Professor’s New Work Looks at Happiness in Soviet Times

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – For decades, scholars have reported how the Soviet culture emphasized that happiness could be found in the utopia of a collective society. Yet how was collective happiness pursued? A groundbreaking new book, co-edited by Illinois Wesleyan University’s Isaac Funk Professor of Russian Studies Marina Balina, explores the concept of happiness as defined by Soviet culture in *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style* (Anthem Press, 2009).

“These essays redefine the preconceived notion of Soviet happiness as the products of official ideology imposed from above and expressed predominantly through collective experience,” said Balina.

Featuring articles by leading specialists in the study of Soviet culture from the United Kingdom (UK), the United States, Germany and Italy, the book is part of the publisher’s series on Russian, East European and European Studies. The goal of this collection of essays is to introduce the Western reader to the most representative ideas of happiness, and the common practices of its pursuit that shaped Soviet everyday life and cultural discourse from the early post-revolutionary years to the later period of Stalinist and post-Stalinist culture.

The book’s essays explore the idea of happiness as portrayed in paintings, architecture, films and posters, which contributed to our understanding of the “Soviet Self.” Along with her editing duties that she shared with Evgeny Dobrenko of the University of Sheffield, UK, Balina has co-authored an introduction and contributed an essay on the concepts of happiness as portrayed in children’s literature titled, “’It’s Grand to be an Orphan!’ Crafting Happy Citizens in Soviet Children’s Literature of the 1920s.”

A native of Russia who earned her doctorate at Leningrad State University (now St. Petersburg), Balina joined Illinois Wesleyan’s faculty in 1989 and is a member of the University’s Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures. Her published research has focused on contemporary Russian life writing including autobiography, memoir, travelogue, and most recently on children’s literature and culture of the former Soviet Union. She has co-edited *Endquote: Sots Art Literature and Soviet Empire Style* (Northwestern UP, 2000), *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Russian Writers since 1980*, (Thomson & Gale Publishers, 2003,) an anthology of Russian and Soviet fairy tales, *Politicizing Magic* (Northwestern UP, 2005), and most recently *Russian Children’s Literature and Culture* (with Larissa Rudova, Routledge, 2008).
University of Illinois professor Edward Diener has been sizing up life satisfaction for 25 years. His wife and a son, both psychologists, are occasional collaborators. He wanted to persuade substantial numbers in the profession to explore the region north of zero, to look at what actively made people feel fulfilled, engaged and meaningfully happy. Mental health, he reasoned, should be more than the absence of mental illness. It should be something akin to a vibrant and muscular fitness of the human mind and spirit. Over the decades, a few psychological researchers had ventured out of the dark realm of mental illness into the sunny land of the mentally hale and hearty. People would go to work as in the old Soviet time not being paid for months and months and when paid, due to inflation that translated into something that could buy you a box of matches or some bread. We had no textbooks or reliable heating in the buildings. Many professors were forced to look for odd jobs on the side just to feed their families. Most still did not quit their jobs at the university. Everyone was looking for any source of income that came in foreign currency since local currency became nearly worthless. They made New Kids on the Block sound like Dream Theater, but you couldn’t get that song out of your head. . . So I guess I was in a sort of protective bubble. The New York Times examined 89 pages of letters, telegrams and internal Soviet government documents revealing in far greater detail the extent of Mr. Sanders’s personal effort to establish ties between his city and a country many Americans then still considered an enemy despite the reforms being initiated at the time under Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet general secretary. The files are open to the public, though archivists there said that, until now, no one had asked to see them. Image. A telex Mr. Sanders sent to a Soviet cosmonaut, thanking her for expediting the sister-city relationship. Credit...Emile Ducke for The New York Times.

Should happiness be taught in schools? Could teaching pupils lessons in emotional intelligence help tackle issues like bullying? Your comments: I think that it’s a bad idea and students these days wouldn’t listen anyway! ‘Happiness lessons’ are a distraction from the core business of education, which is emancipation. On the ‘financial awareness’ subject, I would have thought that financial responsibility would be a parental responsibility - especially for someone who has direct experience! One wonders if “experts” will look at some of these issues and realise that maybe the parents have some responsibility to educate their children. Still, it fills an empty news day reporting more meaningless studies that are a total waste of money. Louise Parsons, Radstock, UK.