
NADIYKA GERBISH
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A UKRAINIAN CHRISTMAS
EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

Foreword

The book you are holding in your hands was published in Ukraine a year before the onset of the full-scale Russia–Ukraine war. This war has been described in different ways, but here is the definition we offer: the country where Christmas is one of the most significant holidays of the year and is celebrated twice, honoring both Eastern and Western traditions, was attacked by the country where Christmas has lost all meaning.

The popularity of Christmas in Ukraine is evidenced by the fact that St Nicholas Day is a favourite holiday amongst Ukrainian children, and one of the gems of world culture is the Ukrainian Christmas song known as 'Carol of the Bells'.

Ukraine is a nation where the traditions of house-to-house carolling and *vertep* shows (nativity plays) are still very much alive. The boundaries of this *vertep*-carolling territory in the east more-or-less coincide with the Russian–Ukrainian border (*see* 'Songs and Carols', page 43). This does not mean that there are no carols in Russia. But the so-called Russian carols are either more recent works written in

the late nineteenth century, or ancient Ukrainian carols appropriated by Russia. And you won't find a crowd of carollers in Russia striding the streets of a village or town on Christmas Eve, as Nikolai Gogol describes in his renowned collection of short stories called *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*, or as seen in modern Lviv in the west, Kyiv in the center, and Kharkiv in the east. *Vertep* shows share the same story. If traces of them can be found in Russian culture, they were brought there by Ukrainian or Belarusian peasants who, before the First World War, fled to Siberia or far eastern Russia in search of free land to feed their families (*see* 'Vertep: The Nativity Scene', page 65).

The simple reason for it is this: both carols and nativity scenes are part of Western Christian culture, originating in the Middle Ages as a result of the Catholic Church wanting to convey the meaning of the gospels to the illiterate community. Ukrainian lands are a borderland territory for Christianity: Ukraine is the West for Eastern Christianity and the East for Western Christianity. Until the beginning of the First World War, Western Christian culture met daily with Eastern Christian culture in Ukraine, and this continued in the western part of Ukraine until the Second World War.

These encounters were marked by conflicts, sometimes terribly bloodstained, as in the Polish–Ukrainian wars of the eighteenth or twentieth centuries. On the other hand, they led to cultural exchanges and mutual borrowing. The history of the Ukrainian carol 'Ne Plach, Rakhyle' ('Don't Weep, Rachel') is especially poignant when seen in this light. Its melody is a variant of the Portuguese–Spanish folio in a musical

arrangement by Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713). The furthest point where it was recorded by the folklorists is Irkutsk, where it arrived with the forcibly displaced Ukrainians. The lyrics of this carol, in their own way, tell the modern history of the Russia–Ukraine war: Ukrainian children are dying due to 'Love for Ukraine – is all their fault, all their fault.'

Many Ukrainian carols have a distinct trace of sadness to them. Even the traditional Christmas fast, unlike Advent, is spent in abstaining, prayer and contemplation (*see* 'Feasting and Fasting', page 29). Likewise, Ukrainian Christmas Eve dinner traditions are focused on commemorating deceased family members, gratitude for being alive and together as a family, and expressing hope for a rich harvest in the coming year. As an agricultural society, Ukrainians have always depended on the crops from their fields to survive.

After Holodomor – the series of man-made famines in Ukraine organised by the Soviet regime in 1932–3 – the sacredness of bread has become deeply ingrained in Ukrainian history and day-to-day customs. The habit of raising and respectfully kissing any piece of bread that falls to the ground required by the older generation has lost its mandatory status in recent years. However, after the Russian occupation of Bucha and Mariupol in March 2022, when the bodies of starved-to-death mothers and children were buried in the yards of their own homes, perhaps the customs of earlier days might be recalled to honour and preserve the memory of present-day martyrs. And as the minefields in the de-occupied regions are slowly turned back into fields sown with wheat, maybe the old tradition of bringing supper to one's nearest family and friends as a Christmas gift might return once again. Two main dishes on Ukrainian Christmas Eve are *Kutia* and *Uzvar* (*see* pages 37–39). *Kutia* symbolises death and *Uzvar* birth and life. The essential message of Christmas and Christianity is this: death doesn't have the final word – life is eternal.

