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Vladimir Putin to Use 2018 World Cup to Score His Own Goals

History shows that for Moscow international sports often march arm in arm with war. Could the pattern be repeated this year?

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The eyes of the world are locked on Russia as it gears up to host the most widely viewed sporting event of the year: the 2018 FIFA World Cup. This prestigious event gives President Vladimir Putin an opportunity to score some goals of his own, both with Russians and in the world arena.

It is an opportunity that Moscow has used on several occasions to great effect.

Russia's View of Sports Dramatically Shifts

In the early years of the Soviet Union, Communists viewed Western-style competitive sports as a tool of capitalism—exploitative, corrupt and bourgeois. The Soviets renounced events like the Olympics as elitist spectacles and boycotted the games of 1920, 1924 and 1928.

But beginning in 1930, this view underwent a dramatic transformation. Soviet leaders came to see that they could use competitive international sports to tighten their grip on power within the USSR and to spread communism around the world.

"[I]mpressed with the growing power of mainstream sport, the [Soviet] regime came to see Western international sport as a useful means of reaching large numbers of foreign workers and of impressing foreign governments with Soviet strength," Barbara Keys wrote in her 2006 book [Globalizing Sport](#). "[T]he political benefits of participation in 'capitalist' sport—including the opportunity to influence foreign public opinion and to project images of national power—drew the Soviet Union into participation," she wrote.

In the decade that followed, the Soviets labored to accomplish the goals defined in a new state slogan: "Catch up with and overtake the bourgeois records in sport."

The ultimate goal was not just to beat the West in sports, but to use these high-profile sports victories to advance the Soviet Union's geopolitical goals.

Such plans were deferred during World War II. But by 1947, the Soviet Union had gained membership in a number of international sports federations and had achieved some notable victories. Each time, the sickle and hammer of the USSR's red flag were on proud display beside the victorious athletes, declaring to the world the superiority of the "new socialist man."

In 1952, the USSR made its Olympic debut. The Summer Games in Finland marked the first Olympiad in which athletes from the Soviet Union competed against Westerners. "The Olympics took on a new political dimension in 1952, one that was destined to grow increasingly important in the decades to follow," wrote Allen Guttman in *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games*.

Sports and War—1980

In late 1979, the “increasingly important” growth of the “new political dimension” of the Olympics was reaching a peak.

Thousands from around the globe—elite athletes, coaches, journalists and spectators—were preparing to visit Moscow. Officials in the Soviet capital were spending billions of rubles to prepare their stadiums, squares and extravagant czarist buildings to host the Olympics for the first time in history.

The eyes of the world were on the Soviet Union. Russian pride was surging to record levels.

Then in that climate of swelling pride, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan with tens of thousands of soldiers. “The Russian troops rushed into Afghanistan,” wrote Herbert W. Armstrong in a Feb. 18, 1980, co-worker letter.

Mr. Armstrong pointed out that the Olympics was about more than sports for the Soviets, which was evident in the anomalous level of state involvement with the athletes. “To the Russians, these games are a big government project,” he wrote. “All other countries may enter only amateur athletes. In Russia, the system is different. The government runs everything, even athletics. Though the Soviets call their athletes amateurs, they are actually in government employ and in real fact are pros!”

The ussr’s invasion of Afghanistan prompted the United States to boycott the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow. Scores of other nations followed America’s lead. But Mr. Armstrong said he agreed with analysts who said the U.S.’s boycott of the Moscow Games was a “slap on the wrist” that would not stop the ussr’s activity in Central Asia.

Time proved this assessment correct, with Soviet forces remaining in Afghanistan until 1989. And despite the boycott, the Soviets declared the 1980 games in Moscow the most glorious in all of history.

Sports and War—2008

Vladimir Putin is a product of the Soviet system, and often uses its tactics in his ongoing quest to restore Russian glory.

Eight years into Putin’s reign, Russia’s national soccer team unexpectedly defeated the Netherlands’ lineup. The June 21 victory meant Russia had entered the semifinals of the 2008 ufa European Football Championship, prompting the largest spontaneous street celebrations in Russia since V-Day in 1945.

Six weeks later, Russian forces invaded Georgia.

The invasion marked the first time since the Soviets had pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989 that Russian tanks were on foreign ground. The *Economist*’s Arkady Ostrovsky drew a connection between the soccer victory and the invasion: “That victory in the football game was a trailer for the wonderful display of Russian armor and strength in the tiny former Soviet republic of Georgia,” he said.

In the October 2008 *Trumpet*, editor in chief Gerald Flurry said the invasion of Georgia would not be Putin’s last: “Russia’s attack on Georgia in August marks the beginning of a [dangerous new era](#) in history,” he wrote. “This was the first military strike of a rising Asian superpower—and there will be more! ... Will a crisis occur over Ukraine? That area is the breadbasket of Russia, and surely it is willing to wage war over that as well.”

Time proved that forecast to be remarkably accurate.

Sports and War—2014

In February 2014, the Winter Olympics were held in Russia. This time, the games were staged in Sochi, and Putin spared no expense to make them a dazzling spectacle that would demonstrate to the world that Russia was great again. The final tab for the event came to \$51 billion, making the Sochi Games by far the most costly in Olympics history.

