBC audience, who were assuming everything was going incredibly well, and the reforms were going to lead to more and more progress, that actually it had changed and a corner had been turned and the lid would come back down again.

Of course, that nearly did happen in 1991. There was an attempted coup, and if it had worked, they would have rolled the clock back and there would have been a communist government again. But it didn't work. They panicked. Lots of people had had enough of a taste of how things could be different not to put up with it. There were other types of politicians like Boris Yeltsin around who didn't want to let it happen, and the republics had already, some of them, gone their own way, notably the Baltics. And by the end of the year, the Soviet Union collapsed. But I was there. I mean, people talk about journalism being the first draft of history.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:14:42] You were really in the middle of things.

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:14:42] It was absolutely true for me.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:14:45] So after that, you were the Washington correspondent and then the diplomatic correspondent from 1998 to 2016, so you were really in the ringside, I mean, sitting there watching the most extraordinary moments in modern history.

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:14:59] I was incredibly lucky with my postings. The idea of going to Washington after five years in this very, very intense time in, first, the former Soviet Union, and then the new world that emerged post-Soviet, which was getting increasingly dangerous and fraught, and I was becoming more of a war correspondent, which I welcomed, I must say. I like testing myself, doing these things that my more experienced male colleagues did, and proving to myself I could do them. But they were a bit hair-raising sometimes.

More than that, it was just so chaotic, and we were having to work so hard that I felt after five years, a bit burnt out, and I thought I needed a change. And I also thought I'd become very divorced from the rest of the world. I was so absorbed in this fascinating world that I was in, the world that had emerged out of the collapsed Soviet Union. And the opportunity came to go to Washington. And I thought that made logical sense because it would be interesting to see how they were handling it having lost their Cold War enemy.

So those were the Clinton years, and I spent a very happy five years there. And I'd been in America for two years as a student so I knew it a bit. And it's a very different sort of experience in being a correspondent.

Then I came back to London for a long stint, nearly 17 years, I think. It was as a diplomatic correspondent, which took me all over the world. And I restarted doing Russian things again and going back a lot with lots of interesting assignments, including interviewing President Putin twice. I often joke that I'm really glad that I did try and learn my irregular verbs when I was at university. When you are interviewing bilingually the Russian president live on global internet you don't want to make mistakes. So remember that
if you were studying languages.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:16:51] And did you think the interviews later and the interviews early on were different?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:16:59] Do you mean Mr Putin?

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:17:01] Yes.

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:17:02] So the first one he'd just been in office a year as president, 2001, and he hadn't really quite found his feet, I don't think. I mean, he'd never been elected before, remember. He was sort of an administrator behind the scenes.

People often ask me this question, and I think after that first interview I'd say, well, I thought there were two Mr Putins. He was very comfortable if you asked him a question about security or nuclear weapons, and he bore into you with his very penetrating blue eyes and answer in quite a sort of aggressive, competent, very fluent manner and knew exactly what he wanted to say.

We'd had this idea in the first interview that as most of the world didn't know very much about Mr Putin, that we would ask him personal questions too, and we had questions from the audience. So there were things like, what's your favourite book, and what's your daily routine. To one very cheeky question. He said "That's very impertinent."

Someone from St Petersburg said, "Do you let your wife wear the trousers or are you the one in control in the marriage?" Actually, he said that he let her look after the upbringing of their children. But when these personal questions came along, then he was much less sure about how to answer them and seemed a little bit uncertain. So that was the second Mr Putin.

So five years later, when I went back to do another interview, which was just before Russia's first G8 presidency, so I think they thought it'd be good to have him again on the world stage on the BBC, the second Mr Putin had gone. It was just the first Mr Putin, the president, the one in control. By now, in 2008, the economy had picked up. He was very sure what he felt. He'd already signalled to the West that he didn't feel that Russia was being respected enough and there was no chink in his armour.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:18:57] So after [being] the diplomatic correspondent you came back in 2016, then you became the Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge, which is a very different kind of a position. But you've achieved success in fields that have been traditionally dominated by men, as you say. How have attitudes to women transformed since you started in the eighties?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:19:20] Well, a huge amount. When I first joined BBC as a producer in 1983, there really weren't any women in leadership positions at all. I remember there was a report done by one woman, who'd got quite far, talking about this glass ceiling and that women were doing lots of interesting jobs lower down, but they never seemed to progress. The BBC was concerned about this and felt they should do more.

