



Press Release

23 December 2004

Happy Christmas Russia... Or not

Have you missed the last post or did you just fail to send any Christmas cards at all? Don't worry, at least international relations don't rest on your Christmas card choices.

A file uncovered as part of Archive Awareness Campaign reveals that this was the Government's problem in 1968. Christmas loomed very close yet Harold Wilson and his Cabinet could not agree on who to send Christmas cards to!

The document, held at The National Archives in Kew, West London, contains correspondence between the Prime Minister's office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in December '68. Following the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Russia, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria, the Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, thought that an exchange of Christmas cards with the invading nations "would be an expression of personal regard and would run counter to our present policy on contacts with the Soviet Union."

The Prime Minister's Office was clearly feeling the Christmas spirit a little more strongly than the FCO with regard to Russia. The Prime Minister was advised by his own staff to "send a short message of personal greetings to Kosygin for the New Year; and perhaps also for Auld Langsyne (sic) to Mikoyan." In a handwritten note Wilson agrees, saying: "On the Russians it seems petty to change the practice. It creates the maximum annoyance with no gain whatsoever. On the whole I'd like to do the same as last year. And why should not the Foreign Office do the same. We have not broken off diplomatic relations."

Not everyone made Wilson's list however. He had "severe doubts" about sending cards to Vorster and Muller, the South African Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, despite them making the Foreign and Commonwealth list and contrary to advice from his own office.

Eventually the disagreements were resolved "at Cabinet" where it was decided that Ministers should send Christmas cards as they wished.

Katie Norgrove, Policy and Development Officer at the National Council on Archives, said: "This fascinating file demonstrates that dilemmas over Christmas card lists exist even at the heart of government - only with implications for international relations rather than relations with Auntie Doris. This is a great example of the intriguing material that can be dug up in the archives."

This is just one of thousands of documents highlighted for Archive Awareness Campaign which sees 500 events taking place this autumn. To find an Archive Awareness Campaign event near you or to discover more about the UK's archives visit www.archiveawareness.com

Notes to Editors

* For more information on any of the above please contact Lucy Fulton on 020 8392 5237.

* 500 events are taking place across the UK this autumn for Archive Awareness Campaign, which aims to reveal the treasures of the archives. The campaign, run by partners the National Council on Archives, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and The National Archives, is now in its second year.

For more information about Archive Awareness Campaign please visit www.archiveawareness.com or contact Lucy Fulton, Archive Awareness Campaign Officer at The National Archives Tel: 020 8392 5237 Email: lucy.fulton@nationalarchives.gov.uk

* The National Archives, Kew, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk has one of the largest archival collections in the world, spanning 1000 years of British history, from Domesday Book to newly released government papers. The free museum and research rooms in Kew, west London, are open to the public 6 days a week.