

## The Solzhenitsyn Affair: Yuri Andropov's Personal Obsession

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### Introduction

When the general public thinks of Soviet assassination and kidnapping, they typically conjure up images from fictional espionage—especially of James Bond, AKA Agent 007. Yet, the real-world history of the Soviet Union in general and of the *Komitet Gozudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti* (KGB, the Committee for State Security and so-called “Sword and Shield” of the Communist Party of the CCCP) in particular, as well as of the KGB’s predecessor organizations, is replete with real-life examples of murder, kidnapping, and other forms of mayhem. Assassinations were specifically handled by KGB’s Department 13, tasked with the grimly euphemistic *mokryie dela*—translated as either “liquid affairs” or “wet work.”<sup>1</sup>

The earliest example that comes to mind is the murder of Leon Trotsky. Fallen far from grace from his heyday as a key participant in the Bolshevik Revolution, the exiled Trotsky was stabbed in the head with an ice pick in 1940 in Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Fast-forward to the Cold War, and the list of Soviet assassination victims runs the gamut from Ukrainian emigré leader Stepan Bandera, to Liv Rebet in the 1950s, to Bulgarian defector Giorgi Markov in 1978 (the latter was killed in the streets of London with an umbrella that discharged a poison pellet into his leg). The KGB was even responsible for kidnappings in such far-flung places as Calcutta and Rangoon.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Soviet Use of Assassination and Kidnapping,” Unclassified document, CIA Historical Review Program, September 22, 1993, [https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol19no3/html/v19i3a01p\\_0001.htm](https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol19no3/html/v19i3a01p_0001.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Enrique Soto-Pérez-de-Celis, “The Death of Leon Trotsky,” *Neurosurgery* 67, no. 2 (2010): 417–23.

<sup>3</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Soviet Use of Assassination and Kidnapping”; Tom Kelly, “Did This Man Kill Cold War Spy Georgi Markov with Umbrella?” *Daily Mail*, March 22, 2013, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2297854/Did-man-kill-Cold-War-spy-Georgi-Markov-umbrella-35-years-prime-suspect-revealed-ex-Communist-agent-working-antiques-dealer-Austria.html>.

However, the agency had its fair share of failed assassination attempts as well, the most notable example being that of the Soviet dissident and literary icon, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

All of these aforementioned examples show that the KGB was willing and able to engage in harassment and discrediting campaigns against perceived “enemies of the state” anywhere in the world. Tactics employed started with beatings and imprisonment, which escalated to murder on occasion. The case of Mr. Solzhenitsyn serves as a high-profile, well-documented example of a victim of the full range of KGB intimidation tactics, including a bungled assassination attempt.

The KGB’s harassment campaign that climaxed with the assassination attempt on famous Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn—the 1970 Nobel Prize laureate who laid bare the horrors of the Soviet gulags via legendary works such as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) and *Gulag Archipelago* (1973)—is firmly established beyond the realm of mere conjecture, circumstantial evidence, or intuition, as explicitly acknowledged by former KGB Major General Oleg Kalugin in his autobiography.<sup>4</sup> Unlike later high profile-targets such as Pope John Paul II, and former Russian intelligence operatives Alexander Litvinenko and Sergei Skripal, whose victimizations were never officially and legally proven to have been perpetrated by the Soviet or post-Soviet Russian security apparatuses, Moscow’s involvement in the Solzhenitsyn affair is undeniable.

What keeps the Soviet assassination tactics as revealed in the Solzhenitsyn case disturbingly relevant and significant in the present day and age is the fact that, even decades after the official collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, these mindsets and tactics persist. They are adopted by the KGB’s successor agencies within the security services of the Russian Federation, at the behest of the current Russian president. Putin was, after all, a former KGB lieutenant

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<sup>4</sup> Oleg Kalugin, *Spymaster: My Thirty-Two Years in Intelligence and Espionage against the West* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 205.

colonel, and remains a *nomenklatura* elite at heart, whose highest-profile alleged victim of the twenty-first century was the aforementioned Mr. Litvinenko, fatally poisoned with radioactive Polonium (using green tea as the vector) in London in November 2006.<sup>5</sup> This becomes an even greater concern in light of America's renewed Great Power near-peer rivalry with a revanchist Russia, engaged in a nonkinetic conflict that has become, for all practical purposes, a Second Cold War.