I remember they sent me on a management course for women in management and on, I think, day three, they said "Now we're going to give you a session where you'll talk to a BBC

woman in management," and the only person they could find was head of makeup, which kind of made the point. So that's then and it's very different now, isn't it?

I mean, here in Cambridge, I think roughly 50 per cent of the heads of houses are women now, which has gone up since I arrived five years ago. When I went to Moscow in 1989, I wasn't the first foreign correspondent based abroad for the BBC, but I was one of the first, probably the third, and most of my colleagues were men and hence the feeling I needed to prove myself on the battlefield.

There was prejudice. I remember before I went, a couple of years before, I was at a reception in London, and there was another very veritable, well-known British journalist, male, older, who said to me, "Well, who are you?", and I said, "Well, I'm a producer and reporter on the BBC World Service Radio," and he looked at me and paused, and then he said, "You know, I don't think they should let women on the radio. Their voices are too high to carry any authority."

I've mentioned that since, and of course, he's retired, and I went on to be Moscow, Washington and diplomatic correspondent, so I felt that surely times had changed. But actually in that, there is something and it's about voice. And if I listen back to myself, even when I was a correspondent in Moscow in 1989, my voice was higher. I was younger, I was more insecure, and I spoke at a higher pitch, and it's much lower now, and I think my own feeling is that a voice lowers when you feel more confident.

And actually now at Peterhouse I do annual little seminars for our graduate students to help them, as they're beginning to present their papers and talks and things, about how to speak and how to present yourself.

There are some tips from my long years as a correspondent, but one of the things I tell them is a little exercise someone once told me, which is before you go on stage, and you're a bit nervous, or Zoom, or whatever it is, and you're not quite sure if your nerves are going to get the better of you, pitch your voice very high in your head and then pitch it as low as you can in your mind and then speak with that low pitch and your voice will come out lower. Once you start low, you'll stay low. You're using your muscles further down in your body so you will not only sound more confident, you will be more confident.

There are a lot of these psychological tricks about how we present ourselves, and I think that as time has gone on and women have felt more confident, but have also understood the need to present themselves as more confident, it has helped. And of course, there are lots of aspects to this question, but I do certainly think that things have changed an awful lot since the mid-1980s.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:23:00] Your comments about the higher pitch are certainly very valid. In terms of linguistic intonation, a higher pitch definitely shows anxiety or surprise. This can occur not necessarily universally, but across languages. And of course, if you inherently have a higher pitch, it's going to show. But I'll go back to the languages issues again. So it's obviously very different now that you're back in Cambridge, but are you enjoying it?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:23:41] Very much, yes. Peterhouse is a lovely college, and I've been here five years now. From the start they were very welcoming and friendly. And of course, the COVID-19 time has been tough. It's been tough for everybody and was rather different from the time before. But even so, it's such a beautiful place.

I was brought up here in Cambridge, so I never really expected to come back and that's been an added bonus for me. I think I understand now. When I was young I was always dying to get away. That's another reason I did languages was to get away from Cambridge, from Britain, go somewhere as far as I could. So I went.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:24:26] Now you're back.

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:24:28] Coming back, I've understood that it is quite good sometimes to revisit where you came from and think about who you are and what you've done and how you've changed. And meeting people who knew my parents has been absolutely wonderful in Cambridge and it's a beautiful city.

I think also another thing is that, particularly latterly in my career when I was a diplomatic correspondent, my job was partly to look at big global trends, which was fascinating – the rise of terrorism, the impact of global warming, the fight against poverty, and so on, the shift to China. But when you're dealing with subjects as big as that, you can sometimes miss dealing with people.

In fact, that's one reason that I kept on trying to remain an expert on Russia so I could go back and do reports for the *Today* programme from Russian villages and actually meet people.

Coming to Cambridge, and particularly to Peterhouse, which is one of the smallest colleges, the smallest of the old colleges, it's wonderful to be dealing with individuals, a tiny community, to be back with the microcosm after having spent so many years dealing with the macrocosm. And of course, it's good to keep the general and the big in mind. We don't want to get lost in the little. But I very much welcome this. I very much enjoy it.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:25:59] Can I go a full circle back to languages in the sense that, do you still think that studying languages is important for young people? And if so, what do you think should be done about allowing young people to study languages?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:26:21] I think it's really so regrettable and frustrating that so many young people, or possibly their teachers, or maybe their parents, think that it's a difficult option, that it's harder to do well in the exams, and that it's kind of tough to learn languages. You have to learn things and you can get them wrong when actually those of us who do study languages know, it's just fun. It's what we all do anyway. Everybody speaks languages. And, you know, not everybody speaks languages perfectly.

