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## **UKRAINIAN CHRISTMAS: LITERARY REFLECTIONS ON TRADITION AND MODERNITY**

### **Christmas in Ukraine**

Christmas celebration in Ukraine is associated with various religious and cultural traditions. Our ancestors followed numerous authentic customs, and many of them have survived to this day.

The first things that comes to one's mind at the mention of a traditional Ukrainian Christmas is Vertep. During the Christmas season, groups of performers, often dressed in traditional costumes, move from house to house or perform in public spaces, presenting short plays or scenes that depict the Nativity story, as well as various folk tales and comedic sketches. Basically, the vertep typically includes a variety of characters, such as angels, shepherds, the Holy Family, and sometimes even fictional characters or animals. It must be noted that atheistic Soviet state severely persecuted religion and the associated elements of culture, and by 1930s the tradition of Christmas verтеps was virtually eliminated.

In fact, during the Soviet era, all Christmas celebrations were suppressed, as the government aimed to diminish religious influence. In Ukraine the suppression of Christmas was part of a broader effort to undermine Ukrainian culture and identity. Despite this, many Ukrainians continued to observe Christmas traditions in private, adapting to the circumstances.

Speaking of Christmas traditions, it is impossible to omit Christmas Eve, known as "Sviaty Vechir" in Ukrainian. Christmas eve is a special and cherished time in Ukraine, filled with unique traditions and customs. It would be a mistake to think that this eve is all about food and drinks, because it is the other way round. This is the time that symbolises deep connection to our ancestors, nature, and of course God. Before the meal begins, the head of the household typically offers a prayer and breaks bread, which is then passed around to each family member. The images of traditional Ukrainian Christmas Eve can be seen in various pieces of Ukrainian literature. One of the most prolific writers on this topic is Mykola Hohol, famous for his novel "Christmas Eve" or "The Night Before Christmas" The story takes place on Christmas Eve. On this evening, Christians prepare 12 meatless dishes, gather with their families, and say prayers. It has long been believed that magical transformations, unusual events, and encounters with evil spirits that walk the world on this evening can take place. The most important dish is kutia.

In fact, Ukrainians cannot imagine their Christmas Eve without Kutia, which is a ritual dish made from boiled wheat, honey, poppy seeds, and sometimes nuts. It holds a symbolic meaning, representing the unity of the family and the wish for a sweet and abundant life. Kutia is a symbol of well-being and a talisman, made from the gifts of nature. After dinner,

kutia is left on the table for the souls of the dead overnight, as it symbolises unity with God.

In some regions of Ukraine, there's also a tradition to bring Kutia to your godparents on Christmas Eve. This tradition can be traced back to Olena Pchilka's short story "The Embarrassing Supper," where a boy brings a poor peasant kutia instead of his godmother, a young landowner.

These traditions and customs prove that Ukraine has a rich tapestry of authentic Christmas traditions that have been passed down through generations. These traditions are deeply rooted in Ukrainian culture and often have both religious and cultural significance.

### **Christmas Eve Tradition in "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky**

Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky is a prominent Ukrainian writer. Kotsiubynsky's early stories were described as examples of ethnographic realism; in years to come he evolved into one of the most talented Ukrainian impressionist and modernist writers. His most famous work is the novella "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" ("Tini Zabutykh Predkiv"), published in 1889. This work is considered a classic of Ukrainian literature and explores the life of the Hutsul people in the Carpathian Mountains.

Hutsuls are a Ukrainian ethnographic group living in the Carpathian Mountains. Their culture combines both Christian and Heathenish traditions. The novella combines elements of folklore, mysticism, naturalism, providing a vivid portrayal of the traditions of the region. The work was written more than one hundred years ago, however, some traditions are still being followed.

In the morning of the day before Christmas, a husband sets up a live fire, and takes some of it to the oven, where his wife prepares food. The wife cooks 12 traditional Ukrainian dishes. The table is covered with various cereals. The man is to give a little bit of each dish to the cattle. The cattle should be the first to try the festive food.

"Ivan was always in a strange mood on Christmas Eve. Imbued with something mysterious and holy, he would reverently perform all the actions as if serving Mass. Striking up a living fire so that Palahna could prepare the supper, he would spread hay over and under the table, mooing like a cow, bleating like a sheep, or neighing like a horse with complete faith to make the livestock prosper. He would fumigate the house and the sheepfold with incense to drive away wild beasts and witches, and when Palahna, her face flushed from bustling about, would announce in the smoke-filled room that all twelve dishes were ready, he would carry a little of each dish to the cattle before sitting down. The cattle had to have the first taste of the cabbage rolls, plums, beans, and barley gruel that Palahna had painstakingly prepared for him."

Then the man enters the house, where his wife prepares a bowl of kalach, a special bread, as well as two jars of honey and water. The host takes this bowl, an axe and goes to the yard to invite evil forces, wild animals and the storm to the Holy Supper. So he does three times. The man says that if they do not have the strength to come to God's Holy Supper, they should not come to his house for the whole year.

