COUNTRY FACT FILE

Location | Northern Asia, bordering Arctic Ocean, between Europe and North Pacific Ocean
Size | 6,592,772 sq. mi.
Capital City | Moscow
Flag Description | Russia’s flag has three equal horizontal bands of white (top), blue, and red (bottom).
Independence | August 24, 1991 (from Soviet Union)
Population | 143,420,309 (2005 est.)
Government | Federation
Nationality | Russian
Major Ethnic Group(s) | Caucasian (Russian, 80%)
Major Language(s) | Russian; many minority languages
Major Religion(s) | Russian Orthodox; Muslim
National Holiday(s) | New Year’s Day, January 1; Old New Year’s Day, January 13; Defender of the Motherland Day, February 23; International Women’s Day, March 8; Labor Day, May 1–2; Victory Day, May 9; Independence Day, June 12; Accord and Reconciliation Day, November 7; Constitution Day, December 12

Introduction

HISTORY

If Western Siberia was the jumping-off point for the migrations across the Bering Strait (Beringia) that brought at least some of the Amerindians to the Americas about 15,000 years ago, and given what is known at the present about human populations in Europe 200,000 years ago, then it is reasonable to expect to find evidence of human habitation in the region now called the Russian Federation. So far, however, the territory to be covered is immense, and the archaeological evidence is piecemeal. For example, archaeologists working in a region south of Moscow found an object of prehistoric art carved from mammoth’s tusk about 17,000 years ago. Discovered at what is thought to have been a Stone Age campsite, one of the ends resembles the torso of a horse with a well-detailed mane.

Near a burial mound in the basin of the Aksai River, several gigantic stones have been found. The construction, a long alley stretching from east to west, is made up of vertically erected massive rocks (menhirs). These megaliths are apparently much older than other European megaliths. The site has been dated to approximately 9,000 B.C.E. Although Russia is so far known to have about 3,000 megalithic structures, including menhirs and dolmens, this is the first discovery of megaliths in the European part of Russia. Previously similar stone monuments had been discovered only in the Caucasus and Siberia.

At an early Neolithic burial place in the Ulyanovsk region on the Volga, southeast of European Russia, archaeologists found a skeleton, which was apparently that of a young woman who lived in the eighth millennium. The skeleton lacks the skull. This suggests that it may have been the practice to bury heads separately from bodies.

A 4,000-year-old megalithic structure was uncovered at a site in the central Russian region of Ryazan. This structure, which archaeologists believe was built as a sanctuary, sits on a hill overlooking the confluence of the Oka and the Pron Rivers. The site is a circle 23 feet in diameter, marked with standing stones 1.5 feet thick and evenly spaced one from each other. There is a large rectangular hole and a standing stone
in the center of the circle. Along the edges of the site there are two more holes. Originally there may have been four of them, but the bank there is being destroyed by a ravine, so the temple has caved in partially. It has been suggested that this megalithic site may have served an astronomical purpose similar to that of Stonehenge.

A group of children, led by a local geologist, found evidence of a 4,000-year-old culture that occupied three islands in the Vuoksa River region near Leningrad: a series of paintings that resemble a fish, a dog, and a prehistoric symbol of the Sun. The Leningrad region, Karelia, and Scandinavia were all densely settled by tribes who built sculptures and painted petroglyphs throughout the region. The Vuoksa region resembles Onega Lake in Karelia, where many petroglyphs as old as 4,000 years have been found.

Beginning in the second millennium B.C.E., various groups occupied Russian territory (Indo-Europeans, Ural-Altaic), but they left no written records, so not much is known about their cultures or activities. To the south, Greeks and Iranians, also Indo-Europeans, established settlements, but again little is known about these groups. Between the fourth and ninth centuries C.E. Huns, Goths, Magyars, and Avars passed through the region but with no lasting (or discernible) effect on the East Slavs, who had begun to spread south and east. From the late eighth century to the mid-ninth century merchants from the Middle East and Germanic commercial groups began to move into the regions inhabited by Finns and Slavic tribes, but these latter groups seem to have offered scant resistance to these activities.

In the ninth century Scandinavian traders set up a center near what is now Ryazan, and mention of the first ruler of Rus is found in Western and Islamic writings. This ruler, called a khagan, controlled what can be regarded as the beginning of the Kievan state. With other Scandinavian raiders, the Varangians, the Rus moved down the major rivers toward Baghdad and Constantinople. Rurik of Jutland, the head of one of the Scandinavian tribes, founded the dynasty that would rule various regions of East Slavic territory until 1598. Written sources describe Rus raids on Constantinople and the northern Caucasus in the early 10th century.

