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Dissident "Spring Cake"

Inga Leonova

When people get into involved conversations about religious food customs, I almost always think of my great-aunt. During World War II, she was evacuated from Kyiv and spent the war in a godforsaken village in a Muslim area of the Caucasus Mountains. She brought back inspiring stories about the villagers clinging to their religious traditions despite the cruel persecution by the Soviet authorities. She also brought back recipes. For as long as I can remember, Aunt Bella cooked traditional dishes for the feasts of the three faiths: Judaism, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam. In the dull and dark Soviet years, in a typical, generally non-religious Soviet family, I would come to Kyiv for a school vacation and encounter hamantaschen for Purim, a twelve-dish Christmas Eve dinner, or halva for Ramadan. There weren't any rites accompanying the dishes, just a mention that a particular dish is served because of this or that holiday.

When I was about thirteen and in a brief fundamentalist Orthodox phase, I once remonstrated with her for being so indiscriminate and giving equal attention to the different traditions. Aunt Bella gave me her stern "surgeon's look"(she was a well-known doctor), and replied calmly, but sharply, "Everything that people do to honor and thank God is worth celebrating. The more, the better."

This response did more than arrest my budding ideological purism. For the first time, it made me ponder the deep connection between people's beliefs and their craft, in the broadest terms—the pondering that eventually resulted in my theological interest in sacred space and the material culture of various faiths.

Many years later, when I first encountered the essay by Fr. Robert Arida, "You Are What You Eat,"[1] the question of the deep significance of relating food and faith presented itself to me from a different angle than the habitual "feasting and fasting."

One aspect of religious dishes that is rarely discussed is related to the survival of traditions under the anti-religious regimes in the twentieth century. Recently, the BBC published a story[2] about the preservation of traditional dishes in Albania under the Communist regime, although the focus of the article was more on ethnic than religious customs. Still, it mentions religious recipes used in secret, such as halva (a very sweet dessert made with nuts, sugar, and rose water and typically prepared for the holiest day of Ramadan). It also notes

[1] https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5357de0fe4b0191d0dc8cf13/t/66bb62dbf417ff18a5f5429b/1723556571485You+are+what+you+eat.pdf accessed May 10, 2025.

[2] https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20250305-the-grannies-who-saved-albanian-cuisine, accessed March 7, 2025.

how dangerous it was to make since the authorities would cruelly persecute those caught in the act.

The "dissident" characteristic of religious dishes shared across the cultures under the Communist yoke was multi-faceted and even ambiguous. One interesting wrinkle was the migration in the Soviet Union of traditional Pascha foods, kulich[3] and paska[4], the Paschal bread and sweet cheese, into the legitimate state deli offerings under the names "spring cake" and "sweet cheese paste." In my (admittedly imperfect) memory, "spring cake" indeed only appeared in the stores in the spring, more precisely, in April, while the cheese paste was more generally available. It would be frivolous to speculate without evidence about the purposeful timing of the offering of the ersatz-kulich around the time of the Paschal celebration. My guess is that, rather than intentional defiance, the timing was opportunistic. Still, the recipe itself, just as the recipes for halva or sweet cheese, endured.

On the personal level, which is where real resistance always dwells, there have also been two entirely different strands. It is important to remember that the erasure of religious identities by the Communists was part of the broader strategy to destroy all non-regimented connections, be they ethnic, family, etc. And this strategy was, on the surface, extremely effective. So many people grew up knowing precious little about their ancestry and their background or believing what was fiction invented by their parents and grandparents to protect their families from persecution. So many have lost the faith of their ancestors entirely, growing up not even as atheists (since atheism is a faith of a kind) but bona fide "nones"—not believing and not bothered. There were others who had held on to their faith and their memories and family stories, and for whom customs and traditions provided a consciously preserved and protected connection to that threatened identity. Yet I would suggest that for everyone, the endurance of the most basic traditional recipes succeeded as fundamental resistance to the Communist project of "destroying the old world to its foundations" (paraphrasing "The International") and "creating a new species of a Soviet human."

Pascha table

In my interviews with friends from both believing and non-believing families, I was struck by the similarity of some of the most basic stories. Almost every family baked blini

[3] In Russia, sweet rich Pascha bread, called paska in Ukraine, similar to Greek tsoureki.

[4] In Russia, sweet cheese paste, traditionally shaped as a pyramid.

