

Assassination Discourse and Political Power: The Death of Alexander Litvinenko

Ronald F. White, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy
College of Mount St. Joseph

Abstract

The death of Alexander Litvinenko on 23 November 2006 and the state-sponsored forensic investigations that followed, reveal troubling truths about assassination discourse in the 21st century. These truths present a daunting challenge to any “general theory of assassination” and cast doubt on the utility of science as an objective arbiter of political truth. Although we can anticipate an increase in the use of science and scientists in these forensic investigations, we can also predict a growing public distrust of scientific investigations conducted under the auspice of political authority. This distrust will be evidenced by interminable “assassination discourse” marked by endless debate over alternative theories publicized by the mass media.

Introduction

Political assassination is one of the least understood forms of lethal aggression among humans. Despite its alarming frequency and profound influence on the course of human history, historians, psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists have contributed little to our understanding of the general phenomenon. Although the statistics are notoriously difficult to decipher, recent research indicates that worldwide at least 78 heads of state have been assassinated between 1946 and 2000.¹ Since then, that number has increased significantly. However, this number fails to capture the true magnitude of this global phenomenon. During that same era, a staggering number of other leaders have also been targeted, including lower level politicians, political candidates, and cultural leaders. Depending upon one’s definition of “assassination” we might also include more recent targets such as leaders of terrorist organizations, criminal witnesses, lawyers, judges, journalists, political adversaries, and even former spies.

High-profile assassinations invariably inspire forensic investigations that are legally empowered to collect evidence and ultimately identify the assassins, co-conspirators, and their motives. The term assassination implies political motivation, and therefore alternative causes of death (accidents, diseases, murder, and legal executions) must be ruled out. “Official investigations” are enormously complex, time-consuming, and expensive. Despite the sociopolitical importance of these forensic investigations, there has been scant research on their nature and cultural significance.

Since the twentieth century, competition between “official” and “unofficial” descriptive interpretations has been shaped by rapidly evolving communication technologies. Official investigations invariably inspire alternative interpretations by well-meaning, truth-seeking critics. These interpretations are then marketed to the public via newspapers, magazines, books, cell phones, cable and satellite television, DVDs, I-Pods, and the Internet. Unofficial interpretations that challenge orthodoxy and/or present alternative “conspiracy theories” tend to be especially market-friendly. As a result of this market-based competition between “official” and “unofficial” interpretations over the underlying “facts” and subsequent “interpretation”, high-level assassinations are now subject to interminable investigations and reinterpretation.

This essay will explore the “official” state-sponsored forensic investigations through the lens of the death of Alexander Litvinenko. First, it will describe the expanding role of forensic science and scientists in the conduct of forensic investigations into high-level assassinations. Second, it will discuss the use of technology in assassinations and their subsequent interpretation via the mass media (newspapers, magazines, books, television, radio, and the Internet). It will suggest that the mass media has created an intellectual atmosphere marked by interminable competition between “official” forensic investigations and “unofficial” investigations conducted by journalists, historians, and other scholars. Finally, this essay will cautiously address the larger question of how the decentralization of political power has reshaped our perception of truth and how the evolution of both weapon technology and information technology may affect the worldwide incidence of assassinations in the future and their subsequent forensic interpretation.

An Assassination

On 23 November 2006 at 9:21 p.m. Alexander Litvinenko, a former Lieutenant-Colonel for the Federal Security Bureau of the Russian Federation (FSB) and long-time Kremlin critic died at University Hospital in London of a mysterious illness. Early speculation suggested poisoning, most likely, radioactive thallium. Within a few hours of his death, the absence of thallium’s telltale gamma ray signature led scientists to the conclusion that it was Polonium 210, a transparent, colorless, odorless, and tasteless radioactive isotope and alpha emitter that was once used, primarily, as a trigger for nuclear weapons. Today, small quantities of Polonium 210 are also occasionally used in the photographic industry’s manufacturing process to eliminate static electricity in machinery, and for nuclear batteries in spacecraft.

But for forensic scientists charged with decoding evidence, the motivation behind the deliberate use of Polonium 210 was unclear. On the one hand, Polonium 210 would appear to be an ideal weapon. It is extraordinarily lethal. Only a few ingested drops bring about an excruciating and certain death. Moreover, surveillance personnel at airports usually screen for high-energy gamma radiation, but not alpha radiation, and therefore small quantities would be easy to transport without detection. When radiation sickness is suspected, hospitals are much more likely to test for gamma than alpha radiation.