From 930 to 1000 the Varangians gained control of the trade route from the Baltic to the Black Sea, creating what became the basis of Kiev's economy and setting the pattern for its political and cultural evolution. While the Varangian Rus could not have thought of themselves as "Scandinavians," they were not East Slavs either; yet they played a central role in organizing the land that would come to be named for them.

From its beginning with Prince Svyatoslav (d. 972), the new East Slavic political power was torn between the impulse to centralization and the impossibility of controlling the sprawling territories. In spite of his victories against other Varangian rulers, the Khazars, and the Bulgars, Svyatoslav was not a unifier. That task was left to his son, Vladimir (c. 980–1015), who would establish the political system that would rule the widespread state, and he invited the patriarch of Constantinople to create an Episcopate in Rus. Vladimir successfully increased his territories, destroyed or assimilated the remaining Varangian clans, and endeavored to establish peaceful relationships with nearby dynasties.

The inherent contradictions between the desire for autonomy, on the one hand, and the need for centralized control and unity on the other, set the stage for what would become the political history of Rus. By the middle of the 12th century, the major territories, because of the prosperity of Kiev, had become autonomous political and economic units. The strands of continuity were everywhere strained, if not broken, in the period following the decline of Kiev. The distinctiveness of the character and historical events of the major East Slavic regions was clear during the Kiev period and persisted into the 20th century.

Following the longest civil war in Russian history, Vasily II (the Blind; 1415–62) became the Grand Prince of Moscow (Muscovy). His son Ivan III (1440–1505), also known as Ivan the Great and the first to call himself “grand duke of all the Russians,” succeeded his father after serving with him as co-regent. Sometimes also referred to as the “gathering of the Russian lands,” he sought to unify the various territories and established what would become the Russian autocracy. His son Vasily III continued the effort to unify the vast territory, but it would be his son Ivan IV the Terrible (1530–84), who would succeed. By incorporating all the surrounding areas, including the Kazan and Astrakhan Khanates to the east and parts of Siberia, he created the Russian Empire. He was called Ivan the Terrible because he was considered the most ruthless tyrant of his times. When the last tsar of that dynasty died without leaving an heir, Sweden and Poland claimed the throne. Finally in 1613, 16-year-old Michael Romanov (1596–1645) of the Romanov Dynasty was elected, and the Romanovs ruled Russia for the next four hundred years. During this time, Russia became a major European power. A member of the same dynasty, Peter the Great (1672–1725), who ruled from 1689 until his death, transformed Russia. He wanted to make Russia more modern militarily, economically, and socially. He traveled a lot.

**Tsar**

The word tsar (or caesar) is derived from the Latin caesar, which means "emperor." It was the title used for the autocratic rulers of the First and Second Bulgarian Empires starting in 913, for the rulers of Serbia in the middle of the 14th century, and for Russia’s rulers from 1547 to 1917.
and learned about European trade, culture, and warfare. Soon Russia was every bit the equal of England, France, and Germany.

When World War I began and Austria declared war on Serbia, Russia went to war to defend the Serbs but was ill prepared for the battle. The ruler Tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918) was not very strong, and the Russian army was defeated. Riots broke out and the Romanovs were overthrown in 1917. Consequently the Bolshevik wing of the Communist Party came to power and formed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) came to power and the Russian Empire strengthened. Under his reign, the USSR fought against Germany in World War II and won. After the war the USSR, United States, Great Britain, and France divided Germany into four zones to be governed by each of the four countries. The USSR’s dominance increased, and hostilities between the world’s two superpowers, the United States and USSR, continued for the next 43 years. While there was no actual fighting, both sides spent enormous amounts of money “fighting” what is known as the “Cold War.”

On March 11, 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev (b. 1931) was elected as the General Secretary of the party. From 1985–88 Gorbachev radically changed the course of the USSR’s foreign policy when he introduced the policies of glasnost (“political openness”), perestroika (“economic restructuring”), and uskorenie (“quickened economic development”). In 1990 he was elected president. However, Gorbachev’s policies to create more political openness reawakened long-suppressed nationalist and anti-Russian feelings in the USSR’s constituent republics. Toward the end of the 1980s, the process of openness and democratization was beyond control. One by one the Soviet republics declared their sovereignty. In September 1991 the USSR recognized the independence of the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Ukraine declared its independence from the USSR in December 1991. In the same month the leaders of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian republics issued a declaration that the USSR was dissolved and was to be replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States.

On December 25, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as president of the USSR, and Boris Yeltsin (b. 1931) succeeded him. After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia faced a multitude of problems. The gross domestic product (GDP) of the country fell, and poverty increased. In the early years of the 21st century, however, Russia’s economy was stabilizing and the country’s GDP is now about one-third of that of the United Kingdom.

**GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE**

Russia, even after the disintegration of the USSR, remains the largest country in the world in terms of area. The country spans both Europe and Asia, stretching from the Baltic Sea in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east, and the Arctic Ocean in the north to the Black Sea in the south. Russia shares land boundaries with Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, China, and North Korea.

