

Towards an autocrat of Russia

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IN EZEKIEL 38 the invader of Israel is spoken of as coming from “the land of Magog” (v. 2). Josephus says that “Magog founded those that from him were named Magogites, but who are by the Greeks called Scythians”.¹ The ancient Scythians populated land which today includes southern Russia. Two areas where Scythian roots are particularly strong are North and South Ossetia. As an assistant editor of the *National Geographic*, Mike Edwards, stated:

“Yet, scholars say, a remnant of the Scythians endures in the 700,000 Ossetians, whose homeland today is a two-part enclave straddling the Caucasus Mountains. North Ossetia, the larger part, lies within Russia, while South Ossetia intrudes into Georgia. The Ossetians declare that their ancestors were the Alans, a tribe in which survived the genes of both Scythians and Sarmatians, who came after them from the Asian steppe”.²

Beslan, where the recent massacre of school children by terrorists took place, is in North Ossetia. The atrocity, taking place as it did amongst descendants of the ancient Magogites, was seen by Russians as an attack upon themselves as a whole. As one Russian television presenter said: “They have declared war on us”.³ Furthermore, the attack looks set to have a profound effect on Russia, an effect which may accelerate its development as the ruthless northern invader. Evidence for this has already been seen in the reaction of President Putin to the crisis.

In Habakkuk the Chaldean invader is spoken of in a way which also points forward to the Gogian invader of the latter days: “Yea also, because he transgresseth by wine, he is a proud man, neither keepeth at home, who enlargeth his desire as hell, and is as death, and cannot be satisfied, but gathereth unto him all nations, and heapeth unto him all people” (2:5). This is the depiction of a leader who is establishing himself as an autocrat, a “proud man” seeking to control “all people”. Whoever may be the individual who will come to be identified as the Gog of Ezekiel 38, the current leader of Russia appears to be developing the role of the Russian presidency in a way that fits more and more the ruthless leader set out in Bible prophecy.

In response to the events at Beslan, the Russian president has sought further to strengthen his position by proposing radical political reform. As the journalist Andrew Jack wrote: “Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, yesterday outlined the biggest shake-up of his country’s political system in a decade, ending the direct election of regional governors and further centralising power in the Kremlin”.⁴

It is anticipated that the changes will come into force by the end of the year. The proposal for increased centralisation of power in Moscow is in some ways a return to the way Russia used to be ruled in the Soviet era. Mr Putin is also seeking to upgrade the country’s security system. As Andrew Jack further shows, this too has echoes of the past:

“Mr Putin also called for an ‘integrated security’ and anti-terror system, raising the spectre of the re-creation of the former Soviet-era KGB internal police”.⁵

This proposed reform of the security system is not the only indication that the KGB approach to security may be making a comeback. When the democratic reforms took place in Russia in 1991 the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of an organisation which later developed into the feared KGB, was pulled down. The statue had stood outside the headquarters of the KGB in Lubyanka Square, Moscow. The toppling of the statue was indicative of the changes sweeping Russia at that time. However, recently, a new statue of him has been set up in the Russian town named after him, Dzerzhinsky. One journalist described the setting up of this statue as “a potent symbol of the new Putinised Russia”.⁶

1. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book I, VI, 1, in Whiston, W. (trans.) (1898), *The works of Flavius Josephus*, London, Routledge, p. 33.
2. Edwards, M. (1996), “Searching for the Scythians”, *National Geographic*, Vol. 190, No. 3, pp. 54-79.
3. “Russia’s horror”, *The Economist*, Sept. 11-17, pp. 9-10.
4. Jack, A. (2004), “Putin shake-up will strengthen power of Kremlin”, *Financial Times*, Sept. 14, p. 1.
5. *Op. cit.*
6. Osborn, A. (2004), “KGB’s founder back on his plinth in Russia”, *Independent on Sunday*, Sept. 12, p. 20.

Dzerzhinsky was responsible for the deaths of thousands of Russians. He formed the Cheka, the original secret police force. It is thought that his agents killed around half a million people during the first six years of Communist rule. He was also responsible for setting up the first labour camps. His organisation was later inherited by Stalin, who used it to terrorise his people. That the memory of such a man should now be once more invoked, apparently with Mr Putin's approval, provides a chilling insight into the way in which Russia is developing.

In his writings Brother Thomas referred to Gog as the "Autocrat of all the Russias".⁷ The term 'autocrat' may seem a little extreme, but its use reflects the way Gog is depicted in the Scriptures. Furthermore, the way in which President Putin is developing his presidency is indeed causing him to become autocratic. This is seen, for example, in the way in which the BBC corre-

spondent Humphrey Hawksley wrote of the initial muted political response to the Beslan crisis. He said it was "in line with the increasingly autocratic style of President Putin's government".⁸

The current changes taking place in Russia, together with the invoking of its Soviet past, show that Russia is becoming more and more like the ruthless Chaldean and Assyrian powers of old. The time will soon come when the "Autocrat of all the Russias", whoever he might be, will be drawn down into the Middle East to invade Israel.

7. For example see Thomas, J. (1924, 11th edition), *Elpis Israel*, Birmingham, C. C. Walker, p. 432. The point I make in this paragraph derives from a similar point made by Brother Don Pearce in a talk given at the Prophecy Day in Rugby, UK, on 28 February 2004.

8. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3627722.stm>

The Olivet Prophecy

5. The appearance of the Son of man

Stephen Hughes

WE NOW TURN our attention to the section of the Olivet Prophecy that deals with the return of Jesus to establish the Kingdom. It begins: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken" (Mt. 24:29).

In prophecy, the sun, moon and stars are symbolic of rulership, as we see, for example, in Isaiah 1:1,2: "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken".

A.D. 70 or latter days?

Initially, Matthew 24:29 appears to apply to A.D. 70. When Judea was destroyed, the sun, moon and stars of the Jewish political heavens were removed. However, when we think about it, this was not really the situation in A.D. 70. At that time Israel was part of the Roman Empire, and therefore, in the language of prophecy, the na-

tion was under the rule of the Roman heaven. We could, of course, envisage there being two heavens in A.D. 70, the Roman heaven and a Judean sub-heaven underneath the Roman heaven—like a kind of false ceiling. Is the two-heaven interpretation a reasonable one? Let us explore further.

We saw in the previous article that the political death of Judea is aptly symbolised by a carcase in Matthew 24:28. If a nation is politically dead then clearly the political heavens have been removed, or rolled up like a scroll, to use the language of Scripture, as for example Isaiah 34:4: "And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree". In Revelation 6:14 similar language is used of the fall of the pagan Roman Empire but also typifies the fall of the kingdom of men at the return of Jesus.

By the time we reach verse 28, in our interpretation of the prophecy any Jewish leadership, such as it was, had already been removed. Assuming this to be the case, then the heavens that we read of in verse 29 are different from the