But overall, its use today is limited by its enormous expense. One ton of uranium ore contains only about 100 micrograms (0.0001 grams) of Polonium. If purchased at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, it would cost about \$3200 per micro-curie to produce.² Given that Litvinenko had been exposed to ten times the lethal dosage, and if the poisoning was deliberate, it would have cost about \$10 million dollars to kill him. If purchased on the European black market it would cost more than \$25 million. Products containing small amounts of Polonium 210 are available online from New Mexico-based United Nuclear. A lethal dose would require 1500 orders at the cost of about \$1 million.

It is not only extremely rare and extraordinarily expensive, but also easy to trace. Over its 138.39-day half-life, Polonium 210 predictably decays into lead, which makes it relatively easy for forensic investigators to trace and decode time-frames. Once suspected, it was relatively simple for British forensic scientists to identify and follow its signature back to its point of origin and identify suspects. Prosecution of the assassin(s), however, is another matter.

Although it is still produced in the United States, forensic scientists concluded that the Polonium 210, most likely came from a laboratory in Russia. Given Litvinenko's status as a former FSB agent, his defection to the West, and his persistent anti-Putin and anti-KGB/FSB rhetoric,³ investigators soon arrived at a consensus: he had been assassinated. On his deathbed, Litvinenko expressed his heartfelt conviction that Putin personally ordered the killing.⁴ Forensic scientists immediately set to work in tracing the Polonium 210, which eventually led directly to another former KGB operative, Andrei Lugovoy. After all, the alleged assassin had recently met with Litvinenko and was known to be in Russia recuperating from a less lethal case of Polonium 210 poisoning. In the absence of an extradition agreement between Great Britain, and because of Lugovoy's newfound legal status as a Russian diplomat, we can expect yet another forensic stalemate, in a long line of worldwide, unsolved, high-profile assassinations.

Although one might be tempted to write off the death of Alexander Litvinenko in terms of the age-old, universal, human propensity for political assassination, his demise also signals the emergence of a troubling new set of scientific and technological forces that will haunt the political landscape of the twenty-first century. But this thesis requires the elucidation of a few murky conceptual issues.

A General Theory of Assassination

The concept of "assassination" is notoriously malleable and open to social construction; therefore political theory requires a "general theory of assassination". Unfortunately, there is very little scholarly activity in that area.⁵ Here is a skeletal outline of what I have suggested as "a prolegomenon to a general theory of assassination."⁶

Most definitions of "assassination" converge on three key criteria: (1) the political importance of the intended target; (2) deliberate political motivation; and (3) the use of deception or treachery in its execution. Throughout human his-

tory, assassination behavior has always been framed by two enormously complex sets of variables that have always been subject to open-ended technological evolution: *motivation* and *opportunity*. Given its clandestine nature, the assassination label is often invoked, after the fact, based on forensic investigations that gather and interpret information relative to both sets of variables.

Forensic investigations, therefore, proceed by eliminating alternative causes of death, such as: natural death, accidental death, legal execution (or “targeted killings”), and apolitical murder (usually by allegedly irrational madmen). Assassins who wish to conceal the nature of their act and their own identity invariably attempt to lead forensic investigations toward these alternative hypotheses. Poisons have always been popular instruments of assassination. Given the opportunity to administer, poisons are bountiful in nature, often difficult to detect, efficient, and easy to transport. They also have the capacity to lead investigators to conclude “natural” or “accidental death”.

Human assassins are motivated by sociopolitical factors. *In-group assassinations* target important persons from within their own regimes, while *out-group assassinations* target important persons from outside regimes. Given that humans often associate themselves with micro-in-groups (or factions) within macro-in-groups, forensic differentiation between in-group and out-group associations can be very complex. The assassination of Litvinenko may have been ordered by Putin, the upper rungs of FSB, by a freestanding faction of the FSB, or by an assassin (or assassins) loosely associated with the FSB, or perhaps some other group or faction.

The ultimate motivation to kill a “politically important” person can be either *forward-looking* (to alter the political future of a regime) or *backward-looking* (retribution for past wrongdoing), or both. Sometimes these motives relate to the personal beliefs of a single “lone gunman”; but sometimes the motivating beliefs are shared collectively by a group of assassins, or a *conspiracy*. Sometimes co-conspirators are involved in the actual killing, but sometimes they overtly or surreptitiously provide encouragement, material resources, information, disinformation, or even transportation. Hence, decoding the multifarious nature of conspiracies is notoriously difficult, especially when self-interested, powerful, well-funded, nation states may be involved.