The Russian landscape is mostly flat and low lying and consists of plains—a region called Siberia. Most of Siberia lies within Russian territory, but some parts belong to Mongolia. These plains are heavily forested toward the north and remain grassy in the southern parts. The relatively low Ural mountain ranges (the highest point is 6,234 feet) are centrally located, acting as a divide between Europe and Asia. The three main rivers of Russia are the Dnieper, Don, and Volga. To the south Russia has the Caucasus mountain range where Mount Elbrus (18,510 feet), Europe’s highest peak, is located. Eastern Russia also has the Verkhoyansk range, and the peninsula of Kamchatka has 160 volcanoes, 29 of which are still active.

The vast expanse of Russia accommodates a great variety of landscapes and climates. Most parts of Russia remain under snow at least six months of the year. The average temperature found across the country is 32°F, and the average is even lower in Siberia. However, the coastal regions are much warmer during the summer months. The climate in Russia can be classified as temperate to Arctic continental.

Forests of pine, spruce, deciduous trees, coniferous forests, steppe grasslands, and even deserts are to be found in Russia. Animals, such as snow leopards, cheetahs, porcupines, gazelles, wild goats, chamois, reindeer, wolves, brown bears, deer, lynx, and the Siberian tiger are also found here. Currently the flora and fauna of Russia are endangered due to poaching, pollution, and fur hunters, but efforts are under way to preserve the remaining wildlife. There are over 140 state nature reserves and several breeding programs to ensure the continued welfare of animal species in Russia.

**ECONOMY**

Even though Russians cultivate food grains, sugar beets, sunflower seeds, vegetables, fruits, and obtain beef and milk from livestock, agriculture is not a major contributor to the economy. Russian soil is unsuitable for extensive agriculture (only 10 percent of the land is arable) and, as a result, the major GDP contributors are industries and services. Tourism has emerged as an important source of foreign exchange.
Caviar is the processed, salted roe (eggs) of various species of fish, but primarily sturgeon. This delicacy is marketed all over the world as a favorite garnish on hors d’oeuvres. Caviar is often highly priced and is associated with haute cuisine. The world’s best caviar comes from the Russian coastal regions. The word caviar comes from the Persian word khag-avar, which means “roe-generator,” to denote the fish as well as its roe. Vegetarian caviar, a soy-based delicacy, is marketed for the vegetarian gourmet market.

The major industries of Russia include mining and coal production, oil, gas, chemicals, metals, machine building, aircraft, space vehicles, shipbuilding, road and rail transportation equipment, communications equipment, agricultural machinery, electric power generating and transmitting equipment, medical and scientific instruments, consumer durables, textiles, foodstuffs, and handicrafts.

Russia is rich in minerals and natural resources. Deposits of oil, natural gas, coal, minerals, and stands of timber are abundant. The country also enjoys good trade relations with Germany, Italy, Netherlands, China, United States, Ukraine, Belarus, Switzerland, Kazakhstan, and France. Russia exports petroleum and petroleum products, natural gas, wood, metals, chemicals, and civilian and military goods. The major imports are machinery and equipment, consumer goods, medicines, meat, sugar, and metal products.

The Russian economy suffered major setbacks after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. The country is now working to reduce the unemployment rate and the economic disparity seen among various regions in Russia itself. Moscow is the hub of economic activity, while there are some regions in Asian Russia that are very backward and underdeveloped.

**CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE**

Russia’s different ethnic groups together form a rich cultural background for the country. The Orthodox Church, along with the Soviet regime, influenced Russian art forms in many ways. Russia has enjoyed rich cultural growth and development for a major part of its turbulent history. The Soviet regime undoubtedly stifled freedom in various fields such as literature, music, religion, and other media of expression. In spite of that, there emerged a new Soviet-characterized style in all these fields.

Russian literature has produced famous writers (some of whom won Nobel prizes for literature) including Alexander Pushkin (1779–1837), Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81), Ivan Turgenev (1818–83), Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), Nikolay Gogol (1809–52), and Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) during different periods in Russian history. Apart from these contributions, some world-famous fairy tales, like The Frog Princess, are of Russian origin.

Russian music was tightly monitored during the Soviet era. However, Russian folk, rock, and pop music survived the regime and have now become the most popular musical forms. The 200-year-old Moscow State Circus and the unique Russian Bolshoi Ballet have all contributed to Russian culture.

When one thinks of Russian architecture, the onion-shaped domes familiar from the Kremlin come to mind. The architecture found in this country has been predominantly religious in nature, with churches having Greek crosses and huge domes. After the dissolution of the USSR there has been a renewed interest in restoring ancient and traditional Russian art forms that are visible in these buildings. The traditional art form of iconography originated here during the medieval period. These were paintings of religious images, often with favored saints shown in the presence of God. This practice, frowned upon by Catholics as a form of idolatry, is very popular in the Russian Orthodox Church.

