

In response to US-UK provocations

Russia expels US diplomats, closes consulate in St. Petersburg

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30 March 2018

The Russian government on Thursday ordered the closure of the American consulate in St. Petersburg and the expulsion of 60 US intelligence agents operating under diplomatic cover, in direct response to the anti-Russian campaign spearheaded by Britain and the United States.

The move came three days after the Trump administration ordered the closing of the Russian consulate in Seattle, Washington and expulsion of 60 Russian officials, most of them working out of the embassy in Washington.

The mutual expulsions and closures mean there are only two Russian consulates in the entire United States, in Washington and New York City, and only two American consulates in Russia, in Moscow and Vladivostok.

US Ambassador Jon Huntsman was summoned to the Russian Foreign Ministry and asked by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov to explain his suggestion that the US government would look into seizing Russian state assets within the United States, in a further escalation of the anti-Russian campaign launched earlier this month by Britain and the US.

According to the Foreign Ministry, Ryabkov told Huntsman that such a move would have the “gravest consequences for global stability.” The ministry statement continued: “It was recommended to the US authorities, who are encouraging and fanning a campaign of slander against our country, to come to their senses and put a stop to reckless actions that are destroying bilateral relations.”

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said his government would expel representatives of all 27 governments that have ordered Russian diplomats to leave, matching the number expelled in each case “tit for tat.” In addition to 23 British diplomats already kicked out and 60 from the US, this will mean 13 from Ukraine, four from Germany, one from Georgia and so on, up to a total of 153.

The US-UK campaign against Russia began with British claims, unsupported by any publicly revealed evidence, that the Russian government was responsible for poisoning

Sergei Skripal, a former British spy, and his daughter Yulia. The two collapsed on a park bench in Salisbury, England March 4 and have been hospitalized in critical condition since then.

On March 15, the US, Britain, France and Germany issued a joint statement declaring Russia responsible for the supposed nerve gas attack on the Skripals. This was followed by similar statements from the European Union and NATO, and then the US expulsions, announced Monday, March 26, the most sweeping diplomatic sanctions since the Cold War.

The EU statement covered up considerable division within the bloc. Greece, Hungary and Cyprus have opposed the campaign, and nine other countries--Belgium, Bulgaria, Ireland, Luxemburg, Malta, Austria, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia--declined to join in the expulsion of diplomats.

There are also divisions within the major European powers, particularly Germany, where prominent leaders of the Social Democratic Party and Left Party have rejected taking action against Moscow in the absence of any proof of Russian responsibility for the Skripal poisoning.

The deputy leader of the SPD, Ralf Stegner, criticized the expulsions in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper, saying he feared an escalation “which can still hurt us very much.” Referring to the lack of evidence, he said: “Appearances and plausibility are not enough to convict.”

The refusal to supply any evidence to back up the charges against Russia is the clearest demonstration that the campaign by London and Washington is a planned and deliberate provocation. The British government has not even submitted samples of the alleged nerve gas poison to the Office for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the UN agency which, based on international treaties to which Britain is a party, has oversight in such cases.

OPCW technicians arrived in Salisbury this week to begin their own tests, with results expected sometime in April.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov reiterated his government's demand that the OPCW meet as early as Monday to discuss the Skripal case and the British government claims.

Lavrov criticized UK Prime Minister Theresa May, saying her government was "forcing everyone to follow an anti-Russian course," leaving the Russian government no alternative but to respond to "absolutely unacceptable actions that are taken against us under very harsh pressure from the United States and Britain under the pretext of the so-called Skripal case."

A number of chemical weapons experts have called into question the official British account, since it does not square with the known facts about nerve gas weapons similar to "novichok," the material allegedly used against the Skripals.

The latest account from London does not help matters. Dean Haydon, the chief of Britain's counter-terrorism police, said the Skripals had come into contact with the nerve agent from the front door of their home. A Russian security official, Major-General Alexander Mikhailov, pointed out that if a nerve gas poisoning had taken place on the doorstep, the Skripals would have died immediately.

Instead, the father and daughter went out to lunch, finished their meal and moved to a bench in a nearby park, where they collapsed. Moreover, British government sources said Thursday that Yulia Skripal was no longer in critical condition and was expected to survive, a result that appeared to rule out an attack by a poison as lethal as novichok.

Nor does the Russian government have a plausible motive for seeking the death of Sergei Skripal, who was jailed rather than executed when uncovered as a double agent in 2004. Skripal was released in a spy swap in 2010, and his daughter Yulia, a Russian citizen, was allowed to leave the country with him.

From the standpoint of motive, the Skripal affair benefits only the military-intelligence agencies in Britain and the United States, which have been seeking every possible pretext for intensifying conflict with Russia. Tensions have been steadily building up over the US-backed right-wing coup in Ukraine, the civil war in Syria, where the US is seeking to oust the Russian-backed regime of Bashar al-Assad, and, more generally, the NATO mobilization in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, clearly aimed at preparing war with Russia.

Washington and London are particularly concerned about the emergence of foreign policy differences with the European Union, which has its own interests in Russia and the Middle East, at odds with those of the United States. The Pentagon is seeking an agreement at the upcoming NATO summit in July on what is being called the "30-30-30" proposal, a commitment to have 30 troop battalions, 30

naval ships and 30 fighter squadrons ready to deploy in the event of a conflict with Russia.

The provocations against Russia also have a powerful domestic motive. The development of a state of quasi-war with Russia provides a pretext for attacks on internal political opposition, both in the United States and Britain, where any significant social struggle can now be branded as "Russian-inspired" or the result of "fake news" spread by Russian "trolls and bots" on the Internet.

Since the New Year, working class struggles have increased in both countries and other parts of Europe in what is emerging as a generalized upsurge of social unrest. The turn to domestic repression and dictatorial methods, including censorship of the Internet, is the response of the ruling classes in all of the major capitalist states. A major aim in demonizing Russia is to stoke up a war fever at home in order to justify repressive measures against social and political opposition from the working class.

Efforts are continuing in the American corporate media to escalate the anti-Russia campaign. NBC News broadcast a report Thursday night claiming--on the basis of a single interview with a Russian defector and former double agent--that the Putin regime has drawn up a "hit list" of eight individuals targeted for assassination.

The list supposedly includes the defector himself, Skripal and Christopher Steele, the former British secret agent who compiled a dossier of anti-Trump material gathered from his contacts within Russia and supplied it to the FBI, the Democratic Party and Senator John McCain.



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