

Notes from the Edge of the World



Rev. Matthew Heise
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I am finishing an extended stay in the States after my January Ph.D. class at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. My visa has been delayed so I will hit the ground running when I fly into St. Petersburg, Russia on February 17. My class on Galatians for second year students will begin the next day on February 18. After that it's back to Georgia for a health care clinic in March. Michigan's weather, though, has prepared me for the inevitable winter chill of Russia which soon awaits me.

Left:

The Evangelical Lutheran church in Tbilisi, Georgia

How did the Lutheran church come to Georgia?

The proliferation today of apocalyptic thrillers like *Left Behind* has their origins in the popularity engendered by Hal Lindsey's 1970s best seller *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Throughout church history, the theme of the Last Days and predictions of the end of the world have been widespread, but none more so than in the 19th century. My interest in this phenomenon was heightened recently when I learned how the Lutheran Church originally came to the country of Georgia.

In The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, our own spiritual ancestors and church founders left Saxony in the 1830s due to a church imbued with the Rationalist spirit of the age. What I wasn't aware of was that in the southwest corner of Germany, Lutherans from Württemberg were also contemplating a move, but in another direction. East instead of West. These Germans

were Lutheran Pietists who had become disillusioned with the state church and what they considered its formality, especially reflected in the liturgy. Like many in modern Evangelical churches in America, they took seriously a theology that could pinpoint the dates when the End Times would begin. *Below: A German style home in the village of Bolnisi, formerly*



Katherinestadt, reflects the cultural impact of Germans in Georgia

Having imbibed the mathematical calculations and predictions of an early 18th century preacher Johann Bengel, Württemberg's Lutherans believed that the world was going to end in 1836. In 1831 Johann Christian Friedrich Burk, a great grandson of Bengel's, compiled a time table determining which of the prophecies of Revelation had been fulfilled and which still awaited their fulfillment. These were confusing times in Europe, the aftermath of the French Revolution when many Pietists saw Napoleon as the Antichrist of Revelation 13, the beast coming out of the sea.

Many of these Württemberg Lutherans now sought a place of hiding, interpreting the woman from Revelation 12:14 as representative of the true community of Christ fleeing a coming Antichrist, one who would be more terrible than even Napoleon. They hoped to find a secluded, mountainous region where God would preserve a holy people for the Last Days. (The basis of their interpretation was Jesus' words in Matthew 24:16--- "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains"). They came to the conclusion that proper place for their community to settle should be somewhere in the vicinity of Mount Ararat (in modern day eastern Turkey). Into this history now stepped a devout Christian who happened to be a German baroness, Juliana von Kruedener. In the summer of 1815, Juliana managed to arrange several meetings with the Russian czar Alexander I. Alexander was at that time perhaps the most admired man in the world, having just led Allied troops to victory over the despised Napoleon. Europe now breathed a sigh of relief after Alexander's troops took Paris and brought peace to the continent.

The meetings also proved to be propitious for the plans of the Württemberg Lutherans. At this time in Russian history, Alexander I was presiding over a growing Evangelical movement which was reflected in the founding of the Russian Bible Society in 18. The Lutherans found a

kindred soul in the czar whose mother, Maria Feodorovna, was a native of Württemberg. (In fact from the time of Catherine the Great to Nicholas II, all of the czars would marry German women). Alexander's piety and openness to Evangelical Christianity began when he started reading the Bible seriously and found great comfort in it during the traumatic days of Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812. Juliana von Kruedener's convinced him to sponsor the emigration of the Württemberg Lutherans to Russia.

As the journey began in 1817 and the first ships floated down the Danube River, flags fluttered in the wind with the words spelled out in gold---"Czar Alexander: Called by God as the Defender of the Faith." Hundreds of German families made the decision to go to this "mountainous place" in the Russian Empire, which just happened to be in the territory of Georgia. So as Saxony's Lutherans contemplated flight to America, other German Lutherans made the trek eastward to Georgia. Von Kruedener herself, along with many others, never made it to this Promised Land (she died in Odessa, Ukraine). However, scores of families arrived in late 1817 and early 1818 and established six communities in what is now modern day Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Below: The choir of Tbilisi's Lutheran Church



Naturally, the world didn't end in 1836. But those who did make it and survived established an Evangelical Lutheran presence in Georgia and Azerbaijan which exists to this day. Through the support of ELKROS (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States), a rebuilt Lutheran church stands in the Georgian capital Tbilisi. It is the church I attend when I am in Georgia on Sundays. Of course today it's easy and proper to criticize the Lutheran Pietists for "date-setting" concerning the End Times. But I find it hard to judge too harshly those who took Scripture as seriously as the Lutheran Pietists did. They lived in an age of Rationalism where reason presumed to have all the answers to the questions of human history. Their theologians erred in reading Scripture solely through their own eyes unencumbered by a sound biblical

exegesis. And yet despite the reasons for the exodus of the Lutheran Pietists from Germany to Georgia, God has blessed their act of faith in His providence by establishing a Lutheran Christian presence among the many peoples in that country today. One need only look at the parishioners who attend Tbilisi's Lutheran church today: Georgians, Azerbaijanis, Russians, Germans, and Armenians. God is gathering a people of His own around His Word.

LCMS World Relief Assists Refugees from South Ossetia

Recently through the assistance of LCMS World Relief and the Lutheran Church in Tbilisi, we were able to provide assistance to refugees who were living in the territory known as South Ossetia. The refugees have since been moved into recently completed government housing. They were grateful for our assistance. I am especially happy that our friends in the Georgian



Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tbilisi witnessed to the hope we have in Jesus Christ. To those who had lost virtually all of their possessions and been uprooted from homes and land which had been in their families for centuries, it was important to assure them of God's love. His love is best expressed when the people of God serve their neighbor. When you show God's love to the least of these my brethren, you serve Him. I am grateful to all who support LCMS World Relief especially in economically difficult times.

Above: Displaced persons who were living in a kindergarten in Tbilisi

Prayer Requests:

Please pray for our upcoming health clinic seminar in Kutaisi, sponsored by LIMM (Lutheran in Medical Mission). Pray for our preparations and the participation of refugees.

Thank God with me for visas received by the Muhly family in Russia and myself. Pray for my safe travel to St. Petersburg on February 16 and for a comprehensible teaching of Galatians in Russian at the Lutheran seminary in Koltushi.

Please pray for preparations on a Muslim evangelism conference in Russia in April and for my preparations to teach in Mongolia in May.

E-mail: matveih@yahoo.com --Mailing address - Evangelical Lutheran Ministries; Attn: **Matthew Heise, International Post Office, Box 76; 37 Varshavskoye Shosse; 104000 Moscow, RUSSIA. To support my work financially, you may send a tax-deductible gift to: LCMS World Mission, 1333 S. Kirkwood Rd., St. Louis, MO 63122-7295. Make checks payable to LCMS World Mission. Mark checks "Support of Matthew Heise."** If you would like to partner with me in this ministry with ongoing support as an individual or congregation, please contact Debra Feenstra for information on Together in Mission or Mission Senders at 1-800-248-1930 Ext. 1651 or Debra.Feenstra@lcms.org Thank you and God bless you!