Sometimes you'll speak a language more perfectly at some point in your life than at others. When I was an au pair in France, aged 18, I spoke pretty good French. Now it's a bit rusty, but I somehow feel confident that if I immersed myself in that world again, I'd pull it back off the back shelf and it would come back. And the same with Russian.

So somehow we need to get the message across that this isn't a negative and a difficult thing to do, but it's a great thing. It's fun. It's interesting to put yourself in other people's shoes. And physically it means, as I found, if you want to go somewhere different, this is a pathway to do it. And not just to be a tourist who's standing there taking photos on your iPhone, but has no idea of what's going on about you, but you can get a job and you can meet people and you can speak their language and you will change, too.

All these things somehow need to be said in a way which gets through to people. And I think part of the problem really has been the exams that just feel. I mean, you do need the basics. As I said, with President Putin, if you're going to have an encounter like that you want to make sure you have learnt your irregular verbs, but at the same time, it shouldn't get in the way of everything.

I often talk to our modern language students here, and I say to them, "You know you've got the best degree. You've got a year abroad built in in year three so you get an extra year. You come back to your final year." They often do very well in their exams because they've spent a year abroad, but also they've had a taste of the world of work so when they finally leave university, it isn't so terrifying and scary because they've already tested themselves in another environment. So it's a bit of a stepping stone into something new.

Then those of us who do languages know it makes you incredibly employable. Your head is just more adaptable. If you've done new things, you can learn other new things. So, you know, I don't know how we get this across, but it's good for you psychologically. It's a mental gym that allows you to just think more agilely and along more than one pathway. It's good for you medically. They've discovered that it can stave off the symptoms of Alzheimer's for several years.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:29:05] Indeed. The more languages you know, the better for your cognitive abilities.

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:29:10] The technical tools I think, can sometimes get in the way. People think, "oh I don't need to learn the language. I'll just take my app". But of course, that's just a pathway. You're not going to get very far with your app in a conversation with someone.

The technology can be helpful. It's been really encouraging to see how many people in this country have been using Duolingo to start learning other languages or brush up on ones that they knew a bit but not that well.

I think that maybe we need to do more to explain that learning languages is not just about learning the vocab and the grammar, which is something which, technically, new aids can help you more with, but it is about how it changes you in other ways – psychologically, socially.

You can become a slightly new person if you go for it. You know maybe the person you always wanted to be. I found this when I went abroad. I'd somehow been the kind of person who never did sport, so I didn't do sport, but when I went abroad, I thought, well, no one knows who I am. I can do sport. I can be a slightly different person. And really that sort of liberation that languages can give anybody, whether in their personal life or in their careers, is something we just need to get the message about across more.

I think that maybe people nowadays, they do feel they live, young people, in a very global competitive world, and they're always worried about how will I compete? If people can see, can understand that this is an extra string to their bow which will just make that difference, as my father said, it'll open that door. It'll put you on the pile of people they'll want to interview. And then that's quite a good takeaway. If they haven't yet experienced it or know that it's something that can be fun and creative, it's a very tangible thing to think well, it's going to be good for you.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:31:00] The value of learning and they just don't appreciate the importance and the value. It's considered to be more of a burden rather than anything else. And thank you.

So let's turn to see if the audience questions are coming up. So it says, "you mentioned comparing yourself to what your more experienced male colleagues were doing, like covering conflicts. Did it give you more drive to prove you could do the same as them to challenge the attitudes that existed?"

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:31:50] Yeah, definitely. I had an occasion, after I'd been in Moscow for two or three years, and a lot of people in London at the BBC were very appreciative of what I was able to do, knowing the language.

One of the tools in my toolbox that I felt I had was having done a humanities degree, so not just a language, but this would hold true for if you were doing English or history or anything that dealt with analysing texts.

Communist speeches could be very long and boring and you get a call from London saying, "well, you know, there's been a speech by Gorbachev, could you do a report on it?" But if you've done textual analysis and you can read between the lines more, then you can make it much more interesting and say quite a lot of this is propagandistic and here is what it's aiming to do, and then it becomes a much more interesting news piece. So a lot of people are appreciative of that.

There were some men in management at the BBC and one of them came to visit me in Moscow and he said, "You know, when we first appointed you, I was against it. I didn't think you had it, you know, young woman, I didn't think you'd be up to it, but actually you've done really well."

