

By ERNEST CONINE

THE KREMLIN CAN'T KILL CHRISTMAS



In "godless" Russia, Grandfather Frost hands out gifts under a New Year's tree, but the meaning of the Nativity survives in the hearts of the people

FOR MORE THAN 45 years, the Kremlin's propaganda machine has hammered away at the theme that Christmas is a fraud.

Yet one day next week hundreds of Soviet children will troop into the Great Kremlin Palace, the very citadel of Red atheism. There they will stare wide-eyed at a towering fir tree festooned with lights and bright baubles, and accept gifts from Grandfather Frost—a benign old gentleman who looks suspiciously like Santa Claus.

To be sure, the word "Christmas" will never be uttered, certainly not by the Kremlin sponsors. The gathering is calculated to instill in the children a devotion not to God but to the state.

Undoubtedly, the regime succeeds at least partially in this aim. But as a news correspondent who lived two years in Moscow, I can testify that the occasion also stands as a monument to the Kremlin's failure to erase Christmas from the hearts of the Soviet people.

Shortly after my arrival in Moscow, I stood shivering one day on Gorky Street, one of the capital's major thoroughfares. While waiting for a taxi, I pondered the sadness of the holiday season in Russia. It was Christmas morning, and I thought of the Nativity scenes in the store windows back home in America, the streets overhung with holly, the soft peal of church bells.

In Moscow, it appeared to be just another

workday. Just one touch of color showed in the great, drab street—a huge red banner urging: "Onward to the Victory of Communism."

Anyone who lives in the U.S.S.R. learns, however, that beneath the dreary surface the Spirit of Bethlehem survives after all the years of propaganda, pressure, and persecution.

Small gifts, even crude Christmas cards, are exchanged among friends. And when I visited the home of one Russian during the holidays, I was surprised to see a Christmas tree; I knew they were unobtainable in the markets. "I cut it myself in the forests near Moscow," he explained. "Many of our people do so."

But more worrisome to the Kremlin is the fact that millions of professed atheists who never go to church any other time—even Communist Party members—attend the special Christmas services which are held on the evening of Dec. 24 in Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches and on Jan. 7 in the Russian Orthodox churches.

TAKE THE CASE of Vasily, a Soviet journalist who once told me mockingly that: "Our cosmonauts found no God in space." One Christmas Eve I visited Moscow's St. Louis Cathedral, where attendance usually is light for normal services. But on this occasion, I could barely crowd in. As I surveyed the faces, I was struck by the number of young people there—including Vasily, who stood silent with his head bowed.

Although galled by the persistence of the Christian faith, Khrushchev and company cannot afford to return to the harsh persecutions of the Stalin era; the resulting discontent might dangerously impair industrial production.

The regime's current tactic is a flank attack. A clever campaign is under way to take Christ out of Christmas—to preserve the festive trappings while removing the religious content and turning the holiday to Communist purposes.

Christmas is not forbidden; it is simply ignored. But on New Year's Day, celebrations are held in workers' clubs and Young Pioneer Palaces all over Russia. The traditional Christmas tree is there, with all the trimmings. But it is called a New Year's tree, and the accent is on the "glorious victories" to be won by communism.

The children's party at the Kremlin is the most glittering of all, with admittance reserved for those who have especially distinguished themselves in Young Pioneer work for the Soviet state. Grandfather Frost, a rotund, white-bearded fellow with a sparkling suit, plays the traditional role of Saint Nicholas.

The authorities go all out to make the celebration a truly happy and memorable one. They hope the youngsters will grow up identifying this occasion with the Party, not the church.

At home, most Russian families now have a tiny tree of their own. Again, it is called a New Year's tree, at least in the presence of foreigners. But it is significant that the tree usually stays in place until Jan. 8, the day after the Russian Orthodox Christmas—even in the homes of my "godless" Soviet acquaintances.

COVER:

This family scene, which will unfold in homes across the land on Christmas morn, was photographed by Shelly Grossman to introduce this special holiday issue.

Family Weekly

December 23, 1962

LEONARD S. DAVIDOW President and Publisher
WALTER C. DREYFUS Vice President
PATRICK E. O'ROURKE Advertising Director
MORTON FRANK Director of Publisher Relations

Send all advertising communications to Family Weekly,
153 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

Address all communications about editorial features to
Family Weekly, 60 E. 56th St., New York 22, N. Y.

Board of Editors

ERNEST V. HEYN Editor-in-Chief
BEN KARTMAN Executive Editor
ROBERT FITZGIBBON Managing Editor
PHILLIP DYKSTRA Art Director
MELANIE DE PROFT Food Editor

Rosalyn Abrevaya, Arden Eidell, Hal London,
Jack Ryan, Peer J. Oppenheimer, Hollywood.

© 1962, FAMILY WEEKLY MAGAZINE, INC., 153 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. All rights reserved.