

# New Year Celebration

By Karine Chilingaryan & Igor Grigorian

*So this is Christmas*, - goes the song. But so many articles were written on Christmas, so we decided to write about New Year instead. It is the time when new calendar year begins, and the last page of the wall calendar was torn off; simple but true. In modern times most of the world celebrates it on January 1, but has it been true through the course of history? Let's check on example of Armenia



Fig. (13)  
Personal stamp of Santa and his wife

During its centuries-long history Armenian people celebrated new year on three different dates, calling them *Kaghand*, *Navasard* and *New Year Amanor*.

## The Dates.

The word *kaghand* derives from the Latin word *calendae*, which in Armenian means the first day of the new year, according to **March 21**, the day of the vernal equinox (fig. 1), which is also the symbol of the awakening of nature. All provinces of Armenia celebrated *Kaghand* widely, with rites performed in the temples accompanied by sacrifices to the gods. The best explanation of the word *kaghand* has given Anania Shirakatsi in his book *Cosmography and the Calendar*:

*What is Kaghand and kaghandikos? Kaghand is the beginning of the month and kaghandikos the initial day of the year.*



Fig. (1) Vernal equinox



Fig. (2) Bagaran



Fig. (3) Olive Branches

Then Armenians started celebrating new year according to the Armenian calendar, on **Navasard 1**, the day when the founder of the Armenian nation patriarch Hayk defeated Titan Bel. According to the tradition, Armenian patriarch Hayk defeated and killed the tyrant Bel in Dzor province on August 11, thus granting freedom to his dynasty. From that time Armenians began to celebrate the New Year on **August 11**. It is believed it happened in the year 2,492 BC. *August* is *Navasard* in Armenian, hence the name of the festival. Whole Armenian nobility and the army would go to Bagavan (Bagaran – fig. 2) village, Bagrevand province to celebrate Navasard which would last several days. Great numbers of the pilgrims would get there as well. Sacrifices to gods, singing, dancing, theatrical performances, and sporting events were inseparable parts of the celebration. Researchers believe that the following words were written by Artashes II, King of Armenia, who favored theater and even has written plays himself:



Who's gonna give me smoke of hearth  
On the morning of the New Year?  
Gracious run of the doe and breeding of deer?  
We were blowing horns and beating drums...  
As the law of the kings demands.

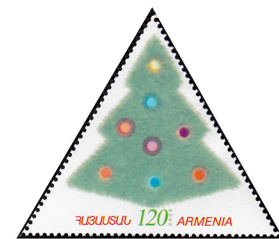


Fig. (4)

With adoption of Christianity in Armenia Navasard was replaced by Saint Karapet Hovhanna day, and with the demolition of old temples the Bagavan festivities were abandoned, although memories of these festivities are still alive and even today Armenians pay tribute to old times by holding annual Navasard Games in California. Long after that Navasard continued to be celebrated in Artsakh, Tavush and Syunik, although on a different day – November 10.

As an official beginning of the year January 1 was adopted by Armenians in general only around 100 years ago. As it is with many other peoples around the world, New Year in Armenia also sums up results of the year that passed, and symbolizes ritual assurance of the success and abundance of the new year and the prevention of evil. Secular celebrations of the New Year are derived from traditions associated with Christmas, although Armenian Christmas is falling on the January 6, after the New Year, as the Armenian Church retained the original date, while Roman Catholic Church moved the date to December 25 to override a pagan holiday.

## The Tree

What about the tree, the reader might ask. Well, tradition has changed several times as well. Originally, Armenians decorated olive branches (fig. 3) with dry fruits and pastries hanging on colored threads. They would also take the branches to church, have them blessed, bring them home and stick them into the ritual breads placed in the middle of the table.