So I felt quite conflicted because I admired him for telling me, but I also felt quite cross. But in that environment, in that context, I did feel I needed to prove myself to people, particularly after the Soviet Union fell apart. It really was necessary to go to some of the republics and find out what was happening there, so I went to Chechnya on my own.

I went to Tajikistan where there was a civil war. And I remember actually very vividly there was a German correspondent who'd gone to the front line in the southern part of Tajikistan to meet ethnic Germans who were fleeing. These were Germans who'd been in Russia, Soviet Union [for] a very long time and now the German government gave them the right to go back to Germany, so he was meeting them as they were fleeing this war and were planning to leave and go to Germany.

I thought, well, he went to the front line, I'm going to go to the front line, so I said to my editors on the phone, "I'm going to go to the front line tomorrow." They said, "Great, that'll make a good news story." And I had a female translator, a Tajik Russian girl, because I thought it be useful to have someone who spoke Tajik as well as Russian, and she arrived in high-heeled shoes with a Sony Walkman.

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:34:13] I thought, oh my goodness, how is this going to work? Anyway, we hired a taxi and we drove down south with refugees streaming in the other direction. And in fact, our taxi man, we came to a burnt-out tank where there'd been a shootout and he said, "I'm not going any further," and we said, "Okay, well, we'll go on foot." So I and my translator, in her high-heeled shoes and her Sony Walkman, turned up at a checkpoint and they assumed we were Russian. So number one, very useful to speak good

Russian. And number two, very useful to be women because they just went “Ah, women, Russian women.”

They didn’t look at our papers and through we went, whereas I’m sure if I had been a male foreign correspondent they probably would have realised that I was foreign, and they might have stopped us. Anyway, we walked on. We arrived at the front line just in time to get caught up in a tank battle. And I remembered my training. We used to have training at BBC. I thought, I’ll roll in the ditch. That’ll be a good place to be and I’ll keep my recorder going. And I did get a very good piece out of it, but I’m proud of what I was doing, absolutely.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:35:23] Wonderful. I have another question about language. How do you think the Russian language makes the Russian mindset? How about other languages and other people?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:35:36] Hmm, I don’t know about that. I do think that language can sometimes lead to a sense of space. The Russian linguistic space is very, very clear, and partly because of their history as well. So, through much of the 20th century, they were quite cut off from much of the rest of the world. Not anymore, and lots of Russians speak very good English and other foreign languages, but I think it’s created a sense of an identity area which has encouraged Russians to talk to themselves more.

I think one of the things that can happen if you have a very small language is you have to speak another one to be able to just operate or get jobs and things. So I think that makes a big difference. But now there are lots of Russians who feel very motivated to learn other languages because they speak.

If you go to Moscow now and you’re standing there with a map, someone will come up and say in English, “Can I help you?” If you’d done that 20 years ago, they might have thought, “I won’t risk talking to that foreigner”. But also, it would have been very hard to find a map. But to the question, I don’t know that I can easily answer that one.

The way they organise tenses in Russia, which is the aspect with perfected and imperfected motion, we don’t even have that concept in our minds in English, just as Russians struggle with the way we use definite and indefinite articles. They use word order to do that. They don’t have signifiers and they find that very mysterious.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:37:38] So here’s another question. You mentioned how, in the USSR before it collapsed, people seem to have turned inwards and the infrastructure, etc was uncared for. I should love to hear more about this, about the USSR more generally too. I understand now that certain people, especially older ones, yearn for the Soviet Union. Do you understand this? How would you explain it?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:38:09] Well, yes, it’s a very good and very big question. The thing about the Soviet Union was that the party controlled everything. It controlled your job, your prospects, whether you could travel or not. Most people couldn’t, abroad, I mean, and even where you could live.

A lot of people were very wary. And apart from that, there was also the whole KGB structure, which was keeping an eye on things, not on everybody but on some people, including foreigners, and I think it made people very wary about what they said in public.

I mean, I have friends who, when their children were very small, would say to them, “Now you’re going to kindergarten, and there are certain things you will hear at home in the kitchen. That’s what we say at home, but you don’t repeat them at school. At school. It’s songs about loving Lenin.” I mean, it’s extraordinary to think about small children having to understand that and make that choice. And lots of people would metaphorically look over their shoulder all the time.

I remember one Soviet friend of mine going to meet her cousin who had married a girl from Iceland, and she was allowed on a rare visit to Moscow, and she went to meet her at the airport and she said, “I knew immediately who she was because she was just kicking her heel in a nonchalant way, not kind of caring who saw her or what she did.” And she said a Soviet citizen would never do that. You’re always thinking about who might be looking at you. And so that’s one very important aspect of the Soviet Union.

