

Alexander Litvinenko was a former KGB spy who fell out with the Putin regime

He died in London 10 years ago after being poisoned with polonium-210

Andrei Lugovoi, another ex-KGB man, is wanted by Britain for the murder

In Russia Lugovoi is a millionaire TV star, an MP — and he even got the girl



LICENCE TO KILL

MARK FRANCHETTI REPORTS

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his time 10 years ago Alexander Litvinenko was dying a slow and agonising death in a London hospital. A controversial former KGB agent who had fled to Britain after falling out with Vladimir Putin's sinister autocracy, Litvinenko, 44, was killed after being poisoned with polonium-210, a deadly isotope that was secretly slipped into his tea at the bar of a hotel in Mayfair.

As I wait for an audience in Moscow with the man Scotland Yard is still seeking for the murder, I'm struck by the singularity of Andrei Lugovoi's fate. Lugovoi must be one of the few people in the world whose life took a breathtaking turn for the better only after he was accused of committing such a heinous crime — the first proven murder with a rare and highly radioactive metal.

In the decade Lugovoi has spent avoiding extradition to Britain from the safety of Russia, Lugovoi's security business has flourished, making him a multimillionaire. He has also launched a successful political career and in September was elected for a third time to the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, where he also sits on its defence committee.

Last year the Kremlin bestowed on Lugovoi, a former KGB bodyguard, a prestigious state award, and he has become a media celebrity, hosting his own long-running TV show about famous Soviet-era traitors. Lugovoi's story has also inspired a Russian TV drama series in which his character is portrayed as a heroic patriot and Litvinenko as a "traitor who betrayed the motherland".

In a happy ending worthy of a Hollywood B-movie, Lugovoi, 50, even gets the girl: in 2013 he married Xenia, a pretty student 23 years his junior, who recently gave him a baby boy. The two met nearly four years ago in the Moscow restaurant where she worked as a manager. As he tells the story, he was so struck by her that he made his first advance with a brashness Donald Trump would be proud of. "Consider today the day you won the lottery," he told her. Dressed all in white, down to Lugovoi's shoes, the couple landed at their wedding on the Black Sea in a helicopter. Pictures of the event were "leaked" to Russia's tabloid press and a video of the ceremony, edited to rousing music from the film *The Last of the Mohicans*, was posted online.

Xenia has since starred in the TV series about her husband and Litvinenko, and runs Lugovoi's Russian cuisine restaurant in central Moscow, where I met him most recently. "Give the man a cup of tea," Lugovoi told one of his minions as I waited for him to wrap up a meeting. "But without polonium," he quickly added, with dark humour.

I first met Lugovoi 10 years ago, immediately after he was suspected of involvement in Litvinenko's poisoning. The former KGB agent was still dying, his face a haunting death mask after his hair fell out due to radiation poisoning. British toxicology experts had yet to identify the deadly substance as polonium-210. When, days later, they did make the discovery, Lugovoi was found to have left a radioactive trail in his wake after meeting Litvinenko in London on several occasions in the autumn of 2006. I, too, had to be checked for contamination after coming into close contact with the alleged murderer — and Scotland Yard sought me out for an unofficial chat.

In the decade since the killing, no foreign journalist has had as much access to Lugovoi as



I have. We have met dozens of times in many different settings, on and off the record.

When I point out the contradiction — that a murder charge in a high-profile and shocking killing has brought him giddy success — Lugovoi quotes a popular Russian saying to describe what he views as a strength: his ability "to turn a lemon into a lemonade". Lugovoi may have an uncanny knack of turning the sour into something sweet, but even he is at times surprised by his good fortune. He admits that his success at home after Britain accused him of Litvinenko's murder is key to understanding why, under Putin, Russia's relations with the West have soured so spectacularly. Putin's growing cynicism and contempt of the West mirrors that of millions of ordinary Russians. It is a mood that evolved over more than two decades and erased the enthused fascination that Lugovoi and many of his compatriots felt for the West when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

Since Litvinenko's murder, his alleged killer has helped fan his country's animosity towards Britain and the US. It has afforded Lugovoi success, popularity and freedom, and has helped spare him a trial in a British court. "It's true," said Lugovoi, "that the accusation of poisoning Litvinenko quickly became a win-win for me at home. People who do not believe I did it view me as a victim of an anti-Russian conspiracy hatched by Britain. Those who suspect I did it think of me as a hero, because I killed a traitor."

