

# The Mystery of Czech Public Holidays

Christmas and Easter are the biggest holidays for both religious and non-religious people in the Czech Republic. Let's have a closer look at why we have public holidays and what Czechs do on these days.

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## Easter Sunday and Easter Monday

April 24–25, 2011  
(dates vary every year)

Easter is the most important Christian holiday, celebrating the **resurrection**<sup>5</sup> of Jesus Christ. Jesus was **crucified**<sup>6</sup> on the cross on **Good Friday**<sup>7</sup> and came back to life on Easter Sunday. In the Czech Republic Easter is a mixture of Christian and **pagan**<sup>8</sup> traditions. On the morning of Easter Monday, boys and men **whip**<sup>9</sup> girls and women on their bottoms with a **willow stick**<sup>10</sup> to make sure they stay healthy for the rest of the year. As a reward girls treat them with hand-painted eggs. The egg is a symbol of fertility and new life.

**Reality:** Kids get a lot of chocolate sweets and adult men are often treated with a **shot of**<sup>11</sup> alcohol, so they can get very weary in the middle of the day if they visit a few female friends.

## May Day, International Workers' Day, Labour Day

May 1

An international Day of Labour is celebrated to remember a **strike**<sup>12</sup> by American workers in Chicago that took place on May 1, 1886. The strikers were demanding an 8-hour working day. It is celebrated in many countries as International Workers' Day or Labour Day. In Czechoslovakia before the Velvet Revolution this day was 'joyfully' celebrated by all the workers. It was obligatory to take part in the **parade**<sup>13</sup> during the socialist regime.

**Reality:** Nowadays it is another day off. May 1 has become a day of love when lovers kiss under blooming cherry trees or, if in Prague, go and pay tribute to K. H. Mácha, the poet of all in love.

## January 1

The first of January is New Year's Day. This day also **marks the beginning**<sup>1</sup> of the independent Czech Republic. The Czech Republic came into existence on January 1, 1993 after the separation of Czechoslovakia into two states – the Czech and Slovak Republics – on December 31, 1992.

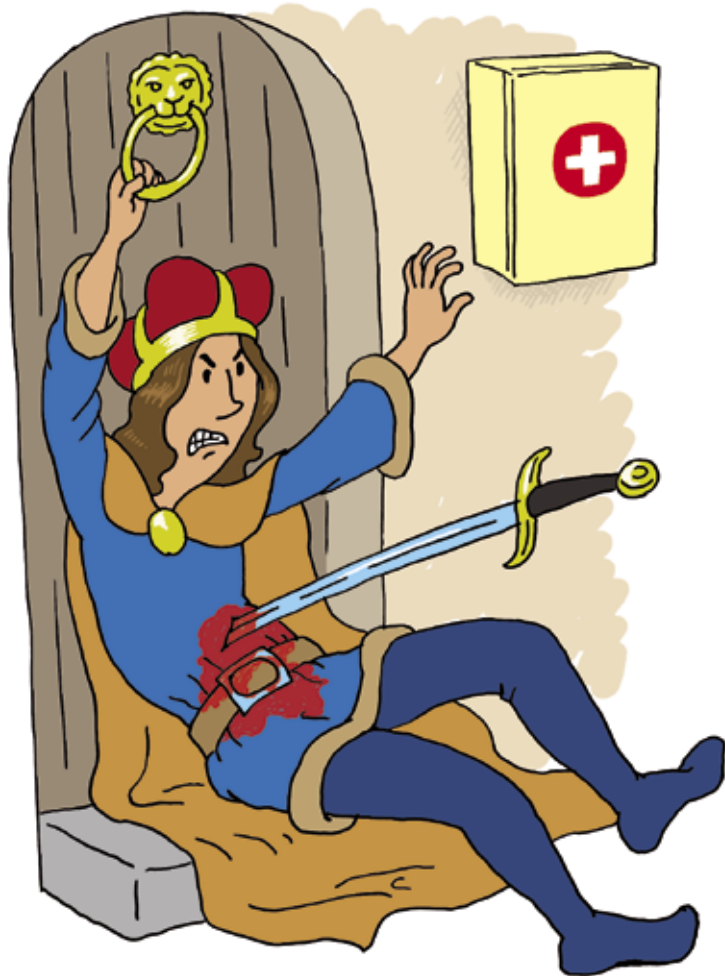
**Reality:** It's the day after the New Year celebration so most Czechs try to **get over** their **hangover**<sup>2</sup>. Those Christians who are **sober**<sup>3</sup> attend **mass**<sup>4</sup> to give thanks for the previous year.

