

Carlos's article for July 29 about a historical novel, a Russian spy novel. The novel's title is called Undetectable in this article, but for the English translation, the title is Untraceable. The article is from El Mundo.

From the secret cities of the USSR to the Putin era, the long, dark romance between Russia and poison: "We have returned to a time when there are no rules."

In Undetectable (Random House) , the novelist exiled in Germany, Sergei Lebedev, traces the long history that links politics and science in the elimination of political rivals over almost a century. Sergei Lebedev, a Russian exile with a clear gaze, worked for years on geological expeditions that were always surprising.

The former spy Alexander Litvinenko died in London in 2006 after being poisoned with polonium-210. **Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia** survived the 2018 Novichok attack that killed a British woman in Salisbury, UK. And **Alexei Navalny** was poisoned in 2020, also with a Novichok nerve agent, before returning to Russia and dying in prison. Each case was treated in the West as an isolated incident, a violent escalation by the regime, but together they form **a common grammar of fear** : the message that no enemy of the Kremlin is truly safe, not even outside of Russia.

"Poison is designed so that you can't prove the crime, and death is terribly painful," Lebedev explains, "but at the same time, it gives the security services the opportunity to make an example: **this is what happens when you cross certain lines** ." That's why, when Navalny was poisoned, a thought crossed the exiled writer's mind: "Yes, we're back to those times. We've returned to an era where the rules no longer exist.

The Skripal poisoning was the starting point for the book: that case opened up the question, and from there I began to look at the long history of poisons as a Soviet and Russian political tool," he says. *Undetectable* describes **the moral infrastructure that sustains the Kremlin** : the scientists, the bureaucrats, the officials, and the silences that survive every regime change. "Many people in the sphere of scientific knowledge were truly in the loyal service of the Soviet Union. And these people were responsible for the

system's ability to monitor its own population, kill political opponents, and threaten the world order," says the author, for whom "you can't understand the Russian state just by looking at the men at the top; you also have to look at those who make it work."

Around the poison, a dance of loyalties unfolds, where old friends intertwine with new enemies. Scientists invented Novichok in the closed city of Shikhany, 960 kilometers south of Moscow, on the banks of the Volga. It was there, in the 1920s, that Soviet and German scientists of the Weimar Republic secretly tested chemical weapons. *Undetectable* is born from that secret place, which in the novel is called The Island. There, the story's protagonist, Professor Kalitin, is a highly talented young Soviet man. He invents the "neophyte" (one of the free translations of the term Novichok), an undetectable neurotoxin. "In Soviet times, there were many cities and territories with varying levels of secrecy... **They were countries within a country, inaccessible even to Soviet citizens** ," explains the author. At the heart of this system were, of course, the nuclear program and the development of biological and chemical weapons.

To research his subject, Lebedev spoke with several people born and raised in these cities, and they all described a very specific characteristic of that environment: "They didn't live in a normal Soviet Union; **they lived in artificially created spaces, very well-supplied, with good services and privileges** ," he explains. "One of these people told me they felt like Romans in a barbarian land, in the middle of the forests of Mordovia." These cities weren't just scientific laboratories, he specifies, "they were also **mental laboratories** , places where the kind of loyal researcher that allows a totalitarian state to survive longer was developed." For the writer, "that's one of the most interesting parts of 20th-century Soviet history." "I would call it the dark romance between the people in power and the people in the sphere of knowledge," he says.

Undetectable reads like so many other Russian thrillers, much like Giuliano da Empoli's *The Magician of the Kremlin* , but it's considerably more profound in its historical research. The protagonist's path crosses with the shadowy Shershnev, the antagonist, though also a victim of the system: a lieutenant colonel in the Russian special forces, a Chechen veteran, an expert in assassinations and clandestine operations who doesn't kill for pleasure, but because he believes that obeying the State is his only identity. The novel

presents three overlapping conflicts: **the scientist against his creation, the executioner against his conscience** (Kalitin begins to see the physical marks of his experiments in the faces of his victims, because even if the poison is undetectable, the damage always leaves a trace), and finally, **the State against time** .

The use of poison changed throughout Soviet history. “During the Stalinist Great Terror, they didn’t need poison. At the height of terror, you don’t need such a sophisticated weapon, just a pistol, a typewriter, and a car... that’s all. **Poisons were used later, especially in the context of the Cold War, as a tool to instill a different kind of fear** ,” Lebedev recalls. Since then, each case has been different, although there is a common thread. Each death reveals something about the nature of the regime. The writer emphasizes that “Navalny’s conviction was that certain rules of the political game still existed, that you could end up in prison for a while, yes, but there was still a political battle to be fought.” However, he asserts, his poisoning was a sign that those rules had disappeared: **“In Russia, politics, in the true sense of the word, no longer exists.**

The syntax of totalitarianism has not always been readily understood in the West: “I was surprised, to put it mildly, by the weakness of the response to cases like Litvinenko or the Skripals, but I think that weakness was part of an attempt to avoid recognizing Russia as a terrorist state,” the author laments. “In reality, when someone uses chemical weapons as an instrument of political assassination, that is **one of the clearest pieces of evidence of state terrorism** , and it is especially so because innocent civilians are also affected.

Faced with the West's bewilderment, "there were two very clear options: to treat these cases harshly, not limit oneself to imposing sanctions, and recognize Russia as a terrorist state; or to continue down the diplomatic path." It is more or less, he recalls, what happened with MH17, the Malaysian plane shot down over eastern Ukraine: "There were many conversations, some judicial proceedings, but Russia emerged practically unpunished, and I don't think it's just a tradition of treating each case separately, but a tradition of trying to appease Russia." Unfortunately, he says, "there is a long tradition in that sense, and that allows all these cases, and also the Russian wars, to be treated as separate episodes, as if they were exceptions." And he gives an example: "Western countries treated the two wars in Chechnya as detours on

Russia's path to democracy, but they were not detours: they were the direct route toward the restoration of the empire."