

# **DARKNESS IS FALLING**

## *Vladimir Putin and the Threat to the West*

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### **A Door Opens**

In 1982, an unlikely door opened for the gospel.

It was the peak of the Cold War. The Soviets had invaded Afghanistan. Ronald Reagan, the avowed anti-Communist, had been elected president. And Billy Graham was suddenly invited to speak at a church-sponsored peace conference in Moscow.

The opportunity was one Graham had long sought. Twenty-three years earlier, in 1959, he'd taken a private trip to the Soviet Union. No press. No entourage. He simply wanted to see the faces of the Russian people and ask the Lord to let him preach the hope of the Cross in the epicenter of atheism, the crucible of Communism.

Now he faced a dilemma: Was God opening this door, or was the enemy?

"The invitation presented serious problems," Graham would later write. "It was no secret that peace conferences in Eastern Europe were ill-disguised showcases for Soviet propaganda. . . . There was no guarantee this one would be any different. . . . If I accepted, would I become an unwitting tool of Communist propaganda?"

The evangelist prayed for wisdom. He asked family and friends for their counsel. And he insisted on three conditions before he would make a final decision.

"First, if I went," he said, "I would only be an observer, not a full delegate. That way, if any pro-Soviet statement was adopted by the assembly, I would not be part of it.

"Second, if I spoke at the conference, I would have complete freedom to speak from the Bible on an appropriate topic of my choice.

"Third, in addition to speaking at the conference, I would be allowed to preach in two Moscow churches, one Orthodox and one Baptist."

To his astonishment, the Soviets agreed to all three.

### **A Firestorm Erupts**

Then the media got hold of the story and a firestorm erupted. Many castigated Graham for even considering an invitation to go to the Evil Empire.

Conflicted, the evangelist flew to Washington to seek the counsel of President Reagan, his

longtime friend. Reagan looked Graham in the eye and said, “I know what’s been in the press. But I believe that God works in mysterious ways.”

Go, Reagan told him. “I’ll be praying for you every mile of the way.”

So Graham went—and the firestorm grew.

The *New York Times* cited critics who blasted the trip as “misguided” and said the evangelist had been “duped” and “used” by Soviet officials.

The *Washington Post* cited “rival preachers” who “accused Graham of the worst sort of heresy—going soft on Communism,” saying Graham had done “grave damage” to the cause of Christ.

Dr. Graham himself would later concede he made some mistakes and made some statements to the press he wished he hadn’t.

## **A Harvest Is Reaped**

And yet, God did work in mysterious ways, blessing that trip beyond anything Graham or his team—much less his critics—could have imagined.

The doors to the entire Soviet bloc suddenly opened for the gospel.

In 1984, the evangelist was invited to preach the gospel in Leningrad, Russia; Tallinn, Estonia; Novosibirsk, Siberia—even in Moscow itself.

In 1988, Graham was invited back again—this time to preach the gospel in Zagorsk, Russia; in Kiev, Ukraine; and in Moscow again.

One door after another opened to preach in the countries of Eastern Europe.

Then in 1992, this North Carolina farm boy was invited to hold a full-blown Billy Graham Crusade in the Olympic Stadium in Moscow.

This time, the *Washington Post* sang a different tune. The *Post* reported that “four million leaflets” were distributed in the Russian capital, inviting Muscovites to the crusade. “There were 1,500 subway and 1,500 bus placards, as well as television commercials and radio ads and banners stretched across the city’s busiest streets.”

And the *Post* reported, “all of this . . . worked. About 100,000 people flocked to a huge indoor Olympic arena in Moscow . . . for three revival meetings.”

The response was tremendous.

An estimated one in four Russians who attended came forward to receive Christ.

One biographer would later write, “Despite the controversy brought on by the 1982 Moscow trip, the long-term consequences of it for [Billy Graham’s] ministry turned out in the end to be helpful on two levels. [First,] the trip opened up virtually the entire Communist world to future visits by him, and [second], in the views of some observers, [Graham’s trip] was a contributing factor to the actual collapse of Communism. . . . [President] Nixon himself, at the end of the 1980s, said he believed that Graham ‘helped bring about the . . . peaceful liberation of Eastern Europe.’”

## **A Young Man Is Inspired**

I was only fifteen when Billy Graham went to Moscow for the first time. When he went back in 1984, I was a senior in high school in a little town in upstate New York.

In December of that year, I had the opportunity to attend the InterVarsity missions conference in Urbana, Illinois. Who was the keynote speaker? None other than the Reverend Billy Graham, and I was spellbound by his message. For decades after, I could still recite the jokes he told and the points he made.

I remember he closed his message by challenging us from the life of C. T. Studd, the great British cricketer, who stunned the world by devoting his life to taking the gospel to the darkest places on earth, and urging young people to follow his lead.