Russians are known for their technological prowess, especially in the field of aeronautics and space research. The Russians launched Sputnik, the first artificial satellite. The first human to go into space was the Russian Yury Gagarin (1934–68) and the first woman to go into space was Valentina Tereshkova (b. 1937).

**CUISINE**

Russian cuisine consists of a wide variety of soups, fish, cereal, and drinks. Vegetables, meats, fruits, mushrooms, berries, and herbs are used in Russian cooking. Russia is a country with very cold winters so the foods consumed there are rich in carbohydrates and fat rather than proteins. Fresh fruits and vegetables are rarely used in cooking. Russian products, such as caviar, buckwheat, and rye flour are widely used in international cuisine.

The main meal is normally eaten at dinnertime and may include beef, chicken, fish, or vegetables. Russians also enjoy a variety of soups during different meals. They have some national soups like mors (a berry drink) are popular even among non-Russians. The beer found in Russian areas is relatively stronger than in most of the European countries. Russians also consume large amounts of coffee and tea.
Public/Legal Holidays

NEW YEAR’S EVE/DAY

Observed by: General Public  
Observed on: December 31–January 2

January 1 marks the beginning of the Western, or Gregorian, calendar and is celebrated as New Year's Day all over the world. Celebrations begin on December 31 (New Year's Eve) and continue through January 2. In Russia the New Year's celebrations have largely replaced Christmas as the major holiday of the season. On New Year's Eve people decorate fir trees, called yolka, and place gifts for family and friends under them. It is a time spent rejoicing with family members. Russian children receive presents from Grandfather Frost (Dyed Moroz, the Russian equivalent of Santa Claus) and the Snow Maiden (Snyegurochka), and take part in special functions in their schools.

Russians also cook a special meal to celebrate the New Year; it includes smoked fish, caviar, roasted meats, and other goodies. Many cakes and other sweets are served, but two of the very special cakes are babka, a round yeast cake, and kulich, a fancy three-tiered fruit bread. (The three layers symbolize the Christian Trinity.) A lot of liquid refreshment is served as well.

Muscovites listen to the bells chime in Red Square and wait for the country's main clock in the Kremlin to strike midnight. Then they drink champagne, greet each other, and make personal resolutions. The second day after New Year's is also a public holiday, and schools and workplaces are closed.

OLD NEW YEAR’S DAY

Observed by: Orthodox Christians  
Observed on: January 13

Even though the term “Old New Year” sounds like an oxymoron, the Russians are only too glad to celebrate New Year's twice a year. This day was the beginning of the new year according to the Julian calendar, which was followed in Russia until February 1918. This is not an official holiday in Russia anymore, but festivities are held all across the country. It is a day set aside for family, and most Russians stay at home.

DEFENDER OF THE MOTHERLAND DAY

Observed by: General Public  
Observed on: February 23

This day was declared a public holiday only in 2001. During the Soviet era, February 23 was known as the Day of the Soviet Army and Navy. Now it is called the Defender of the Motherland Day. This is usually a day off from work. It is treated as the male equivalent of International Women's Day in Russia, and women present men with flowers and gifts.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY

Observed by: General Public  
Observed on: March 8

International Women's Day (IWD), observed annually on March 8, is an important day of global celebration for the economic, political, and social achievements of women. The proposal to have a special day on which to recognize women and their many achievements was first suggested at the turn of the 20th century, when rapid industrialization and economic expansion led to workers’ protests over dangerous working conditions. Women who worked in clothing and textile factories had held a demonstration on March 8, 1857, in New York City, protesting what they saw as very poor working conditions and low wages.

The first IWD was observed on February 28, 1909, in the United States, following a declaration by the Socialist Party of America. International Women’s Day was declared the following year at the first international women's conference in Copenhagen, organized by the Socialist International. On March 25, 1911, the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City killed over 140 women. A lack of safety measures was blamed for the high death toll. In the West, International Women's Day was observed during the 1910s and 1920s and then lapsed into obscurity until the second wave of feminism revived it in the 1960s. In 1975 the United Nations began sponsoring International Women's Day.

On this day in Russia, men present women with gifts and flowers. Traditionally the men take over all domestic tasks and give the women a day off from chores. This day is also considered and celebrated as the advent of spring in Russia.

Fun Fact
Santa Claus was the name given to St. Nicholas (c. 270–345/352), a real person born in Asia Minor at the Greco-Roman city of Myra in the province of Lycia (now in Turkey), when the entire culture of the region was Greek. St. Nicholas was the patron saint of Russia. When the Soviet government suppressed religious observances, St. Nicholas was replaced by Dyed Moroz, or Grandfather Frost, the Russian spirit of winter who brought gifts on New Year's.

