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## The strange case of the spy and the sushi

By Simon Hooper for CNN

(CNN) -- In a week in which the latest James Bond movie premiered a few streets away in Leicester Square, the news of the apparent poisoning of a former KGB spy in a London sushi bar offered a glimpse into a real-life world of intrigue and espionage.

Aleksander Litvinenko, a former Russian security officer who defected to the UK in 2000, has been in a critical condition in a London hospital since being taken ill on November 1 following a lunch appointment with a man who claimed to have information on the killing of Russian investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya.

Police investigating the case said Litvinenko, an avowed critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin who had been sentenced for treason, had been poisoned with thallium -- a highly toxic metal usually used to kill rats.

On Monday The Times of London quoted the KGB's former London station chief as saying that only the Russian state security agency -- now known as the FSB -- could have carried out such a plot.

Oleg Gordievsky, who defected from the Soviet Union to the UK in 1985, told the newspaper that Litvinenko was an "obvious enemy" and that the apparent assassination attempt was "state-sponsored."

In fact, poisoning has often been the preferred tactic for those wishing to dispose of their enemies quietly -- as numerous alleged former cases demonstrate:

- In 1978 the Bulgarian dissident and BBC broadcaster Georgi Markov was poisoned with a ricin-tipped umbrella on Waterloo Bridge in London. Markov had been standing at a bus stop amid a crowd of commuters when he was jabbed in the leg by a man holding the umbrella. The man apologized and walked off hurriedly. Markov died three days later.
- In 2004 Ukrainian presidential contender Viktor Yushchenko claimed he had been poisoned after his face suddenly became disfigured. Medical tests revealed he had been poisoned with a nerve agent, dioxin, but Yushchenko recovered, going on to win the election.
- In 1994 Peter Haack, a former agent for East Germany's secret police, the Stasi, was found guilty of attempting to poison the East German defector Wolfgang Welsch and his family during a holiday in Israel. Haack had befriended the family and then spiked their hamburgers with thallium.
- In 1995 senior Russian businessman Ivan Kivelidi and his secretary died after being poisoned with "heavy mineral salts" which had apparently been smeared on his telephone.
- In 2002, Chechen rebel commander Ibn al-Khattab, a Saudi-born warlord who had fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan and financed Islamic militants in the breakaway Russian region, died after receiving a poisoned letter, allegedly from a Russian security agent.
- In 2003 Russian parliamentary deputy and journalist Yuri Shchekochikhin died shortly after suffering an unexplained skin rash. His relatives and friends claimed he had been poisoned with dioxin because of his investigations into a series of apartment bombings in Moscow in 1999.
- Thallium was also the preferred poison of choice of Saddam Hussein's secret police, according to The Times. In 1988 Iraqi businessman Abdullah Ali fell ill after eating in a London restaurant. He claimed his vodka had been spiked -- a suspicion confirmed by pathologists following his death 15 days later. Hundreds of other dissidents may have met their end in similar fashion.
- South African agents are believed to have once plotted to kill Nelson Mandela using thallium while he was in prison on Robben Island. Steve Biko, the anti-apartheid campaigner who died in 1977, was also allegedly poisoned.
- Fidel Castro claims to have survived more than 600 CIA attempts on his life, many of them allegedly involving elaborate and bizarre attempts to poison the Cuban leader. One involved dusting Castro's shoes with thallium to make him fall ill -- or at least make his iconic beard fall out.

Other outlandish plots included an exploding cigar, an explosive shell designed to catch Castro's eye while he was scuba-diving and a diving suit infected with a deadly fungus.

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