

The Salisbury Poisonings: Skripal drama framed as anti-Russian propaganda

By Thomas Scripps
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In 2018, Britain published its National Security Capability Review, outlining a new “Fusion Doctrine.” This called for the “use of all our capabilities; from economic levers, through cutting-edge military resources to our wider diplomatic and cultural influence on the world’s stage” to “project our global influence.” The BBC, especially its World Service, was named as a key instrument of UK “soft power.”

The BBC’s three-part *The Salisbury Poisonings*, aired on consecutive nights last week, employs drama as a major piece of state propaganda, designed to reignite the Skripal affair that dominated UK politics during 2018. It marked a major turning point in British foreign policy towards an aggressive imperialist confrontation with Russia.

On March 4, 2018, former Russian turned UK intelligence operative Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found unconscious on a park bench in Salisbury. A police officer involved in the investigation, Nick Bailey, also fell ill.

Within days, Prime Minister Theresa May’s Conservative government had launched an international campaign accusing the Russian government of having attempted to assassinate the pair with a “weapons grade” nerve agent, “novichok”, described as the “most powerful and unique chemical weapon in the world.” Hundreds of police and military officials descended on Salisbury, cordoning off different sections of the city.

Three months later, local residents Charlie Rowley and his partner Dawn Sturgess were admitted to hospital, having apparently come into contact with the same toxic substance as the Skripals. Sergei, Yulia, Bailey, and Rowley all recovered—the Skripals have not been heard from since. Sturgess tragically died.

On September 5, the British government identified two Russian citizens as the alleged assassins.

The six-month saga, based on unproven allegations and riddled with unanswered questions and major inexplicable inconsistencies, provided the backdrop to a relentless anti-Russian political campaign. This included the mass expulsion of Russian diplomats, the boycott of broadcaster *Russia Today*, the imposing of sanctions, allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential elections and an escalated war-drive against the Russia-allied government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The UK’s National Security Capability Review made a special point of targeting Russia in Britain’s plans for military confrontations.

Every major newspaper and broadcaster played its part, parroting each twist, turn and accusation made by British officials over the Skripal affair and issuing their own sabre-rattling denunciations of Russia. No outlet was more fervent than the *Guardian*. In addition to numerous outraged editorials and opinion pieces, the paper organised an event in June 2018 titled, “The Skripal case: a new Cold War?” attended by ferocious anti-communist and warmonger Anne Applebaum and long-time anti-Russia agitator and *Guardian* writer, Luke Harding.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) wrote on March 28, 2018, “The orchestrated outcry over the Skripal poisoning is part of an endless series

of provocations, ranging from the Olympic doping ‘scandal’ to the endless propaganda about Russian ‘meddling’ in the US election, all designed to prepare the population for war.”

While this campaign was pushed into the background for a period, the ending of the lockdown and return to politics as usual in the midst of unprecedented social and geopolitical crisis has signalled a relaunch of the British ruling class’ warmongering agenda.

Director Saul Dibb and producer Karen Lewis said that “The idea of the drama was never to tell the spy story and the global politics.”

Whether or not they are naïve enough to believe this, the supposed rejection of political questions only means the two created a drama in which the political agenda was spoon-fed to them by the British state and its accomplices.

Warmonger and chemical weapons expert Lieutenant Colonel Hamish De Bretton Gordon is listed as a “military advisor” and *Guardian* journalists Caroline Bannock and Steven Morris are credited as script consultants.

The Salisbury Poisonings de facto begins with the same claims made by May and her then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson that Russia had deployed a chemical weapon on the streets of Britain. Its opening sequence consists of contemporary news footage reporting on the “Beast from the East” approaching the UK—referring to cold winds from Siberia given pathetic Cold War overtones in response to the Skripal events. This is punctuated with an image of Russian President Vladimir Putin participating in a traditional Russian Orthodox ritual. The meaning is clear: this is a story about the threat posed by Russia.

