

Litvinenko: Poisonous espionage

Written by Eric Walberg



Last week's cancellation of the CFE treaty by Russia and the tit-for-tat expulsion of Russian and British diplomats -- seemingly unrelated -- have strong parallels in Cold War mythology, according to Eric Walberg

26/7/7 -- Four Russian diplomats were expelled from Britain last week as a pressure tactic to try to force Russia to extradite Andrei Lugovoi, the key suspect in the death of a former KGB officer and proud new UK citizen, Alexander Litvinenko. The expulsion came shortly after Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia was pulling out of the CFE treaty and as Polish President Lech Kaczynski was visiting Washington to finalise the US missile bases in Europe. What a coincidence.

Yet another coincidence: less than 48 hours before the expulsion, ex-US Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Schultz, Chevron Chairman David O'Reilly and friends had discussions with President Putin in Moscow at a conference "Russia-USA: A view on the future", which the US side later described as "frank", meaning Putin didn't give an inch on anything. In case Kissinger didn't get the message, Putin slipped out of the conference to meet Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi who agreed with him that China wants a "multipolar world" and even more trade with Russia. Chinese-Russian trade has increased by almost 50 per cent annually the last few years.

It seems all the Western guns available weren't able to budge the Kremlin, so the poodle was called in to bark and make a scene.

A spokesman for the Russian Foreign Ministry said that the expulsions were "a well-staged action to politicise the Litvinenko case" and pointed out that the government of Britain had refused to extradite two prominent opponents of the Kremlin who live there: a businessman, Boris Berezovsky, and Akhmed Zakayev, the exiled Chechen leader -- both friends and mentors of poor, dead Litvinenko.

Although both sides expelled diplomats in 1996 on accusations of spying, the latest turn of

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events seemed far more serious, reminiscent of 1985, when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher expelled 24 Soviet diplomats, prompting CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev to do the same, despite their mutual admiration.

This is all vintage Le Carre. You could easily mistake 2007 for 1967 or better 1937. Though on his deathbed Litvinenko purportedly accused Putin of ordering his murder, even his widow Marina doesn't agree, though she does think it was planned in Moscow. It could very well be that the KGB's successor, the FSB, is implicated in this cloak-and-polonium affair, just as the CIA, KGB, Mossad and their ilk were and are active in hundreds of assassinations of their enemies.

After 18 years as a model KGB/FSB officer he seems to have cracked, beginning with a theatrical press conference in November 1998, where he publicly accused his superiors of ordering the assassination of oligarch Boris Berezovsky, "the Jew who'd robbed half the country". Critics say the accusation was fabricated to help Berezovsky blacken enemies in the FSB. Litvinenko was fired and later joined Berezovsky in the UK, where he was granted political asylum and citizenship. He soon published *The FSB Blows up Russia* (2001) which claims agents from the FSB rather than Chechen terrorists coordinated the 1999 Russian apartment bombings that killed more than 300 people.

His accusations against Putin and the FSB continued to come thick and fast. In his next book, *Gang from Lubyanka* (2002), he alleged that Putin was personally involved in organised crime. With regard to the July 2005 bombings in London, Litvinenko said that, "terrorist infection creeps worldwide from the cabinets of the Lubyanka Square and the Kremlin" and accused Putin of being a paedophile, comparing him to the notorious rapist and serial killer Andrei Chikatilo. In October, he publicly accused Putin of assassinating crusading journalist Anna Politovskaya.

Two weeks later, on 1 November 2006, Litvinenko suddenly fell ill and was hospitalised. Alex Goldfarb, who had arranged Litvinenko's escape from Moscow in 2000 and is now director of a human rights group set up by Berezovsky, emerged as his official spokesman using Berezovsky's PR agency, Bell Pottinger. Through them, Litvinenko stated that he met three former KGB agents on the day he fell ill, including Andrei Lugovoi.

