

close
next
prev
info-button

theguardian

Alexander Litvinenko inquiry: six things we've learned so far

The inquiry into the killing of the Russian spy, held at the high court, has heard some extraordinary testimony

Who killed Alexander Litvinenko? We look back at the case

Luke Harding

Friday 30 January 2015 08.20 EST

1 The men allegedly sent to kill Alexander Litvinenko were clueless assassins

There are two theories to explain why polonium was used to kill Litvinenko. The first says the Kremlin meant to send a demonstrative message. The message was for Boris Berezovsky, Litvinenko's friend and President Vladimir Putin's enemy.



Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun speaking during an interview on Ekho Moskvy radio in Moscow in 2006. Photograph: Reuters

It said: wherever you are, we can get you. The polonium was a sort of lethal calling card (Polonium-210 is rare, expensive, and practically impossible to obtain - unless, of course, you own a nuclear reactor).

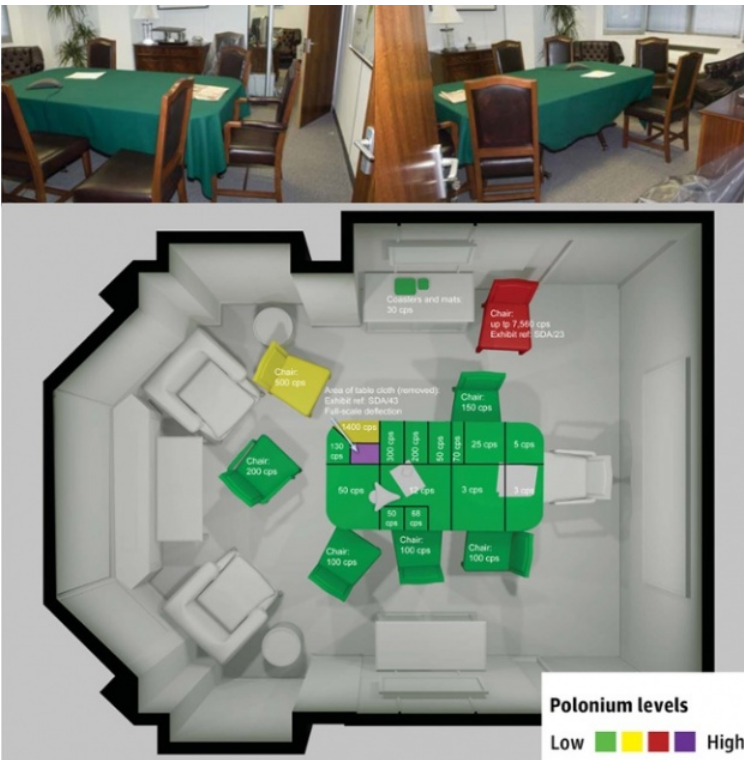
The second theory says that the polonium wasn't meant to be discovered. Litvinenko would die in agony, but nobody would know why. The evidence laid out by this week's public

inquiry suggests the second theory is more plausible: whoever allegedly dispatched Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun to London assumed they'd never be caught. The two Russians knew their mission was to kill Litvinenko, according to this narrative, but seemingly had no idea what sort of poison they were carrying, or the fact it was highly radioactive.

This week the counsel to the inquiry, Robin Tam QC, painted a picture of two bungling assassins, who tried to murder Litvinenko not once but twice. Lugovoi and Kovtun first tried to poison Litvinenko on 16 October 2006, during a meeting at the private security company Erinys in Grosvenor Square, central London, he claimed. It's not entirely clear what happened. But it looks as if a jug or glass containing polonium spilled all over the table. Nuclear experts later found huge amounts of contamination on a small area of the green baize tablecloth.

On that occasion Litvinenko was exposed to a tiny dose; he threw up that evening but survived.

The assassins allegedly tried again on 1 November. The three men met in the Pine bar of the Millennium hotel. Lugovoi had put the polonium in a teapot, the inquiry heard. Litvinenko sipped some of the tea "three or four times". The tea was cold - he told police he didn't like it. The dose he ingested was "far in excess of known survivability limits". Later that evening, Litvinenko was vomiting again, the radiation was spreading through his body. He was dying.