"Ten years on everyone here has forgotten about it. I rarely get asked about Litvinenko and most Russians know me as a politician and media figure. The only restriction is not being able to travel outside Russia, in

Lugovoi made his first advance on Xenia with a brashness Donald Trump would be proud of. "Consider today the day you won the lottery," he told her



order to avoid arrest, but I've long become used to that. I love to holiday in Russia, it's not an issue."

The alleged killer's bullishness, too, is indicative of the mood in his country, and of the Kremlin's growing assertiveness, as it seeks to regain some of the influence it lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union. With Donald Trump in the White House, that looks more likely: Trump has repeatedly praised Putin as a strong leader and dismissed warnings from the intelligence services that Russia is behind widespread cyber-hacking in the US and the West. Putin was one of the first world leaders to congratulate Trump on his victory.

"Russians are long fed up with the West lecturing us as if we were schoolchildren," says Lugovoi. "We see the hypocrisy. We see that more often than not it's selfish national interests you're pursuing — not those high ideals you claim to be espousing."

Spending time with Lugovoi over 10 years has been a journey that confounded my expectations. I suspected him, then believed his denials, then became even more confused. All the while I was coming to like him — despite my conviction, now, that he definitely took part in the murder.

Ours has been an odd relationship, for I have told him many times that I have no doubts he poisoned Litvinenko, and I have openly made fun of some of his more outlandish denials and claims — chief among them that British intelligence murdered Litvinenko to blacken Russia's image. I have called him a cynical opportunist to his face and asked him how he sleeps at night. We have clashed and taunted each other, once ceasing to talk for months when

I angered him by introducing him to a close colleague he later felt had misrepresented him.

Lugovoi knows I think he's lying and I know he has to keep feigning his innocence. After all, what choice does he have? And yet he has never turned down my many interview requests and has always courteously agreed to meet for off-the-record chats. Except for the single most crucial question he cannot answer honestly — did you do it? — I have always found him forthcoming, frank and reasonable.

To my surprise, he once invited me to his young wife's birthday, an intimate gathering of close friends and relatives on a lavish floating restaurant moored on the Moscow river. Oddly, I was the only outsider. The evening began with scantily clad female and male dancers gyrating among the tables and ended with a live performance by Lugovoi and inebriated friends of patriotic Soviet songs, with Xenia on the drums and Lugovoi playing electric guitar.

Lit by firework candles, the oversized birthday cake was in the shape of a lion and a cobra, to mark Xenia's zodiac sign and the Chinese calendar year she was born. "Do you realise how lucky you've been, how well it all seems to have turned out for you despite it all? It could all have ended very differently..." I shouted in his ear as he took a break from the dancefloor.

"Yes, I do," he replied.

"The thing is that you're one of the few people in the world to really know the whole truth about what happened, right?" I went on.

"Almost the whole truth," he said, in one of the more tantalising exchanges we've had, as it felt like →

A TALE OF TWO SPOOKS

Left: Alexander Litvinenko with his wife, Marina, and son, Anatoli, in London in 2000 — six years before he was murdered. Above: Andrei Lugovoi and his young bride, Xenia, on their wedding day in 2013

"Give the man a cup of tea," Lugovoi told one of his minions as I waited for him. "But without polonium"



FIRESIDE CHAT The alleged killers Dmitry Kovtun (left) and Andrei Lugovoi (centre) talk to Mark Franchetti

a confession of sorts. But by the time I left, Lugovoi was again dancing furiously and doing bodyweight exercises on a chair to the applause of his delighted friends, seemingly without a worry in the world.

“C’mon, Andrei, we both know that if you did take part in Litvinenko’s murder, you’re hardly going to tell me, are you?” I often say to him. Every time, he smiles a wide, spontaneous grin. For me, that has always been more revealing than anything he has said.

As intriguing as that he quickly began to revel in the attention the murder accusation brought. He once asked if I could procure, as a memento, a copy of a British daily that ran his photograph on its front page. As the premiere of the TV show he was to host neared, he texted me several times to tell me to watch it — and recently autographed a box set of the programme for a colleague who was visiting from London. He was also visibly pleased when I visited him on set to write about the TV series that fictionalised his and Litvinenko’s story.

For someone so adamant that he played no part in the murder, Lugovoi has expressed very little pity over the years for the terribly painful and slow death Litvinenko suffered (it took three weeks for the radioactive poison to kill him).

In the first year after the murder, I also spent much time with Dmitry Kovtun, a childhood friend of Lugovoi, who was with him in London when he last met Litvinenko, on November 1, 2006, the day the former KGB officer was poisoned. Kovtun, who has since fallen out with Lugovoi, is the only other person wanted by Scotland Yard over the murder. He, too, denies any involvement, despite suffering heavy radioactive contamination.