See also Volume III: SPRING FESTIVALS
**LABOR DAY**

**Celebrated by:** General Public  
**Observed on:** May 1–2

May 1 is celebrated as Labor Day, also known as May Day or Workers’ Day, in many parts of the world to commemorate the important role played by workers in building nations and societies. The earliest origins of May Day celebrations are ascribed to pagan rituals that were practiced by farmers, peasants, and villagers in Europe well before the Middle Ages, and this is one of the reasons the day is also called Spring and Labor Holiday in Russia. The radical politics underlying the observance, however, go back to 1889, when the Second International, a consortium of socialist organizations, designated May 1 a day to recognize the importance of workers around the world and scheduled the first demonstrations and celebrations for the following year, 1890. They coordinated this observance with the strike called by the U.S. labor union, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), demanding an eight-hour workday.

In Russia Labor Day celebrations last for two days, when the traditions of “making subbotnik” are observed; people wash, clean, and place everything in order. This activity is often done in small groups at the workplace or in schools and back yards. On these days there are festive parades through Moscow’s Red Square and St. Petersburg’s Palace Square. May 1 was known as Day of the International Solidarity of Workers during the Soviet regime, and Communist demonstrations were held on Russian streets on this day.

*See also* Volume III: Labor Day; Spring Festivals

**VICTORY DAY**

**Observed by:** General Public  
**Observed on:** May 9

Victory Day commemorates the defeat of German Fascists by the Soviet allies during World War II, which ended in 1945. This is one of the most celebrated national holidays in Russia. People go to see military parades and other demonstrations. War veterans visit the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and honor their fallen comrades. The national media broadcast patriotic programs and songs. War memorial services are held in places such as the Piskaryovskoye Cemetery in St. Petersburg. There are numerous concerts, fireworks displays, and other entertainments in city parks. Russia wears a patriotic look with banners everywhere that salute the soldiers. On this day all Russian schools and offices are closed.

**CONSTITUTION DAY**

**Observed by:** General Public  
**Observed on:** December 12

Constitution Day commemorates the day in 1993 when Russians chose to be a democratic state.

**CHRISTMAS**

**Observed by:** Christians  
**Observed on:** January 7

Christmas, called Sochelnik in Russia, is a day of celebration for Christians all over the world and marks the birth of Jesus. As in most other Orthodox Christian countries Christmas in Russia is celebrated on January 7 to conform to the Julian calendar and not December 25, the official holiday of the Gregorian, or Western, calendar. Following the 1917 revolution, Christmas was banned in Russia, along with other religious celebrations. It was not until 75 years later in 1992 that the holiday was openly observed again. It is once again celebrated, with the faithful attending an all-night liturgy. However, Christmas is a quiet holiday.

**Fun Fact**

Orthodox Christians call the pre-Christmas fast “Lesser Lent” to distinguish it from the more important fast that precedes Easter, called “Great Lent.”
In Russia Christmas celebrations begin on Christmas Eve (January 6), when Orthodox Christians break a 39-day-long fast with a 12-course dinner, each course in honor of an Apostle of Jesus. The fast for Christmas continues until someone spots the first evening star on Christmas Eve. The 12 courses include: mushroom soup (or sauerkraut soup) with zaprashka (a brown sauce); a Lenten bread (pagach); grated garlic; a bowl of honey; baked cod; fresh apricots, oranges, figs, and dates; nuts; kidney beans with shredded potatoes seasoned with lots of garlic; peas; parsley potatoes; bobalki (small biscuits combined with sauerkraut or poppy seed with honey); and a lot of red wine. Russians make a traditional dish called kutya on this day; it is a porridge of various grains, honey, and poppy seeds.

One of the many ceremonies associated with the Christmas Eve is called Kolyadki. During this ceremony people wish each other wealth and happiness. Like many other Russian celebrations, this is a pagan ritual that has been assimilated and continued as a Christmas activity. People used to pray to the ancient solar goddess Kolyada to make the days grow longer.

As a part of the ceremony people make a snow lady, called Lady Kolyada, with a carrot nose, prunes for eyes, and green beans for teeth. It is believed that Lady Kolyada joins groups of people carrying decorated stars, to visit and greet people during this season. People sing and dance around the snow lady with torches of fire and push a festive wheel. Children also dress up as animals usually shown as part of Christmas nativity scenes (sheep, cattle, and donkeys), sing Christmas carols, and pray to Baby Jesus.

Families also attend church and offer prayers in a special liturgy before Christmas.

