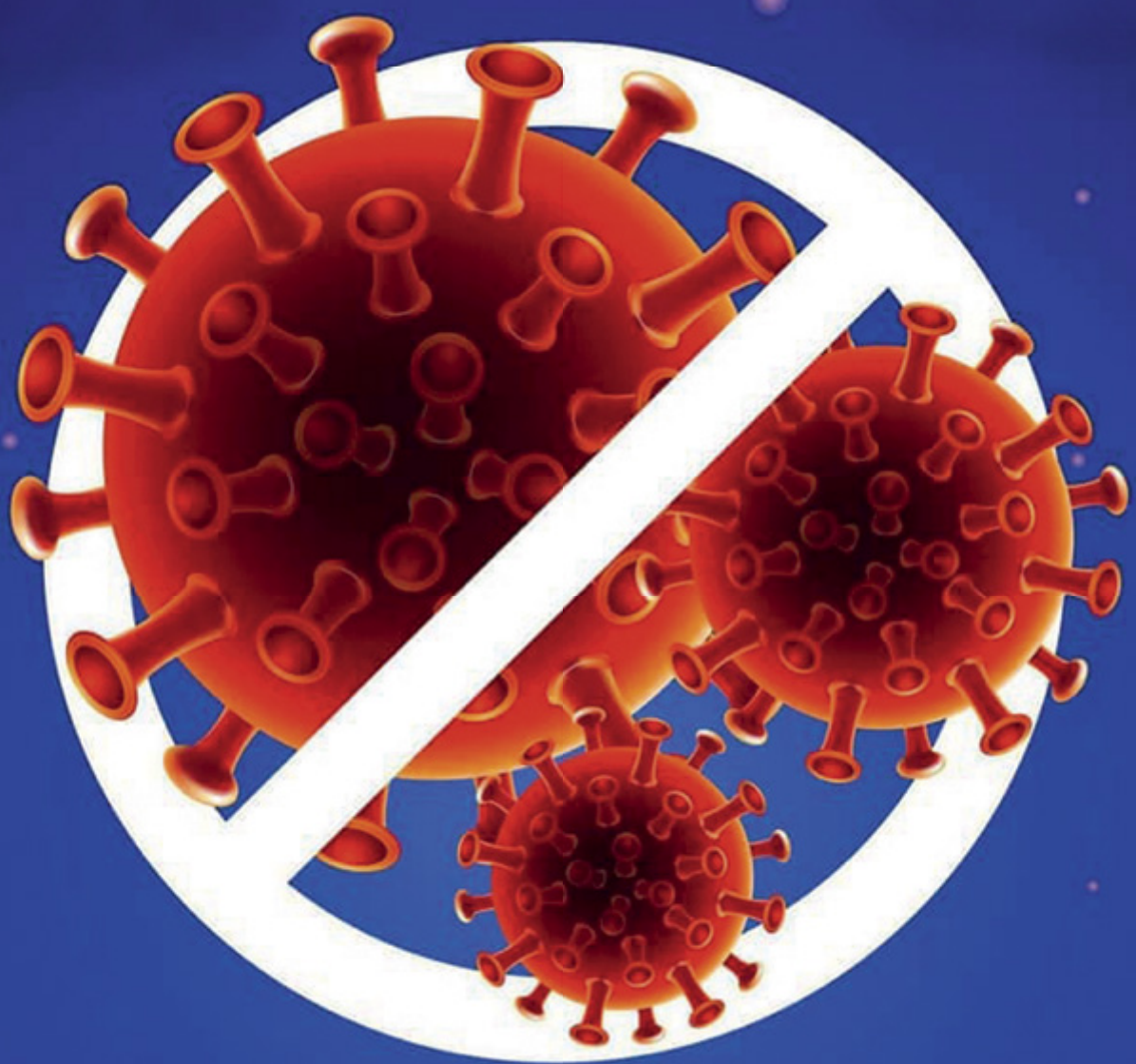
RUSSIAN MIND

LA PENSEE RUSSE

№122/06 (4993)
June 2020

Russkaya Mysl
Russian/English

Founded in 1880
www.RussianMind.com



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EDITOR'S LETTER

CORONAVIRUS EXPOSED TAN

What is expected during the summer? Will they allow us go to the sea? Will they allow us swim or have rest on the beach? Other people definitely will take the sun there too – they are the people whom we are carefully warned about, right?

While the summer season is drawing on rapidly, holidays and vacations turn into a key question, especially across tourist destinations, such as Greece, Italy, Spain, France. Italians have already declared that the country reopens for the tourists. But is it all true, if the Schengen area remains shut? It may open for Europeans only. Meanwhile! It is not necessarily right, that the Schengen area will remain shut constantly. Ambivalence demonstrated by the governments of the EU member states in May is so confusing, that we may expect any deviations. It is just one thing after another!

The French government also promises to remove a ban of hotels and restaurants "from July 2". But travel professionals did not settle their nerves. They have already lost the summer season, at least its half. People are clueless too. Where is a proper place for rest? Rent prices for country houses skyrocketed for this summer. We expect the deficit of accommodations.

Do not guess. This is meaningless. It is clear enough that this summer will be weird. Whether rest may be paralysed? Whether we can relax with tension, have fun cautiously? That is why it is not clear whether people would travel to the south in their ordinary way. Because they will not avoid overcrowded areas. Must we wear a mask while sitting in a restaurant? Must we take the sun on the beach in a mask? Must we dance in a night club wearing a mask? How shall we pay attentions to a strange girl? Wearing a mask too?

There are a lot of questions. But there is only a single response: keep off fellow human beings! Well, so what about going to get a tan?

Victor Loupan

Russian Mind
No122/06(4993),
JUNE 2020

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EITHER US OR THEM

We started shrinking from each other on orders from above

VICTOR LOUPAN,
Head of the Editorial Board

The history of mankind can be interpreted as a line of royal dynasties and wars accompanying them; as a chain of rebellions, riots, jacqueries, revolutions; as a humanity's battle against the yoke of enslavement; as an epoch-making development from the slave-owning system to feudalism, from feudalism to capitalism, from capitalism to socialism, and so on – up to the heaven on earth.

All these interpretations, like many other representations, include both objective and subjective factors. But generally, all of them are what you would call "grounded".

A "medical history" of mankind can also be used as one of the sufficiently legitimated historiographical approaches. Even after a formal study we can recognise that the history consists of a line of epidemics, – awfully fatal epidemics, such as smallpox, black plague, cholera, typhoid fever, tuberculosis, malaria, leprosy, influenza, and finally – COVID-19.

In "The Bell", which is a part of the film "Andrey Rublev" by Tarkovsky, the grand prince cannot find a craftsman to mould the bell. Young Boriska tells horsed retainers: "The entire population died. The last one is snorting there, but he will also go to Maker soon". Then the retainers take him along, as there are no other people to take. All of them died from smallpox. This deadly viral disease had agonised mankind over the millenniums, killing at least 40% of the total infected population. The entire provinces and regions died out. Over the centuries smallpox terrified people across continents (there are records in India evidencing the smallpox epidemics happening in the 8th century). During the 20th century black smallpox claimed the lives of over 300 million people globally. It is absolutely unbelievable.

Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin wrote the remarkable play "A Feast in Time of Plague" as one of his "Little Tragedies". Why "in time of plague"? Where does this name originate from? The thing is, this terrible disease, with its horrific pandemic periods, scared the history of mankind. Death rate reaches 95% at its bubonic form and 98% at its pulmonary form. At the end of the 6th century around 100 millions died globally during plague epidemic, including a half of the Byzantium population. In the 14th century the plague pandemic wiped out one third of the total European habitants, which is an equivalent of 35 million people. The latest plague epidemic was registered in Asia in 1850, but it was limited to India and China killing 6 to 10 million people there.

Many languages commonly feature the word "cholera" as an expletive. This horrible disease had remained local over the millenniums, but in the 19th century cholera developed into a pandemic which turned out to claim the lives of tens of millions around the world. It was the first time in 1816 when it happened globally, and it even reached the south regions of the USSR in 1966. For instance, Odessa saw overall panic: the city was girt in with the KGB military force to isolate the centre of infection. This happened under the circumstances where no radio or television channels or mass media disclosed the reason for it. But locals somehow got access to the information and distributed it further, feeling alarm collectively. After some time, regional newspapers mentioned something related as a reminder of the event never considered to be official.

Typhoid is another terrible pandemic disease leading to mental disorder and other adverse effects due to high fever. For example, my grandfather went blind due to typhoid experienced during the war. Only in Russia 30 million people went through typhoid during World War I and the Russian Civil War, among which 3.5 million died.

Tuberculosis has been also accompanying human beings for hundreds of years. For a long while it had been perceived as a poverty-related disease caused by excessive humidity in the room and general insanitary conditions. With this, everyone was comfortable with the fact that this disease extinguished lives of genius people who never lived in poverty: Frédéric Chopin, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, Franz Kafka and many others.

It has been affirmed nowadays that one third of the total population of Earth has been infected with tuberculosis (bacillus Kochii), and around eight million of them get sick annually, among which two million die.