Long before the 2022 escalation, there had been a heated discussion in Ukraine about who should bring the gifts to children for the Christmas and New Year holidays: St Nicholas or Grandfather Frost, the latter being a Russian tradition. Many Ukrainians, with their inherent pragmatism, tried to reconcile the two by celebrating two Christmases, with Ukrainian children receiving gifts twice (*see* 'St Nicholas and Grandfather Frost', page 89). Yet Russian children were deprived of this prospect, not by their own choice or by the choice

of their parents, but on the whim of the Soviet regime. In the Soviet Union, not only was Christmas cancelled, but New Year celebrations were banned for a time, and pre-school children were even hauled out to watch the demonstrations against their parents holding New Year's parties (*see* 'A Ban on Christmas', page 103).

The ban on Christmas in the USSR, which lasted until the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, was very similar to what was going on in Germany under Hitler, and if in Soviet history there was only one instance when carols were sung openly and uncensored from the concert hall stage, it was thanks to a Ukrainian, Ivan Kozlovsky – said to be Stalin's favourite singer.

Ukrainian Christmas traditions, music and culture are deeply rooted in the country's history of sorrow, courage and resistance. This is not so different from the very first Christmas. Then, Judea was under occupation and the emperor's myrmidon, Herod, was a terrorist and mass-murderer, hunting innocent children to secure his own throne. Baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph had to escape to Egypt in the middle of the night and stay there for several years as refugees. As C. S. Lewis put

it, our whole world is enemy-occupied territory and Christmas is the story of the rightful king, who landed in the disguise of a child to invite us to participate in a great campaign of sabotage.

The war between Ukraine and Russia is also a war for the freedom of Christmas culture. Christmas, especially during wartime, can make the impossible happen. Enemies on both front lines can reconcile for a short time and although examples of military Christmas reconciliations might be rare, the fact they have happened gives us hope and the chance to imagine peace (*see* 'Christmas Truces', page 115). They encourage us to be optimistic that these one-time military truces might have a lasting effect after the war, but only if those modern-day Herods – Hitler, Stalin, Putin – disappear for good.

Christmas is a time that reminds us that justice and love prevail, even when it seems that both are slowly dying. It ensures the indestructibility of hope in times of the greatest hopelessness. For as long as we celebrate Christmas, we can neither be defeated nor destroyed. This is the message that Ukraine is trying to convey to the world, and this is what our book is about.

When is Christmas?

Christmas in Ukraine is celebrated twice – on 25 December and 7 January – following both Western and Eastern traditions. Over the years, there has been an ongoing discussion as to which of these dates should be used for the celebration. But considering the richness and diversity of Ukraine's cultural heritage, a consensus was reached in 2017 to celebrate Christmas twice a year – and in so doing, reconcile and enrich the traditions of Western and Eastern Christianity.

Two of the gospels – Luke and Matthew – tell us about Christ's birth, but neither of them gives us a date for it. The first person who tried to specify the year was a monk called Dionysius Exiguus (Dionysius the Humble). It was his idea to create a dating system starting from the birth of Christ. He believed that Christ was born in the thirty-first year of the reign of the Roman emperor Augustus, because that was the year of the census. It's likely that he was mistaken though because the New Testament tells us that Jesus was born during King Herod's reign, and we know that Herod died in 4 BC. So most contemporary scholars believe that Christ's birth must have taken place somewhere between 6 and 2 BC.

There is also uncertainty about the day and month of Christ's birth. The early Christians, in the second to fourth centuries, gave different dates for the nativity: 25 or 28 March; 9 or 31 April; 21 May; 17 or 28 November; 25 or 28 December. The date of 25 December was calculated by St Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (born in 258), and over time this date was celebrated.

Interestingly enough, Christmas wasn't celebrated until the third century. Instead, the first Christians celebrated only the Resurrection of Jesus Christ at Easter, believing this to be the key event that gave the entire Christian story its meaning.

These early Christians considered a birthday to be a purely pagan holiday. One of the first Church Fathers, Origen (185–253/4), referenced the words of the prophet Jeremiah: 'Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!' (Jeremiah 20:14). Origen reminded Christians that no saint commemorated his birthday. What's more, he claimed that they cursed the day they had been born.

