

'Aha' Moment In Poisonings Led to Russia

Attack on Arms Dealer Bared Assassins Unit

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ

SOFIA, Bulgaria — The Russian assassin used an alias, Sergei Fedotov, and slipped into Bulgaria unnoticed, checking into a hotel in Sofia near the office of a local arms manufacturer who had been selling ammunition to Ukraine.

He led a team of three men. Within days, one man sneaked into a locked parking garage, smeared poison on the handle of the arms manufacturer's car, then left, undetected, except for blurry images captured by surveillance video.

Shortly after, the arms manufacturer, Emilian Gebrev, was meeting with business partners at a rooftop restaurant when he began to hallucinate and vomit.

The poisoning left Mr. Gebrev, now 65, hospitalized for a month. His son was poisoned, and so was another top executive at his company. When Mr. Gebrev was discharged, the assassins poisoned him and his son again, at their summer home on the Black Sea. They all survived, though Mr. Gebrev's business has yet to recover fully.

The assassination attempts in 2015 were remarkable not only for their brazenness and persistence, but also because security and intelligence officials in the West initially did not notice. Bulgarian prosecutors looked at the case, failed to unearth any evidence and closed it.

Now Western security and intelligence officials say the Bulgaria poisonings were a critical clue that helped expose a campaign by the Kremlin and its sprawling web of intelligence operatives to eliminate Russia's enemies abroad and destabilize the West.

"With Bulgaria, there was an 'aha' moment," said one European security official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss classified intelligence matters. "We looked at it and thought, damn, everything aligned."

Entering his third decade in power, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia is pushing hard to re-establish Russia as a world power. Russia cannot compete economically or militarily with the United States and China, so Mr. Putin is waging an asymmetric shadow war. Russian mercenaries are fighting in Syria, Libya and Ukraine. Russian hackers are sowing discord through disinformation and working to undermine elections.

Russian assassins have also been busy.

In October, The New York Times revealed that a specialized group of Russian intelligence operatives — Unit 29155 — had for years been assigned to carry out killings and political disruption

Continued on Page 12



DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Forty percent of Republican members of Congress have either retired or lost at the ballot box since President Trump took office.

Republican Party Under Trump Offers 2 Options: All In, or Out

By JONATHAN MARTIN
and MAGGIE HABERMAN

BIRMINGHAM, Mich. — By the summer of 2017, Dave Trott, a two-term Republican congressman, was worried enough about President Trump's erratic behavior and his flailing attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act that he criticized the president in a closed-door meeting with fellow G.O.P. lawmakers.

The response was instantane-

ous — but had nothing to do with the substance of Mr. Trott's concerns. "Dave, you need to know somebody has already told the White House what you said," he recalled a colleague telling him. "Be ready for a barrage of tweets."

Mr. Trott got the message: To defy Mr. Trump is to invite the president's wrath, ostracism within the party and a premature end to a career in Republican politics. Mr. Trott decided not to seek re-election in his suburban Detroit district, concluding that running

as anti-Trump Republican was untenable, and joining a wave of Republican departures from Congress that has left those who remain more devoted to the president than ever.

"If I was still there and speaking out against the president, what would happen to me?" Mr. Trott said before answering his own question: Mr. Trump would have lashed out and pressured House G.O.P. leaders to punish him.

Just under four years after he

began his takeover of a party to which he had little connection, Mr. Trump enters 2020 burdened with the ignominy of being the first sitting president to seek re-election after being impeached.

But he does so wearing a political coat of armor built on total loy-

Continued on Page 22

AID TO UKRAINE Officials discussed a freeze after a Trump-Zelensky call, emails show. PAGE 31

Barred by U.S., Migrants Suffer In Violent Limbo Along Border

By MIRIAM JORDAN

REYNOSA, Mexico — He remembers being on his knees, gagged and blinded with duct tape, his hands tied behind his back. One of his captors struck his left thigh with a bat and scraped his neck with an ax, threatening to cut him.

His 3-year-old son watched and wailed.

"Tell the boy to shut up. Make him shut up," one of the men barked, ripping the duct tape from his mouth.

A few hours earlier, the 28-year-old migrant from Honduras, whose name is José, had been walking with his son down a street in Reynosa, Mexico, having been turned back at the border by the United States. Suddenly three men grabbed him, shoved a hood

over his head and thrust him and his son into a vehicle.

The abduction on Nov. 25 set off hours of intense negotiations as José's wife in the United States, forced to listen to the sounds of her husband being tortured, tearfully negotiated a ransom over the phone.