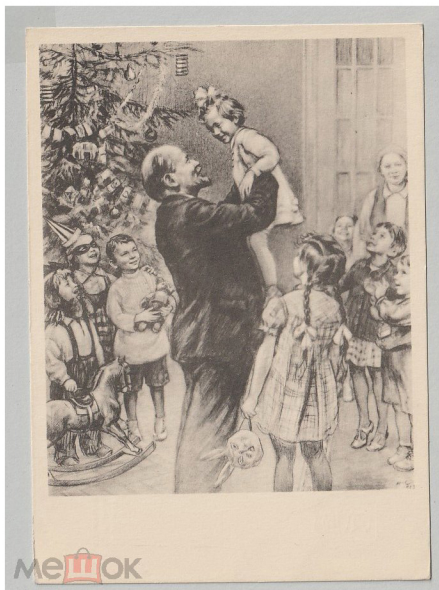


Fig. (5) Lenin, children, Christmas tree



Fig. (6) Down with Bogeois Christmas Tree



Fig. (7) Decorated Christmas Tree

Later, when decorating Christmas tree tradition widely spread throughout the world it came to Armenia as well (fig. 4). Armenia at the time was a part of the Russian Empire, then later became part of the Soviet Union, and was following all instructions from Moscow. Although Russian Synod prohibited Christmas tree tradition as having roots in Germany with whom Russian Empire was at war, after the revolution Bolsheviks allowed the Christmas tree to be decorated. Even Lenin was portrayed with children with the Christmas tree in the background (fig. 5). Around 1925 a movement against religious beliefs started in Russia by the League of Militant Atheists; their propaganda was directed against Christmas trees as a part of religious traditions (fig. 6).



Some people would still decorate the tree, but would completely draw the curtains as there were patrols walking in neighborhood to document violations. That campaign lasted several years, until in 1935 while in the car with Stalin and Khrushchev another politician Pavel Postyshev raised the question of returning the Christmas tree tradition. Stalin was not against it, and the very next day Postyshev wrote in *Pravda* newspaper:

*In the pre-revolutionary era the bourgeoisie and the capitalist officials always put up a tree for their children on New Year. Children of the working classes looked on with envy through the windows at the gleaming tree adorned with colored lights and the children of the rich playing around it.*

*Why do our schools, orphanages, nurseries, children's clubs, and Young Pioneer Palaces deprive children of the working class of the Soviet State of this wonderful enjoyment? Because some "left-leaning" exaggerators decried this pastime as a bourgeois children's indulgence. It is time to put an end to this wrongful condemnation of the tree, which is a joyful diversion for the children. The Young Pioneer scout leaders are called upon to organize holiday celebrations for the children that feature New Year trees. In schools, orphanages, clubs, cinemas, and theaters – children's New Year trees should be everywhere!...Our children will be grateful to us for giving them back the New Year tree. I'm sure the Young Communists will take a very active part in this enterprise and do away with the silly misconception that the New Year tree is a bourgeois excess.*

*So, let's organize a New Year celebration for kids and arrange a good Soviet New Year tree in all our cities and rural villages!*



Fig. (8) St. Nicholas

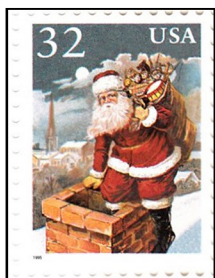


Fig. (9) Santa in Chimney



Fig. (10) Santa and Reindeers

From that time on Christmas tree was returned to the people, but as a symbol of the New Year, stripped of its religious meaning of celebrating Christmas. Soviet propaganda was so of the most popular holiday celebrations of the year. Also, as the Armenian Church celebrates Christmas (birth of Christ) on January 6 there is no conflict between secular and religious aspects of the Christmas tree. The main Christmas tree strong that Armenians till now decorate



Fig. (11) Santa Workshop and North Pole



Fig. (12) Santa in Workshop



a Christmas tree with New Year in mind making it one of Armenia is usually set up in the Republic Square (fig. 7 – Stylized Xmas tree in front of the Government Building), but due to situation with Artsakh and COVID-19 pandemic it was decided not to erect one this year and cancel all New Year celebration events.

Armenians living in Muslim countries decorate a Christmas tree with Christmas ornaments. The tree is called New Year tree because it is specific to the New Year. The New Year celebrations started in the late 1920s and became popular as trees were brought into the countries as New Year trees. Since then setting up a New Year tree became a traditional event. It is usually put up between beginning of December and the end of January.

Giving Christmas presents among Armenians in Armenia and other countries is shifted from the Christmas Eve to that of the New Year. The gifts are usually opened after midnight when the toasts to New Year are already made.



Fig. (14) Moroz



Fig. (15) Nicholas the pleaser



Fig. (16) Father Frost by Vasnetsov

### **Saint Nicholas (Sinter Klaas)/ Santa Claus/Ded Moroz (Grandfather Frost)/Kaghand Pap (Dzmer Pap)**

Now let's look at the main character who shows up once a year and only at the New Year.

The Legend of Santa Claus (as this is how that character is widely known nowadays) can be traced back hundreds of years to a monk named St. Nicholas (fig. 8). It is believed he was born sometime around 280 AD in Patara, near Myra (Antalya province, modern day Turkey). Much admired for his piety and kindness, St. Nicholas became the subject of many legends. It is sad that he gave away all of his inherited wealth and traveled the countryside helping the poor and sick. Over the course of many years his popularity spread across many countries, and he later became known as the protector of children and sailors. His feast day is celebrated on the anniversary of his death, December 6. This was considered a lucky day to make large purchases or to get married. By the Renaissance he was the most popular saint in Europe, and even at the





Fig. 17 Moroz figurine



Fig. (18) Troika Maxi Card



Fig. (19) Snegurochka



Fig. (20) Kaghand pap

times when veneration of saints began to be discouraged St. Nicholas maintained a positive reputation, especially in Holland.