Now, probably a lot of people would say, “I never felt like that. I lived there happily and life was fine.” And it is true in Putin’s Russia. Lots of people would say, “I have a great life and I don’t have anything to worry about.” It’s only those who challenged the system who might say “it’s not quite like that for me, you know”. But I think in the Soviet Union, it was more difficult for more people because of this party control at every level, economic and political.

I remember when the Soviet Union collapsed, in 1991. You know, we had years of reform and things easing up, but it wasn’t until it collapsed and Boris Yeltsin banned the Communist Party, and for a while the KGB was disbanded, that suddenly I felt a kind of weight lift off my shoulder.

I remember talking to Russian friends about it. That you could somehow not worry anymore about what you said to people because there wasn’t going to be any further consequence of someone calling you in saying could you report on that foreigner, or what was it you said?

So I think these things on that level, the level of political control, is one thing that I was very conscious of as a foreigner. But I think actually, although lots of people don’t remember it, it didn’t colour everything. And the other thing is that this was a society where ostensibly the state looked after you, so it controlled you, but looked after you. And if you did the right things, you could get that holiday by the Black Sea at a party sanatorium, or you could get your child into the right university.

Or you would get your wage packet no matter how little work you did, which is where the lack of accountability came in. And when the whole system collapsed and suddenly people had to be accountable for their actions and jobs had to be real, and if your job didn’t, you didn’t do it, or you could be sacked, or if your place of work didn’t function properly, it might go bankrupt and then you’d end up without a job. And in the nineties often people ended up not being paid because everything was so dysfunctional.

It’s not really surprising that people became very nostalgic for this old world where maybe you didn’t get very much, but it felt as though it was served up to you on a plate and you didn’t have so many responsibilities about your life. Responsibilities we all take for granted, but we never had to worry about – your pension and worry about filling in forms in order to get insurance, medical insurance.

So I do understand it, but I do also, having lived there and remembering it vividly from the mid-1970s and early 1980s and then the late 1980s, I think quite often people don’t remember just how constricted it was and difficult and unfair.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:42:32] And it was easy to forget the worst parts. I'm going to take two brief questions. One, I think, rather important. Are there any books you would particularly recommend for a sixth-former intending to read Russian at university, either on the language or about Russia today?

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:42:53] Well, there are lots of books today that are coming out about Putin's Russia, so I really don't know where to start. There are so many. When I've talked to sixth-formers who've done Russian history, and I get very excited because it is a very exciting history, and they think they'd like to go on and study it, I'm often quite struck [by] how they hear the history of the Soviet Union of the 20th century, and they learn about Stalin and they learn about Communist Party and the Bolsheviks and everything, but they don't always get the other side, which is what I'm talking about in the Soviet Union.

People didn't remember, or choose not to talk about so much, which is just how it affected people personally. And I often with these sixth-formers say "why don't you read Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, which is fiction, but it's based on his own experiences of the Gulag, and that's the other side."

Especially when I was in Moscow, I became aware in the very early stages, but almost everybody I knew had someone in their family who'd been in the camps. I mean, Gorbachev did. His grandfather was, and it wasn't talked about that much. And I remember a friend of mine at university who was a theatre director, actually, and I thought he was a great guy. And one day we had a long chat and it turned out he was an orphan because both his parents had been in the camps and it was something he didn't talk about, but everybody's life was coloured by what happened. And I think you get at it better through fiction.

Solzhenitsyn is not a bad place to start, and I suggest *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* because it's quite short and quite a lot of it seems rather long, like many Russian novels. So for a sixth-former, it's a good one to just read, and then you hopefully get a taste of it and then you want to look at other things. Anyway, that would be my first recommendation.

Professor Aditi Lahiri FBA [00:44:56] Thank you. We have plenty more questions, but I'm afraid we've run out of time. So thank you so much, Bridget, for a fascinating conversation. And thanks to our audience for tuning in. Do please refer to the British Academy's website and social media channels for details about future events. And the next one, next Thursday, would be interesting as well. *Why history? Revitalising endangered languages*. It's with Professor Julia Sallabank. So I'm going to thank Bridget once again for an absolutely brilliant and fascinating conversation. And thank you, everybody else again for joining us today. And goodbye from all of us at the British Academy.

Bridget Kendall FBA (Hon) [00:45:38] Thank you and goodbye.

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