

Russia Ordered a Killing That Made No Sense. Then the Assassin Started Talking.

The headstone of Ivan Mamchur, a Ukrainian prison guard and military veteran who was murdered in Rivne, a city in western Ukraine. Credit Joseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

Image



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By [Michael Schwartz](#)

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RIVNE, Ukraine — The target lived on the sixth floor of a cheerless, salmon-colored building on Vidinska Street, across from a thicket of weeping willows. Oleg Smorodinov found him there, rented a small apartment on the ground floor, and waited.

He had gotten the name from his two handlers in Moscow. They met at the Vienna Cafe, a few blocks from the headquarters of Russia’s domestic intelligence agency, and handed him a list of six people in Ukraine. Find them, they told Mr. Smorodinov, and he set off. He was already boasting to friends that he was a spy.

Each person on the list was assigned a code name related to flowers. One was ‘briar.’ Another was ‘buttercup.’ The target, a man named Ivan Mamchur, was called ‘rose.’ To Mr. Smorodinov, he was a nobody, an electrician who worked at the local jail. To the handlers in Moscow, though, he was significant.

“Drenched in blood up to his elbows,” they told him.

The surveillance was uneventful. At 7 each morning, Mr. Mamchur left his wife and daughter, rode his bicycle to work, and returned each evening at 6. “Like clockwork,” Mr. Smorodinov recalled. In his idle hours, Mr. Smorodinov drank beer in the parking lot where an old woman kept watch on a clowder of cats.

Then, on Sept. 16, 2016, Mr. Smorodinov’s phone buzzed with a text message from Moscow.

“The rose has to be picked today,” he remembered it saying. “Tomorrow, it will no longer be relevant.”

In the grim hallway outside the man’s apartment, Mr. Smorodinov positioned himself, a cigarette in one hand and in the other, a pneumatic pistol modified to fire real bullets and fitted with a silencer.

“I took the pistol,” he later recalled, “and thought ‘what will be, will be.’ ”

Oleg Smorodinov in a defendant’s cage in a courtroom in Rivne.CreditJoseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

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As Mr. Mamchur emerged from the elevator, Mr. Smorodinov called his name and fired until the magazine was empty.

Mr. Mamchur did not fall immediately, but turned toward his assassin, stumbling a few steps before gasping.

"It was not me," he said. "I'm not guilty."

Then he dropped to the concrete floor.

Mr. Smorodinov fled to Moscow, where his handlers treated him to dinner at a Japanese sushi chain called Two Chopsticks. For his work, they bought him a Mercedes van, pictures of which he posted on social media. But they withheld a portion of a promised \$5,000 because he had left the murder weapon in Ukraine.

They told him not to worry. No one would ever catch him. No one would ever care. At the time, Mr. Smorodinov was not certain why they had asked him to kill Ivan Mamchur but now he thinks he knows.

"It was revenge," he told me. "Most likely revenge."

'They Have a Workflow. They Murder People.'

I met Oleg Smorodinov last October, during his trial at the Rivne City Court in Ukraine, about two years after the murder. He had been arrested a few months after it happened while crossing back into Ukraine to surprise an ex-girlfriend for her birthday.

A mistake. She helped tip off the police.

"He killed a person," she told me later by text message. "Let him answer for it."

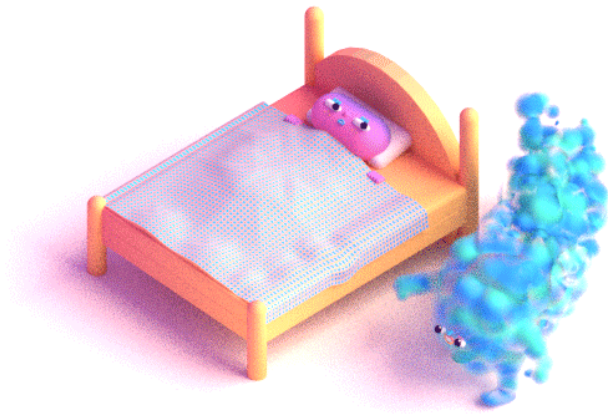
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The Rivne City Court. Ukrainian prosecutors say Mr. Smorodinov was a hitman for Russia's intelligence services. Credit Joseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

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The courtroom was tiny, about the size of a large bedroom in a New York apartment, if one equipped with a steel cage. I approached Mr. Smorodinov as he was being locked in. He was dressed in a blue track suit and perked up when I introduced myself as a reporter. He was surprisingly eager to talk and invited me to meet him afterward, in the jail.

