

THE WORLD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
CHRISTMAS

GERRY BOWLER



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Russia Carollers and a puppet theatre in rural 19th-century Russia.

Russia Before the Communist Revolution of 1917, Christmas in Russia was celebrated with great solemnity as one of the high points of the religious calendar of the Orthodox Church and as a joyous midwinter festival by the population. Fasting began weeks ahead of Christmas, with all meat and dairy products shunned by the devout and no food eaten at all on Christmas Eve until the first star appeared in the sky. The traditional Christmas Eve meal consisted of 12 meatless dishes (in honour of the 12 apostles), and *KUTYA*, a sweet porridge eaten to ensure future prosperity and happiness. Priests might visit the home to sprinkle it with holy water, and the Christmas Day church service was massively attended. Folk celebrations involved the Christmas tree, carolling from house to house – singing *kolyadki*, songs of blessing and begging – mumming and masquerading (as described in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*), and visits from Saint Nicholas, the *BABOUSHKA*, and *Kolyada*, a white-robed girl who travelled by sleigh and who personified the Christmas season. It was also the time of prognostication, ceremonies to predict the future, especially the identity of one's spouse. (See *PODBLYUDNUIYA* and *DIVINATION*.)

All this changed with Communism and the drive to suppress religion. Christmas celebrations were forbidden, and where they could not be utterly abolished they were channelled into secular New Year's rites. Thus the "New Year's tree," New Year's presents and feasting, and the replacement of Saint Nicholas and the *Baboushka* by Dyed Moroz (Grandfather Frost), his niece *Snegurochka* (the Snow Maiden), and the New Year's Boy. Calendar reform further confused the matter:

while the government shifted from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in keeping with the rest of the world, the Orthodox Church clung to the old ways of reckoning time. Therefore, in the Soviet Union, New Year's Day (January 1, Gregorian) occurred before Christmas Day (December 25, Julian), which served to weaken the impulse to celebrate Christmas.

The fall of Eastern European Communism and the death of the Soviet Union has brought a revival in religion in Russia, and the people are rediscovering traditional holidays and customs and trying to blend them with newer customs they have grown used to. Churches are filled with young people, and state officials now take part in the Christmas liturgies they once tried to repress. Television stations broadcast the Christmas Eve midnight mass from the Cathedral of the Epiphany in Moscow, and hundreds of thousands of Russians take part in the *Krestny Khod* ceremony of "walking the cross," in which a candle-lit procession of priests and congregants goes outside on Christmas Eve to circle the church before returning inside for a round of carol singing. Christmas observances have returned to millions of Russian homes, and many children wait until January 6, Christmas Eve in the Julian calendar, to open their presents. The singing of the *kolyadki* has been revived, mumming and fortune-telling continue to be popular, and the *crèche*, though not a traditional item of devotion in Orthodox countries, has been adopted by many Russian families.

New Year's celebrations continue to be popular nevertheless; the January 1 dinner will probably be a grander affair



Russia A Soviet-era stamp depicting Grandfather Frost and the New Year's Tree.

than that on January 7. Grandfather Frost and the Snow Maiden have now become commercial icons in the way Santa Claus is in the West; they are on display in shopping malls, public celebrations, and at private affairs. Children at year-end parties join hands around the Christmas tree and ritually call on the Snow Maiden three times before she appears and the festivities can begin. Though Santa Claus is making some inroads, Grandfather Frost remains the predominant gift-bringer both for those children who receive presents on New Year's Eve and those who get them at Christmas.