

UK: Fresh novichok allegations used to escalate anti-Russia offensive

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While the facts remain obscured in the case of Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov and their alleged role in the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, the political significance of the story is crystal clear. The novichok scandal is at the centre of the British government's ratcheting up of diplomatic, economic and military tensions against Russia.

According to the May government and its security/police services, Petrov and Boshirov are agents of Russian military intelligence, the GRU, who travelled to London on false passports on March 2 with the aim of killing Russian double agent Sergei Skripal. Having taken a cheap hotel in east London for two nights, they carried out reconnaissance during a short trip to Salisbury on March 3 and then returned the next day to apply nerve agent to the Skripals' front door. They left the country later that evening. Police say they have found traces of novichok in the London hotel used by the pair.

Once again Russia has rejected any involvement in the Skripal's poisoning and states that the latest identifications are the continuation of British fake news. Moscow says the two men are "civilians" and that there is "nothing criminal about them."

Interviewed on Russia Today (RT), Petrov and Boshirov said they are sports nutritionists and travelled to London for a short holiday, planning to spend a few days visiting Stonehenge and Salisbury Cathedral. Their initial visit to Salisbury was, they say, cut short by poor weather, forcing them to return a second time.

The tourist narrative has been widely ridiculed, and their explanation for having spent most of their short time in the country to make two, also relatively brief, visits to Salisbury is curious.

But this does not make British police claims regarding the pair any less incongruous. If the police narrative is to be believed, two GRU operatives, on a highly dangerous mission, choose some of the cheapest digs in London to

stay and made no effort to conceal themselves—their images caught on CCTV footage some 500 metres from the Skripal's home and others showing them stopping to admire stamps and other produce in shop windows.

The fact remains that there is nothing in the evidence presented by the police to justify British government charges that the Skripals were the victims of an operation ordered by President Vladimir Putin.

Not only did the apparently deadly novichok fail to kill its intended target, as well as his daughter, Yulia, and an attending police officer who was also exposed (none of whom have been seen in public for months.) These same operatives were apparently careless enough, and the British security clean-up team incompetent enough, to leave a discarded perfume bottle containing the nerve agent either lying around in a park or discarded in a charity bin, where it is said to have been picked up by Dawn Sturgess' partner, Charlie Rowley, months later. Sturgess—who no one claims was ever an intended victim—died tragically in July and Rowley, after apparently recovering, is said now to also be fighting for his life.

Above all, there remains the glaring problem that, until now, the police narrative was that the Skripals had left their home by 9:15 a.m. Sunday morning and are not known to have returned. Petrov and Boshirov, however, arrived in Salisbury at 11:48 a.m. How then were the Skripals to have been poisoned by an apparently deadly and fast-acting nerve agent applied to the door handle of their home? And why was the police officer who found them—nowhere near their home—also exposed?

All the British media is now reporting how passport data uncovered by investigative journalists demonstrates that the pair were GRU operatives. But the original source of this investigation is the Bellingcat research collective. This organisation has form when it comes to anti-Russian provocations, in connection with the downing of the

MH17 flight over Ukraine, the continuing conflict in the East of that country and the use of chemical weapons in Syria—in short, in every major inflection point in the war drive against Russia.

Bellingcat's website was set up in 2014 by Eliot Higgins, a senior fellow in the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab and Future Europe Initiative. The Atlantic Council is a leading US geopolitical strategy think tank. Higgins was one of five authors of an Atlantic Council report released in 2016, "Distract, Deceive, Destroy," on Russia's role in Syria, which concluded by calling for US missile strikes. According to Bellingcat's own articles, Higgins and the rest of the site's staff work closely with their "colleagues at the Atlantic Council."

Everything one reads in the media with respect to the Salisbury poisonings must be treated with more than a healthy dose of scepticism. There are clearly multiple hidden motives in play, in what is a strategic geopolitical part of the world.

Salisbury is the centre of British military operations. The Salisbury Plain training area is the largest military base in Britain. Just a few weeks before the Skripals were poisoned, a 12,000 - strong military exercise was conducted there, hosting forces from 17 nations as part of a series of war-games against Russia. Thousands of troops and officers are stationed in the local Tidworth, Larkhill and Bulford barracks and surrounding villages. The Porton Down bio-chemical warfare laboratories are located nearby.

Given its strategic importance, there is no doubt that the intelligence forces of every other significant military power in the world have an established presence in the area. It was revealed in May that Pablo Miller, an ex-MI6 agent with close ties to Sergei Skripal, a turned Russian operative, was living in Salisbury—a fact the government tried to suppress.

For the British working class, however, the most crucial question is not to uncover every intricacy of the dealings between capitalist spies, but to understand to what political ends the British narrative over the Skripal affair is being pursued.

In the current period, British foreign policy has been defined by an increasingly aggressive, militarist posture towards Russia. In April, the Skripal affair provided the linchpin of the UK's National Security Capability Review, targeted directly against Russia.

With the two fundamental props of Britain's position on the world stage—NATO and the European Union—rent by worsening divisions, the ruling class are seeking to

establish the UK as the head of a new alignment of imperialist powers on a fanatically anti-Russian programme.

The war drive also reflects an effort to create a jingoistic outlet for domestic tensions and provides both a cover for censoring "Kremlin sponsored" social opposition—and a stick with which to beat recalcitrant figures like Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

But this agenda runs up against strong anti-war sentiment in the working class. To proceed with its war plans, a core of anti-Russian sentiment must be created in the population. Information about what happened in Salisbury is therefore being drip-fed to a complicit media to fuel a concerted chauvinist propaganda campaign. The police's work is being carried out not as a rigorous criminal investigation, but as a serialised murder mystery. Pieces of, for the most part, vague and contradictory "evidence" are presented every few weeks, leaving long enough intervals for the official media—which functions as a propaganda tool—to spin their story while demanding tougher action against Russia.

A case in point is the especially fevered article by Carole Cadwalladr in the *Observer*, where she lamented and implored, "Russia is mocking us. First the Salisbury attack, then information warfare. Time to wake up."

She writes, "[I]ncreasingly, it seems like the government, the intelligence services and the army have been asleep at the wheel; still are asleep at the wheel." Russia is accused of carrying out "warfare disguised as political theatre." And further, "The theatre of war has changed. We haven't kept up. And the government is in denial. Or paralysis. Or both."

Cadwalladr even lambasts Conservative former foreign secretary Boris Johnson for being too soft on the Russian threat. As in the United States, where it is the Democrats leading the demands for economic and military aggression against Moscow, so too in the UK it is the supposedly liberal media that points the way.



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