The trial had been underway for weeks but seemed like a formality. Ukrainian prosecutors say he was a hit man for Russia's intelligence services. His DNA was found on the murder weapon and on cigarette butts collected at the scene. Mr. Smorodinov admits he pulled the trigger.

The three judges sat glumly beneath a nylon Ukrainian flag, listening impassively as a prosecutor read out the results of a ballistics test and a gory medical examiner's report.

Everyone seemed bored. Violence is normalized in Ukraine.

For months, I had been traveling in Russia and Europe, reporting on the [poisoning last year](#) in England of the former Russian spy, Sergei V. Skripal. It had touched off a geopolitical confrontation and brought talk of a new Cold War. Britain and its allies enacted sanctions and expelled more than [150 Russian diplomats](#) after blaming the nerve agent attack on two officers from Russia's military intelligence service, the G.R.U.

For Ukraine, Russian interference was an old reality. Russian special forces had [seized Crimea](#) in February 2014 and since then, the Kremlin has supplied arms, funding and troops to fuel a separatist war in eastern Ukraine that has cost 13,000 lives.

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Russian soldiers in Crimea in 2014. Credit Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Image



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Assassinations happen frequently enough in Ukraine that they are often just blips in the local news cycle. In 2006, Russian President Vladimir V. Putin signed a law legalizing targeted killings abroad, and Ukrainian officials say teams of Russian hit men operate freely inside the country.

"For the intelligence services, as bad as this sounds, murdering people is just part of the work flow," said Oleksiy Arestovych, a retired officer in Ukraine's military intelligence service. "They go to work, it's their job. You have a work flow, you write articles. They have a workflow, they murder people."

"It doesn't really worry them," he said. "They celebrate it, mark it, without much sentiment."

The Skripal poisoning had woken the West up to this. In Britain, authorities are now reviewing the cases of several Russians whose deaths on British soil were not initially deemed suspicious. In the United States, a bipartisan group of senators recently introduced legislation that would require the State Department to determine whether Russia should be deemed a state sponsor of terrorism.

"There's no evidence to suggest that Russia can be deterred from making these kinds attacks," said Daniel Hoffman, a former C.I.A. station chief who helped negotiate the release of Mr. Skripal from a Russian prison in 2010. "It really does fall on the people at risk to try to conceal their location and be on the lookout for any signs that the Russians might be targeting them."

Russian officials have denied their country's involvement in the Skripal poisoning. In a text message, Dmitri S. Peskov, Mr. Putin's spokesman, said the Kremlin knew of neither Mr. Mamchur nor Mr. Smorodinov.

I had come to Ukraine to learn more about G.R.U. assassins like those accused of trying to kill Mr. Skripal. Ukraine was where the agency had proved itself to Mr. Putin by helping to seize Crimea back in 2014. But now, G.R.U. fingerprints were turning up around the world.

President Vladimir V. Putin has questioned the notion of Ukraine's independence from Russia. Credit Pool photo by Alexei Nikolsky

Image



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Several years ago, while working in Moscow, I had gotten to know a handful of Russian intelligence officers. A retired colonel once listed the qualities that he, as a professional, believed a successful assassin should possess.

"To do this," he told me, "you need spirit and training and hatred. And in addition to hatred, you also need money and desire."

But these were elite assassins. More often, I learned, if the Kremlin wants you dead, they send someone like Oleg Smorodinov, an amoral hired gun willing to kill in exchange for a few thousand dollars and a Mercedes van.

Liquidators

At the Rivne jail, the guards confiscated my scarf. They worried that Mr. Smorodinov could use it to strangle me.

In earlier photos, Mr. Smorodinov does look menacing, with a sailor's blocky build and a boxer's misshapen face. But jail has aged him, melting away his musculature.

"A grandpa," he sighs. He is 51.