The research materials used herein have been carefully considered, bearing in mind potential inherent biases of the content. Especial wariness has been employed when taking into account possible ideologically rooted biases like overtly pro-leftist and pro-rightist worldviews, as well as more individualistic biases such as shameless self-promotion and self-aggrandizement by KGB defectors in an attempt to curry favor with Western society.

Specifically, in the immortal words of Mark Twain, “the person that had took a bull by the tail once had learnt sixty or seventy times as much as a person that hadn't;” as such, this article relies heavily on the works of former high-ranking Soviet intelligence officers-turned-defectors. Among such defector authors are the aforementioned Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin (former press officer at the Soviet Embassy in Washington), Major Vasili Mitrokhin (extracted in 1992 by the British Secret Intelligence Service, or SIS, better known as MI6), and Colonel Oleg Gordievsky (the highest-ranking KGB officer ever to work on behalf of Britain), all of whose writing will prove highly useful due to first-hand knowledge of the Solzhenitsyn affair in particular, and KGB “wet work” in general. The elements examined in their works include: 1) the initial imprisonment of Solzhenitsyn; 2) early harassment efforts against Solzhenitsyn as well as the motivations behind them that ultimately escalated to the assassination attempt; 3) the plot

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<sup>5</sup> Reema Shah, “A Poisonous Ally: Growing Russo-British Tensions,” *Harvard International Review* 30 (2008): 1, 11–12.

itself and the execution of the actual mission; 4) the aftermath of exile and continuing harassment and discrediting campaign against Solzhenitsyn; and 5) the resolution in Solzhenitsyn's enduring legacy.

### **The Case at Hand**

Mr. Solzhenitsyn's reputation as a hero of the anticommunist movement remains largely intact;<sup>6</sup> as *National Review* founder and longtime Editor-in-Chief William F. Buckley Jr. put it, “*The Gulag Archipelago* told us everything we needed to know about the pathology of Soviet Communism.”<sup>7</sup> Solzhenitsyn came onto the world stage at the height of the Cold War, when both superpowers were posturing for global hegemony. His works, which exposed the massive human rights violations that the communist system depended upon to operate, deprived the Soviet propaganda machine of the moral high ground and helped plant the seeds for the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union.

Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn was born on December 11, 1918, in the resort city of Kislovodsk in the North Caucasus region of southern Russia, and his infancy and toddlerhood coincided with the heyday of the Russian Civil War. In his mid-twenties, Solzhenitsyn served as an artillery officer in the Red Army during the East Prussia campaign of the Second World War,<sup>8</sup> earning the Order of the Red Star for battlefield heroism in July 1944. However, a mere seven months after his decoration, Captain Solzhenitsyn was arrested and incarcerated “for a chance indiscretion” (as Hitchens terms it), after making derogatory comments about Josef Stalin in private letters to a friend.<sup>9</sup> During his resultant eight-year sentence in a labor camp, he became

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Horvath, “‘The Solzhenitsyn Effect’: East European Dissidents and the Demise of the Revolutionary Privilege,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2007): 879–81.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Gid Powers, *Not without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 409.

<sup>8</sup> Or as the Russians term it, the Great Patriotic War (*Velikaya Otechestvennaya voyna*).

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Hitchens, “The Man Who Could Not Be Broken, Dissident Alexander

disillusioned with the supposed superiority of Soviet state ideology and experienced the ordeal that would eventually serve as the basis for *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (hereafter referred to as simply *Ivan Denisovich*). Solzhenitsyn was coincidentally released from prison on the same day that Stalin died.<sup>10</sup> Thanks to the brief thaw of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization and modest liberalization era, Solzhenitsyn was exonerated and was initially able to publish *Ivan Denisovich* without legal repercussion;<sup>11</sup> indeed, *Ivan Denosvich* was assigned as a school textbook and Khrushchev himself praised the book, stating that "there's a Stalinist in each of you; there's even a Stalinist in me. We must root out this evil."<sup>12</sup>

