**Holidays in Russia, Britain and the USA**

Feasts and festivals serve to meet specific social and psychological needs of the people of the country. Holidays can be religious and secular, national and local, official and unofficial. The dates that are memorable to every Russian citizen are Victory Day, May Day, Constitution Day, Women's Day, and the Day of Sovereignty of the Russian Federation. These are national holidays; people do not work on these days. The most important date in Russia is Victory Day. Observed on May 9, it commemorates the Victory of the Russian troops over the Nazi invaders. On that day the veterans meet in the parks and squares of the cities to recollect the days of war and exchange greetings. Wartime music is played everywhere. At night fireworks are let off. May Day is also very popular in our country. This is the day of friendship and support.

One of the biggest festivals of the year is New Year. Peter I the Great decreed that New Year should be marked in Russia on January 1. The coming of New Year is celebrated with a New Year Tree, presents, Grandpa Frost, European Santa Claus, and a hearty meal. In our country New Year is toasted in champagne at family gatherings. New Year's feasts are widely covered by mass media.

Recently new national holidays have been introduced in our country. These are Christmas and Easter. Christmas and Easter are both religious holidays. Now they are officially marked throughout our country. In Russia Christmas is celebrated on January 7. Easter is the most important holiday for the Orthodox. Besides the religious significance, these holidays have become the days of family reunion and happiness.

The major holidays in Great Britain are New Year's Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Labour Day (May 1), Christmas Day, and Boxing Day. Public holidays are called Bank Holidays, because on these days banks, most of the shops and offices are closed. The Bank Holidays were appointed by the Act of Parliament in 1871.

Christmas is the festival that everyone celebrates on December 25. On Christmas people usually stay with their families. On Christmas Eve children hang stockings at the ends of their beds for Father Christmas to fill them with toys. Boxing Day, marked on December 26, is the day on which boxes of presents are given to the people who have given service during a year. New Year is marked in accordance with the family tradition and personal taste.

Easter Peace Marches have become the feature of the epoch. They are held during Easter Holidays. The first Easter Peace March was held in 1958. The peak of the Easter Peace Marches was reached in the 1960s. These Marches bring together the people who are concerned with the global problems of the future of our planet. In Britain May Day, the day of the workers struggle and solidarity, is observed with marches and rallies. It marks a new stage in workers' efforts to win a better life.

On Whit-Monday (last Monday in May) and the first Monday in August all parks and holiday-places are crowded. In London some people go to Hampton Court Palace, to the Tower of London or to the Zoo.

But besides public holidays the British observe certain traditions on such days as Pancake Day, Bonfire Night or Guy Fawkes Night, April Fool's Day, Mother's Day, which unless they fall on Sunday are ordinary working days. Carnival-like celebrations were held in England on Shrove Tuesday or Pancake Day, the day before the Lenten fast began, until the 19-th century. Feasts of pancakes and much drinking followed the contests; one of them was all-over-town ball game. Today the only regularly observed custom is pancake eating. This tradition of merrymaking and feasting continues also in the United States on Shrove Tuesday in Louisiana. The first of April is known as April Fool's Day or All Fool's Day. It is the day of jokes and any person can become a victim of traditional tricks of the undone shoelace or a crooked tie or a false invitation to a party. For three centuries Mother's Day has been the day of family reunion when adult children come back to their parents with boxes of presents. A typical British festival takes place on November 5. On that day in 1605 Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament. He failed in doing so, but the children of Britain never forget him. Every year, on "Guy Fawkes Night" they make "guys" to burn on bonfires, and let off fireworks.

There are local festivals all through the year. In spring, village children dance round the Maypole. Maypole is an ancient fertility emblem of the beginning of summer. In ancient times it was a pagan spring festival. It was celebrated with garlands and flowers, dancing and games on the village green. A tall pole decorated with flowers, maypole, was erected to which ribbons were attached and held by the dancers. In autumn, people take vegetables and fruit to church for the Harvest Festival, and once a year Lord Mayor of London puts on a show and rides through the streets in the golden coach.

National festivals in the United States include Thanksgiving Day, Independence Day, St. Patrick's Day, Mother's Day, and Memorial Day. Independence Day is observed on July 4. On this day, in 1776, America adopted the Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, and started the fight for freedom from the British rule. The celebration of it began in the American Revolution. Since then it has been a patriotic holiday. People go out into the streets on July 4, dress up and take part in parades and open-air meetings. In the evening there are always parties and fireworks.

