

SIBYLLINE LEAVES March 2018

Responding to Russia

Craig G. Bartholomew

Isaiah 5:20

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

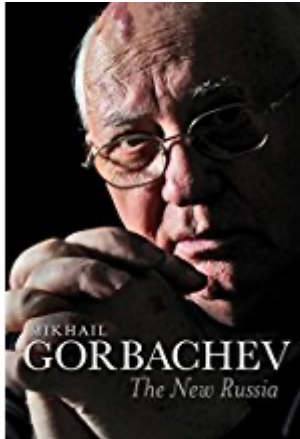
In our comfortable West, affluence easily trumps everything, including justice. Generations have come and gone since World War II so that our historical memory of that time when Britain had to take an extraordinarily courageous and sacrificial stand against the terrifying shadow of Nazi Germany seems a distant past. Since then, the UK and the West have experienced a sustained period of economic stability, with entitlement and consumerism moving to the front of our cultures. Alas, these easily make us reluctant to embrace or even engage anything that makes us less comfortable, even if it involves serious injustice.

The Salisbury assassination attempts on Sergei Skripal, the former Russian double agent, and his daughter Yulia, fall clearly into the category of “serious injustice,” and yet one wonders how disturbed we are by such events.



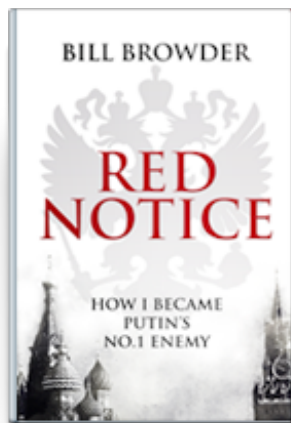
Almost certainly executed by the Russian State, in a brutal, reckless use of the powerful and dangerous nerve agent novichok, the attempted assassinations seem to have caused no major outcry among us, no sign of collective action, no communal cry of “Enough!” Is it possible that we have become so flabby and comfortable that we will choose the path of least resistance so long as our consumer comforts are not affected? Have we reached a point where attempted murder no longer moves us?

I have no doubt that Russia is a great country with extraordinary depth culturally and historically. It needs to be seen for *all* that it is, both positively and negatively. We need to listen to Russian and not just Western voices. I have, for example, found it instructive to read Mikhail Gorbachev's *The New Russia* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016) with its thoughtful critiques of both Russia and the West, and its longing for a healthy, democratic Russia. We



should hope for the day when Russia will occupy its full, deserved place among the nations of the world, so that we all benefit from its unique and special gifts. Similarly, I have no doubt that the West is far from perfect and that Western governments are partially responsible for the state Russia is in today.

Murder, is however, murder, and when it becomes a pattern, as it has with the Putin regime, it needs to be seen for what it is, opposed as strongly as possible and brought to a stop. The Salisbury attempted assassinations are but one more in a long list of assassinations of opponents and critics of the Putin regime, both within and outside the Russian State.



A picture, it is often said, is worth a thousand words. In my case it was the story, recounted in Bill Browder's must-read *Red Notice: How I Became Putin's No. 1 Enemy* (London: Transworld, 2015). If there is one book you read at this time I recommend *Red Notice*. It reads like a thriller but is spine-chilling as the narrative unfolds. Browder set up a major hedge fund in the new Russia and commuted back and forth between his wife in London and Moscow, until on one return journey he was held at Moscow airport and then extradited back to the UK. The full force of Putin's regime was unleashed against his company, and employees had to go into hiding, all for no good reason apart

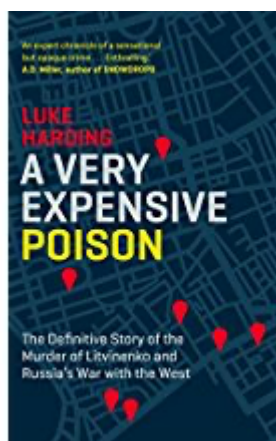
from rampant corruption by the Russian State. One of Browder's Russian lawyers, Sergei Magnitsky, refused to do so, believing that human rights would prevail in Russia. Sergei was arrested, held, tortured, and denied medical treatment despite being unwell. After months of being imprisoned, he was taken to a detention centre, handcuffed to a rail, and beaten to death. His unforgivable sin: *as a Christian* he refused to bear false witness by endorsing the propaganda of the Russian State.

Browder did everything he could to help Sergei and to get the British and American governments to intervene. Tellingly, neither the British government nor the US Secretary of State were willing to help. After all, the US was in the midst of resetting the relationship with Russia. Browder persevered and with the help of Senators Cardin, McGovern, McCain



and others eventually and remarkably the Magnitsky law was enacted by the US government and applied against all those known to be involved in Sergei's murder.

