When Defiance Turns into Violence: Status, Roles, and Killing Thy Enemy

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Introduction

In early August 2021, Vitaly Shishov failed to return from his regular morning run in Kyiv. Shishov directed the Belarussian House in Ukraine, a non-governmental organization helping those who fled their country after anti-government protests in the summer and fall of 2020. After a brief search, Shishov was found hanged in a public park near his apartment. The Ukrainian police investigated his death as a "murder masked as a suicide."[1] Earlier in May 2021, Belarussian authorities forced a passenger plane from Athens to Vilnius to land in Minsk in order to detain Raman Pratasevich, a twenty-six year old Belarusian blogger and journalist, who had left Belarus in 2019 because he was on a terrorist watch list of the Belarussian State Security Committee, known as the KGB.[2]

Transjurisdictional authoritarian repression is on the rise. A recent report by Freedom House suggests that it is "becoming normal … [that] governments reach across national borders to silence dissent among their diaspora and exile communities."[3] In 608 cases since 2014, the report lists thirty-one governments that operated in seventy-nine foreign countries to detain, assault, physically intimidate, use unlawful deportation or rendition, and suspected assassination to harm opponents.[4] To explain this phenomenon, which he terms "transnational authoritarianism," Gerasimos Tsourapas argued that the rise of global migration flows has presented autocratic governments with an "illiberal paradox," a situation in which authoritarian governments wish to encourage emigration for economic gains, while seeking to control

1 Anton Traianovski and Megan Specia, "Missing Belarussian Activist is Found Dead in Park in Ukraine," *New York Times*, August 3, 2021, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/world/europe/belarus-activist-dead-kyiv.html?smid=url-share.

2 Hanna Liubakova, "Why Lukashenko Diverted a Plane to Catch Belarusian Blogger," *Deutsche Welle*, May 24, 2021, accessed February 3, 2023, https://p.dw.com/p/3tt0S.

3 Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2021), 1–2, https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.20958.97600.

4 Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*, 1–2.

transborder movements because of political and security concerns.[5] To address the paradox, autocratic governments engage in various strategies, ranging from legitimization and cooptation to transnational repression.[6]

For millennia, governments, both democratic and autocratic, have engaged in two prominent and violent forms of repression at home: Politically motivated murder of dissidents (politicide) and minorities (genocide), often on a massive scale, to establish, expand, or stabilize their rule.[7] Targeted killings, the use of intentional lethal force against a culpable person or group outside the (physical) custody of the targeting agent, became more prevalent and prominent in the 2000s as various governments started using unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) and stopped denying the fact that they engaged in such practices.[8]

This article focuses on a third form of violent transnational repression: Political murder as an act of defiant enmity. In such cases, I argue here, a political regime reacts to crosscutting legitimatory pressures from inside and outside its sovereign space, i.e., transnational/trans-jurisdictional, rather than focusing on internal repression alone, i.e., purges.[9] In this way, the regime deliberately kills or attempts to kill a political opponent by symbolic means, often using poisons and/or in public view, to demonstrate the regime's defiance and power, to set an example for both domestic and international audiences. Domestically, the ruler thereby asserts their position as the final arbiter of life and death; internationally, the ruler superimposes their own interpretation of their role as a sovereign equal upon other governments. Taking the life of

5 Gerasimos Tsourapas, "Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-Optation in World Politics," *International Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (2020): 616–644, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa061.

6 See also Jose Kaire De Francisco, *Dictatorships and the Globalization of Repression* (PhD diss., University of Minnesota Twin Cities, 2021), https://hdl.handle.net/11299/216381.

7 Franklin L. Ford, *Political Murder: From Tyrannicide to Terrorism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); and Barbara Harff, "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955," in *Genocide and Human Rights*, ed. Mark Lattimer (New York: Routledge, 2007), 329–346.

8 Martin Senn and Jodok Troy, "The Transformation of Targeted Killing and International Order," *Contemporary Security Policy* 38, no. 2 (2019): 175–211; and Vincent C. Keating, "Membership has its Privileges: Targeted Killing Norms and the Firewall of International Society," *International Studies Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2022): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac040.

9 Reportedly, the governments of Rwanda and India have been suspected of killing political opponents abroad lately, i.e., in South Africa, Mozambique, and Canada, but none of these killings involved symbolic means or places. See Michela Wrong, "Rwanda Accused of Broad Campaign of Repression against Dissidents," *The Guardian*, October 10, 2023, accessed February 15, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/10/rwanda-accused-of-broad-campaign-of-repression-against-dissidents; and Tanya Mehra and Colin Clarke, "The India-Canada Rift: Sikh Extremism and Rise of Transnational Repression?", *International Centre for Counterterrorism*, October 17, 2023, accessed February 15, 2024, https://www.icct.nl/publication/india-canada-rift-sikh-extremism-and-rise-transnational-repression.

one's own citizens abroad is therefore a reaffirmation of the regime's status as an equal (great) power to be reckoned with, despite the interference of a liberal international society. Defiant political murder abroad is an act of both transnational repression and expression.

My approach to this topic is built on literature from several distinct fields. Taking cues from recent advances in social psychology and international relations about the effects of emotions on state behavior,[10] this article interprets defiant political murders as relational and emotional phenomena. This approach is justified because the occurrence of such murders is tied to a constellation of affective relationships between the fearsome autocratic leaderships that symbolically kill an opponent to superimpose their "greatness" and domestic and international others they deem as threatening the legitimacy of their rule.[11]

Drawing on symbolic interactionist role theory and psychological studies on defiance, this article explains defiant political murder as a violent act of transnational role superimposition by which an offended ruler lashes out to reinstate self-pride through killing those who inflict fear and humiliation upon them and/or their regime. Symbolic political murder, and possibly other forms of transnational repression, are thus not simply causal outcomes of the presence or absence of certain material or immaterial factors, such as migration,[12] norm transformation,[13] regime type,[14] power differentials,[15] cultural dispositions,[16] or individual attributes, such as personal pathologies.[17]

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10 Robin Markwica, *Emotional Choices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

11 See Linus Hagström, "Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In)Security: The Narrative Mediation of Greatness and Weakness in International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2021): 331–342, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab011.

12 Tsourapas, "Global Autocracies."

13 Simon F. Pratt, "Norm Transformation and the Institutionalization of Targeted Killing in the US," *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 3 (2019): 723–747; and Mathias Großklaus, "Friction, Not Erosion: Assassination Norms at the Fault Line between Sovereignty and Liberal Values," in *The Transformation of Targeted Killing and International Order*, ed. Martin Senn and Jodok Troy (New York: Routledge, 2020), 86–106.

14 Bruno Frey, "Why Kill Politicians? A Rational Choice Analysis of Political Assassinations" (Working Paper, No. 324, University of Zurich, 2007); and Arie Perliger, *The Rationale of Political Assassinations*, (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, US Military Academy, 2015).

15 W. John Green, *A History of Political Murder in Latin America: Killing the Messengers of Change* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015).

16 Peter Kreuzer, *If You Cannot Beat Them, Kill Them: Fatal Violence against Politicians in the Philippines* (Frankfurt / Main: Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2021).

17 Lawrence Z. Freedman, "Assassination: Psychopathology and Social Pathology," *Postgraduate Medicine* 37 (1965): 650–658; and Juliet Kaarbo, "New Directions for Leader Personality Research: Breaking Bad in Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2021): 423–441, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa221.

As such, defiant political murders are not primarily used to reduce the risk of a coup or an imminent (physical) threat to the regime. Rather, I argue here that defiant political murders are embedded in "feeling rules" that specify which emotions are considered appropriate and expected in specific situations. These feelings rules extend to international relations.[18] By openly killing its own citizens on foreign territory, an autocratic regime brazenly defies the feeling rules of the current liberal international order, which prioritizes human dignity over state sovereignty.[19] In the Russian case, as Gulnaz Sharafutdinova has so aptly shown, President Vladimir Putin has been able to transform emotions of shame and humilitation about the loss of the Soviet Union and troublesome transition of the 1990s into pride and patriotism by drawing on two central pillars of Soviet collective identity: Soviet exceptionalism and a keen sense of extreme foreign threat to the state and its people by the "West."[20]

This article makes three main contributions to the pertinent literature. First, it furthers the current debate in role theory research on how international and domestic role taking are linked and how this link may be conceptualized.[21] In this vein, the concept of defiant political murders clarifies the conditions under which autocratic regimes openly and symbolically kill their citizens abroad. Second, my approach contributes to the study of transnational repression by clarifying the role of open murder as an instrument of active defiance in an international order that is viewed by a particular autocratic government, personal rulers, as hostile and overbearing. This way, it adds a relational argument to the literature on transnational repression that has up until now foregrounded individual or regime type attributes as causal forces. Third, this article adds rich empirical evidence on the relational entanglements of state

18 Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 551–575; 563–564; and Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, "Theorizing Emotions in World Politics," *International Theory* 6, no. 3 (2014): 491–514; 508, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971914000232.

19 Karin M. Fierke, "Human Dignity, Basal Emotion, and a Global Emotionology," in *Emotions, Politics, and War*, ed. Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory (New York: Routledge, 2015), 45–57; 54.

20 Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (Oxford: Oxford, University Press, 2020), 115–116. See also Alicja Curanović, *The Sense of Mission in Russian Foreign Policy: Destined for Greatness!* (London: Routledge, 2021).

21 Sebastian Harnisch, "Full-Spectrum Role-Taking: A Two-Level Role Theoretical Model," paper presented at the *Annual Conference of the International Studies Association*, Toronto, Canada, March 26–30, 2014; Klaus Brummer and Cameron G. Thies, "The Contested Selection of National Role Conceptions," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 11, no. 3 (2015): 273–293; Christian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo, "Unpacking the Ego in Role Theory: Vertical and Horizontal Role Contestation and Foreign Policy," in *Domestic Role Contestation, Foreign Policy, and International Relations*, ed. Christian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo (London: Routledge, 2016), 1–22; and David M. McCourt, "Domestic Contestation over Foreign Policy, Role-Based and Otherwise: Three Cautionary Cases," *Politics* 41, no. 2 (2021): 173–188.

leaders and their emotional responses to role expectations in social hierarchies: when powerful rulers are denied recognition, i.e. deference, of their (superior) role status, both domestically and internationally, they experience emotional resentment and may engage in violent and defiant behavior to restore their pride and sense of self-worth. This article also contributes to questions arising from the concept of ambivalent enmity. First, by clarifying when and how plausible deniability is forfeited in state-sponsored killings of citizens abroad, it sheds light on how secrecy and its ostentatious rejection are used to express ambivalence. Second, the article problematizes the claim that defiant political murders simply imitate enemy behavior, e.g., by serving as effective means for ending dissent or as revenge. Instead, the essay foregrounds the symbolic functions of the killings, which are meant to demonstrate the superiority of the perpetrator and to reinstate the perpetrator as a great power, thus changing the international order.