But how could I forget about leprosy? Leprosy, or lepra. Those who came before us knew it and were afraid of it long before the new era. The Bible mentions leprous persons too. Everyone is shrinking from them. Actually, this is a very dangerous contagion. That is why kisses given by Orthodox Christian saints to leprous persons symbolised very special self-sacrifice. It is considered that two million of disabled leprosy victims are spread worldwide today.

It will take some time to understand the real sense of these events.

Your humble servant dives into all this horrific statistics to provide some historical data to analyse the existing panic reaction to COVID-19. By the middle of this May (meaning the period of almost six months) this Coronavirus has killed a little over 300 thousand people over the globe. The victims mostly include elderly people with a number of chronic diseases and other pathological conditions. According to the official statistics, the average age of Coronavirus victims in the USA exceeds the average age of mortality. It is impressive, especially when backgrounded by the efforts taken by the countries. I mean not only economic measures leading to the epochal crisis and sharp slowdown expressed in historically significant indicators, but also political measures defying elementary human rights: the freedom of movement, the freedom of association, the freedom of communication, the freedom of labour, and the freedom of visiting our near and dear ones.

Elon Musk, an American billionaire and entrepreneur, who vociferously opposes all these restrictions, affirms that the hysteria invading the developed countries has been originally based on a free soil. Our country leaders followed the recommendations provided by "some experts" who clearly warned that avoidance of the "voice of reason" would cause millions of deaths. They forecasted two million deaths only in the USA. The real number is eighty thousands. Mask says: "Today everyone understands that the danger level has been overestimated by an order". In his opinion, this is why return to normal life has both sudden and irrational nature – especially when being conducted under unchanged circumstances.

It will take some time to understand the real sense of these events. It is too early to realise the content and the context of the challenge sent to us, because we started shrinking from each other, we stopped kissing our kids and grandchildren, or visit our moms and grandmothers, or offer hand to our friends – all on orders from above.

Looking through the window, like from inside the cage, hundred millions found themselves hooked into the sensation of fear of the outside world, which is basically specific to irrational beings, like those laboratory rabbits who suffer from depression, because laboratory technicians allow a fox walk around the cage. The fox does not eat them. It only shows up too often.

MAY THE GREAT DEPRESSION HAPPEN AGAIN?

Depression can be avoided under any circumstances, however it requires reasonable cooperation, negotiation skills and refusal of unnecessary ambitions

VYACHESLAV KATAMIDZE,
a writer and historian

The USA and some other Western countries are gradually relaxing quarantine restrictions, and the businesses are coming back to the operational mode being called "close to normal one".

Finance ministers recognise, that complete restoration of enterprises will take long time and many billions of dollars. Losses are so great that economic experts of country leaders strongly encourage them to use their best efforts to start repairing economy immediately. The most pessimistic economists suppose that, as a result of the pandemic and related colossal financial losses, the world may face economic tremors which can be compared only to the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Exactly, the Great Depression was the hardest time lived through by developed countries between two world wars, and to a certain degree it triggered World War II.

The Great Depression began in the USA in 1929 and lasted for a whole decade. American historians wrote that the major reason for the chain of events leading to the dramatic economic collapse included crash of securities and the whole stock market. But if we scratch beneath the surface, we will see that stock market decline had been caused by unprincipled stagging, forced stock cost escalation and low-secured stock emission.

October 29, 1929 is called the first day of the Depression, or "Black Tuesday". After the stock market crash, the whole USA suffered from a real "economic tsunami" which washed banks, enterprises, entire economic areas away. 700 banks collapsed over the first two months of the Depression; other 3000 banks went into bankruptcy during the next year of 1930. By the end of the decade the failed banks numbered 9000.

Bankruptcy of the banks led to millions of depositors loosing their savings. As a result, population everywhere began to draw money out of other banks, that propelled into a long chain of collapses among financial institutions. By the end of the second month following the market crash, shareholders lost 40 billion US Dollars, worth around 800 billion in 2020 dollars. The US economy was close to the total collapse.

The first several months of the Depression showed a rapid growth in unemployment, mass impoverishment, speculations, and development of black market as well. It resulted in a sharp drop in consumer demand, consequently, more and more enterprises got closed. Unemployment increased fast. Diseases caused by malnutrition and worsening living conditions became common in poor districts. Millions of people completely lost their accommodation.

Unemployed people in the garden.

The countries exporting their goods to the USA did not face such economic hardships at the beginning of the Depression as importing countries did. For want of a better response, the United States Congress adopted the so-called Tariff Act which actually protected and gave advantages to the remaining American companies by increasing import taxes applicable to a wide range of the imported goods. Global trade faced a sharp slowdown. At the last, President Roosevelt and the Congress were forced to adopt a new act, according to which the president could negotiate introduction of new, lower tariffs.

The queue for free meals provided by Al Capone, a local godfather. Chicago, 1931.

In addition to all the difficulties experienced by the USA, the country suffered from another catastrophe: severe drought repeatedly happened year after year in the states being especially important to the whole country due to their agricultural output. As modern agricultural implements were manufactured in very limited numbers under the Depression conditions, with the low amounts of investments attracted in this sector, volumes and quality of agricultural products dropped. People in many states completely stopped farming.

The fact is, many farms were located in the Great Plains, and due to heavy weather conditions farms were basically small. They commonly rented agricultural implements, but under the Great Depression they could not pay their debts, had no funds for further farming and logically went to bankruptcy very fast. They had neither seeds nor livestock feed. On top of all, many of them invested in stocks or borrowed money from banks; now they had lost all their money. Lots and lots of farmers were completely broke. Sometimes they sold everything they had and moved to seek for a job in larger cities where the situation was even worse.

Unemployment became very common during the Great Depression. In 1933 unemployed people in the USA numbered 15 million (8.4% of total population), however it was supposed that unemployment had reached its high earlier (around 25%). It means that during some period one forth of total employed population of the USA had no real means of subsistence. Many plants and factories tried to retain qualified personnel, but it was extremely hard to do so.

President Hoover was blamed for these events in America (as the Great Depression began during his rule); he allegedly refused his staff recommendations and economic advices and ignored the Federal Reserve System which stocks supposedly turned economy even worse. But generally, the Great Depression was a simply terrible economic crisis, which periodic repetition is immanent to the capitalist system under the circumstances where the goods and services market as well as a multi-layer and multi-level financial sector are underregulated. There is no doubt that market is important for development of any country, but the completely deregulated market may create conditions for a new crisis.

May the consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic, together with the deregulated market, create conditions for a new major depression? I do not think so. With the sufficient financial resources available, high degree of computerisation at any level and robotisation of industries, with the continuously growing market of low-cost labour and opportunities for agreements between business partners over the globe, a depression can be avoided under any circumstances, however it requires reasonable cooperation, negotiation skills and refusal of unnecessary ambitions.

And, of course, for that purpose the leaders have to listen to wise advices and comply with their undertakings in good faith.

SOCIETY

MY LOCKDOWN DIARY FROM A SMALL, OLD TOWN IN ITALY

BEPPE SEVERGNINI

Crema is less than 15 miles away from Italy's original lockdown areas of Codogno and Castiglione d'Adda.
Eddy Buttarelli/REDA & CO — Universal Images Group, via Getty Images

Everything was shut: no schools, no shops, no bars and restaurants, no meetings. Just "Stay at home." It was painful for me and all Italians. This is my Lockdown Diary.

***

An open society in lockdown: It's almost an oxymoron, a mind game. Until it happens, and life suddenly changes. It's happening to me and all Italians. Beginning in the north, where I live, and now in the whole country. Everything is shut: no schools, no meetings, no parties, no movies, no plays, no sporting events. No bars and no restaurants. No shops open, except food stores and pharmacies.

The Italian government's mantra is three words: "Restate a casa" – Stay at home.

***

What happens to daily life in a small, old town near Milan during an epidemic?

Crema is pretty, wealthy and proud, a quintessential Italian community where everyone knows each other. It has been described in books and became a backdrop for the film "Call Me by Your Name." Outside my window, I can see the whole of the main square, Piazza del Duomo.

As I write, it's 10 a.m. and the square is empty – a bizarre silence. Normally, the square teems with students, shoppers, farmers, friends heading to cafes for their morning cappuccino. Beneath my window, pensioners usually gather to catch the early sun. Today the sun bounces off the bricks of the cathedral, undisturbed except for a lonely cyclist pedaling through the Torrazzo gate – a woman, apparently, though it's hard to say behind the face mask. Even the church bells sound different in the empty quiet.

When people have appeared, they've given one another a wide berth. So un-Italian. Normally, people charge into each other and greet with affection, shaking hands, kissing and embracing. Italy is a touchy-feely society. We tend to trust our senses and intuition more than grand ideas (those are Germany's trademark). For us, life is food, wine, music, arts, design, landscape; the smell of the countryside; the warmth of one's family, and the embrace of friends. Those involve our mouths, our noses, our ears, our eyes, our hands.

Fear of Covid-19 forces us to repudiate those senses. It's painful.

