

Russian intelligence and the long arm of vengeance



Illustration on Russian directed assassinations abroad by Alexander Hunter/The Washington Times Illustration on Russian directed assassinations abroad ... more >

COMMENTARY

By David V. Gioe and Michael S. Goodman
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OPINION:

Moscow has a long history of murdering enemies of the state in far-off places. Those cooperating with the West, especially in the realm of intelligence, have been targeted for assassination since before World War II.

On March 4, Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, the most recent victims of Moscow's vengeance, were found unresponsive on a park bench in the sleepy English city of Salisbury, poisoned with Novichok, a nerve agent in the Russian inventory. Nine days later, Nikolai Glushkov died in an "unexplained" manner, according to British police, who are taking nothing for granted.

Mr. Skripal was a former member of the Soviet/Russian Military Intelligence Service, the GRU, but secretly served British intelligence for at least a decade. He was convicted of treason in Russia and swapped in exchange for Russian deep cover "illegals" in 2010, but never forgiven. From the Russian perspective, there is no statute of limitations on betrayal.

In 2010, Vladimir Putin wanted his intelligence operatives back from the U.S. and made the deal with American authorities. That was an act of pragmatic calculation, not forgiveness. There is no "water under the bridge." For Mr. Putin, Mr. Skripal was still as guilty along the Avon as the Moskva. Russian intelligence felt it was time to act for two reasons.

First, in recent years the British Security Service (MI5) had to pull resources away from state-based threats to focus on Islamic radicals. The year 2017 saw deadly attacks at the Manchester Arena, Westminster Bridge and Borough Market. Moreover, while those attacks were “successful,” MI5 thwarted nine other attacks, offering a glimpse into the magnitude of the threat. Russian intelligence would have extrapolated from MI5’s daunting task keeping tabs on terror that their freedom of action (and freedom from surveillance) was favorable.

Second, Mr. Putin may calculate that the Brexit negotiations are not going well and London’s banking center may be unwilling to sanction sanctions. Illustrative of this hesitancy to turn away Russian money, after Mr. Putin invaded Ukraine in 2014, Britain would “not support, for now, trade sanctions or close London’s financial centre to Russians.”

Mr. Putin may reason that, if invading Ukraine would not invite any real response from Whitehall, surely a dead spy wouldn’t either. In the aftermath of former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko’s assassination in 2006, David Cameron’s response was to expel a few Russian diplomats.

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In 2013, exiled Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky was found hanged in his London home, but Britain is not the only place where traitors have been murdered. In 2015, former Putin adviser Mikhail Lesin died of “blunt force injuries” in a Washington, D.C., hotel, including trauma to his “neck, torso, upper extremities and lower extremities.” There is no reason to bruise a victim’s legs during a murder, but such a painful experience would send the right message.

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson stated the “use of this nerve agent would represent the first use of nerve agents on the continent of Europe since the Second World War,” but in 1978 Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov was murdered on Waterloo Bridge with Ricin. Although not technically a nerve agent, Mr. Johnson’s statement about changing norms is a distinction without a difference given the various exotic ways in which defectors have been poisoned in Britain.

While being pushed out of windows or bludgeoned are terrifying ways to die, poison appeals for a few reasons. First, it is quiet and can be done in the open. It would be suitable for sleepy Salisbury, as in the case of Mr. Skripal, or London hotel tea, as in the case of Mr. Litvinenko. It can give the assassin time to depart the scene.

Second, the victim suffers, often publicly. The photographs of Litvinenko, hairless, gaunt, suffering in his hospital bed grimly underscores the intended message for anyone who might consider cooperating with a Western intelligence service. Finally, any thug can murder with a gun or blunt force to the head, but Russians have taken assassination to a dramatic art form, wishing to separate themselves from thieves and the underground.

The use of laboratory grade exotic poisons shows that assassinations are not *mano a mano*, but rather brings the power of a state against an individual, making the situation seem hopeless. Before his death, Mr. Berezovsky observed with prophetic gallows humor that his security guard “was not a bodyguard; he’s a witness.” Even when not fatal, poison is also successful in enduring disfigurement as happened to former Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, who defeated the Kremlin’s man in 2004.

The Russian message to defectors is clear: Choose your team carefully, and ask, can they protect you in perpetuity? Russia’s state TV warned, “Don’t choose England as a place to live Whether you’re a professional traitor to the motherland or you just hate your country in your spare time, I repeat, no matter, don’t move to England Something is not right there People get hanged, poisoned, they die in helicopter crashes and fall out of windows in industrial quantities.” Not too subtle.

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