In reality, he is the one who should be afraid. Rivne is a proudly anti-Russian city in western Ukraine with a monument that bears the spectral faces of the 21 local sons who have died in the fighting still underway in eastern Ukraine against the Russian-backed separatist groups.

Mr. Smorodinov is an ethnic Russian who moved to eastern Ukraine as a teenager. He later fought with the same separatists loathed in Rivne.

A memorial in Rivne for protesters killed in the 2013-14 antigovernment uprising in Ukraine. CreditJoseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

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A memorial in Rivne for protesters killed in the 2013-14 antigovernment uprising in Ukraine. Credit Joseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

For his safety, he is being held in the smaller transit jail rather than the main detention center where the victim, Mr. Mamchur, worked. One guard told him a story, perhaps apocryphal, about an accused Russian assassin who was jailed in Kiev, the capital. He was dead within 40 minutes.

In the first of our three meetings, Mr. Smorodinov unfolded a map of central Moscow that he had drawn from memory on graph paper. He pointed to a pencil-shaded block labeled Vienna Cafe, around the corner from a square representing the headquarters of Russia's Federal Security Service, or F.S.B., the main successor of the Soviet K.G.B.

"This, in general, is where I met with my handlers, in the cafe," he said.

Left, the gun used in the killing was left behind at the crime scene. Right, a map of central Moscow that Mr. Smorodinov drew from memory. It includes a cafe where he said he often met his Russian handlers. Credit Ukrainian law enforcement; Joseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

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Left, the gun used in the killing was left behind at the crime scene. Right, a map of central Moscow that Mr. Smorodinov drew from memory. It includes a cafe where he said he often met his Russian handlers. Credit Ukrainian law enforcement; Joseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

Mr. Smorodinov has never been an intelligence officer, or so he says. Though he had once served in the Soviet navy and worked for a few years as a police officer, he has dedicated much of his adult life to organized crime, having done time in prison for bribery and extortion. Between prison stints, he worked as a sex trafficker, shuttling women from Ukraine to clients in Moscow, a former criminal associate told me.

Mr. Smorodinov described the murder in minute detail, including the text message from Moscow, the floral code names and the stunned expression on Mr. Mamchur's face as he collapsed to the floor.

But he is trying to persuade prosecutors, and me, that he was an unwitting assassin, duped by the two mysterious handlers he met at the Vienna Cafe, men he knew only as Philipp and Maksim.

Mr. Smorodinov said he was steered to them by contacts he made at weapons expos in Moscow. He settled in the Russian capital in 2015 after he was injured by artillery fire while fighting in eastern Ukraine.

Nikolai A. Gorbunov, whose company OOO Zenit sells accessories for AK-style assault rifles, recalled Mr. Smorodinov and said Russian intelligence agents frequently attend the expos.

At one expo, Mr. Smorodinov said someone linked to Wagner, the Russian mercenary outfit, mentioned a need for fighters in Syria, where Russian troops are supporting the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

"I wanted to go to Syria," he said, "honestly, to shoot, to fight, to earn money."

But when the plan fell through, Mr. Smorodinov said the Wagner contact introduced him to Maksim and Philipp. He was thrilled. He equated it to a job in the Interior Ministry.

"I was thinking of my pension — to work several years and retire to collect my pension," he said.

The residential building where Mr. Smorodinov killed Mr. Mamchur. Credit Joseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

Image



The residential building where Mr. Smorodinov killed Mr. Mamchur.CreditJoseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

When he arrived in Rivne, Mr. Smorodinov said he understood that his mission was to document Mr. Mamchur's movements. The murder was supposed to have been carried out by a team of what he called "the liquidators."

"Liquidators only work for one day, an hour, two, three, not more," he said. "They work under the principle that they don't exist. As soon as they arrive, they're gone to a different city."

An inconvenient fact in this scenario is that during his stay in Rivne, his accomplice, Kostya, identified by investigators as Konstantin Ivanov, brought him two guns, one of which had a silencer. In their communications, alluding to the code names of the targets, the two men referred to the guns as "watering cans."