***

Crema is less than 15 miles away from the original lockdown areas of Codogno and Castiglione d'Adda, and our hospital has been swamped by Covid-19 patients. I know several people who work there – doctors, nurses, staff. They're exhausted, but don't give up. Lombardy's public health service is the best in Italy, and Italy's is widely considered the best in Europe. Still, it's hard. Three young people started a fund-raising campaign to support our hospital; in one day they collected 80,000 euros. "But what do you do with the money if protective equipment for doctors and nurses is not available?" an acquaintance who works at the hospital texted to me.

You might assume that our inboxes would be bursting with emails, now that people are at home with time on their hands. Not so. Most emails announce the cancellation of events and the interruption of services. Even the deluge of WhatsApp messages, which flooded smartphones with news and jokes at the beginning of the epidemic, has dried up. Facebook posts, by contrast, haven't. People put up little manifestoes to tell the outside world what's on their minds, like messages in a digital bottle. Irene Soave, a colleague at Corriere della Sera and a fellow author, wrote: "The least panic-stricken are the people like me, who tend to panic. My so-called 'calm friends' call me ten times a day to ask: 'Are you worried?' But their voices sound an octave too high."

***

After lunch – at home with my wife, Ortensia: Large groups are to be avoided – we go for a walk with our dog, Mirta. We're allowed to do that. Detailed instructions from the government include a list of FAQs, and walks in the countryside are permitted "as long as it is not in a group, and keeping a distance of one meter from each other." Other common questions? "Can I go to work?" (Answer: yes, but you have to prove that's where you're going.) "Can I go and see my friends in another town?" (Answer: no.) "Can I go away on vacation?" (Answer: forget about it.)

So off we walk, in the lukewarm sun, among flat fields and shallow ditches, with the snow-covered mountains around Bergamo in the background. The sky is lacquered blue. Mirta – a black Labrador – is blissfully oblivious of the epidemic, enthusiastic about the smell of the coming Italian spring. Along the tracks, normally used by local farmers, we meet a few joggers. Most wave hello. No one stops.

***

Our son Antonio, 27, runs a restaurant not far from here on a little lake created by spring water from the Serio River. He employs six people, about his age. They tried to keep going, but earlier this month new rules forced restaurants – even those in the countryside, like Antonio's – to shut at 6 p.m. Although ingredients could be bought and were being delivered, it didn't make sense to open just for lunch. People can't travel or meet up, and those who do so don't enjoy themselves. Some employers in Italy's huge tourist industry have sent their staff on vacation or unpaid leave. Antonio decided to pay his staff's salaries even while the restaurant lies shut. But how long can he afford that?

We return home, along semi-deserted streets. I switch on the television. Serie A, Italy's main soccer league, is suspended. No matches. Watching reruns of last night's N.B.A. basketball or last weekend's Premier League soccer, played to packed stadiums, seems weird. I walk back to my office to finish writing my column for Corriere della Sera. I'm going there tomorrow. Milan is 30 miles away. I will have to carry my press card and fill in a form declaring that my travel is for work, in case the police stop me. Life at the paper, I'm told, has changed. Those who can work from home are invited to do so; desk staff are down to the bare minimum. Most companies are doing the same (in Italy we use the expression "smartworking," implying that going into an office is not that smart). But information is vital, as the government keeps saying. So we keep going, one way or another, and that's not bad. We feel like firefighters in a fire – at least we have something to do.

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Late afternoon, I leave my study in Crema and head back home. The light has changed, the square is still empty. I walk along by the Duomo, a jewel of Romanesque Gothic architecture. It was burned to the ground by a vindictive German emperor in the 12th century, after a long siege; the "Cremaschi" – the people of Crema – built a new one. I try the side door: It's open. Inside, it's dark. In a side chapel, there is a wooden crucifix carved in the 13th century, to which people in town prayed for help during the plague of 1630–1631, described in Alessandro Manzoni's "The Betrothed," and again in 1747. Today, a woman is sitting in the front. She hears me but doesn't turn her head.

***

I leave the church. Suddenly, there's loud music outside. Noise at last! But we all know what it is. The resident lunatic who spends his days cycling back and forth along the main streets, with a huge boombox mounted on the back of his bike. A few months ago, someone stole a previous boombox, and people in Crema raised money to buy him a new, louder one. He loves old hits, apparently. Today it's "Ti Amo," by Umberto Tozzi. It's absurd, but nicely so. Life goes on in Italy, after all.

HOW TO COPE WITH THE ANXIETY OF LIFE AFTER LOCKDOWN

LISA WALDEN

Are you feeling anxious about life after lockdown? For many of us, the past few weeks have been spent in the comfort of our homes, away from common anxiety triggers, and at a much slower pace than before. But, with lockdown restrictions beginning to tentatively lift, some people may be feeling anxious about whether they will be able to readjust back to 'normality'.

Whether you usually feel anxious or not, the change in lifestyle may feel particularly challenging for some. "Change and uncertainty are difficult for most of us to deal with, and can affect our mental health and wellbeing, potentially leading to increased stress, anxiety and depression," Stephen Buckley, Head of Information at mental health charity, Mind, tells.

"None of us really know exactly what the future looks like. It's therefore understandable that many people will be worried about life after lockdown, whether that's concerns about returning to work, children going back to school, job security, finances, or generally adjusting to former routines."

Just as we were getting comfortable with this new 'normal', the next adjustment phase could also take some getting used to – and it's OK to take your time.

Whether you're feeling anxious now or want some expert tips on how to cope after lockdown, Stephen has shared his advice on how to navigate through this season of uncertainty. Have a look at them below…

1 Talk to loved ones around you

One of the best things you can do for your own mental health is to have open conversations with loved ones around you. "If you're worried you might find the transition back to 'normality' difficult, talk to others you trust," Stephen tells.

"If you're concerned about the kids going back to school, talk to the school about what measures they have in place to make the transition

easier. Similarly, employers should be thinking about what support they can offer – such as a phased return back to your usual place of work for example, gradually reducing the number of days per week you work from home.

"We might even see workplaces decide that asking staff to go to their usual place of work is largely unnecessary, and give staff the option to continue to work from home most of the time, particularly if commuting could pose a risk to your health."

2 Plan to do the things you love again

We have been living in a time like no other, so, naturally, it may take time to get back into the swing of things once lockdown is over.

A simple way to help relieve heightened levels of anxiety is to plan ahead; make a list of the simple pleasures you want to do again, friends you want to visit, places you want to travel to, or the restaurants you want to dine at.

"It's worth capturing the things that you're missing at the moment, such as going out to eat and visiting friends at their homes. Consider organising these kinds of events post-lockdown, as well as finding virtual alternatives in the interim," adds Stephen.

3 Begin to reestablish your old routine

Whether you've been working from home or have been spending more time with your household, our daily lives are looking somewhat different to what they once did. A great way to help ease you into normality again is to reestablish your old routine, such as heading to bed earlier, for example.

"When things begin to return to 'normal', re-establishing familiar former routines can be helpful, but it might also be a good opportunity to reflect on whether you can continue some of the things you've been doing differently. If you've been working remotely, was there anything that helped make things more streamlined and dynamic?"

4 Review your priorities in life

"When it comes to our personal lives, many of us are finding the current pace of life easier to deal with, as we're less pressured to attend social gatherings, for example. It's worth reflecting on whether we want things to return to how they were before, or if there's an opportunity to review our priorities and really think about what makes us happy," adds Stephen.

This is again something incredibly simple, but it will help anyone suffering with anxiety in the coming weeks.

5 Be careful where you read your news

While it's important to stay informed with the news around us, be careful where you get your information from. "Feeling well-informed can help us cope with uncertainty. But make sure that you're turning to reliable sources of news that reflect facts, not rumours and speculation."

If you're feeling nervous, switch off from reading or watching the news for a while and instead catch up once a day. Make sure you do things that boost your mood such as baking, drawing, reading, writing, going on a countryside walk or chatting to a friend on the phone.

For up-to-date advice you can trust, see the NHS coronavirus webpage and gov.uk coronavirus webpages.

6 Remember that things will take a while to adjust

"It's unlikely that any of us will be instantly afforded all the freedom we had pre-lockdown, and some of us, including older people and/or those with compromised immunity may have to wait a little longer before things return to 'normal'," Stephen says.

