

Do Assassinations Serve Little Purpose Other than to Communicate Resolve?

Written by Arran Kennedy

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/09/24/do-assassinations-serve-little-purpose-other-than-to-communicate-resolve/>

ARRAN KENNEDY, SEP 24 2022

This essay examines three case studies of assassination that, *prima facie*, served little purpose other than communicating resolve: Russia's assassination of Alexander Litvinenko, the poisoning of Sergei Skripal, and Mossad's killing campaign against Iranian nuclear scientists. Each assassination communicated resolve because they were of 'implausible deniability': easily attributable to, but not officially acknowledged by, the perpetrator (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018). But each case study also demonstrates that the assassinations—including the attempted but ultimately failed assassination of Skripal—served purposes alongside communicating resolve. The essay is organised as follows. First, it establishes that Litvinenko's assassination, as well as communicating resolve against treachery, eliminated a Kremlin-perceived threat, increased Russian diplomatic leverage, and provided the opportunity for Russia to hit back at the West after years of perceived slights. Second, Russia achieved other purposes alongside communicating resolve when it poisoned Skripal. Like the Litvinenko case, Skripal's assassination likely stymied international investigations against Russia that he was aiding with his GRU knowledge, as well as serving to stem the tide of recent defections from Russian intelligence. Third, Israel's assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists not only sent a message of resolve that Israel would never allow Iran to be nuclear-capable, but Israel derived practical utility from them too: significantly delaying the program, creating power struggles within Tehran, complementing other programs aimed at defections, and preventing the use of inadequate and dangerous alternatives like airstrikes. The essay, therefore, concludes that to suggest assassinations solely communicate resolve is to adopt a narrow view of the purpose of assassinations—even 'theatrical' ones.

Alexander Litvinenko

In 2006, former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officer Litvinenko was poisoned by Andrey Lugovoy and Dmitry Kovtun—'probably' on the orders of President Putin—with polonium-210 following 'a most eventful life in the United Kingdom' as a dissident during which he was a consultant for the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6) (Litvinenko Inquiry, 2016, p. 51, p. 246). Litvinenko fled after the fallout from his 1998 press conference accusing the FSB and its then-Director, Vladimir Putin, of colluding with organised crime groups, and planning extrajudicial murder of opponents (ibid., p. 23). 'Never in the history of the Russian security services has the FSB experienced such public exposure,' Litvinenko's wife observed (ibid., p. 23). As Hill and Gaddy (2015, p. 367) demonstrate in *Mr. Putin*, 'themes of national and personal loyalty and betrayal have been a frequent part of Putin's discourse as president.' Litvinenko's assassination was a manifestation of that.

Poisoning is often mentioned as a suitable method of assassinating traitors in the ancient text *Arthashastra*, and Putin adopted it against Litvinenko to send a strategic message of resolve: traitors, wherever they reside, will publicly suffer from exotic poisons that '[bring] the full power of the state to bear against an individual, framing the situation as hopeless and futile' (Gioe et al., 2019, p. 565). As Kovtun told an associate who questioned why he did not just shoot Litvinenko: "it is meant to set an example" (Litvinenko Inquiry, 2016, p. 152). Litvinenko's assassination was, therefore, a 'theatrical murder,' evidenced by the *choice of weapon* (military-grade poison), the *modus operandi* (the operation's execution was voluntarily self-denouncing of Russia's culpability), and *post-operational behaviour* (public celebration of the assassins) (Hänni and Grossman, 2020, pp. 405-6). Yet Litvinenko's assassination did not occur in a vacuum, but rather reinforced the wider narrative of resolve Russia sought to convey during this period.

