

# An Alternative Explanation to the Skripal Mystery

An alternative explanation to the mystery surrounding the poisoning of Russian double-agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter may involve a possibility that neither the British nor Russian governments want to talk about, as Gareth Porter explores.

**By Gareth Porter** *Special to Consortium News*



For weeks, British Prime Minister Theresa May and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson have insisted that there is “no alternative explanation” to Russian government responsibility for the poisoning of former double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury last month.

But in fact the British government is well aware that such an alternative explanation does exist. It is based on the well-documented fact that the “Novichok” nerve agent synthesized by Soviet scientist in the 1980s had been sold by the scientist—who led the development of the nerve agent—to individuals linked to Russian criminal organizations as long ago as 1994 and was used to kill a Russian banker in 1995.

The connection between the Novichok nerve agent and a previous murder linked to the murky Russian criminal underworld would account for the facts of the Salisbury poisoning far better than the official line that it was a Russian government assassination attempt.

The credibility of the May government’s attempt to blame it on Russian President Vladimir Putin has suffered because of Yulia Skripal’s relatively rapid recovery, the apparent improvement of Sergei Skripal’s condition and a medical specialist’s statement that the Skripals had exhibited no symptoms of nerve agent poisoning.

## **How a Crime Syndicate Got Nerve Agent**

The highly independent Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* has published a detailed account of how Russian organized crime figures obtained nerve agent in 1994 from Leonid Rink, the head of the former Soviet government laboratory that had synthesized it.

The newspaper gleaned the information about the transaction from Rink’s court testimony in the 1995 murder of prominent banker Ivan Kivelidi, the leader of

the Russian Entrepreneurs' Round Table, an organization engaged in a conflict with a powerful group of directors of state-owned enterprises.

Rink testified that after the post-Soviet Russian economic meltdown had begun he filled each of several ampoules with 0.25 grams of nerve agent and stored it in his own garage. Just one such ampoule held enough agent to kill 100 people, according to Rink, the lead scientist in the development of the series of nerve agents called Novichok ("newcomer" in Russian).

Rink further admitted that he had then sold one of the ampoules in 1995 to Artur Talanov, who then lived in Latvia and was later seriously wounded in an attempted robbery of a cash van in Estonia, for less than \$1,800.

In 1995, some of that nerve agent was applied to Kivelidi's telephone receiver to kill him, as the court documents in the murder case reveal. Police found that there were links between Talanov and Vladimir Khutsishvili, who had been a board member of Kivelidi's bank, according to the Kivelidi murder investigation. Khutsishvili was eventually found guilty of poisoning Kivelidi, although it was found that he hired someone else to carry out the poisoning.

But that wasn't the only nerve agent that Rink sold to gangsters. Rink admitted in court in 2007 that he had sold four of the vials to someone named Ryabov, who had organized crime connections in 1994. Those vials were said to have been seized later by Federal Security Police.

But the investigation of the Kivelidi murder found that vials had also fallen into the hands of other criminal syndicates, including one Chechen organization. Furthermore, Rink testified that he had given each of the recipients of the nerve agent detailed instructions on how it worked and how to handle it safely.

### **The Mystery of the Non-Lethal Nerve Agent**

The newly-revealed story of how organized crime got control of hundreds of doses of lethal nerve agent from a government laboratory sheds crucial light on the mystery of the poisoning in Salisbury, especially in light of the timeline of the Skripals on the day of the poisoning and their unexpectedly swift recovery.

Reports of their activities on March 4 show that they were strolling in central Salisbury, dining, and visiting a pub for several hours before collapsing on a park bench sometime after 4 pm.

The announcements of Yulia's rapid recovery on March 28 and that Sergei was now "stable" and "improving rapidly" about a week later appears to be in contradiction with the British insistence that they were poisoned by a Russian government intelligence team. The Novichok-type nerve

agent has been characterized as quick acting and highly lethal.