The drama is forced into a series of ludicrous evasions and distortions. The very first scene is pure invention, showing a group of people gathered round the poisoned Skripals as crowds of concerned people look on. Sturgess is shown walking nearby. Sturgess was not present, and the first person to provide aid was the Chief Nurse of the British Army stationed at the nearby Porton Down chemical weapons facility, Colonel Alison McCourt. This was information the government kept hidden for months until inadvertently revealed by McCourt’s daughter.

These changes are not a case of artistic license, but political deception. The axis of the drama is artificially shifted away from the Skripals, the world of British espionage Sergei was involved in and the intimate involvement of the British state in the events surrounding his poisoning. Instead it centres on the fate of Dawn Sturgess and the supposed threat to the people of Salisbury. This renders the story inexplicable, but accomplishes two political aims—obscuring sensitive details of the UK state’s involvement in the events and encouraging the idea of a Russian “chemical weapons attack on a British city,” in the words of each episode’s title screen.

Whistleblower and former British ambassador Craig Murray carried out a meticulous examination of the Skripal affair in 2018 and subsequently. In a series of blog posts on *The Salisbury Poisonings*, he notes that the narrative leaves out any account of the poisoning of the Skripals. After

first suggesting that a nerve agent had been planted on Yulia on a return trip from Russia, or slipped into the pair's meal at a local restaurant, or into the air conditioning of their car, government figures eventually settled on the claim that the poison had been smeared onto the door handle of the Skripal's home. This required the Skripals to have returned home—unnoticed by CCTV after being seen leaving in the morning—just a short time before the alleged Russian assassins turned up in Salisbury to apply the nerve agent in broad daylight and left again just a short time afterwards, presumably with both contriving to grip the door handle on their way out.

It was never explained how a sample of this substance which had been made to adhere to a surface and then been exposed outdoors for a prolonged period of time was later described as “of high purity” with an “almost complete absence of impurities” in a mostly redacted Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) report. Nor was it explained how this “high purity” “toxic chemical” (the OPCW report prefaces the term “nerve agent” with “allegedly”) rendered both Skripals—of different ages and body weights—ill at the same time over three hours later so that neither had an opportunity to call for help.

The BBC series avoids any reference to Sergei's connection with British intelligence agencies, which was the only possible basis for their being targeted. Skripal lived in close proximity to his MI6 handler Pablo Miller—a fact the government tried to bar the press from reporting. Miller appears to have worked at private intelligence firm Orbis, run by former British spy Christopher Steele. The two of them and Skripal were active in intelligence work in Russia in the same years. More recently, Steele was the man responsible for producing a discredited dossier of salacious and unverified accusations linking Donald Trump to the Putin government. All these intriguing dramatic avenues are passed over.

What is included is often dubious. Forced to account for the Skripals' seemingly miraculous survival of a planned assassination, the show has a Porton Down military laboratory expert say, “The paramedics assumed that they had overdosed on fentanyl so they gave them a shot of Naloxone, which happens to combat nerve agent toxicity. Plus, it was cold, further inhibiting the speed with which the substance took effect.” Or, in the embarrassingly unironic words of the *Daily Mirror's* review of *The Salisbury Poisonings*, “typical British weather saved the Skripals' lives.”

Another fortunate soul is policeman Nick Bailey, the first person to investigate the Skripals' home, who is shown rubbing the “nerve agent” acquired from the door handle into the soft tissue around his eye but who does not fall ill for another 24 hours and then also recovers. A search and clean of Bailey's house finds traces “in almost every room of the house. Kitchen, bathroom, living room, bedrooms. It was even on the light switches. We found it in the family car too.” The show puts the fact that his wife and children were not affected down to divine intervention: “I like to think of myself as a man of science, but the only word for that is a miracle.”

As Murray points out, the same is presumably true for all the Salisbury residents who somehow avoided the traces the Skripals are supposed to have left throughout the pub and restaurant they visited on the day they fell ill.