Dr. Graham cited a letter C. T. Studd wrote near the end of his life, as he prepared to head to Africa: “Last June, at the mouth of the Congo, there awaited a thousand prospectors, traders, merchants, and gold seekers, waiting to rush into those regions as soon as the government opened the door to them. For rumor declared that there’s an abundance of gold. If such men hear so loudly the call of gold and obey it, can it be that the ears of Christ’s soldiers are deaf to the call of God and the cries of the dying souls of men? Are gamblers for gold so many, and gamblers for God so few?”

As I sat there in that arena filled with 17,000 young people, I wanted to be a gambler for God. I was the grandson of Orthodox Jews who escaped Russia in the early years of the twentieth century—during the reign of Czar Nicholas II—because of the horrific persecution of the Jews. There was no doubt in my mind, I had been given a great gift.

My family had fled Russia as darkness was falling and revolution was coming.

By God’s grace, they didn’t settle in Poland or Austria or Germany, where so many Russian Jews would be annihilated in the coming Holocaust. In God’s mercy, my family headed for America, where they found economic, political, and spiritual freedom. This is where we heard the gospel, and this is where we said yes.

To whom much is given, much is required. That night in Urbana, I knew I wanted to take the gospel into dark places like the Soviet Union, just like Billy Graham. No one was asking me to preach in stadiums. But in the summer of 1986, I headed to Moscow with friends, to smuggle Bibles and share Christ with anyone who would listen.

It was still the Soviet Union then. But the earthquake was coming. Three years later, the Berlin Wall would fall. On Christmas Day, 1991, the Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin for the last time. The Evil Empire was no more. The Russian people were finally free to hear the gospel and say yes, without fear. It was historic, miraculous, and exhilarating.

## **A Door Shuts**

But that was then.

Today, those doors are once again closed.

Preaching the gospel in the open air is now illegal in Russia. So is sharing the gospel with friends and coworkers—even in your own home. So is inviting friends to come to church to hear the Word of God.

*Christianity Today* described the new Russian law signed in July 2016 as the “most restrictive measures [against religious freedom] in post-Soviet history.”

## **Darkness Is Falling**

Darkness is falling in Russia.

A new czar has risen, and his name is Vladimir Putin.

Putin calls himself a Christian, but he has declared war on the gospel. Opponents wind up in jail. Journalists disappear or die. The economy is suffocating. Poverty is rampant. Deaths by alcoholism and drug overdoses are exploding. Since Putin came to power in 2000, the population has shrunk by more than three million people. They’re not emigrating. They’re dying. One in four Russian men die before age fifty-five. And Russians aren’t having enough children to replace themselves. Why would they? They have no hope.

Yet on March 18—barring something unforeseen—Russians will go to the polls and reelect Vladimir Putin once again, giving him power to rule until 2024.

Why? If life is so dismal in post-Soviet Russia, why is Putin so popular? Why should it matter to our leaders in Washington that by the end of his next term, Putin will have ruled for nearly a quarter of century? And why should any of this matter to you and the American Evangelical movement?

Allow me to take those questions one at a time.

## **Why Is Putin So Popular?**

First, why is Putin so popular? For this, let me tell you a story.

In 1999, then-Russian president Boris Yeltsin, the father of Russian democracy, appointed Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin to be prime minister.

That seemed odd because Putin had spent most of his life as an officer in the KGB, rising to become the head of the FSB.

Why would Yeltsin, who had so courageously taken on the Communist regime in the early 1990s and was the face of the democratic revolution when the Soviet Union finally imploded, turn over the reins of power to a KGB man?

No one really knows for sure.

What we do know is that the moment Yeltsin appointed him to be prime minister in August 1999, Putin’s approval rating was only 31 percent. Many Russians didn’t even know who he was. Yet in just a few short months, his approval rating had skyrocketed to the mideighties. When Yeltsin formally stepped down as president, Putin was easily elected to replace him.

How did the Putin become so popular overnight?

By invading Chechnya. By bombing Grozny, the Chechen capital—home to some 400,000 people—nearly out of existence.

Why Chechnya? Putin insisted that a series of apartment bombings in Moscow and several other Russian cities were the work of Radical Muslim terrorists from Chechnya. There was no evidence, mind you. The bombings remain unsolved to this day. Indeed, a number of reputable Russian and foreign journalists, academics and political leaders believe the FSB itself was responsible for the bombings, to create a pretext by which Putin could go to war in defense of Mother Russia.

Is that true? I cannot say. Did it work? I'll let you be the judge. What we know for certain is that a previously obscure KGB man was suddenly the new ruler of Russia.

Fast-forward a few years. Putin's approval ratings drop from the mideighties to the midsixties. And Putin is fit to be tied.