A still image from security cameras at a convenience store showing Konstantin Ivanov, Mr. Smorodinov's accomplice. He brought Mr. Smorodinov two guns, one of which had a silencer.CreditUkrainian Law Enforcement

Image



A still image from security cameras at a convenience store showing Konstantin Ivanov, Mr. Smorodinov's accomplice. He

brought Mr. Smorodinov two guns, one of which had a silencer. Credit Ukrainian Law Enforcement

"We're dealing with flowers here," Mr. Smorodinov said.

Mr. Smorodinov insisted that even as he fired the shots into Mr. Mamchur, he thought it was a charade, a way to test his mettle. The bullets could have been blanks, he said.

"I'm standing there, and go up to him and say, 'Get up.' It's not a test," he told me. "That's what went through my head. 'It's not a test.'"

It is not an especially convincing defense. Aleksandr Gatiyatullin, who headed the criminal gang Mr. Smorodinov was involved with in the early 2000s and served time in prison with him, described him as thickheaded, willing to take serious risks without thinking much about the consequences.

Weeks before Mr. Mamchur's murder, Mr. Gatiyatullin said, Mr. Smorodinov confided in him and his wife, claiming that he had been made a lieutenant in the F.S.B. and was working in Ukraine on a special mission.

"We laughed and laughed. No one ever took him seriously," Mr. Gatiyatullin said. "Then this murder of Mamchur happened. I see he posts photos of a Mercedes minibus and I wonder where he got the money for it."

He added: "I think some F.S.B. guys called him for a meeting, saw what an idiot he was and thought they could use him."

The List

On the day Mr. Smorodinov was arrested, Ukraine's prosecutor general, Yuri V. Lutsenko, held a news conference and described the murder as further evidence that Ukraine was "in a state of war." Ukraine's news media quickly lost interest, chalking it up as just another bloody episode in Russia's continuing interference.

Prosecutors seem only marginally interested in why Mr. Mamchur had been a target. To Ukrainian officials, the answer seemed obvious.

Mr. Smorodinov told a New York Times reporter about a list of names of six Ukrainian men. Credit Joseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

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“This is part of an interlinked chain of crimes, the main purpose of which is to destabilize the country,” Serhii Knyazev, the chief of Ukraine’s national police, told me.

But it wasn’t that simple. From the morning I met him in the courtroom, Mr. Smorodinov had talked about a list of six names. They were all Ukrainians, and his first assignment had been to locate each of them. Once he did that, he was sent to Rivne.

In jail, he gave me the passcodes to his social media accounts and told me I could find the list on his computer, which was in Moscow with his nephew. When I telephoned the nephew, Vladimir Dobrovolsky, he said he knew about his uncle’s trips to Ukraine to “surveil people.”

“I tried not to get involved in that,” Mr. Dobrovolsky said. “With the intelligence services, the less you know, the better you sleep.”

He emailed me the files and I found a flood of photos of naked women and one document named “List of Workers,” a title Mr. Smorodinov said he had concocted as a ruse in case anyone seized his computer.

The six men were of different ages and, except for two of them, lived in different cities. Ukrainian investigators and prosecutors hadn’t been very interested. One police investigator told me he had never even seen the list and asked if I could forward a copy. I never did.

I had assumed the people on the list were somehow tied to Russia’s continuing conflict in Ukraine, that the Kremlin was seeking revenge against individuals tied to the fighting. And as I investigated the names, I learned that they did all share a military background.

But there was a surprise. What tied them together wasn’t the Ukraine conflict. Instead, it was a different Russian war.

A Different War

In early August 2008, I rushed from Moscow to Tbilisi to cover the [conflict breaking out](#) between Russia and the Republic of Georgia. I had never covered a war and hired a driver to take me and a photographer to get as close to the action as possible. It did not take long.

On a road in the middle of a field, we were stopped by Georgian military police officers, who said they were looking for spies. I don’t remember the exact chronology of what happened next: I had gotten out to speak with the officers, when an antiaircraft battery began firing toward a Russian bomber that I strained to see against the bright blue of the sky.

Then came a terrible whooshing sound that kept getting louder until it felt like my ears were going to pop. I dove into a ditch just as the bombs hit the road. A squadron of Russian Air Force fighter jets, Su-25s, appeared, pummeling everything in view — apartment buildings, the fields on either side of us.