But another important factor played a role in Easter taking precedence over Christmas in the early Christian calendar: in the Roman Empire, Christians were considered state criminals. They were routinely persecuted and subjected to torture and martyrdom. Under such circumstances, placing the emphasis on Christ's death and resurrection was very natural. They believed that both saints and martyrs should be remembered on the day of their death – their true birth for eternity. They also anticipated that the second coming of the Messiah would occur during their lifetimes.

All this changed when Constantine, who had come to power as Roman emperor in 306, fought a battle against the Emperor Maxentius. The battle took place on the outskirts of the city, next to the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber River. Constantine's chances of victory were slim: his army was fatigued by the long trek and began surrendering in great numbers. However, that night Constantine had a dream. He saw the sign of the cross in the sky and heard the words, 'In this sign, you will conquer'. In the morning he commanded his soldiers to paint crosses on their shields and by the end of the day his army had won the battle.

A few different versions of this story exist. Nevertheless, they all agree that the victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 marked the beginning of Constantine's conversion to Christianity. He legalised Christianity and it soon became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Unsurprisingly, the first written reference to the celebration of Christmas dates from the time of Constantine's reign. It is found in the Roman Chronograph of 354 and cites the year 336 as the date for the first celebration of Christmas.

There was another event in Constantine's reign that would have worldwide significance. He relocated the capital from Rome – which was under the constant threat of the Barbarians – to Byzantium, a Greek colony on the coast of the Black Sea. Here, he built a new city, Constantinople, which was well protected on all sides by a mountain range and the sea. A new empire was formed, with its capital in Constantinople, which eventually became known as the Byzantine Empire – and this was the main territory in which Christmas was officially celebrated every year.

In 476, under the onslaught of the Barbarians, Rome finally and definitively fell, and the lands of the former Roman Empire were plunged into the Dark Ages (500–800), a period of unremitting wars and decline.

All the Eastern Christian Churches, with the exception of the Armenian Church, accepted 25 December as Christmas Day. In contrast, Christians in Egypt celebrated Christmas on 6 January – the day in which the Three Wise Men from the East visited Christ,

the Virgin Mary and Joseph, and presented them with gifts. This date was also associated with the baptism of Jesus, which in most Western Churches is known as the Epiphany.

Hence, a situation arose where the Eastern and Western Churches celebrated Christmas on different days. So in 567, the Council of Tours came to a constructive compromise, introducing Christmas holidays that lasted for twelve days, from 25 December to 6 January. Within the next few centuries, different cultures introduced additional celebrations on Epiphany Eve, Twelfth Night. In Britain, this was a

time of general merriment (and is where the name of the Shakespeare play *Twelfth Night* comes from). In the eastern Orthodox countries, it is the night of the second Holy Supper.

Christianity came to England in the seventh century and to Germany in the eighth century, but it was neither completely nor definitively established in these countries during the Dark Ages. Christian missionaries continued to perish at the hands of pagans, as was the fate of St Boniface, who brought Christianity and the symbol of the Christmas tree to Germany. It was also the fate of another great martyr, Václav, who formed the basis of the English carol about 'Good King Wenceslas' of Bohemia (the present-day Czech Republic).

The coronation of the Frankish King Charlemagne as the emperor of the new Holy Roman Empire proved to be a turning point. It was held in Rome on Christmas Day of 800, and Charlemagne accepted the imperial crown from the hands of the Pope. Since then, Christmas has been an official holiday in the lands that were part of this large empire: present-day France, Germany and Northern Italy. Then, Christmas gradually arrived in eastern and northern Europe with the Christianisation of Moravia (863), Bulgaria (864), Poland (966), Rus (988), Hungary (1000), Sweden (1100), Norway (1154) and Lithuania (1387).

In its early stages, the Christian Christmas was superimposed on existing pagan traditions almost everywhere. The Church didn't simply repress or eradicate these traditions, but cleverly utilised them and adapted them to its goals. Pope Gregory the Great officially approved this tactic. He recommended not destroying the pagan temples, but

only the idols in them, and replacing them with Christian symbols. That, he wrote, is what God had done with the Jewish people in Egypt and what Paul the Apostle had done in Greece.

