

## **Pallid Tales and Death Bed Confessions**

Written by

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### **Pallid Tales and Death Bed Confessions**

**Empire Burlesque** - Chris Floyd - Everyone knows that Russian exile Alexander Litvinenko was killed by radiation poisoning in London last month. But beyond that bare fact, almost nothing is clear about the case. The truth has disappeared, probably forever, into the shadowlands ? that murky confluence of crime, violence, money and politics where so much of the real business of the world is conducted. However, an examination of some of the curiously overlooked aspects of the affair might send at least a few shafts of light into the cloud of unknowing that has enveloped Litvinenko's death.

<http://www.chris-floyd.com/images/litvin%20glow.jpg>

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### **Pale Fire and London Fog:**

#### **[Illuminating Outliers in the Death of Alexander Litvinenko](#)**

### **Chris Floyd**

Empire Burlesque

01 December 2006

This is an updated version of the piece that appeared yesterday at Truthout.org.

### **I. The Baron and the Billionaire**

Of course, one of the chief obstacles in assessing the situation is the fact that almost everything we knew about the case for weeks was spoonfed to the media by the most elite PR operation in Britain. Almost from the moment that Litvinenko fell ill, he disappeared behind a phalanx of handlers paid for by his patron, Boris Berezovsky, the fugitive Russian billionaire and shadowlands operator par excellence. To handle ? and generate ? the publicity surrounding the incident, Berezovsky called on his old friend, [Baron Bell of Belgravia](#) , who, back when he was just plain old Tim Bell, served as the private propaganda chief for Margaret Thatcher, as Sourcewatch reports. The baron has also flacked for disgraced media mogul Conrad Black, disgraceful media mogul Rupert Murdoch, and the Coalition Provisional Authority, the

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mechanism set up by the Bush Administration to eviscerate Iraq.

(Speaking of the CPA, UK investigators now say they've found traces of Polonium 201, the radioactive isotope believed to have killed Litvinenko, in the London offices of Erinys, a private security company. As [I noted in CounterPunch](#) back in December 2003, Bush's CPA gave Erinys' Iraqi branch ? formed as a joint venture with business cronies and family members of bigtime shadowlander Ahmad Chalabi ? \$40 million to guard oil pipelines in the conquered land. This has grown into a much larger stash, not to mention an armed force of 16,000 men ? something of a militia, one might say. The freebooters also bagged big money riding shotgun for Halliburton and Bechtel in those palmy CPA days of yore. And as the Guardian reports, Erinys is also active in Russia. You pull at one string in the shadowlands, and a whole tangled nest of other dark business starts shaking somewhere else.)

The leaping lord's PR shop has also represented Ukraine President Viktor Yushchenko, another victim of a spectacularly ham-handed poisoning laid at the Kremlin's door. Yet another client was former Russian President Boris Yeltsin, whose "miraculous" 1996 election victory ? in the face of [single-digit approval ratings](#) ? was engineered by a small group of oligarchs who were later given carte blanche to plunder Russia's state-owned enterprises and vast natural resources for private profit. The acknowledged leader of this clique ? which had muscled its way to riches and power in the brutal, Hobbesian free-for-all that characterized the Yeltsin years ? was of course a certain Boris Berezovsky.

As one of the prime vettors of political aspirants in the Yeltsin court, Berezovsky was instrumental in bringing the obscure but presumably biddable ex-KGB apparatchik Vladimir Putin to power. But Putin had a clique of his own, based in the security organs ? and soon the oligarchs found themselves out-muscled, on the receiving end of the state machinery they had manipulated for so long. Most fled abroad, where they'd stashed their billions; some were jailed. Berezovsky, charged with embezzlement and money laundering, repaired to sumptuous digs in London and environs, there to become Putin's most ferociously outspoken critic. He also found new friends in high places ? including Neil Bush, George W.'s scandal-ridden brother. Berezovsky is one of the backers of Neil's ["educational software"](#) company, which peddles a dumbed-down "interactive teaching" system called COW to public school systems loath to risk their federal funding by rejecting a First Family boondoggle.

This then is the team that controlled the flow of information during the three agonizing weeks it took Litvinenko to die. They set out the basic storyline that was followed, with scarcely a variation, by all the leading UK papers and most of the world media. The Cold War had come again, we were told: a bold dissident against the tyrannical Putin regime had been assassinated in the streets of London by the undead KGB, wielding strange poisons concocted in secret laboratories. (All this while the latest James Bond movie was having its gala premiere!) A

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carefully composed photograph of the martyr was released by the baronial PR outfit, and quickly became the global emblem of the case. This is what Putin has done, Litvinenko was said to have said: see his evil handiwork with your own eyes.

