

Inquiry into death of Alexander Litvinenko opens in London

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An inquiry into the death of the fugitive ex-Russian spy, Alexander Litvinenko opened this week—nearly eight years after he was murdered.

Litvinenko died from radioactive polonium-210 poisoning on November 23, 2006. It is claimed that the toxic element was contained in tea he drank during a meeting at London's Millennium Hotel on November 1, with two former Russian KGB agents, Andrey Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun.

Litvinenko had been a lieutenant-colonel in Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB, the successor to the KGB), but had reportedly fallen out with his associates over corruption allegations. In 1998, he charged that the FSB had given him the order to kill Boris Berezovsky, a Russian oligarch and opponent of President Vladimir Putin. Litvinenko was charged with abusing his office and spent nine months on remand before being acquitted. He fled to Britain in 2000 and was granted political asylum.

Berezovsky, who left Russia for the UK at the same time, became Litvinenko's associate and patron. The oligarch died in suspicious circumstances at his home in March 2013.

Litvinenko went on to accuse the FSB of bombing Moscow apartment blocks and two other cities in 1999, as a pretext for Russia's second invasion of Chechnya, as well as the 2006 murder of journalist and Putin critic Anna Politkovskaya. A close friend of Chechen separatist leader Akhmed Zakayev, also exiled in London, Litvinenko reportedly converted to Islam shortly before his death.

His killing was greeted with banner headlines, especially after traces of polonium-210 were discovered in hotels that Lugovoi had stayed in during his visit and the two aircraft on which he had travelled.

However, this was followed by damaging revelations

that Litvinenko was working for Britain's MI6 intelligence agency. The government has refused to confirm or deny his involvement but in 2007, the *Daily Mail* cited intelligence sources claiming that Litvinenko was paid about £2,000 per month for his services and alleged that then MI6 head, Sir John Scarlett, was personally involved in his recruitment. There is also evidence that he worked with Spanish, Italian and Georgian security services.

A British request in May 2007 for Lugovoi's extradition to stand trial for Litvinenko's murder was rejected by Moscow, on the grounds that Russia's constitution forbids the extradition of its citizens. Lugovoi, who represents the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia in the Duma, denies the charges and has accused British intelligence of involvement in the assassination.

The standoff presented major political difficulties for the British government, especially as London had become the home to numerous Russian oligarchs, many of them political opponents of President Vladimir Putin. With Litvinenko charging on his deathbed that his assassination had been ordered by the Kremlin, this raised concerns that the British capital had become the locus for internecine warfare within the Russian elite.

Russian-British relations deteriorated further, with the UK's decision to expel four Russian diplomats in July that year. The move came as antagonisms between Moscow and Washington accelerated over a range of issues, including the US decision to station its anti-missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic. Putin responded by signing a presidential decree for Russia's withdrawal from the Treaty for Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE).

Backing for the UK's action was cautious in Europe, however, especially given disputes over the status of

Kosovo and fears for European gas and oil security.

Moreover, under conditions in which the Russian economy appeared to be enjoying a boom thanks to rising oil and gas prices, sections of Britain's ruling elite were anxious that any further retaliatory measures would jeopardise UK investment and alienate Russian oligarchs fuelling London's property and stock-market boom.

The case was parked. In 2013, a coroner's inquest into Litvinenko's death—required under British law—was delayed. Coroner Sir Robert Owen argued that his inquest was unable to hear confidential British intelligence material relevant to the case and requested a public inquiry, which can take such evidence in secret.

The government refused and was challenged in the High Court by Litvinenko's widow, Marina. In February 2014, it ruled that ministers should reconsider the decision. Three months later, the government agreed to a public inquiry, headed by Owen.

The inquiry is unlikely to shed any real light on Litvinenko's death. The government has set strict limitations. Much of the most important evidence will be heard in secret, with some of the 70 witnesses testifying from behind a screen. Others will be given complete secrecy. Parts of Owen's report, which is not expected until the end of the year, will remain classified. Even Litvinenko's widow will not be allowed to see the secret parts of the judge's report.

Any examination of the role of Britain's security services, and whether they could have prevented Litvinenko's killing, has been ruled out. Notwithstanding the claim that the inquiry will impartially consider all theories—which include that Litvinenko was involved in smuggling polonium-210 and inadvertently poisoned himself—Owen has previously stated that he has seen evidence amounting to a “prima facie case” that Litvinenko was murdered by the Russian state.

The timing of the government's decision and the opening of the inquiry is politically significant. It came against the backdrop of the Western-backed, right wing putsch in Kiev in February 2014, and the downing of Malaysian passenger flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine in July the same year.

Without any evidence, the NATO powers seized on the MH17 atrocity to press ahead with long-standing

geo-political plans for the military encirclement of Russia and the destabilisation of the Putin regime. The US and the European Union imposed financial and diplomatic sanctions against Moscow which, combined with collapsing oil prices, have devastated the Russian economy. NATO has stepped up the stationing of troops and armaments on Russia's borders and is now directly training Ukrainian forces, which include fascist militias, for Kiev's bloody civil war in the east.

The forces overseeing the inquiry are poised to use it not to determine the circumstances of Litvinenko's murder, but as grist for the mill of NATO's anti-Russian propaganda campaign. The tone of the inquiry was set by Ben Emmerson QC, in his opening statement. Emmerson, a visiting professor in human rights law at Oxford University and United Nations special rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights, charged Putin directly with ordering Litvinenko's murder.

Litvinenko was “eliminated” because he had made an enemy of the “close knit group of criminals who surrounded and still surround Vladimir Putin and keep his corrupt regime in power,” he said.

Accusing Moscow of carrying out “an act of nuclear terrorism on the streets of a major city which put the lives of numerous other members of the public at risk,” he said the inquiry would unmask Putin as “nothing more or less than a common criminal dressed up as a head of state.”



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