## Liberation Day

May 8

This day celebrates the end of the Second World War (WWII) in Europe. Soviet **troops**<sup>14</sup> captured Berlin, which led to Germany's **unconditional surrender**<sup>15</sup> on May 8, 1945. In some parts of the world, however, WWII continued. The American army was still fighting with Japan. Prague was **liberated**<sup>16</sup> in the morning on May 8, 1945 by the Soviet Army.

**Reality:** Ceremonial acts take place; the Czech president, political representatives and WWII veterans commemorate the end of the war by placing flower **wreaths**<sup>17</sup> at memorials of the victims of WWII.



## St. Wenceslas Day, the Day of Czech Statehood

### September 28

The day when the whole nation remembers the main patron saint of the Czech state. Wenceslas was one of the early **Premyslid dukes of Bohemia**<sup>23</sup>. He was born in 907, the son of Bořivoj I. and Drahomíra. In 921 Wenceslas became the duke of Bohemia and ruled until his death on September 28, 935 when he was murdered by his younger brother Boleslav I. He is the first Czech ruler to **suffer a martyr's death**<sup>24</sup> and many legends were created afterwards.

**Reality:** One of the longest squares in Prague is named after this historical figure. The statue of Saint Wenceslas at the top of the square is a popular meeting point. Masses in the name of St Wenceslas are also said.

## Independent Czechoslovak State Day

### October 28

On this day the Czechoslovak state declared independence at the end of the First World War (WW I) in 1918. Until that time Czech and Slovak countries had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, worked from exile on the formation and later the **recognition**<sup>25</sup> of Czechoslovakia as an independent state.

**Reality:** On this day the president of the republic gives honours to people who did special **deeds**<sup>26</sup>.

## Saints Cyril and Methodius Day

### July 5

A day to remember Cyril (Constantine) and Methodius, two Byzantine Greek brothers who came to Great Moravia in 863 to spread Christianity. They influenced the cultural life and development of **Slavs**<sup>18</sup> because they used the old Slavic language during the masses and created the **Glagolitic alphabet**<sup>19</sup>.

**Reality:** Religious celebrations take place, as well as masses and processions remembering the two brothers that brought Christianity to Central Europe. The Majority of Czechs enjoy a day off at the beginning of the summer.

## Jan Hus Day

### July 6

On July 6 in 1415, religious reformer Jan Hus was burned at the **stake**<sup>20</sup> in Kostnice. Jan Hus was a **priest**<sup>21</sup> and reformer who blamed Catholic representatives for unholy behaviour. Eventually he was sentenced to death by burning for spreading his revolutionary criticism.

**Reality:** Because it is two **consecutive**<sup>22</sup> days off, Cyril and Methodius on July 5 followed by Jan Hus Day on July 6, Czechs take two days off and join them with the weekend, and they spend it at their summer cottages.





## Christmas December 24–26

### Christmas Eve – December 24

Christmas in Christian tradition is a celebration of the birth of baby Jesus. Jesus was born the son of a poor **carpenter**<sup>29</sup> Joseph and his wife Mary in a **stable in Bethlehem**<sup>30</sup>. His arrival in this world was announced by a comet that appeared in the sky.

**Reality:** Christmas Eve is the most important feast day of all the Czech holidays. In the morning a Christmas tree is decorated. Vegetable soup is usually served for lunch as Christmas is a **fasting**<sup>31</sup> time. In the evening the family gathers together to have a traditional dinner that consists of fish soup and carp fillet with potato salad. After dinner children await the ringing of the bell that announces that little baby Jesus has come to visit them and left presents under the Christmas tree. People often go to a midnight mass on Christmas Eve.

### Christmas Day – December 25

**Reality:** It is not celebrated in a special manner in the Czech Republic, but the day is a time for family visits. The 25<sup>th</sup> is not as important a day as in English-speaking countries where children receive their presents.

### St. Stephen's Day, Second Day of Czech Christmas – December 26

**Reality:** Family reunions continue.

## Day of the Fight for Freedom and Democracy November 17

A day when we remember very important **milestones**<sup>27</sup> from our history. In 1939, Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia and proclaimed it the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Czech students demonstrated against the occupation and the demonstration was brutally **suppressed**<sup>28</sup>. In reaction, Czech universities were closed by the Nazis on November 17.

In 1989 the Velvet Revolution started as a student demonstration against the communist regime. This day commemorates the struggle and fight for freedom.

**Reality:** This day is little more than a day off for most people. Some bring flowers and light candles on Národní třída in Prague and other places connected with the Velvet Revolution.

### VOCABULARY

- <sup>1</sup> **to mark the beginning** – značit počátek
- <sup>2</sup> **to get over hangover** – překonat kocovinu
- <sup>3</sup> **sober** – střízlivý
- <sup>4</sup> **mass** [ma:s] – mše
- <sup>5</sup> **resurrection** [rezə'rekʃ(ə)n] – vzkříšení
- <sup>6</sup> **to crucify** – ukřižovat
- <sup>7</sup> **Good Friday** – Velký pátek
- <sup>8</sup> **pagan** [peɪg(ə)n] – pohanský
- <sup>9</sup> **to whip** [wɪp] – šlehat
- <sup>10</sup> **willow stick** [wɪləʊ stɪk] – vrbový proutek, pomlázka
- <sup>11</sup> **shot of** – panák (alkoholu)
- <sup>12</sup> **strike** [strɪk] – stávká
- <sup>13</sup> **parade** [pə'reɪd] – slavnostní průvod, přehlídka
- <sup>14</sup> **troops** [tru:ps] – vojenské jednotky

- <sup>15</sup> **unconditional surrender** [ʌnkən'dɪʃ(ə)n(ə)l sə'rendə] – bezpodmínečná kapitulace
- <sup>16</sup> **to liberate** ['lɪbəreɪt] – osvobodit
- <sup>17</sup> **wreaths** [rɪ:θ] – věnec
- <sup>18</sup> **Slav** [slɑ:v] – Slovan
- <sup>19</sup> **Glagolitic alphabet** [glægə'ɪltɪk] – hlaholice
- <sup>20</sup> **stake** [steɪk] – hranice
- <sup>21</sup> **priest** [prɪ:st] – kněz
- <sup>22</sup> **consecutive** [kən'sekjətɪv] – za sebou jdoucích
- <sup>23</sup> **Premyslid duke of Bohemia** – přemyslovský český kníže
- <sup>24</sup> **suffer a martyr's death** – zemřít mučednickou smrtí
- <sup>25</sup> **recognition** [rɛkəg'nɪʃ(ə)n] – uznání
- <sup>26</sup> **deed** [di:d] – skutek
- <sup>27</sup> **milestones from our history** ['mɪlstəʊnz] – milníky naší historie
- <sup>28</sup> **to suppress** [sə'pres] – potlačit
- <sup>29</sup> **carpenter** ['kɑ:p(ə)ntə] – tesář

- <sup>30</sup> **stable in Bethlehem** [steɪb(ə)] – chlév, stodola v Betlémě
- <sup>31</sup> **fasting** ['fɑ:stɪŋ] – postní

### LANGUAGE POINT

**Feast – Festival – Holiday – Vacation**  
Generally, a **feast** means any large meal with varied and high-quality food. It can also have a religious connotation – there are special feasts or feast days for saints or after periods of fasting. The word **festival** comes from this latter use. Over time it has been expanded to refer to any large organised celebrations for a specific purpose. Today we have food festivals, art festivals, music festivals, theatre festivals and even beer festivals. Also arising from religious celebrations is the word **holiday**, which was originally 'holy day' (e.g. Christmas, Easter).

However, the word is more general now and refers to special times in the year when people do not go to work or school. For workers, those days are public holidays or bank holidays. For students they are called school holidays. In the UK, people often abbreviate it to 'hols', especially when talking about the summer holidays or 'summer hols'. For the British and Australians, the word holiday can also refer to a trip (for example, "I went on holiday to the Bahamas."). Canadians and Americans are more likely to use the word **vacation** in such cases ("I went on vacation to the Bahamas.") Also, in the USA, summer holidays can be called summer vacation.