Blessing of the fruits. "Apple Spas".

for Maslenitsa and either bought or baked kulich around Pascha time. In many households, the knowledge of how to color eggs and how to bake the larks (bird-shaped sweet pastries traditionally baked on the Feast of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste) was retained without necessarily knowing what those customs meant.

Here, for example, is a story from a friend in whose family the grandmothers (born right around the Revolution of 1917) had retained some connection to the Church while the parents (WWII generation) have already identified as non-believers. Many other family stories echoed these experiences:

> "My grandmother made sure the babies were baptized, and up to the age of seven, she and her sister occasionally took them to church to take communion. After seven, the children were on their own. In both my mom's and dad's families, eggs were painted before Pascha. Grandmother's sister used to take several eggs to church to get blessed, and everyone ate a piece of the Holy Egg. My grandmother's stepmother, who died before I was born, used to bake the Easter kulich. After her passing, people usually bought "Spring cakes," and grandma would take one of them to be blessed, and then it would be shared by her entire extended family. My grandmother's sister went to church regularly. The Easter table was mandatory, but we did not make paska, instead, we bought sweet cheese paste, and it wasn't taken to be blessed. Grandmother fasted, but only from meat. Grandmother's mother-in-law also fasted from milk, but she ate everything at a party, and if someone did not know and brought her a non-Lenten culinary gift, she would take a piece. If one of the grannies went to liturgy, they would always bring back prosphoras. They observed traditional August Savior feasts ("Honey ", "Apple", and "Walnut") and took food to be blessed and then eaten with family members. Family gatherings with pancakes on Forgiveness Sunday were obligatory (and still are),

as well as the rite of general reconciliation. Christmas was almost entirely eclipsed by the New Year holidays, but grannies went to church in the morning on Christmas Day and brought prosphoras. Another grandmother and a beloved neighbor baked the larks from Lenten dough for the Feast of the Forty Martyrs. We did not have scrambled eggs for Pentecost—I know about this custom only from ethnographic descriptions. On the Feast of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, my grandma and her sister tried not to eat anything round and encouraged us to adhere to that custom, but we did not particularly care about it. And of course, there was traditional food for the funerals, simple and hearty food, usually meat and potatoes, but always kutya[5]. In my family, they did not bake crosses for the Exaltation and the Ladder, but others did."[6]

In Communist Albania, where persecution of all things religious was considerably more brutal, the Church was completely destroyed, and no grandmothers were going to church to bless foods, people still managed to retain their culinary traditions tied to the religious customs. An Albanian friend remembers,

> "At Pascha times, there were red eggs, dyed in onion skins. As kids, we never saw them properly because the grown-ups were afraid we would mention them outside the house, and that could have meant persecution and even death. So, they used to break them in secret, and if one of us kids noticed, we were told that they were tomatoes. Instead of proper Pascha bread, they would make small sweet bread, and the kids were told that that was a kind of pita bread.
>
> There were other special foods. Around Christmas, there were koulourakia[7] as well as roasted turkey with stuffing, and pispilita (a type of pie, or pita made with corn flour, greens, spinach, scallions, nettles, feta cheese, butter). Pascha was all about lamb: roasted lamb cooked with scallions, mageritsa soup with lamb entrails, and sausage also made with lamb entrails.
>
> Some of these meals needed baking, and in Albania, we didn't have stoves for baking. Some heating wood stoves had small ovens that fit small pans, but these stoves were used only during the winter. For baking, we had to use the neighborhood stone and wood ovens. We would prepare

Easter eggs dyed in onion skins. Photo by Oana Cicalau: https://www.pexels.com/photo/traditional-easter-eggs-on-embroidered-cloth-31685633/

[5] Kutya or koliva, a dish made with boiled wheat, honey, and various kinds of dried fruit or pomegranate. Made for commemorative services, funerals, and the Christmas Eve dinner.

[6] Interview with Anna Masterkova, February 3, 2025.

[7] Sweet baked dessert. In Greece, it is one of the Paschal dishes.

the food and take it there to bake every day, from very early in the morning till late in the evening. The state bakers did a great job, but during religious celebrations, the Secret Police were watching what food people brought to the ovens to be baked. So, we couldn't go there with a big leg of marinated lamb, or with pans of pispilita, sweet bread, or koulourakia. Instead, our grandmothers used to cook small portions, or light the winter stoves with wood hidden in the houses, and cook the lamb in big pots instead of roasting it. Roman Catholics had eel with rice for Easter and roasted pork for Christmas, which they also made in secret. The only meal that could be cooked openly was the roasted turkey that, together with the Christmas tree, was a tradition transferred to the New Year (New Year Turkey, New Year Tree) and therefore preserved in the open.