But the official Russian forensic investigation in conjunction with the Kivelidi's murder, as reported by *Novaya Gazeta*, concluded that the Novichok did not take effect instantaneously but generally took from one and a half to five hours.

The Russian government has now made an official issue of the fact that the nerve agent used in the poisoning proved not to be lethal. In his news conference on April 14 Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the Swiss Spiez Laboratory, working on the case for the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), had found traces in the Skripals' bloodsample, of the nerve agent BZ, which was never developed by Soviet scientists but was in the arsenals of the United States and Britain.

Lavrov also acknowledged that the lab had in addition found traces of "A-234"—one of the nerve agents in the Novichok series – “in its initial state and in high concentration”. Lavrov argued that had the assassins used A-234 nerve agent, which he noted is at least eight times more deadly than VX nerve gas, it “would have killed the Skripals.”

But if the poisoning had been done with some of the A-234 nerve agent that was sold by Rink to organized crime figures, it probably would not have been that lethal.

Vil Mirzayanov, the counter-intelligence specialist on the team that developed Novichok and who later revealed the existence of the Novichok program, explained in an interview with *The Guardian* that the agent lost its effectiveness. “The final product, in storage, after one year is already losing 2%, 3%,” Mirzayanov said, “The next year more, and the next year more. In 10-15 years, it's no longer effective.”

Exposure to even a large dose of such a normally lethal poison more than 25 years after it was first produced could account for the apparent lack of normal symptoms associated with exposure to that kind of nerve agent experienced by the Skripals, as well as for their relatively speedy recovery. That lends further credibility to a possible explanation that someone with a personal grudge against Sergei Skripal carried out the poisoning.

### **An Absence of Nerve Agent Symptoms?**

Also challenging the official British line is a statement by a medical specialist involved in the Salisbury District Hospital's care for the Skripals revealing that they had not exhibited any symptoms of nerve agent poisoning.

Stephen Davies, a consultant on emergency medicine for the Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust, which runs the Salisbury District Hospital, wrote a letter published in *The Times* on March 16 that presented a problem for the official British government position. Davies wrote, “[M]ay I clarify that no patients have experienced symptoms of nerve-agent poisoning in Salisbury, and there have only ever been three patients with significant poisoning.” Obviously, Sergei and Yulia Skripal were “patients” in the hospital and were thus included in that statement.

*The Times* made the unusual decision to cover the Davies letter in a news story, but tellingly failed to quote the crucial statement in the letter that “no patients have experienced symptoms of nerve-agent poisoning in Salisbury” or to report on the significance of the statement.

To rule out the possibility that Davies intended to say something quite different, this writer requested a confirmation or denial of what Davies had written in his letter from the press officer for the Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust, Patrick Butler. But Butler did not respond for a week and then refused directly to deny, confirm or explain the Davies statement.

Instead Butler said in an email, “Three people were admitted and treated as inpatients at Salisbury District Hospital for the effects of nerve agent poisoning as Stephen Davies wrote.” When he was reminded that the letter had actually said something quite different, Butler simply repeated the statement he had just sent and then added, “The Trust will not be providing any further information on this matter.”

Butler did not respond to two separate requests from the writer for assistance in contacting Davies. The refusal of the NHS Foundation Trust to engage at all on the subject underlines the sensitivity of the British government about nerve agent that didn’t work.

There are many individuals in Russia whose feelings about Sergei Skripal’s having become a double agent for Britain’s MI6 – including former colleagues of his – could provide a personal motive for the poisoning. And it is certainly plausible that those individuals could have had obtained some of the nerve agent sold by Leonid Rink that entered the black market.

Neither the British government nor the Russian government is apparently eager to acknowledge that alternative explanation. The British don’t want it discussed, because they are determined to use the Salisbury poisoning to push their anti-Russian agenda; and the Russians may be reluctant to talk about it, because it would inevitably get into details of a secret nerve agent research project that they have claimed they closed down in 1992, despite Rink’s testimony in the

court case that he was still doing some work for the Russian military until 1994.

