

UK “identifies” Russian agents in attempted Skripal assassination

Robert Stevens
7 September 2018

The UK government and media have doubled down on their anti-Russian campaign following Wednesday’s announcement by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) that two men have been named as suspects in the poisoning of former Russian/British double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia.

The police released passport photos and CCTV images of two men in various locations, including Gatwick Airport and Salisbury. But despite hysterical news broadcasts and front-page headlines regarding “Russian assassins,” the public know nothing more substantively about the events of Sunday, March 4, than they did more than six months ago.

CPS Director of Legal Services Sue Hemming said that evidence from counter-terrorism police meant “it is clearly in the public interest to charge Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov, who are Russian nationals,” with the attempted murder of Sergei, Yulia and police officer Nick Bailey.

Prime Minister Theresa May then told parliament that, in addition to the police investigation, the security and intelligence agencies had conducted their own investigation and, “based on a body of intelligence, the Government has concluded that the two individuals named by the police and CPS are officers from the Russian military intelligence service, also known as the GRU.”

She added: “So this was not a rogue operation. It was almost certainly also approved outside the GRU at a senior level of the Russian state.”

The Russian Foreign Ministry has categorically rejected the UK’s claims, stating the names of the two men “do not mean anything to us.”

May did not detail the intelligence she was supposedly acting on. Instead she singled out Russia as the main enemy of the West that had to be confronted, declaring, “This chemical weapons attack on our soil was part of a wider pattern of Russian behaviour that persistently seeks to undermine our security and that of our allies around the world.”

“Back in March, Russia sought to sow doubt and uncertainty about the evidence we presented to this

House—and some were minded to believe them,” May told parliament. “Today’s announcement shows that we were right.”

Except that it doesn’t. The new narrative is that “Petrov” and “Boshirov” flew into Gatwick airport on Friday, March 2. CCTV footage purportedly verifies this. They checked into a budget hotel in Bow, east London, and the next day, according to police, travelled to Salisbury, staying in the area for several hours, before returning to London.

The pair then returned to Salisbury on Sunday, March 4. Police claim they are shown on CCTV at 11:58 a.m., on Wilton Road, “moments before the attack” on Sergei Skripal.

The police say two more images show the “suspects at Salisbury train station at 13.50 on Sunday, 4 March, as they embark on their journey back to London.” Another image shows the “suspects passing through passport control at London Heathrow at 19.28 on Sunday evening (4 March)—in the image, ‘Petrov’ is at the front and ‘Boshirov’ at the back.”

May’s definitive assertion of Russian authorship was contradicted by Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, National Lead for Counter-Terrorism Policing. Asked by the press if he had any evidence that the two men were Russian State operatives, he said, “No.” Basu said in his statement that “it is likely that they were travelling under aliases and that these are not their real names.”

BBC Security Correspondent Gordon Corera reported that he understood the authorities identified the pair “a while back” and “may also know their real names.” But if so, why are they not being made public?

Former UK ambassador Craig Murray asked: “1. Why did two alleged GRU agents travel under false names and fake passports, but still use *Russian* names and *Russian* passports? If they had used EU passports—say from Lithuania or Estonia for example—they wouldn’t have needed a visa, thanks to EU freedom of movement agreements, and could still have spoken Russian without raising suspicion.”

Murray retweeted a statement from a freelance journalist, Neil Clark, pointing out: “If the two men were identified coming through Gatwick, it is impossible that the police do not know what kind of visa they were travelling on. Something is very wrong here—ties in with the fact that the photos released [showing grainy images of the men’s faces on dark backgrounds] are not UK visa standard photos.”

Among the glaring oddities in the new account is that the two photos released of “Petrov” and “Boshirov” shows them both in what appears to be the same space at Gatwick airport *at precisely the same second* (16:22:43 on March 2, 2018.) Raising the physical impossibility, Murray suggests the CCTV images may have been doctored. The police are now claiming that the two are in different but similar places passing CCTV cameras at exactly the same time.

The government’s latest narrative fails to correspond with claims it has maintained for months that the Skripals were poisoned by “novichok” being applied to the front door knob of Sergei’s house.

Murray points out that the Skripals left their home at 9:15 a.m. on March 4 and were assumed not to have returned home, before they were found collapsed. “But the Metropolitan Police state that Boshirov and Petrov did not arrive in Salisbury until 11.48 on the day of the poisoning. That means that they could not have applied a nerve agent to the Skripals’ doorknob before noon at the earliest.”

An article on the *Off Guardian* website noted that the police said the Bow Hotel was “contaminated” with novichok, but no one has been reported ill in six months at the hotel. Moreover, to contaminate the room “the suspects would have to physically apply the poison to it, and since they allegedly left [sic] country on March 4th—the same day as the alleged attack—the contamination must have happened BEFORE Sergei Skripal was poisoned.”

Also, previously the Metropolitan Police said that it was connecting the poisoning of the Skripals with that of Dawn Sturgess and her partner Charley Rowley. Dawn died in hospital after being exposed to what was described as a novichok on July 8. Rowley is now seriously ill with reported meningitis.

Yet Basu commented, “We don’t yet know where the suspects disposed of the Novichok they used to attack the door, where Dawn and Charlie got the bottle that poisoned them, or if it is the same bottle used in both poisonings.”

The government’s narrative cannot be taken at face value, especially as it is supplied by the same security services that faked “evidence” of Iraq having “weapons of mass destruction” to justify pre-emptive war against Iraq.

Moreover, the timing of the government’s latest disclosure is highly suspect. Yesterday, the UK raised its new allegations against Moscow at the United Nations Security

Council, after which the US, France, Germany and Canada issued a joint statement that the Russian government “almost certainly” approved the poisoning of the Skripals.

The same day the European Union announced it was extending, for a further six months, the sanctions it had imposed on around 150 Russian individuals and 50 companies following the right-wing Western-backed coup in Ukraine in 2014. Complaints of Russian aggression in Crimea have been used to carry through a massive NATO build-up on Russia’s borders.

May wants the EU to go further and follow the US, which imposed additional sanctions from August 27 on the basis that Russia had used “chemical weapons in violation of international law or lethal chemical weapons against its own nationals.” This include terminating aid, except on urgent humanitarian grounds, restricting access to US credit, ending aspects of financing and prohibiting exports to Russia of “restricted goods or technology.” Russia has 90 days to allow inspectors from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to verify it does not have chemical weapons, or Washington will impose a far more severe set of sanctions.

These measures unfold as the US renews threats over the operation by forces loyal to the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad against Al Qaeda affiliates that control the northwestern province of Idlib. Denouncing the “threat of an imminent Assad regime attack, backed by Russia and Iran,” the White House stated that, in the event of a chemical weapons attack, “the United States and its Allies will respond swiftly and appropriately.”

Washington and London are not responding out of humanitarian concerns. They have backed the Al Qaeda-affiliated terror groups in Syria as part of their regime-change operations in the Middle East, and broader geostrategic objectives against Russia and Iran. As in previous instances—Douma in April for example—Washington’s threats amount to an invitation to the Al Qaeda forces to stage an incident to justify military intervention by the US and its allies.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact