

Inquiry into Salisbury poisonings set to repeat official “Russian assassins” narrative

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The public inquiry into the death of Dawn Sturgess in the summer of 2018 will shed no light at all. Its main purpose has already been accomplished: to provide more fuel for the fire of Russophobia immediately following the claims by Britain’s chief spy, MI5’s Ken McCallum, who claimed Russia was on a mission to produce “sustained mayhem on British and European streets”.

A statement submitted by the British Foreign Office at the outset of the hearings alleged, in the *Guardian*’s eager reporting, “UK believes Putin personally authorised Salisbury novichok attack”.

According to the official account, Sturgess died after coming into contact with a nerve agent brought into the country by Russian assassins—identified as Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov—aiming to kill exchanged double agent Sergei Skripal, living in Salisbury. The inquiry, which runs till the end of December, will not scrutinise these claims but try to construct some sort of vaguely credible narrative out of them.

This will be a difficult task—a large part of the reason that the livestream of proceedings will be broadcast with a delay, that only a carefully vetted list of participants will be allowed to take part, and that sections of evidence will not be made public at all.

Whatever Petrov and Boshirov’s purpose in Salisbury—close to the Porton Down chemical warfare research facility and the Salisbury Plains military training area, and therefore a likely espionage hotspot for every major power on the planet—the fact remains that the “assassination gone wrong” story is not plausible on the available evidence, and is in many places ludicrous.

Petrov and Boshirov are supposed to have applied a “novichok” nerve agent to the handle of Skripal’s front door, before taking a leisurely stroll, in view of CCTV

cameras, back through Salisbury to the train station to return to London. At some point along the way, they deposited, for reasons unknown, a sealed box containing the nerve agent disguised as a perfume in a charity bin.

After several explanations were circulated, “novichok” was eventually officially described as among the most lethal nerve agents on the planet. The inquiry repeats this claim, suggesting that the small perfume bottle could have killed thousands.

Skripal and his daughter Yulia, who according to the official story came into direct contact with the nerve agent, spent three hours over lunch before it took effect at the same time for both of them, leaving them slumped on a park bench. They were then discovered by the Chief Nurse of the British Army, Colonel Alison McCourt, and taken to hospital. Both survived and have since been spirited away with new identities.

As part of the police investigation, officer Nick Bailey was sent to the Skripals’ house, apparently becoming contaminated in the same way. He was hospitalised (also surviving) but not before returning home and allegedly leaving traces of the nerve agent around his house, which somehow left his family members unscathed.

A three months’ long operation scoured Salisbury for the substance responsible, but its discovery in a regularly used Cancer Research charity bin was finally made by Charlie Rowley, who suffered from drug and alcohol abuse and sometimes took from it.

Rowley allegedly brought the perfume package home and gave it to Dawn Sturgess as a present. Struggling to open it, the pair spilled the substance over Rowley’s hands. He washed it off with water and soap, remarking later that it had not smelled like perfume.

Sturgess nonetheless sprayed the mixture on her

wrists, and was hospitalised after quickly falling ill, dying just over a week later. Rowley was hospitalised several hours after Sturgess but survived, discharged after three weeks.

It apparently took investigators nearly two weeks to find the perfume bottle in Rowley's house, in a rubbish pile by the sink. It took another three months before they announced even the brand of the perfume.

Besides the obvious questions arising from this absurd story, the inquiry will not investigate the lengths gone to by the British state to cover up the backgrounds of many of the key players, or to shape the narrative behind the scenes. McCourt's involvement, for example, was kept secret for the best part of a year, until it was revealed on local radio by her daughter, whom she had nominated for an award for helping to provide first aid to the Skripals.

The censorship apparatus of the British state immediately swung into action over Sergei Skripal's involvement with British intelligence, with D-Notices ordering the major papers and broadcasters not to speak of his MI6 handler Pablo Miller, who lived nearby.

Miller was a close associate of Christopher Steele, who was central in producing a dossier alleging a compromised relationship between Donald Trump and Russia used by the Democratic Party in efforts to impeach the then-president in pursuit of war plans against Moscow.

Miller was later found to be listed in the files of the Integrity Initiative—a British psy-ops unit bringing together high-ranking military and intelligence personnel with academics and prominent journalists—made public by the Anonymous hacking group in late 2018. Miller's name and email address were included as part of a group containing a senior political figure at Porton Down, Howard Body, and representatives from the Ministry of Defence, the US embassy and the BBC.

Another individual associated with the Integrity Initiative is former US intelligence operative Dan Kaszeta, who was called upon by the media to explain the science behind the previously unheard of “novichok” nerve agent. In particular, he provided the explanation for why an apparently successfully executed assassination plan with one of the world's deadliest nerve agents had failed to kill its intended target, suggesting the substance had decayed in the

wind and rain.

The contradiction between this claim and the report of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons that the sample provided by the British government showed an “almost complete absence of impurities” was never explained. Nor were any implications drawn from the fact that Porton Down admitted it could not verify that the nerve agent in question was produced in Russia. Or that the UK's largest chemical warfare training exercise was taking place on Salisbury plain at the time the Skripals fell ill.

All of the above is cause for a serious investigation into what took place in 2018 and led to the tragic death of a 44-year-old mother and a dangerous escalation of international tensions. That would include an examination of the responsibility of the British state and its military and intelligence services, with their own long history of deceit, espionage, murder and reckless violence.

At a time when Britain, along with the rest of the NATO alliance, and Russia are engaged in a war in Ukraine involving the threatened use of nuclear weapons, it would be more important still that such an investigation be conducted openly and without prejudice.

Nothing of the kind is on offer from the British government and its state-managed inquiry. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party is if anything even more concerned than its Tory predecessor to ramp up tensions with Russia in alliance with Washington, and to shield the activities of the British security services. Starmer himself, as Director of Public Prosecutions, routinely acted to ensure police officers and secret service operatives were kept unaccountable.



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