

Russian diplomats expelled over allegations of poisoning of ex-spy in UK

Bill Van Auken
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The coordinated mass expulsion of Russian diplomats announced Monday by Washington, 14 European Union countries, Ukraine and Canada over allegations of Moscow's responsibility for the March 4 poisoning of former Russian spy and British double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the southern English city of Salisbury marks a major escalation of the political and military threats against Russia, the world's second major nuclear power.

It was reported Tuesday morning that the Australian government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was joining in this operation, preparing to expel two Russian diplomats that it claimed were "undeclared intelligence officers."

British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson boasted that the actions of the various governments "stands in history as the largest collective expulsion of Russian intelligence officers ever and will help defend our shared security." What he meant was that the Western retaliation against Moscow surpassed anything carried out during the most tense periods of the Cold War against the former Soviet Union.

This dangerous and provocative campaign, orchestrated by the military and intelligence agencies in the US and the UK, has been mounted based on wholly unfounded accusations. No more evidence has been presented to back up the latest diplomatic expulsions than the unsubstantiated statement made two weeks ago by British Prime Minister Theresa May and Foreign Minister Johnson that Russia was "highly likely" to have been behind what has been described as a nerve agent attack on the former double agent.

The British government has claimed that the nerve agent used in the attack on Skripal and his daughter was "of a type" (Novichok) that had once been manufactured in the Soviet Union. British authorities, however, have refused to provide Moscow with any sample of the alleged agent,

as required by the rules set by the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), or to the UN Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). The "of a type" description means that the substance used could have been manufactured virtually anywhere.

Indeed, even while it expelled three Russian diplomats "in solidarity" with London and NATO, the government of the Czech Republic ordered its intelligence service to conduct an investigation to determine whether the nerve agent could have been manufactured in that country.

The majority of the diplomatic expulsions were carried out by the Trump administration, with 60 Russian diplomats and their families—48 from Moscow's embassy in Washington and 12 from the Russian mission to the United Nations—ordered to leave the country within one week.

In addition, Washington ordered the shutdown of the Russian consulate in the city of Seattle, Washington. This move was justified on the trumped-up pretext that it was too close to a US submarine base and Boeing aircraft plants, thereby supposedly representing some sort of military threat.

Asserting Russia's use of "a military-grade chemical weapon on the soil of the United Kingdom" as fact, a statement issued by the White House Monday described this alleged act as "the latest in its ongoing pattern of destabilizing activities around the world."

Among these "destabilizing activities" is Moscow's backing for the government of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, where Russia has provided air support for government forces in overrunning one of the last major strongholds of the Islamist "rebels" in the Damascus suburb of eastern Ghouta, signaling a major reversal for the seven-year-old US-backed war for regime change.

Last week, the top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, charged that Russia was providing aid and arms to the Taliban, allegations that Moscow

described as “absolutely baseless” and “nonsense.”

The reality is that, from the Middle East to Eastern Europe to South and Central Asia, Russia’s continued existence represents an obstacle to US imperialism’s drive to assert its global hegemony by military means. This is why Washington has jumped onto the bandwagon over the issue of the alleged attempted assassination of Skripal and his daughter and joined with London in pressuring the other European powers to fall into line.

London began the expulsions, ordering 23 Russian diplomats to leave the country. Moscow retaliated by expelling 23 British diplomats. The expulsions ordered by the other European powers Monday, however, were of a largely token character, with Germany and France each ordering four Russian diplomats to leave, the same number targeted by Canada. The exception was the virulently anti-Russian government of Ukraine, which expelled 13 Russian diplomats.

Despite the expressions of solidarity and unity against the alleged Russian crime, there are deep divisions within the NATO alliance over relations with Moscow. Germany has forged closer trade ties with Russia, particularly in relation to Russian natural gas and crude oil, with Berlin’s backing for the Nord Stream II pipeline that would double gas supplies from Russia to Germany.

The Skripal affair is being utilized by Washington and London to counter the moves by Paris and Berlin toward the development of an independent European military alliance, counterposed to the US-dominated NATO. Despite the formal statements of solidarity with the UK, divisions within both Germany and France over the hardline stance against Russia remain deep.

Moscow, meanwhile, has threatened to carry out tit-for-tat countermeasures against every country expelling its diplomatic personnel.

“We express a decisive protest over the decision taken by a number of EU and NATO countries to expel Russian diplomats. There will be a mirror-like response. We will work it out in the coming days and give our response with regard to each country ... We consider this step as unfriendly and not serving the tasks and interests of establishing the causes and finding the perpetrators of the incident that took place on March 4 in Salisbury,” the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Russia’s ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov, told the media Monday, “What the USA is doing today is destroying what little remains of Russian-American relations. All responsibility for the consequences of the destruction of Russian-American

relations rests with the USA.”

He added that “there is not a single piece of evidence of the Russian Federation’s interference in the investigation of the case as such, or of Russia’s involvement in the tragedy that took place in Salisbury.”

Britain’s Defense Minister Gavin Williamson, who recently responded to Moscow’s denials of the UK’s charges by telling the media that Russia should “go away and shut up,” delivered a provocative speech Monday in Estonia, where British troops are deployed as part of NATO’s buildup on Russia’s border. “The world’s patience is rather wearing thin with President Putin and his actions,” he said.

Meanwhile, in Washington, leading Democrats responded to the latest anti-Russian measures taken by the Trump administration by denouncing the US president for not going far enough in terms of provocations against Moscow.

Democratic Congressman Eliot Engel, the ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, called the expulsion of the Russian diplomats a “welcome demonstration of Western unity and solidarity” and said he hoped that “in the future we will see more joint efforts to push back against Russian aggression.”

Engel added, however, that the US action only underscored “the administration’s weak response to Russia’s ongoing attack right here in the United States,” referring to the allegations of Russian “meddling” in the 2016 US presidential election.

Speaking for decisive layers within the CIA and other US military and intelligence agencies, the opposition of Democrats like Engel to Trump is rooted principally in differences over US imperialist strategy. They are pushing for a military confrontation with Russia, sooner rather than later.



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