When we were children, we used to wonder why certain foods were only cooked in the Spring. Of course, the adults couldn't tell us about Pascha. And yet our grandmothers, aunts, and mothers always found a way of cooking these meals to mark the tradition."[8]

All this may present a fascinating subject for a different study, one on how the "restoration of religion" in Russia after the fall of Communism has immediately focused on the external expressions and customs at the expense of the deeper spiritual content. I would argue, however, that the retention of the faith-based material customs in their most basic aspect, that of food, constitutes a more important theological phenomenon than meets the eye. The imbuing of food that nourishes the body with spiritual meaning—tying it to the feasts, ascribing significance to its elements—preserves the connection between the spiritual and the material that emphasizes the holistic nature of creation. Neither disembodied ideas nor nutrition without meaning possesses the ability to nourish life in its fullness. Yet the experience of "dissident foods" that preserve their stories and the embodied tradition in the times of oblivion and spiritual darkness carries in it the light of the Incarnation, of word becoming flesh and destroying the oblivion of death by uniting the disunited natures. The "Spring cake" or the "New Year turkey" thus brings the eucharistic celebration into the world from which the powers of darkness try, and fail, to excise the Eucharist. Life reigns. ✠

[8] Interview with Klorela Alcala, May 11, 2025.

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KULICH / PASKA

Dough:
- 2 envelopes (4 ½ teaspoons) active dry yeast
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon flour
- ¼ cup warm water
- 12 cups sifted all-purpose flour
- 2 cups milk, warmed (100° to 110° F.)
- 3 large eggs, room temperature
- 8 large yolks, room temperature
- ⅔ cup sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- Zest of 1 lemon
- Zest of 1 orange
- ¾cup raisins
- ½ cup candied fruit
- 1 tablespoon Amaretto
- 1 tablespoon Cointreau
- 8 tablespoons of melted unsalted butter, plus more to grease the pans (1 stick)
- ½ cup vegetable or sunflower oil

Topping:
3 extra egg yolks plus 1 Tbsp. water for brushing the tops of kulich.
OR
- 1 egg white
- ½ cup powdered sugar
- ½ teaspoon lemon juice
- 3-4 teaspoons water

Instructions:

Using a hand mixer, mix all ingredients for about five minutes. Cover the tops of kulich and leave them out to dry for several hours.

1. In a medium bowl, combine yeast, 1 tablespoon flour, 1 tablespoon sugar, and ¼ cup of warm water. Mix until smooth. Set bowl aside until mixture is bubbly, 10 to 15 minutes.

2. Add 4 cups of flour and milk to the yeast mixture. With a wooden spoon, mix until well combined. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise at room temperature until doubled in size, about 30 minutes.

3. In the bowl of a heavy-duty electric mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat 3 eggs, 8 egg yolks, and sugar until light and pale yellow, about 5 minutes. Add the mixture from steps 1 and 2. Add salt, vanilla extract, lemon zest, orange zest, rum or brandy, melted butter, and vegetable oil. Whisk on medium speed until combined.

4. Remove the whisk attachment from the machine and fit with the dough hook attachment. With the mixer on medium-low speed, gradually add enough of the remaining 8 cups of flour until the dough comes away from the side of the bowl. Transfer dough to a clean work surface. Knead dough, adding any remaining flour, if necessary, until smooth and elastic, 5 to 10 minutes. Transfer dough to a large bowl, and cover with a cloth or plastic wrap. Place in a warm spot away from drafts, and let it rise until doubled in size, 1 to 2 hours.

5. Place rack in lower two-thirds of oven, and heat to 350°F. Butter kulich forms (coffee cans, paper molds, saucepans). Cut a piece of waxed paper or parchment paper about 2 inches longer than the circumference of the can *(not needed for special kulich paper molds)*. Fold this in half lengthwise to make a double thickness. Place

inside the can, patting it to adhere to the butter. The collar should extend 3 to 4 inches above the rim of the can. Seal the 2-inch flap with more butter. Cut out circles and put them on the bottom of the can, so the kulich comes out more easily.