It has indeed been encouraging to see Theresa May, Boris Johnson and so many of our NATO allies take a strong and principled stand against Russia in response to the attempted assassinations in Salisbury. By contrast it took the British government a very long time to investigate and respond to the Russian poisoning through polonium of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006. An excellent and readable book in this regard is Luke Harding, *A Very Expensive Poison* (London: Guardian Books, 2016).



In Proverbs 2:8 Lady Wisdom speaks evocatively of the LORD as “guarding the paths of justice.” In this section, as throughout Proverbs, wisdom and justice are held inseparably together. To really seek wisdom involves finding justice, and finding justice means becoming wise. Few of us would be comfortable with being labelled “fools,” the opposite of “wise” in Proverbs.

However, a good test of whether or not we are genuinely wise is whether or not we are passionate about justice, and not just justice for ourselves but justice for all, especially the weak and vulnerable. “Blessed,” said Jesus, “are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” William Barclay speaks in this respect of the bliss of the starving spirit. Christ's followers are passionately to pursue personal and

communal righteousness, which certainly includes justice. How can it be said of us that we too “guard the paths of justice” if assassination attempts in Salisbury leave us unmoved as just another item on the evening news. And, not least when a long list of other names precedes those of Sergei and Yulia Skripal.

Browder’s courage, resilience, and refusal to be browbeaten by Putin and his colleagues is exemplary, as he sought justice for Sergei against all odds. There is, of course, a cost to pay for such resilience and resistance, undoubtedly one of the messages sent by the Kremlin through yet another assassination attempt, and one reason, among others, why Browder wrote *Red Notice*.

If we are wise, how then should we respond to recent events in Salisbury?

1. With appropriate outrage and legitimate anger – murder is totally unacceptable and abhorrent. There is no ethical dilemma here – it is simply wrong.
2. By learning all we can about Russia and how it has become the police state that it now is. This including listening carefully to reliable Russian voices which can help us gain a critical perspective on Western actions.
3. By reading *at least one book* on this pattern of abhorrent behaviour by the Russian State. There are many good books out there. I particularly recommend Browder’s *Red Notice* and Harding’s *A Very Expensive Poison*.
4. By praying for Russia, for Sergei and Yulia, for the many other victims, and supporting folk like Bill Browder who continue to have to worry about their security on a daily basis.



5. By writing to the relevant UK, European and American, etc., government officials, praising them for their quick and vocal action – if that was the case, as in the UK – and pressing them to investigate such attacks thoroughly and to take *the most effective action* to ensure this never happens

again. Through Browder’s work and against far too many odds, in December 2012, the United States passed the [Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act](#), which imposes visa sanctions and asset freezes on those involved in Sergei’s arrest, torture and death, as well as other gross human rights abusers. In March 2012 a [motion](#) was unanimously passed in the House of Commons in the UK, calling on the government to impose visa sanctions and asset freezes on the Russian officials who falsely

arrested, tortured and killed Sergei Magnitsky and then covered up the crime. For all of this and more see Browder's website www.billbrowder.com

In the UK I encourage you to write to your local MP. My letter to my MP can be found below. You are most welcome to use it to draft a letter to your own MP.

6. By refusing to forget and by honouring the memory of those who have been slain in this way.
7. By doing all we can to support honest, rigorous, investigative journalism. The quote from Isaiah above reads like a damning indictment of "Fake News." Fake news has become a weapon in the arsenal of the Russian State and in far too much of the life of Western democracies. For "Russian cooperation" in the Litvinenko inquiry readers are referred to Harding, *A Very Expensive Poison*, chapter 8. The report of the thorough British inquiry into the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko can be found at <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160613090324/https://www.litvinenko.org/report>

Christians need to have a vested interest in raising up a new generation of first-rate journalists who will commit themselves, with our support, to telling the truth whatever the cost.

Craig's Letter to his MP

Daniel Zeichner MP, Cambridge

Dear Mr. Zeichner,

I am writing to you as my MP to express my deep concern over the recent attempted assassinations of Sergei and Yulia Skripal. I am grateful to the government for taking quick action in response to the attempted murders.

I would be grateful if you could raise the following question with the government: Once the investigation is complete, will the travel and assets of those involved in this horrendous crime be targeted, in a comparable way to action taken in relation to the death of Sergei Magnitsky?

Yours faithfully

Craig Bartholomew (Revd. Dr.)