In a series of phone conversations, and in several voice messages reviewed by The New York Times, the wife, a woman named Cindy who works at a bakery in Elizabeth, N.J., promised to get the \$3,000 the kidnappers were demanding. "I will do everything to get it," she said, sobbing into the phone. "But don't let them hurt him. Take care of the child."

Hundreds of thousands of people fled Central America over the



ILANA PANICH-LINSMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Kidnappers tortured José in front of his son last month in Mexico. They demanded ransom in phone calls to his wife in the U.S.

past year, many of them seeking asylum in the United States from threats of extortion, murder and forced recruitment into gangs. But instead of allowing them to enter, the Trump administration

has forced more than 55,000 asylum seekers to wait for months in lawless Mexican border towns like Reynosa while it considers their requests for protection, ac-

Continued on Page 21



MATT LUDTKE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A Century of Organized Chaos

In its 100th year, the N.F.L. sits atop America's sports hierarchy. It wasn't always so. SportsSunday.

Where Crawdads Sing, and Fly Off the Shelves

By ALEXANDRA ALTER

In the summer of 2018, Putnam published an unusual debut novel by a retired wildlife biologist named Delia Owens. The book, which had an odd title and didn't fit neatly into any genre, hardly seemed destined to be a blockbuster, so Putnam printed about 28,000 copies.

It wasn't nearly enough. A year and a half later, the novel, "Where the Crawdads Sing," an absorbing, atmospheric tale about a lonely girl's coming of age in the marshes of North Carolina, has sold more than four and a half million copies. It's an astonishing trajectory for any debut novelist, much less for a reclusive, 70-year-old scientist, whose previous published works chronicled the dec-

A Debut Novel Defying Gravity at the Top of Best-Seller Lists

ades she spent in the deserts and valleys of Botswana and Zambia, where she studied hyenas, lions and elephants.

As the end of 2019 approaches, "Crawdads" has sold more print copies than any other adult title this year — fiction or nonfiction — according to NPD BookScan, blowing away the combined print sales of new novels by John Grisham, Margaret Atwood and Stephen King. Putnam has returned to the printers nearly 40 times to feed a seemingly bottom-

less demand for the book. Foreign rights have sold in 41 countries.

Industry analysts have struggled to explain the novel's staying power, particularly at a moment when fiction sales over all are flagging, and most blockbuster novels drop off the best-seller list after a few weeks.

For the past several years, adult fiction sales have steadily fallen — in 2019, adult fiction sales through early December totaled around 116 million units, down from nearly 144 million in 2015, according to NPD BookScan. In a tough retail environment for fiction, publishers and agents frequently complain that it has become harder and harder for even established novelists to break through the noise of the news cycle.

"Crawdads" seems to be the *Continued on Page 28*

INTERNATIONAL 4-15

Shrinking Haven for Uighurs

China's repressed Uighurs have long found sanctuary in Turkey. But as the country strengthens ties with China, the Uighurs are worried. PAGE 6

For Women, a Watery Respite

The only two pools that allow female swimmers in Kabul, Afghanistan, have become a reprieve from bombings and the threat of a Taliban takeover. PAGE 8

Street Justice Surges in India

After the police killed the suspects of a gang rape and murder in a major Indian city, support has risen for vigilante violence against other suspects. PAGE 14

NATIONAL 16-32

Fiction Writer Shifts to Truth

Richard North Patterson wrote best-selling novels about presidents, until he decided that the political moment was too strange to make anything up. PAGE 16

Stories Lost on the News Beat

Eight journalists who were forced to leave newsrooms in 2019 reflect on the coverage they left undone. PAGE 26

SPORTSSUNDAY

Sun Rises. Patriots Win Title.

A little fakery was involved as the Patriots won their 11th straight A.F.C. East title by defeating the Bills. PAGE 14

ARTS & LEISURE

Hollywood's Male Troubles

In a year of uneasy masculinity, men in films are working on their issues and feelings. Often left out? Women. PAGE 10

The Show Must Go On, and On

At many musicals these days, post-curtain numbers send audiences into the night with a parting gift. PAGE 5



SUNDAY BUSINESS

The Decade Tech Lost Its Way

Remember when social networking was seen as a force for revolution and tech billionaires were like heroes? What happened? In short, the 2010s. PAGE 1

MAGAZINE

Longer Goodbyes

A growing home-funeral movement believes that families can benefit by tending to and being with the bodies of their deceased loved ones.

SUNDAY REVIEW

Nicholas Kristof

PAGE 9



TRAVEL

A Castaway Life

An unguided Robinson Crusoe-inspired sail around the Exuma Islands in the Bahamas brings eight friends even closer together. PAGE 4