6. When the dough has doubled in bulk, punch down. If desired, set aside a portion of the dough in a medium bowl covered with plastic wrap for decorations. Divide the remaining dough evenly between the forms. Place the bowl and saucepans of dough in a warm place to rise for about 30 minutes.

7. After 30 minutes, on a clean work surface, shape reserved dough into desired motifs—suns, crosses, rosettes, birds, braids, scrolls, etc. Keep any dough that is not being used covered with plastic to prevent it from drying out. Brush the surface of risen dough in saucepans with 3 lightly beaten egg whites. Attach decorative dough ornaments, using a toothpick if necessary, to secure motifs to loaves. Keep in a warm place to rise until it reaches almost the top of the cans, 20 to 30 minutes. *(You can secure motifs with toothpicks and leave them on to bake, but then gently take them out after baking.)*

8. In a small bowl, whisk together the remaining 3 egg yolks and 1 tablespoon water. Brush the egg mixture on the surface of the loaves. Bake for 10 minutes, lower the oven temperature to 325°F, and bake for an additional 50 minutes. Cool kulich in cans for 30 minutes. When kulich has cooled but is still warm, gently remove from cans and transfer to a rack to cool.

CHEESE PASKA

Ingredients:

- 1 kg farmer's cheese
- 200 g butter
- 5 eggs
- 200 g sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla
- 400 ml cream 10–20%
- 100 g nuts
- 100 g raisins
- 100 g candied fruit
- 1 tbsp Cointreau or Amaretto

Instructions:

1. Put farmer's cheese and softened butter in a blender and mix.

2. Beat eggs with sugar, add vanilla, and cream. Place mixture in a pan over medium heat, bring to a boil, cook for 3 minutes until thickened, stirring constantly.

3. Finely chop the nuts, cut the candied fruit, wash and dry the raisins.

4. Mix cottage cheese, nuts, raisins, and candied fruits.

5. Add the egg mixture to the cottage cheese and stir. Add liquor.

6. Cover the paska mold with 2–3 layers of gauze, put in the mixture, fold the edges of the gauze, and place the mold on a plate.

7. Place a weight on the mold and refrigerate for 12 hours.

KOULOURAKIA

Ingredients:

- 250g butter (8.8 oz.)
- 1 ½cup plain white sugar
- 13g powdered baking ammonia (2.5 tsp, flat). If you have trouble finding baking ammonia, or you don't like the taste, you could substitute with 2.5 tsp double-acting baking powder.
- ½cup lukewarm milk (130ml)
- 4 medium eggs
- 1 tbsp vanilla extract
- Zest of 1 orange
- 1kg all-purpose (plain) flour (35 oz.)
- 2 egg yolks and 1 tbsp water for glazing

Instructions:

To prepare this traditional koulourakia recipe, start by mixing the butter and sugar. In a mixer's bowl, add the sugar and butter (chopped) and mix for about 10–15 minutes, until the butter is creamy and fluffy. (Once starting to prepare this koulourakia recipe, make sure that the butter is at room temperature).

In the meantime, warm the milk until lukewarm and remove the pot from the heat. Add the ammonia and whisk until fully dissolved. Set aside.

In the butter-sugar mixture, add the eggs one at a time, whilst mixing, allowing time for each one to be absorbed, before adding another. Pour in the vanilla extract, the orange zest, and the milk & ammonia blend and mix to combine. Add the flour, a little bit at a time, whilst mixing, until the ingredients are combined, and the dough is soft and not too sticky.

Cover the dough for the koulourakia with some plastic wrap and set aside to rest for 30 minutes.

Place the dough for the koulourakia on a clean working surface, take a small piece of dough and form long cords. Shape the koulourakia with your hands, giving them any shape you like.

Line a large baking tray with parchment paper and place the koulourakia, leaving some distance between them as they will rise a lot when baked. For this koulourakia recipe, you will need approx. 4–5 large baking trays, depending on the size of the cookies you make.

In a small bowl, add the egg yolks and 1 tbsp water and whisk with a fork. Brush the top of the koulourakia and bake in a preheated oven at 200C/400F fan for 15–20 minutes, until fully cooked and golden brown on the outside (or the ammonia would not have been fully used up).

Let the koulourakia cool down completely on a cooling rack and store in airtight containers for up to three weeks.