**Gareth Porter is an independent journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for Journalism. He is the author of numerous books, including *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare* (Just World Books, 2014).**

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## Instead of a Pulitzer, He was Fired

Don North, veteran TV reporter, looks back on his days with the late Consortium News founder and editor Bob Parry, beginning in Central America during Reagan's wars.

**By Don North**



I first met Bob back in the early 80's in El Salvador. We bonded immediately over our mutual revulsion for US President Ronald Reagan and his dirty wars in Central America.

I was trying to film and produce documentaries and spent three months in the mountains with FMLN guerrillas trying to tell their story. Bob was with the Associated Press and later *Newsweek* and *The Nation*. But we both had the same problem – few mainstream media organizations wanted to go up against what Reagan was promoting. On a meagre budget I produced a half-hour program “*Guazapa: The Face of War in El Salvador.*”

It got a few showings in church basements and colleges but no network would run it and even PBS, supposedly a haven for independent journalism said, “Show us something supporting the Salvador government and we might consider it.”

Bob uncovered the Iran-Contra scandal, but instead of a Pulitzer he was fired by the AP and later *Newsweek* and Bloomberg. So Bob took the advice of renowned media critic A.J. Liebling: “Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.”

With the help of sons Sam and Nat, Bob started a magazine called *I.F. Stone Magazine* and a newsletter called *The Consortium*, which soon morphed into *ConsortiumNews.com* on the Internet, blazing the way for a generation of news bloggers.

I continued making documentaries nobody wanted to buy, mostly about wars that nobody gave a damn about, but it turned out that along the way I would often stumble onto stories that interested Bob for Consortium News.

Alas, I wasn't a natural fit...A Canadian immigrant who spelled in strange Canadian Franco-English and coming from a broadcast background I didn't care how I spelled things as long as I could pronounce them. But Bob, as you know, was a patient editor and diligent fact and spell checker and often from his encyclopaedic brain offered a sentence here or a paragraph there that somehow made my story make sense and flow.

There was only one time in 23 years that I can remember Bob and I not being able to agree on a story. I was in northern Iraq, in the city of Irbil teaching a journalism class, but the Kurds were holding an election and I jumped in to cover convoluted Kurdish politics. I'd spent some time on it and tried to figure out what it all meant and would lead to. Bob didn't like it and gave me probably the worst appraisal he used.

..."Don, it just reads like something I already read in the New York Times"... in other words he thought it was lousy journalism. A few weeks ago I happened to find that article in old files...and you know...Bob was right.

Over 23 years Bob published an amazing variety of stories that others shied away from ... a long row of candles that shone light in dark places. As Winston Churchill once said, "The longer you look back, the farther you can look forward." And they are still all there in the Consortium archives and make very good reading today. I skimmed over it the other day to recall some of my favorite contributions.

As you would suspect Bob and I were drawn to a lot of stories about embattled journalists. And when after 9/11 the mainstream media were beating the drums for George Bush's Iraq invasion Consortium News published tough questions.

Liebling, one of Bob's favorite journalists, had it right. He wrote "I take a grave view of the Press. It is the weak slat under the bed of democracy."

After the disastrous war it turned out Bob's posts were right...Liebling was right. Veteran journalist Bill Moyers picked up on Liebling's words in one of my favourite quotes: "After the invasion of Iraq, the slat broke and some strange bedfellows fell to the floor; establishment journalists, neo-conservative polemicists, beltway pundits, right wing warmongers flying the skull and bones of the 'balanced and fair brigade,' and administration flacks whose classified leaks were manufactured lies—all romping on the same mattress in the foreplay to disaster. Thousands of casualties and billions of dollars later, most of the

media co-conspirators caught in *flagrante delicto* are still prominent, still celebrated, and still holding forth with no more contrition than a weather-caster who made the wrong prediction as to the next day's temperature."

In 2015 Bob won the coveted I.F. Stone Medal from the Nieman Foundation...I suspect largely because he was such a devoted disciple of Izzy Stone whose advice..."Never believe anything until its been officially denied"...became a golden rule for Bob.