However, this grace period ended once Leonid Brezhnev replaced Khrushchev, and Vladimir Semichastny—Alexander Shelepin's successor as KGB chairman—initiated a regressive onslaught on Soviet dissidents. Among the earliest intellectual targets of Semischatny's persecution efforts was Boris Pasternak of *Doctor Zhivago* fame.<sup>13</sup> While Solzhenitsyn's celebrity status, left over from *Ivan Denisovich*, initially saved him from re-arrest, he was nonetheless subjected to a renewed round of scrutiny by the KGB, who codenamed the dissident *Pauk* ("Spider"). Upon seizure of manuscripts that he left for safekeeping at a friend's home, it was reported to the Central Committee in 1965 that "the manuscripts provided proof that 'Solzhenitsyn indulges in politically damaging statements and disseminates slanderous fabrications.'"<sup>14</sup>

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Solzhenitsyn Survived the Stalinist Gulags and the KGB. His Writings Were Confiscated and Burned. But He Persisted," *Edmonton Journal*, August 6, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Hitchens.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Chris Berg, "Alexander Solzhenitsyn's Challenging Legacy," *Institute of Public Affairs* 60 (2008): 4.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *Inside the KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 479.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 311.

Solzhenitsyn's precarious situation went from bad to worse upon Yuri Andropov's assumption of the KGB Chairmanship: "By the time the Central Committee considered the matter in March 1967, Solzhenitsyn had sent his latest novel, *Cancer Ward*, to the West and had almost finished *The Gulag Archipelago*, his epic study of the labor camps. Within the Central Committee, the initiative in calling for 'decisive measures' to deal with Solzhenitsyn's 'anti-Soviet activities' came from Andropov, who succeeded Semichastny as KGB chairman in the summer of 1967."<sup>15</sup> Andropov ratcheted up his predecessor's persecution of Soviet dissidents to an even higher level of intensity, going so far as to create a new KGB Fifth Directorate—in the wake of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968—for the express intention of cracking down all forms of dissent. The Prague Spring was a major source of concern for the KGB due to the moral support it received not only from Solzhenitsyn but from other famous Soviet intellectual dissidents like Andrei Sakharov.<sup>16</sup> The new chairman's "personal obsession" with Solzhenitsyn was intensified to borderline apoplexy upon the announcement in October 1970 that the subversive celebrity author had won the Nobel Prize for Literature.<sup>17</sup> In reaction to this news, Chairman Andropov submitted a memorandum (endorsed by Roman Rudenko, then-Procurator General of the Soviet Union) to the Politburo containing a draft decree to strip Solzhenitsyn of his citizenship and expel him from the USSR.

However, Andropov initially failed to convince a majority of the Politburo to buy into his agenda, even clashing with Brezhnev about the proper approach to contending with the Solzhenitsyn question: "Brezhnev showed more sympathy for the contrary views of his crony, Nikolai Shchelovok, the Interior Minister, who argued in the autumn of 1971 that Solzhenitsyn

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, 311.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew and Gordievsky, *Inside the KGB*, 488.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 310–11.

needed to be won over, not persecuted: ‘One of the higher-ups needs to sit down and talk with him, to remove the bitter taste that persecution has, no doubt, left in his mouth.’<sup>18</sup> This in turn signed Mr. Shchelovok’s death warrant, as he was framed for corruption by Andropov, but committed suicide before going to trial.

It becomes evident then, given that the assassination attempt on Solzhenitsyn took place in the summer of 1971, *before* the Brezhnev-Shchelovok agreement discussed in the preceding paragraph, that this was a rogue operation on the part of Andropov and the KGB, as Brezhnev himself did not approve it (and none of the readings cited for this project indicate that the general secretary had any foreknowledge of the mission). The exact reasons why Andropov was willing and able to risk going against the publicly stated wishes of Brezhnev to take a softer approach to Solzhenitsyn are unclear from the readings. One can only speculate that Andropov’s obsession with the literary icon so utterly colored the chairman’s judgement that he deemed the rewards of getting rid of the perceived public nuisance worth the calculated risk of inciting the wrath of the general secretary. Andrew and Mitrokhin do not discuss the assassination mission, but Maj. Gen. Kalugin’s first-person account fills in the gap, making reference to the KGB’s Operational and Technical Directorate, which had a laboratory that concocted innovative ways of killing people, “from poisons that could be slipped into drinks to gels that could be rubbed on a person to induce a heart attack. A KGB agent rubbed just such a substance on Alexander Solzhenitsyn in a store in Russia in the early 1970s, making him violently ill but not killing him.”<sup>19</sup>

Kalugin does not elaborate any further, but Sloane and Steele provide additional details, drawing from the narrative of retired KGB Lt. Col. Boris Ivanov, who in turn told his story to

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, 312.