Metropolitan Police's 3D graphic showing polonium contamination on the green baize tablecloth in Grosvenor Square

2 The most extraordinary piece of new evidence involves a German waiter

Lugovoi and Kovtun have consistently denied they had anything to do with Litvinenko's death.

But on Tuesday, Tam claimed a sensational piece of new evidence. Between 1996 and 2001 Kovtun lived in Germany, and worked as a waiter in an Italian restaurant in Hamburg. There, in the city's picturesque harbour overlooking the Elbe, Kovtun got friendly with another waiter - identified only as D2. He would see D2 whenever he went back to Germany.

On 28 October 2006, Kovtun flew to Hamburg from Moscow. This time he took polonium with him, Tam claimed. Kovtun stayed with his German ex-wife, and on the evening of 30 October met D2 in a restaurant. During a walk afterwards in a Hamburg amusement arcade, Kovtun confessed he was travelling to London to kill someone, the inquiry heard.



Two police officers carry a cardboard box, secured with tape marked radioactive from an apartment building in Hamburg-Ottensen. Photograph: Bodo Marks/Reuters

Tam said Kovtun described Litvinenko as “a traitor with blood on his hands who did deals with Chechnya”. Kovtun then asked D2 an extraordinary question: did he know a cook in London? Kovtun said he had “a very expensive poison and that he needed the cook to put the poison in Mr Litvinenko’s food and drink”. D2 thought his friend was “talking rubbish”. But he did know a cook who had worked with both of them at Il Porto, their Hamburg restaurant. He indirectly passed Kovtun the cook’s number, the court heard.

Early on 1 November, Kovtun flew from Hamburg to Gatwick; at 11.30am he used Lugovoi’s mobile to call the cook. The cook (identified only as C2) said he was busy and would ring back, said Tam. Four hours later, Lugovoi and Kovtun are said to have come up with another hastily improvised plan, allegedly slipping polonium into Litvinenko’s pot of tea. Litvinenko, meanwhile formed a dim view of Kovtun, whom he hardly knew. He described him as a “very unpleasant type”, telling police: “I think he’s either an alcoholic or a drug addict.” He quoted Kovtun as saying that his ex-wife came from a wealthy German family, with Kovtun adding: “I am interested in money and money alone in this life. Nothing else.”

3 The Metropolitan police have done an impressive job



An officer blocks traffic as a police van takes up a position outside the Millennium hotel in Grosvenor Square in London.
Photograph: Odd Andersen/AFP/Getty Images

The Met has been the focus of much public criticism but its investigation into Litvinenko's murder was painstaking and exemplary. Around 100 detectives were involved, together with 100 uniformed officers.

To begin with they had little to go on - a dying Russian who spoke poor English; a baffling plot involving visitors from Moscow; and a swirl of disparate crime scenes. Two detectives, Brent Hyatt and Chris Hoar, from the Met's specialist crime unit, interviewed Litvinenko in his intensive care bed.

The transcript of their conversations (pdf), revealed this week, shows the pair gradually piecing together the clues. Litvinenko went under the name of Edwin Redwald Carter. The officers addressed him rather quaintly as Edwin.

They asked whether he had received death threats. And whom did he meet before falling ill. Litvinenko told them, yes, that within months of escaping to Britain in 2000 the ominous threats began.

In May 2001, he got a call from a former colleague, Major Andrei Porkin. Porkin was a subordinate of Litvinenko's in Russia's FSB spy agency. He allegedly told Litvinenko bluntly that if he failed to return to Russia "you will either be brought back in a body bag, or pushed in front of a train".

In London, spies based at the Russian embassy followed him; in 2003 one of them, Victor Kirov, tried to barge into Litvinenko's home in Muswell Hill, north London (Kirov later warned him to stop criticising Putin). Litvinenko gives a vivid account of his meetings with Lugovoi and Kovtun. He describes drinking tea in the Millennium hotel bar. The teapot was already on the table; Lugovoi asked the waiter to bring Litvinenko a clean cup; Lugovoi didn't drink anything himself.

Litvinenko had a sharp eye for detail: Lugovoi was wearing a flashy Swiss gold watch, worth \$50,000 (£33,000), and cardigan bought in Harrods. The police interviews took place on 19 and 20 November 2006, at UCL hospital; by 23 November, Litivenko was dead. They are a kind of unique witness statement taken from a ghost - a ghost who explicitly blames Putin for his murder.