My argument proceeds as follows: First, the paper theorizes how contrarian role assertion in a group that collectively expects commensurate role behavior, i.e., defiance, results in different forms of transnational repression, in this case political murder. Second, I describe how different forms of insulting/humiliating behavior bring about international hierarchies that result in defiant counter role taking. Third, I present two different case studies in which a governmental perpetrator covertly or openly killed an opponent, here focusing on the interplay of domestic and international treatments of misrecognition and disrespect towards the perpetrating regime. A brief conclusion summarizes the major findings and implications for future research and policy.

Role theory, disrespect, and defiance

International role theory has thus far been primarily concerned with the emergence of an international actor's "self" and how that self is functionally positioned in international society.[22] Drawing on George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionist framework,[23] a relational strand of role theory has foregrounded the distinction between the median concepts of "I" and "me," in which the former represents the individual capacity to generate spontaneous and creative impulses whereas the latter refers to the capacity to see its self through

22 Sebastian Harnisch, "Role Theory: Operationalization of Key Concepts," in *Role Theory in International Relations*, ed. Sebastian Harnisch, Cornelia Frank, and Hanns W. Maull (New York: Routledge, 2011), 7–15; Sebastian Harnisch, "Conceptualizing the Minefield: Role Theory and Foreign Policy Learning," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8, no. 1 (2012): 47–69; David M. McCourt, "The Roles States Play: A Meadian Interactionist Approach," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15, no. 3 (2012): 378–381; and David M. McCourt, *Britain and World Power since 1945: Constructing a Nation's Role in International Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

23 George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

the eyes of others. This process is referred to as "self-identification," whereas the relational positioning *vis-à-vis* others is described as "role taking."[24]

If role taking is reciprocated by another actor through adoption of a commensurate role, a stable role pattern and social structure of matching functionally specified role expectations occurs. Moreover, the roles actors come to play not only stabilize external (inter)national structures, such as norms, they also stabilize and/or transform the self of an actor.[25] As role taking and making processes—the latter indicating a change of self-expectations towards the content of the functional role—are frequently contested, both domestically and internationally,[26] these contestations impact upon the stabilization of the self, i.e., the ontological security of an actor.[27] It follows that the role of role taking and role making is tied to both the re-establishment of ontological security and the management of emotions: If state leaders encounter others who confirm their role and respective identity claims, they are more likely to experience increased self-esteem and positive emotions, such as pride or joy; if state leaders feel that their roles are rejected or questioned, however, they may experience lowered self-esteem or humiliation and other negative emotions such as fear, shame, or anger.[28]

When adopting role identities within states, decision makers also embrace the expectations attached to their position and the state's position in the world. By identifying with these international roles, they endorse the feelings that go along with the state's international social position.[29] As Samuel A. Greene and Graeme Robertson have shown, rulers can enlist substantial additional emotional identification with the regime when taking up adversarial nationalist foreign policy roles, such as, in their case-study, the 2014 annexation of

24 Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 173–178; and Sebastian Harnisch, "'Dialogue and Emergence': George Herbert Mead's Contribution to Role Theory and His Reconstruction of International Politics," in *Role Theory in International Relations*, 36–54.

25 Sebastian Harnisch, "Role Theory and the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy," in *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order?* ed. Sebastian Harnisch, Sebastian Bersick, and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3–21; 4; and McCourt, *Britain and World Power since 1945*, 25–27.

26 Cantir and Kaarbo, "Unpacking the Ego in Role Theory."

27 Stephan Klose, "Interactionist Role Theory Meets Ontological Security Studies: An Exploration of Synergies between Socio-psychological Approaches to the Study of International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 3 (2020): 851–874.

28 Markwica, *Emotional Choices*, 65; Curanović, *The Sense of Mission in Russian Foreign Policy*, 106.

29 Alisher Faizullaev, "Diplomacy and Self," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 17, no. 3 (2006): 497–522; and Alisher Faizullaev, "Individual Experiencing of States," *Review of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2007): 531–554.

Crimea by Russia.[30] Notably, through this "Crimean moment," Putin was able to reassert Russia's claim on so-called historical Russian territory against international critique and sanctions, and to significantly bolster his status by raising citizen support rather than intra-elite consensus.[31] Hence, while self-identification between the state and ruler has changed over time, nationalism and other forms of self-identification with the state, such as honor cultures, also shape the emotions of rulers, state agents, and citizens.[32]

Being cast into an unappealing role by another actor—either explicitly when the other tries to socialize an actor into an inferior role (direct altercasting), or implicitly, when the other actor takes on a new role, repositioning the other into an inferior role (indirect altercasting), [33] lays the groundwork for defiant behavior.[34] From a role theory perspective, defiance, then, can be defined as a spontaneous or deliberate effort to shed (or avoid) an inferior counter role.[35] Structurally speaking, defiant role taking aims to resist some specific role altercasting behavior, thus leaving the overall relationship intact. As Russian President Dmitry Medvedev noted in 2008, when pushing back against the earlier US bombing of Serbia (1999) and NATO's expansion to Russia's borders: Russia "will not tolerate any more humiliation and we are not joking."[36] This role taking pattern then amounts to opposition in a given social order where only some norms or rules are contested.[37] In contrast, defiant role taking is geared towards violating central decision-making procedures

30 Samuel A. Greene and Graeme Robertson, "Affect and Autocracy: Emotions and Attitudes in Russia after Crimea," *Perspectives on Politics* 20, no. 1 (2022): 38–52. See also Olga Malinova, "Obsession with Status and Ressentiment: Historical Backgrounds of the Russian Discursive Identity Construction," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47, no. 3–4 (2014): 291–303.

31 Greene and Robertson, "Affect and Autocracy," 48.

32 Oded Löwenheim and Gadi Heimann, "Revenge in International Politics," *Security Studies* 17, no. 4 (2008): 685–724.

33 Cameron Thies, "The US and China: Altercast Roles and Changing Power in the 20th Century," in *China's International Roles*, 97–109; 98.

34 For a detailed treatment of Russia, its misrecognition by the West, and respective effects on Russian foreign policy see Curanović*, The Sense of Mission in Russian Foreign Policy*; and Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

35 Reinhard Wolf, "Between Deference and Defiance: Hierarchical Status Roles and International Conflict," *International Studies Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2022): 4, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab063.

36 As cited in Joslyn Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation: Anger and Status in World Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2020), 2.

37 Christopher Daase and Nicole Deitelhoff, "Opposition and Dissidence: Two Modes of Resistance against International Rule," *International Political Theory* 15, no. 1 (2019): 11–30.

or norms, thereby calling into question the order or central elements of it.[38] Thus, when addressing the Valdai Club in 2014, Putin claimed that NATO and Western nations had violated the sovereignty and dignity of Eastern European nations: "It is impossible to keep humiliating one's partners forever in such a way. That kind of relationship eventually breaks down."[39]

From a temporal point of view, role taking may amount to preemptive defiance, if a hierarchical social order has not yet been (re)established, with the defiant actor trying to preserve or regain the status quo of his or her (former) functional position in the current social order. Emancipatory defiance occurs if and when a subaltern actor in a hierarchical role setting rejects the subordinate role, thereby attempting to change the status quo.[40] Whereas preemptive defiance tends to be conservative in nature, an attempt to preserve a given order and the stable self-identification based on the respective roles taken in that order, emancipatory defiance is revisionist and voluntaristic in nature because it aims to retrofit an existing order with a given (ego-based) role expectation.[41]

Emotions, resentments, and deadly enmity

In hierarchical social orders, struggles over role status are especially prone to violence because disrespect and misrecognition by others deny the role holder the opportunity to establish a positive and stable self-identification, i.e., ontological security.[42] Either a superior role holder violates certain basic rights, such as sovereignty or territorial integrity in an inter-state setting, thereby denying ontological security of a subaltern role holder who cannot yield anymore and engage in stable deferent role patterns; or a superior role holder denies one of his peers the constitutive respect of being treated as equally superior, thus lowering the position of the other nation among worthy nations as well as exposing the leadership of that nation as weak and inferior.[43]

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38 Daase and Deitelhoff, "Opposition and Dissidence," 18–20.

39 As cited in Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation*, 2. For similar statements by North Korean officials, see C. I. Moon and I. Hwang, "Identity, Supreme Dignity, and North Korea's External Behavior: A Cultural/Ideational Perspective," *Korea Observer* 45, no. 1 (2014): 1–37.

40 Lonnie Athens, "Mead's Analysis of Social Conflict: A Radical Interactionist's Critique," *The American Sociologist* 43, no. 4 (2012): 428–447; 441.

41 See Alan Bloomfield, "Norm Antipreneurs and Theorizing Resistance to Normative Change," *Review of International Studies* 42, no. 2 (2016): 310–333.

42 Alan P. Fiske and Tage S. Rai, *Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

43 R. J. Eidelson and J. I. Eidelson, "Dangerous Ideas: Five Beliefs that Propel Groups toward Conflict," *American Psychology* 58, no. 3 (2003): 182–192.

