

In the world of state espionage, disloyalty can be deadly. A brutal reminder of that came with another chapter in the story of Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian state security operative who in 2000 fled Russia for Britain. The results of the public inquiry into his 2006 death, finally released on January 21st, confirm what everyone has always strongly suspected: He was almost certainly assassinated by the Russian government, probably with a blessing for the operation by President Vladimir Putin himself, writes Fred Burton. That the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) would murder a dissident on foreign soil is anything but surprising. In a way, it's a confirmation of what Litvinenko himself criticized about the agency that succeeded the KGB. After he defected, Litvinenko became a vocal opponent of the Russian government. Following years of trying to expose corruption in the FSB's upper echelons, he had come to believe the agency was nothing more than a brute squad for Putin's government, bent on picking off the president's political opponents one by one. Litvinenko had hoped raising public awareness would bring about some kind of reform. But it was not to be. In 2006, Litvinenko checked into a London hospital with polonium poisoning and died almost a month later. Russia denied any involvement in the poisoning, but according to investigators the amount of the radioactive isotope used in the attack would be hard to come by on the private market. All the evidence suggests this was a sophisticated operation by Russia's security service, one of the world's most ruthless and effective intelligence agencies. The Long Arm of the KGB During my time working in the U.S. intelligence services, my colleagues and I were no stranger to Russian hit jobs. What Litvinenko called "excesses" on the part of his government, we came to understand as its modus operandi. KGB operatives struck all over Europe, Russia and South Asia, leaving such a trail of blood in their wake that the U.S. intelligence community took to calling Russian operations "wet" jobs. Other attacks were more subtle, more creative, employing poison in lieu of beatings or gunfire. They were not always effective from the outset. Perhaps the first time the agency attempted to use radiation poisoning, in 1957 on KGB defector Nikolai Khokhlov, the attempt was an utter failure. Khokhlov did end up in the hospital with radiation poisoning, but he walked out alive. In 1978, dissident Bulgarian writer Georgi Markov was less fortunate. Early on Sept. 7, he'd felt a sharp pain in the back of his leg. That night, he checked into a London hospital with a high fever, and four days later, he was dead. At first the death was a complete mystery, but the autopsy revealed the truth. In broad daylight, on a busy street, a member of the Bulgarian secret police, aided by the KGB, had shot him in the back of the leg with a ricin-laced pellet. The reason the attack had gone unnoticed? The tiny pellet had come out the tip of a retrofitted umbrella. The so-called umbrella murder was just one of countless poisonings connected with Russian intelligence, and the attacks continued well into the 21st century. Such political opponents as Czech Communist leader Alexander Dubcek, Sunni jihadist fighter Ibn al-Khattab and Russian businessman Roman Tsepov all allegedly were targeted, though not all those attacks were fatal. It's widely believed that the death of Russian journalist Yuri Shchekochikhin in 2003 was caused by thallium poisoning. Journalist Anna Politkovskaya survived an attack by the same method before her assassination by gunshot two years later. So the FSB was well-practiced by 2006, when death came to Alexander Litvinenko in a cup of polonium-laced green tea. War in the Shadows Now that the public inquiry has confirmed Russian involvement in Litvinenko's death, the British government has to choose its response. British Prime Minister David Cameron is already exploring sanctions against Russia and has announced that his government is freezing the assets of the suspected assassins: Dmitry Kovtun and Andrei Lugovoy. The next step could be interesting. The British intelligence service,

MI6, doubtless is aware of ♦ and keeping tabs on ♦ a good number of FSB operatives in Britain at this very moment. I would not be surprised if the British declare the Russian FSB station chief in London "PNG," or persona non grata, meaning he would have 24 hours to leave the country.

Of course, that could spark a tit-for-tat spy war and put Britain's own MI6 operatives in Russia at incredible risk, and the FSB is as merciless toward foreign spies as it is toward defectors and double agents. There's a reason that the informal rules that U.S. spies use to stay safe while undercover ("everyone is potentially an enemy," and "never go against your gut," just to name a few) have been dubbed the "Moscow Rules." Moreover, Britain's recourses are limited thanks to foreign policy considerations.

Still, with the BBC reporting that the polonium used to kill Litvinenko contaminated at least 40 locations in London, including planes, hotels and streets, the British security services may have no choice but to ratchet up the never-ending intelligence war.

Fred Burton, is vice president of intelligence at Stratfor. Department. Production Editor: Margaret Fox

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