

Deciphering Russia's August Holidays

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

August 28, 2020



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Яблочный Спас: Apple Feast of the Savior

During the Soviet period, the revolutionary months of February and October were considered cursed, but in the post-Soviet years, August has become the Bad Month.

August was the month of the first attempted coup in 1991. On Aug. 17, 1998, the ruble was devalued and the government defaulted on its debt. The next year on Aug. 31 a bomb exploded in the Okhotny Ryad shopping mall, killing one, injuring dozens, and becoming the harbinger for a series of deadly apartment house bombings. The following year the Kursk submarine sank in the Barents Sea. In 2008, Russia went to war with Georgia. This is not to mention at least seven plane and train crashes in August over the years.

This year we have — well, I don't have to remind you what's going on. It's not a happy month.

It's a shame that Russians tend to dread the month now, because in the old days — the very old days — it was a festive month when the harvest was coming in and folks were celebrating major church holidays.

Those holidays may be a bit puzzling for visitors and readers of Russian literature — as are the church yards so filled with produce that they appear to be temporary food warehouses. It's all for three big August holidays called Спас.

Спас in old Russian is Savior — Спаситель. This is one of those tricky words, not to be confused with спасатель, which is a life-saver, rescuer or life-guard. Спас is also used commonly to refer to churches dedicated to the Savior.

This is, by the way, the derivation of the name Spaso House, the Moscow residence of the U.S. Ambassador. It gets its origins from the street it's located on, Спасопесковский переулок (“Savior-on-the-sands” Lane), which in turn is named after the church there, called in full Храм Спаса Преображения, что на Песках (the Church of the Transfiguration of the Savior that's on the Sands). Since there were many churches dedicated to the Transfiguration of the Savior in Moscow, people added an identifying note; in this case, “on the Sands” refers to the sandy ground in the Arbat district. Spaso House actually sounds a bit jocular – something like Savior House – but it is so widespread it is simply transliterated back into Russian as Спасо-Хаус.

Спас is also the folk name for the three Feasts of the Savior celebrated in August. The first of these is called Медовый Спас (“Savior of the Honey Feast Day”) or Мокрый Спас (“Savior of the Water Feast Day,” literally “Wet” Savior Feast Day), celebrated on August 14. In the church calendar it's called Происхождение честных древ Креста Господня (The Procession of the Venerable Wood of the Life-Creating Cross of the Lord). It was the custom in Constantinople to carry a relic of the cross on which Christ was crucified around the city in this month to battle seasonal ailments. In Russia August 1 — the Old Style date of this holiday — was also the day Grand Prince Vladimir and all of Rus was baptized, hence the “wet” folk name. Traditionally it is the day beekeepers harvest the season's honey: На первый Спас и нищий медку попробует. (On the First Savior Feast Day even the poor get to taste some honey).

The second Спас (August 19) is Яблочный (Apple), more properly праздник Преображения Господня (holiday of the Transfiguration of the Savior). Traditionally people bring fruit to the church to be blessed and then give it to children, the ill and poor. There is also a belief (verging, it would seem, on superstition) that mothers whose children have died and daughters whose mothers have died cannot eat apples or other fruit until this holiday; otherwise they will be denied apples in the afterlife. It also a weather predicting day: Каков Второй Спас – таков и январь. (As is the Second Savior Feast Day, so will January be). Unless weather patterns have changed, I assume this means “particularly cold for the season” or “lots of precipitation” and not “the entire month of January will be just like August 19.”

For curious souls, there are two other apple words associated with religion. Адамово яблоко (Adam's apple) is that protuberance men have in their necks where their larynx is. It got its name from the belief that when Adam took a bite of the apple in the Garden of Eden, it stuck in his throat going down. Now it is just one of the characteristics of men, including, some people

think, other less attractive qualities: Хвастовство ☒ такой же вторичный половой признак, как адамово яблоко или растительность на лице (Bombast is a secondary sex characteristic like the Adam's apple or facial hair.)

And then there was once a very wicked kind of apple — земляное яблоко (ground apple), also called чёртово (the devil's apple) or even содомское (Sodom's apple). This was, of all things, the potato. Introduced to Russia by Peter the Great in the 17th century — hence its German name, картофель — it didn't come with an instruction manual, and many peasants died from eating raw or green potatoes and sprouts. Even in the 19th century many Russians considered the potato, now firmly part of Russian cuisine, Satanic food.

The third Спас (August 29), celebrated this weekend, thankfully does not involve dangerous food. It's called Хлебный ("Bread") or Ореховый ("Nut") Спас, since it was time to harvest the wheat and ripened nuts. This is празднование иконы "Нерукотворный образ" Господа Иисуса Христа (the celebration of the Image "Not-Made-By-Hands" of our Lord Jesus Christ), dedicated to the image of Christ that appeared on a cloth He used. For this reason, it's also called Спас на полотне ("Savior on Linen Cloth") and linen and cloth were traditionally sold on this day. It's the time to harvest the grain and bake using the season's first flour. Третий Спас – хлеба припас. (The Third Savior Feast Day stocks up on grain.) This is also the day the birds take off for the winter.

If you missed the first two holidays, don't despair: churches are still selling fresh honey. And there plenty of apples yet to come.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/08/28/deciphering-russias-august-holidays-a71264>