On Christmas Day the festivities continue with church services, followed by dining on special Christmas delicacies, such as fish, borscht, cabbage stuffed with millet, and cooked dried fruit. People sing carols and gather around the Christmas tree to exchange gifts on this day. Children open gifts that they have received from St. Nicholas. Russian families gather at lunch or dinner to celebrate Christmas with a special meal that usually features a roasted goose and pork dishes.

See also Volume III: CHRISTIANITY; CHRISTMAS; LENT

★ ST. TATIANA DAY

**Observed by:** Orthodox Christians
**Observed on:** January 25

St. Tatiana Day, also called Students’ Day or Tatiana’s Fête, commemorates the feast of St. Tatiana, who lived in Rome from 223–35. She practiced Christianity at a time when the Romans were persecuting Christians. As a result, she and her family were tortured and put to death by the Roman emperor Alexander Severus. The Russians honor and pray for St. Tatiana on this day. This is also seen as the beginning of the winter holidays in Russia. The students of Russia have another special reason to celebrate this day. In 1775 on this day, the Empress Elizabeth signed a decree to establish Moscow University. Russian students rarely get to celebrate New Year’s Day because they are busy preparing for exams. On Students’ Day they make up for that loss by partying and having fun.

See also Volume III: CHRISTIANITY

★ BLINI DAY

**Observed by:** General Public
**Observed on:** One day before the beginning of Lent

Blini Day, or Maslyanitsa (Butter Festival), is the eve of Lent, and Russians celebrate this day by eating special pancakes served with honey, fresh cream, and caviar. Some people celebrate the occasion by breaking holes in frozen lakes and rivers and swimming in the icy water. There is a traditional Russian carnival held on this day and the week preceding it. This day is celebrated by wearing masks and costumes, dances, songs, children’s events, as well as by consuming hot tea and pancakes, generally served outdoors.

Blini Day has a pagan origin. Long ago, Russians celebrated the arrival of spring on this day. They burned a scarecrow to signify the end of a harsh winter. People made round yellow pancakes that resemble the Sun, in the Sun’s honor. When Russians embraced Christianity, they modified this festival and began celebrating both the beginning of Lent and the end of winter simultaneously. On this day all food items that are to be avoided during Lent (namely butter, cheese, cream, and meat) are eaten. These practices have given the celebration other names—Pancake Week and Cheese Week; in French-speaking countries the day is known as Mardi Gras, and in English-speaking countries it is known as Fat Tuesday or Shrove Tuesday.
**HOLY WEEK**

**Observed by:** Christians  
**Observed on:** March

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, as in other Christian sects, Easter is the central observance of the liturgical year, and the date of most church holidays is determined by the date on which Easter falls. Easter is the feast of feasts. Although every Sunday in the Eastern Orthodox Church is dedicated to Jesus' Resurrection, 100 more days are dedicated specifically to the events of Easter—50 before it in preparation, and 50 after it for glorifying Christ. The 50 days prior to Easter are a part of the period of Triodion, the period for strengthening one's faith. The means are well known: repentance, prayer, and self-control. The 50 days following Easter are the Pentecostarion (from the Greek pentikonta, meaning fifty).

Holy Week begins with the phrase: “Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany.” His arrival coincided with the Jewish Passover (Pesach). The church relates preparation and redemption to the events of this week.

In Russia the observances of Holy Week begin on the Saturday Morning of St. Lazarus, the day before Palm Sunday. On this day the raising from the dead of St. Lazarus, the friend of Jesus, is celebrated.

See also Volume III: Christianity; Easter; Holy Week; Lent; Palm Sunday; Pesach

**Palm Sunday**

**Observed by:** Christians  
**Observed on:** Last Sunday before Easter

Palm Sunday remembers Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, amid thongs of palm-bearing devotees.

See also Volume III: Christianity; Easter; Holy Week; Lent; Palm Sunday

**HOLY MONDAY**

**Observed by:** Christians  
**Observed on:** Monday before Easter

On Holy Monday, the faithful remember how Jesus cursed a fig tree that had leaves and no fruit—a reminder of the holowness of outward piety.

See also Volume III: Christianity; Easter; Holy Week; Lent

**HOLY TUESDAY**

**Observed by:** Christians  
**Observed on:** Tuesday before Easter

Tuesday of Holy Week (often observed in advance on Monday evening) commemorates the parable of the Ten Virgins. Ethical preparation and wakefulness are the foundations of vivid faith.

See also Volume III: Christianity; Easter; Holy Week; Lent

**HOLY WEDNESDAY**

**Observed by:** Christians  
**Observed on:** Wednesday before Easter

Holy Wednesday commemorates the anointing of Jesus with myrrh at the house of Simon the leper.

See also Volume III: Christianity; Easter; Holy Week; Lent; Maundy Thursday

**MAUNDY THURSDAY**

**Observed by:** Christians  
**Observed on:** Thursday before Easter

Maundy Thursday celebrates: the washing of the disciples’ feet; the institution of the Holy Eucharist; the marvelous prayer; and Judas’s betrayal of Jesus.