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Russia was seeking to reassert itself as a Great Power after years of perceived Western triumphalism. The poisoning occurred months before Putin's (2007) Munich Speech when he rallied against the side-lining of Russia. As Lugovoy said following Litvinenko's assassination: "there was a small period of time when nobody took Russia into account, for ten years. Now, gentlemen, you will have to take Russia into account" (Litvinenko Inquiry, 2016, p. 80). Herein lies two other purposes of Litvinenko's assassination beyond communicating resolve. First, Putin—correctly—believes that assassinations give him greater international heft against the West than he would otherwise have, and a sense of omnipotence that Russia's power otherwise does not warrant (Gioe et al., 2019, p. 569). Implausibly deniable covert actions aid the cultivation of such a narrative (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018, p. 491). Thus, the Kremlin hand is suspected to be behind the death of every Russian in the Home Counties or London. Second, Litvinenko's assassination allowed Russia to hit back at this triumphalism while avoiding a complete rupture and long-term consequences. Through Russia's (albeit implausible) non-acknowledgement, and the difficulty in directly linking a Putin directive to the assassination, there was reduced pressure on Britain to escalate the crisis, and it could, thus, still make the case for future engagement with Russia (Urban, 2018, p. 249). Indeed, as the Intelligence and Security Committee's (2020) *Russia* report shows, Britain did not inflict long-term damage to Russia.

Furthermore, Litvinenko's assassination aided the Russian narrative by belittling the West. As Gioe et al. (2019, p. 570) note, 'brutal assassinations are a particularly terrifying way to demonstrate the weakness of the West to Westerners.' The polonium-210 trail around London added to that (Litvinenko Inquiry, 2016, pp. 109-180). This was reinforced by the Russian response to the British investigation. To show contempt for Western institutions and processes, Russian prosecutors denied certain interviews by Metropolitan Police officers in Moscow and, for instance, overtly altered translated interview transcripts to inhibit the investigation (Harding, 2016, p. 204). Likewise, British detectives accused Russia of poisoning them with gastroenteritis as a "deliberate plot to weaken [them] physically" (Kerbaj, 2017). But this poisoning was less about curtailing the detectives and more symbolic: the gastroenteritis was slipped into a cup of tea, like Litvinenko's poisoning, as a way of showing derision. And when Britain requested Lugovoy's extradition, Putin used the opportunity to highlight British decline, accusing Britain of "colonial thinking" (Harding, 2007). Domestically, these events 'were interpreted as proof that [Russia] would not be pushed around by the outside world' and were utilised by Putin to foster anti-Western sentiment (Soldatov and Borogan, 2010, p. 208). Beyond this message of resolve, Litvinenko's assassination also had operational value for Russia because his continued existence was perceived as a threat to the *regimen*.

In London, Litvinenko pushed the thesis in *Blowing Up Russia* that the FSB orchestrated the 1999 apartment bombings as a pretext for the Second Chechen War and to facilitate Putin's rise (Litvinenko and Felshtinsky, 2013). Despite banning the book and closing theatres showing the Berezovsky-backed film about it, a 2002 poll suggested 40% of Russians doubted the official explanation for the bombings (Harding, 2016, p. 54). This carefully-researched thesis and its influential supporters in Russia – many of whom were also assassinated – were perceived as a threat (Litvinenko Inquiry, 2016, pp. 56-62). Litvinenko also continued investigating FSB-Mafia links and became increasingly involved in international investigations into them. The Italian Mitrokhin Commission received Litvinenko's testimony on sensitive this topic, and other information on alleged FSB gun-running to Al-Qaeda (ibid., pp. 68-71). As a 'walking encyclopaedia on organised crime' (Harding, 2016, p. 5), Litvinenko was contributing, with increasing frequency, to Spanish investigations against Russian Mafia, specifically vis-à-vis money-laundering by the Putin-associated Tambov Gang – and Litvinenko was willing to testify in open court (Litvinenko Inquiry, 2016, pp. 72-3). Litvinenko also aided the transcription of the 'Kuchma Tapes' revealing this Putin-Tambov connection and served on a War Crimes Commission gathering evidence of Russian actions in Chechnya, further implicating the Kremlin elite (ibid., p. 61-2).

Consequently, Litvinenko's assassination eliminated a perceived threat, increased Russian diplomatic leverage, and afforded Russia the opportunity to hit back at the West, while also communicating resolve. Likewise, the Skripal case served other purposes alongside signalling.

