

In the 11th century, a Persian (Iranian) Shiite cult leader, Hassan-e Sabah, holed up in a mountain top castle (Alamut) and recruited a fanatical cult of young men and women to assassinate enemies of the cult anywhere in the known world of the time. One Caliph was actually murdered at prayer in a mosque, hundreds of miles from Alamut. Nobody was safe from the Assassin Cult, which continued its deadly work for 135 years until a stronger force of killers, the Mongols, rampaging the world, put them out of business.

Assassinating enemies with poison was the favored weapon of Lucrecia Borgia, daughter of the family of popes and rulers in early Renaissance Italy. Poisoning has always been considered cowardly and feminine, not as manly as a knife or muscle.

Today, poisoning has been resurrected by Russia, during the last years of the Communist reign and continued by today\222s dictator, Vladimir Putin, who pretends to be democratically elected. Now, 20 years into his rise to power, his main concern is to stay in power because once lost, he is subject to assassination or worse: imprisonment for his many crimes. He is not about to take his chances on fair and free elections. Protesters and rivals must be removed.

Poisoning has psychological value too: showing the world the ruined faces of poison victims and the agonizing deaths they suffer. But Putin does not stop at that. Rivals are shot walking in Red Square. Journalists are mysteriously murdered or locked up to die in prison. The Russian press is intimidated into downplaying demonstrations of irate, fed up citizens throughout Russia. The free world is not intimidated, however. Putin is fingered and condemned for his actions---with the sole exception of his "best friend," Donald Trump, who never says a word of condemnation of Putin\222s actions. Trump, when asked in 2017 by Bill O\222Reilly, if he condemns Putin\222s murders of journalists, took a long breath and paused and then answered: "You think our country is so innocent? Our country does plenty of killing too." Listeners were horrified.

If Trump could deal with journalists as Putin does, he would certainly do so. He cannot do so yet, but he did go so far as to encourage the chant at his Convention: "Twelve more years!" Then he could match Putin\222s "Presidency for Life." Poor Trump has Putin-envy.

The rest of the civilized world, however, reacts with outrage over the Russian killing, particularly the poisonings carried out not only in Russia, but abroad as well. The latest is Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny, poisoned by tea while waiting for his flight from the Siberian city of Omsk on August 20. The Russian hospital delayed releasing comatose Navalny to German doctors, hoping (wrongly) that the evidence of poison would dissipate before they could evacuate him.

During Putin\222s two-decade reign, high profile victims have included Alexander Litvinenko and Sergei Skripal, both poisoned in exile in the UK, and former Ukrainian leader Viktor Yushchenko, who was targeted as he ran for the Ukrainian presidency in 2004.

John Herbst, director of the Eurasia Center of the respected Atlantic Council, notes that unrest is growing on the eastern and western fringes of the country, and Putin\222s popularity rating is plummeting. The Kremlin\222s special services have demonstrated their fondness for poisoning as a way to deal with inconvenient individuals. Alexey Navalny apparently drank poisoned tea in Siberia while preparing for regional elections. Navalny has been more than a thorn in the Kremlin\222s side for years, but now particularly dangerous during the angry protests in the far east of Siberia, in Minsk and Khabarovsk, and also in Russia\222s satellite Belarus, on the west.

Herbst notes: "In short, the upcoming elections may be a vulnerability. And Belarus is seething. Reports are that Moscow has dispatched experts to reopen Belarusian state TV in the wake of a strike; and the deployment of Russian troops to end the unrest is possible. Removing an effective operator like Navalny reduces risk to the Kremlin in regard to both problems."

Fortunately, few dictators die in bed of old age.

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