

The campaign over the Skripal poisoning: An international war provocation

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The campaign by the imperialist powers in Europe and the United States over the poisoning of former Russian spy and British double agent Sergei Skripal stinks to high heaven. The most far-reaching claims are being made, with the most far-reaching consequences, without any substantiation.

The propaganda offensive is not about what may or may not have happened in a park in Salisbury, England on March 4. It is about creating the pretext for a massive escalation of the war drive in Syria, the broader Middle East, and against Russia itself.

When Skripal and his daughter were first discovered on a park bench, the police declared that establishing what had happened would take weeks, if not months. The British government, however, has wrapped up the case far more quickly than any conventional criminal inquiry.

On March 12, Prime Minister Theresa May's declared that Russia was "highly likely" to have been responsible for "an indiscriminate and reckless act against the United Kingdom." This has been followed by the declaration of UK Foreign Minister Boris Johnson Friday that "our quarrel is with Putin's Kremlin, and with his decision—and we think it overwhelmingly likely that it was his decision—to direct the use of a nerve agent on the streets of the UK."

The assertions of the British government were endorsed by the US, France and Germany on Thursday, which declared the poisoning "the first offensive use of a nerve agent in Europe since the Second World War." "It certainly looks like the Russians were behind it," Trump declared on Thursday, with the administration announcing new sanctions against Russia.

The rapidity with which the major imperialist policies have signed on to the statements of the UK makes clear

that a plan was worked out beforehand. It required only the appropriate occasion to unveil it.

The story as told by the UK government is full of contradictions, without a shred of probative evidence. The entire pretext is based on the analysis coming out of Porton Down, the biochemical warfare facility dedicated to developing weapons of mass destruction, which is located only 10 miles from Salisbury. After first asserting that the poison was a nerve gas like Sarin or VX, the agency now claims that the toxic agent is "of a type developed by Russia," namely Novichok.

As former UK ambassador and author Craig Murray has noted, the phrase "of a type developed by Russia" is carefully chosen. He cited a source within the British government as confirming that "Porton Down scientists are not able to identify the nerve gas as being of Russian manufacture, and have been resentful of the pressuring being placed on them to do so."

Even if one were to accept the conclusion of the British government about the use of Novichok—and it has refused to provide samples to Russia or anyone else—this does not constitute proof that Russia directed the attack. The chemical was researched during the era of the Soviet Union. There is no evidence that Russia ever produced it, and it could just as easily have been manufactured in London, Langley or one of the states in the former Soviet Union that are now bitterly hostile to Russia.

And if a Russian was in fact involved, this is a far cry from proving the responsibility of the Russian government.

The Russian government has strenuously denied any involvement. Presidential press secretary Dmitri Peskov said on Friday, "In international practice we never encountered such behavior at the state level when very serious accusations are being brought up against a

country—our country in this case—with such wording as ‘apparently,’ ‘most likely’ and so on.” Such an approach, he noted, “contradicts not only international law, but common sense as a whole.”

The Putin regime is deeply reactionary, governing on behalf of a criminal financial oligarchy that grew rich by plundering the assets of the former Soviet Union. But there is no proof that it was involved in the attack on Skripal and many reasons to question why it would want to do so, as it provides a ready-made pretext for aggression by the US and Europe.

From the standpoint of who benefits, the most likely guilty parties in the Skripal affair are London and Washington, rather than Moscow. They are furious that the Russian government is obstructing their operations in Syria, aimed at removing the Assad government and setting up a puppet regime.

The events of the past two weeks were preceded by a significant escalation in Syria. On February 7, US warplanes and artillery batteries carried out a massacre in the north-eastern province of Deir Ezzor—knowing that the bulk of hundreds of casualties would be Russian mercenaries. On February 25, the Trump administration declared that it no longer needed further approval for a vast expansion of military operations against Syria and its allies, including Iran.

Preparations have also been made for a direct conflict with Russia itself. It was only on January 19 that US Defence Secretary James Mattis announced a new National Defence Strategy that declared, “Great power competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of US national security.”

All the governments involved in the present campaign are warmongering regimes, run by the military-intelligence agencies. They all, moreover, face deep internal crises. The UK is riven by internal conflicts over Brexit. The Trump administration in the US staggers from crisis to crisis and is currently carrying out a purge of top government officials. In Germany, the major parties have finally formed a government, nearly six months after elections in September—the last piece of the political machinery required to secure the US-led anti-Russian alliance now in operation.

In addition to justifying the expansion of war abroad, the campaign against Russia provides a pretext for an escalation of attacks on democratic rights at home. In

the United States, the campaign over “Russian meddling” has already been used by the ruling class—led by the Democratic Party and the CIA—with the pretext for censoring the Internet.

March 20 marks the 15th anniversary of the launching of the 2003 Iraq war based on a torrent of lies. As part of a concerted campaign to “prove” the existence of weapons of mass destruction, the US and UK spent months manufacturing intelligence, producing two “dodgy dossiers,” and even sending in weapons inspectors to Iraq. After these inspectors found no evidence of a nuclear or chemical weapons programme, on February 5, US Secretary of State Colin Powell appeared before the United Nations to present his infamous and wholly manufactured slide show, purporting to show photographic “evidence” of Iraq hiding unconventional weapons. On March 18, on this basis, the Labour government of Tony Blair committed the UK to support a US-led war.

The same playbook is being used again, only the case now being made against Russia regarding Skripal is even flimsier than that offered up to justify war against Iraq.

Within the political establishments in all the imperialist powers involved, there is no significant opposition to the present disastrous course. The Labour Party in Britain, like the Democrats in the US, are the most bellicose advocates of anti-Russian measures. In the media, not a single major publication has come out against the filthy campaign waged because the hallowed “free press” is nothing but a mouthpiece of the financial oligarchy and its drive to seize the markets and resources of the entire world.

The working class can only combat the growing danger of war by its own independent political action, in opposition to all parties of the ruling class. The formation of a new anti-war movement, uniting the great mass of working people and youth in opposition to capitalism and imperialism, is the most urgent political task.



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