I have listened many times to Lugovoi’s claims of innocence: once over a dinner as he drank from a £180 bottle of red wine and puffed on a Cuban cigar. On a three-day hunting trip in a remote forest close

to the Volga River, I watched the two men drink vodka and sing sentimental Communist-era songs around a fire with friends from their days in the Soviet army. And at one of Lugovoi’s birthday parties, I saw one guest present him with a 1937 heavy machinegun mounted on wheels; another gave him a walking stick encrusted with precious stones and gold — and a dagger concealed in its handle.

Lugovoi invited me backstage during the conference at which he launched his political career with the ultra-nationalist LDPR party. He also took me in his chauffeur-driven BMW to a compound outside Moscow to watch him fire a gun as bodyguards from his security company trained in the background. “I invite you on holiday to Crimea!” he texted me with glee and sarcasm after the Kremlin seized the peninsula, plunging Russia’s relations with the West to their lowest ebb since the Cold War. “I suggest you take up Russian citizenship before it’s too late. We’ll save you!”

He also invited me to interview him at length on a yacht in the Black Sea, where he has spent most of his summer holidays since Interpol took an interest in the case. After my persistent questioning, Lugovoi and Xenia happily posed with jet skis for the camera.

David Cameron confirmed that an international warrant for the arrest of Lugovoi and Kovtun was in place earlier this year, after a British public inquiry ruled there was “no doubt” that the pair were responsible, and that the operation was “probably” approved by Putin.

Why, I asked him recently, did he grant me such privileged access? What’s in it for him? “I know you think I did it, and you’ve been frank, but I also felt that, having lived in Russia for so long, you have a better understanding of how things work here. Over the years I’ve met with more than 100 foreign journalists. Too many times I’ve been shocked by ➤➤➤

The radioactive trail that led to Lugovoi’s door

OCTOBER 16, 2006
Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun meet Litvinenko at an office in Mayfair and allegedly spray polonium-210 into his teacup — but he fails to take a drink



OCTOBER 18
The pair fly back to Moscow, contaminating their seats on the plane with radiation



OCTOBER 25
Less than a week after Litvinenko makes a speech blaming Putin for the killing of a journalist, Lugovoi returns to London on a BA flight, leaving more traces of radiation. He flies back to Moscow three days later



OCTOBER 31
Lugovoi returns to London again, this time with family and friends to watch a football match. Kovtun joins him the next day, via Hamburg. Radioactive trails are later found at Emirates stadium and in Hamburg



NOVEMBER 1
Lugovoi and Kovtun meet Litvinenko at the Millennium Hotel, where they allegedly spray polonium-210 into a pot of green tea. This time, Litvinenko does drink. He returns home and falls ill



how little they get about us Russians. I also hoped you'd see that I'm a normal person, not a cold-blooded killer."

For me, in my hopeless and maddening quest to get to the bottom of Litvinenko's murder, this has always been the key unanswered question: what was the true extent of Lugovoi and Kovtun's involvement? To know that would unlock all the other riddles in one of the most high-profile and brazen murders in contemporary British history.

This much we can be sure of: for all their vehement denials, Lugovoi and Kovtun spiked Litvinenko's tea with polonium-210. The radioactive trail they left behind, on plane seats, in hotel rooms, offices and the London bar where Litvinenko was poisoned, is beyond damning. It is scientifically proven.

The other certainty is that only the Russian state could have procured such a rare and expensive isotope, which has to be created in a nuclear reactor. It would have been chosen because it is extremely difficult to identify — unless you are looking for it. That was the crucial mistake made by those who ordered Litvinenko's killing: assuming that British experts wouldn't spot it. The presence of polonium-210 can only be noticed if tests are conducted for alpha particle emissions. Once you find those, it is strikingly easy to trace.

The Russians nearly got away with it — British experts identified that polonium-210 was used only hours before Litvinenko's death. Any other poison could have been blamed on anyone and the murder might have remained unsolved. But polonium-210 points the finger only at Russia's security services. It is a good start, but a decade since the killing, the rest is mere speculation and deduction.

Who exactly in Moscow ordered the murder, and why? What had they hoped to achieve by killing Litvinenko? Who chose Lugovoi and Kovtun to carry out the murder? How and when? What exactly did the alleged killers know and what did they think they had signed up for? These are the key questions that have nagged me throughout my time of unique access to Lugovoi.

