



Written by [William F. Jasper](#) on January 22, 2007

Putin, Poison, and Murder

As Alexander Litvinenko lay dying under tight police protection at London's University College hospital, he pointed an accusing finger at the man he believed responsible for ordering his assassination: Russian President Vladimir Putin (pictured). The dying man had good cause for suspecting Putin. Abundant evidence, including a radioactive trail of polonium-210, the substance used to poison him, leads right back to Putin's operatives in Moscow. In addition, the Kremlin's heavy-handed tactics to thwart the efforts of British police detectives sent to Russia to investigate the poisoning do little for the credibility of Putin's protestations of innocence and his pledges to do everything possible to help solve the crime.



Litvinenko had become ill on November 1, after a meeting at London's Mayfair Millennium Hotel with three Russian "businessmen": Andrei Lugovoi, Dmitry Kovtun, and Vyacheslav Sokolenco. Lugovoi acknowledges that he is a former agent of the FSB, the renamed KGB. Litvinenko was sure that he had been poisoned later that evening, when he was seized with violent vomiting. After three weeks of agonizing deterioration, in which the fit 43-year-old Litvinenko lost his hair and shrunk to a shell of his former self, he died on November 23.

Even as his life was ebbing away, Alexander and his wife, Marina, had been hoping for a recovery. "I did not lose hope," she told the *Sunday Times* of London. "He was a very handsome man, but each day for him was like 10 years, he became older in how he looked." Mrs. Litvinenko added: "Even until the last day, and the day before when he became unconscious, I thought that he would be OK. We were both completely sure he would recover. We had been talking about bone-marrow transplants and looking to the future."

The poison, initially thought to be thallium, turned out to be polonium-210, which Dr. Andrea Sella, lecturer in chemistry at University College London, told reporters was "one of the rarest substances on the planet" and few could obtain it. "This is not some random killing," Dr. Sella said. "This is not a tool chosen by a group of amateurs. These people had some serious resources behind them."

Polonium-210 leaves a radioactive trail and, as many news stories have noted, that trail has turned up wherever Lugovoi and Kovtun went in London, Germany, and Russia: a hotel restaurant, airplanes, an apartment, a soccer stadium. One of the more important polonium traces is on a passport photo of Kovtun, which he left at the Hamburg City Hall in Germany, where he had applied for a residency permit two days before meeting with Litvinenko.

When British police detectives from Scotland Yard went to Russia to interview a number of witnesses and suspects, including the three men who had met with Litvinenko, they were told that two of the main



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objects of interest, Lugovoi and Kovtun, were in hospital quarantine for radiation poisoning. The detectives were also informed by Russia's chief prosecutor Yuri Chaika that, in the words of a Reuters report, they would be "virtually relegated to the role of observers," as Russian police carried out the interviews. Chaika, a Putin flunky, further made it clear that no suspects would be extradited to England. He has kept the British detectives on a very short leash.

Spokesmen for Putin have denounced suspicions of Putin's involvement as "absurd" and part of a frame-up and conspiracy to discredit Putin and Russia at home and abroad. As to be expected, the Russian press, reflecting Putin's control, points the accusing finger at Putin's enemies, most frequently citing Boris Berezovsky, a former Putin ally now in exile in London, as the likely culprit. Not surprisingly, many journalists in the West have picked up and parroted this theme as well.

However, in addition to considerable evidence tying Putin to the murder through his secret-service minions, it is clear that he — not Berezovsky — qualifies as the top candidate possessing the classical criteria for a crime suspect: motive, opportunity, and means.

What Litvinenko Knew

Litvinenko, an ex-agent of the Soviet KGB (and its successor, the Russian FSB), was a fierce critic of Putin even before fleeing to Britain with his family in 2000. He had first come to the attention of the Western media in 1998 while still a lieutenant colonel in the FSB, creating a stir with his public revelation that he had been ordered to assassinate Berezovsky, one of Russia's richest new oligarchs. It was an order he refused to carry out. The head of the FSB at the time: Vladimir Putin.

After obtaining asylum in England, Litvinenko became an even bigger thorn in Putin's side. His powerful 2002 book, *Blowing Up Russia: Terror From Within*, with Yuri Felshtinsky, presents convincing evidence which supports the charges of investigative journalists and Russian analysts that the infamous series of apartment bombings in Moscow and Volgograd in 1999 were provocations by Putin's FSB, not the work of Chechen terrorists. The September 1999 bombings killed over 300 people and wounded hundreds of others. Putin, who was named prime minister under President Boris Yeltsin just three weeks before the bombings began, expertly played up the incidents to stir public outrage in favor of retaliation against Chechnya.