4 The Met has a crack 3D modelling team

The murder of Litvinenko was an unprecedented event. It was the first ever case of poisoning in the UK involving alpha radiation, rarer than gamma radiation, and much harder to detect. In the weeks that followed, the inquiry heard, the police found a trail of polonium left by Lugovoi and Kovtun across London.

Detectives visited the pair's hotel rooms, the Pine bar, the Erinys boardroom. They tracked down a Mercedes car used by Lugovoi. Everywhere they found polonium. This aspect of the police investigation was called Operation Avocet. Nuclear forensic experts took a series of alpha radiation readings. Next the Met's computer-aided modelling bureau produced striking 3D images and models of the key crime scenes. These graphics were colour-coded green, yellow, red and purple; purple represented the highest level of contamination, showing levels of 10,000 radiation counts per second and above. Litvinenko's teapot, for example, has a lurid purple spout and a large purple section in the middle.

The room where Lugovoi stayed in the Sheraton hotel, room 848, yielded some extraordinary readings (Lugovoi checked in there during his second of three trips to London, between 25-28 October, 2006). High levels of alpha radiation were discovered on the wall, floor and toilet seat of the room's bathroom; and on the telephone book. But the readings from the bin in the bathroom were off the scale; the bin is purple.

OM/11
RESTRICTED

DOCUMENT RECORD PRINT

RECORD OF INTERVIEW

Number: Y11

Enter type:
(SDN / ROTI / Contemporaneous Notes / Index of Interview with VIW /
Visually recorded interview)

Person interviewed: CARTER, EDWIN REDWALD

Place of interview: University College Hospital, Critical Care Unit

Date of interview: 19/11/2006

Time commenced: 1704 Time concluded: 1750

Duration of interview: 46 minutes Tape reference nos. (->) CII/10

Interviewer(s): DI HYATT, DS HOAR

Other persons present: Ms TUPPER (Interpreter)

Police Exhibit No: CII/10A Number of Pages: 10

Signature of interviewer producing exhibit

Tape counter times(-)	Person speaking	Text
0.09	DI HYATT	I'm Detective Inspector Brent HYATT from the Specialist Crime Directorate of the Metropolitan Police Service. This is a continuation of the interview of Mr Edwin CARTER at the University College Hospital, London. He's being interviewed as a significant witness. The date is the 19 th of December 2006.
	DS HOAR	November.
	DI HYATT	Sorry my apologies, November, the 19 th of November

RESTRICTED

The inquiry transcript. [Click here to read](#)

It looks as if Lugovoi may have thrown one large dose of polonium in the bin. Why? We don't know. The Met also pieced together thousands of records of calls made by all of the main players in the case between June and November 2006. These call logs confirm Litvinenko's contacts with Lugovoi, who on one occasion together with his wife visited Litvinenko's London home.

5 British spies use Waterstones book store as a meeting place

Not much is known about Litvinenko's secret role working for British intelligence. Litvinenko wasn't a double agent: he had no contact with MI6 while he was in Russia. The British special intelligence service recruited him as an informant in 2003, two years after he fled to London.

MI6 put Litvinenko on its payroll, gave him an encrypted phone and assigned him a minder, "Martin". In return, Litvinenko passed on useful information about senior Kremlin figures and their links with Russian organised crime. He knew about Russian mafia activities in Spain, his specialism as an FSB officer. MI6 introduced him to the Spanish intelligence service and in 2006 he travelled to Madrid.

Owen has said that he won't examine whether MI6 could have done more to protect their source. Nor will the government make public its own secret files on the case, including MI6's assessment of whether Litvinenko may have been at risk. Owen can review this secret evidence and use it in his findings.

Buried in this week's transcripts, however, are a couple of tantalising details. The day before he was poisoned - 31 October - Litvinenko met Martin. The venue was the basement cafe of Waterstones book shop in Piccadilly Circus, the time 4pm. The two arranged the rendezvous by phone. Martin ordered coffee, while Litvinenko drank hot chocolate. The Russian also ate three small French pastries. We don't know what they talked about. Litvinenko last spoke to his handler on 19 November, in the presence of police, while critically ill in his hospital bed. Their conversation hasn't been released. Did Martin realise the danger Litvinenko was in? Should he have done? The government won't tell us.