A Russian soldier sitting on a tank in the Georgian town of Igoeti in 2008. Credit Justyna Mielnikiewicz for The New York Times

Image



A Russian soldier sitting on a tank in the Georgian town of Igoeti in 2008. Credit Justyna Mielnikiewicz for The New York Times

One thing stands out vividly: the anti-aircraft guns firing round after round into the sky. I have a memory of a single Su-25 coming down in flames, floating like a leaf, back and forth, until it hit the ground.

The war lasted only five days and ended with a crushing victory for Moscow. But in many ways, the conflict was an embarrassment for Russia's intelligence services. Years earlier, Ukraine had secretly sold sophisticated anti-aircraft systems to Georgia, allowing for the [effective defense that I had seen](#).

Russian officials refused to believe that Georgian soldiers had the skill to operate the complicated systems. Ukrainian troops, they insisted, must have helped.

For Mr. Putin — who has described Russians and Ukrainians as “one people” — it was an act of bloody treachery.

“We don't know who decided to deliver equipment and weapons from Ukraine during the conflict, but whoever it was, that person made a huge mistake,” Mr. Putin said at a news conference shortly after the war.

“That the weapons delivered in the course of military action were operated by specialists from Ukraine is a crime,” he continued. “If we find confirmation of this, we will accordingly make contact with the people who did it.”

Ukraine's Russia-backed Party of Regions, then in the opposition, began an investigation and published the names of Ukrainian soldiers believed to have been involved. One man, described in the report as having “participated in military actions,” was on Mr. Smorodinov's list.

So were two others who appeared in books about the war written by Russian historians. Ukrainian officials confirmed that a fourth man on the list was in Georgia but provided no details. A fifth man confirmed to me that he was in Georgia, but denied any involvement in the war.

The Times is withholding the names of the men for their safety.

“Fortunately, these citizens are alive,” Mr. Knyazev, the national police chief, told me. “At least for now.”

Georgians near a building hit by bombardments in Gori in 2008. Credit Dimitar Dilkov/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Image



Georgians near a building hit by bombardments in Gori in 2008. Credit Dimitar Dilkov/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Mr. Mamchur was third on the list, the only name highlighted in green font.

Initially, Ukrainian officials were reluctant to tell me that he had been in Georgia. His wife refused to speak with me. But a co-worker at the Rivne jail, Serhii M. Klymchuk, said Mr. Mamchur spoke fondly about his time in Georgia and praised the efficiency of the Georgian military.

Eventually, officials confirmed that Mr. Mamchur had been in Georgia when the war began, as a commander in the Ukrainian army's third special operations regiment, an elite contingent whose fighters had also seen action in Iraq and Afghanistan. But they insisted that neither he nor any other Ukrainian soldier took part in the fighting.

Yuri I. Yekhanurov, who was Ukraine's defense minister at the time, said he rushed to evacuate the soldiers when the fighting started.

"I remember that time well," he said in an interview. "For me, it was a problem to extract my people."

The Kremlin has never believed that. After the war, Russian state television produced an all-out propaganda campaign that included a [documentary by Arkady Mamontov](#), whose films often serve as a barometer of Kremlin sentiment.

In one scene, Mr. Mamontov is shown berating a bewildered, shirtless man inside his home in Ukraine, accusing him of firing on Russian jets during the war.

"Are you a former soldier?" Mr. Mamontov shouts as the man fumbles for answers. "Ukrainians and Russians we're brothers — and you shot them down," he said.

Curiously, a month before Mr. Mamchur was killed, Russian television again aired the Mamontov documentary.

Mr. Smorodinov assumes he will be found guilty. In more than six hours of interviews, not once did he express remorse. Had he not been caught, he acknowledged, he most likely would have continued working his way down the list, name by name.

He is hoping to be swapped for one of the dozens of Ukrainians imprisoned in Russia, but the Russians have yet to show any interest.

"He doesn't understand that no one needs him," Mr. Knyazev, the national police chief, said. "He's forgotten, written off, a used bullet. Our enemy, unfortunately, has a lot of people like him in reserve."

Stanislav Kozliuk and Sergey Korovayny contributed reporting from Rivne, Ukraine.