

UK's Porton Down military lab head: Russia not identified as source of Skripal poisoning

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4 April 2018

Scientists at the UK's Porton Down military laboratory have not identified Russia as the source of the nerve agent used in the alleged attempted assassination of former double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia.

Gary Aitkenhead, chief executive of the Porton Down Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL), told *Sky News* that scientists had “not verified the precise source” of the material used in the attack in Salisbury on March 4.

His admission confirms that the British establishment is guilty of a criminal hoax, surpassing even that of the dodgy “intelligence” dossier manufactured to justify the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Notably, the US and British media have been almost silent on Aitkenhead's statement, which cuts across efforts by the political establishment to ratchet up tensions with Russia in order to justify not only military rearmament, but moves to suppress domestic political opposition in the name of combatting foreign “meddling.” While the Guardian reported the story in its online edition, the report had disappeared from its front page by mid-day.

“It is not our job [DSTL]” to determine where the agent was manufactured, or by whom, Aitkenhead said. Nor could he confirm that the agent used was novichok—the military grade nerve poison that the British government insists could only have been manufactured by Russia.

“At this stage ... we have been able to establish that it is novichok *or from that family*” (emphasis added), he said. Asked if Russia could be confirmed as the source, he said that all DTSL had done was provide “the scientific information to government” who “have then used a number of other sources to piece together the conclusions that they have come to.”

Aitkenhead's statements explode the British government's utilisation of the Skripals' apparent poisoning to ratchet up NATO's provocations against Moscow.

Prime Minister Theresa May told parliament on March 12 that the agent used against the Skripals was “of a type” (novichok) manufactured in Russia. “Based on the positive identification of this chemical agent by world-leading

experts at Porton Down ... the government has concluded that it is highly likely that Russia was responsible” for attempted murder on British soil, she said.

The prime minister did not present a shred of evidence to back up her charge, and her weasel word formulation “highly likely” was framed so as to leave wriggle room.

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson showed no such caution, stating that it was “overwhelmingly likely” that the Kremlin had authorised the attack. Rejecting Russia's continued insistence that it was not involved, Johnson accused Moscow of a “haystack of lies” and compared Russian President Vladimir Putin to Hitler.

Johnson later claimed that Porton Down had now told him they had “positively identified the nerve agent as Russian.” Questioned on German Broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* on how he knew “that the source of this nerve agent, novichok, is Russian,” Johnson replied, “When I look at the evidence. I mean the people from Porton Down, the, er, the laboratory [they have samples], they were absolutely categorical. And I asked the guy myself, I said ‘are you sure’ and he said ‘there's no doubt.’”

On this basis, Britain sought and won the expulsion of 130 Russian diplomats from 26 countries—most notably the US—and demanded the acceleration of NATO efforts against Russia's “destabilising activities”.

Responding to the statement by Porton Down, Russian President Vladimir Putin demanded an inquiry into the Salisbury incident, stating his concern at the “the speed at which the anti-Russian campaign has been launched.”

The provocative and reckless character of these moves was underscored by Defence Minister Gavin Williamson. Addressing British troops stationed on the border between Estonia and Russia—part of the NATO build-up against Moscow—he threatened, “The world's patience is rather wearing thin with President Putin and his actions.”

Now it is clear that it is the British government that is guilty of a “haystack of lies.” As the WSWWS warned, “The most plausible explanation of the poisoning in Salisbury is that the unfortunate Mr. Skripal, a washed-up double agent,

and his daughter are merely expendable pawns in a conspiracy devised by the US and British intelligence agencies to further very definite geostrategic objectives.

In the weeks since the Skripals were found unconscious on a park bench, Britain's authorities have refused to provide Moscow with samples of the alleged agent, as is required under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) supervised by the UN Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

The British government and a pliant media have constantly changed their story—from the Skripals' being poisoned by the "opioid fentanyl" to one involving a military-grade nerve agent. The source of their contamination has also required adjustment from a present brought into the UK by Yulia, to the ventilation system in their car to a door handle on Skripal's home.

After claims that the Skripals and Sgt Nick Bailey—also reportedly contaminated—were unlikely to survive, Bailey was discharged from hospital on March 22. Then, on Thursday, Yulia too made an apparently miraculous recovery. Her whereabouts, along with her father who reportedly remains in a critical condition, are still unknown, and the British government continues to deny Russia access to them.

Aitkenhead's statement appears to have caught the government and media on the back foot. When it was revealed he was to speak to *Sky News*, the suspicion was that he would attempt to substantiate the government's case.

The DSTL chief said that the poison involved was "something that is *probably* only within the capabilities of a state actor" (emphasis added), but this still falls far short of Johnson's categorical insistence this is the case.

Moreover, Aitkenhead's claim that the agent deployed was an "extremely toxic substance" for which there is no known antidote only raises further questions. Given Johnson's claim that the novichok supposedly used is "ten times more powerful" than any other military grade agent, how is it that two of the three affected have now recovered, and why were more people not incapacitated?

Aitkenhead's interview came on the eve of the convening of the OPCW today in The Hague to discuss the Salisbury attack at Moscow's request. The result of the OPCW investigation is to be announced by early next week.

In the last days, Moscow had upped its denunciations of British allegations, accusing the UK secret services of involvement in the attack.

Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, said the UK and the United States were "resorting to open lies, blatant misinformation," with a view to manufacturing a confrontation with Moscow even more dangerous than during the Cold War.

"This can be also beneficial to the British government which found itself in an inconvenient situation after failing to fulfil its promises to voters on Brexit's conditions," he said, referring to the deepening political crisis over Britain's exit from the European Union.

Asked by *Sky News* to respond to such a grave allegation, Aitkenhead's comments were especially noteworthy. He said there was "no way that anything like that would ever have come from us *or leave the four walls of our facilities.*"

"We deal with a number of very toxic substances as part of the work that we do," he went on. But Porton Down has "the highest levels of security and controls" and was regularly monitored by the OPCW. "[I]f there was any hint that anything that we have would be leaving our four walls then we wouldn't be allowed to operate."

Porton Down is located only eight miles from Salisbury. The secretive facility is the centre of Britain's chemical weapons research, which dates back to the First World War. In 2008, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) agreed a £3 million out of court settlement relating to hundreds of ex-servicemen who were used as guinea pigs at the installation between 1939 and 1989. The participants had been told they were taking part in cold remedy studies, but some had been poisoned with sarin and other noxious agents.

In 2003, Porton Down was integral to government propaganda over Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction. Just weeks into the Iraq war, chemical weapons expert, Dr David Kelly, who was based at Porton Down, was outed as the source of allegations that the Labour government of Tony Blair had "sexed up" reports on Iraq's military capability to justify pre-emptive war. Kelly was found dead weeks later on July 17, 2003.

Last week it was revealed that Britain's MoD completed a major chemical warfare exercise on Salisbury Plain just days before the Skripals' poisoning. The three-week "realistic exercise scenario" involved 300 military personnel, the Dstl and Royal Marine Commandos in an exercise to test their preparedness for "chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear" threats, an MoD release from February 20 boasted.



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