

December 15, 2006

Spies, Espionage and Nuclear Materials

Cold war issues resurfaced with death of Alexander Litvinenko

After the Cold War ended, as the United States entered the post-Cold War period, the world anticipated a period of relative calm conducive to peace and prosperity. Now the age of Terrorism and Islamic Jihad stands in stark contrast to the relative uncertainty of the Cold War. From an American perspective, the Soviets, while certainly powerful, were relatively reliable, predictable and conservative adversaries compared to today's challenges pertaining to terrorism. However, some elements of the past never seem to go away, and recent developments regarding spies, nuclear material and organized crime are again raising their ugly heads. These subjects are quite different from the daily carnage emanating from the world of terrorism that has reached global proportions. In this issue, The Lipman Report will provide a different perspective on security concerns, to examine recent developments regarding these old but constant nemeses, widely thought to have disappeared with the Cold War, that have just recently returned to the international stage.

The authors John Le Carre and Frederick Forsyth would have been hard pressed to script such a complicated web of shadowy figures and murky alliances as have surfaced on the international scene during the past month. This venue has been transfixed with terrorism for the past several years. Hardly a week passes without an egregious act of terrorism occurring somewhere in the world or information regarding indictments, arrests and convictions of those responsible for these horrific acts. However, during the past week terrorism fatigue has been replaced with the events in London surrounding the death of ex-KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko, who was poisoned by ingesting polonium-210, a highly toxic radioactive isotope. The "whodunnit" theories now implicate just about every possible player, and this phenomenon brings our interest back to the Cold War topics of spies, espionage, the movement of nuclear material and organized crime.

Circumstances of Litvinenko's death

Conspiracy theories are running rampant not only in the West, but more so in Russia, whose history has led to the development of a strong sense of xenophobia and paranoia. In order to set the stage, it will be necessary to explain who Alexander Litvinenko was and why someone would want to kill him. Litvinenko was a colonel in the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor to the Committee for State Security (KGB). After the failed coup in 1991 against Mikhail Gorbachev, the KGB was broken up into numerous agencies, the most important being the FSB, whose responsibilities would mirror the FBI, and the SVR, whose responsibilities would be similar to the CIA. Senior members of the KGB, including the Director Aleksandr Kryuchkov, were involved in the failed coup and the status and prestige of the KGB suffered immeasurably during this period, causing its demise and fractioning. This case is undoubtedly linked to the shadowy world of agents and businessmen, defectors, spies and exiles let loose by the dissolution of the KGB, and entwined with successor agencies. Regardless of the loss of prestige and resources during the nineties, its cadre, proudly referred to as "chekists," maintained their close bonds, remained loyal to the state and seriously resented developments in Russian society, such as corruption, organized crime, the oligarchy's fleecing of Russia's rich resources and the subsequent diminution of Russia's power and position in the world. Russia has always been a police state, and being a policeman in Russia is a valued career. In the seven year rule of President Vladimir Putin, the security service has returned to prestige and power. All the most important jobs in Russia today are held by KGB or former KGB officers "in every ministry, in every

(continued on next page)

Spies, Espionage and Nuclear Materials

Cold war issues resurfaced with death of Alexander Litvinenko

industry.” With the advent of former police and intelligence agents running the country, their resentment has turned into “payback time.”

James Bond aficionados are familiar with the organization Smersch, but this organization actually existed in the years following the Russian Revolution and Civil War to eradicate traitors who had fled abroad. The translation of “smersch” from Russian to English is “death to spies,” and the KGB actually had a department dedicated to “wet matters,” which were extralegal operations. It is not known in the public sector whether such a department exists in this day and age of incipient democracy in Russia, but there are certainly some former chekists who wish for the “good old days.”

Motives for Litvinenko’s death

Litvinenko would seem to be a traditional figure in Russian and Soviet history. He was a career officer with the KGB, attaining the rank of Colonel. Sources reveal he was the FSB officer assigned to the investigation of the attempted assassination of Boris Beresovsky in Moscow during the spring of 1994. Beresovsky was injured in a car bombing that killed his driver and bodyguard only a few blocks from the Kremlin. This investigation allowed Litvinenko to become acquainted with Beresovsky, who was one of the richest oligarchs in Russia at that time, who gamed the system during the period of “shock therapy” transforming the economy from communism to capitalism. He had accumulated vast fortunes in the automobile, airline and energy industries. He was later forced to leave Russia because of his criticism of the post-Yelstin government and received asylum in

the United Kingdom. Then for reasons that are not altogether clear, Litvinenko defected to the UK in 2000, claiming all sorts of illegal activity by his former employer, thus becoming an exile and a strident critic of the state he had served. Litvinenko also later requested asylum in the United Kingdom, claiming he was tasked to assassinate Beresovsky in the UK. Litvinenko wrote two books that made explosive allegations about the FSB and President Vladimir Putin, and recently he had been investigating the October 7 shooting death of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was also a critic of the Putin government. The books are poorly sourced and amount to a litany of purported misdeeds by the FSB, including the bombings of apartment houses in Moscow in 1999, when several explosions occurred in lower middle class neighborhoods, killing hundreds of people. More than two hundred people perished and separatists from Chechnya were blamed and these provocative acts launched the second Chechen war during the 1990s. Litvinenko alleged that the FSB caused the bombings to justify the war. Russian and Soviet tradition on this is clear: turncoats like Litvinenko must be dealt with, whether they are telling the truth or spreading fabrications, for two reasons. First, they represent an ongoing embarrassment to the state. And second, if they are permitted to continue with their criticisms, they will encourage other dissidents.