<sup>19</sup> Kalugin, *Spymaster*, 205.

Dmitri Likhanov, a journalist with the Russian *Sovershenno Sekretno* [Top Secret] newspaper.<sup>20</sup>

Ivanov recounted that he was a member of a three-man KGB hit team that tailed Solzhenitsyn from Novochoerkassk to a department store in the town of Rostov-on-the-Don on the afternoon of August, 8, 1971, wherein the hit team approached the writer as he queued up at the candy counter of a delicatessen. In Lt. Col. Ivanov's own words, "I remember distinctly the movement of his hands and a particular object he was holding. The whole operation lasted two or three minutes. The man left our shop, our boss started to smile. Outside he said quietly but firmly: 'It's all over. He won't live much longer'."<sup>21</sup>

Solzhenitsyn himself, for his part, recalled that he fell seriously ill with unexplained blisters during this trip, and that while he remembered no injection, "half way through the day...the skin on my left side started to hurt a lot...The next morning I was reduced to a terrible state. My left hip, left side, stomach, and back were covered with blisters up to 15 centimeters in diameter."<sup>22</sup> The writer's doctor was unable to diagnose his ailment at the time, but twenty-first-century toxicologists who have examined the physician's clinical notes state that the symptoms indicate a strong likelihood of ricin poisoning, which causes red blood corpuscles to stick together. Likhanov affirmed that the operation was indeed approved by Andropov.<sup>23</sup> In Steele's view, geopolitics had everything to do with why Brezhnev was reluctant to simply imprison the dissident: Solzhenitsyn was too high-profile a figure abroad, and Moscow was eagerly hoping for detente with the West, especially after the U.S. had announced the month prior that then-President Richard Nixon was planning his historic visit to Red China (the so-called playing of

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<sup>20</sup> Wendy Sloane, "Report Says Solzhenitsyn Target of 1971 KGB Poisoning Attempt," *AP News*, 1992, <https://apnews.com/8a513d7f1f54bfe06759caa8df9f12b7>.; Jonathan Steele, "KGB Tried to Assassinate Solzhenitsyn, Ex-Agent Says," *Edmonton Journal*, April 21, 1992.

<sup>21</sup> Steele.

<sup>22</sup> Steele.

<sup>23</sup> Sloane, "Report Says Solzhenitsyn Target."



the “China Card,” as termed by former Nixon staffer John Erlichmann), as a result of which Moscow feared pending isolation.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, had the assassination attempt succeeded, it presumably could have been covered under the veneer of plausible deniability—a convenient cover story of an unfortunate accident or illness.

### **Aftermath**

Though Andropov’s assassination mission had failed, his harassment campaign against Solzhenitsyn continued unabated. Mitrokhin and Andrew recount an incident in August 1971 (the authors do not provide an exact calendar day, meaning it is unclear whether this was before or after the assassination attempt) wherein a friend of the writer had called unexpectedly at his dacha while the celebrity dissident was away and had come across a bevy of KGB officers in the attic who were probably searching for subversive documents. These agency men administered a severe beating to Solzhenitsyn’s unfortunate friend, and Andropov sarcastically ordered Solzhenitsyn to be “informed that the participation of the KGB in this incident is a figment of his imagination.”<sup>25</sup>

In September 1973 subsequent to a highly influential letter of appeal written by Andrei Sakharov that was printed in the *Washington Post*, the U.S. Congress passed the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which opposed most-favored nation (MFN) trade status for the Soviet Union until it ended restrictions on emigration. The passing of this bill inadvertently granted Andropov at least a short-term political victory, as Brezhnev was now firmly in the KGB Chairman’s anti-Sakharov, anti-Solzhenitsyn camp, angrily declaring that “we should have stopped them right away.”<sup>26</sup> By then, Andropov had full voting member status in the Politburo, and on February 10,

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<sup>24</sup> Steele.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, 317.