Sergei Skripal

In 2018, former GRU officer and 'highly paid, highly valued MI6 spy' Skripal was theatrically poisoned (though he survived) by Russian intelligence with Novichok, a military-grade nerve agent, after eight years of living in Salisbury

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with no public profile (Urban, 2018; Macintyre, 2018; Gioe et al., 2019). Though it came infrequently, Skripal provided SIS with valuable information, including organisational charts, names of undercover operatives, and GRU posting plans (Macintyre, 2018), filling a hole in Britain's intelligence picture (Urban, 2018, p. 62). While the counterterrorism-dominated early-2000s meant "his product ended up being only of interest to a handful of CI nerds," an intelligence figure told Urban (2018, p. 106), it nevertheless undermined Russian intelligence as Putin sought to rebuild it.

Like the Litvinenko case, the method of Skripal's poisoning was the message and had all the hallmarks of Hänni and Grossman's criterion for theatrical murder to demonstrate resolve. Using Novichok guaranteed a prolonged and public battle to save Skripal. Novichok's 'obvious Russian-ness' reflected 'a policy of deliberately implausible deniability' (Omand, 2018, p. 6) and reinforced the state-vs.-individual narrative. And the post-operational behaviour was grotesquely public: Kremlin propaganda outlets warning traitors to avoid England because of the high body count of former spies (Bennetts, 2018), the Russian Embassy (2018) tweeting 'we definitely need a Poirot in Salisbury,' and the promotion of debunked conspiracy theories by Russia's MFA (Bellingcat, 2018). The infamous RT interview with the hitmen has been described as a Russian misfire (Urban 2018, p. 313; Gioe et al., 2019, p. 597) but this is a misinterpretation. The interviewer has intimate links to the Kremlin (ODNI, 2017, Annex. A) and her interview was just another part of the theatrical taunting: ridiculing a former *Spetsnaz* officer on television demonstrates that even highly-decorated Russians are pawns in Putin's game, reinforcing the narrative of impunity.

In addition, the message of resolve was particularly potent considering Skripal was part of a spy-swap with the 'Ghost Stories' illegals in 2010. In public, Putin was effusive with praise for the illegals and sang patriotic songs with them upon their return to Russia (Parfitt, 2010), but in private he was humiliated, reportedly "livid," that the pride of Russian intelligence had been monitored by the FBI for a decade (Corera, 2020, pp. 301-2). The 2010 Vienna spy-swap was, thus, forced onto Putin: Russia was at the mercy of events, with the West dominant, which undermined Putin's image. 'Revenge for that humiliation would come served in a bottle of perfume eight years later,' Corera (2020, p. 8) noted. In addition, as part of the swap, Skripal had been pardoned by the Russian state. In contrast to the West, that admission of guilt is immaterial in Putin's Russia since 'bygones are certainly not that' (Gioe et al., 2019, p. 569). Skripal's attempted assassination showed Russian resolve was unrelenting and cannot be punctured by 'agreements' like a spy-swap. However, Skripal's poisoning also served other purposes.

Like the Litvinenko case, the attempted assassination likely stymied investigations against Russia. The length of Skripal's debriefing at MI6's Fort Monckton—lasting only one month (Urban, 2018, p. 193) in comparison to Oleg Gordievsky's lasting 80 days (Gordievsky, 1995, p. 401) – does not accurately portray his cooperation with SIS, with whom he continued to cooperate for years after (Macintyre, 2018). Urban (2018, pp. 241-2) details Skripal's cooperation with Baltic and Central European states, rumoured visits to Ukraine, and collaboration with Switzerland over Russian corruption and its espionage against international bodies based there—all of which posed a risk to Russia's operations. Schwirtz and Bautista (2018) also claim his cooperation 'possibly... led to the expulsion of undercover operatives' in Prague and Tallinn. Like Gordievsky being crucial for Western understanding of the KGB mindset during the 1980s (Barrass, 2009, p. 407), Skripal's poisoning likely prevented his GRU knowledge from being further weaponised against Russia, particularly when Western attention re-focused on the GRU following the 2016 U.S. election. The GRU, after all, had maintained its Soviet name and structure (Strokan and Taylor, 2018, p. 159), hence rendering Skripal's historical insight still useful.

