

Russian Holidays and Traditions
(Russkiye prazdniki i traditsii)

Russian people enjoy celebrating. There are many different types of Russian holidays and celebrations that are associated with the historical and political events, like the Victory Day on the 9th May. Other Russian holidays can be seen to derive from the Russian Orthodox religion. Some of them include Christmas, Easter and name days. Russian people have many opportunities to enjoy the holiday festivities, whether they are celebrating the International Women's Day on the 8th March or St Valentine's Day, adopted from the Western holidays.

In this lecture, I will talk about the main Russian holidays: New Year, Christmas, Easter, Victory Day, the Independence Day and other celebrations that Russian people enjoy, their origins and traditions. We will look at the customs followed to celebrate Russian wedding.

Before the Communist time, Russian holidays were associated with the Russian Orthodox religion and the reign of the tsar. Special days of the tsar's family were celebrated. In the villages peasants followed special events marked in the Orthodox calendar. One example of the Russian Orthodox celebration is *Kreshenie*. *Kresheniye* involves celebrating the baptising of Christ, (celebrated on the 19th January, still winter in Russia) were many Russian people swim in the *prorub* (a hole, made in the frozen river). Today Russians can freely celebrate the Orthodox holidays, as opposed to the Communist time.

After the October 1917 revolution, religious holidays were banned, most of the churches were destroyed and closed. People were not aloud to talk about religion and if someone attended church they could loose their job. Religious celebrations were still followed in some Russian Orthodox families quietly. Instead official and political holidays became more prominent and important.

While in Europe people celebrated Christmas, in Russia more emphasis was put on the New Year celebrations.

In textbook (*Modern Russian Culture*, 1998) you can find some information about decline of religious holidays due to political powers on p.142.

Russian celebrations today come from many separate roots – old Russian celebrations, during the tsar period, the traditions of the many ethnic groups that make up the Russian population, festivals connected with the Russian Orthodox church; and Soviet-period holidays. There are also holidays that have been introduced from other countries.

One of the biggest Russian holidays is the New Year. In Russia, like in Australia celebrations begin on the night 31st of December, where Russian people commemorate the events of the year. Usually, people would invite their friends and family to have dinner together and make numerous toasts, while watching Russian concerts on television. Russian President, Dmitriy Medvedev makes a festive speech to all the Russian people and wishes a prosperous New Year. At midnight, Russian people like to listen to the 12 beats of the Cremlle clock – *Kuranti*, while making toasts and wishing each other a happy New Year. Fireworks lit up the night sky and thousands of people gather in the Red Square to celebrate - no matter how cold it is!

Before New Year was celebrated in the beginning of March, while for the Orthodox church it was 1st of September. Peter the Great (who was in reign from 1682 - 1725) changed everything, placing New Year on 1st of January as in Europe.

The main attribute of this holiday is a fir tree (*yolka*), or Christmas tree. Peter the Great introduced the custom of decorating fir trees for the Christmas and New Year's holidays after his visit to Europe in the eighteenth century. Russian children like to decorate the Christmas tree with real nuts, wrapped in coloured foil and sweets, as well as beautiful Christmas tree decorations and

tinsel. Children eagerly await the arrival of *Ded Moroz* - Grandfather Frost and *Snegurochka* - his granddaughter, the Snow Maiden with presents.

The New Year's celebration usually flows directly into the celebration of the Russian Orthodox Christmas celebrated on January 7. The Russian Orthodox church celebrates Christmas, in accordance with the Julian calendar. Until 1918, Russia continued to use the Julian calendar (set up by Julius Caesar). The difference between the Julian (the old Russian) and the Gregorian (European) calendars was thirteen days. When the Soviet government adopted Gregorian calendar Russian people started to celebrate many holidays twice: according to the new style and the old one.

Christmas was introduced as a public holiday only after the Soviet Union collapsed, 75 years later. Since 1992 Christmas has been openly observed in Russia. On Christmas Eve (6 January), churches hold special services and an all-night Mass. According to the Orthodox tradition, people prepare for the celebration a long time in advance by fasting and going to the church. The fast usually finishes after the first star appears in the night sky or until after the evening service. Once the first star has appeared, the celebrations begin. All family members gather to share a festive meal to celebrate the coming of Christ Child. Although the food served is strictly Lenten, it is served in a festive and joyous manner. The Russians call this meal "The Holy Supper". *Kutya* is a special porridge and it is served as the primary dish. It is very symbolic with its ingredients being various grains for hope, honey and poppy seeds for happiness and peace. The following days neighbours, friends and family visit each other to share the joys of the celebrations. They give each other presents, sing and dance. Children and adults can go from house to house singing Christmas carols, *kolyadki* or reciting short poems, wishing household members happiness and health. In return for their songs, the singers are offered sweets and coins.