*Santa Claus is coming to town*, as the song goes. But how and where is his name came from? In December 1773, and again in 1774, a New York newspaper reported that groups of Dutch (read Holland) families gathered to honor the anniversary of Saint Nicolas death. His Dutch nickname, Sinter Klaas, a shortened form of Sint Nikolaas (Saint Nicholas in Dutch) evolved in the US into Santa Claus, or shortly Santa. In 1804 John Pintard, merchant and founder of New York Historical Society, distributed engraved woodcuts of St. Nicholas at the society annual meeting. The background of the engraving contained now-familiar Santa images including stockings filled with toys and fruit hanging over the fireplace. His now-familiar appearance as a *right jolly old elf* with a portly figure and the supernatural ability to ascend a chimney (fig. 9) with a mere nod of his head is attributed to the image created by Clement Clarke Moore in his 1822 poem *An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas*, more widely known as *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*. His poem helped popularize the now-familiar image of Santa Claus who flew from house to house on Christmas Eve in a miniature sleigh led by eight flying reindeer (fig. 10) to leave presents for well-behaved deserving children. In 1881, political cartoonist Thomas Nast drew on Moore's poem to create the first likeness of the Santa Claus that we know today. Santa was depicted as a rotund, cheerful man with full, white beard, holding a sack with toys (fig. 11). Nast gave Santa his red suit trimmed with white fur, North Pole workshop (fig. 12), elves and his wife, Mrs. Claus (fig 13).



Fig. (21) Aralez 54





Fig. (22)

Armenian Santa



Fig. (23)

Armenian stylized  
Santa Claus and  
Christmas tree

*Ded Moroz, Ded Moroz, he brought us presents, -* chant children in Russia. Image of Ded Moroz (Grandfather Frost, Russian Santa Claus) that we know now emerged only in 1930s, and only as a part of the New Year festivities (fig. 14), not Christmas. As in other countries, his roots



Fig. (24)

First Christmas  
Card published  
in London,  
1862

go back to Saint Nicolas (Called Nicholas the Pleaser) in Russian rite (fig.15). But was he always kind and generous old man? Oh, no! In East Slavic mythology, short, angry, cruel, with long white beard he was known to run across the fields and summon bitter frosts banging his stick on the ground (Fig. 16, painting by Vasnetsov). He did not give presents, rather took them by force; little children and food was his usual loot. It was said that he would return kidnapped



Fig. (25)

Germany  
Christmas  
Ornaments

children only upon receiving generous gifts from their parents. In 1840s first attempts were made to popularize the image of a jovial, red-nosed, round-bellied figure. His outfit changed as well, from wearing off-white coat and white round hat (Fig. 17 – a figurine from our collection of 12 Santa Clause figurines from various countries) to wearing blue or red coat and tall *valenki* (traditional felted boots). He differs from his foreign counterparts by riding *troika* (triplet)



employing three horses that drive his Russian sleigh (fig. 18). Ded Moroz usually appears with a helper, his granddaughter, Snegurochka who wears long silver-blue robes and a furry cap or snowflake-like crown (fig. 19). She is a unique attribute of Ded Moroz, since similar characters in other countries do not have a female companion.

According to the old Armenian tradition in Armenia the New Year character symbol was not Santa Claus, Kaghand Pap (fig. 20) who appeared with a big cane and sheepskin-made fur



Fig. (27)