He gives a major speech declaring the collapse of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical disaster” of the twentieth century.

He decries the fact that “tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots [find] themselves outside Russian territory.”

Then he vows that “Russia was, is, and will . . . be a major European power.”

Aggressively rebuilding the Russian military, he signs a military budget four times larger than when he took office in 2000.

And in the summer of 2008—with the world focused on the opening of the Olympic games in Beijing—Putin and his protégé Dmitri Medvedev order Russian forces to invade the Republic of Georgia. Russia proceeds to occupy 20 percent of Georgia, which they hold to this day. And Putin's poll numbers skyrocket to 88 percent.

Fast-forward again. Now it's 2011 and 2012. Russians are on the streets protesting Kremlin corruption, election fraud, and bleak economic conditions. Putin's numbers are deflating, dropping to a low of 61 percent.

Without warning, Putin orders Russian forces to invade eastern and southern Ukraine. He does so even as Russia is hosting the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. On March 18, 2014, Putin formally annexes Crimea into the Russian Federation. His approval ratings shoot up again, this time to 83 percent.

A short time later, Putin plants the Russian flag in the blood-soaked soil of Syria. He sends Russian forces into Syria to bolster his alliance with Bashar al-Assad, the ayatollahs of Iran, and the jihadists of Hezbollah. Together, they help slaughter hundreds of thousands of people. Millions more flee for their lives. And suddenly Putin is king. Russia is the new superpower in the Middle East.

Just in time for another Russian presidential election.

Vladimir Putin isn't popular because he's making day-to-day life better for the average Russian. He's popular because he appeals to the bloodlust deep in the Russian soul. Putin creates a crisis. He sends Russian forces into battle. He crushes enemies. He plants the flag. He declares victory. And the people have something to cheer for.

## Why Should It Matter to Washington and the West?

Which brings us to question two: Why should any of this matter to leaders in Washington and the West?

Because Vladimir Putin poses a grave and growing threat to the national security of the United States and our allies of any power in the world—greater than Radical Islam, greater than Iran or North Korea or China.

Just yesterday, Putin made global headlines around the world by announcing that Russia has developed new first-strike nuclear missiles and state-of-the-art hypersonic underwater torpedoes that make NATO defenses “completely useless.”

In an angry, menacing State of the Union address, the Russian president vowed that “Russia cannot be contained.” He explained when and how Russia will use nuclear weapons against her enemies. He complained no one has been listening to his threats and promises of nuclear superiority over the West.

“Listen now,” he warned. “I’m not bluffing.”

Putin is hungry for wealth, hungrier for power, hungrier still for territory. He must be stopped, yet no one is stopping him.

Think of the Godfather movies. Yet Putin is not Sonny Corleone. He’s Michael. He’s not a rash, hotheaded, impulsive gangster. He’s a cold-blooded, methodical, calculating killer, with seven thousand nuclear warheads and the ICBMs to deliver them.

Another way to understand Putin is that he sees himself as a modern-day czar. He’s not a Communist. He’s not a Marxist or Leninist. He is, rather, an imperialist. He feels humiliated by the collapse of the Soviet Empire. He sees his mission as rebuilding the glory of Mother Russia, and to that end, he is hell-bent on expanding Russia’s borders.

“My historical mission,” he once said, is to stop “the collapse of the USSR. . . . If I can help save Russia from collapse, then I’ll have something to be proud of.

“The monarch [that is, the czar] doesn’t have to worry about whether or not he will be elected, or about petty political interests, or about how to influence the electorate. He can think about the destiny of the people and not become distracted with trivialities.”

Thus, one part mafia kingpin, one part imperialist czar, Putin is . . .

- rebuilding the Russian offensive war machine,
- rebuilding Russia’s strategic and tactical nuclear forces,
- selling advanced weapons and even nuclear technology to Iran,
- selling weapons to North Korea,
- invading her neighbors,
- silencing his critics,
- and threatening the West.

The big question is: What’s next?

It's a question I war-game in my next political thriller, which releases next week—*The Kremlin Conspiracy*.

In *The Kremlin Conspiracy*, a new czar is rising in Moscow. He's not Putin. Not exactly. Let's call him Putin-esque. But he's plotting a lightning-fast invasion of not one but three of the Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Each has been a member of NATO since 2004. An invasion of any would trigger Article 5 of the NATO mutual-defense pact. This means that all of NATO—led by the U.S.—would be obligated to go to war to stop the Russian invasion and liberate the Baltics if they were captured.

But this raises another critical question: Would the U.S. and NATO really go to full-scale war with Russia—a war that could very well escalate into a thermonuclear exchange—to rescue three countries most Americans likely cannot find on a map?