Yeltsin resigned under mysterious circumstances on December 31, 1999, naming Putin to succeed him as acting president. Putin then surprised other presidential candidates and gave himself an advantage by holding the presidential election in March 2000, rather than in the fall, as previously scheduled. Playing up his popular hardline-against-terrorism image, Putin easily rode to victory. The bombings in Russia that were blamed on the Chechens couldn't have come at a more opportune time for Putin — or at a worse time for the Chechens, because they already had most of the concessions they were likely to get from the Russians and any violence would mean a loss of these concessions.

As Russia's FSB chief, then as prime minister, and finally as president, Vladimir Putin has been the driving force behind Russia's brutal terror occupation of Chechnya. Under his reign, Russian bombers have pounded Chechnya's cities and villages into rubble, while Russian ground forces have systematically engaged in massacres of civilians, as well as widespread torture, rape, and looting. At the same time, Putin has invoked the threat of Chechen terrorism in Russia to justify more and more police-state controls in Russia and greater centralization of power in his hands.

Putin's brutal foreign and domestic policies have earned him many critics, both at home and abroad. Many of his harshest critics inside Russia have already been silenced — by murder, prison, or



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intimidation. Litvinenko was, arguably, one of his most potent critics outside of Russia. As a former KGB/FSB insider, Litvinenko had specific knowledge about Putin's FSB operations and brought a level of credibility to many of the most serious charges against Putin. Besides the ordered assassination of Berezovsky and 1999 terror bombings, those charges include:

- **The murder of Anna Politkovskaya,** Russia's bravest and most famous investigative reporter. Best known for her repeated dangerous travels inside Chechnya and her unflinching reporting on Russian atrocities there, she was also the author of three books — *The Dirty War*, *A Small Corner of Hell*, and *Putin's Russia* — all of which severely indict Putin and his regime. Litvinenko was close to Politkovskaya, and in a presentation to international journalists at London's Frontline Club, an independent media group, he outlined the evidence for his charge that Putin was directly responsible for her assassination. (You can watch that presentation in streaming video at www.frontlineclub.com.) Politkovskaya survived a poisoning attempt in 2004, but in October 2006, just three weeks before the Litvinenko poisoning, she was gunned down in the elevator of her Moscow apartment building.
 - **The Ryazan Incident.** On the night of September 22, 1999, an alert resident of an apartment complex in the Russian city of Ryazan reported suspicious activities to local police. Responding, the police found a large quantity of hexogene explosive, timed to detonate at 5:30 the next morning. They evacuated the building and captured some of the bombers, who turned out to be (surprise!) FSB agents. Caught red-handed, the FSB then claimed that this had been merely an "exercise" and the substance was not really hexogene, but sugar. Litvinenko, in his book and in interviews, showed that the planned Ryazan bombing was to be the culminating incident justifying the invasion of Chechnya.
 - **The 2004 Beslan Massacre.** On September 1, 2004, terrorists took 1,200 children, parents, and teachers hostage at an elementary school in Beslan, a town in the Russian republic of North Ossetia. The Russian military attacked the school with flamethrowers, grenades, and machine guns. The death toll of 365 included 186 children, not to mention the hundreds wounded. In addition to outrage over the carnage caused by the Russian military attack on the school, there ensued demands for information about the "terrorists." Why had they been recently released from an FSB prison and *allowed* into the Beslan area? Litvinenko explained why, showing that the only explanation that fit the evidence was that the Beslan Massacre was an FSB provocation.
 - **The FSB/al-Qaeda Connection.** In a 2005 interview with the Polish newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, Litvinenko revealed that Ayman al-Zawahiri, the reputed Number Two chief in al-Qaeda and the man second only to Osama bin Laden on the FBI's "Most Wanted Terrorists" list, was trained by the Russian FSB. According to Litvinenko, "Ayman al-Zawahiri trained at a Federal Security Service (FSB) base in Dagestan in 1998," before being "transferred to Afghanistan, where he became Osama bin Laden's deputy." And, charged Litvinenko, al-Zawahiri was not the only al-Qaeda operative trained by the FSB.
- In the grim Stalinist world of the KGB/FSB, revealing any *one* of these state secrets would be more than sufficient cause for relentless pursuit and execution. Arguably the most damaging disclosure for Putin is Litvinenko's charge concerning the FSB/al-Qaeda connection. All of the other above-mentioned revelations deal with Russia's "internal affairs" and Chechnya. And while world leaders and the world press have occasionally expressed outrage over the Kremlin's ongoing barbarities there, it is by now pretty clear to Putin & Company that they have little to fear from "world opinion" over their Chechen operations. But al-Qaeda? Since 9/11, it has become the new global menace, supposedly even more dangerous than the old "Evil Empire," the Soviet Union, ever was. It certainly wouldn't do to have it widely known that our "partner" against terror, Putin, and his FSB, are joined at the hip with the



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perpetrators of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

However, as explosive as Litvinenko's FSB/al-Qaeda charge is, it never caused Putin to suffer any political blowback because the Western press, in general, never bothered even to *report* it, let alone investigate it. So, is there possibly another even more compelling reason for Putin to take the risk of killing a British citizen (Litvinenko had just received British citizenship shortly before his death) on British soil? Indeed, it seems there is.