Another big holiday in the USA is Thanksgiving Day. It commemorates colonial celebrations following the first successful harvests in 1621. The first national Thanksgiving Day, proclaimed by George Washington, was celebrated on November 26, 1789. Abraham Lincoln revived the custom in 1863. In 1941 Congress provided that Thanksgiving should fall on the fourth Thursday of November. On this day American families meet for a special dinner, usually with turkey and pumpkin pie. They give thanks to God for the past year.

Children always have fun at Halloween on October 31. They dress up like ghosts and witches. They cut up a pumpkin to look like a frightening face and put a light inside. They go from house to house and say "Trick" or "Treat"? If they get a "Treat" (sweets or an apple), they go away happy. But if they don't, they play tricks.

Memorial Day falls on the fourth Monday of May. It is the day on which the Americans honour the dead. At first it was the day on which flags or flowers were placed on graves of the soldiers who perished in the American Civil War. Now it has become the day on which the dead of all wars and all other dead are remembered. On this day veterans of military services hold special ceremonies in cemeteries or at war monuments. Parades or special programmes are held at schools or public meeting places. In addition to the widely recognised holidays listed above, two Sundays are observed in a very special way. These are the second Sunday in May, which is always Mother's Day and the other is the third Sunday in June, which is Father's Day.

In the USA there are 50 states, and there are many holidays that are not observed nation-wide but are celebrated in certain states only. Columbus Day is observed on October 12 in 34 states. It commemorates the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus who landed in the New World on October 12, 1492. The major celebration of the day takes place in New York City, which holds a huge parade each year.

Until the mid-1970s February 22, the birthday of George Washington, the first President of the USA, was observed as a federal holiday. In addition many states celebrated the birthday of Abraham Lincoln on February 12. In the 1970s Congress declared that in order to honour all past presidents of the USA, a single holiday, called President's Day, would be observed on the third Monday in February.

Labour Day is observed on the first Monday in September. It has been a federal holiday since 1894, but it was observed in some places before that date as a result of campaigns launched by an organisation of workers called the "Knights of Labour". Its purpose is to honour the working people of the country. In many cities the day is marked by parades of working people representing the labour unions.

- How do Americans honour their war veterans?

- Veteran's Day, originally called Armistice Day, was established to honour those Americans who had served in World War I. It falls on November 11, the day on which that war ended. Now it honours veterans of all the wars in which the USA has been involved. Organisations of war veterans hold parades or other special ceremonies. The President or another high official places a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery outside Washington. The soldiers from each war the United States has fought in since World War I are buried there.

- What holidays are celebrated throughout the world?

- Feasts and festivals vary greatly in type. Some of them are religious in character; others have flourished in modern civilisations. Secular modern festivals are often mixed with previous religious festivals. Christmas is the most important religious holiday for Christians. They attend special church services to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. On this day most banks and offices are closed and the workers including government employees have the day off. May Day is a springtime fertility festival that can be traced back to the Great Mother festival of Greco-Roman times. It has become a festival of the labouring class of the world. At the same time May Day commemorates the suppression of the workers in Chicago on May 1, 1886, who were struggling for an eight-hour working day. In 1889 American Labour Unions decided to hold such demonstrations everywhere. This social festival is observed in different countries. St. Valentine's Day is celebrated on February 14. It is not an official holiday, but people in many countries celebrate it in a very special manner. They send greeting cards to the people they love. Such cards are called "Valentines". This day is named after a Christian martyr, whose feast day is observed on that day. It is held that Valentine before his execution sent a message of friendship to his prison warden's blind daughter. Nowadays New Year is celebrated at midnight on 31st in many countries. Although certain countries calculate time by other calendars, most countries number their years according to the Gregorian calendar introduced in the 16-th century by Pope Gregory XIII. Although certain countries follow their national calendar, they always remember January 1. New Year's Day is a cultural festival. Bells ring out around the world to welcome New Year.

- Is there anything common in the celebration of New Year's Day in different countries?

- New Year is a family day. On this day everyone gives and receives presents. Both adults and children love it. People believe that a miracle is a must on this day. They are also convinced that if New Year begins well it will continue like that. On the New Year night people visit their friends or stay at home and watch TV. The dancing goes on all night. On January 1 business offices, banks, schools are closed so that people can feast, dance, and generally enjoy themselves.

- Are there differences in the celebrations and customs of New Year in European countries?

- In Scotland New Year's Eve is called Hogmanay. It is notable for its Flambeaux Procession and the custom of First-Footing. Most differences in European tradition are connected with a meal or special food. Food is essential because most people prefer to stay up all night to welcome New Year. In Switzerland special bread, rich in butter, eggs and raisins is baked and a roasted goose is cooked. In Spain there is a custom to eat 12 grapes at midnight. In Greece some people play cards believing that they will be lucky the whole year if they win. In Turkey celebrations are held in restaurants all night long.