In *The Kremlin Conspiracy*, my fictional czar is betting the answer is no.

He's gambling that NATO will huff and puff but won't lift a finger to stop him. And if he's right, he knows that's the end of NATO. There is no mutual defense pact if a NATO country can be invaded in broad daylight and no one lifts a finger to rescue them. And make no mistake: the collapse of NATO means the czar running the Kremlin—the man whose finger rests on the button controlling some seven thousand nuclear warheads and the missiles to deliver them—is suddenly the most powerful man on the planet, able to dictate his terms to every nation in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and beyond.

The central theme of my novels is this: To misunderstand the nature and threat of evil is to risk being blindsided by it.

What if our leaders in Washington are so focused on the threats emanating from North Korea, Iran, ISIS, and China—true threats, all—that they are blindsided by a Russian tyrant plotting the collapse of NATO?

I pray this is only the stuff of a high-octane political thriller.

But with every day that passes, I fear it may be more fact than fiction.

## **Why Should It Matter to Evangelicals?**

Which brings us to question number three: Why should any of this matter to American evangelicals?

Three reasons in closing.

### **First, the Scriptures call us to be “watchmen on the walls.”**

The Lord said to the ancient Hebrew prophet Ezekiel, “Son of man, speak to your people and say to them: ‘When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not heed the warning and the sword comes and takes their life, their blood will be on their own head. Since they heard the sound of the trumpet but did not heed the warning, their blood will be on their own head. If they



had heeded the warning, they would have saved themselves. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes someone's life, that person's life will be taken because of their sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for their blood" (Ezekiel 33:2-6).

As servants of the Lord, you and I must always be ready, willing, and able to identify emerging threats to our nation and to warn our leaders and people.

### **Second, the Scriptures call us to take the gospel into dark places.**

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

Darkness is falling in Russia—143 million people spread across eleven time zones are slaves of an evil they either cannot see or cannot stop. We must stand with our brothers and sisters who love Christ but hear the prison doors closing and locking around them. We dare not put our lamp under a bushel. The Billy Graham era may be over, but we must never stop communicating the Good News, especially to nations enslaved by cruel and wicked tyrants.

### **Third, the Scriptures call us to be prayer warriors.**

Most of us can't walk into the Oval Office or other corridors of power. It is, therefore, easy to feel that we have no influence when global events spin out of control.

But the truth is we are sons and daughters of our Father in heaven. We have direct access to the King of kings and the Lord of lords. We can have tremendous impact on the course of men and nations by getting on our knees in intercessory prayer.

Jesus never taught his disciples they were powerless in the face of evil. To the contrary, he said "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

He said, "Love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

Likewise, the apostle Paul commanded us to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people" (Ephesians 6:18).

Paul wrote, "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

What's more, Paul commanded us to be "joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer" (Romans 12:12).

So, dear friends, let us pray without ceasing for Vladimir Putin, his family, and his advisors—pray they are saved or removed from power.

Let us pray for our brothers and sisters in Russia, that "words may be given [to them] so that



[they] will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which [they are] ambassador[s] in chains. Pray that [they] may declare it fearlessly, as [they] should” (Ephesians 6:19-20).

Let us pray, too, for President Trump and Vice President Pence, and their advisors, for the wisdom to know how best to counter the Putin threat and safeguard the American people and our allies in NATO and the Middle East.

## Conclusion

Darkness is falling in Russia.

A czar is rising—at war with the gospel, perhaps soon with us.

In the face of such evil, let us not be silent or cower in fear. Rather, let us be strong and courageous and serve Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

My father’s family escaped from the last czar, and I’m so grateful that they did. But I don’t intend to run from this czar. With whatever means I have, I intend to confront him. Not that I have much. A novel. A blog. A microphone or two. But what if you and I worked together? What if we sounded the trumpet, to arouse our government, the people, and the church to each play our part? What if we took to heart what one man can do when he believes that “nothing is impossible with God”?

Today, after all, we remember the extraordinary impact made by a simple, humble North Carolina farm boy. In the eyes of the world, he didn’t seem special as he got started in life. But in the eyes of heaven, he was a servant of the most high God.

Billy Graham was the greatest evangelist the world has ever known. He preached the gospel in 185 countries—including Moscow and throughout the Evil Empire. He preached the gospel to more people face-to-face than anyone in the history of mankind. He brought Christ to the poor and the powerless, and to presidents and prime ministers.

There will never be another Billy Graham.

But there doesn’t need to be.

You and I can pick up our cross and carry on the mission.

We may never bear the fruit he bore.

But this is not the measure of our success.

Our task is to be faithful.

Faithful to see threats.

Faithful to sound the alarm.

Faithful to rouse the people to action, even in the face of grave danger.

Let us, then, be faithful, come what may.

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