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The Man Who Knew Too Much

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When police entered the red brick house in Oxfordshire, they found the body of a stocky, bushy-haired scientist sprawled across the kitchen floor. Blood from severe wounds in his neck, arms, and stomach pooled around him. A large kitchen knife lay in his lifeless hand, and a second smaller blade was in the kitchen sink.

The murder detective who attended the scene would [tell](#) his inquest that she was shocked to witness injuries that were “so extensive”. Still, the police and coroner [declared](#) it a suicide – concluding that Dr Matthew Puncher had somehow managed to stab and slash himself repeatedly with [two](#) separate knives before succumbing to his wounds. Suicide by stabbing is [rare](#) – and cases with [multiple wounds](#) are exceedingly so. But this case was still more unusual.

Puncher, a renowned government radiation scientist, had played a key role in uncovering one of the most shocking assassinations in a century: the death of Alexander Litvinenko, a defector from the Russian security services in London. Puncher was part of a team of scientists whose research discovered a vital clue that helped a British inquiry conclude Litvinenko’s murder was [likely](#) ordered by the Russian president, Vladimir Putin.

Police were quick to close the case on Puncher’s death, determining that there were no grounds for suspicion, despite his role in that international controversy and research trips he subsequently made to Russia on behalf of the British and American governments.

Now, BuzzFeed News can reveal that Puncher is among at least 14 people US intelligence officials suspect were killed in the UK by Russian mafia groups or secret services, two forces that sometimes work together, since Putin’s rise to power. Four American intelligence officials said US spies have gathered intelligence about the scientist’s death and believe that he “was assassinated”. They said they have passed MI6, Britain’s secret intelligence service, information connecting Puncher’s death – and 13 others – to Russia. Yet the British police have ruled out suspicions in all those cases and shut down any further investigation.

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Russian assassins are being allowed to operate in Britain with impunity, 17 current and former high-ranking intelligence officials on both sides of the Atlantic told BuzzFeed News. Litvinenko’s assassination was a blatant act of provocation that could not be ignored. But many other less glaring cases have gone unpunished, sources said, out of a desire to avoid antagonising Russia and to protect the flow of Russian money into British banks and properties.

Last week we [revealed](#) that US spy agencies had handed the British government high-grade intelligence that the Russian whistleblower Alexander Perepilichnyy, who died in Surrey in 2012, was likely assassinated on the direct orders of the Kremlin – but the authorities sidelined that and other evidence pointing to murder, instead declaring that he had died of natural causes. Then we [exposed](#) intelligence connecting the Russian state or mafia to the deaths of nine more men in the UK, including the

Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky and his British fixer Scot Young, that were all deemed unsuspicious by the British police.

Today, as we reveal fresh evidence in the Puncher case, we can also disclose US intelligence connecting two further deaths in Britain to the assassination of Litvinenko:

- The Russian diplomat Igor Ponomarev died in London two days before Litvinenko was poisoned – and on the eve of a [planned meeting](#) with Mario Scaramella, a key associate of the defector who was investigating corrupt activities by the Russian secret services in Italy. Ponomarev [complained](#) of extreme thirst and [reportedly](#) downed three litres of water just before keeling over after a trip to the opera, raising suspicions that he, too, had been poisoned – but his body was reportedly whisked back to Russia before a postmortem could be performed. Four high-ranking intelligence sources told BuzzFeed News that US spy agencies have information suggesting he was assassinated.
- Daniel McGrory – a journalist for The Times who reported extensively on Litvinenko's death – died five days before the airing of a [documentary](#) about the case in which he was interviewed. McGrory's family firmly believe he died of natural causes, telling BuzzFeed News an autopsy found he had a brain haemorrhage due to an enlarged heart. But now the four American intelligence sources have told BuzzFeed News that British intelligence officials are so concerned about Russia-sanctioned killings that they have taken a harder look, asking US spy agencies for information about McGrory's death “in the context of assassinations”. A second contributor to the documentary, the US security consultant Paul Joyal, was shot outside his home shortly after it aired by two unknown assailants, and only narrowly survived.

In Puncher's case, an investigation by BuzzFeed News has uncovered suspicions that the scientist and his colleagues were being tailed by the Russian secret service, the FSB, during visits to the country in the months before he died. And though British police [testified](#) at the inquest into Puncher's death that “no-one in his family seemed particularly surprised he had taken his own life”, it can now be revealed that officers never interviewed several close relatives and colleagues, some of whom suspect foul play. One source close to the family said Puncher's death was “highly suspicious” and likely connected to work he was doing in Russia that came to the attention of the FSB. “If that's the case,” the relative said, “it could only have come from Putin.”

