

RUSSIAN CULTURE

EDUCATION

Russian children begin school when they are 6 years old. Elementary school consists of the first 4 grades, middle school consists of 5 grades and high school is 2 grades. It is only required that children attend the first 9 grades. After that a child can go to work or do work/study. If a child wants to go to the University, however, he or she must complete all 11 grades. There are approximately 25-30 students in each class. All students learn at least one foreign language in school.

After classes children can stay at school, much like after-school programs in the U.S. until 6 pm. During this time the children can play, do homework, or participate in other activities such as dancing, singing, painting, or sports. These after-school programs are for free.

Children are expected to be ready if the teacher calls them to answer homework questions or problems at the blackboard. If a student is not ready he or she will receive a bad grade. The grading system is: 5-excellent, 4 - very good, 3 - satisfactory, 2 - negative mark - if a student is not prepared or if his answer was very bad. Student's grades are not treated as confidential. All classmates know exactly who received which grade; the reason is to encourage children to compete for better grades. Poor grades are an embarrassment.

If a student is graduating a school with only "5"s, and has had no lower grades in total marks for all 11 years, he or she will receive a "Gold medal". If the student has one "4" he or she will receive a "Silver medal". Earning a Gold medal is a big advantage for admission to a higher educational institution.

Unlike the U.S., students remain in the same classes with their first grade classmates from 1st through 11th grade. The classmates therefore know each other very well because they study and grow up together. After school classmates remain lifelong friends.

Another very big difference between Russian and American schools is the amount of discipline and respect between teacher and student. Russian teachers are very strict and the children cannot talk, misbehave or be disrespectful in the classroom; it simply is not tolerated. This is true at the college and university level as well.

Russian education system has three levels: school (called "school's education"), college ("middle education" and University ("high education"). A University education is more prestigious and higher than a College/middle education.

HOLIDAYS

New Year Celebration

This is the most favorite holiday in Russia. It is anticipated as much as the Christmas holiday is in the U.S.

When the communists came into power they forbid religious holidays. But Christmas tradition was so strong (the people continued to decorate the Christmas trees in an underhand way) and the government allowed the people to celebrate what was the

Christmas holiday now in a different way and at a different time: now as a New Year holiday so long as the religious meaning was eliminated.

Gradually the religious meaning to the holiday has deteriorated leaving the general meaning of the New Year holiday as one for a hope that the new year will be more happy and that all bad remains behind in the old year. But the non-religious traditions of the Christmas holiday remain: Santa Claus, gifts, dancing around the Christmas tree and happy family times.

Russian version of Santa Claus

Old man Frost or "Ded Moroz" is the favored legend. Outwardly he resembles Santa Claus. He wears a long coat (usually red, sometimes blue), has a long beard and felt boots and carries a stick and a big sack. He comes by horses, usually 3. In the northern part of Russia he comes by deer.

Old man Frost comes with his granddaughter, Snegurochka, the Snow Maiden, to help deliver the gifts. Snegurochka is made of snow; she is a beautiful young girl. She is always a blonde with big blue eyes and red cheeks. She too wears either a blue or red long coat. When the people decorate their apartments and Christmas tree, they place a Santa Claus and Snegurochka either under the Christmas tree or somewhere else in the room.

Gifts are never put in stockings. Russian Santa Claus lays the gifts down under the tree (at midnight). If the children are too small and are sleeping on New Year's night (eve), they run to see under the tree when they awaken. If a family is celebrating the holiday together, all the gifts are put under the tree before midnight. After midnight everyone goes to the tree and opens gifts. After that they celebrate with a large festive dinner. It is a very late night. New Year's gifts are big and generous.

Russia has special children's New Year Parties (called "New Year Tree"). They take place one week before New Year and two weeks after (winter school vacations). This is special show for children (preschool, elementary and part of middle school age), with St. Claus, Snegurochka, gifts, singing and dancing around the Christmas tree. The parents buy a ticket for the child. The show is much like the Radio City Music Hall show in New York City.

Russians do not celebrate Halloween, but at Christmas time people wear different costumes at New Year's parties. In country areas, children dress in costumes and go from neighbor to neighbor and are given candy and treats, much like Halloween. The children will dance and sing when they visit the neighbors. Very often the costumes are sewn by the parents.

There are many popular children's Christmas songs (like American "Jingle Bells"). Eventually you will find a link here so you can hear some of the songs.

New Year's Eve (called New Year's Night in Russia) is a big celebration. There are many people in the streets celebrating. Families with young children celebrate at home just with their own family. Young single people like to go out from home. In the big cities there are many choices: many clubs and restaurants have special programs. The theatres and ballet are also popular on December 31 and January 1. Nobody wants to be alone on this night.

Russian Orthodox Easter

Pascha is the highest celebration of the Orthodox Church. Russian Orthodox churches herald in the glorious event with a service, beginning at midnight on Pascha Sunday. After the service, proclaiming Christ's Resurrection, Easter baskets are blessed and shared. The signifies the end of the Great Lent, a forty day period of fasting.

May Day - May 1-2

Originally the "Day of International Solidarity of Workers", it became just a holiday of spring and labor, though communists make their traditional demonstrations on that day, also called "International Labor Day".

DANCE

Russia is world-renowned for its ballet dancers. Dancers such as Alexander Godunov have brought world-wide attention to the art form.

The original purpose of the ballet in Russia was to entertain the royal court. In the early 19th century, the theaters were opened up to anyone who could afford a ticket. There was a seating section called a *rayok*, or 'paradise gallery', that consisted of simple wooden benches. This allowed non-wealthy people to the ballet because tickets in this section were inexpensive.

The first ballet company was the Imperial School of Ballet in St. Petersburg in the 1740s. The Ballet Russe was a ballet company founded in the 1909. The headquarters of the ballet company was located in Paris, France. George Balanchine, founded the New York City Ballet Company in 1948. Today, the Kirov Ballet company (now known as the Mariinsky Ballet) and the Bol'shoy company are two world-renowned Russian ballet companies that tour the world

DOLLS

A **Matryoshka doll** or a **Russian nested doll** is a set of dolls of decreasing sizes placed one inside the other. "Matryoshka" (Матрёшка) is a derivative of the Russian female first name "Matryona". A set of matryoshkas consists of a wooden figure which can be pulled apart to reveal another figure of the same sort inside. It has, in turn, another figure inside, and so on. The number of nested figures is usually five or more.

Inside, it contains other figures that may be of both genders, usually ending in a baby that does not open. The artistry is in the painting of each doll, which can be extremely detailed.

Matryoshkas are often designed to follow a particular theme, for instance peasant girls in traditional dress, but the theme can be anything, from fairy tale characters to Soviet leaders.