The human tragedy of the victim's painful deterioration was genuine: a man cut down in his prime, leaving behind a grieving wife, an orphaned son, a weeping father. As a PR move, it was even more effective: the disturbing images, coupled with the drumbeat of accusations against Putin, obscured several essential questions, such as: Who was Alexander Litvinenko? Why would the Kremlin risk a rupture with the West by killing him in such an open, garish fashion? And who was the obscure "Italian academic" he met with at that fatal sushi bar where, we were told, he probably ingested, somehow, the radioactive hemlock?

## II. Wheels Within Wheels

In the press, Litvinenko is invariably described as a "fierce critic of Putin" or words to that effect, and as former officer in the FSB, one of the post-Soviet successor agencies of the KGB. (Most of the media stories skate over the fact that Litvinenko was also a military counterintelligence officer in the old KGB as well.) He is said to have fled Russia after refusing an alleged order to murder Berezovsky ? who promptly took him in, provided him with a house in London, and bankrolled Litvinenko's book, which accused Putin of staging the 1999 Moscow apartment bombing that the Kremlin cited as justification for its second savage war of destruction against Chechnya.

Litvinenko's deathbed j'accuse against Putin ? again, released by the Berezovsky phalanx ? was heard around the world, as we all know. But this was the first time that Litvinenko's relentless barrage of charges against Putin had ever attracted widespread attention ? or an assumption of credibility. His previous book had sunk without a trace; Berezovsky had in fact been shopping around for someone to write another terrifying tome on the subject, once asking Russian journalist Oleg Sultanov to take it on and make it "as scary as possible," [as The Scotsman reports](#)

. "Alex Goldfarb, Berezovsky's closest ally [and one of the chief spokesmen during Litvinenko's illness], admitted the Litvinenko books were a flop. So it [was] urgently necessary to create some hot new reading material which would prove that 'our cause is just' and Putin is the enemy of the human race," Sultanov told the paper.

Over the years, Litvinenko had charged, among many other things, that the Kremlin had trained

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al-Qaeda's top leaders prior to 9/11; that Putin was behind last year's subway bombings in London; that the FSB was responsible for the 2002 Moscow theater massacre and the horrific 2004 slaughter at the Beslan schoolhouse; and that Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi was a long-time KGB agent. This summer, when Putin was filmed playfully smooching a small boy's belly, Litvinenko rushed out a piece declaring that [Putin was a paedophile](#) ? a proven fact that he and other FSB officials had known for years, he said, although he didn't explain why he had refrained from revealing this damning information before.

None of these charges had been taken seriously, or even noticed in the media. Almost no one had ever heard of Litvinenko before the poisoning. Unlike [Anna Politkovskaya](#) , the muckraking, anti-Putin journalist murdered in Moscow in October, Litvinenko did not have an international reputation based on years of solid, credible work in the field. He was an ex-KGB agent who had fled one quadrant of the shadowlands in the Kremlin for another quadrant under Berezovsky's roof. The fact that he had accused Putin of involvement in every major crime of the 21st century does not mean that he was necessarily wrong in this last, fatal instance, of course. But awareness of that fact would have given a different, more shaded context to the dramatic deathbed charges. Yet Berezovsky and his baron skillfully kept such mitigating data out of the public eye ? and the media were happy to seize on the simple, more sellable tale of the dying champion of truth surrounded by simple, loving friends.

<http://www.chris-floyd.com/images/mario.jpg>

They were equally willing to ignore the curious connections of the last man who supposedly met with Litvinenko before the onset of his disease: Mario Scaramella (above), invariably described as an "Italian academic" or "security expert" who had either given Litvinenko documents revealing the Putin-backed murderers of Politkovskaya, or else passed on the word from his contacts in Russian intelligence that Litvinenko was marked for death, or in one account purportedly by Litvinenko himself, produced some vague, non-urgent emails about Politkovskaya then pointedly and nervously refused to eat sushi with the Russian.

It was weeks before the Mail on Sunday sussed out the fact that [Scaramella](#) was in fact "a self-professed expert in nuclear materials" ? especially loose nukestuff floating around the ex-Soviet states ? who also had strong connections with both Russian and Italian intelligence sources. The former tipped him off about attempts to smuggle nuclear materials out of Russia and the east to terrorist and criminal gangs; the latter allowed him to lead an armed police raid to snatch some smugglers he'd fingered. What's more, Scaramella had also gone commercial with his nuclear services, founding a company that offered "environmental protection and security" against various biohazards ? services that some panicky Londoners might have paid good money for as Polonium scares swept the capital after Litvinenko's death. Scaramella also

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claimed academic associations with the universities of Stanford, Naples and Greenwich ? none of which had any record of his working for them.