See also Volume III: Christianity; Easter; Holy Week; Lent; Maundy Thursday

**GOOD FRIDAY**

**Observed by:** Christians  
**Observed on:** Friday before Easter

Good Friday celebrates Jesus’ Passion on the Cross. According to Christian belief, to take away sins he willingly endured the Cross and death. The confession from the cross of the penitent thief, crucified with Jesus, is celebrated. During the procession, the faithful kneel and pray for their spiritual welfare, then reverently kiss the crucifix.

During Good Friday services the removal of Jesus’ body from the Cross is commemorated with a sense of mourning for the terrible events that occurred. As the priest reads the Gospel, he removes Jesus’ body from the cross, wraps it in a white cloth, and takes it to the altar. The priest then carries the cloth on which the body of Jesus is painted or embroidered around the church before placing it inside the sepulcher, a carved bier that symbolizes the tomb, reminding the faithful that during Jesus’ entombment he descended into Hades to free the dead of the ages.

After several hymns are sung, the priest sprinkles the sepulcher and the whole congregation with fragrant water.

Christians observe Good Friday with fasting, prayer, cleanliness, self-examination, confession, and good works, in humility and repentance. Psalms are read and Resurrection hymns are sung that tell of Jesus’ descent into Hades. Most of the readings of this day are from the Old Testament. On this day the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil is officiated.

See also Volume III: Christianity; Easter; Good Friday; Holy Week; Lent
**Easter Eggs**

Russian Easter eggs are red because this was the color of the blood Jesus shed for his people. It is also believed that when Mary Magdalene visited Emperor Tiberius, she handed him a red egg and proclaimed, “Christ has risen!”

Russian Easter eggs are dyed red by boiling eggs with onion skins. Onion peels are gathered for this purpose in the weeks that precede Easter. Depending on the color of the peels, Easter eggs can be bright red or dark brown. These eggs are used for different Easter games. In one such game, one person holds an Easter egg firmly in his or her hand, while others try to crack it by hitting it with their Easter eggs. Whoever eventually has an unbroken Easter egg emerges as the winner.

There are special Easter eggs known as *pyansky* in Russia. These masterpieces are impressively painted and decorated with jewels and stones and are often kept for public display. Some of the most famous Easter eggs were made by court jeweler and artist Peter Karl Fabergé (1846–1920), who was commissioned in 1884 by Tsar Alexander III (1845–94) to make a special Easter present for the tsar’s wife.

**Easter**

*Observed by:* Christians  
*Observed on:* First Sunday after Lent

 Called Pashka in Russia, Easter celebrates the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Christian savior. The Russian Easter tradition includes baking a cake the night before and giving children red-painted eggs, symbolizing the blood of Jesus and eternal life.  

*See also* Volume III: Christianity; Easter; Holy Week; Lent; Spring Festivals

**Red Hill Day**

*Observed by:* Orthodox Christians  
*Observed on:* First Sunday after Easter

Red Hill Day, known in Russian as Krasnaya Gorka, is celebrated on the first Sunday after Easter to welcome the advent of spring. Russians consider this day to be ideal for weddings. On this day, people gather at St. Petersburg to sing Easter songs, play Easter games, and take part in other traditional Russian festivities. In the past people welcomed spring during this holiday, as if “inviting” it to their lands. The appearance of the first green leaves on the trees after winter was usually celebrated by singing and dancing around the trees.

*See also* Volume III: Christianity; Easter; Spring Festivals

**Feast of St. John the Baptist**

*Observed by:* Christians  
*Observed on:* July 7

In Russia this day is known as the Day of Ivan Kupala. Ivan Kupala is the Russian name for John the Baptist. It is associated with St. Andrew as well. It is a holiday that has its roots in pagan times with the celebration of the summer solstice, the longest day of the year. (The winter solstice, when the longest night of the year is celebrated, is called Korochun.) Originally a time when pagan fertility rites were observed, it has been adopted into the Orthodox Christian calendar.

It was believed that on this day the Sun was forced to sink, and a young girl helped the Sun rise again by washing it with the dew collected from
St. John’s Night on the Bare Mountain

This work is commonly known as *Night on Bald Mountain*. The story is about a peasant who sees a witches’ sabbath on the Bald Mountain near Kiev on St. John’s Eve. In Russian, Ivanova noch’ na Lisyore, this work is commonly known as *Night on Bald Mountain*.

