

UN agency fails to substantiate claims of Russian use of “military grade nerve agent” in Skripal poisoning

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The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) released the executive summary of its much-anticipated findings into the poisoning of Russian double agent Sergei Skripal, his daughter Yulia and an attending police officer in Salisbury, England on March 4.

The report by the UN agency is crucial in the efforts at damage limitation after last week’s implosion of the claims that an ultra-deadly nerve agent had been used on British soil, 10 times more toxic than sarin gas, and so sophisticated that it had to have been produced by a state actor. The claims were blown to bits after the policeman and Yulia Skripal made full recoveries, and Sergei Skripal was also said to be out of danger.

True to form, the OPCW summary and the response to it by the media in Britain and internationally continue the lies and disinformation in pursuit of US and NATO war plans against Russia. Only the executive summary has been released publicly. The full text is classified and has been made available only to “state parties.”

The summary is extremely vague. The OPCW does not mention Russia. Nor does it use the term *novichok*—the Russian name for a family of nerve agents whose incessant repetition is meant to provide irrefutable proof of the Russian government’s involvement.

The only time the OPCW uses the term “nerve agent” it is prefaced with the caveat “allegedly.” The description throughout is of a “toxic chemical” being deployed on March 4 against the Skripals. The OPCW does not name the chemical, nor does it identify its origins. On both counts, this fails to substantiate the claims that were at the centre of the British government’s misinformation.

All the OPCW summary does is “confirm the findings of the United Kingdom relating to the identity [not the origins] of the toxic chemical that was used in Salisbury and severely injured three people.”

Oddly, the OPCW states that the toxic chemical involved was of “high purity” with an “almost complete absence” of any impurities. This has been cited as proof that only a state power could be involved. Yet, attempting to explain why all three individuals had recovered, unnamed British officials claimed this was because a diluted [gel] form of the toxin had been developed, to delay the death of the Skripals long enough for the Russian agent involved to flee the country!

In other words, the toxic substance is both of “high purity” and highly diluted, manifesting whatever properties are required to meet the needs of the anti-Russian propaganda campaign, even if those properties directly contradict each other.

The alleged attack on the Skripals served as a critical element in justifying US and British war plans against Russia. Without any evidence, the government of Prime Minister Theresa May mounted a hysterical campaign asserting that Russia was responsible for an “attempted murder” on British soil.

On this basis, the UK sought and won the support of more than 20 western allies—most prominently Washington—to expel dozens of Russian diplomats.

Very quickly, however, the government’s claims began to unravel. Not only have all three recovered from what was described as an assassination attempt involving a “military grade” nerve agent, among the most deadly in the world, but the policeman and Yulia have been released from hospital, and Sergei is

expected to be released shortly.

Most damaging, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson was exposed publicly as a liar for his claim that the UK's chemical weapons facility, the Porton Down Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, had verified Russia as the source of the attack.

Johnson told German broadcaster Deutsche Welle on March 20 that "the people from Porton Down" were "absolutely categorical" that the source of the nerve agent used against the Skripals was Russia. "I asked the guy myself," he said, "and he said 'there's no doubt.'"

But on April 3, Gary Aitkenhead, chief executive of Porton Down, told Sky News that scientists had "not verified the precise source" of the material used in the attack.

The admission indicated widespread unease among scientists. The *Financial Times* reported that "chemistry experts are uneasy" about government claims over *novichok*. "The whole family of *novichoks* are quite easy to make," it cited Phil Parsons, an organic chemistry professor at Imperial College London. "You could synthesise them in any good chemistry lab, though you would have to take stringent safety precautions to prevent the staff being poisoned."

The obvious discrepancies between the multiple versions of the British government account and the OPCW findings have not prevented a barrage of headlines proclaiming that the UN agency has found in favour of British charges against Russia.

Johnson, whose office only days before had been destroying evidence of his previous lies, immediately dissembled, claiming that the OPCW had "confirmed findings of the United Kingdom relating to the identity of the toxic chemical" used against the Skripals. "That was a military grade nerve agent—a Novichok.

"There can be no doubt what was used and there remains no alternative explanation about who was responsible—only Russia has the means, motive and record."

The Skripals remain under close guard. Since being released from hospital last Thursday, Yulia has been held at an undisclosed "secure location." A statement issued, supposedly on her behalf by the Metropolitan Police, claimed that she did not want assistance from the Russian Embassy. Nor did she want contact at this point with her cousin and closest living relative in Russia, Viktoria, who was denied a visa by the British

authorities to visit her.

Sergei is said to be recovering quickly. According to the *Sunday Times*, plans are afoot to relocate father and daughter to the US where they "will be offered new identities and a new life."

The Russian Embassy disputed the authenticity of Yulia's statement and said that the British authorities "must urgently provide tangible evidence that Yulia is alright and not deprived of her freedom." It has described efforts to relocate the Skripals to the US or with any of the UK's intelligence allies as a "gross violation of international law" that would be seen "as an abduction."

Craig Murray, former British ambassador to Ukraine, also pointed to the peculiarities in the formulations used in the statement put out in Yulia's name.

Noting sentences such as, "At the moment I do not wish to avail myself of their [Russian Embassy] services," Murray said, "To put it plainly, as someone who has much experience of it, the English of the statement is precisely the English of an official in the UK security services and precisely not the English of somebody like Yulia Skripal or of a natural translation from Russian."

Even "at the most benevolent reading of the British authorities' actions," he concluded, "Yulia Skripal is being kept incommunicado, and under duress."



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