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“He also had to summon to the holy supper the hostile powers against which he had guarded all his life. Taking a bowl of food in one hand and an axe in the other, he would go outside. Dressed in white mantles, the green mountains listened attentively as the gold of the stars rang in the skies and the frost flashed its silver sword, cutting down the sounds in the air, and Ivan extended his arm into this winter-clad loneliness and invited all the necromancers, sorcerers, astrologers, wolves, and bears to share the holy supper with him. He called the tempest to accept his invitation to sumptuous dishes and brandies, but it did not accept, and no one came, although Ivan asked three times. Then he adjured them never to come and sighed lightly.”

The man enters the house, locks the door, smokes the family with incense. After that, the family prays for the souls of strangers who drowned, were killed, executed, who are in hell, whom no one will remember, so that God would let them join the people for the Holy Supper. At the same time, they ask God for everything to be fine in the household, thank Him for being in peace during these holidays, and ask them to live the same way until the next year.

“Palahna was waiting in the house. The embers in the stove sizzled quietly; the dishes rested on the hay, and a Christmas peace filled the dark corners. Hunger called Ivan and Palahna to the table, but they did not dare sit down yet. Palahna looked at her husband, and they knelt together, begging God to allow the souls nobody knew, the souls of people lost or killed at work in the forest, or crippled on highways, or drowned in deep waters to come to their table.”

Before sitting at the table, the host takes a bowl with food for souls and invites both righteous and sinful souls to the Last Supper, so that they would eat in their world as people do on the Holy Evening. If someone wants to sit down after dinner, they have to blow on the bench so as not to crush the soul that might be sitting there. After dinner, the owners make fortune-telling so that everything will be fine with the cattle and the apiary.

“Blow on the bench before you sit down!” Palahna cautioned him. But Ivan knew what to do without being told. Carefully blowing clear a place on the bench to avoid crushing a soul, he would sit down to the supper.”

### **Christmas Projects during the War**

Throughout the war, Ukrainians continue to demonstrate an unwavering commitment to artistic innovation while also maintaining their cultural heritage. Despite the constant blackouts due to shelling and missile strikes, Ukrainians persist in composing Christmas carols that serve as poignant symbols of resilience. These carols, infused with modern themes and perspectives, capture the essence of contemporary Ukrainian life. Below, you will find Ukrainian Christmas carols along with their English translations, offering a glimpse into current way of life.

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Carol, carol, caroling!  
Winter cold is not an enemy!  
Quicky open house's door,  
Hearing generators' roar!

Коляд, коляд, коляда!  
Холод взимку – не біда!  
Двері швидше відчиняйте,  
Генератор запускайте!

Carol, carol, a joyful sound  
Our victory's all around!  
To every home, bring cheer and glee,  
A year that's happy, rich, and free.

Колядую, колядую,  
Перемогу нашу чую!  
Хай приходить в кожду хату  
Рік щасливий і багатий.

Ethnomusicologist and folk singer Oleksiy Zayets has created his own carol dedicated to the valorous Armed Forces of Ukraine. After each verse, the chorus was repeated: “Give, Lord, to our army health and strength in battle.” It demonstrates that carols are not confined to antiquity but can embody modernity and relevance. Most importantly, they are another testament to the vibrant Ukrainian culture. Ukrainians in times of war try even harder to preserve their own traditions and culture. The world already knows our “Shchedryk” or “Carol of the Bells,” that is why modern artists are trying to popularize others.

Ukrainian writer Maryana Savka's musical “Write Letters to St. Nicholas!” embodies a powerful narrative centered around a family and their neighbors coming together to weave a camouflage net for the Armed Forces, despite interference from malevolent forces. In the heart of the story, angels intervene to protect the endeavor, transforming the net into a magical symbol of unity and resilience. This tale is brought to life by over 150 artists including the esteemed national choral band “Dudaryk” and the symphony orchestra “INSO-Lviv,” carries profound significance. Notably, the role of St. Nicholas was played by the actor Oleksiy Kravchuk, who was a sniper from the beginning of the full-scale invasion. His call sign is “Saint Nicholas.” After the injury and rehabilitation, he returned to the artistic life and is engaged in volunteer work. His story symbolizes the indomitable spirit of the Ukrainian people in the face of adversity, reinforcing the musical's message of hope, community, and the enduring power of resilience.

Ukrainian culture now exists thanks to our military, who even on the front lines put up a Christmas tree, wear Santa Claus hats, or hang St. Nicholas socks next to children's drawings. Christmas is a symbol of unity and wonder, so in such dark times for us, it gives light to our souls, because good always triumphs over evil. As Maryana Savka said, “I understood, starting with a full-scale war, that a miracle happens every day and is created by people whom the Lord weaves into unions and associations.”

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