Supplied/BuzzFeed News

A young Dr Matthew Puncher.

A former senior counter-terror officer for Scotland Yard, the UK's premier police force, told BuzzFeed News Puncher's death should have been investigated as a potential assassination. A suicide by multiple knife wounds, he said, “is very unusual”. Puncher's trips to Russia before his death should be “properly investigated”, he continued, especially given the scientist's role in the Litvinenko investigation. He said he was “alarmed” that the case had rested with local police officers in Thames Valley “because they wouldn't have the ability to follow through the international links” and said it should have been escalated to the elite team of counter-terror officers who investigated Litvinenko's killing. Thames Valley police said they have “received no new evidence regarding this investigation since the inquest was held”.

Prime minister Theresa May is now facing [mounting pressure](#) to explain her role in concealing evidence relating to Russian assassinations in Britain. In her six years as home secretary, she spearheaded the British government's response to national security threats, and she personally intervened to delay the public inquiry into Litvinenko's death, citing the need to [protect](#) "international relations" with Russia. The British government declined to comment on Puncher's case or the other 13 deaths, citing national security concerns. But a spokesperson said in a statement: "The UK Government takes seriously its obligation to protect people in the UK from hostile state activity – including assassinations."

Today, we reveal the story of a man who knew too much about one of Russia's most notorious assassinations – and the British authorities who looked the other way when he met his brutal end.

As Alexander Litvinenko faded fast in a London hospital in November 2006 – losing his hair, shedding weight, and turning yellow from jaundice as his organs failed – the spy turned passionate Kremlin critic insisted that he had been poisoned by Russian agents acting on Putin's orders. But doctors were flummoxed: Though his symptoms suggested radiation sickness, their Geiger counters detected no evidence of the gamma rays commonly associated with radioactive materials.

Then, after extensive tests, a team of government scientists struck upon a seismic [discovery](#): Litvinenko had been given a fatal dose of polonium 210 – a rare nuclear isotope that emits alpha rather than gamma rays and is therefore undetectable by regular radiation checks. The discovery of the polonium in the defector's system came three weeks after he had first fallen ill. The following morning, he was dead.

It fell to the affable and unassuming Puncher, a scientist at the government's Health Protection Agency who had spent a decade studying the effects of radiation on the human body, to [measure](#) the precise amount of polonium in the dead man's system. The level of radioactive contamination he discovered was off the scale. "This is an unprecedented event in the UK," the HPA [said](#) in a public statement. "It is the first time someone in the UK has apparently been deliberately poisoned with a radioactive agent."

The discovery put the Kremlin [squarely](#) in the frame. Russia, which keeps polonium under rigorous state control, is the only country in the world that produces the radioactive chemical in the amounts used to kill Litvinenko. On the eve of his death, Litvinenko himself had [released](#) a statement accusing the Russian president, warning that "the howl of protest from around the world will reverberate, Mr Putin, in your ears for the rest of your life". That message, and a harrowing image of the emaciated, hairless defector on his deathbed, had been beamed around the globe.

Getty

Alexander Litvinenko on his deathbed.

Now that the scientists had identified polonium's unusual alpha rays, detectives from Scotland Yard's elite counter-terror force were able to [discover](#) a radioactive trail all over London left behind by the two men Litvinenko had accused of his murder. Andrey Lugovoy and Dmitry Kovtun had contaminated almost everything they touched since arriving on a British Airways flight from Russia: Traces of polonium were found in their hotel rooms, the restaurants and strip club they had visited, and

the Pine Bar of the Millennium Hotel where they had slipped the poison into Litvinenko's tea.

The evidence was so blatant that authorities had no option but to take action. The Crown Prosecution Service charged Lugovoy and Kovtun, both of whom [denied](#) any role in the killing, with murder. But the Russian government refused to extradite the two assassins, and diplomatic relations between the two countries all but ground to a halt, with both sides expelling diplomats. Without access to the two prime suspects, the police investigation stalled too.

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It took almost 10 years for the government to relent to demands for a full public inquiry into Litvinenko's killing, after the official inquest into his cause of death stalled because it lacked powers to hear top secret evidence from MI6. Theresa May [explained](#) in a 2013 letter to the coroner that "international relations have been a factor in the Government's decision-making" not to establish an inquiry empowered to review classified material. But then, after Russia's annexation of Crimea sparked international condemnation, the position changed.

Sir Robert Owen heard testimony for almost a year, much of it held behind closed doors, and in January 2016 his inquiry delivered an explosive verdict. Lugovoy and Kovtun had killed Litvinenko in an FSB operation that was "probably approved", the judge [said](#), "by President Putin".