Another journalist/philosopher Bob followed was of course George Orwell. A few months ago I followed Orwell's trail around Barcelona, Spain to write "Homage to Barcelona" for Consortium. Orwell wrote a rule for journalists which is especially true for these times now as we hurtle toward a new cold war. "During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act."

Sadly, Bob is gone and the world weighs less. But WOW, what an impression he left...as well as the inspiration, and I hope the courage for all of us to carry on in his tradition.

**Don North, a veteran war correspondent who covered the Vietnam War and many other conflicts around the world, is the author of Inappropriate Conduct, the story of a WW II correspondent whose career was crushed by the intrigue he uncovered.**

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## Blowing up Lack of 'Evidence' in Syria Chemical Attack

It is wise to remember the U.S.S. Maine, the Gulf of Tonkin and Iraqi WMD in assessing the rationale for the U.S. attack last weekend on Syria, says Ann Wright.

**By Ann Wright**



Just a few hours before the arrival in Syria of UN chemical weapons inspectors to investigate the use of chemicals in Duma, a Damascus suburb where last week 42 persons were reportedly killed, the attack against Syrian government chemical facilities by the U.S. and its British and French allies with neither U.N. nor Congressional authorization is a bit suspicious—to put it mildly.

For the three Western nations to bomb before the international inspectors from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) could check the bodies of those killed for chemicals, take soil samples, talk to survivors and compare the results with what is in the Syrian government chemical facilities is bewildering— unless the U.S., UK and France knew the UN inspectors were going to find NOTHING to substantiate their assessment. Without any evidence, but with merely a “high possibility”, the three countries were going to attack Syria anyway.



With the alphabet soup of militias in Syria, hired and equipped by the US, UK, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Russia, the UAE, Qatar and Israel, each group has the capability of executing a Duma attack. Chemical attacks are easy to do, especially by groups that have access to the targeted area and to chemicals that can be used as weapons.

The question of why a group would execute such an attack should be leave fingerprints on the operation.

What would be the purpose for the Syrian government to use chemicals when they know Western countries are itching to use missiles to hit locations their militias have been unable to reach?

Would the Syrian government and their Russian allies purposefully use chemicals to invite an attack?

Are militia groups trying to keep their international sponsors and need an immediate reason to get continued funding especially when President Trump said last week that he wants to pull 2,000 U.S. troops out of Syria?



Proof of responsibility for the attack was still missing the day before the missile strikes when Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis said, “the US is looking for evidence” and the British government merely said “it is highly likely the Syrian government did the attack.”

This US strike follows in the line of other Presidential administrations that have ordered US military attacks that have gotten our country into civil wars, invasions, and occupations by telling Congress and the American people lies:

Remember the *Maine*? (Cuba)

Remember the “Tonkin Gulf Attack”? (Viet Nam)

Remember US medical students “at risk?” (Grenada)

Remember “I saw Saddam’s troops throw Kuwaiti babies out of incubators”? (Iraq War I)

Remember Iraq’s “Weapons of Mass Destruction”? (Iraq War II)

Remember the earlier gas attacks in Syria in which the British Parliament refused to authorize an attack on the Syrian government because it was unclear who was responsible—and Obama threw the decision of a U.S. attack to Congress—which to their credit voted No?

Remember Gaddafi is going to massacre the people of Benghazi and is giving viagra to his troops to rape the women? (Libya)

Remember the “nerve gas” attack in Salisbury, England that still has not been linked to Russia?

Remember Russia’s March 17 warning that the US was planning to stage a chemical attack in Syria to provoke a military “response”?

President Trump has been played by the war hawks in his cabinet—CIA Director Mike Pompeo and his new National Security Advisor, the eternal war-monger John Bolton.

Meanwhile the people of Syria continue to be killed by the bombings from all sides.

**Ann Wright is a retired US Army Reserve Colonel and a former US diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the weapons of mass destruction lies of the Bush administration for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. She is the co-author of “Dissent: Voices of Conscience.”**

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