Litvinenko’s publications and public criticism of Putin in conjunction with the resurgence of the KGB may have inspired both forward-looking and backward-looking political motivation. However, most politicians would agree that forward-looking, state-sponsored assassinations are rarely, if ever, rationally justified. Although the KGB/FSB might be intensely interested in deterring high-level defections of its former agents, it knows that most of the Western world abhors state-sponsored assassination. International sanctions could have a devastating economic and political impact on Russia. Strategically, this would be a tough call for pragmatic, forward-looking, high-level, Russian leaders, but only if the involvement of governmental officials could be proven.

But most assassinations have always been motivated, at least in part, by backward-looking retribution. Decoding retributive assassinations can be enor-

mously difficult because they involve connecting *acts* with *motivation*. Many retributive assassinations are, no doubt, inspired by propaganda. Modern communication technologies facilitate the rapid spread of propaganda and make it relatively easy for co-conspirators to motivate large numbers of potential assassins. Many propaganda-inspired assassinations are conducted by assassins unknown to the propagandists and operate outside of their sphere of influence and control.

Highly motivated lone assassins have long retributive memories and can wait a long time for an opportunity to get even. But for communities of individuals, memories can be extended indefinitely via culture. If Litvinenko's assassination was ordered by either the upper rungs of the FSB or by a few individual members within a radical faction, long institutional retributive memories were operative. But retribution often wreaks havoc with cost-benefit ratios. Rational assassins would have to balance the benefits of exacting retribution against the potential costs of international condemnation and perhaps political isolation. And of course, the potential for recurrent cycles of "tit-for-tat" retributive assassinations would also raise the cost.

In the Litvinenko case, motivation and opportunity seemed relatively easy for forensic investigators to decode. Litvinenko was regarded as a "traitor" by Putin and the KGB/FSB. Moreover, on 8 June 2006 the Russian Duma granted the KGB/FSB legal authority to engage in "targeted killings", at home and abroad, as a useful weapon in the "War on Terrorism". According to many sources, that agency had already been actively engaged in both out-group assassination of politically important persons in other countries (Chechnya) and in-group assassination of internal dissidents. Although it is not known how many "terrorists" have been successfully "targeted", we do know that between 2000 and 2006 at least 13 journalists critical of the Russian government have been murdered.⁷ None of these cases have been solved. Those forensic investigations remain deadlocked, inconclusive, and the lone assassins and/or co-conspirators unprosecuted.

The opportunity to assassinate any politically important person is constrained by the assassin's ability to *locate* that target at a given time or place, and the ability to gain sufficient *access* to that target. Hence, any regimes that hope to protect their most politically important persons from motivated assassins must either *conceal location*, *block access*, or both. However, both of these strategies are undermined by rapidly evolving *information technologies* (television, internet, cell phones), and increasingly lethal *weapon technologies* (poisons, guns, and bombs). Obviously, access to protective strategies and technologies is constrained by economic reality.

Sometimes assassins "act alone", the proverbial "lone gunman", and sometimes assassins act in cooperation with co-conspirators. Well-funded state-sponsored conspiracies make for highly effective assassins. Armed with state-of-the-art technologies, they are also notoriously difficult to unravel. These difficulties are magnified when assassinations are planned and executed by supposedly centralized organizations (FSB and CIA), but executed by lower-level internal factions without specific knowledge of the upper rungs of leadership: strategists

call it “plausible deniability”. It is enormously difficult to thwart highly motivated, well-funded state sponsored assassins. If the Russian KGB/FSB is back on the prowl, and if it is was responsible for at least some of those assassinations, then the Litvinenko assassination was constrained by little more than his British citizenship and international distain for state-sponsored assassinations.

Given the aforementioned motivational inertia, opportunity could be favorably enhanced by a well-funded, secret organization like the FSB. On the other hand, Litvinenko certainly could have done more to protect himself. He might have concealed his identity and/or location in Great Britain. But without any visible means of supporting his family, that would have been difficult. But more importantly, it would have undermined his political agenda. In short, Litvinenko was a “sitting duck” who was easily located, easily accessed, and easily assassinated.

Conclusion

Although most analysts and the global media have focused on the diplomatic repercussions of the now-simmering rift between Russia and Great Britain, there is a larger issue at stake: a two-pronged technological arms race regarding killers and their prey, weapons, and information. Among evolutionary theorists, there is a well established principle known as the “Red Queen Effect”, which is based on the character in *Alice in Wonderland* who runs in place, but doesn’t get anywhere. In cultural evolution the Red Queen Effect is most often invoked in the context of technological evolution, especially stalemated arms races, where one-side gains a temporary technological advantage, only to be eclipsed by counter-active innovations on the other side.