The next holiday is the "Old New Year" (13 January - it is not a public holiday). It is a special day for Russian people, who still celebrate the start of the New Year according to the old calendar. In Russia, the Christmas tree is usually up

until at least 13th January. Children can still find more surprise presents under the Christmas tree.

On the 19th January, Kresheniye (Baptism of the Lord) is a big celebration in Russia. Churches held special services. Despite the celebration being held in winter, many people dive in the “prorub” (man-made hole in the frozen lake).

14th February is St Valentine’s day. This celebration has been influenced from the West European countries and it became very popular in recent years.

23rd February is a day dedicated to celebrate the Soviet armed forces, but has increasingly come to be seen as the day to honour Russian men. On this day men can receive small presents from women. I remember preparing presents with girls at school, which we gave to boys.

When the winter is coming to an end (end of February/ early March) Russian people like to enjoy the festivities of *Maslyanitsa* - Shrovetide, or Butter Week to say farewell to the cold winter. It is the first day of Lent in the Christian calendar. Russian people enjoy the festive meal before fasting for Lent. This celebration originates to the pre-revolutionary times until recent. The highlight of this holiday is the eating of the *bliny* (pancakes). The weeklong festivities include the making of *bliny*, tobogganing, rides on *troikas* (sleigh pulled by three horses) and burning a straw person to mark the end of winter. There are many types of Russian *bliny* - pancakes with caviar, or pancakes with meat and mushrooms, pancakes with farm cheese and sour cream or pancakes with sweet honey. There is a Russian saying, when something is delicious – *palchiki oblijesh* (so delicious that you will lick your fingers).

One of the characteristics of Russian country festivals include the singing of ditties, or short Russian songs, called *chastushka*. *Chastushka* are usually a humorous improvisation of recent events and making fun of particular characters. *Chastushka* songs are sung in a dance rhythm to the accompaniment of a *balalaika* (a string instrument similar to a guitar) or Russian accordion. From the textbook (Modern Russian Culture, 1998, p.143)

Kelly wrote: “ *Chastushki* express an age-old humour of bodily functions that was accommodated just as readily in the songs and dances of the *skomorokhi*, the anecdotes of Russian villages, and the raree shows, popular street comedies, and cheap prints of Russian cities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Very often, though, the *chastushka* is the vehicle of a much more aggressive topicality...”. The revolutionists used *chastushka* to express discontent and provide revolutionary ideas to the public. During communist period, the songs were used to send propaganda messages to Russian people. Today most *chastushka* songs are different to the Soviet time and do not carry the communist themes. Performance of clever and funny ditties is a popular custom at Russian parties and weddings in Russia.

"Women's Day" is a popular celebration in Russia and is held on the 8th March. Men can give women gifts and flowers. They can do something special, like cook a delicious dinner, invite her to the restaurant or theatre. This holiday was established by a German Communist Party Leader named Clara Zetkin to commemorate the struggle for women's rights. Over the years it has lost its political meaning, and today it is comparable to Mother's Day. I remember when I was little, my father and I would wake up very early and buy flowers for my mum at the market. We would also make this day very special for her.

April Fool's Day or the non-official "Day of Laughter" is celebrated on the 1st April. On this day, you must be cautious, because many jokes are presented in newspapers, on TV and radio. The motto of this day: "*Pervoye aprelya - nikomu ne veryu*" means do not trust anybody on the 1st April. Russian people enjoy telling each other jokes, *anekdoti*. These can be told during different celebrations, such as birthdays, weddings or New Year.

Another important religious holiday is Easter - *Paskha*. It was the most important holiday of the year during Tsarist time in Russia. People begin preparing for the holiday 40 days before Easter Sunday. On Easter Sunday it is customary to greet and kiss each other three times with the words "Christ is Risen" to which they answer, "Truly He has risen". Russian families can bring

a basket of food to the church on Saturday evening or early Sunday morning to be blessed with holy water by the priest. The traditional Easter food includes a variety of Easter cakes or bread - *kulich*, an Easter cheese cake – paskha, hard-boiled painted eggs, as well as meat, salads and other delicious plates. It is a custom to give other people “painted eggs” and celebrations continue for at least a week. Following Easter, families pay special visit to the graves of their relatives, leaving food and other gifts there.