**Fun Fact**

On this day, youngsters collect plants and herbs that are believed to have curative powers, such as *medvezhye ushko* (“bear’s ear”), *bogetenka* (“rich people’s grass”), and *razrye-trava* (“love-break-grass”). These herbs are then put under the pillows of people who are ill. During earlier times, young boys and girls would swim in the river late at night and jump over bonfires in pairs. If after the jump they were still holding hands, it was considered a good sign, indicating the couple would marry soon.

See also Volume III: Christianity

**PENTECOST**

Observed by: Christians  
Observed on: Fifty days after Easter

The Russian celebration of Pentecost is known as Troitsa (the Holy Trinity) and is widely celebrated. On this day people decorate their houses with green branches. In the past they clothed birch trees like maidens and sang and danced around them. They also made garlands of birch branches and flowers that had been immersed in water and used them for fortune-telling.

See also Volume III: Christianity; Easter; Pentecost

**Regional Holidays**

**MOSCOW’S DAY**

Observed by: General Public  
Observed on: September 19  
Observed in: Moscow

Moscow, the Russian capital, is more than 850 years old. It is the administrative hub of the country as well as the center of the Orthodox Church. On Moscow’s Day, or Day of the City, the city celebrates its birthday with a series of patriotic events and other official ceremonies. The Russian president and other administrative officials take part in the festivities. The national television and radio channels broadcast special programs on this day. The streets are colorfully decorated, and there are parades held on the streets of Moscow. Music, street performances, and dances are the highlights of this day.

**FESTIVAL OF THE NORTH**

Observed in: Kola Peninsula  
Observed by: General Public  
Observed on: Late March or early April

The Festival of the North is an annual event that has been held in the Kola Peninsular region of Russia since 1934. The largest celebrations take place in the city of Murmansk, the capital of the beautiful but isolated Kola region. (Murmansk is the largest city in the world north of the Arctic Circle!) This event, which lasts 10 days, celebrates the end of “polar nights,” the time when the Sun does not shine at all, which is most of December and January.

Sporting events such as ice hockey, skiing, and reindeer racing take place during this time. Some people go for a swim in the icy waters of Lake Semyonovskyaya. During this festival the ethnic Sami people hold reindeer contests, celebrate with singing, dancing, drinking, and feasting. They celebrate their culture because it has survived adverse conditions for thousands of years.

**DAY OF MEMORY AND GRIEF**

Observed in: Khabarovsk  
Observed by: General Public  
Observed on: June 22

This day is marked to commemorate the events that occurred in Khabarovsk in 1941 during World War II. The Japanese Imperial Army invaded Khabarovsk but soon met with resistance from the Russians. Some claim that the Japanese army used biological weapons in Khabarovsk during this war. In any event, the severe weather conditions made fighting difficult anyway, and many soldiers from both sides perished in the war.

On this day the administrators of the territory of Khabarovsk and war veterans lay garlands at the Eternal Flame in Slava (Glory) Square. The guards of honor salute the dead, while everyone observes a moment of silence. Meetings of veterans are held with the youth at the city’s schools.

**Rites of Passage**

**BIRTH**

Even though Russians may not follow this ritual today, the *bania* (sauna) birth is worth mentioning. Russians, like the inhabitants of the frigid Scandinavian countries, considered sweat baths to be a cleansing ritual, and elaborate arrangements for steam saunas were made in Russian households. Since these places were considered the most hygienic place in the house, women often gave birth inside banias. The midwife assisted the mother during the process, while also trying to protect her from evil spirits.
After the birth occurred, both the mother and child were lightly beaten with birch twigs to purify them.

**MARRIAGE**

Russian couples have two wedding ceremonies: civil and religious. The church wedding is not considered legal or official even today. However, if a couple lives together for two consecutive years, they are considered legally married. The civil wedding is barely attended by any relatives or friends, but the church wedding is a big affair. The Russian Orthodox Church has its own set of unique rituals and traditions. The rings and the couple are blessed by the priest. They couple then walk around a table on which the Bible and a crucifix have been placed. Next the couple are crowned as king and queen of their domestic kingdom. They drink wine from a common cup during the ceremony to symbolize unity and the sharing of joys and sorrows.

After the ceremony the guests throw coins on the couple to wish them unbounded wealth and fortune in their life together. The couple then takes a small tour around the city visiting historic sites and laying flowers at the Grave of the Unknown Soldier. When they return to the banquet hall, a feast is held in their honor. Food, drinks, dancing, singing, and toasting are a part of all Russian wedding parties. Some feasts are known to go on for two days.

**DEATH**

When a Russian dies, the body is placed in an open casket and kept in a funeral home for the mourners to grieve. The mourners wear dark clothes and bring an even number of flowers for the dead. No one in Russia gives an even number of flowers to their loved ones, unless that person is dead. After the funeral service, the family members have a memorial dinner or a “mercy meal” in the honor of the deceased. If the deceased leaves behind a widow, she wears black for two years.

**Further Reading**