The wheels within wheels grind on. On that same portentous day of sushi, Litvinenko also met three Russians in a bar, including yet another ex-KGB/FSB man: Andrei Lugovi, who had once been arrested for assisting Berezovsky ally Nikolai Glushkov in an alleged escape attempt from police custody, "where he was being held on charges of embezzlement (to the tune of \$250 million) and massive fraud," [as Justin Raimondo notes](#) in his exhaustive series on the case at Antiwar.com. Lugovi was later released; Glushkov was tried and convicted on lesser charges of financial chicanery related to the case and served three years in prison. Last month, a Moscow court in Putin's iron-handed tyrannical regime refused Kremlin requests to retry Glushkov on the fraud charges, Novosti reports.

During his FSB days, Lugovi also served as one of the bodyguards for Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, during the latter's short but tumultuous tenure guiding Russia's first post-Soviet government. Gaidar was a "free-market" zealot and ardent Thatcherite who, under the guidance of Harvard economist Jeffrey Sachs, applied a chainsaw to Russia's social and economic infrastructure: "shock therapy," it was called, and it almost killed the patient. Millions lost their jobs, were driven out into the streets to beg or sell off their possessions, millions fell ill as the economy collapsed, multitudes died, and Russia began its horrifying plunge in average lifespan ? an unprecedented event for a developed nation.

Now Gaidar's family claim that he too has been poisoned by some mysterious substance; he became violently ill during a trip to Dublin last week. The Gaidar illness, with its tenuous link to Lugovi, is yet another dark string in the increasingly tangled skein. Gaidar, by the way, although nominally in the political opposition, also works occasionally as an economic consultant for the Putin government.

Lugovi meanwhile has apparently become a successful private detective and "security consultant" in Moscow. In recent days, Berezovsky has begun hinting heavily that his former friend Lugovi has been restored to the good graces of the Russian security organs and thus might have had a hand in Litvinenko's poisoning. How else to explain his booming business? "Anyone close to me can normally not even find work in Moscow, let alone have a successful business," Berezovsky told the Moscow Times (again, noted by Raimondo). Yet Berezovsky himself has maintained successful business interests in Moscow throughout his bitter exile and denunciations of Putin. He only sold his controlling interest in the top Russian newspaper, Kommersant, earlier this year ? and not because he was forced to sell by the media-controlling Kremlin tyrant, but evidently because he wanted a quick cash infusion for other enterprises, the

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Independent reports. (Maybe Neil Bush was about to bounce a check.)

All of this adds up to?well, nothing much in particular. It's the usual murky ooze you find whenever an incident like the Litvinenko case turns over a rock in the shadowlands: strange connections, mixed motives, bluffs and double-bluffs, half-truths, black ops, lurid tales, chancers, bagmen, spies, tycoon, mercenaries, war, murder, and money. It's clear that almost every single player in the Litvinenko killing could have had access to the sophisticated technical means necessary to deliver Polonium 210 as an edible poison. It's not clear at all that any of them had a compelling reason to do so.

To be sure, Putin is a ruthless operator on behalf of what he perceives as Russia's national interests, which he tends to identify with the power and privilege of his own elitist clique, as do all our world statesmen ? none more so than his avowed soulmate, George W. Bush. And like Bush, Putin has proven himself capable of wholesale slaughter and pinpoint "extrajudicial killing" in the service of those interests. Some of his critics have certainly ended up dead. Some of his supporters have too. (And so have some of Berezovsky's critics, such as the American journalist Paul Khlebnikov, whose book, "Godfather of the Kremlin" blackened Berezovsky's name around the world far more successfully than Litvinenko's ignored, forgotten tome ever did with Putin. [Khlebnikov was gunned down, Godfather-style](#) , in Moscow in 2004.)

But it beggars belief that a savvy operator like Putin would have countenanced a plan to kill a small-fry critic in a such a spectacularly public fashion, in the capital of a foreign country, with a slow-acting radioactive isotope that guaranteed weeks of damaging headlines and international outcry, putting at risk months of delicate negotiations over Russia's expansion into the European energy market and other lucrative deals. Someone who wanted to embarrass Putin, for whatever reason, might have done it. ( [Matt Taibbi has an excellent article](#) with some of the more solid speculations on this point.) Someone with motives entirely unconnected to Russian politics might have done it.

[Rogue elements](#)

of this or that faction or agency or government might have done it. But it's clear from all the facts available that the one person who would benefit least from the murder is the one who has been most widely and confidently accused of ordering it: Putin.

And so the question of who killed Alexander Litvinenko remains an impenetrable mystery. But at least it has thrown a flickering light on the borders of the shadowlands, a pale fire in which we can dimly perceive the ugly machinations, the violence and deceit, the crime and corruption that lie beneath the gilded images of the movers and shakers of the world.