The famous *Faberge* eggs, made of gold and covered with beautifully decorated enamel shell, date from the time when Tsar Aleksandr III ordered one from the St Petersburg jeweller Karl Faberge as a present for his wife for Easter.

1-2 May is the Spring and Labour Day holiday. During the Soviet era there were great demonstrations on the 1st of May in the Red Square and in every city, as everyone was required to show their loyalty and celebrate the Worker's Solidarity day. Today, the nature of the May Day has changed and it is now called Spring Holiday.

9 May is Victory Day. This day commemorates when Nazi Germany capitulated in 1945 after the 4-year World War II with the Soviet Union and other countries. 20 million people were lost in the war from the Soviet Union. It is also an anti-war holiday, a time to remember the horrors of the war and how lucky we are to live in peace. There is a great Military parade held every year in the Red Square in Moscow and thousands of people gather to see it. The parade is also shown on national television. A minute of silence is observed in the memory of those who died defending USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). Fireworks lit up the city. Flowers and wreaths are brought to the memorials, which can be found in every city and village in Russia. Veterans wear their medals and gather together to celebrate. They are feted with many concerts, speeches and flowers. Children learn songs and poems against war. They bring flowers to memorials. Schools hold Assemblies and invite veterans to attend. Celebrating Victory day can also be seen in the Russian schools in Sydney, where children prepare special concerts for the Veterans,

often their grandparents and great-grandparents. This year 2010, it will be 65 years since the end of World War II.

This day marks the end of the World War II, but it is also commemorating tens of thousands of soldiers, who died in Afghanistan and Chechnya. When the Soviet Union entered Afghanistan in 1979 to help a group of struggling Afghans at their request, nobody in the USSR expected the involvement to grow into a full-scale war that lasted more than 10 years. There was no choice for the 18-year old boys drafted for compulsory army service in Afghanistan, from which thousands returned in zinc coffins and those who survived were emotionally traumatised. The veterans from Afghanistan can be referred to as "the lost generation".

12 June is the Independence Day. This day celebrates the independence of the Russian republic, which followed from Boris Yel'tsin's announcement in 1990. It is an official holiday. Many Russian people spend this day on their country homes or "dacha" - a block of land in countryside where fruits and vegetables are grown. In 1993 more than half of Russia's population had some access to a *dacha*, which was an important food source for families, struggling during Russia's financial crises. Today many dacha have transformed into mansions, and many prefer to live there - outside the busy city centre.

Each city in Russia also celebrates their own town festival – *den' goroda*. St Petersburg's day is at the start of White Nights on 29 May. The white nights, *belye nochi* last for over a month in midsummer, when the twilight extends well into the night. The White Nights season provides a romantic time to celebrate with concerts and music.

Some celebrations are celebrated mainly in Russian villages. *Ivana Kupala* is a nature's festival, celebrated in summer on the 7th July. It dates back to pre-Christian times, when people believed that nature had special powers that were capable of changing their lives for the better. During the night of Ivana Kupala celebration, many plants and herbs are believed to acquire healing

powers. People look for fern flowers in the forest as they believe they can bring luck and happiness. Young unmarried women sing songs about love and marriage. They dance and make *venok* – a special garland made out of plants and flowers that girls wear round their heads. At dawn, they go to a riverbank and set fresh flowers afloat in the river. If the river takes the flowers downstream, the woman will soon be happily married. If the flowers come back, the young woman has to wait for at least another year for a groom. People also perform other rituals to ensure there is an abundant harvest in autumn. Today people living in the rural Russia continue to enjoy taking part in this summer festival.

The Day of Knowledge is celebrated on the 1st September when children begin their school year. Many students bring flowers to school for teachers. There are special Assemblies before the classes start, that welcome to school all children and families.

National Unity Day is held on the 4th November. The idea of this holiday is for all the classes of Russian society to unite to preserve Russian statehood. It is argued that this day is an attempted replacement to counter Communist demonstrations on November 7 holiday, which marked the anniversary of the October Revolution.

7 November – is the Day of the October Revolution (25 October according to the old calendar). It's still an official holiday in Russia though there is not such a huge celebration as it used to be during the Soviet era. During Communist period the day was celebrated with parades and demonstrations in every city. Streets were filled with red flags and pictures of the Communist leaders. In Moscow, the Red Square was packed with people waiting to see the parades and hear the speeches. There were missile launches and tanks rumbling across the city centre. The celebrations were shown on the television and broadcasted on the radio. Today only patriots of the Communist party and those, who feel nostalgic, celebrate this event.