I do not believe Lugovoi is a cold-blooded killer. Not because he has shown me his human and engaging side, but because no ruthless assassin sent on a top-secret mission by Russia would act as Lugovoi did before and after the murder. Even British police believe Lugovoi and Kovtun did not know they were dealing with polonium. Had they known, they would not have handled it so recklessly: on one occasion Lugovoi sought to dispose of the deadly substance by pouring it down the sink of his London hotel room, leaving highly radioactive traces everywhere. Later, he even managed accidentally to contaminate his own children.

That their handlers in Moscow treated Lugovoi and Kovtun on a need-to-know basis is, in itself, unsurprising. But if Lugovoi knew his job was to kill Litvinenko, why did he not think he and Kovtun would be fingered as the prime suspects, given that

I asked Lugovoi if he has a clear conscience. "Yes," he said without hesitating. "I sleep fine"

they were the last people outside his family to meet Litvinenko before he fell violently ill? Why would he agree to carry out a murder in a way that would obviously blow his cover at once? Would he not, at the very least, ask to travel to London on a fake passport? And why did Lugovoi seem genuinely bewildered and almost rattled when he was first named as a suspect? One of the first things he did was to contact the British embassy in Moscow to say he was available for questioning. Then he went to the media and sought to contact Litvinenko's widow, Marina, shortly before her husband died. That reaction is more typical of someone who has been caught off guard and fears for his own safety than that of a cold-blooded hitman.

By contrast, it has been 12 years since two professional assassins sent by Russian military intelligence were arrested in Qatar after blowing up Zelimkhan Yanderbiyev, a Chechen rebel leader wanted by Moscow. There are still no publicly available photos of the two killers — despite their trial and conviction in a Qatar court. Now they are back in Russia and still nothing is known about them. That is how Russian state hitmen act. Unlike Lugovoi, they do not strive to become celebrities.

Lugovoi had access to Litvinenko — who was granted asylum in Britain and had become a paid MI6 source on Putin's Russia — as the two former KGB agents had sought to set up a security consultancy business together. Lugovoi has claimed that, in the process, British intelligence sought to recruit him too, which is far from improbable.

One theory is that Russia's security services pressurised or blackmailed Lugovoi into carrying out the killing, choosing him because he knew Litvinenko — who was very wary about whom he met, as he feared becoming a target.

But no highly experienced secret police force such as Russia's is likely to run the high risks involved in coercing someone into committing a murder like Litvinenko's. More probable is that Lugovoi's handlers did not tell him that the substance he slipped into Litvinenko's tea would kill him. What substance Lugovoi thought he was handling, and to what end, are the missing pieces of the puzzle. To know those two facts would reveal what the men who ordered Litvinenko's murder had planned when they assumed polonium-210 would not be discovered, and why Lugovoi became involved.

I recently asked Lugovoi if he has a clear conscience. "Yes," he said without hesitation. "I sleep fine." I believe him — not because I think he is innocent, but because I believe he either killed and is firmly convinced he did the right thing, or because he did without knowing it.

So does he have any regrets?

"If I could go back in time, all I'd change is I would not get involved with Litvinenko, that's all. When he first called me, out of the blue, to discuss business I should have known better and turned him down."

Many times I have asked Lugovoi to promise to come and whisper the truth in my ear on my deathbed. He has said he would. Of course he does not mean it. And the depressing reality is this: Litvinenko's family will never see justice and the full truth behind his murder will never come out. That is maybe the most damning indictment of post-Soviet Russia — its fiercely deep-rooted inability ever to be honest about its darker past. That will not change, not in our lifetime ■

NOVEMBER 3, 2006
Litvinenko is admitted to hospital in London



NOVEMBER 20
Scotland Yard's anti-terror unit begins investigating as Litvinenko suffers hair and weight loss



NOVEMBER 23
Litvinenko dies from radiation poisoning



DECEMBER 11
Lugovoi, who is reportedly being treated for radiation sickness, is interrogated by the Russian prosecutor general's office alongside British detectives — who later complain that no tape was made



MAY 22, 2007
Britain calls for the extradition of Lugovoi, to charge him with murder. In July, Russia officially refuses



DECEMBER 10
Britain's ambassador to Moscow denounces the election of Lugovoi to the Duma, Russia's parliament



JULY 31, 2014
A public inquiry into Litvinenko's death headed by Sir Robert Owen opens in Britain



MARCH 9, 2015
Putin awards Lugovoi a medal for "services to the fatherland"



JANUARY 21, 2016
The inquiry finds that Lugovoi and Kovtun poisoned Litvinenko in an operation that was "probably approved by ... President Putin"