There is a difference between humiliation and degradation/dishonoring practices and the respective social orders in which they are situated.[44] The former, humiliation, has been referred to as "enforced lowering of any person or group by a process of subjugation that damages their dignity … and to humiliate is to transgress the rightful expectations of every human being and of all humanity that basic human rights will be respected."[45] Dignity is embedded in a social order in which (human) actors display an inalienable worth, regardless of social status, gender, race, age, political opinion, property, or nationality.[46] Thus, as Josiah Ober has highlighted, dignity cannot be lost or gained and there can be no competition over it.[47]

Degradation may refer to the implicit or explicit violation "of a kind of status attached to physical bravery and the unwillingness to be dominated by anyone."[48] As such, it is based on internal quality but requires constant recognition by others to exist.[49] Hence, honor cultures infuse an obsession with respect and a readiness to violently respond when an actor's honor is offended.[50] By insulting an actor, through word or practice, a role holder takes on a dominating position, as the position of the insulted actor is based on their reputation of being able to guard one's honor at all times.[51] It follows that by engaging in reciprocal violent and insulting action towards an other, i.e., through vengeance, honor and ontological security may be restored as bravery is displayed.[52]

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44 Jardar N. Østbo, "Dignity Promotion and the Revenge of Honor," *Journal of Extreme Anthropology* 4, no. 1 (2021): 198–226.

45 Evelin Lindner, *Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006), xiv.

46 United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: United Nations, 1948), https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf.

47 Josiah Ober, "Democracy's Dignity," *The American Political Science Review* 106, no. 4 (2012): 827–846; 832.

48 Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, "Microaggression and Moral Cultures," *Comparative Sociology* 13, no. 6 (2014): 692–726; 712, https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341332.

49 Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

50 Mark Cooney, *Warriors and Peacemakers: How Third Parties Shape Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

51 Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars* (Cham: Springer, 2018), 57, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70329-9.

52 Angela K.-Y. Leung, and Doy Cohen, "Within- and Between-Culture Variation: Individual Differences and the Cultural Logics of Honor, Face, and Dignity Cultures," *Journal of Psychology and Social Psychology* 100, no. 3 (2011): 507–526; 510, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022151; and Löwenheim and Heimann, *Revenge in International Politics*, 695.

Resentment is a corresponding emotional attitude that endorses a negative stereotype about another actor's moral character.[53] In contemporary political theory, resentment denotes a legitimate sense of anger and desire for justice in the face of an injury,[54] whereas "ressentiment" indicates the self-defeating inward turn of this emotion onto the self. As such, ressentiment may be understood as "suspended, delayed, or botched revenge."[55] Thus, when resentment turns onto the self, self-victimization and ressentiments may turn into violence as a traumatized self searches for and finds an external culprit. Eliminating that culprit, oftentimes identified as an alleged "fifth column" of members of one's own society deemed to conspire with external enemies,[56] temporarily, or in our case, permanently, is intended to free the self from its perceived impotence. Yet, in effect it merely returns the self to its former state rather than providing genuine self-affirmation.

Table 1: *Disrespect and defiant behavior: cognitive, somatic, and action-oriented indicators*

Cognitive Indicators	Somatic Indicators	Action-oriented Indicators
Insistence on equality/ superiority	Spontaneous (self-reporting of) arousal	Negatively biased perceptions
Complaints about unequal treatment	Self-reporting on feeling of disrespect	Reduction of interaction
Claim that alter overstepped role	Metaphors and strong exaggerations	Strengthened risk acceptance
Symbolic demonstration of superior role	Self-reporting of emotional reaction	Aggressive behavior
Defiant speech acts	Reinstatement of legitimate role position	Claims to equal or superior role vis-à-vis (significant) others

Disrespect for an actor's domestic or international role and respective status may thus trigger intense responses that feature cognitive, somatic, and action-

53 Reinhard Wolf, Sven-Eric Fikenscher, and Lena Jaschob, "Emotionen in den internationalen Beziehungen: Das Beispiel Ressentiments" [Emotions in international relations: The example of ressentiments], in *Emotionen und Politik: Begründungen, Konzeptionen und Praxisfelder einer politikwissenschaftlichen Emotionsforschung* [Emotions and politics: Justifications, conceptions, and applications of emotion research in political science], ed. Karl-Rudolf Korte (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2015), 187–212; 196.

54 Elisabetta Brighi, "The Globalisation of Resentment: Failure, Denial, and Violence in World Politics," *Millennium* 44, no. 3 (2015): 411–432; 422, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829816643174.

55 Brighi, "The Globalisation of Resentment," 422.

56 Dmitry Chernobrov, "Who is the Modern 'Traitor'? 'Fifth Column' Accusations in US and UK Politics and Media," *Politics* 39, no. 3 (2019): 347–362.

oriented reactions. On a cognitive level, these responses refer to the relative position of the aggrieved party's role *vis-à-vis* the other and the social order in which both are positioned. On the somatic level, the actor may spontaneously report on the emotional state he or she is in, either by reflecting on (strong and disproportionate) bodily effects or comparisons to experiences of others, especially the perpetrator. On the action level, anger is related to resentment or hatred, and results in negative biased perceptions of the other, a reduction in interaction, an increase in risk acceptance, and aggressive behavior.[57]To account for various distinct types of defiant political murder, this article argues that the motives for this act lie at the intersection of decision makers' domestic and international ontological security seeking, resulting from conflicts over hierarchical role relations and repeated experience of subjugative altercasting behavior by (significant) others. As such, defiant political murders, emanating from both domestic and/or subjugating international role interaction, typically have the following characteristics:

> 1. Function: Defiant political murders do not (exclusively) serve the prevention of domestic regime change as they are deemed to restore a long history of humiliating or degrading behavior by the targeted actor (and third parties). Therefore, gloating behavior, the enjoyment of someone else's discomfort, is often part of defiant political murders.[58]
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> 2. Context: The murder is preceded by a long series of speech acts or practices of ressentiment and defiance *vis-à-vis* the targeted actor and/or domestic and (liberal) international others.[59] This contextualization may involve the claim that a cultural context, i.e., espionage culture, requires the murder to restore honor.
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> 3. Confirmability*:* The factual circumstances (location, weapon, approach) allow direct inferences about the perpetrator(s) without damning criminal evidence (open and deliberate norm violation) resulting in a successful criminal procedure and sentence.
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> 4. Symbolism: The publicity and disproportionality of the murder, i.e., using rare and dangerous weapons in public

57 See Table 1, based on Reinhard Wolf, "Identifying Emotional Reactions to Status Deprivations in Discourse," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 3 (2017): 491–496.

58 Löwenheim and Heimann, *Revenge in International Politics*, 696.

59 Löwenheim and Heimann, *Revenge in International Politics*, 693.

> spaces, clearly prioritizes revenge and vengeance for past humiliations rather than aiming for the prevention of future acts of degradation.[60]

Research design

This definition of defiant political murder is new. The classical definition by Franklin L. Ford holds that political murder in general is homicide related to the body politic and governance, including both targeted assassinations and random killings designed to intimidate opponents, while calling attention to a given cause.[61] Defiant political murder adds two important additional dimensions: these murders are symbolic in the way that the public method is intended to subjugate the victim for malfeasance by using particularly dangerous and painful means, i.e., nuclear substances. They are also relational in the way that the site of crime is chosen to address a transnational audience and the act itself is meant to brazenly break international legal norms and openly violate transnational feeling rules. It follows that defiant political murders are related to both domestic and international politics, as the perpetrator signals that he/she will not succumb to international norms that protect the physical integrity of individuals against governmental actions.[62]

As such, defiant political murder should be systematically distinguished from violent political purges, i.e., forceful removal of individuals from a polity (politicide) or from elite positions to prevent regime change (coups),[63] and more regular forms of (transnational) repression of oppositional groups and individuals to ensure efficient ruling through reducing costs for repression.[64] Defiant political murder should also be differentiated from targeted killing, a violent use of force against foreign non-state agents rather than citizens targeted by their "own government."

Building upon the recent literature on defiance in international politics,[65] defiant political murders are embedded in overlapping national and transnational feeling rules that trigger an (unintended) emotional response on the national level to a transnational behavioral expectation. To demonstrate the

60 Löwenheim and Heimann, *Revenge in International Politics*, 692.

61 Ford, *Political Murder,* 1.

62 Fierke, "Human Dignity, Basal Emotion, and a Global Emotionology."

63 Jun Koga Sudduth, "Strategic Logic of Elite Purges in Dictatorships," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 13 (2017): 1768–1801.

64 Tsourapas, "Global Autocracies."

65 Rochelle Terman, "Rewarding Resistance: Theorizing Defiance to International Shaming" (Manuscript, University of Chicago, 2019); Wolf, "Between Deference and Defiance".

critical role of defiant behavior in recent international political murders, the article uses two case studies to present different types of defiant transnational political killings. It investigates one great power (Russia) and a lesser power (North Korea) to illustrate the plausibility of the theoretical argument.[66]

I use data from two data sets on political murder in the Soviet Union and Russia (1924–2020), collected by Peter C. Oleson,[67] and North Korea, prepared by Taekbin Kim,[68] to contextualize the case studies on defiant political killings. I use process-tracing and leverage some original data and secondary sources to analyze these case studies: Video footage of the public killing of Kim Jong-nam and the (public) suffering by Alexander Litvinenko;[69] forensic reporting by various government reports and international investigative networks, such as Bellingcat;[70] (local) media coverage[71] as well as extensive secondary sources.[72]

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66 Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 75.

67 Peter C. Oleson, "Stalin's Disciple: Vladimir Putin and Russia's Newest 'Wet Affairs'," *The Intelligencer: Journal of US Intelligence Studies* 22, no. 2 (2016): 19–27; Peter C. Oleson, "'Wet Affairs,' Part II," *The Intelligencer: Journal of US Intelligence Studies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 7–16; and Peter C. Oleson, "'Wet Affairs,' Part III: Russia's Assassination Pandemic," *The Intelligencer: Journal of US Intelligence Studies* 26, no. 2 (2021): 5–24.

68 Taekbin Kim, "Who Is Purged? Determinants of Elite Purges in North Korea," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 54, no. 3 (2021): 73–96, https://doi.org/10.1525/j.postcomstud.2021.54.3.73.