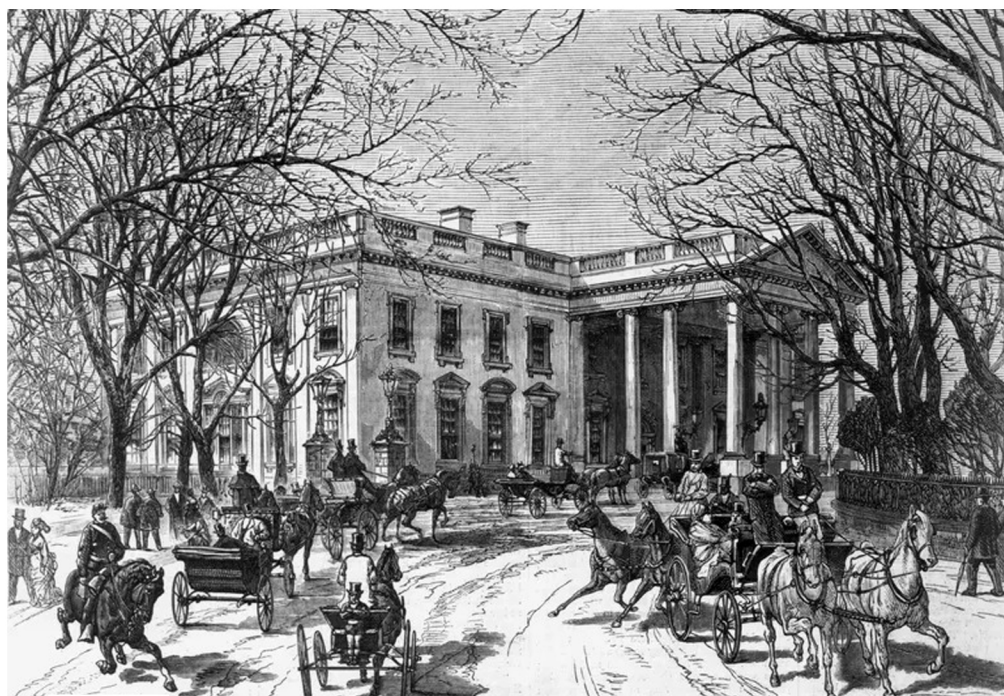


Fig. (28) White House in Winter

coat. In Armenian cultural believes and mythology, he was accompanied by imps (or elves) and aralezes (dog-like creatures, or spirits – fig. 21) who live in the sky (on Mount Ararat in other version), whose names were Yera – Attacker , Ani – Grace or Warrior , Hazaran - Countless, Push – Thorn , Imastun – Wise , Antes– Invisible , Yegheg – Reed , Areg – Sunny , Aspet Char mazan – Hellion Knight , Chtptik – Talkative and Parpar Rumbler .

Kaghand Pap did not bring gifts to children, but gave New Year seven pieces of advice; mutual respect, peace, honesty, wisdom, diligence, humility, and contentment. During Soviet times Kaghand Pap dropped out of popular culture and was replaced by Dzmer Pap (Grandfather Frost) and his granddaughter Dzyunanushik (Snowflake). Dzmer Par image is depicted on the Armenian stamp of 2011 (fig. 22) and a stylized Christmas tree and his hat are shown on 2017 stamp printed tête-bêche (fig. 23). Since 2010 both Kaghand Pap and Dzmer Pap are equally popular in Armenia and are welcome guests at the New Year celebration.



Fig. (29)

First White house  
Christmas Tree  
with Electrical  
lights



Fig.(30)  
Moroz with Veteran  
of Labor Medal

### Few little known facts

1. The custom of sending Christmas cards started in UK in 1843 by Sir Henry Cole. He was a civil servant (so were called government workers at the time). He had the idea with his friend John Horsley who was an artist. They designed the first card (fig. 24) and sold them for 1 shilling each (8 cents today, although 1 shilling was a lot of money then!). The card had three panels; the outer two panels showed people caring for the poor and the center panel portrayed a family having a large Christmas dinner. About 1,000 (or less) were printed and sold. They are very rare now, and cost thousands. The original cards were advertised with the slogan *Just published, a Christmas Congratulation Card; or picture emblematical of old English festivity to perpetuate kind recollections between dear friends.*
2. First time decorating a Christmas tree was said to happen in Elsass, France (previously in Germany) in the XVII century. To decorate, paper roses, apples, cookies, cubes of sugar, and glitter were used (fig. 25).
3. First glass ornaments were made in Turing, Saxon in XVI century, but their mass production started only in the mid-XIX century, same place (fig. 26 – Germany and fig. 27 - USA).
4. For the first time ever electrical light strings and garlands were used in the White House (fig. 28) on the Christmas tree in 1895 during presidency of Grover Cleveland (fig. 29). They were prohibitively expensive for average American as they had to be hard-wired separately.
5. In Russia, by the order of the Pension Fund authorities, Ded Moroz was awarded the title of the Veteran of the Fairy Tale Labor (fig. 30).

Additional details on Fig. (1) by Simon Petrossian : March 21<sup>st</sup> is the vernal equinox, and marks the beginning of spring in the Northern Hemisphere. It marks the first day of the first month in Persian (Iranian) calendar, called *Nowruz* (new day in Farsi), it has been celebrated by Iranians as a beginning of the new year for over 3000 years and has been recognized by United Nations as : *International Day of Nowruz*. Nowruz has Iranian and Zoroastrian origins, although it is a secular holiday for most celebrants that is enjoyed by people of several different faiths, but remains a holy day for Zoroastrians.