1974, two and half years after failing to kill Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Andropov received a consolation prize (figuratively speaking), in the form of Solzhenitsy's expulsion from the Soviet Union, first to Frankfurt and then to Zurich.<sup>27</sup>

However, having sent his arch-nemesis into exile, Chairman Andropov was not content to leave well enough alone. He continued to harass the dissident during the latter's exile via a smear campaign, which within a few years would be unwittingly aided both by left-leaning members of American academia and the mainstream media (which shall be elaborated upon below), as well as Solzhenitsyn's own missteps, including anti-Semitic pronouncements. During Solzhenitsyn's time in Switzerland, the KGB employed the services of their Czechoslovak Warsaw Pact era counterparts, the *Státní bezpečnost* (StB; "State Security"), whose operatives had infiltrated the Czech émigré community and were thus able to penetrate Solzhenitsyn's entourage by posing as survivors of the Prague Spring. Thus, StB agents like Valentina Holubová and František Holub found their way into Solzhenitsyn's Zurich inner circle and enabled the KGB to keep tabs on the exile's contacts with supporters inside the USSR as well as his activities in the West.

Yet even this was insufficient for Andropov, who intensified the pursuit of his anti-Solzhenitsyn agenda even further on September 19, 1974, by approving Plan No. 5/9-16091, a large-scale "multifaceted plan" to discredit and destabilize Solzhenitsyn and his family and sever his links with dissidents in the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup> In 1975 alone, twenty different hostile operations were carried out, and by 1976, Solzhenitsyn's position in Zurich became untenable. He fled to the United States, resettling in Vermont within a fifty-acre estate behind an eight-foot-high chain-linked fence, where he largely became a recluse.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, 318.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, 318–19.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, 320.

However, in June 1978 Mr. Solzhenitsyn briefly emerged from his shell of isolation to deliver his most famous speech, the Harvard Commencement Address, titled “A World Split Apart.”<sup>30</sup> If *The Gulag Archipelago* was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s literary *magnum opus*, then the Harvard Address was his oratorical one. The dissident held nothing back in his address, and his American audience members were quite taken aback by his sheer verbal ferocity and vehemence: “The Western World has lost its civic courage...Such a decline in courage is particularly noticeable among the ruling and intellectual elites, causing an impression of loss of courage by the entire society.” He thundered that “the Communist regime in the East could endure and grow due to the enthusiastic support from an enormous number of Western intellectuals who (feeling the kinship!) refused to see communism’s crimes, and when they could no longer do so, they tried to justify these crimes.”<sup>31</sup>

Solzhenitsyn’s speech was the victim of unfortunate timing, taking place a year after then-President Jimmy Carter delivered an address at the University of Notre Dame, wherein he proclaimed that America had freed itself of its “inordinate fear of communism.”<sup>32</sup> In an ironic twist of fate, just as fear of undermining detente and potential improvement of Soviet-US relations had restrained Brezhnev from reimprisoning Solzhenitsyn in the early 1970s, left-leaning American journalists expressed fears that the dissident’s words would destroy relations with the Soviets. The *New York Times* in particular denounced the Harvard speech as “the wanderings of a mind split apart” and added that “we fear that Mr. Solzhenitsyn does the world no favor by calling up a holy war”; the *Washington Post* piggybacked the *Times* op-ed by

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<sup>30</sup> Powers, *Not without Honor*, 361.

<sup>31</sup> Powers, 361–63.

<sup>32</sup> Powers, 354.

editorializing that the dissident was trying to revive the “boundless cold war” that had supposedly (as per the Carter speech) been finally consigned to the past.<sup>33</sup>

These American detractors of Solzhenitsyn and apologists for the Soviet Union, whether inadvertently or subconsciously intentionally, played right into the hands of Andropov’s agenda. In the summer of 1978, key members of the KGB’s First Chief Directorate (FCD) and Fifth Directorate attended a video screening of the Harvard Address. It was with considerable glee that the KGB officers present noted the hostile reception inflicted upon the speech by the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, believing that Solzhenitsyn alienated his American listeners with his bellicose language, and agreed that no active measures were necessary to counter the Harvard Address, as the writer-tuned-orator had sufficiently discredited himself.<sup>34</sup> This may at least partially explain why Andropov made no further attempts on Solzhenitsyn’s life. Although, given the chairman’s consuming animosity toward the Nobel laureate, one still has to wonder why Andropov did not direct the KGB to take one final parting shot (both literally and figuratively) at his old nemesis, especially considering that in September of that same year, the agency did murder Georgi Markov in London.<sup>35</sup>