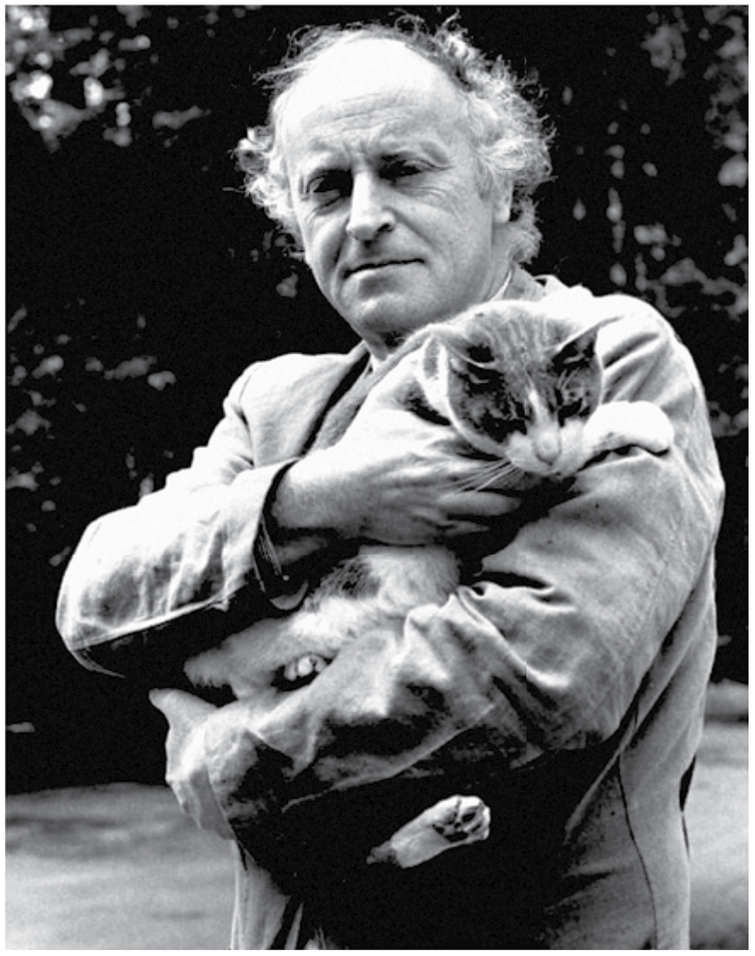
As lockdown restrictions gradually begin to lift, remember that it will take a while for life to get back to 'normal' – and it's OK if you take longer to adjust than others.

"In terms of adjusting to change, phased approaches, rather than large and sudden ones, are generally easier to deal with. It's also important to recognise that some people won't be ready to return to "normality", even if the lockdown eases and things like schools and workplaces reopen. There will be many who don't feel their concerns have been adequately addressed for whom a much slower, more gradual reintegration would be more appropriate."

JOSEPH BRODSKY

May 24 was the 80th anniversary of Joseph Brodsky, the Russian and American poet

LACHLAN MACKINNON



In 1987 Joseph Brodsky, then 47, became the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. It had been widely expected, honouring a poet who, born in one culture, had become a master of another.

Brodsky was an only child, born in Leningrad in 1940. His father, Alexander Brodsky, was serving as a naval officer – he only met him once before the age of eight: his mother, Maria Volpert, worked as a secretary, well below her intellectual capacity. In 1949, Brodsky's father was dismissed from the navy during a wave of anti-Semitism and could only eke out a piecemeal career as a photojournalist. Brodsky would write about the "forty square metres" in which the family lived in the essay "In a Room and a Half", recalling the cramped conditions (though generous by Soviet standards) which helped to make him inward, bookish, solitary.

At 15, Brodsky left school, at about which time he began to write poetry. He worked variously as a labourer, a mill operative and a mortuary assistant among other jobs, while his complex love-life came to centre on Marina Basmanova and their son Andrei: these difficult times were the subject of some of his most moving early work. Brodsky began publishing when he was 18, and rapidly made a considerable reputation. In 1960 he met Anna Akhmatova, the longest-lived of the great generation of herself, Boris Pasternak, Marian Tsvetayeva and Osip Mandelstam. She admired his work but dreaded seeing "The golden stamp of failure / On this yet untroubled brow".

Her fears were justified. Brodsky's success, and the enthusiasm provoked by his readings, alarmed the authorities. Accounts of what happened between December 1963 and January 1964 vary – some have Brodsky on the run, some confined to a psychiatric hospital. At all events, this period ended with Brodsky being put on trial. The charge was "social parasitism".

The judge, Savelyeva, asked Brodsky who had given him authorisation to be a poet, and he replied, "No one. Who was it who decided I was a member of the human race?" It was for this prickly independence of spirit, rather than anything specifically political, that the poet was punished. At a second hearing, he was exiled for five years to the village of Norinskaya in the Archangel region.

The Brodsky trial was a turning-point for the developing dissident movement: it was also an international scandal, and Brodsky was released early, in September 1965. In exile, he had read W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", and its dictum that time "Worships language and forgives / Everyone by whom it lives" had set his ethical compass. "If time worships language, it means that language is greater, or older, than time, which is, in its turn, older and greater than space," Brodsky wrote; a poem was now "a game language plays to restructure time".

Though released, Brodsky continued to be persecuted, and was forbidden to accept the foreign invitations his reputation had earned. Finally, on 4 June 1972, he was expelled from the Soviet Union and sent to Vienna. He was met by the American scholar Carl Proffer, who two days later took him to Auden's house in Kirchstetten (Auden was already writing an introduction for Brodsky's Selected Poems, his first appearance in English). During the next three weeks, Auden took charge of Brodsky's affairs, seeing to it that he met useful people and received money from the Academy of American Poets.

Brodsky soon joined Carl Proffer as his colleague at the University of Michigan, the beginning of his career in American academia. Other institutions he was associated with include Columbia, New York University, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College and, in England, Cambridge. Brodsky received many academic and public honours, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a MacArthur Foundation award, an honorary doctorate from Yale, the Nobel Prize and, in 1991, appointment to the one-year post of Poet Laureate of the United States.

In 1990 Brodsky married Maria Sozzani: they had one child. He had undergone three heart operations by the time he was 40 but continued to smoke heavily. He never returned to the Soviet Union, partly perhaps for medical reasons, partly perhaps because he had been away for too much of his life when Soviet Communism collapsed.

Brodsky became a familiar figure on the international reading circuit. Together with Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney and Les Murray, he belonged to the most esteemed group of living poets, although he also formed part of the Eastern emigre cluster including Czeslaw Milosz and Tomas Venclova.

His reputation as a writer in the West was enhanced by three collections published in English, Selected Poems (1973), A Part of Speech (1979) and To Urania (1988). He was also an exceptional critic and memoirist, as shown by Less than One: selected essays (1988), and he published two plays, Marbles (1985) and Democracy (1990). His essay on Venice, Watermark (1992), is the kind of book travel-writing exists to produce.

Poets usually fear exile because it cuts them off from the language on which they depend. Brodsky told me that this had not been a problem for him, given the ease with which he could always drive north into Canada and listen to Russian radio. Nonetheless, he began to write some poems in English, as well as increasingly translating himself. The results met with mixed responses. Sometimes Brodsky's vocabulary seems a little aside of what he means, as in the line "thrice let knives rake my nitty-gritty", which is an odd way of expressing heart-surgery. Those who complained about apparent technical deficiencies too easily forgot, though, that Brodsky was engaged in creating a new idiolect, precisely the half-English of a deracinated man. From his mentor Auden he learns to rummage in the more arcane areas of English vocabulary, and the resulting style is, while sometimes disconcerting, usually self- consistent and achieved.

Joseph Brodsky's poems are allusive, difficult, learned pieces, influenced by the intellectual concision of John Donne as well as the sudden transitions of Osip Mandelstam. Indeed, though Akhmatova admired him, she was puzzled by his attendance on her. The difficulty she found in his work was very far from her own clarity, and we should probably see Brodsky as Mandelstam's heir. Through him, the culture of pre- revolutionary St Petersburg found a continuing voice. Exploring the relation of man and art to time, expressing a great love for the created world and an open attitude to faith (his own position was variable), Joseph Brodsky belonged to a high humanist tradition, and the endless excitement of his darting perceptions kept alive the values of the European civilisation that shaped him.

He wrote that "until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx, / only gratitude will be gushing from it"; now, it is ours to be grateful. His early death is a catastrophic loss for Russian and American letters.

Brodsky died of a heart attack on January 28, 1996 at his home in New York City.

20 OF THE WORST EPIDEMICS AND PANDEMICS IN HISTORY

OWEN JARUS

Throughout the course of history, disease outbreaks have ravaged humanity, sometimes changing the course of history and, at times, signalling the end of entire civilizations. Here are 20 of the worst epidemics and pandemics, dating from prehistoric to modern times.

1 Prehistoric epidemic: Circa 3000 B.C.

About 5,000 years ago, an epidemic wiped out a prehistoric village in China. The bodies of the dead were stuffed inside a house that was later burned down. No age group was spared, as the skeletons of juveniles, young adults and middle-age people were found inside the house. The archaeological site is now called "Hamin Mangha" and is one of the best-preserved prehistoric sites in north-eastern China. Archaeological and anthropological study indicates that the epidemic happened quickly enough that there was no time for proper burials, and the site was not inhabited again.

Before the discovery of Hamin Mangha, another prehistoric mass burial that dates to roughly the same time period was found at a site called Miaozigou, in north-eastern China. Together, these discoveries suggest that an epidemic ravaged the entire region.

2 Plague of Athens: 430 B.C.

Around 430 B.C., not long after a war between Athens and Sparta began, an epidemic ravaged the people of Athens and lasted for five years. Some estimates put the death toll as high as 100,000 people. The Greek historian Thucydides (460–400 B.C.) wrote that "people in good health were all of a sudden attacked by violent heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes, the inward parts, such as the throat or tongue, becoming bloody and emitting an unnatural and fetid breath" (translation by Richard Crawley from the book "The History of the Peloponnesian War," London Dent, 1914).