Historically Russia has dealt with traitors as it deems necessary, without international input, but now the situation in Russia has changed and Russia in the age of globalization cannot be impervious to the sentiments of the global community. As recently as 1981 the

CIA director at the time, and now incoming U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert M. Gates, asserted that the Russian KGB assisted the Bulgarian organs of state security in the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II. Now the situation is murkier.

Post-USSR operations and assassinations

The transition years for Russia were an economic and strategic disaster. Vladimir Putin, a former KGB colonel, came into office with the intention of reversing that disaster. For Putin, the only solution to Russian chaos was the reassertion of Russian values, namely that the state was the center of Russian society, and the intelligence apparatus was the center of the Russian state. Consequently we are witnessing the ascendancy of the intelligence services.

Russia has a history of using poison to quiet critics and eliminate adversaries. Arguably the most famous of the KGB poisonings was the killing of Georgi Markov, a Bulgarian dissident, who met his end on a bridge in London in 1978. In this incident, Markov was struck with a ricin pellet fired from a specially designed umbrella. Markov died four days later. Oleg Kalugin, former chief of the KGB's counterintelligence directorate claimed in his 1994 book, "The First Chief Directorate," that the Bulgarians requested KGB assistance in killing Markov. Sergei Golubev, who was in charge of the KGB's "wet work," a term used for assassination jobs, flew to Sofia, Bulgaria, with the pellets and the umbrella.

Vitaliy Yurchenko, a KGB chief who defected to the West in 1985, told the CIA about a facility called "Special Lab 100." In this KGB facility, scientists developed the poisons used in the assassinations. However the KGB's "wet work" was thought to have ended with the collapse of the USSR. The aforementioned Kalugin claims the FSB established a new directorate two years ago to

carry out operations outside of Russia. However Kalugin is a defector who resides in the United States and undoubtedly still has sources in Russia, but it is doubtful he would have proof of FSB complicity,

The Russians have been criticized for many years for having lax controls over their nuclear materials and weapons. The Russians have denied this fact and, in their defense, most of the allegations regarding the selling of nuclear materials in the West, including the infamous "red mercury," have been resolved as criminal scams or misinformation to besmirch Russia by its enemies. The Russians are also involved in the war on terror, cooperating with the West, and tight maintenance of their nuclear materials is in their best interests.

Tracking polonium-210

Polonium was first discovered by Marie Curie at the end of the 19th century and named for her homeland, Poland. In order to obtain a large enough dose of polonium-210 to kill someone, it would have to be manufactured in a channel type nuclear reactor common only in Russia, Britain, and Canada. Russia produces about eight grams of polonium-210 monthly, according to the head of the Russian Atomic Energy Agency, Sergey Kiriyyenko. The entire amount is produced in one plant in the Urals and is exported to the United States for use in the paint and printing industries.

Polonium-210 is radioactive and poisonous. Some Russian scientists claim the choice of polonium as a weapon is logical because the alpha rays are weak and can be blocked by a few sheets of paper, making it easy to conceal, and it diffuses well, meaning it can be used in a simple aerosol form.

Scotland Yard considers Litvinenko's death a murder and has opened an official investigation. A team has been dispatched to Russia,

(continued on next page)

Spies, Espionage and Nuclear Materials

Cold war issues resurfaced with death of Alexander Litvinenko

and the Russians claim they will cooperate. Interpol is now coordinating this ongoing investigation, involving forces in Germany, Russia and Britain. Ironically the two individuals, reportedly Russian businessman, with whom Litvinenko met on November 1 were former intelligence officers. One of these businessmen, Dmitry Kovtun, is the primary suspect in Litvinenko's death. The chief Russian prosecutor Yuriy Chaika insists the government will cooperate with Scotland Yard, but Russia will lead the investigation within its own boundaries. This is normal, but he also stated that no Russian citizens will be extradited. This is also not unusual in the absence of an extradition treaty. In view of the circumstances there is not much hope for a successful resolution of this investigation in view of Russia's sad recent history in resolving contract killings. Few contract killings are ever solved whether perpetrated by organized crime figures or politically motivated. As a result the conspiracy advocates will have a field day.

Nuclear regulators in Washington and abroad are studying whether or not to tighten security on polonium-210 in case terrorists seek the deadly material for dirty bombs that spew radioactivity. British authorities traced the risk of radioactive contamination to a dozen sites around London and commercial jets carrying more than 33,000 people. Polonium-210 is a very nasty isotope, its availability on the market is "not trivial" and, given the risks of terrorists using polonium-210 to sow disease and death in urban attacks, prudence dictates that stricter controls be implemented. Nuclear experts call polonium-210 one of the most toxic materials known to science. A tiny speck can kill a person. A dirty bomb uses ordinary explosives in its core and radioactive materials on the outside. If detonated in a city, it would scatter radio-active

dust and debris, which could kill hundreds and sicken thousands. This material definitely warrants more scrutiny as a definite weapon of terrorists.

The Time for Urgency is Now[®]

Although the threat of terrorism is now foremost among American and world concerns, the threat of espionage and industrial espionage still exists, whether initiated by foreign intelligence services or former spies working for corporations. There has been a recent influx of former intelligence officers working for foreign corporations, and the FBI continues to point out the dangers evidenced by foreign intelligence services. Additionally, the global technological era brings with it new risks and requires new ways of looking at security. The growth of technology and the dependence on technology necessitates a heightened awareness to the threat of industrial espionage that could emanate externally from competitors or internally from disgruntled employees. The saga of Alexander Litvinenko reminds us of all the potential threats that the world has not actively addressed in recent years, and the potential for problems that are difficult to predict. Litvinenko's story will run its course and the conspiracy theorists will have their day, but the lesson to be learned is that this spy business, one of the oldest professions, is still with us and is more dangerous than ever.



The Lipman Report Editors