69 National Geographic, "The Murder of Kim Jong-un's Brother | North Korea: Inside the Mind of a Dictator," *National Geographic*, uploaded May 21, 2021, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Xca_uEBHd8; "CCTV Footage Shows Kim Jong-Nam Assassination," *Sky News*, February 20, 2017, accessed January 15, 2022, https://news.sky.com/story/cctv-footage-shows-kim-jong-nam-assassination-10774839; and 5 News, "New CCTV Shows Moment Kim Jong Nam Assassinated," *5 News*, uploaded on February 20, 2017, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ak-ile2HUFY.

70 "If it Hadn't Been for the Prompt Work of the Medics: FSB Officer Inadvertently Confesses Murder Plot to Navalny," *Bellingcat*, December 21, 2020, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/12/21/if-it-hadnt-been-for-the-prompt-work-of-the-medics-fsb-officer-inadvertently-confesses-murder-plot-to-navalny/.

71 "Kim Jong-Nam's Death: Unravelling the Mystery," *BBC News*, February 25, 2017, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39077603.

72 Heidi Blake, *From Russia with Blood: The Kremlin's Ruthless Assassination Program and Vladimir Putin's Secret War on the West* (New York: Mulholland Books, 2019); Alex Goldfarb with Marina Litvinenko, *Death of a Dissident: The Poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and the Return of the KGB* (New York: Free Press, 2007); Luke Harding, *A Very Expensive Poison: The Definitive Story of the Murder of Litvinenko and Russia's War with the West* (London: Guardian Books, 2016); Amy Knight, *Orders to Kill: The Putin Regime and Political Murder* (London: St. Martin's Press, 2017); Jung H. Pak, *Becoming Kim Jong-Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insight into North Korea's Enigmatic Dictator* (New York: Ballantine, 2020); and Martin Sixsmith, *The Litvinenko File: The True Story of a Death Foretold* (London: Macmillan, 2007).

To better understand how and when defiant murders occur, this article asks "how something became possible" rather than "why something happened."[73] To do so, one needs to establish the conditions in which an action or process occurs,[74] and these facilitating conditions need to be broken down further into political configurations—relational factors indicating the (mal)distribution of authority and social and emotional capital among the actors involved—and the ideational dependences, i.e., historically specific dispositions and institutional memories in the discourse.[75]

While the political configurations that create or allow for defiant murders are fairly well established in the secondary literature on both Russia and North Korea, the ideational dependences are not. This article therefore focuses on a thick historical description of the specific ideational dispositions of the respective regime to trace the interactions between the original role taking and the killing to re-establish recognition as a great power (Russia) or a nuclear power to be reckoned with (North Korea).

Russia

There is no dearth of studies of purges and political murders in Soviet or Russian history.[76] Neither is there a lack of analyses arguing that the Russian government has pursued an "aggressive foreign policy,"[77] has sought to be

73 Rosanne L. Doty, "Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of US Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines," *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1993): 297–320; 297.

74 Stefano Guzzini, "Securitization as a Causal Mechanism," *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 4–5 (2011): 329–341.

75 Corey Robinson, "Tracing and Explaining Securitization: Social Mechanisms, Process Tracing, and the Securitization of Irregular Migration," *Security Dialogue* 48, no. 6 (2017): 505–523; 516.

76 An incomplete list includes: Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *The Russian Syndrome: One Thousand Years of Political Murder* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1992); Knight, *Orders to Kill*; Oleson, "Stalin's Disciple"; Oleson, "'Wet Affairs,' Part II"; Oleson, "'Wet Affairs,' Part III"; Mark Urban, *The Skripal Files: The Life and near Death of a Russian Spy* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018); Blake, *From Russia with Blood*; David V. Gioe, Michael S. Goodman, and David S. Frey, "Unforgiven: Russian Intelligence Vengeance as Political Theatre and Strategic Messaging," *Intelligence and National Security* 34, no. 4 (2019): 561–575, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2019.1573537; and Adrian Hänni and Miguel Grossmann, "Death to Traitors? The Pursuit of Intelligence Defectors from the Soviet Union to the Putin Era," *Intelligence and National Security* 35, no. 3 (2020): 403–423, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2020.1728046.

77 Maria Snegovaya, "What Factors Contribute to the Aggressive Foreign Policy of Russian Leaders?," *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 1 (2020): 93–110, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2018.1554408.

recognized as a "great power,"[78] a "true European state,"[79] acted as "deviant power,"[80] or played the role of a "defiant actor."[81] However, there has thus far been no systematic attempt to bring these distant literatures together to further explain the nexus between great power status seeking, deviant and defiant behavior, and symbolic acts of murder. Rather, as David V. Gioe et al. and Adrian Hänni and Miguel Grossmann have suggested,[82] the recent public killings of Alexander Litvinenko (2006) and Sergei Skripal (2018) should be interpreted as part of "vengeance operations" of Russian intelligence agencies, which do not match an older pattern of Soviet intelligence agencies killing defectors.[83]

Although it seems that the symbolic murders of Alexander Litvinenko and Sergei Skripal broke new ground when compared to historical patterns of killing defectors during the Cold War, recent defiant political murders are neither restricted to intelligence defectors—as the case of Alexei Navalny suggests—nor are they initiated by Russia only, as the cases of Kim Jong-nam (North Korea), Jamal Khashoggi (Saudi Arabia), Vitaly Shishov (Belarus), and other victims indicate.[84] Defiant political murders are not a plausible instrument to attain international prestige or status as a great power, because these types of killing one's citizens beyond the nation's borders are regularly followed by sanctions and other acts of status deprivation. Rather, defiant and symbolic political murders originate from a deep sense of role derogation of an autocratic ruler by a domestic and/or foreign other so that the murder is meant to restore superiority in one of two (or both) role relationships with domestic and international opponents.

In the case of Russia, Reinhard Wolf has identified three major episodes in Russian foreign policy practices of defiance: the disposition of Russian

78 Eric Ringmar, "The Recognition Game: Soviet Russia against the West," *Cooperation and Conflict* 37, no. 2 (2002): 115–136; Deborah W. Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010): 63–95; Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The Frustrating Partnership: Honor, Status, and Emotions in Russia's Discourses of the West," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47, no. 3–4 (2014): 345–354.

79 Iver B. Neumann, "Russia's Europe, 1991–2016: Inferiority to Superiority," *International Affairs* 92, no. 6 (2016): 1381–1399.

80 Jardar N. Østbo, "Strategic Transgressions: Russia's Deviant Sovereignty and the Myth of Evgenii Prigozhin," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 29, no. 2 (2021): 183–208.

81 Wolf, "Between Deference and Defiance."

82 Gioe, Goodman, and Frey, "Unforgiven"; and Hänni, and Grossmann, "Death to Traitors?"

83 Gioe, Goodman, and Frey, "Unforgiven."

84 Kim, "Who Is Purged?"

paratroopers at Pristina airport to face off Western troops in 1999, the invasion of Georgian territory in 2008, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and hybrid warfare in Eastern Ukraine thereafter.[85] In all three episodes, Russian government officials propagated a traditional conception of state sovereignty that stands in contradiction to the Western conception of sovereignty as a responsibility towards the people rather than a right of the government *vis-à-vis* the people and other states.[86]

It comes as no surprise that the Russian foreign policy elite regarded the color revolutions, starting in the mid-2000s, as a direct threat to Russian sovereignty. As Putin famously complained in 2007 at the Munich Security conference: The United States was talking and acting like a "strict uncle" who has "overstepped its national border in every way … imposing all kinds of policies on other nations."[87] More than a decade later, Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Russian Security Council, decried how the United States misused international law by replacing it with the "doctrine of a rules-based order" that gives the United States the prerogative to "intervene militarily and introduce sanctions against unwanted states [*sic*] and meddle in their internal affairs."[88] Rather than being a "liberal world order," Konstantin Kosachev, head of the Federation Council's Foreign Committee, seconded, that order constituted a "global dictate of liberal states."[89]

What irked Putin the most during this period, according to various sources, was the Western and US disrespect in their attempts to tell Russia how to behave: "attempts are made to weaken us from within, make us more acquiescent, make us toe the line … we don't need [the US] constantly getting mixed up in our affairs."[90] It is also possible, if not probable, that personal grievances of Putin or his close confidants also played a role in the targets or time period of some murders. As Amy Knight reports in her authoritative history of political murder in Russia under Putin, Litvinenko, shortly before

85 Wolf, "Between Deference and Defiance," 6.

86 Ruth Deyermond, "The Uses of Sovereignty in Twenty-First Century Russian Foreign Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 6 (2016): 957–987; 967.

87 Vladimir Putin, "Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy," February 10, 2007, accessed January 15, 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034.

88 Nikolai Patrushev, "Videt tsel" [To see the goal], *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, November 11, 2019, accessed January 11, 2021, https://rg.ru/2019/11/11/patrushev-ssha-stremiatsia-izbavitsia-ot-mezhdunarodno-pravovyh-ramok.html.

89 Konstantin Kosachev, "Miroporiadok, postroennyi na pravilakh" [A Rules-Based World Order], *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, July 1, 2020, accessed January 12, 2021, https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2020-0701/7_7899_system.html?print=Y.

90 As cited in Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: The Inside Story of Russia and America* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2018), 244.

his forceful death in July 2006, wrote an article in the *Chechen Press* reporting on rumors that Putin was a pedophile after the President had greeted a group of tourists outside the Kremlin and lifted a young boy's t-shirt to kiss him on the stomach.[91]

The Soviet KGB had long held a policy of targeting political opponents and intelligence defectors throughout the Cold War.[92] The KGB preferred a pattern of public executions for opponents, or discreet, camouflaged killings by entrusted surrogates to prevent the victim from revealing further secrets and maintain credible deterrence against further defections from the KGB.[93] In contrast to the vast number of political killings and the new type of defiant political murders under Putin,[94] these earlier KGB-directed killings were geared towards domestic sovereignty and organizational resilience in the face of the mishandling of state and intelligence secrets. The means and circumstances of these killings were functional rather than symbolic and while they were moderately effective when compared to their deterrence aims, they were highly effective in killing the victims (see Table 2).[95]

In a rare public interview in December 2017, the then-Director of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), Alexandr Bortnikov, described how the Soviet/Russian security apparatus viewed the figure of the "traitor":

> One must take historical conditions into account. On repeated occasions our Fatherland was the object of hostile incursions by foreign powers. The adversary tried to defeat us either in open battle, or by relying on traitors inside the country, using their help to sow trouble, divide the nation, paralyze the state's ability to react to emerging threats in a timely and efficient manner. For some, the destruction of Russia to this day remains an *idée fixe*.[96]

91 Knight, *Orders to Kill*, 158.

92 Knight, *Orders to Kill*; Blake, *From Russia with Blood*; Hänni and Grossmann, "Death to Traitors?"

93 Hänni and Grossmann, "Death to Traitors?" 7.

94 As Karl Dewey notes regarding political murder through poisoning, President Putin has overseen more politically motivated poison attacks than any other Soviet or Russian leader. See Karl Dewey, "Poisonous Affairs: Russia's Evolving Use of Poison in Covert Action," *The Nonproliferation Review* 2023 (Online First): 2.

