

Claims made by former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko as he lay dying of radioactive poisoning in a London hospital bed have been backed by [public inquiry](#) . Litvinenko accused Russian agents of putting him there and went to his grave pointing the finger at the Kremlin.

Litvinenko had become a critic of president Vladimir Putin and had fled to Britain, where he worked for MI6.

The inquiry into his death, conducted by British judge Robert Owen, found that the murder was executed under the “probable” direction of the FSB – Russia’s intelligence and security service. Going further than many had expected, he also said the killing was “probably approved” by president Vladimir Putin himself.

As the findings were published, British home secretary Theresa May attacked Russia over this [“blatant and unacceptable breach of the most fundamental tenets of international law and of civilised behaviour”](#) . Meanwhile, the Russian ambassador has called the findings a [“gross provocation”](#) .

This could be a sign of things to come – Litvinenko’s death triggered a sharp deterioration of UK-Russian political relations, including tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions and a spike in surveillance more reminiscent of the Cold War. Given the current need for cooperation with Putin over Isis, Syria and the recent Iranian nuclear deal, however, the British prime minister, David Cameron, will have to tread a delicate line in his response.

Murky dealings

Litvinenko’s death has shone a light into the subterranean world of spies, secret warfare, and assassination playing out on the streets of Britain.

London has long been a haven for exiles and subversives. By extension, it has hosted numerous political assassinations over the years – the most famous perhaps being the stabbing

Litvinenko inquiry: 25 years on from the Cold War, espionage endures

Written by The Conversation USA

of Bulgarian dissident [Georgi Markov](#) with a poison-injecting umbrella on Westminster Bridge in 1978.

That Litvinenko is said to have had ties to British intelligence and, at its request, worked with the Spanish secret services, adds another layer of intrigue.

Litvinenko, it is claimed, [worked with MI6](#) from around 2004, had a dedicated contact called “Martin”, and received £2,000 per month for his services. Although there is debate about whether he worked with MI6 as a part-time consultant or as an agent, he seemingly assisted authorities looking at Russian organised crime and, more specifically, on mafia activities in Spain.

Unsurprisingly, the British government offered few clues. It has consistently neither confirmed nor denied Litvinenko’s relationship with MI6.

Given the strong evidence of his involvement, this may seem petty. But neither conforming nor denying (or NCND in government jargon) protects other agents who could otherwise find themselves in Litvinenko’s unenviable position. Denying implicitly suggests that any accusation not denied is true. Confirming reveals insight into British practices, which in turn has the potential to put agents at risk and make them less willing to cooperate.

What is more important in this case, as Robert Owen stated, is that the Russian state clearly thought Litvinenko to be working for MI6 and accused him of gathering incriminating intelligence on Putin.

Placement abroad

Litvinenko’s case highlights the dangers of cooperating with foreign intelligence services. But danger is a fact of life in international espionage and Litvinenko’s death is unlikely to affect MI6 operations. Indeed, even though Litvinenko had previously received threats, and even though it took MI6 more than two weeks to realise that Litvinenko had been poisoned, Owen’s inquiry did not examine whether MI6 should have done more to protect him.

Litvinenko inquiry: 25 years on from the Cold War, espionage endures

Written by The Conversation USA

He is far from the first Russian (or Soviet) intelligence officer alleged to have spied for the west and meet an untimely demise. During the Cold War, [Oleg Penkovsky](#) helped avert nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis before being uncovered and shot in Moscow in 1963. Others have been luckier: [Oleg](#)

[Lyalin](#)

was given a new identity by MI5 after helping to expose the scale of Russian espionage in London in the early 1970s, while

[Oleg Gordievksy](#)

was only spared execution as a result of a daring British rescue, which involved smuggling him out of Russia in the boot of a car.

There is no evidence as to how highly MI6 rated Litvinenko's intelligence, and it is unlikely that he was as valuable as the star agents of the Cold War, but his case amply demonstrates the dangers and persistence of intelligence operations against Russia.

Now what?

Despite the risks, British intelligence will continue to recruit and run Russian dissidents. Moscow remains a high priority target.

The number of Russian spies operating covertly in the UK is back up to Cold War levels – perhaps even as high as in the aftermath of Operation Foot in 1971 when Edward Heath, then prime minister, dramatically expelled 105 spies.

MI5, more associated these days with countering terrorism, has had to increase its resources dedicated to Russia in the aftermath of the Litvinenko murder. MI5's then director general, Jonathan Evans, [said](#) :

It is a matter of some disappointment to me that I still have to devote significant amounts of equipment, money and staff to countering this threat.

By 2010, MI5 confirmed that it had increased its spending on countering hostile foreign activity – largely from Russia and China – by [27%](#) over the previous year.

Litvinenko inquiry: 25 years on from the Cold War, espionage endures

Written by The Conversation USA

Meanwhile, the British government remains deeply interested in Russian organised crime, cyber-attacks targeting defence and technology information, aggressive activity in Eastern Europe and implications for NATO, and Russian attitudes to issues from Syria to Iran. The Cold War may be over, but espionage endures.

Rory Cormac holds an AHRC research fellowship, and specialises in intelligence and covert action.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/litvinenko-inquiry-25-years-on-from-the-cold-war-espionage-endures-53523>