12 December is the Constitution Day in Russia. The first Constitution of the Russian Federation was adopted in 1993 (previous Constitutions were all Soviet Union's). It is a recent public holiday, and there are no special customs connected with this day.

During the year, Russian people can generally have two weeks of holidays from their work place, but there are many long weekends, which many people use to travel and to relax at their country homes.

There are also days dedicated to professions, where Russians celebrate people working in a particular industry, similar to Australian Banker's Day. These celebrations are not official public holidays. There are Teacher's Day, Militsiya Day (Police Day), Agricultural Day, Train Workers Day, Fisherman's Day, even Custom Worker's Day and many others. The Communist Party introduced special days for almost every profession. This tradition has continued in Russia today with an ever increasing range of days eager to recognise people's achievements.

Wedding celebrations can provide a colourful insight of some of the Russian customs and traditions. Russian people used to marry early (mostly at age 18 - 22), usually when both partners are students. During Communist period there were many compulsory events organised by "Komsomol", which was an organisation responsible for communist upbringing of the youth. During summer months students were sent to do "work experience", not related to their future profession. It usually involved working on the field, gathering vegetables and fruit in the country. After work, young people spend their spare time together in performances and competitions. It was like a scout camp for university students. Many couples, including my parents have met during their "work experience" and were married, while studying at university.

In pre - revolutionary Russia during the autumn and winter months *posidelki* or evening parties were frequently held in the villages. They included work-related gatherings, where young women would do embroidery and men could make *lapti* (straw shoes) or *dudochka* (a pipe made from wood) are some of

the examples. Afterwards young people would join in the singing, dancing and playing various games.

Phanti is one of the games that were played at *Posidelki* parties. It involves each person to give something that belongs to them to the leader. To get their items back they have to perform a special task that the leader asks. When the leader gives a task he does not know who the items belong to. The tasks may involve someone reciting a poem, singing a song, telling a joke, dancing and acting. *Posidelki* parties were a fun way to spend the long winter nights and helped young people to get to know each other.

Once a couple decides to marry, they need to obtain a wedding certificate from ZAGS - Civil Registry Office (*Otdel zapisi aktov grazhdanskovo sostoyaniya*) or from special Wedding Palaces (*Dvortsy brakosochetaniya*). The waiting period ranges from 1 - 3 months, giving time to prepare for the wedding.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union there has been an increase in the number of weddings taking place in churches. However marriage at the local registry office is still required by law. One of the traditions of the Russian Orthodox wedding ceremony revolves around *ventsy* or special wedding crowns, that are held above the bride's and groom's heads throughout the service by their "witnesses" (best man and bridesmaid). By the end of the ceremony, the witnesses' arms will be ready to drop off!

After the wedding it is the custom for the couple to be driven around the town to visit important sites, such as historical monuments and the eternal flame commemorating those lost in war. The wedding banquet that follows can last for two days in the city. In villages wedding celebrations can continue for a week and often the whole village is invited.

During the communist period, the bride's family was supposed to pay for the reception. Today, this has changed and bride's and groom's families usually share expenses. The reception takes place at a restaurant or at groom's and

bride's home, the last option is more affordable but less and less popular, mostly because of the size constraints.

The biggest concern at the wedding is to have enough alcohol. A Russian wedding is an event where most people will be drunk. Having plenty of food is typical for any Russian function, and a wedding is not an exception. If you have enough liquor and food, the wedding is basically ready.

During the feast, the bride and groom are presented with various challenges, ranging from having to sweep up coins thrown on the floor by the guest, to the groom having to “buy” back his wife (usually with vodka). Many toasts are made. Frequent shouts of “*Gor’ko!*” (bitter!) can be heard from the guests, a sign that the groom should kiss the bride to “sweeten” life. They will also be asked to take a bite of a loaf of bread and whoever takes the larger bite is set to be the head of the household.

The Russian sauna, *banya* is associated with many Russian celebrations, including marriage. The tradition of the Russian sauna dates back to the Middle Ages. Before the revolution (in 1917) almost every Russian village house had their own *banya*, separate from the main house. The *banya* was built close to a water supply, such as a lake, river or a town well. The temperature inside a *banya* is heated by the use of wood-burning stoves. Inside people can sit or lie naked on benches and beat themselves with *vyenik* - where birch or oak branches are tied together. The humid air is so hot that one can stay there only for a limited period of time. Afterwards people can jump into cold water or roll around in the snow. *Banya* is also a popular place to meet with friends and relax, a great Russian custom that is followed today.