Ben Emmerson QC Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

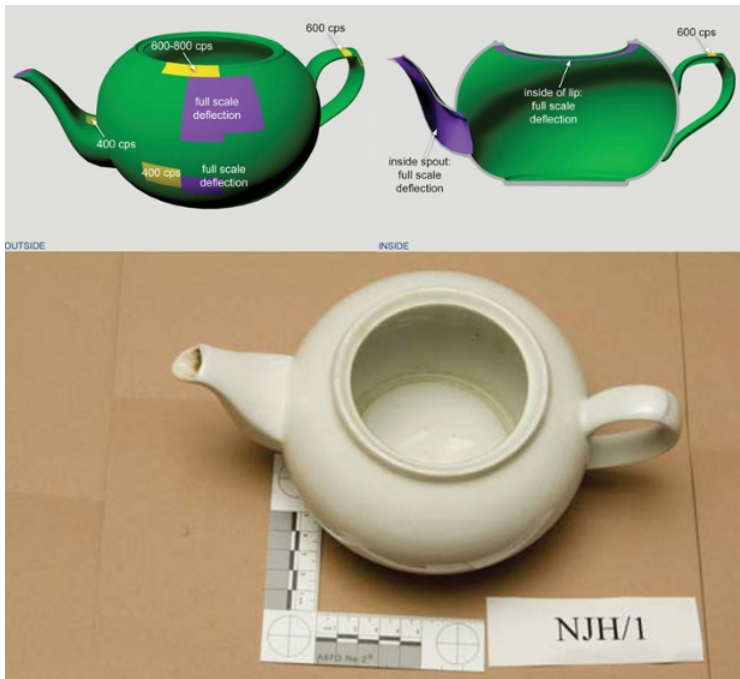
6 Ben Emmerson QC has annoyed Vladimir Putin

Ben Emmerson, the lawyer acting for Litvinenko's widow, Marina (pictured left), is a wordsmith. In his opening remarks to the public inquiry, he described Putin as a "common criminal dressed up as a head of state". He suggested Litvinenko may have been murdered for exposing links between Putin and Russia's biggest organised crime syndicate, which is active in Spain. Emmerson further alleged that under Putin Russia had become "a mafia state".

Back in Moscow, Lugovoi has dismissed the inquiry as a "judicial farce". Kremlin officials haven't reacted formally yet but when they do, are likely to paint the court hearings as western propaganda. In public, officials are insouciant. In private, Emmerson's remarks appear to have touched a nerve. On Wednesday, the day after Emmerson's speech, Moscow sent a pair of Tupolev-95 "bear" bombers over the Channel. RAF Typhoon jets were scrambled to intercept them as they flew along the south coast. The Russian bombers had their transponders turned off, a provocative move that poses a danger to civilian flights. On Thursday the Foreign Office summoned Russia's ambassador, Alexander Yakovenko, to complain.

The public inquiry will last 10 weeks. There may be further drama to come.

*Luke Harding is the author of **Mafia State: How One Reporter Became an Enemy of the Brutal New Russia**, published by Guardian Faber*



Metropolitan Police's 3D graphic showing polonium contamination in the teapot. From green (low) to purple (high)

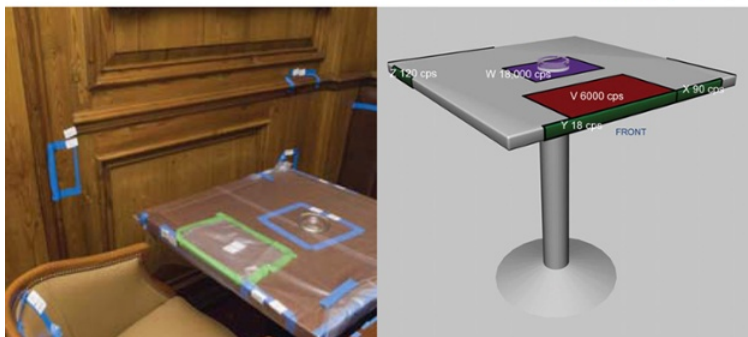
Putin ordered Alexander Litvinenko murder, inquiry into death told

Opening day hears Russian president called a 'common criminal' as lawyers lay out case surrounding former spy's death

Read more



Polonium levels Low High



Metropolitan Police's 3D graphic showing polonium contamination of the table and chair