Likewise, an examination of the months preceding the poisoning indicates a Kremlin fearful of Western intelligence penetration, and therefore, engaging in a stroke of 'political theatre' to stem the tide. The revelation in mid-2017 that Oleg Smolenkov – a senior Kremlin aide with access to documents on Putin's desk (Barnes et al., 2019)—was a long-standing CIA asset and extracted from Moscow will have caused alarm. Likewise, Gioe et al. (2019, p. 564) speculate the ever-expanding Mueller investigation being powered by HUMINT likely served as an incentive to act in early 2018 to prevent further cooperation or send a message to 'future turncoats.' And while correlation does not equal causation, several CIA agents in Moscow had reportedly (and unusually) 'gone dark' in the months following the poisoning, restricting Langley's purview into Russia's subversion plans for the 2018 elections, thereby undermining efforts to counter them (Barnes and Rosenberg, 2018). Of course, demonstrating old assets are protected is vital for the credibility of agencies to maintain current agents and recruit new ones. Thus, the attempted

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assassination likely limited cooperation from assets at a crucial time and will have given potential new recruits pause for thought.

Consequently, Russia derived a practical utility from both the Litvinenko and Skripal poisonings, as well as communicating resolve. Israel has similarly used assassinations for these purposes.

Israeli assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists

Assassination has long featured in Israeli statecraft (Bergman, 2019), including against Iranian nuclear scientists as part of a larger mosaic of Mossad's covert action to stymie Iran's nuclear program, alongside sabotage of Iran's nuclear supply chain and cyber-attacks against its nuclear infrastructure like the Stuxnet virus (Maher, 2021). This mosaic was viewed as the only alternative to the two remaining and less desirable options to Israel. As former CIA Director Michael Hayden (2016, p. 291) put it: 'bombing or the bomb.' Therefore, it is necessary to examine how much assassination contributes to that objective, beyond visibly communicating resolve.

Like the Russian assassinations, the method communicates resolve. Until 2012, assassinations came from unassuming motorbikes: either carrying gunmen, used as explosives themselves, or driven alongside cars to quietly place imminently-exploding limpet mines on them (Bergman, 2019, p. 622). While these methods have operational and tactical value, the strategic message is also clear: you can always be found, and your death can come from the most unassuming place. When the assassination campaign resumed in 2020, the message changed—but was no less strategic—and became similar to the Russian cases: Mossad used a 'souped-up,' highly-advanced, A.I.-enabled robotic machine-gun (Bergman and Fassihi, 2021), bringing to bear the full force of the Israeli state on individual Iranian scientists.

Critics argue the assassinations are little more than political signalling. For example, Tobey (2012, p. 65) noted 'it is difficult to imagine a country having a scientific infrastructure large enough to support a nuclear weapons program, but too small to sustain a viable effort after the loss of even several individuals', while Richelson (2002, pp. 251-2) suggested assassination can provide a false sense of security while creating martyrs. Kayemm (2012) likewise argued that assassinations are 'merely a footnote compared to the sustained effort of global sanctions combined with diplomacy', while Maher (2021, p. 1019) noted those assassinations might provide Iran international sympathy it would otherwise not garner. It could also be argued that other elements of the covert action mosaic disrupted Iran's capability, with assassination playing little on-the-ground role. Sabotage operations exploited Iran's reliance on foreign suppliers and black-market middlemen in its nuclear supply chain by supplying defective or manipulated parts that caused accidents during enrichment (ibid., pp. 1020-22). For example, Iran used vacuum pumps modified by Los Alamos laboratories to break down at critical moments (Collins and Frantz, 2011, pp. 50-53). Likewise, Stuxnet, a joint U.S.-Israeli cyber weapon unleashed in early 2009, physically destroyed Iran's centrifuges (Zetter, 2014). A secret U.S. study estimated it set back Iran's program by two years, spread to non-centrifuge networks, and caused the failure of 1/5th of centrifuges in 2009-10 (Sanger, 2012, ch. 8). This argument is further evidenced, critics suggest, by the Osirak reactor case of the 1970s: Mossad sought to deny Saddam the bomb but Israel's 'presumed use of assassination in Iraq had no material impact on the Iraqi program,' and only a preventative airstrike destroyed it (Ramberg, 2012, p. 42). Thus, Israel repeating this supposedly failed assassination strategy could be seen as an admission that it serves little purpose other than resolve—while sabotage and Stuxnet damage Iran's capability. However, it is evident assassinations significantly slowed Iran's ability to develop and deliver a weapon by targeting hard-to-replace assets and encouraging defections. Four reasons are given.