What exactly this epidemic was has long been a source of debate among scientists; a number of diseases have been put forward as possibilities, including typhoid fever and Ebola. Many scholars believe that overcrowding caused by the war exacerbated the epidemic. Sparta's army was stronger, forcing the Athenians to take refuge behind a series of fortifications called the "long walls" that protected their city. Despite the epidemic, the war continued on, not ending until 404 B.C., when Athens was forced to capitulate to Sparta.

3 Antonine Plague: A.D. 165–180

When soldiers returned to the Roman Empire from campaigning, they brought back more than the spoils of victory. The Antonine Plague, which may have been smallpox, laid waste to the army and may have killed over 5 million people in the Roman empire, wrote April Pudsey, a senior lecturer in Roman History at Manchester Metropolitan University, in a paper published in the book "Disability in Antiquity," Routledge, 2017).

Many historians believe that the epidemic was first brought into the Roman Empire by soldiers returning home after a war against Parthia. The epidemic contributed to the end of the Pax Romana (the Roman Peace), a period from 27 B.C. to A.D. 180, when Rome was at the height of its power. After A. D. 180, instability grew throughout the Roman Empire, as it experienced more civil wars and invasions by "barbarian" groups. Christianity became increasingly popular in the time after the plague occurred.

4 Plague of Cyprian: A.D. 250–271

Named after St. Cyprian, a bishop of Carthage (a city in Tunisia) who described the epidemic as signalling the end of the world, the Plague of Cyprian is estimated to have killed 5,000 people a day in Rome alone. In 2014, archaeologists in Luxor found what appears to be a mass burial site of plague victims. Their bodies were covered with a thick layer of lime (historically used as a disinfectant). Archaeologists found three kilns used to manufacture lime and the remains of plague victims burned in a giant bonfire.

The remains found where a bonfire incinerated many of the victims of an ancient epidemic in the city of Thebes in Egypt. (Image credit: N. Cijan/ Associazione Culturale per lo Studio dell'Egitto e del Sudan ONLUS)

Experts aren't sure what disease caused the epidemic. "The bowels, relaxed into a constant flux, discharge the bodily strength [and] a fire originated in the marrow ferments into wounds of the fauces (an area of the mouth)," Cyprian wrote in Latin in a work called "De mortalitate" (translation by Philip Schaff from the book "Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1885).

5 Plague of Justinian: A.D. 541–542

The Byzantine Empire was ravaged by the bubonic plague, which marked the start of its decline. The plague reoccurred periodically afterward. Some estimates suggest that up to 10% of the world's population died.

The plague is named after the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (reigned A.D. 527–565). Under his reign, the Byzantine Empire reached its greatest extent, controlling territory that stretched from the Middle East to Western Europe. Justinian constructed a great cathedral known as Hagia Sophia ("Holy Wisdom") in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), the empire's capital. Justinian also got sick with the plague and survived; however, his empire gradually lost territory in the time after the plague struck.

6 The Black Death: 1346–1353

The Black Death travelled from Asia to Europe, leaving devastation in its wake. Some estimates suggest that it wiped out over half of Europe's population. It was caused by a strain of the bacterium Yersinia pestis that is likely extinct today and was spread by fleas on infected rodents. The bodies of victims were buried in mass graves.

The plague changed the course of Europe's history. With so many dead, labour became harder to find, bringing about better pay for workers and the end of Europe's system of serfdom. Studies suggest that surviving workers had better access to meat and higher-quality bread. The lack of cheap labour may also have contributed to technological innovation.

Illustration from Liber chronicarum, 1. CCLXIIII; Skeletons are rising from the dead for the dance of death. (Image credit: Anton Koberger, 1493/Public domain)

7 Cocoliztli epidemic: 1545–1548

The infection that caused the cocoliztli epidemic was a form of viral haemorrhagic fever that killed 15 million inhabitants of Mexico and Central America. Among a population already weakened by extreme drought, the disease proved to be utterly catastrophic. "Cocoliztli" is the Aztec word for "pest."

A recent study that examined DNA from the skeletons of victims found that they were infected with a subspecies of Salmonella known as S. paratyphi C, which causes enteric fever, a category of fever that includes typhoid. Enteric fever can cause high fever, dehydration and gastrointestinal problems and is still a major health threat today.

8 American Plagues: 16th century

The American Plagues are a cluster of Eurasian diseases brought to the Americas by European explorers. These illnesses, including smallpox, contributed to the collapse of the Inca and Aztec civilizations. Some estimates suggest that 90% of the indigenous population in the Western Hemisphere was killed off.

The diseases helped a Spanish force led by Hernán Cortés conquer the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán in 1519 and another Spanish force led by Francisco

Painting by O. Graeff (1892) of Hernan Cortes and his troops. The Spanish conqueror was able to capture Aztec cities left devastated by smallpox.
(Image credit: Shutterstock)

Pizarro conquer the Incas in 1532. The Spanish took over the territories of both empires. In both cases, the Aztec and Incan armies had been ravaged by disease and were unable to withstand the Spanish forces. When citizens of Britain, France, Portugal and the Netherlands began exploring, conquering and settling the Western Hemisphere, they were also helped by the fact that disease had vastly reduced the size of any indigenous groups that opposed them.

9 Great Plague of London: 1665–1666

The Black Death's last major outbreak in Great Britain caused a mass exodus from London, led by King Charles II. The plague started in April 1665 and spread rapidly through the hot summer months. Fleas from plague-infected rodents were one of the main causes of transmission. By the time the plague ended, about 100,000 people, including 15% of the population of London, had died. But this was not the end of that city's suffering. On Sept. 2, 1666, the Great Fire of London started, lasting for four days and burning down a large portion of the city.

10 Great Plague of Marseille: 1720–1723

Historical records say that the Great Plague of Marseille started when a ship called Grand-Saint-Antoine docked in Marseille, France, carrying a cargo of goods from the eastern Mediterranean. Although the ship was quarantined, plague still got into the city, likely through fleas on plague-infected rodents.

Plague spread quickly, and over the next three years, as many as 100,000 people may have died in Marseille and surrounding areas. It's estimated that up to 30% of the population of Marseille may have perished.

11 Russian plague: 1770–1772

In plague-ravaged Moscow, the terror of quarantined citizens erupted into violence. Riots spread through the city and culminated in the murder of Archbishop Ambrosius, who was encouraging crowds not to gather for worship.

The empress of Russia, Catherine II (also called Catherine the Great), was so desperate to contain the plague and restore public order that she issued a hasty decree ordering that all factories be moved from Moscow. By the time the plague ended, as many as 100,000 people may have died. Even after the plague ended, Catherine struggled to restore order. In 1773, Yemelyan Pugachev, a man who claimed to be Peter III (Catherine's executed husband), led an insurrection that resulted in the deaths of thousands more.

12 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic: 1793

When yellow fever seized Philadelphia, the United States' capital at the time, officials wrongly believed that slaves were immune. As a result, abolitionists called for people of African origin to be recruited to nurse the sick.

The disease is carried and transmitted by mosquitoes, which experienced a population boom during the particularly hot and humid summer weather in Philadelphia that year. It wasn't until winter arrived – and the mosquitoes died out – that the epidemic finally stopped. By then, more than 5,000 people had died.

13 Flu pandemic: 1889–1890

In the modern industrial age, new transport links made it easier for influenza viruses to wreak havoc. In just a few months, the disease spanned the globe, killing 1 million people. It took just five weeks for the epidemic to reach peak mortality.

The earliest cases were reported in Russia. The virus spread rapidly throughout St. Petersburg before it quickly made its way throughout Europe and the rest of the world, despite the fact that air travel didn't exist yet.

14 American polio epidemic: 1916

A polio epidemic that started in New York City caused 27,000 cases and 6,000 deaths in the United States. The disease mainly affects children and sometimes leaves survivors with permanent disabilities.

Polio epidemics occurred sporadically in the United States until the Salk vaccine was developed in 1954. As the vaccine became widely available, cases in the United States declined. The last polio case in the United States was reported in 1979. Worldwide vaccination efforts have greatly reduced the disease, although it is not yet completely eradicated.

15 Spanish Flu: 1918–1920

An estimated 500 million people from the South Seas to the North Pole fell victim to Spanish Flu. One-fifth of those died, with some indigenous communities pushed to the brink of extinction. The flu's spread and lethality was enhanced by the cramped conditions of soldiers and poor wartime nutrition that many people were experiencing during World War I.

Despite the name Spanish Flu, the disease likely did not start in Spain. Spain was a neutral nation during the war and did not enforce strict censorship of its press, which could therefore freely publish early accounts of the illness. As a result, people falsely believed the illness was specific to Spain, and the name Spanish Flu stuck.

Emergency hospital during influenza epidemic, Camp Funston, Kansas.
(Image credit: Otis Historical Archives, National Museum of Health and Medicine)

16 Asian Flu: 1957–1958

The Asian Flu pandemic was another global showing for influenza. With its roots in China, the disease claimed more than 1 million lives. The virus that caused the pandemic was a blend of avian flu viruses.

