

Mighty Moscow

Moscow captured my heart. Last year I passed through on my way to visit and work with friends several hours away. While my destination was itself a bustling mid-sized city, nothing compares to Moscow. My mid-winter visit caught the broad avenues, buildings of every description, cars, buses, trains, and pedestrians in those February gray-brown tones I am familiar with in Chicago.

To the fiercely nationalistic Russian people, Moscow “lies downhill from the rest of Russia.” All money and resources flow to Moscow. Proud of its history, its power, its culture, its wealth, many are also saddened by the corruption that Moscow represents.

Russia is an enigma. Strong and rich. Ruled for centuries with an iron hand. Abundant natural resources. Systematically plundered by those in power. Weak and poor. Russia’s population is dropping by half a million a year. Its birthrate is among the lowest in the world. Its abortion rate remains one of the world’s highest. There are more than 800,000 orphans in Russia, and over one million street children. The country claims one of the world’s highest rates of imprisonment with 825,000 incarcerated. Russian alcoholism rips and tears at the social fabric. They have Europe’s highest and fastest rising rate of HIV/AIDS.

In this context sits bulging, wealthy, mighty Moscow. By all accounts, 15 million people make Moscow home. There may be up to two to three million undocumented residents. The city has the highest concentration of billionaires in the world. It is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in Europe.

Massive demographic shifts marked the last 20 years. Jews were the largest non-Slavic ethnic group in Moscow. Now, from a high of a quarter million, their numbers have dwindled to just above 50,000. Meanwhile, there are 50,000 Chinese making the city their home. Major immigration from Central Asia, including many illegals, has been noted. Large num-

bers of believers have emigrated out of Russia, many to Germany.

Moscow dominated international headlines in the last half of 2013. President Obama’s “red line strategy” on Syria created global tension. When President Putin stepped in at the last minute, you could hear a collective sigh of relief. Eric Snowden was stuck in the Moscow airport for weeks. Russian laws on homosexuality were in the news and perhaps more so because Russia will host the winter Olympics this year.

All this speaks again to the disproportionate impact of cities. They are centers of power, culture, education, business, and corruption of all sorts. This “clout of the metropolis” is precisely what the Holy Spirit led Paul to leverage in evangelizing the world in the first century.

While this city fills volumes with dramatic bloody history, a more modern Moscow has been the stage for scene after scene of intrigue. International agents and other shadowy characters fill out a cast both real and imagined, engaged in activities, nefarious or patriotic, depending on your point of view. Navigating Kurskyska Train Station at midnight had me suspecting clandestine operations all around me!

Whether it’s renowned Red Square bounded by the hulking Kremlin and St. Basil’s famous profile, bustling Kutuzov Avenue, Russia Hall, or storied Gorky Park, we all know that Moscow is people, people, people. The student, backpack slung over his shoulder. The Kyrgyz peasant. The smartly adorned businesswoman. And, yes, the babushka.

One vineyard laborer described the evangelical mindset in Moscow as inwardly focused — many churches spending most of their money, effort, time, and gifts on maintaining that machinery of local programs — with very little effort toward engaging lost people. There seems to be a lack of vision and very few examples of how to move outside the walls of church houses.

Barriers to ministry include suspicion directed at any non-orthodox religion, absolute

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ignorance of God’s Word, and difficulties in establishing friendships with unbelievers.

An American church planter in Moscow for 15 years says the opportunities are massive, however, because younger generations tend to be questioning truth, religion in general, and Orthodoxy in particular. Modern life offers them little real hope.

The government is bolstering and using the Russian-Orthodox Church under the guise of national and cultural loyalty, to pressure if not persecute evangelicals. The evangelical ingress of the 90s, much of it from America, was often insensitive to history and culture, creating tension between Western believers and those who had suffered decades of brutal oppression under Soviet communism.

Life and ministry in Moscow is incredibly expensive, and this directly impacts existing work as well as ministry prospects. Americans, used to instant everything, struggle to understand the levels of support needed for missionaries who are chipping each soul out of granite.

How can we pray and lead our churches to pray? Pray for Russian Christian leaders, pastors, evangelists, missionaries, and academicians. Ask God to give them wisdom when facing obstacles, creativity in connecting with the lost, imagination in meeting needs in the name of Jesus, building bridges for the gospel. Pray for the older leaders who have paid dearly for their faith to patiently mentor young leaders. Ask God to raise up a new generation of innovative, faithful leaders who can build and lead churches with multiplication in view.

Jesus loves Moscow. Moscow can be a mighty mountain from which gospel streams flow out across this great land and beyond.

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