95 All data collected from Oleson, "Stalin's Disciple"; Oleson, "'Wet Affairs,' Part II"; and Oleson, "'Wet Affairs,' Part III." Please also note the comprehensive list of political murders and attempted murders in the Data Appendix.

96 As cited in Julie Fedor, "The Figure of the Traitor in the Checkist Cosmology," *The Routledge International Handbook of Universities, Security, and Intelligence Studies*, ed. Liam Francis Gearon (New York: Routledge, 2020), 178–186.

Table 2: *Public Political murder in the Soviet Union (Politburo only) and Russia (opposition / secret service) (1934–2020): Attempts and implementation ratio*

Soviet Union		
Year	**Deaths**	**Implementation ratio**
1934	1	100%
1935	1	100%
1936	2	100%
1937	5	100%
1938	9	100%
1939	1	100%
1940	3	100%
1948	1	100%
1953	1	100%
1978	1	100%
Sum Soviet Union	**25**	**100%**
Russian Federation		
Year	**Total / successful (+unsure)/ failed**	
1993/1994	1/1/0	100%
1995	1/1/0	100%
1996	0	0
1997	1/1/0	100%
1998	2/2/0	100%
1999	0	0
2000	1/1/0	100%
2001	0	0
2002	1/1/0	100%
2003	4/4/0	100%
2004	5/5/0	100%
2005	0	0
2006	5/4/1	80%
2007	7/5/2	71,43%
2008	4/2/2	50%
2009	5/4/1	80%
2010	5/3(*1)/1	80%

2011	0	0
2012	4/2/2	50%
2013	1/1/0	100%
2014	9/9/0	100%
2015	4/2/2	50%
2016	14/12(**1)/1	92,86%
2017	17/12/5	70,56%
2018	7/4/3	57,14%
2019	5/4/1	80%
2020	2/1/1	50%
Sum Russian Federation	**105 assassinations /81 (+2) successful / 22 failed attempts**	**79,05%**
Total Soviet Union & Russian Federation	**130 assassinations / 108 successful / 22 failed attempts**	**82,31%**

* Sergei Tretyakov: Died, probably of natural causes.

** Aleksandr Poteyev: Death declared, possibly disinformation to cover defection.

When compared to the Soviet cases, the (attempted) public murders of Litvinenko, S. Skripal, and Alexei Navalny with rare and dangerous nuclear and chemical substances clearly stand out.[97] In all cases, the perpetrators had the chance to assassinate the victim quietly and effectively, given that subsequent investigations revealed that the victims had been observed for months. In contrast to the other two attempted killings, the Litvinenko murder stands out. Before the highly publicized press conference in November 1998, where former FSB agent Litvinenko and some of his colleagues explained to a global audience how and why the FSB had been involved in corruption, conspiracy, and extrajudicial (attempted) killings, no other FSB agent had exposed so many and wide-reaching operational secrets of the FSB. As a consequence, Litvenenko not only lost his job at the FSB but also was convicted (on fabricated charges) to a year in prison before fleeing to London.[98]

97 In a rare WMD-related murder during the Cold War, a KGB agent killed Georgi Makov in 1978 in London by using a ricin-infested pellet delivered with a modified umbrella. See Daniel Salisbury and Karl Dewey, "Murder on Waterloo Bridge: Placing the Assassination of Georgi Markov in Past and Present Context, 1970–2018," *Contemporary British History* 37, no. 1 (2023): 128–156, https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2022.2160707.

98 John B. Dunlop, "Post-Communist Political Violence: The Poisoning of Aleksandr Litvinenko," in *Political Violence: Belief, Behavior, and Legitimation*, ed. Paul Hollander (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 93–108; 98.

In London, Litvinenko positioned himself as a dissident to the Russian regime. Not only did he associate with Boris Berezovsky as a security advisor, he also collaborated with Spanish and British intelligence agencies. Moreover, in 2001, Litvinenko co-authored a book, *Blowing up Russia*,[99] in which he accused the FSB as responsible for the terrorist bombings of several apartment buildings in Moscow in 1999, thereby directly implicating Putin and his close friend Nicolai Patrushev (head of FSB) in one of the worst terrorist attacks on Russian soil.[100]

In early November 2006, Litvinenko met with two Russian businessmen, Andrey Lugovoy and Dmitry Kovtun, in a hotel bar in London for tea. A British public inquiry under the former Foreign Minister Sir Robert Owen found that on this occasion, these two individuals poisoned Litvinenko with Polonium-201, a rare and dangerous nuclear substance, leaving traces of the poison all over London and beyond. Litvinenko was hospitalized for poisoning and died following a torturous three-week period.[101]

The Litvinenko murder established a pattern of defiant political murder in the Russian Federation under President Putin: The perpetrators used a rare and weapons-grade nuclear or (highly restricted) chemical substance that leads to a prolonged, painful, and visible death to achieve maximum and extended attention, thereby creating a phase of public humiliation for those who had allegedly betrayed Russia. The significance of this phase of humiliation is supported by Putin's gloating behavior, stating about Litvinenko in 2010: "Traitors will kick the bucket. … Trust me. These people betrayed their friends, their brothers in arms. Whatever they got in exchange for it, those thirty pieces of silver they were given, they will choke on them."[102]

We see this pattern repeated in further attacks. Sergei Skripal, his daughter, and two unrelated British citizens were poisoned with Novichok, a rare military-grade nerve agent, in the fall of 2018. Again, Putin derided the victim, calling Skripal a "traitor" and "scumbag" following the attack.[103]

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99 Yuri Felshtinsky, *Alexander Litvinenko, Blowing Up Russia*, 2nd ed. (London: Gibson Square, 2007).

100 John B. Dunlop, *The Moscow Bombings of September 1999: Examinations of Russian Terrorist Attacks at the Onset of Vladimir Putin's Rule* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

101 "The Litvinenko Inquiry: Report from the Public Inquiry into the Death of Alexander Litvinenko, Chairman: Sir Robert Owen, Home Office, UK," January 21, 2016, accessed July 15, 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/493860/The-Litvinenko-Inquiry-H-C-695-web.pdf; Harding, *A Very Expensive Poison*.

102 As cited in Editorial Board, "Vladimir Putin's Toxic Reach," *New York Times*, March 12, 2018, accessed February 3, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/12/opinion/russia-spy-poison-britain.html.

103 Marc Bennetts, "Skripal is Just a Scumbag and Traitor, Says Putin," *The Times*, October 3, 2018, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/skripal-is-just-a-scumbag-and-traitor-says-putin-3qfghcrjg.

There is also substantial evidence that Navalny, after several earlier attempts on his life, was observed for several weeks by an FSB team in 2020 and then also poisoned with Novichok, surviving only, as an involved FSB agent later revealed, because of the prompt intervention by paramedics.[104]

In this pattern, the perpetrators leave behind extensive and visible evidence of their operation such that subsequent investigations can pinpoint specific perpetrators by name, travel itineraries, implications in earlier murders, etc. In the case of Skripal, for example, the two agents dropped a perfume bottle containing the military-grade poison in a garbage can, which resulted in an unrelated British couple becoming contaminated with the woman dying a few days later. Given the professionalism in other covert (domestic) killings, this apparent sloppiness suggests that the operators either saw no need to conceal their actions or deliberately chose to leave visible evidence for the investigators to find. It is thus plausible to suggest that the operatives wished to maximize the power gap between the victim and the perpetrator by strengthening the confirmability of the offence while keeping their impunity.

The confirmability and symbolism of the act thus provides further evidence that the murders of Litvinenko and Skripal, and the attempted murder of Navalny,[105] should be treated as instances of defiant political murder because the perpetrating governments did not try to conceal their nefarious actions.[106] In addition, the Russian Duma passed a new law in 2006 that explicitly gave the President the authority to use the Armed Forces and Intelligence services to kill so-called enemies of the Russian state on foreign soil.[107] Thanks to this law, when deliberately killing the enemies of the Russian state, perpetrators merely implemented national legislation, superimposing Russia's law upon the legal order of the target state.[108] It follows that these defiant killings may be characterized as preemptive defiant acts of murder, as they were geared towards preserving Russia's status as a great sovereign power capable of imposing its will upon international society and key political players, such as the United Kingdom (Litvinenko, Skripal) or Germany (Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a legal resident, was shot in Berlin in August 2020 by a Russian agent).

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104 Bellingcat, "If it Hadn't Been for the Prompt Work of the Medics."

105 Suzanne Freeman, "Fear and a Pattern of Political Killing in Russia," *precís* (Spring/Summer 2021), accessed January 15, 2022, https://cis.mit.edu/publications/magazine/fear-and-pattern-political-killing-russia.

106 Kim, "Who is Purged?," 74.

107 Alice Cuddy, "What Authority Does Putin Have to Order Extrajudicial Killings Abroad?," *Euronews*, August 3, 2018, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.euronews.com/2018/03/08/what-authority-does-putin-have-to-order-extrajudicial-killings-abroad-.