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention notes that the disease spread rapidly and was reported in Singapore in February 1957, Hong Kong in April 1957, and the coastal cities of the United States in the summer of 1957. The total death toll was more than 1.1 million worldwide, with 116,000 deaths occurring in the United States.

17 AIDS pandemic and epidemic: 1981-present day

AIDS has claimed an estimated 35 million lives since it was first identified. HIV, which is the virus that causes AIDS, likely developed from a chimpanzee virus that transferred to humans in West Africa in the 1920s. The virus made its way around the world, and AIDS was a pandemic by the late 20th century. Now, about 64% of the estimated 40 million living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) live in sub-Saharan Africa.

For decades, the disease had no known cure, but medication developed in the 1990s now allows people with the disease to experience a normal life span with regular treatment. Even more encouraging, two people have been cured of HIV as of early 2020.

18 H1N1 Swine Flu pandemic: 2009–2010

The 2009 swine flu pandemic was caused by a new strain of H1N1 that originated in Mexico in the spring of 2009 before spreading to the rest of the world. In one year, the virus infected as many as 1.4 billion people across the globe and killed between 151,700 and 575,400 people, according to the CDC.

The 2009 flu pandemic primarily affected children and young adults, and 80% of the deaths were in people younger than 65, the CDC reported. That was unusual, considering that most strains of flu viruses, including those that cause seasonal flu, cause the highest percentage of deaths in people ages 65 and older. But in the case of the swine flu, older people seemed to have already built up enough immunity to the group of viruses that H1N1 belongs to, so weren't affected as much. A vaccine for the H1N1 virus that caused the swine flu is now included in the annual flu vaccine.

19 West African Ebola epidemic: 2014–2016

Ebola ravaged West Africa between 2014 and 2016, with 28,600 reported cases and 11,325 deaths. The first case to be reported was in Guinea in December 2013, then the disease quickly spread to Liberia and Sierra Leone. The bulk of the cases and deaths occurred in those three countries. A smaller number of cases occurred in Nigeria, Mali, Senegal, the United States and Europe, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention reported.

There is no cure for Ebola, although efforts at finding a vaccine are ongoing. The first known cases of Ebola occurred in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1976, and the virus may have originated in bats.

20 Zika Virus epidemic: 2015-present day

The impact of the recent Zika epidemic in South America and Central America won't be known for several years. In the meantime, scientists face a race against time to bring the virus under control. The Zika virus is usually spread through mosquitoes of the Aedes genus, although it can also be sexually transmitted in humans.

While Zika is usually not harmful to adults or children, it can attack infants who are still in the womb and cause birth defects. The type of mosquitoes that carry Zika flourish best in warm, humid climates, making South America, Central America and parts of the southern United States prime areas for the virus to flourish.

HISTORY

22 JUNE 1941: OPERATION BARBAROSSA

RAVI PERERA

When Adolf Hitler founded his Third Reich in January of 1933 there was a decisive 'quickening' of history towards the cataclysmic Second World War. The strong capable race had embraced the assertive philosophy of the Nationalist Socialist Party of Hitler; as events would show a portentous development for the rest of the world.

Humbled, despite their mighty efforts in the First World War, betrayed by both external as well as internal forces, their once strong and orderly country was reduced to near anarchy. To many Germans in 1933, the National Socialist Party of Hitler seemed like the benediction the nation had prayed for.

By 1939, in six short years, the evident abilities of the disciplined Germans had once again created a powerful nation with an awesome military machine. The martial race was armed and ready. Led by its extraordinarily able General Staff, which both friend and foe considered a "corps d'elite", Hitler's Wehrmacht was easily the best fighting machine in the world at the time.

It was said of the German officer class that they were "men of outstanding intellectual aptitude and physical stamina, governed by a code of ascetic self-discipline. Their strength lay in their complete self-effacement to the point of anonymity. In times of peace they were expected to devote themselves wholly to knowledge and education. In war, outstanding bravery and capability were demanded of them."

As the war drums rolled across Europe in 1939–40, the aggressive German army triumphed with surprising ease over the once vaunted armies of Poland, France and other European nations. In the case of the French, they in fact outnumbered the Germans in many strategic aspects such as in men and tanks. But in military thinking they seemed stuck in earlier wars, trench warfare or even the Napoleonic times, when the infantry or the cavalry charge won the day. The Germans on the other hand were ready for mobile warfare fought with mechanised armoured forces, closely supported by deadly accurate air and artillery power, making optimum use of advance technology such as the radio for real-time communication.

The French were conquered in a few short weeks. The British were never more thankful for the English Channel! After a half-hearted attempt to subdue the stubborn island with air power alone, Hitler turned his eyes to the east. The stage was now set for the greatest human conflict in history.

Operation Barbarossa

The Soviet Union, the largest country in the world which perhaps maintained the biggest army at the time, was shrouded in mystery. The Stalinist system did not provide statistics of its military strength at information bureaus. But it was obvious that in comparison to Western Europe the conditions in the Soviet Union were poor and primitive. The Russian roads were not anything like what the motorised German army had used in Europe. There were very few all-weather roads in the country proving a terrible obstacle in bad Russian weather conditions. And unlike other countries the Germans had vanquished in the previous summers, the Soviet Union was much too large to be brought under in one aggressive dash.

But the German army, full of confidence after its remarkable achievements in the previous summer campaigns, had come to believe that nothing was impossible for the German soldier. Addressing the higher echelons of the army, Hitler boastfully predicted that when Operation Barbarossa, the name given to the German plan for the impending campaign against the Soviet Union, commenced, "The world will hold its breath". "One good kick on the door and the entire rotten structure will collapse," he said to further emphasise his conviction that the Soviet Union was no match for the proven, battle-hardened German war machine.

This confidence was reflected in the astonishing fact that the German army launched the war against

the Soviet Union where it was expected to conquer an area of about one million square miles in one summer campaign with just a few divisions more than it had deployed in the previous summer against France, a country of approximately 150,000 square miles.

For the "good kick on the door", the Germans gathered nearly four million soldiers on the long Russian border. Provided air cover by the vigorous Luftwaffe, supported by nearly 4,000 pieces of heavy artillery and most importantly given the cutting impetus by the brilliantly led panzer divisions, the German army's campaign in the East was indeed going to open with a breath-taking fury.

In view of the immense land area it had to conquer with human resources, Germany could not afford to keep in uniform for too long, the Wehrmacht had to gain a decisive result in that summer of 1941. With this strategic goal in mind its military planners aimed at fatally wounding the Red Army west of the Dnieper River. Committing themselves to a huge undertaking with a numerically weaker army and limited resources, the Germans were gambling on the skills and capabilities of its soldiers to bring them a quick victory.

German soldiers fighting in the Soviet Union as part of Operation Barbarossa, 1941. NARA/U.S. Department of Defense

For operational purposes they divided their forces into three large army groups. The Army Group North under the command of Field Marshal von Leeb was to capture the Baltic area and Leningrad (St. Petersburg). The Army Group Center under Field Marshal von Bock was to drive to Moscow through the Russian heartland. Field Marshal von Rundstedt leading the Army Group South was to bring the fertile Ukraine under its heel.

German tanks in the Soviet Union preparing for an attack as part of Operation Barbarossa, July 21, 1941. AP

After a few nervous postponements, the date for the opening of the campaign was fixed for 22 June, the same day that Napoleon in 1812 launched his ill-fated invasion of Russia. Starting their eastward thrust at about 3.00 a.m. on that day, the German war machine once again gave an almost flawless display of its awesome prowess. Within 48 hours more than 2,000 Russian fighter planes were down. The German Panzer divisions exploiting the gaps punched in the defensive barriers of the Russians by their opening salvos drove on eastward relentlessly with the aim of achieving strategic dominance, leaving the task of destroying the shocked and confused stragglers of the enemy forces to the rapidly following infantry divisions.

Machine gunners of the far eastern Red Army in the USSR, during the German invasion of 1941.

Savage conflict

By mid-July, in just three weeks of fighting, Russians had lost 3,500 tanks, 6,000 planes and more than two million men. The famous German tank commander General Heinz Guderian, leading a powerful armoured corp attached to the Army Group Center, noted in a memorandum that the "Russians were severely hampered by the political demands of the State leadership and suffered a basic fear of taking responsibility. This, combined with bad coordination, meant that orders to carry out necessary measures, counter-measures in particular, are issued too late. Soviet tank forces were insufficiently trained and lacked intelligence and initiative during the offensive."

In these early stages of the war to many observers it appeared that the Wehrmacht had once again delivered a death blow to a powerful adversary well before it could even fully comprehend the attackers' diabolical intentions.

Although German propaganda portrayed the average Russian as a semi-Asiatic primitive of sub-human qualities and no match in the battle field to the masterful Teutons, it did not take long for the German soldiers to realise that in the Russian vastness they were facing a fight to the death with this Slav/Mongol race. On that bloody battlefield German skills confronted Russian stubbornness, the attacker's courage was met by the defenders' recklessness and the conquerors' contempt was matched by the hatred of resisters. The eastern campaign that began so dazzlingly for the invader on 22 June 1941 raged on in the mind-boggling vastness of Russia until mid-1945. The young soldiers of the two nations were locked in a war of savagery on a scale rarely witnessed in human conflict. Russia alone suffered more than 20 million deaths in those four years of relentless fighting.