Litvinenko Must Die

The revelation that most likely sealed Alexander Litvinenko's death warrant was his charge that Italy's current prime minister, Romano Prodi, was known as the KGB's top man in Italy. If true, that would also make him one of Russia's top assets in all of Europe, since Prodi served as president of the European Commission from September 1999 through November 2004, one of the most critical periods of the European Union, which included the launching of the euro currency, expansion of the EU to include former communist countries, and drafting of the proposed EU constitution. And if true, it would make Litvinenko a bomb that could, potentially, topple governments, end high-level careers, send government officials to prison, and destroy a vast intelligence network that has taken more than a generation to put in place.

According to Alexander Litvinenko, when he was planning to flee from Russia in 2000, he consulted his former KGB boss and trusted friend, General Anatoly Trofimov, who advised him not to seek refuge in Italy, since it was loaded with KGB agents. "Don't go to Italy," General Trofimov said, "there are many KGB agents among the politicians: Romano Prodi is our man there." At the time, Signor Prodi was Italy's prime minister. That was immediately before his stint as EU Commission president, which was followed by his return as Italy's prime minister in May 2006.

Litvinenko's charge regarding Prodi was brought into the open on April 3, 2006, when Gerard Batten, a British Member of the European Parliament (MEP), brought the matter before the European Parliament and requested an investigation. Batten noted that Litvinenko was one of his constituents and recounted the Litvinenko-Trofimov conversation. General Trofimov and his wife were both shot dead in their automobile near their Moscow apartment in April 2005.

Not surprisingly, the European Parliament, which is loaded with MEPs who are communists, "former communists," socialists, Greens, and other assorted leftists, has not put an inquiry into the Prodi-KGB connections at the top of its priority list. It presumably has more *important* business to consider, such as regulating the orange and sugar content of marmalade, and outlawing homophobia and xenophobia.

However, in Italy, apparently, the Mitrokhin Commission *did* take the Litvinenko charge seriously. Named for ex-KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokhin, the commission (also referred to as the Guzzanti Commission, after its chairman, Senator Paolo Guzzanti) was launched in 2002 by the Italian Parliament to investigate Soviet penetration of Italian institutions since World War II. This was long overdue, since Italy, which had the largest Communist Party of any country in Western Europe, has included open communists and ex-communists in many of its top government posts. The current Prodi regime is no exception. (See "[Prodi's Retinue](#).")

The Mitrokhin/Guzzanti Commission was interested in what Litvinenko had to say about Prodi and had dispatched one of its investigators, Mario Scaramella, to meet with him. Litvinenko and Scaramella met on several occasions and Litvinenko went to Italy in 2004 to provide testimony to the commission. In fact, Scaramella met with Litvinenko in London on November 1, shortly before Litvinenko's meeting



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with the Russians. He reportedly had arranged the meeting to bring warning about, and details of, an assassination plot against Litvinenko and Senator Guzzanti. Early press reports on the case stated that Scaramella had been poisoned also, but he was released from University College Hospital apparently unharmed.

There has been speculation in political and intelligence circles that a particular Italian professor/politician revealed by Mitrokhin, but referred to only by the KGB code name UCHITEL ("the Teacher"), pointed to Prodi, a former professor and longtime insider in Italy's top business and political echelons. This would help explain why Prodi, during his earlier stint as prime minister, failed to take any action when British intelligence provided his government with information in 1996 about 261 Italians who had been operating for decades as agents for the KGB. When British sources publicly released this information in 1999, Prodi claimed not to have been informed about it earlier. However, his defense minister confirmed that he had given the British information to Prodi.

Subsequently, when the Mitrokhin Commission began delving into the matter, Prodi and his influential media and political backers went into hyperdrive to stop publication of the report. It was due out in March 2006, but still remains unpublished. More recently, on November 20, just three days before Litvinenko's death, Prodi fired the chiefs of three of Italy's intelligence agencies, all of whom would have been important to any investigation of the Mitrokhin information. If Prodi is Moscow's man, as General Trofimov is alleged to have said, then Russia's intelligence structures would stop at nothing to protect such a valuable, long-term investment.

Photo: Vladimir Putin



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