108 Sixsmith, *The Litvinenko File*, 303.

North Korea

Political murders and purges have been regular features of the North Korean regime since its inception, but defiant political murders have been rare. The database by Taekbin Kim accounts for 367 purges between 1948–2019.[109] There is also plenty of evidence for high-profile (attempted) political killings, including a 1968 raid by special commandoes to murder the South Korean President Park Chung-hee, the (successful) bombing of a South Korean ministerial delegation in Rangoon (1983), and the shooting of Yi Han-young, a cousin on Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-un's older half-brother, who defected to South Korea in 1997.[110] The public dismissal (and eventual killing) of Kim Jong-un's uncle, Chang Song-teak, in 2013 and the prominent murder of his half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, in 2017, are often interpreted as similar purges among the North Korean elite, meant to solidify Kim Jong-un's rule by executing potential rivals.[111] However, there is plausible evidence to suggest that at least the state-sponsored assassination of Kim Jong-nam should be interpreted as a defiant political murder.

The North Korean regime has a long history of defiant behavior geared towards preserving its sovereignty and state autonomy (*Juche* ideology) with a political leadership cult that does not tolerate any sign of disloyalty by citizens or foreigners.[112] For a long time, the country has been the paradigmatic "rogue state" of the international community.[113] This label assumes an adversarial relationship that includes recourse to preemptive use of force including alleged weapons of mass destruction. Such stigmatization may lead the accused state to associate with other deviant actors—including behaviors such as coalition

109 Kim, "Who is Purged?"

110 Anna Fifield, "A Not-That-Short History of North Korean Assassinations and Attempts," *Washington Post*, February 15, 2017, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/02/15/a-not-that-short-history-of-north-korean-assassinations-and-attempts/.

111 Anna Fifield, *The Great Successor: The Secret Rise and Rule of Kim Jong Un* (London: John Murray, 2019), 83; Kim, "Who is Purged?," 69.

112 Jae-Cheon Lim, *Leader Symbols and Personality Cult in North Korea: The Leader State* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2; and Sang-hun Choe and Norimitsu Onishi, "North Korea's Tears: A Blend of Cult, Culture, and Coercion," *New York Times*, December 21, 2011, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/21/world/asia/north-korean-mourning-blends-emotion-and-coercion.html. Desecrating the North Korea leadership, even if only by throwing away a newspaper with an image, is a serious crime in North Korea and will be punished harshly, as the pitiful story of American student Otto Warmbier attests, see Amy B. Wang and Susan Svrluga, "Otto Warmbier's Parents Speak Out: 'North Korea is Not a Victim. They're Terrorists'." *Washington Post*, September 26, 2017.

113 Alexandra Homolar, "Rebels Without a Conscience: The Evolution of the Rogue States Narrative in US Security Policy," *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 4 (2011): 705–727; and Carmen Wunderlich, *Rogue States as Norm Entrepreneurs: Norm Research in International Relations* (Cham: Springer, 2020).

building or behavioral reversal—but it also regularly results in spirals of mutual demonization.[114]

A typically defiant statement by the North Korean propaganda operation during the reign of Kim Jong-il blends the country's renunciatory position with its adherence to the leadership cult:

> The U.S.-led imperialist forces and international reactionaries are fabricating nuclear, missile, and other issues to strangle the North militarily and economically. We neither want nor will avoid a war. If a war is imposed, we will never miss the opportunity.[115]

The statement closes with the threat of a catastrophic war, setting the North Korean people in direct contradistinction with the United States and its alleged aggressive politics:

> The respected Marshal [Kim Jong-il] has created an army-centered politics for the first time in the political history of world and brilliantly materialized it. It is the unshakable faith and character of the Korean people and army to meet a challenge with a thousand-fold annihilating strike and a war of aggression with a liberation war of justice. If the United States misjudges the quality of the Korean people rallied around the great brilliant commander in one mind in the spirit of human bombs and unleashes a war of aggression, the Korean people will not miss the opportunity to rise up as one.[116]

Under Kim Jong-un, North Korea's domestic propaganda has taken an additional defiant turn, associating US sanctions as signs of enmity directed against the "self-revival" (*charyŏk kaengsaeng*) of the North Korean people. In this view, the reign of Kim Jong-un is identified with a "New Dawn" (*Ryŏmyŏng*) that elevates North Korea to the international space.[117]

> Despite the persistent military pressure and vicious economic blockade of the monstrous US imperialists, through shortages of food and fuel brought on by untimely natural disasters, our army and people followed

114 Martin Senn, *Wolves in the Woods: The Rogue State Concept from a Constructivist Perspective* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2009).

115 Cited in Jasper Becker, *Rogue Regime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

116 Cited in Becker, *Rogue Regime*, 8.

117 Meredith Shaw, "The Abyss Gazes Back: How North Korean Propaganda Interprets Sanctions, Threats, and Diplomacy," *The Pacific Review* 35, no. 1 (2022): 202–228, https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1844281.

> the Great General's will to build a strong nation, devoting their bodies and their lives. If it would ease their suffering, Comrade Kim Jong Un would willingly burn his body to ash and become their fire and foundation.[118]

Defiant speeches and behavior have been particularly strong in North Korea's nonproliferation policies.[119] The North Korean government regularly criticizes the current nonproliferation order, particularly the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as discriminatory and asymmetric and uses (defiant) norm-transgressive behavior to elicit concessions by great powers,[120] especially the United States.[121] However, North Korea rarely itself engages in norm entrepreneurship, allies with like-minded states, or takes responsibility for its own actions, i.e., its self-proclaimed nuclear weapon status.[122]

Notably, when announcing its intention to establish a nuclear deterrent force in June 2003, the North Korean regime argued that building nuclear weapons was a necessary and legitimate response to the "hostile policy" of the US and the need to "reduce conventional weapons … and channel manpower resources and funds into economic construction and the betterment of people's living."[123] Rather than addressing the whole international society and regularly disparaging international institutions, such as the United Nations Security Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), North Korean statements display a strong desire to receive recognition by the United States as a formally equal interlocutor and respected partner, thereby ending a "century of humiliation" for Koreans, characterized by Japanese occupation and US domination.[124]

When gauging the immediate context of the assassination of Kim Jong-nam, it becomes obvious that the interaction between the United States and North Korea took a potentially decisive adversarial turn in the early days of the Trump administration: To begin with, during the interregnum, the North

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118 Cited in Shaw, "The Abyss Gazes Back," 13.

119 Tanya Ogilvie-White, "The Defiant States," *Nonproliferation Review* 17, no. 1 (2010): 115–138, https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700903484702; Wunderlich, *Rogue States as Norm Entrepreneurs*; and Michal Smetana, *Nuclear Deviance: Stigma Politics and the Rules of the Nonproliferation Game* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2020).

120 Deon Geldenhuys, *Deviant Conduct in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 168.

121 Smetana, *Nuclear Deviance*, 177.

122 Wunderlich, *Rogue States as Norm Entrepreneurs*, 245–247.

123 KCNA, "KCNA on DPRK's Nuclear Deterrent Force," *KCNA,* June 9, 2003, accessed April 28, 2024, http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2003/200306/news06/10.htm.

124 Bruce W. Bennet, Kang Choi, Myong-Hyun Go, Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., Jiyoung Park, Bruce Klingner, and Du-Hyeogn Cha, *Countering the Risks of North Korean Nuclear Weapons* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1015-1.html.

Korean Foreign Ministry issued a Memorandum (November 21, 2016), claiming that the US had "aimed at political suffocation and system collapse" under President Obama, listing nineteen specific instances, which resulted "in defaming the supreme dignity of the DPRK—the gravest of all sins."[125] Then on December 1, 2016, former US General of the Eighth Army, General Walter Sharp, stated that the United States ought to launch a preemptive strike on North Korean sites should North Korea put an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on a launch pad and the US was uncertain whether or not it carried a nuclear warhead.[126] In his traditional New Year's address, Kim Jung-un primarily discussed North Korea's economy, but also praised recent advances of its nuclear weapons program, most notably a "first H-bomb test, test-firing of various means of strike and nuclear-warhead[s] … and enter[ing] the final stage of preparation for the test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile" capable of reaching the continental United States.[127] In an immediate response, President-Elect Trump sent a tweet, reprimanding Kim Jong-un directly: "North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won't happen!"[128] thereby implying that the United States would act preemptively against the ICBM missile test Kim Jong-un had announced during his earlier New Year's address.

In sum, the defiant political murder of Kim Jong-nam is preceded by a string of practices that show North Korean defiance concerning weapons of mass destruction and its struggle for recognition as an equal partner with the United States. The ensuing interaction pattern with the incoming Trump administration, however, is characterized by both partners seeking first-mover advantages and domination. In particular, as various US actors, including the President-elect, signal a willingness to strike, North Korea presents their missile capabilities to challenge the Trump administration to recognize their equal status.[129]

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125 KCNA, "Kim Jong Un's 2017 New Year's Address," *KCNA*, January 2, 2017, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/KJU_2017_New_Years_Address.pdf.

126 Richard Sisk, "Former US General Calls for Pre-emptive Strike on North Korea," *Defense Tech*, December 1, 2016, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.military.com/defensetech/2016/12/01/pre-emptive-strike-north-korea/amp.

127 KCNA, "Kim Jong Un's 2017 New Year's Address."

128 Maggie Haberman and David Sanger, "'It Won't Happen!' Donald Trump Says of North Korean Missile Test," *New York Times*, January 2, 2017, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/02/world/asia/trump-twitter-north-korea-missiles-china.html.

129 Hongyu Zhang, Weiqi Zhang, and Dimitry Zinoviev, "Deterrence or Coercion: Analyzing DPRK's Nuclear Intentions with Its Propaganda Texts," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, online first (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221147003.

