

The Christmas Encyclopedia

Second Edition

William D. Crump



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the fate of the next harvest. This and a host of other superstitions, now abandoned, embellished the holidays (they derived from ancient winter solstice folklore holding that danger and evil lurked in the winter darkness). Rituals foretold the weather for each of the following year's months, predicted whether a girl would marry in the new year, dispelled evil spirits, assured good health and fortune for the coming year, and so forth. Following Christmas Eve Midnight Mass, which frequently extended until dawn, it was permissible to serve meat as families with friends gathered for Christmas dinner.

Other customs included groups of people traveling about their villages singing *kolyadki* (Christmas carols). Originally commemorating the renewal of the year and other folk themes, these carols later incorporated the message of the Nativity. The carolers customarily expected rewards of confections, but if these were not forthcoming, the subsequent carols bestowed curses upon the household. Other groups, "mummers," donned outlandish costumes as clowns, spirits, and especially as wild animals and entertained at homes and public places. (The Russian author Leo Tolstoy provides a vivid description of Christmas mumming practices among Russian aristocrats in a passage from his novel *War and Peace* [1865–1869].) Christmas trees became popular in the 1800s, and their decorations included fruits, candy dolls and animals, walnuts, wooden figures, paper lanterns and chains, and a star tree topper.

Russian folklore holds that two spirits have brought holiday gifts. One possibly derived from the "Frost," an entity of rural society encompassing all that was bitterly cold. To prevent this unseen menace from harming the crops, it was customary to "invite the Frost to supper" by setting out food for it. In the nineteenth century, the Frost took on human qualities as urban regions concocted the legend of *D'yed Moroz* ("Grandfather Frost"). Residing in the Russian forests, Grandfather Frost arrived at Christmastime with gifts for children in a *troika* (sleigh pulled by three horses abreast). His long, red, fur-trimmed suit with hat and long, white beard somewhat resembled the St. Nicholas of Europe. In

Europe, whereas naughty children were threatened with punishment by St. Nicholas's demon antithesis, Grandfather Frost merely ignored them.

The second spirit, *Baboushka* ("Grandmother"), brought gifts on Epiphany Eve. According to legend, *Baboushka* was sweeping her house when the three Magi passed by en route to Bethlehem. When they invited her to accompany them, she refused, claiming that her housework precluded a long journey. Later, she repented and, upon collecting a few toys for the Christ Child, set out to overtake the Magi. Because she found neither them nor the Christ Child, she returned annually on Epiphany Eve to examine each sleeping child, hoping to find Jesus, then left a small gift behind. In variations of the story, all with the same conclusion, *Baboushka* either deceived the Magi or refused them lodging, or she denied asylum to the Holy Family in their flight from King Herod's soldiers.

In 1699, Czar Peter the Great established January 1 as New Year's Day in Russia. At the czar's command, celebrations included the lighting of bonfires on New Year's Eve. Homes were decked with evergreen garlands, and feasting abounded for seven additional days.

Seeking to eradicate Christmas, the Communists established a secular Winter Festival during the last half of December as a period devoted to feasting, fantasy, fireworks, and parades. During his rule (1929–1953), dictator Joseph Stalin declared New Year's Day as a national family holiday instead of Christmas and replaced the Christmas tree with the New Year's tree in 1935. Grandfather Frost, now appearing in either blue or red, was retained to bring gifts on New Year's Eve instead of Christmas Eve, and two more figures were added to complement him. One of these, *Snegurochka* ("Snow Maiden"), was based on a secular legend about a childless, elderly couple who, desiring a child of their own, fashioned a little girl out of snow. Although she achieved mortality and became their daughter during the winter, she melted as spring approached but returned annually with the winter snows. Snow Maiden, portrayed as a beautiful young girl with blond braids, white fur hat, blue robe or short fur coat, and knee boots, became Grand-

father Frost's granddaughter who assisted him on his rounds. A youth portrayed the other figure, New Year's Boy, who depicted the freshness of the new year, and his costume bore the numerals of that year. Secular equivalents to Mary, Joseph, and the Christ Child, groups comprising Grandfather Frost, Snow Maiden, and New Year's Boy made public appearances throughout the country, the most notable of which was at the annual New Year's children's festival held at the Palace of Congresses in the Kremlin. Adults imbibed vodka on New Year's Eve, champagne on New Year's Day, and feasted on suckling pig, *karavay* (round bread), and *baba* (round coffeecake). Few could afford such luxuries as caviar, smoked fish, and other roast meats. For many older Russians, the holidays extended until January 14, New Year's Day on the Julian calendar.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, although New Year's celebrations have continued to dominate the holidays, Russians have incorporated the "Catholic Christmas" into the season. Thus the holidays begin on December 24 (Gregorian calendar), with Christmas observed on January 7 (Julian calendar), and extend through January 14, New Year's Day (Julian calendar). Still popular are the children's festival in the Kremlin and other parties; Grandfather Frost and Snow Maiden; and

gift exchanges, which may occur at Christmas as well as the new year. The Museum of Folk and National Arts in Moscow sponsors "The Christmas Gift," an exhibit of traditional toys and gifts that were commonly found prior to the Revolution. Typical cuisine is returning to that of former centuries, such as *borscht*, *blini* (small pancakes served with sour cream, caviar, and smoked salmon), fish, *baba*, *kissel*, and *piroshki* (turnovers stuffed with meat, fish, chicken, eggs, and vegetables). Thus *Sviatki* (Christmas season) is resurfacing and changing, as manifested by the appearance of Christmas trees, Nativity scenes (novelties to Russia), the adoption of Western traditions such as Santa Claus decorations and American and English carols (*kolyadki* only occasionally appear in stage performances), and the increasing attendance at Christmas Eve Midnight Mass. The latter is a service of many hours that compels the worshippers to stand during its entirety, with peripheral benches reserved only for the aged and infirm. Then follows *Krestny Khod* ("Walking with the Cross"), a candlelight procession that forms outside around the church as the congregation bears religious symbols.

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See also Epiphany; Ukraine.

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Saint Andrew's Day

See Advent

Saint Barbara's Day

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Saint John's Day

See The Twelve Days of Christmas (time period)

Saint Kitts and Nevis

See West Indies

Saint Lucy's Day

See Advent

Saint Nicholas

(?304–?345). Archbishop of Myra in Asia Minor (now Demre, Turkey) and popularly accepted as the personage on whom the mythical Santa Claus is based.

With the exception of a few fairly certain facts, virtually everything written about St. Nicholas is based on legends. He is known to have lived during the fourth century and was present at the Council of Nicea in the year 325.