Worldwide, the Red Queen is alive and well, especially in Iraq. On one side we have the growing use of “improvised exploding devices” and “suicide bombers”. On the other, we have advanced explosive detection technology, better armored vehicles, and advanced head-trauma treatment. At the moment, the assassins seem to have the advantage. Moreover, as scientists and arms dealers continue to provide an endless stream of increasingly lethal weaponry, surveillance equipment, and mass communication technology we can expect an increase in the use of science in the age-old art of assassination. Science, however, will not only contribute to increasingly sophisticated surveillance equipment and weaponry, but it will also spawn increasingly efficient mass communications technologies that facilitate the spread of propaganda, which will motivate more potential assassins.

As more assassins gain access to increasingly more sophisticated surveillance equipment, more lethal explosives, and mass communication technologies, free-standing and loosely-associated radical factions (e.g., terrorist cells) will gain unprecedented coercive power. Political rallies in democratic nations will, therefore, be increasingly targeted by highly motivated, well-financed, opportunistic assassins and their well-oiled propaganda machines. Although leaders of nation states with unlimited budgets will be able to keep pace and protect their most “politically important persons”, other less “politically important persons” with

limited power and resources, like Alexander Litvinenko and Benazir Bhutto, will be more easily assassinated.

Given the prevailing security-conscious political climate in Russia, the United States, and most of the Western World, we can also anticipate an epidemic of forensically “unsolved” assassinations attributed to unaffiliated “lone gunmen”, decentralized radical groups such as Al-Qaeda, and/or “rogue factions” from within covert state-sponsored institutions such as the CIA and the FSB. State-sponsored investigations will be not only much more expensive, but also more readily manipulated by politicians. Allegedly objective, scientific investigations conducted by well-organized, state-sponsored forensic investigators will compete with alternative hypotheses, thus creating an interpretative “Red Queen Effect”.

In the Litvinenko case, the Russian authorities are currently conducting their own “scientific” investigation, and developing their own alternative hypotheses. In the mass media, Andrei Lugovoy is portrayed by the Russian government as a survivor of an attempted assassination orchestrated by Boris Berezovsky, another Russian exile and multi-billionaire, now residing in England. Another active hypothesis suggests that cash-strapped Litvinenko was attempting to blackmail high-level Russian leaders.

As the various “official” forensic investigations are released in the aftermath of the Bhutto assassination we can expect concerted efforts on the part of the United States, Great Britain, and Pakistan to blame the killing on internal terrorist factions, while Bhutto’s followers will portray the Pakistani military establishment as either incompetent or even co-conspirators. Thus we can also anticipate an endless stream of “unofficial” incommensurable conspiracy theories published by journalists, scientists, film directors, and professional and amateur historians. The “Red Queen” is, indeed, alive and well in Pakistan too!

The twenty-first century will certainly contribute to the rapidity of the “pulse of death”.⁸ But it will also contribute to a further decline in our faith in government and further undermine science’s authority as an objective arbiter of the truth.

Endnotes

¹ See: Zaryab Iqbal and Christopher Zorn, “Sic Semper Tyrannis? Power, Repression, and Assassination Since the Second World War,” *Journal of Politics* Vol. 68, No. 3, August 2006, pp. 489–501.

² Jefferson Lab: <http://education.jlab.org/itselemental/ele084.html>

³ Alexander Litvinenko and Yuri Felshtinsky, *Blowing Up Russia: The Secret Plot to Bring Back KGB Terror* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007); Alexander Litvinenko, *Allegations: Selected Works by Alexander Litvinenko* (Aquilon Limited, 2007)

⁴ There are two excellent books on the life and death of Litvinenko: Alex Goldfarb and Marina Litvinenko, *Death of a Dissident: The Poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and the Return of the KGB* (New York: Free Press, 2007); Martin Sixsmith, *The Litvinenko File: The Life and Death of a Russian Spy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007).

⁵ *Op. cit.* Iqbal and Zorn

⁶ Ronald F. White, "A Prolegomenon to a General Theory of Assassination," *Assassination Research*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2007).

⁷ One of the murdered journalists was Ana Politkovskaya. See: Ana Politkovskaya, *Putin's Russia: Life in a Failing Democracy* (New York: Holt, 2007); *A Russian Diary: A Journalist's Final Account of Life, Corruption, and Death in Putin's Russia* (New York: Random House, 2007); *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007)

⁸ An earlier draft of this essay was presented at the *Pulse of Death Now: The Austin H. Kutscher Memorial Conference*, held at Columbia University on March 29, 2008.