First, Iran is not the USSR: in the latter, assassinations would have been inconsequential owing to the sheer number of scientists and how far-advanced its capabilities were, while the exact opposite conditions exist in Iran, meaning assassination can significantly delay the program (Richelson, 2002, p. 259). Hayden concluded Mossad's assassinations were the most effective measure against Iran's nuclear program, and told newly-elected President Obama as much when Obama asked how much fissile material there was at Natanz: "it doesn't matter," Hayden said, because scientists were building knowledge and confidence at Natanz and "that knowledge, Mr. President, is stored in the brains of the scientists," who will apply it elsewhere—and thus, assassinations were key (Bergman, 2019, pp. 625-6).

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Second, after the 2012-2020 hiatus, Israel resumed its assassination campaign by killing Iran's chief scientist. This caused a power struggle between reformists and hardliners (Wintour, 2020), which in the past has resulted in growing defections and leaks from Iranian technocrats 'creating a new flow of intelligence about [Iran's] secretive nuclear program' that significantly informed U.S. NIE's (Warrick and Miller, 2010), and thus probably improved sabotage/cyber efforts as well.

Third, the assassinations were 'hybrid assassinations' because they served as a 'stick' complementing the 'carrot' of the CIA's purported Brain Drain program – which, when combined, had synergistic effects. Brain Drain was aimed both at promising young Iranian graduates and serving nuclear weapons scientists, of whom four defected between 2005-8 (Katz and Hendel, 2018, pp. 89-91). 'Putting the most pressure on Iranians by 2012,' Katz and Hendel (2018, p. 89) conclude, 'appeared to be the defection or assassination of Iranian scientists affiliated with the Republic's nuclear program'. Assassinations were a form of psychological warfare seeking to instil fear in Iran's scientific elite and weaken the allure of working in Iran's best-funded project (Sanger, 2012, ch. 6), combined with incentives to defect. Further, Brain Drain forced Iran to establish a counterintelligence section, Oghab-2, specifically for monitoring its nuclear scientists abroad and checking imported nuclear parts for signs of sabotage—thus further diverting resources from the actual program (Katz and Hendel, p. 89). Combined with the other covert measures, this forced Iran to be more cautious and paranoid—a sign of the psychological toll the omnipresent threat of equipment self-destructing (sabotage, Stuxnet) or scientists dying (assassinations) had (Maher, 2021, p. 1026).

Fourth, the assassinations served a purpose because they were better than the inadequate and dangerous alternatives. The CIA's attempt in 2000 to provide Iran with flawed blueprints for a (therefore, inoperable) nuclear weapon backfired when the scientist tasked with passing on the blueprint tipped the Iranians off and confirmed the accurate parts, thus *advancing* Iran's nuclear program (Risen, 2006, ch. 9). The CIA's infiltration and attempted manipulation of the AQ Khan proliferation ring, in part to stymie Iran, largely failed to halt Iran's program, and may have encouraged the ring further (Collins and Frantz, 2011). And an examination of previous military strikes against nuclear facilities revealed a paradox: strikes were only successful if carried out well before the nuclear threat was imminent, but this is when strikes are least legitimate, thus inferring that Israeli military action would be unlikely to delay Tehran's progress, given Iran's advanced knowledge base and the risk of escalation through bombing (Kreps and Fuhrmann, 2011). Assassinations, then, were a key component of Israel's covert action: they communicated resolve, while also damaging Iran's capabilities.

In conclusion, these case studies have demonstrated that assassinations do not solely communicate resolve. In the Litvinenko and Skripal cases, Russia communicated resolve against treachery while simultaneously eliminating perceived threats, countering the West, and increasing Russian influence. Similarly, in the Israel case, assassination was found to have made a material contribution to Mossad's campaign against Iran's nuclear program. Thus, the reason the assassinations showed resolve was, in part, *because* they were eliminating perceived threats. In all three cases, therefore, the question was shown to erroneously characterise the purpose of assassination.

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