It was in this political context that two women from Indonesia and Vietnam, guided by eight North Korean agents, used the powerful nerve agent Venomous Agent X (VX) to attack Kim Jong-nam at Kuala Lumpur International Airport on February 13, 2017. After suffering painful convulsions, the victim died on the way to the hospital, with security cameras capturing the attack in great detail.[130] In the aftermath, a brief diplomatic crisis ensued between Malaysia and North Korea over the causes and the investigation of the death. Most of the culprits fled the country immediately after the attack. Only the two women were arrested and tried, and after serving truncated sentences released because the prosecution dropped or lowered the charges.[131]

There had been various previous attempts on Kim Jong-nam's life, dating back to the early 2000s.[132] In addition, there is ample evidence that Kim Jong-un ordered at least several dozens of purges and assassinations during the early years of his reign, most notably the murder of his uncle and mentor, Chang Song-taek, to consolidate his grip on power.[133] However, the timing, circumstances, and modus operandi of Kim Jong-nam's assassination suggest that deterrence *vis-à-vis* domestic rivals was a secondary concern in this murder. Given the earlier attempts on his life and that he carried antidotes against various poisons, including VX, with him at the time, and given that the two women were recruited and used in a similar situation several months before, it is noteworthy that Kim Jong-nam was killed during a period of heightened tensions with the United States. The timing is all the more suspicious when one considers that Kim Jong-nam reportedly met with an CIA agent just days before the attack and was carrying a large sum of cash (US $120,000) in a backpack when he was assaulted.[134] Most important, however, is the use of a prohibited and dangerous nerve agent in a highly-visible and public setting. Due to these factors, it is more than plausible to suggest that this murder was meant to signal at least two things: first, that North Korea possessed weapons of mass destruction, a fact it had not acknowledged before; and, secondly, that

130 The brazen attack at one of the busiest international airports has been documented in the movie *The Assassins*, directed by Ryan White (London: Dogwood, 2020). See https://releasing.dogwoof.com/assassins.

131 Fifield, *The Great Successor*, 156.

132 Doug B. Clark, "The Untold Story of Kim Jong Nam's Assassination," *GQ Magazine*, September 25, 2017, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.gq.com/story/kim-jong-nam-accidental-assassination.

133 Ken E. Gause, "North Korean Political Dynamics of the KJU Era," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 25, no 1 (2016): 33–63; and Kim, "Who is Purged?"

134 Warren Strobel, "North Korean Leader's Slain Half Brother Was a CIA Source," *Wall Street Journal*, June 10, 2019, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/north-korean-leaders-slain-half-brother-was-said-to-have-been-a-cia-informant-11560203662?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink.

the regime was also willing and able to use them to strengthen its deterrence against external threats, particularly those with relations to the US.[135] In this view, the defiant political murder of Kim Jong-nam, an alleged CIA informant, becomes an act of emancipatory defiance because the regime imposed its own new status role as a nuclear weapon state upon the United States at a time when the US President suggested preemptive military action to deny North Korea and its leader that status role.

Conclusion

Fortunately, defiant political murders are rare. The number of instances and perpetrating countries has grown notably over the past fifteen years, however, which indicates changing dynamics in the international community. These defiant political murders signal that some members of the international community live in a state of enmity with the broader liberal, Western-dominated, international order as they seek to reassert their (status) position as either great powers or nuclear powers to be reckoned with, thereby contesting the current rules-based order. The article has developed a theoretical explanation based on international role theory and the concept of defiance to integrate norm-violating behavior with resentment in a feeling structure to explain this particular type of violent transnational repression.

Conceptually, defiant political murders are interpreted in this paper as more than a reaction to increasing norm compliance pressure by the liberal international community to protect an individual's physical integrity. Rather, they are conceptualized as relational phenomena that occur when opponents question the superior domestic and international role of an autocratic ruler. This questioning triggers resentments that may originate from violations of functional cultures, i.e., the moral code of intelligence services, or international diplomatic rules and attached feeling structures. Many discreet political murders may be explained in this way. However, defiant transnational political murders are committed publicly and use attention grabbing means so that the perpetrating state can display its (often illegal) capacities and willingness to use weapons or other means that potentially endanger the broader public. This is to say, defiant political murders are intended to hurt more than the victim: They superimpose the perpetrator's self-claimed role in international relations upon a specific significant other, e.g., the United Kingdom, and the international community as a whole to roll back liberal advances in the protection of citizens of autocratic states living abroad.

135 Richard C. Paddock, Choe Sang-Hun, and Nicholas Wade, "In Kim Jong-nam's Death, North Korea Lets Loose a Weapon of Mass Destruction," *New York Times*, February 24, 2017, accessed January 15, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/24/world/asia/north-korea-kim-jong-nam-vx-nerve-agent.html.

Theoretically, the superimposition of a perpetrator's self-claimed role may be geared towards re-establishing or stabilizing a superior role. This might be a great power role, as in the case of Russia, that is deemed to be under threat. In the case of North Korea, the regime has used various means to gain recognition for its self-claimed role as a nuclear weapon state and equal interlocutor to the United States, but it has used the defiant political murder of Kim Jong-nam to showcase its willingness to use weapons of mass destruction. Defiant political murders are expressions of the desire for superior domestic and international role assertions, and their increasing numbers indicate that more and more perpetrating regimes deem it necessary to assassinate opponents on foreign territory with highly dangerous weapons to send a message to a third actor or the international society.

Empirically, the two case studies revealed important insights about the roots of enmity in international politics. Extant studies on political murders tend to assume that the opponent or their potential capacity to challenge the perpetrating regime were important causes for the respective murder. While all victims may have had a degree of this capacity, most lacked the potential to seriously threaten the regime at the time they were killed. Furthermore, when breaking international norms on the production, transport, and use of chemical or nuclear agents, the perpetrators gave no indication that their intention was to openly contest these norms in general. Rather, they violated these norms in order to seize the attention of the international community.

To clarify, this article did not intend to present a systematic paper on all cases of defiant political murder, nor does it in any way condone the practices described. Rather, it is concerned with the meaning of transnational public assassinations, with an eye to improving our ability to limit them. The findings suggest that defiant political murders may be prevented by better protecting potential victims, by paying more attention to the words and deeds of both great and subaltern powers, and by seeking to preserve or expand the status in international society of those have developed a particularly strong sense of mistrust and emotional insecurity.

Data appendix

Source	**Date**	**Political murder**	**Victim (intelligence service / opposition)**	**Type of murder (WMD/ no WMD)**	**Suspected perpetrator (private / state)**
Oleson 2016	1934	Sergei Kirov (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (initiation of the Great Purge)

Oleson 2016	1935	Valerian Kui-by-shev (Politburo member)	Opposition	Unknown causes	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1936	Lev Kamenev (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1936	Grigori Zinoviev (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1937	Mikhail Tomsky (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1937	Nikolai Uglanov (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1937	Karl Baumann (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1937	Grigory Sokol-nikov (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1937	Georgi Konstanti-novich (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1938	Nikolai Krestink-sky (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1938	Nikolai Burkharin (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1938	Aleksei Rykov (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1938	Yan Rudzutak (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)

Oleson 2016	1938	Vlas Chubar (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1938	Stanislav Koslor (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1938	Sergei Syrtsov (Politburo member)	Opposition	Details unknown	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1938	Andrei Bubnov (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1938	Andrei Andreyev (Politburo member)	Opposition	Details unknown	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1939	Pavel Postyshev (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1940	Robert Eikhe (Eihe) (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1940	Leon Trotsky (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1940	Nikolai Yezhov (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1948	Laurence Duggan	Secret service (State Department employee, NKVD agent)	No WMD (supposed suicide)	
Oleson 2016	1953	Lavrentij Beria (Politburo member)	Opposition	No WMD	State actor (as part of the Great Purge)
Oleson 2016	1978	Georgi Makov	Opposition (Bulgarian critic)	WMD (poisoned)	

Russian Federation/Post-Soviet era (after 1989)					
Oleson 2021	1993–1994	Sons of Ryszard Kuklinski	Secret service-associated (father was Polish General staff colonel and prolific CIA spy)	No WMD	
Oleson 2016	1995	Ivan Kivelidi	Business (corruption fighter, head of Russian Business Roundtable)	WMD (poisoned)	State actor
Oleson 2021	1997, August 18	Mikhail Manevich	Opposition (tried to regain control of the port for the St. Petersburg city government that had been taken over by criminals in league with Putin's position as deputy mayor)	No WMD	Private actor
Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2021	1998, November 20	Galina Starovoitova	Opposition	No WMD	Private actor (former GRU agent)
Oleson 2021	1998	Yury Shutov	Opposition	No WMD	
Oleson 2021	2000, February 19	Anatoly Sobchak	Opposition (former politician; writing KGB-critical article)	WMD (probably poisoned)	Private actor
Oleson 2016	2002, March 20	Ibn al-Khattab	Opposition (Chechen rebel military leader; former anti-Soviet mujahedeen fighter in Afghanistan)	WMD (poisoned)	State actor
Oleson 2016	2003, April 17	Sergei Yushenkov	Opposition (co-chairman of Liberal Russia movement)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2021	2003, July 3	Yuri Shchekochikhin	Opposition (journalism)	WMD (probably poisoned)	State actor

Oleson 2021	2003, September; 2008; 2009, March	Yamadayev Brothers	Opposition (Chechen opposition)	No WMD	State actors
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	Late 2003	Stephen Moss	Business (associate of Stephen Curtis and Scot Young; associated with death of Scot Young and Boris Berezovsky)	Unknown cause ("heart attack")	
Oleson 2016	2004, February 13	Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev	Opposition (Presdient of break-away Chechen Republic)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2004, March 3	Stephen Curtis	Business/Opposition (tax lawyer Yukos Oil; associated with Scot Young and others)	No WMD	
Oleson 2016	2004, June 19	Nikolai Girenko	Opposition (human rights defender)	No WMD	Private actor
Oleson 2016	2004, July 9	Paul Klebnikov	Opposition (journalist)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2016	2004, September 5 (?)	Viktor Yushchenko	Opposition (anti-Russian candidate for presidency in Ukraine)	WMD (poisoned)	State actor
Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2021	2006, September 14	Andrei Kozlov	Business (deputy chairman of Russia Central Bank)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2016	2006, October 7	Anna Politkovskaya	Opposition (journalist)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2006, October 30	Igor Ponomarev	Government official (representative to International Maritime Organization; investigating KGB links to Italy)	WMD (probably poisoned)	State actor

Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2006, November 23	Alexander Litvinenko	Secret service and Opposition (KGB defector in 2000; associate of Boris Berezovsky)	WMD (poisoned)	State actor
Oleson 2016	2006, November 24	Igor Gaidar	Opposition	WMD (potentially poisoned, victim survived)	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2007, January 7	Yuri Golubev	Business (fought Kremlin's efforts to seize Yukos Oil)	Unknown cause ("heart attack")	
Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2018	2007, Feburary 20	Daniel McGrory	Opposition (investigative journalist)	Unknown cause ("heart attack")	State actor
Oleson 2016	2007, March 1	Paul Joyal	Opposition (commentator on Russian Affairs; worked for US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence)	No WMD (victim survived)	State actor
Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2021	2007, March 2	Ivan Safronov	Opposition (journalist)	No WMD	
Oleson 2021	2007, October 6	Yury Gladkov	Opposition (St. Petersburg council deputy investigating corruption)	WMD (probably poisoned)	State actor
Oleson 2016	2007, November 2	Oleg Gordievsky	Secret service (Soviet KBG resident and British agent)	WMD (poisoned, victim survived)	State actor
Oleson 2016	2007, December	Oleg Zhukovsky	Business (VTB bank executive; opposed state takeover)	No WMD	
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2008, February 12	Badri Patarkatsishvili	Opposition (associated with Boris Berezovsky and Putin critic)	WMD (probably poisoned)	State actor

Oleson 2016	2008, March / Remains found in 2013	Leonid Rozhetskin	Business (sold assets to a former FSB agents)	No WMD	
Oleson 2018	2008, Summer	Bob Dudley	Business (BP executive running joint venture NK-BP dialogue)	WMD (poisoned, victim survived)	State actor
Oleson 2021	2008, November 13	Mikhail Beketov	Opposition (journalist)	No WMD (victim survived)	State actor
Oleson 2021	2009, January 13	Umar Israilov	Opposition (allegations against Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2016	2009, January 19	Stanislav Markelov	Opposition (human rights lawyer)	No WMD	Private actor
Oleson 2021	2009, March	Alexander Antonov	Business (Russian banker in London)	No WMD (victim survived)	Private actor
Oleson 2016	2009, July 14	Natalia Estemirova	Opposition (human rights activist)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2021	2009, November 16	Sergei Magnitsky	Business (tax lawyer supporting Hermitage Capital Management in corruption charges)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2016	2010, Feburary 10	Anatoly Sobchak	(campaigning for Putin in Kaliningrad at time of death)	WMD (possibly poisoned)	
Oleson 2016	2010, June 13 (?)	Sergei Tretyakov	Secret service (source to the FBI)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2010, August 16	Gareth Williams	Secret service (GCHQ officer assigned to MI6)	Unknown cause	
Oleson 2018	2010, November 6	Oleg Kashin	Opposition (journalist)	No WMD (victim survived)	State actor

Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2010, November 17	Paul Castle	Business (associated with Scot Young)	No WMD	Private actors
Oleson 2021	2012, March	German Gorbuntsov	Business (banker; charged with money laundering in Moldova; allegedly had evidence to the attempted murder of Alexander Antonov)	No WMD (victim survived)	
Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2012, November 10	Alexander Perepilichny	Business (financier exposing corruption in Hermitage Capital Investors)	WMD (poisoned)	State actor
Oleson 2018/ Oleson 2021	2012, late November	Robbie Curtis	(associated with Boris Berezovsky)	No WMD	Private actor
Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2013, March 23	Boris Berezovsky	Opposition (Yeltsin-era oligarch, businessman)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2014, March 15	Reshat Ametov	Opposition (Crimean activist)	No WMD	
Oleson 2018/ Oleson 2021	2014, March 16	Alexander Pochinok	Opposition (former minister, critic of Crimea annexation)	Unknown cause ("heart attack")	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2014, April 17	Volodymyr Rybak	Opposition (city council member in eastern Ukraine)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2014, July 12	Valeriya Novodnorskaya	Opposition (liberal politician, Soviet era dissident)	Unknown cause ("toxic shock syndrome")	State actor
Oleson 2021	2014, July 17	Malaysian Air Flight MH-17 (Netherlands/ Ukraine)		No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2016	2014, October 20	Christophe de Margerie	Business (CEO of French oil company Total SA)	No WMD	State actor

Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2014, November 12	Johnny Elichaoff	Business (associated with Scot Young)	No WMD	
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2014, December 8	Scot Young	Business (associate of Boris Berezovsky)	No WMD	
Oleson 2021	2014, unknown date	Boris Kolesnikov	Former government official (Interior Ministry police officer)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2015, February 27	Boris Nemtsov	Opposition (liberal politician)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2021	2015, April–May	Emilian Gebrev	Business (Bulgarian arms dealer; proliferating to Georgia during Russo-Georgian War)	WMD (poisoned two times, victim survived)	State actor
Oleson 2016	2015, May	Vladimir Kara-Murza (poisoning 1 of 2)	Opposition (urged US Congress to impose Maginsky Act sanctions against Russia)	WMD (poisoned, victim survived)	State actor
Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2015, November 5	Mikhail Lesin	Former government official (Putin's former press minister)	No WMD	Private actor
Oleson 2016	2016, January 4	Igor Sergun	Secret service (Colonel General head of the GRU [Russian military intelligence]; power struggle with FSB)	Unknown cause (“heart attack”)	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2016, January 25	Alesya Malakyan	Opposition (daugther of opposition activist Irina Kalmykova)	Unknown cause	
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2016, February 3	Vyacheslav Sinev	(Chairman of Russian Anti-doping Agency)	Unknown cause	

Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2016, February 14	Nikita Kamaev	Opposition (resigned executive director of Russian Anti-doping Agency)	Unknown cause ("heart attack")	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2016, March 23rd	Denis Voronenkov	Opposition	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2016, May 4	Dr Matthew Puncher	Scientist (uncovering poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2016 / Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2016, July 20	Pavel Sheremet	Opposition (Belorussian journalist)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2016	2016, July	Aleksandr Poteyev	Secret service (SVR colonel and defector; revealing Russian spies in the US)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2016, August 27	Alexander Shchetinin	Opposition (journalist)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2021	2016, September 16	Ivan Mamchur	Opposition (commander of Ukrainian special forces regiment in Georgia 2008)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2021	2016, October	Milo Dukanovic	Political (prime-minister of Montenegro; plan was to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO)	Planned assassination	State actor
Oleson 2018	2016, October 31	Adam Osmayev	Opposition (critic of Chechen president)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2016, November 8	Sergei Krivov	Secret service (diplomat; believed to be a security/counterintelligence official)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2016, November 8	Valdimir Shreydler	Opposition (pro-Ukrainian activist)	Unknown cause ("heart attack")	

Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2016, December 26	Oleg Erovinkin	Secret service (FSB member)	Unknown cause ("heart attack")	State actor
Oleson 2018	2017, February 2	Vladimir Kara-Murza (poisoning 2 of 2)	Opposition (urged US Congress to impose Maginsky Act sanctions against Russia)	WMD (poisoned)	State actor
Oleson 2018	2017, February 17	Viktor Parshutkin	Opposition (Russian lawyer who forced Russia to withdraw false charges against a Ukrainian political prisoner)	Unknown cause	State actor
Oleson 2018	2017, March 2	Alex Oronov	Opposition (Ukrainian émigré and US citizen who organized a meeting with Trump's lawyer, Michael Cohen, concerning a peace plan that would give Putin control of Ukraine	Unknown cause	
Oleson 2018	2017, March 16	Yevgeny Khamaganov	Opposition (journalist)	No WMD	Private actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2017, March 18	Vladimir Evdokimov	Former exective of Roskosmos space agency	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2017, March 18	Nikolai Volkov	Political officer under Putin (head of construction department of Russian Interior Ministry)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2017, March 23	Denis Voronenkov	Opposition	No WMD	State actor

Oleson 2021	2017, March 31	Col Oleksandr Zharaberyush	Secret service (Donetsk's local counterintelligence service)	No WMD	Private (Russian backed separatists were blamed)
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2017, April 4	Vadim Tyulpanov	Senator under Putin (killed while in office)	No WMD	
Oleson 2018	2017, April 19	Nikolai Andrushchenko	Opposition (newspaper editor)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2021	2017, April 27	Alexei Navalny	Opposition	WMD (poisoned, victim survived)	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2017, June 27	Col Maksym Shapoval	Secret service (Commander of Ukrainian special forces Chief Intelligence Directorate)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2017, September 8	Timor Mahauri	Opposition (Chechen fighter with Ukrainian troops)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018	2017, September	Yulia Latynina	Opposition (journalist and radio reporter)	No WMD (victim survived)	State actor
Oleson 2021	2017 October 23	Tatyana Felgengauer	Opposition (radio presenter, accused of aiding foreign interests)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018	2017, October 25	Igor Mosiychuk	Opposition (journalist and member of Radical Party in Ukrainian parliament)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2018, January 8	Mikus Alps	Opposition (anti-Russian Ukrainian militia)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018	2018, March 4	Sergei Skripal and Yulia Skripal	Secret service (former MI6 agent and daughter)	WMD (poisoned, victims survived, one accidental victim killed)	State actor

Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2018, March 12	Nikolai Glushkov	Opposition (friend of Putin critic and former deputy director of Aeroflot [formerly used for international spying operations])	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2018 / Oleson 2021	2018, April 15	Maxim Borodin	Opposition (journalist)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2021	2018, May 2	Arkady Babchencko	Opposition (journalists)	No WMD (victim survived staged murder attempt)	State actor
Oleson 2021	2018, July	Three Russian Journalists (Orkhan Dzhemal, Aleksandr Rastorguyev, Kirill Radchenko)	Opposition (journalists)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2021	2018, September 12	Pyotr Verzilov	Opposition (activist in Pussy Riot)	WMD (poisoned, victim suvived)	State actor
Oleson 2021	2019, February	Igor Malashenko	Opposition (media executive)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2021	2019, August 23	Zelimkhan Khangoshvili	Opposition (Chechen rebel field commander)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2021	2019, late July	Alexei Navalny	Opposition	WMD (poisoned, victim survived)	State actor
Oleson 2021	2019, November 11	James Le Mesurier	Opposition (Syrian relief organisation White Hats)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2021	2019, November 30	Dmitry Obretetskiy	Business	No WMD	
Oleson 2021	2020, January 30	Imran Aliev	Opposition (blogger)	No WMD	State actor
Oleson 2021	2020, August 20	Alexei Navalny	Opposition	WMD (poisoned, victim survived)	State actor