Nazism and Communism, the ideologies professed by the two armies that clashed with such bitterness in 1941, are dead in these two countries today. Germany has rebuilt and is one of the most prosperous nations on the planet. Russia, after her failed experiment with Communism, is yet struggling to find a place in world affairs that befits its size and potential. But they both surely remember the four years when the best of these two brave nations fought on a terrible battlefield and often died a soldier's death.

War is a terrible, tragic and most times wasteful thing. But paradoxically, war often brings out some of the best qualities in man. The titanic clash that began in that summer of 1941 demanded of the combatants, super human effort, amazing physical endurance, boundless courage, iron discipline, selfless comradeship and finally the unflinching sacrificing of oneself. The stage and the human actors of that bloody drama to this day inspire awe by its sheer scale, intensity, wickedness and undeniable heroism.

"Two things have altered not, since first the world began, the beauty of the wild green earth, and the bravery of man."

10 OF THE BEST FEEL-GOOD BOOKS

These uplifting reads are guaranteed to put a smile on your face

JOANNE FINNEY

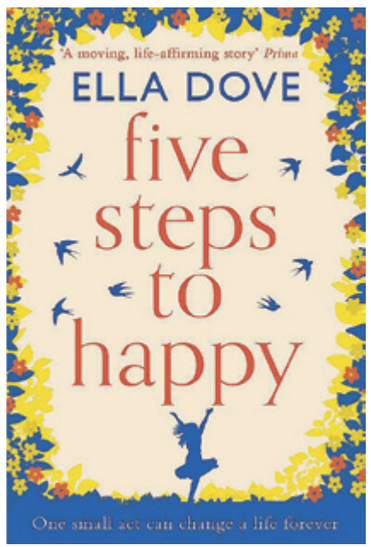
I don't know about you but in the difficult times, I'm reading more than ever. Grabbing my book and knowing I can escape what's going on in the real world for an hour or so has been sanity saving.

The books I'm wanting to read right aren't suspenseful thrillers or dramas about dysfunctional families. Instead what I'm craving are funny, charming, uplifting stories where I know nothing too bad will happen and where I'm guaranteed a happy ending.

If you're in need of a pick me up (and, quite frankly, who isn't?), these feel-good reads will put a smile on your face.

Five Steps to Happy by Ella Dove

Five Steps to Happy is the page turning debut novel by GH feature writer Ella Dove. The story of how actress Heidi has to find a new future after a life-changing accident is based on Ella's own experience. Lovely writing and engaging characters.

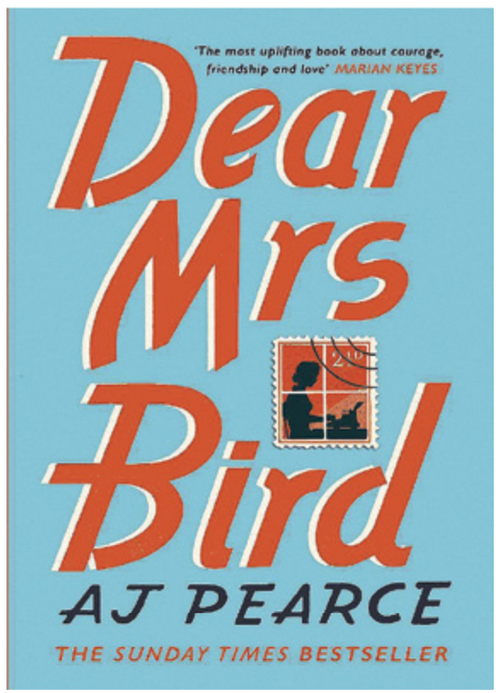


The Flat share by Beth O'Leary

I love the idea behind this clever rom-com: Tiffy and Leon share a flat – and a bed – but have never met as she works days as an editor and he works nights as a nurse. It's funny and charming but there are moments of real poignancy, too. Guaranteed to leave you with a smile on your face.

Dear Mrs Bird by AJ Pearce

In wartime London, Emmy dreams of being a lady war correspondent but instead finds herself typing up the agony aunt page column at Woman's Friend, where she can't help but add her own advice. This charming, joyous debut is a love-letter to female friendship and the Blitz spirit. A warm hug in book form.



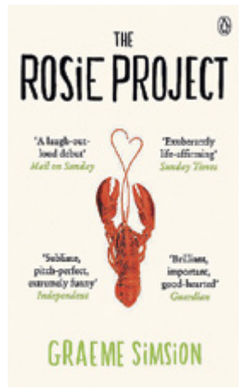
The Keeper of Lost Things by Ruth Hogan

In this charming novel a celebrated writer spends years collecting lost objects and trying to reconnect them

with their owners. On his death, he leaves it all to his assistant to carry on his work.

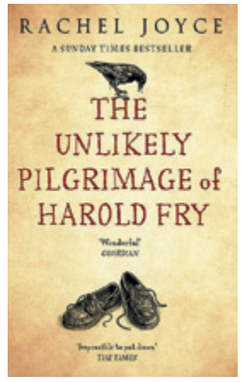
The Rosie Project by Graeme Simsion

Funny, charming and heart-warming, this debut is a gem of a novel about a rather awkward university professor's search for love. I loved this unconventional romance and although its sequels don't quite match the original, they're worth a read too.

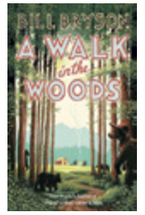


The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry by Rachel Joyce

One morning Harold sets out to post a letter and begins a journey that will change his life. There are moments that are unbearably moving but ultimately it's an uplifting, big-hearted read.



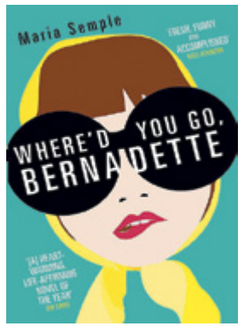
A Walk in The Woods by Bill Bryson



This comic memoir of Bryson's misadventures as he and a friend attempt to hike the Appalachian Trail is so funny it will make your stomach ache from laughing! At a time when we can't get out into nature ourselves, this is the next best thing.

Where'd You Go, Bernadette by Maria Semple

Told through a series of emails and documents, this is the story of Bee and her madcap mum, who goes missing on a trip to Antarctica. Maria Semple's novel is hilarious, hugely enjoyable – and truly original.

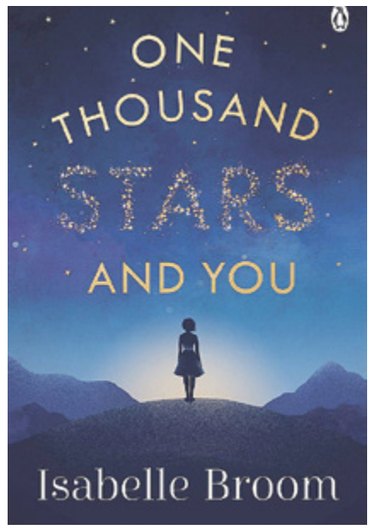


The Little Paris Bookshop by Nina George

A bookseller who prescribes novels to his troubled customers – but can't heal his own heartbreak – is the hero of this wonderful novella. It was a huge hit across Europe and is a must-read for anyone who believes in the transformative power of books.

One Thousand Stars and You by Isabelle Broom

A trip to Sri Lanka is Alice's last hurrah before she settles down to a life of domesticity with soon-to-be-husband, Richard. There she meets Max, a veteran recovering from a traumatic injury and soon has to make some very difficult decisions. The will-they-won't-they romance is really well done but it's the gorgeous descriptions of Sri Lanka that I especially loved.



THE BEST FEEL-GOOD MOVIES

COLLIDER STAFF

You've had a bad day. You've had a bad week. You've had a bad year. And sometimes, you're not in the mood to watch "the best" films. Sometimes you not only want a movie that can lift your spirits; you need that movie.

With that in mind, we've compiled a list of feel-good films to put you in a better mood. They're all terrific movies that carry an uplifting message that is earned, thoughtful, and will definitely leave you smiling as the credits roll.

The Princess Bride

The framing device of this movie is literally an old man reading the story you're about to see to his grandson in order to make that grandson feel better. I've never read William Goldman's original novel, but I wouldn't hesitate for a second to show this a kid who was feeling under the weather or to an adult for that matter. "Fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, true love, miracles…" this is a movie that truly has it all, and even in it's "darkest" moments, it's still funny, warm, and a reprieve from your daily worries. And if "Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya…" doesn't put a smile on your face, I fear nothing will. – Matt Goldberg

An American Tail

You would be forgiven for thinking that this animated tale that starts with an anti-Semitic attack, a troubled ocean crossing, and the separation of a family of America-bound immigrants is not exactly "feel good." But it's in the first act of this under-appreciated classic that the dismal stakes are established so that the film's ultimate conclusion is that much more rewarding.