At the end of the second episode, Charlie Rowley is shown picking a perfume bottle out of a charity bin, but this scene takes place at least two months before he did so in reality. The bottle was supposedly used by the Russian agents to store the “novichok” nerve agent, poisoning Rowley and Dawn Sturgess in June 2018. Moving this event forward in the timeline is an attempt to conceal the implausibility that any such item would remain undisturbed in a regularly emptied bin for over three months. The story accepts the idea that such an incriminating piece of evidence would be so casually left behind by professional assassins.

Another shift in the timeline occurs to place the authorities' discovery

of this perfume bottle before in Rowley and Sturgess' flat Rowley's regaining consciousness. In fact, despite searching the flat intensively, the police only “discovered” the perfume bottle, sitting on the kitchen counter, after Rowley told them he had picked up something of that description. Rowley is not shown spilling the substance over his hands as he opened the bottle, as he said he did, a fact which made his own survival all the more miraculous.

The Salisbury Poisonings both records and renews a grave turn in UK politics. Writing on the UK's National Security Capability Review and the Skripal affair in April 2018, the WSWS explained, “It outlines a strategy of London acting as the linchpin of the campaign waged by powerful sections of America's military and security apparatus for stepped-up aggression against Russia, while using this alliance, together with the UK's military, security and nuclear capabilities, to pressure the European powers for a favourable post-Brexit economic and political settlement.

“In moving against Russia, Britain hopes to draw the European powers behind it through NATO.”

The same criminal policy is again in development, spearheaded by the same forces as in 2018 and centred around the ubiquitous figure of Luke Harding.

The BBC drama has received extensive coverage and glowing reviews. The *Times* wrote, “This is the toxic aftermath of a Russian hit job seen through the eyes of ordinary citizens. Any chance Putin is watching?” The *Sun* published, “BBC drama *The Salisbury Poisonings* explores ordinary heroes who risked their lives to save town from deadly nerve agent,” the *Daily Mail*, “The haunting hidden stories behind the horror of Kremlin killing” and the *Telegraph*, “A warm tribute to ordinary people who rose to an extraordinary challenge.”

The *Guardian* produced the interview with the drama's director and producer and another with Sturgess's family. Both were conducted, without acknowledgement, by the two journalists who served as script consultants on *The Salisbury Poisonings*—who were reporting on their own work.

Every article and review is at pains to make a connection between a “Russian chemical attack” and the suffering caused by the coronavirus pandemic, mimicking Trump's attempt to draw a line between China and COVID-19. This has provided a massive platform for Harding to launch his new book, *Shadow State: Murder, Mayhem and Russia's Remaking of the West*, which is to be the subject of an online *Guardian* event with Carole Cadwalladr on July 22—“How Russia is remaking the West.”

In December 2018, hacking group Anonymous released documents showing that Cadwalladr and other UK journalists were included on the mailing list of a UK psy-ops scheme called the Integrity Initiative. Others included the BBC's Jonathon Marcus, the *Financial Times's* Neil Buckley and *Sky News's* and the *Times's* Deborah Haynes, all of whom wrote on the Skripal affair. Documents show that the operation, run by the military and the Foreign Office, directly intervened to shape the “narrative” of the events in Salisbury.

In November 2018, Harding moved on from focusing on the Skripals to fabricating the claim, now discredited but never retracted by the *Guardian*, that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange held meetings with US President Donald Trump's former campaign manager Paul Manafort while he was in the Ecuadorian embassy. The story became a key component of efforts by the Democrats to present WikiLeaks and “Russian interference” as the causes of Trump's 2016 election victory over Hillary Clinton.

Two *Guardian* exclusives have so far been informed by Harding's book. One, written by Harding himself, is a paean to Bellingcat, a shadowy research organisation closely tied to the Atlantic Council which routinely “uncovers” information, often falsified, useful to the interests of US imperialism. The other is a claim made by Christopher Steele, of Orbis fame and the former employer of Sergei Skripal, to parliament's

intelligence and security committee that May and then Johnson supposedly ignored the “likely hold” Russia has on Trump.

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