Litvinenko died three weeks later of lethal polonium-210 radiation poisoning. A senior official said investigators had concluded the murder was "a 'state-sponsored' assassination

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orchestrated by Russian security services." On 28 May 2007, the British Foreign Office officially submitted a request to the government of Russia for the extradition of Lugovoi. On 31 May Lugovoi held a news conference at which he accused MI6 of attempting to recruit him and blamed either MI6, the Russian mafia, or fugitive Kremlin opponent Boris Berezovsky for the killing, saying he is a "victim not a perpetrator of a radiation attack".

Some of Litvinenko's accusations have a ring of truth -- possible FSB assassination attempts on Berezovsky, Politovskaya, and others. Others, while far-fetched, merit further investigation -- FSB blowing up a Moscow apartment building and blaming Chechens, and the Moscow theatre hostage-taking abetted by Chechens working for the FSB. However, his claims of FSB training Al-Qaeda number two Ayman El-Zawahri in Dagestan in the years before 9/11 or that the Kremlin had ordered the Beslan massacre or that Putin is a paedophile suggest he was paranoid and obsessed with stirring up personal animosity towards Putin, to the point of invoking his own death.

Whatever the truth is about Litvinenko, he was clearly off the deep end by the end. A Russian student friend at University of Westminster, Julia Svetlichnaja, said she received more than 100 e-mails from him in the months prior to his death, proposing that she enter into a business deal with him and "make money". He was low on money and his anti-Putin campaign was going nowhere. He was courting death, whether from the FSB, his purported friends or his own doing. And just as it was tragic that many well-meaning people -- East and West -- were caught in the superpower meatgrinder in the Cold War, it is sad today that many people, disgusted with the horrors taking place everyday, go crazy and/or become victims of the harsh world of political intrigue.

It's very doubtful that this tale will ever be unravelled -- perhaps the Western media account is true, perhaps not. But just as the Soviet Union played a positive role in world politics, a countervailing force to Western imperialism in its Hitlerian incarnation and its softer US/European variants, Russia under Putin is playing a positive role on the world stage today. All the Litvinkos in the world, packaged by their PR managers, can't change that fact. And there are Western assassinations every bit as suspect -- David Kelly, the British scientist whose mysterious "suicide" implicated the British government, and which was airbrushed out of the picture by a very partisan government "investigation", for one. Politics is a dirty business, and threats to the powers-that-be often suffer ill fates.

While we can cherish British traditions of free speech and democracy, we must remember it is also a crafty political animal, deeply implicated in US imperial plans, as the "coincidences" above suggest. We can also cherish the haven free from the imperialist mindset that the SU once

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provided, and that Russia provides to some extent today. It is not a benign place -- it is the home of corruption, violence, bureaucracy and, yes, political and Mafia-style assassinations, the legacy of the SU and its collapse.

But it is also the home of much greater freedom of thought than the West, now in the grip of US-Israeli brainwashing. And its influence -- political and economic (it is currently the biggest oil and gas producer in the world) -- is spreading rapidly in a world tired of US-led serial wars and bullying.

It is a shame that Litvinenko died his gruesome death, but he was courting disaster, from his flamboyant press conference onwards. His actions were not well-thought out; he was impulsive and emotional, to the point of touchingly converting to Islam in sympathy with the Chechens as he lay dying. I wonder if Goldfarb and Berezovsky had a hand in that little PR stunt? He is a reminder that the world of international politics is one of intrigue and danger. He played the game and lost. Just as Soviet dissidents had little real influence on events -- they were more gadflies or weathervanes, so are the likes of Litvinenko today.

Another "coincidence": the day after the Russians announced they were expelling four British diplomats, the media solemnly reported that fighter planes from Britain and Norway scrambled Friday to keep watch on Russian Uf-95 bombers that were approaching the countries' air space, though a Norwegian military official admitted this was actually routine. Yes, one after another, Poland, Estonia and now brave little Norway are all worried about a Russian invasion and scurrying to take protection under Great Britain's generous skirts. Ho-hum.

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/855/in2.htm>