The underdog in this case is actually a tiny, charming mouse of Russian Jewish heritage by the name of Fievel Mousekewitz. Rather than be stopped in his tracks by those who would choose to prey on him when he gets lost in the big city, Fievel makes a variety of friends from all classes, nationalities, and backgrounds throughout his travels. It's through his quest to reunite with his family that he actually manages to bring about meaningful change in mouse society at large in the New World. That's a lesson that's every bit as uplifting today as it was 30 years ago. – Dave Trumbore

Singing in the Rain

Golden Age Hollywood is always a treasure trove of feel-good movies. Without the fanciful visual effects films enjoy these days, classic films hinged entirely on story and character, resulting in a much more intimate viewing experience. Singin' in the Rain is an excellent example, and as one of the best musicals ever made, is a swell feel-good movie pick – especially for film lovers. The film is a

"backstage musical" that takes place during Hollywood's transition from silent film to talkies. Gene Kelly plays a popular silent film star whose singing and dancing acumen makes the transition easy, but his leading lady's dreadful voice puts her career in danger. Meanwhile, Kelly comes across a fan/chorus girl played by Debbie Reynolds, and together they join forces with Cosmo (Donald O'Connor) to turn Kelly's new talkie into a fully-fledged musical. The performances are winning, the set design is spectacular, and the musical numbers are some of the best ever filmed. You really can't go wrong with Singin' in the Rain. – Adam Chitwood

Sing Street

While 2016 was quite possibly the worst year ever, it did give us one of the best feel-good movies ever: Sing Street. This 80s-set musical/coming-of-age story hails from Once and Begin Again filmmaker John Carney and follows a young Irish boy who starts a band in order to impress a girl. In writing their original music, they cover the various trends of the decade – there are songs that sound like Duran Duran and there are songs that sound like The Cure. At heart, it's a story about young love and discovering who you are while not shying away from the harsh realities of real life – yes indeed, this is optimism that doesn't ignore realism. That's sometimes a tough mix, but one that's certainly necessary at this particular point in time. The songs are genuinely great, the performances are incredible (especially from newcomer Lucy Boynton), and the ending is a humdinger. I dare you to watch this movie and not smile. – Adam Chitwood

Zootopia

Who knew an animated feature from Disney would be one of the most socially conscious films of 2016? Zootopia is a surprisingly thoughtful chronicle of prejudice and inherent bias, telling the story of a young bunny who wants nothing more than to be a top police officer in a world filled with various types of animals. However, while the world of Zootopia is integrated with predators and prey working and living side-by-side, historical prejudices are alive and well, and the film doesn't shy away from showing that oftentimes the fault lies with those who believe themselves to be wholly innocent and justified. The movie is funny and gorgeous, with top-notch world building, but it also has something to say, which ensures that it's much more than a lazy cash grab. It's wildly entertaining and it ends on a solid upbeat note (hence "feel-good"), but it's refreshingly introspective about the world we live in. – Adam Chitwood

Shakespeare in Love

While infamous for shocking everyone and taking Best Picture over Saving Private Ryan, there's plenty to love about Shakespeare in Love, and it's the per-

stylish heist tale with charm to spare. The cast is phenomenal, but Soderbergh's narrative choices make the film a joy to watch, keeping the audience on its toes until the final reveal. Even when you know the outcome, the film is compelling all the same thanks to pitch-perfect comedic timing from this spectacular ensemble. And Soderbergh's photography captures Las Vegas like never before. – Adam Chitwood

Love Actually

When it comes to feel-good movies, schmaltz really isn't an issue. Sure Love Actually is ooey gooey and incredibly sentimental, but isn't that also part of its charm? This is the ultimate romantic comedy combined with the ultimate Christmas movie to make one, super-charming concoction that's guaranteed to pick you up – or at least make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside. – Adam Chitwood

fect feel-good movie. It's a delightful film with a delightful story and a delightful cast, offering a romantic fan-fiction-style take on the creation of William Shakespeare's most famous play. While a bit slight, there's something about this movie that makes it feel like a warm blanket. It's comforting and sweeping in its crafting of the central romance between Shakespeare and the daughter of a wealthy merchant, and Ben Affleck makes for a pretty hilarious self-absorbed actor. It's charming as all get-out, and for all the anglophiles out there, Shakespeare in Love is something like comfort food in the form of a romantic historical fiction dramedy. – Adam Chitwood

Ocean's Eleven

If it's a movie to take your mind off of everything that you're looking for, look no further than Ocean's Eleven. Filmmaker Steven Soderbergh's star-studded remake is a rip-roaring,

Matilda

There's nothing subtle abut Matilda's positive message. Danny DeVito's adaptation of Roald Dahl's children's classic is a film that celebrates the kind, the creative, and the underdogs without reserve. The good characters have cutesy names like Miss Honey and Lavender while the bad guys, each of them uniquely grotesque but for their shared baseness, have dissonant, cringe-y names like Trunchbull and Wormwood. But that direct simplicity is part of what makes Matilda such a delightful spirit-lifter. Through the story of the titular brilliant and magical bookworm, Matilda is 100% pure in it's pursuit to celebrate the best of humanity, invite the audience to embrace their own peculiar magic, and demonstrate that the power of kindness ensures the good always overcomes the bad. – Haleigh Foutch

The Birdcage

If there's a message the world needs right now, it's that all it takes to respect lifestyles we don't understand is to respect the humanity of the person living it. Underneath the politicking and the piety, we're all just folk. That's the root of The Birdcage, a brilliant and utterly charming comedy of errors about two gay men in Palm Beach Florida who reluctantly agree to pretend they're a conventional family so their son can win the approval of his bride-to-be's family. The flamboyant duo, who own a popular local drag nightclub, find themselves up against her father (Gene Hackman), a conservative senator, the co-founder of the Committee for Moral Order, who's in the midst of a scandal. The result is a descent into comedy chaos, fully equipped with elaborate schemes, mistaken identities, and vibrant theatricality. Robin Williams is in top form here, human and hilarious, and he's absolute gold as the contrast to Nathan Lane's effusive drama queen, but they're always characters, never caricatures, and that gives The Birdcage a lot of heart to go with the gut-busting laughs. – Haleigh Foutch

Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs

Even if there weren't a montage in this movie set to the song "Sunshine and Lollipops", Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs would still put a gigantic smile on your face. It has all of the anarchic silliness of directors Phil Lord and Christopher Miller (I still have no idea how they got away with the snowball scene), but it's also got a lot of heart to go along with the story of food raining down from the sky. There's a nice father-son bonding subplot, there's a good love story, and there's a talking monkey who rips the heart out of a sentient gummi bear. It's also the only film in cinema history with a Welcome to Mooseport joke. What's not to like? – Matt Goldberg

WHY DO RUSSIANS BUTCHER ENGLISH WORDS THAT START WITH 'H'?

ALEXANDRA GUZEVA

What's behind the mysterious practice of just swapping 'H' for 'G' in the Russian language? And how did the linguistic tradition come about?

Foreigners are frequently surprised to hear Russians pronouncing and writing Hitler as 'Gitler', Harry as 'Garri', and 'Henry' as 'Genri'. To make matters worse, we butcher Shakespeare in much the same way, by saying 'Gamlet'. And the famous American university suddenly becomes 'Garvard' when we say it. What the geck?! Sorry… heck.

There is just no such sound

Actually, the English sound 'h' – as in 'Hamlet' – just doesn't exist in Russian. Yes, we have our own 'h', which transforms into 'x' in the Cyrillic alphabet, and then transliterated as "kh" when writing in English again – as in 'Khabarovsk'. However, it's much closer to how you would pronounce the Scottish lake Loch.

When English words started to pour into Russian in the 16th century, the only thing that was basically similar to this soft English sound 'h' was the fricative 'g' (written as 'г' in Cyrillic, but pronounced like with the back of your tongue resting against the throat). This pronunciation was typical of peasants from rural southern areas.

In modern history this dialect still exists, but people who pronounce this fricative 'h' are considered to be somewhat provincial – and therefore "not very educated" – frequently becoming the butt of jokes by Muscovites and other northern city-dwellers. One of the most famous examples of the 20th century was Nikita Khrushchev. For official correspondence and occasions, such a form was considered unacceptable, betraying Khrushchev's southern beginnings, and causing dozens of anecdotes and parodies of his pronunciation. The closer to the Ukraine border you get (Rostov, Krasnodar etc.), the more likely you are to encounter the pronunciation. At the same time in Ukraine it is considered as a norm.

The Russian language tends to pronounce voiced consonants instead of breathy voices and aspirated consonants. Russians don't soften sounds – you can hear this in the cases of 'r' and 'g' particularly. That's why our language sounds so rude to nations that don't do hard Rs.

So, historically, the English sound 'h' could only be close to the fricative 'g', so was easily transformed into a voiced consonant and its written version – 'g'. By then the Russian language already had lots of words from Greek and Latin, so words such as 'Helios' and 'hemoglobin' are all pronounced with 'G'.

The Russian language tended to appropriate foreign words this way up to mid-20th century (Hence Hitler facing the same philological fate).