

Still no facts in UK/Russia double agent poisoning case

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Almost a week since the former Russian/British double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were hospitalised, the facts of their apparent poisoning remain unexplained and undetermined.

That has not prevented the media and sections of the government from hysterical accusations against Russia for “attempted murder” on British soil.

Skripal and his daughter are in a critical condition after allegedly being exposed to what has been described only as a “nerve agent.” They were found last Saturday afternoon unconscious on a bench near a shopping centre in the small cathedral city of Salisbury.

The 66-year-old Skripal is a former colonel in Russia’s GRU, the military intelligence service. He spent four years in a Russian jail—out of a 13-year prison sentence—after being found guilty in 2006 of passing secrets to MI6, the UK’s foreign intelligence service. He was released in 2010, when he was pardoned by Russia as part of a well-publicized 10-person spy swap between the US, the UK and Russia. He then moved to the UK.

Details of Skripal’s activities in Britain are murky to say the least. Nor is there any serious attempt to explain why he and his daughter would be targeted for murder in such a public fashion after more than seven years.

Nonetheless, on Friday Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson announced that military personnel have joined counter-terrorist police in investigating the case, with up to 180 people mobilised. This was after it was claimed that 21 people had been treated as a result of the incident, and the cemetery where Skripal’s wife is buried was cordoned off.

Contradictions in reports as to the source of the substance to which Skripal and his daughter were allegedly exposed continue to pile up. Initially it was asserted they were exposed at a restaurant or public

house. Now there are suggestions it may have been in Skripal’s home. It is also suggested that Yulia brought the nerve agent into the UK from Russia, contained in what she was told was a present from friends.

There are also conflicting reports as to whether Skripal was still involved in espionage activities for private contractors attached to the British security forces.

The *Times* said he had given lectures on the tactics used by the intelligence agencies in the Soviet era and its successor, the Federal Security Service. Valery Morozov, a Russian exile, told Channel 4 News that Skripal remained in contact with military intelligence officers at the Russian Embassy.

The *Independent* reported that Skripal “may have become a target after using his contacts in the intelligence community to work for private security firms ...”

Citing a “security source,” the newspaper said Skripal “could have come to the attention of certain people in Russia by attempting to ‘freelance’ for companies run by former MI5, MI6 and GCHQ spies.” The article claimed Skripal had “kept in touch with members of the intelligence community, past and present ...”

Many private security firms in the UK are headed by former MI5 and MI6 spies. The *Daily Telegraph* noted last year that the “intelligence” industry “is thriving—at least in terms of the numbers of companies providing these services.” It noted that research firm Gartner estimated the “the worldwide industry is expected to make around \$20bn (£15.87bn) in revenue this year.”

One possible link Skripal had with British intelligence was via the security firm Orbis Business Intelligence. According to a *Telegraph* report, an unnamed intelligence consultant employed by the firm

said he was close to Skripal as they both lived in southern England.

Orbis was founded by former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele, after he left MI6 in 2009. It was Steele who authored the 35-page report, paid for by the Democrats in the US, and used to paint US President Trump as a Russian stooge.

Steele sold his document, based on unverified material supplied by his Russian contacts, to the Washington-based Fusion GPS, for which he reportedly received £130,000.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov rejected any Russian involvement in the attack on Skripal, stating, “What we see is only news reports ... saying that if it is Russia, then a response is going to be given that Russia is going to remember forever. That is not serious. This is propaganda fair and square and it is trying to raise tensions,” Lavrov said.

He said that Russia “will be willing to contemplate” assisting with the investigation, “if we have the necessary data and facts.”

The reaction of the UK media and politicians suggest little interest in getting to the truth of the affair. For some time now, there has been a campaign, led by defence chiefs, to demand a stepped-up military campaign against Russia, which the Skripal affair is being used to accelerate.

Tom Tugendhat, Conservative chairman of parliament’s Foreign Affairs Select Committee (FASC), told a *Spectator* magazine podcast that the case was “remarkably similar” to the death of Alexander Litvinenko—who died from radioactive polonium-210 poisoning in 2006.

Tugendhat went on to assert, “It looks likely that his [Skripal’s] wife was murdered a year or so ago. His son was also murdered in 2017.”

Skripal’s wife died of cancer in 2012 according to her death certificate, while his son was killed in a car crash in St. Petersburg last year.

On this basis Tugendhat asserted there was a “very strong pattern,” at the “centre” of which “appears very strongly to be the Kremlin.”

Another Conservative FASC member, Bob Seely, said, “Regardless of whether the Russians are involved in this case, they are fighting a new Cold War against us and you need to wise up to that fact. They have form in this, they have malign intent. It is very, very unlikely

to be someone else.”

Seely was previously a reporter on the Soviet Union for Murdoch’s *Times*, which is at the forefront of the anti-Russian campaign. Earlier this month the *Times* interviewed senior armed forces figures calling for UK military spending to be escalated, with Russia singled out as the enemy.

Murdoch’s *Sun* reported that Prime Minister Theresa May is preparing “full spectrum retaliation against Vladimir Putin for the nerve agent hit on spy Sergei Skripal ... across diplomatic, economic and military fronts to punish the Salisbury outrage—dubbed by Home Secretary Amber Rudd as ‘a brazen and reckless act.’”

A comment in the *Telegraph* by Fraser Nelson typifies the brazen and reckless disregard for truth animating this latest anti-Russian campaign. Headlined “Britain can’t prove that Putin was behind the Skripal poisoning—but we must act nevertheless,” Nelson complained that while Rudd had said she would respond “as soon as she has proof ... the whole point of such murders is that proof never arrives. This is a new kind of conflict, and deserves a new kind of response.”



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