

Ex-Spy Litvinenko Told British Police Putin Ordered His Death

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Ex-KGB spy Alexander Litvinenko, who died after drinking tea poisoned with a rare radioactive isotope, told British police beforehand that President Vladimir Putin was personally behind it, an inquiry into his killing heard on Tuesday.

British authorities believe Kremlin-critic Litvinenko was poisoned with green tea laced with polonium-210 at the Pine Bar of the plush Millennium hotel in central London on Nov. 1, 2006 during a meeting with two Russians, Andrei Lugovoy and Dmitry Kovtun.

He died three weeks later and in opening submissions, the lawyer to the inquiry, Robin Tam, repeated earlier assertions that secret British government evidence provided a "prima facie" case of Russian culpability.

The long-awaited public inquiry heard that Litvinenko had made the accusation himself from his hospital bed shortly before his death.

"I have no doubt whatsoever this was done by the Russian secret service," Litvinenko told

British detectives.

"Having knowledge of the system I know that the order about such a killing of a citizen of another country on its territory, especially if it's something to with Great Britain, could have been given by only one person.

"That person is the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin."

The Kremlin has always denied any involvement in the death as have Lugovoy and Kovtun, the main suspects.

Russia has rejected British attempts to extradite the two men, but inquiry chairman Robert Owen said they had been invited to give evidence by videolink from Russia.

"The issues to which Mr. Litvinenko's death gave rise are of the utmost gravity and have attracted worldwide interest and concern," Owen told the inquiry at London's High Court.

The controversy generated by the killing chilled Anglo-Russian relations to a post-Cold War low. As ties improved, Britain rejected holding an inquiry in 2013, but with relations subsequently soured by the Ukraine crisis, the British government changed its mind last July.

Inquiry lawyer Tam said the evidence showed there had been a previous attempt to poison Litvinenko during meetings he had the month before with Lugovoy and Kovtun. Tests had shown traces of polonium at offices, hotels and planes used by the two Russians, he said.

Litvinenko, who fled Russia exactly six years before he was fatally poisoned, had become a stringent critic of Putin and the FSB security agency successor to the KGB. He had become sympathetic to the cause of Chechen separatists and was friendly with Anna Politkovskaya, murdered in Moscow in 2006.

The inquiry heard his house and that of his friend, exiled Chechen leader Akhmed Zakayev, had been firebombed in 2004, there was evidence he had worked for Britain's MI6 foreign spy agency and that he converted to Islam shortly before his death.

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