Ultimately, Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn got the proverbial last laugh on his tormentors and detractors, as he outlived both Andropov (who died in 1984) and the Soviet Union itself (which collapsed in 1991). He was awarded the State Prize of the Russian Federation in 2007, and upon his death on August 3, 2008, his funeral took place at the Academy of Science in Moscow, “with all the hallmarks of an official lying in state,” as Muscovites lined

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<sup>33</sup> Powers, 363–64.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, 321.

<sup>35</sup> Kelly, “Did This Man Kill Cold War Spy?”

up in droves to render him homage. This provided a dramatic reaffirmation of the last three words of Christopher Hitchens' eulogy title, "But He Persisted."<sup>36</sup>

The works cited herein leave the reader with a nagging question: why did the KGB not carry out a second assassination attempt on Mr. Solzhenitsyn; given the agency's aforementioned sheer ruthlessness and willingness to kill its opponents within the borders of nations thousands of miles from Soviet borders (including Great Britain, the U.S.'s strongest military ally, and Mexico, America's proverbial next-door neighbor on the southern border)? One wonders if Mr. Andropov did not consider Mr. Solzhenitsyn to be fair game for "wet work" during the dissident's exile in either Switzerland or the U.S. It is only speculation that perhaps the USSR had a some sort of "gentlemen's agreement" with these two nations—to avoid violating the long-standing neutrality policy of the former and not create a *causus belli* within the latter (i.e., turning the Cold War into a literal, hot one).

In addition, there exists a lingering question as to why the dissident received such a hostile reception within the U.S, especially in reaction to his Harvard address. Was this more self-inflicted due to abrasive personality quirks and speaking style, or due to latent pro-Soviet sympathies amongst leftist U.S. academicians and journalists carrying over from the Stalin days?

## **Conclusions**

Fast-forwarding to present-day concerns about revanchist Russia of the Vladimir Putin era and the unofficial Second Cold War that it has spawned, it is useful to compare the failed attempt on Solzhenitsyn's life with a far more recent bungled assassination attempt—allegedly and highly likely committed by Moscow's security apparatus (though of course officially couched in a cushion of "plausible deniability")—on Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in

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<sup>36</sup> Hitchens.

March 2018. The would-be assassins, Col. Anatoliy Chepiga (alias Ruslan Boshirov) and Alexander Mishkin (alias Alexander Petrov), both career GRU officers and recipients of the Hero of the Russian Federation medal (post-Soviet Russia's highest state award), employed *novichok*, a lethal nerve agent developed in state labs late in the Soviet era, delivered via a fake Nina Ricci perfume bottle to the door handle of Mr. Skripal's living quarters.<sup>37</sup> Fortunately for Skripal and his daughter, they both survived the ordeal, but an innocent bystander, Ms. Dawn Sturgess, did not. Sturgess's partner, Mr. Charlie Rowley, fell ill but managed to pull through. Although Chepiga and Mishkin made good on the escape back to Moscow, the Kremlin did not go completely unscathed politically, as then-UK Prime Minister Theresa May punitively expelled twenty-three Russian diplomats who were suspected of spying.<sup>38</sup>

The lesson learned here is that Putin's Russia, as omnipotent as it appears to be at first glance (the Litvinenko murder in 2006 [yet another incident mostly likely ordered by Putin but conveniently couched in plausible deniability], the annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea from the Ukraine in 2014, and so forth), is not actually infallible, and just as the Soviet secret police could and did fail vis-à-vis Solzhenitsyn, the present day Russian secret police can and do fail as well. This is something that anti-Putin dissidents can and should take to heart.

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<sup>37</sup> Luke Harding, "The Skripal Poisonings: The Bungled Assassinations with the Kremlin's Fingerprints All over It," *Guardian*, December 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/26/skripal-poisonings-bungled-assassination-kremlin-putin-salisbury>.

<sup>38</sup> Harding.

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