“The 2014 Sochi Olympics are Vladimir Putin’s declaration that [the Soviet empire has been resurrected!](#)” the *Trumpet*’s Brad Macdonald wrote during the games. “These Olympics are important to Putin because they embody and declare a powerful message about Russia, and about Russia’s president. Forget the athletes; the Sochi Olympics have been a two-week celebration of the muscle, ambition and ruthlessness of Vladimir Putin!”

The Sochi Games concluded on February 23.

Four days later, unmarked Russian troops took over the Supreme Council of Crimea in Ukraine, and captured key sites across the peninsula. By mid-March, Putin had officially annexed Crimea into Mother Russia. He had literally redrawn the borders of Europe.

In the *Trumpet*’s May 2014 issue, Mr. Flurry mentioned the connection between Russia’s victorious Olympiad and the country’s subsequent war in Ukraine: “Just days after Putin accepted the applause of the world at [the Winter Olympics in Sochi](#), mysterious ‘gunmen’ carrying no flags or national markings began taking over government buildings in the Crimean Peninsula. Before the West realized exactly what was happening, Russia had captured Crimea without firing a shot.”

Sports and War—2018?

These chapters of recent history show that international sporting events in Russia often march arm and arm with conflict. Some analysts speculate that the pieces are in place for the pattern to be repeated this year.

“The world will be looking very nervously at what the World Cup of 2018 might bring in terms of geopolitics and international crisis,” Ostrovsky said. “Making Russia great again on the world stage is all about aggression.”

The *Independent* says the 2018 World Cup will be “the most political and politicized World Cup ever, and maybe the most political and politicized sporting event ever.”

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny says that, if nothing else, Putin will be able to use the glamour of hosting the World Cup to boost his power within Russia. “It is sold to the population as Russia’s big foreign-policy victory, and as a sign that Russia’s greatness is reborn,” he said.

Russia’s presidential election will take place on March 18, about 12 weeks before the World Cup begins. Navalny says the proximity of the two events means Putin can use the sport to distract voters from his leadership failings and to deflect their discontent outward. “The World Cup and the election are connected,” Navalny said. “The Kremlin will be very actively using the football World Cup. The entire international agenda associated with poverty, inequality, corruption will be replaced by discussions of whether Russia has been shown respect or humiliated.”

There is no question that Putin will win the election. But his legitimacy depends not on his locking the presidency for a fourth term, but on his maintaining and reinforcing his position as a new-fashioned czar. To accomplish this, Putin needs to continue scoring big goals on the world stage. Continuing to rebuild the collapsed Soviet Empire and continuing to [dominate the Middle East](#) are among the surest ways he can achieve such goals.

Whether Putin uses the World Cup only to further his domestic goals or to pursue his geopolitical ambitions in the Russian periphery, it will be important to closely watch “the game around the game.”

The *Trumpet* believes the game around the game—meaning Putin’s ongoing rise and his drive to restore Russia’s superpower status—is vital to watch because it is fulfilling Bible prophecy.

The Prophesied ‘Prince of Russia’

The prophecy in question is recorded in Ezekiel 38: “And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of man, set thy face against Gog, the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, and prophesy against him” (verses 1-2).

Bible scholars generally agree that “Gog” refers to Russia, and that “the land of Magog” includes the vast area where modern China is located. Meshech is a group of people whose name appears throughout history in several variations: Musku, Muski, Mushki. These are all related to the modern Russian spelling of Moscow—“Москва.” Tubal refers to another region of Russia. To the east of the Ural Mountains lies the city of Tobolsk, which is named after the Tobol River, an appellation derived from the ancient name Tubal. Tobolsk was formerly the headquarters of Russian government over the Siberian expanse.

Another name for all of Russia lies somewhat hidden in this passage. There is disagreement over how the Hebrew word *rosh* should be translated into English in this verse. The King James Version above renders it as the adjective “chief.” But the correct translation—used by Young’s Literal Translation and others—renders it not as an adjective, but a proper noun: *Rosh*. Properly translated, the verse reads, “the prince of Rosh, Meshech and Tubal.”

Rosh was an ancient name for Russia, once called *Rus*. Many histories and commentaries—including *Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible*—acknowledge this.

So the identity of this “prince” of Russia, Moscow and Tobolsk begins to take clear shape: The list of all three names confirms that this is one individual ruling over all the various peoples across Russia.

Ezekiel 38 shows that this individual must be prophesied “against” because he is going to play a key role in a global cataclysm that brings unprecedented destruction to mankind—World War iii.

Mr. Flurry explained in the September 2014 issue of the *Philadelphia Trumpet* that this passage in Ezekiel is describing Vladimir Putin: “We need to watch Vladimir Putin closely. He *is* the ‘[prince of Rosh](#)’ that God inspired Ezekiel to write about 2,500 years ago!”

In his booklet [The Prophesied ‘Prince of Russia.’](#) Mr. Flurry thoroughly examines the role the Russian Federation and Vladimir Putin play in end-time Bible prophecy. And he says the fact that Mr. Putin is now on the scene proves that the most hope-filled possible event in mankind’s history is now very near.

In the near term, the increasingly aggressive Putin’s Russia is a harbinger of terrible global tumult. But this development is intimately tied to the best imaginable news! That’s why, as the World Cup draws near, it will be important to see whether

Russian sports will, once again, march arm and arm with conflict. ■

