

Anti-Russia campaign revived in UK with alleged discovery of “novichok” in perfume bottle

Our reporter
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The “novichok” story entered a new phase last week as Charlie Rowley regained consciousness, two days after his partner Dawn Sturgess died in hospital. Over the past weeks, a succession of unsubstantiated stories and police reports have coalesced into a government sanctioned account of how the pair fell ill.

On June 29, Rowley and Sturgess are supposed to have encountered, in a public place in Salisbury, a “container” of some sort that stored the “novichok” nerve agent. The narrative is that this was likely discarded by Russian state-sponsored agents who had attempted to assassinate double-agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter on March 4.

The pair travelled to Rowley’s home in Amesbury that evening and the following morning, June 30, Sturgess was taken seriously ill and transported to hospital. Rowley appeared fine but fell ill later that afternoon.

According to Rowley’s brother, who was able to speak with him briefly, Charlie said he had picked up a “perfume bottle” before falling ill. Police have not confirmed or denied this claim but had previously reported finding a “small bottle” in Charlie’s Amesbury home.

Busy parroting the latest from the police/government, no one in the media has raised the slightest query over the timing of this development. With Rowley regaining consciousness, the discovery of the long sought-after “container” is aimed at putting the increasingly discredited authorities back in control of the “novichok” story. The perfume bottle is now under examination at the Porton Down chemicals weapons facility, just a few miles from Salisbury/Amesbury.

The resources at the disposal of the police and intelligence operation since the hospitalisation of Sturgess and Rowley have been massive. One hundred counterterrorism officers are involved in the investigation

covering Salisbury, Amesbury and environs and have had 12 days of access to Rowley’s house—the focus of the search.

Why nothing has yet been uncovered to link Moscow to Sturgess and Rowley is diverted by references to the “hot weather” and the difficulty of working for long stretches in hazmat suits. Belying these excuses, the police announced that they had seized some 400 items at the time of finding the alleged container.

There is no innocent explanation as to why a “small bottle” was not among the first of these items to be seized and made public. Precisely this possibility was raised by BBC security correspondent Frank Gardner at the very start of the whole affair. Gardner is reported to be close to intelligence agencies and has admitted that MI6 tried to recruit him in an earlier period.

Yet only now does what is being treated as a “smoking gun” appear, with the *Daily Mail* headlining its article, “Pollen on bottle which contained novichok that killed mother could prove it was used by Russian agents in attack on former double agent and his daughter.”

Even granting the existence of a vessel containing novichok, credulity is stretched to its limits. The last word on the Skripal case had it that a novichok agent was applied to Sergei’s door in a gel form—a “gloopy substance” according to Gordon Corera, another BBC security correspondent. What Sturgess and Rowley are supposed to have done with a bottle containing an unknown “gloopy substance” and why they took it home, given the media hysteria about possible deadly chemicals in the Salisbury area, is not considered.

Based on the apparent strength of the nerve agent and what some experts are now saying about its ability to remain potent in a container for decades, the fact that any direct contact with a large amount of the substance was

not very quickly fatal is remarkable. It was the day after the pair were supposed to have found the bottle that Sturgess and then Rowley fell ill. Did they save opening the bottle till the morning? And if so did Rowley not suspect anything when Sturgess then soon had to be hospitalised?

One person who might be expected to provide answers on this score is Sam Hobson, a mutual friend of Sturgess and Rowley who was with them the day they were taken to hospital, and for part of the evening before. But he has disappeared from all media reports.

On the subject of disappearances, the SKWAWKBOX website reported Sunday an online *Telegraph* article, “Novichok poisoning: Did Skripal attackers use Charlie Rowley’s flat as a safe house?” which was quickly taken down and replaced by the standard media line, “Novichok poisoning: Nerve agent found in perfume bottle, says victim’s brother.”

The original article noted that experts believe the idea that Rowley and Sturgess picked up the container somewhere “is unlikely given the length of time it took the couple to fall ill, with Ms Sturgess not taken to hospital until the following morning and Mr Rowley admitted more than eight hours later.”

“Instead, one key theory now being explored, is that the couple found the bottle in the apartment, after it was left there when Skripal’s would be assassins used it as a safe house while they prepared the attack.”

Then there is the situation with Sturgess’ body, which her family have been told is not likely to be released for months. An inquest into her death will be opened on Thursday. Former British ambassador Craig Murray suggested shortly after Sturgess died that the government would seek to prevent the proper conduct of this legal investigation, raising the example of David Kelly, a former scientist at Porton Down. His suspicious death on July 17, 2003, officially by suicide, followed criticisms he made of the “dodgy dossier” used to justify pre-emptive war against Iraq.

Murray has published a detailed list of questions and criticisms of the government’s narrative of the whole novichok affair. Specifically, with regard to Sturgess and Rowley, Murray asks:

“Why would trained assassins leave crucial evidence lying around in a public place in Salisbury?

“Why would they be conducting any part of the operation with the novichok in a public area in central Salisbury?

“If Rowley and Sturgess had direct contact straight from

the container, why did they not both die quickly?

“Why had four months searching of Salisbury and a massive police, security service and military operation not found this container, if Rowley and Sturgess could?”

More broadly, he questions how the Tory government can say Russia has an assassination programme centred on the production and use of novichok and why it did not inform “the OPCW [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons] inspectors who certified Russia’s chemical weapons stocks as dismantled.”

Further on the issue of timing, the container’s “discovery” on Friday coincided with the indictment by US Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein of 12 Russian military/intelligence officers for allegedly hacking the servers of the Democratic National Committee and the email account of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta.

Coming just three days before the high-level press conference between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, it was the occasion for a massive barrage of propaganda from the Democrats and their US intelligence agency backers demanding the Trump administration reorient its foreign policy goal toward geopolitical conflict with Russia.

In this light, the *New York Times* reported Sunday that the “same Russian military intelligence service now accused of disrupting the 2016 presidential election in America may also be responsible for the nerve agent attack in Britain against a former Russian spy...”

Russia’s GRU “serves as an undercover strike force for the Kremlin”, the NYT claimed, asserting, “From the earliest days of the Skripal investigation, the G.R.U. was a suspect...”



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