

One year since the Skripal poisoning

By Robert Stevens
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“I hope that moving forward Salisbury will once again be known for being a beautiful, welcoming English city and not for the events of 4 March 2018,” said Prime Minister Theresa May on March 4, 2019.

Monday marked one year since the still-unexplained events in Salisbury, England which sparked a major international crisis. On March 4, 2018, Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found on a bench near a shopping centre in Salisbury town centre in an unconscious state. They were allegedly poisoned by a nerve agent, novichok.

Sergei Skripal was a Russian agent, who spied for Britain in the 1990s and early 2000s. He was convicted by Russia for “high treason” in 2006. Four years later, he was sent to Britain in exchange for Russian spies jailed by London, after which he settled in Salisbury.

May has good reason for wanting to draw a veil over the events of March 4. Just 10 days later, without providing any evidence, she declared that her government had concluded it was “highly likely that Russia was responsible” for an “attempted murder” on British soil. The Skripals’ poisoning was used to ratchet up tensions with Russia, leading to the expulsion of 150 Russian diplomatic staff from embassies around the world and the extensions of sanctions against Moscow.

Discussion took place as to whether the UK should invoke article 5 of the NATO treaty to compel NATO countries to “assist” any member state attacked to take “such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force.”

Even now there is no concrete evidence linking the regime of President Vladimir Putin with the Skripal poisoning—or even proof that novichok was involved. What Russia had to gain by killing Skripal has never been answered.

The Russian government was denied access to its citizens from the moment they were hospitalised, in

breach of international law. On Monday, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that its diplomats have been unable to receive answers to “the simplest questions” from Britain about the events. “The absurdity is the absence of the chronology of events of that day or those days, what time and what happened, and who was where.”

Sergei and Yulia were supposedly attacked by the deadliest nerve agent ever invented, with the official narrative being that novichok was smeared on the front door handle of Sergei’s house. Yet both made a miraculous recovery and were spirited out of hospital, in April and May, by intelligence and police officers. Apart from a fleeting glimpse of Yulia, who read a prepared statement in an unknown location last May 24, both Skripals have disappeared from view. On Saturday, the *Daily Mirror* reported obliquely, “They remain under MI5 guard at great expense.”

Not only have the Skripals disappeared, but so too has Sergei’s home. What was once a crime scene has over the last year been dismantled, including having its roof taken off, and decontaminated by, as reported by the *Independent*, “almost 200 military personnel from the Royal Air Force and Army, alongside specialist contractors ...”

Then there is the role of the Porton Down biochemical warfare facility, located just a few miles from Salisbury. Porton Down has for decades specialized in producing nerve gases. May’s allegations that Russia was responsible were initially based on shifting analyses and blatantly contradictory statements, all of which came from Porton Down.

Such was the level of public scepticism in these accounts that the Institute for Statecraft and its Integrity Initiative—a secret propaganda network tied to the UK security services—felt it necessary to intervene and raise concerns that the government was “far too weak,” declaring, according to a leaked document dated March

11, 2018, “[I]t’s essential the government makes a much stronger response this time.”

Every new fact that emerges throws more doubt on the narrative of the Tory government.

Last month it emerged that the first person to give first aid to the Skripals was the *most senior nurse in the British Army*, Alison McCourt, who happened to stumble across the pair while walking with her daughter. Likewise, the likelihood of McCourt being unaffected after giving CPR to the Skripals—with Yulia according to one witness, “frothing at the mouth,” is to say the least unlikely.

On Monday, Kier Pritchard, chief constable of Wiltshire, claimed that he had never been informed that Sergei Skripal was even living in Salisbury—an oversight that may be explained by the fact that he was actively working with MI6 via private contractors attached to the British security forces—before the events took place. Pritchard knows not to ask awkward questions, declaring, “Why would I know? ... There was clearly a decision made not to inform the force and not to inform the chief constable and I respect that decision.”

While the Skripals survived, as did a police officer Nick Bailey, who was also hospitalised after being sent to Skripal’s home after the poisoning, there was one fatality associated with the case.

On June 30 in nearby Amesbury, nearly four months after the Skripal poisonings, a 44-year-old woman, Dawn Sturgess, sprayed a substance said to be novichok onto her wrists, thinking it was a perfume. The “perfume bottle” was supposedly offloaded into a charity bin by the extraordinarily inefficient assassins and found by her partner Charlie Rowley. Dawn Sturgess died in hospital on July 8. Rowley has suffered ill-health ever since the incident.

The British government has provided no substantial information as to the circumstances of Dawn’s death, even to the Sturgess family. In an interview with the *Guardian* last month, her father, Stan, said, “I want justice from our own government. What are they hiding? I don’t think they have given us all the facts.”

Over the weekend, Dawn’s 20-year-old son, Ewan Hope, told the *Daily Mirror* that he had written to Putin for any answers he could provide, but his family had not heard anything from the British government or their local MP—“not a phone call, a letter, or anything.”

On her visit to Salisbury to mark the anniversary, May described the city as emerging “from the shadow cast by the use of chemical weapons on the streets of our country.” The clean-up operation, whatever this involved, officially ended last week and even the Skripal’s house was declared safe. No other contaminant has ever been reported.

All glaring inconsistencies and omissions notwithstanding, the Skripal affair continues to be used to whip up anti-Russian hysteria in order to further demonise and isolate Moscow, as part of an overall agenda of preparing for a military conflict.

Britain’s main purveyor of anti-Russian propaganda, the *Guardian*, wrote Monday that according to a “source with knowledge” who spoke to the Press Association, “The intelligence agencies have been investigating unusual and increased activity at the Russian embassy in Kensington in the days leading up to and after the attack on the Skripals.”

The transparent purpose of this story, again with no evidence provided, is to reinforce the narrative that the Russian government tried to assassinate the Skripals, in order to combat the continued scepticism of the British public and justify further acts of aggression against Moscow.

The author also recommends:

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[14 March 2018]

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