The Kremlin [dismissed](#) the verdict as a "blatant provocation" by the British government. One Foreign Ministry spokesperson said the case had been "politicised" and "darkened the general atmosphere of our bilateral relations". Lugovoy, who was now a member of the Russian parliament and had been [awarded](#) a medal for "services to the motherland" by Putin during the inquiry, dismissed the verdict as "a pathetic attempt by London to use a 'skeleton in the cupboard' to support their political ambitions". A variety of unnamed government sources were quoted by Kremlin-controlled media outlets warning of "serious consequences" for Britain.

And, at that very moment, Puncher was hard at work on another project that would bring him directly into the sights of the Russian state. In the weeks directly before and after the verdict, his work would take him to Russia to study the effects of radiation at the Mayak nuclear site – the state facility that was the very source of the polonium used to kill Litvinenko. Soon he too would be dead.

The Mayak nuclear facility is a place so secretive that until recently it was not even on the map. Buried deep in the forests of Russia's Ural mountains, and surrounded by a 250km exclusion zone, it is home to the country's most closely guarded nuclear secrets. This was the birthplace of the Soviet atomic bomb project, and the site of a series of devastating nuclear disasters that were covered up for decades until the fall of the USSR. It is one of the most contaminated places on the planet – [known by some](#) as "the graveyard of the earth".

When Puncher travelled to Russia in the final weeks of Litvinenko inquiry, he was there on behalf of the US government. He had been placed in charge of a [sensitive assignment](#) – codenamed Project 2.4 – to measure the effects on workers of radiation from the plutonium produced at the Mayak facility. Nuclear spills had caused widespread sickness, mutations, cancer, and radiation poisoning among nearby residents, and the facility had accepted US help in improving safety at the site.

Puncher's assignment was part of a US federal contract given to [Public Health England](#), the government agency that succeeded the HPA to guard the British public from

health hazards including chemical and nuclear exposure. Under the US research contract, Puncher and his team were tasked with working on software programs designed to measure the risks of radiation exposure at Mayak.

Project 2.4 had taken Puncher to Russia a number of times – and as he and his colleagues went about their work, they noticed something disquieting. They were being “followed and bugged”, Dr Alan Birchall told BuzzFeed News, “definitely by the FSB” and, they suspected, also by British spies. “It wasn’t a happy project to work on,” said Birchall, a long-time scientist who accompanied Puncher on several trips to Russia and knew him well.

On one of those trips, just before Christmas 2015, something happened that left Puncher a haunted man. When he returned, his disposition had “changed completely”, his wife would later tell the inquest into his cause of death. A man who had loved doing homework with his children and cooking at home, who generally had a positive attitude, suddenly “just lost interest”, she testified. “I had to prompt him to do things like getting dressed and washing up, things he did without thinking before.” Kathryn Puncher declined to speak to BuzzFeed News.

Nevertheless, Puncher summoned the energy to return to Russia in February for what was to be his final trip. The translator who accompanied him, Olga Lazareva, told BuzzFeed News that his work went well and she “didn’t see any worrying signs”.

But when he came home, the 46-year-old was in a state of acute distress – telling his family and colleagues that he had made a serious mathematical “mistake” on Project 2.4 that was so bad he was worried he might end up in prison.

His coworkers were baffled. Several told BuzzFeed News that the “coding error” Puncher felt he had made in his secret research was really no big deal, and that he had simply taken “another route” to get the same answer in calculating the effects of the plutonium on local residents. Public Health England said it received no indication that his abilities were in question. His colleague George Etherington told the inquest he had assured Puncher his fears of prosecution were “groundless” and that “he would look back and wonder why he worried so much.” But he said Puncher remained inexplicably inconsolable.

Puncher was so distressed about these mistakes that his mother, Janet, had felt compelled to ask him: “Could someone die?” She later told the police that her son had reassured her there was no risk of that happening.

But soon afterwards Puncher was found dead on his kitchen floor.

The web of death

FSB
The Kremlin
Russian mafia
Stephen Moss
Stephen Curtis
Igor Ponomarev
Alexander Litvinenko
Yuri Golubev
Daniel McGrory
Badri Patarkatsishvili
Gareth Williams
Paul Castle
Alexander Perepilichnyy
Robbie Curtis
Boris Berezovsky
Johnny Elishaoff
Scot Young
Matthew Puncher
2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017
Chris Applegate and Tim Lane / BuzzFeed News

Click on the images to learn more about each death

To Detective Constable Rachel Carter, who inspected the kitchen, the whole scene was “very unusual”. There was no sign of a struggle: None of the furniture had been knocked over, and all the blood belonged to Puncher. And yet “his injuries were so extensive”, and there was so much blood, that she struggled to believe he had turned two knives upon himself. “It caused me some unease initially,” she testified at his inquest. “I didn’t know how he could have inflicted all those injuries on himself without losing consciousness.”

But the police took evidence from Puncher’s wife Kathryn, who told them her husband had become so crippled with anxiety about his work that he had tried to hang himself with a computer cable the week before his body was found. Officers determined that Puncher must have managed to stab himself to death, and closed the case.

The Home Office pathologist Dr Nicholas Hunt testified that though he could not “entirely exclude” murder, it *was* possible for Puncher to have knifed himself that many times and still remain conscious. He noted that the scientist “had small wounds to his hands and such injuries may be seen in the context of defensive actions in a third party assault with a blade”, but he said it was also possible that they were sustained when the knife became “wetted with blood” and slipped in his hands.

Carter testified that, despite her early doubts, she was ultimately “satisfied” that it was a suicide. “All the information told us he was **very depressed** and no-one in his family seemed particularly surprised he had taken his own life,” she said. The coroner, Nicholas Graham, delivered a verdict of suicide.

BuzzFeed News has now spoken with eight relatives and friends of Puncher who all said they were astonished by the suggestion that he was suicidal – but were never interviewed by police. Each said that Puncher had no known history of **depression** and that his change in disposition after the Russia trip came as a shock, especially for someone known to them as consistently calm and rational. Members of his family said that they only learned of the **depression** and previous suicide attempt after he died.

Relatives said Thames Valley police had never interviewed the scientist’s son, Sam Puncher, or either of his two brothers, Ben and Seb. Statements were only taken, they said, from Puncher’s parents and wife Kathryn. Sam could not believe that his father had committed suicide, according to his mother, Puncher’s first wife. “He just said straight away: ‘How could my dad do that?’” she said. “‘How could he not say goodbye to me? I don’t understand.’”

“I didn’t know how he could have inflicted all those injuries on himself without losing consciousness”

Many of Puncher’s relatives were unwilling to be named in the context of his death, but a source close to the family said they were baffled that he had been sent back to Russia in the direct aftermath of the public inquiry that had accused Putin of ordering an assassination. “I would be highly critical of sending somebody who had been investigating Litvinenko on a trip to Moscow,” the source told BuzzFeed News.

Dr Phil Blower, a long-time friend of Puncher’s, also wants answers. “It’s very weird that he goes off to Russia then he comes back and is suddenly depressed and

irrational," he said. "I think there are definitely still questions to be asked, and I'm astonished that none of this is being investigated by anyone serious."

A spokesperson for Public Health England said the "verdict of the Coroner was clear" that Puncher committed suicide, and the agency's "thoughts remain with Dr Puncher's family".

But the former senior Scotland Yard counter-terror officer who spoke to BuzzFeed News said Puncher's sudden change of mood should not have been enough to persuade police to rule out foul play in his death. "The state can mess up minds, it can do all sorts of things. It has research laboratories, it has science facilities," he said. "There are all sorts of drugs that can be given to people to create depression." He said the proximity of Puncher's changes of mood to his trips to Russia was potentially "very serious" and should be investigated fully. And he said the local Thames Valley police were in no way equipped to carry out the task. It should, he said, have been taken over by Scotland Yard's counter-terror team – who have the security clearance needed to communicate with Britain's spy agencies in case they have any intelligence that might be relevant to solving a case.

Behind the scenes, even as the police investigation was being shut down, BuzzFeed News has learned from four intelligence officials that US spy agencies were providing Britain's secret intelligence service with information connecting Puncher's death to Russia. The officials told BuzzFeed News that one factor they take into consideration when assessing whether suspicious deaths can be connected to the Kremlin is: "Could Russia be driving these people to suicide?" But in Puncher's case, they said their assessment was that he had likely been assassinated. A CIA spokesperson declined to comment on intelligence matters.

In a bizarre twist, after the suicide verdict there was one entity still eager to connect Puncher's death to the Litvinenko inquiry: the Russian government. Channel One, a state-controlled Russian television outlet, aired a segment calling it a "very strange suicide" and asked, "What was Matthew Puncher afraid of?"

The presenter raised the question: "Could he have made a mistake in the case of Litvinenko?", adding that "according to the British authorities, this question is not relevant".

US spies watch such pronouncements from Kremlin-controlled media outlets closely. "When Russia kills people they do it to send a message," one high-ranking official said: "Don't cross Putin."

In our next story, BuzzFeed News will reveal the last of the 14 deaths US intelligence officials believe is linked to Russia.

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