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License to Kill

British police say their investigation into the poisoning of former Russian army colonel Sergei Skripal in Salisbury may take many months, yet prime minister Theresa May has already identified the guilty party, claiming the order came from the Kremlin. Foreign secretary Boris Johnson, sees the incident as ‘part of a pattern of reckless behaviour by President Vladimir Putin,’ which is the ‘common thread that joins [the poisoning] with [Russia’s] annexation of Crimea, the cyberattacks in Ukraine, the hacking of Germany’s parliament ... interference in foreign elections’ and ‘indulgence of Assad’s atrocities in Syria’ (1). The reasoning goes: if Putin is capable of doing it, then he must be guilty.

From Leon Trotsky, killed with an ice pick in Mexico, to Alexander Litvinenko, poisoned with polonium in London, Russia’s security services have undoubtedly liquidated many opponents of the Kremlin living abroad. Other countries have resorted to such measures without triggering the same diplomatic uproar. France, Germany and the US have been involved in the kind of state-sponsored assassination that has so offended Johnson, yet this has not stopped them joining him and May in railing against Russia.

Israel has taken great care to avoid commenting, perhaps because it is one of the countries that most frequently ‘carry out this kind of operation, known as an “extraterritorial elimination”’ (2). The list of Palestinians, including official representatives, killed by Israel’s secret service abroad makes the Russians look like amateurs: at least half a dozen in Paris alone, without serious consequences. Moroccan opposition leader Mehdi Ben Barka also disappeared in Paris; the African National Congress’s chief representative in

France, Dulcie September, and more recently three Kurdish activists, were assassinated there. Across the Atlantic, Orlando Letelier, a minister under former Chilean president Salvador Allende, was killed in Washington DC by agents of Augusto Pinochet, which did not stop Ronald Reagan from feting Pinochet; and Margaret Thatcher was happy to drink tea (without polonium) with the dictator and present him with a silver dish.

‘Extraterritorial elimination’ is also a fitting term for the US practice of killing presumed terrorists abroad with drones. Barack Obama officially authorised more than 2,300 such killings during his presidency. For his part, François Hollande has admitted to ordering extrajudicial killings of ‘enemies of the state’ when he was president (an average of one a month during his term), though none of his political allies reproached him for it during the Socialist Party primaries in January 2017 (3).

François de Rugy, who has since become president of France’s National Assembly, even said at the time: ‘Yes, it is sometimes necessary.’