

# Questions mount about UK allegations over "novichok" poison in Skripal case

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19 March 2018

As London escalates tensions with Russia, accusing Moscow of poisoning former British spy Sergei Skripal with “novichok” in Salisbury on March 4, questions are mounting in diplomatic and scientific circles over the British government’s account. It is not clear whether the “novichok” chemical weapon even exists. Particularly since London has still provided no tangible evidence to support its accusations, this raises the question of whether its entire case against Russia is based on lies.

Last week, as former German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel declared that London’s allegations against Russia were like the script for a “really bad James Bond movie,” former British ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray wrote a brief but devastating note on “novichok.” His article, titled “The Novichok Story is Indeed Another Iraqi WMD Scam,” compared the allegations that Russia has “novichok” to the infamous US-UK lies claiming Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, used to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The allegations of Russian use of “novichok” have come from the British government and its bio-chemical warfare facility at Porton Down, a few kilometers away from Salisbury. However, as Murray points out, Dr. Robin Black, the head of the Detection Laboratory at Porton Down, had cast doubt as to the existence of “novichok” nerve agents as recently as 2016.

In a contribution to the scientific work *Chemical Warfare Toxicology*, which can be consulted online via Google Books, Black wrote:

In recent years, there has been much speculation that a fourth generation of nerve agents, ‘Novichoks’ (newcomer), was

developed in Russia, beginning in the 1970s as part of the ‘Foliant’ programme, with the aim of finding agents that would compromise defensive countermeasures. Information on these compounds has been sparse in the public domain, mostly originating from a dissident Russian military chemist, Vil Mirzayanov. No independent confirmation of the structures or the properties of such compounds has been published.

Mirzayanov wrote that he had worked on “novichok” compounds in a 1995 article that did not make clear whether anyone ever managed to develop these compounds into a viable nerve agent. He wrote, “One should be mindful that the chemical components or precursors of A-232 or its binary version novichok-5 are ordinary organophosphates that can be made at commercial chemical companies that manufacture such products as fertilizers and pesticides.”

Mirzayanov went on to publish a book in 2008 titled *State Secrets: An Insider’s Account of the Russian Chemical Warfare Program*. In the book, still available for sale on Amazon, Mirzayanov published what he claimed were the chemical formulas for the “novichok” compounds that the Soviet chemical weapons program worked on. This means that virtually anyone with access to chemical installations could manufacture the “novichok” compounds Mirzayanov claimed he had helped develop.

Mirzayanov’s claims failed to persuade the scientific community, either in Britain or internationally, of the existence of “novichok” chemical weapons, however. The Porton Down facility was not alone in expressing its doubts. In 2013, as Murray notes, the Scientific

Advisory Board (SAB) of the UN Office for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) similarly made clear that it had no evidence that “novichok” compounds had been turned into a nerve agent.

In this report, still available on the OPCW web site, the SAB explained that it was not including “novichoks” on its list of chemical weapons, because it had seen no evidence that the compounds involved could be developed into a chemical weapon. It wrote:

[T]he definition of toxic chemicals in the Convention would cover all potential candidate chemicals that might be utilised as chemical weapons. Regarding new toxic chemicals not listed in the Annex on Chemicals but which may nevertheless pose a risk to the Convention, the SAB makes reference to “Novichoks”. The name “Novichok” is used in a publication of a former Soviet scientist who reported investigating a new class of nerve agents suitable for use as binary chemical weapons. The SAB states that it has insufficient information to comment on the existence or properties of “Novichoks.”

After London helped Washington launch a war based on WMD lies in 2003, no one has reason to believe the UK government’s unsubstantiated allegations of Russian use of “novichok,” which are at the center of its case against Russia. Instead, several questions should be asked, including the following.

If a “novichok” weapon was secretly developed based on the compounds described by Mirzayanov, and UK officials have found it after it was used to poison Skripal:

- Why have they refused to turn over a sample of this dangerous, unknown compound to the OPCW for analysis, so that future “novichok” attacks could be better treated?

- How do they know that this weapon originated in Russia, when the formulas are available for sale to anyone on Amazon (for just US\$7.25 on Kindle)?

- In particular, how do UK officials know that this attack does not originate, as did the 2001 anthrax attacks in the United States, in sections of their own country’s bio-chemical warfare apparatus?

If, as the scientific community appears to believe, the “novichok” nerve gas does not exist, and London has therefore not found it in Salisbury, then why is it again stoking a war hysteria based on WMD lies—this time aimed at Russia, a major nuclear power?



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