It's perhaps no surprise that Christmas day, on 25 December, falls on one of the shortest days of the year. To bring a bit of life-affirming light during this difficult and dismal period, the non-Christian peoples would hold midwinter holidays, or festivals. The most well-known of these was *Yule* (mid-November–early January) in Northern Europe, *Saturnalia* (17–24 December) and *Kalenda* (from 1 January as the beginning of the new year; hence the words 'calendar' and '*kolyadky*', as Christmas carols are called in Eastern Europe) in Rome. And so, in the middle of the gloomy and cold winter, when the ground was frozen and people were suffering from malnutrition and a multitude of ailments, some joyous days appeared.

These were the happiest of holidays, when work would stop, tables would bow under the weight of food and people would decorate their houses with branches and candles, visit one another, exchange gifts, organise carnivals and devote themselves to merrymaking in every imaginable way. A similar tradition even existed among the Barbarian peoples north of the Roman Empire. They followed the solar calendar and, accordingly, celebrated the summer (21 June) and winter (21 December) solstices.

In Ancient Egypt, celebrations fell on 6 January. This concluded the obligatory forty days of fasting which marked the death of Osiris. It was believed that on the fortieth day, when Osiris rose from the dead, the

waters of the Nile turned into wine, and bathing in the river marked the end of the fasting.

Christians consciously adopted not only certain traditions from non-Christians, but also the date of their celebrations, helping to lend them religious significance and convey the joy of Christ's birth. Ancient theologians also believed that God had created the world at the beginning of spring, on 25 March. Accordingly, his son – Jesus – was supposed to be conceived on that same day, and the end of the ninth month of pregnancy fell on 25 December.

By the end of the sixteenth century a new schism emerged between Western and Eastern Christians in the celebration of Christmas, due to the introduction of a new calendar. The old Julian calendar was lagging behind the solar cycle because the astronomical year doesn't last precisely 365 days – but 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 6 seconds. Despite adding a leap year every four years, the Julian calendar gradually fell out of sync with the equinoxes – and equinoxes were vital for calculating Easter correctly. Pope Gregory XIII decided to drop ten days to bring the calendar back into line with the equinoxes. This became known as the Gregorian calendar.

The Orthodox churches did not accept these reforms and stuck to the Julian calendar. By that token, what was the end of December for Western Christians became the beginning of January for Eastern Christians. The gap grew with every century, and there is now a difference of thirteen days. Therefore, Christmas in Ukraine lasts from 7–18 January (in 2017, Ukraine recognised 25 December as an

official holiday, along with the traditional Orthodox Christmas on 7 January). Nowadays, Ukraine together with Belarus, Eritrea, Lebanon and Moldova are the countries where Christmas comes not once, but twice a year.

Ukraine's traditions reflect the syncretic nature of Christmas. Christmas emerged as a holiday in the Mediterranean and spread through the lands of the western and eastern (Byzantine) Roman Empires to the 'Barbarian' lands of northern Europe. With the rise of Europe since the sixteenth century, and its transformation into a world power, Christmas has gradually spanned the world, absorbing local traditions and transporting them to other territories. Christmas has continued acquiring one thing and losing another to the point where it has now become a truly global holiday, the most well-known in the world.

A note on the cover

While working on the cover of the book *A Ukrainian Christmas*, most of all I wanted to make it festive. The plant and flower motifs, as well as ornaments have an in-depth history in Ukrainian art. They were created both in happy times and in times of war and grief, and it helped Ukrainians to maintain their identity and preserve their memory. It is very much in tune with the holiday of Christmas and the birth of a new life. No matter what.

Olena Staranchuk

‘Christmas brings the indestructibility of hope in times of the greatest hopelessness. As long as we celebrate this holiday, we can neither be defeated nor destroyed. This is the message that Ukraine is trying to convey to the world. And this is what our book is about.’

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This beautiful illustrated book introduces readers to the culture, traditions, reflections and celebrations of the Ukrainian people during Christmas. Originally published in 2020 in Ukraine, to immediate acclaim, this English language version includes a new Foreword written by the authors following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022.