

Britain: Statement on attempted assassination of Russian spy

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On 4 March 2018, a former Russian spy turned double agent for MI5, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter Yulia, were poisoned using Novichok, a hitherto obscure nerve agent. The British government has named Russia and its newly re-elected President, Vladimir Putin, as the culprit.

The main evidence is the claimed development of Novichok by Russia, as claimed by experts at Porton Down, Britain's own chemical warfare laboratory. However, the same scientists have also made clear that they have no evidence that the Novichok used in Salisbury was itself produced in Russia. The identity of the assassins, if known, has not been revealed.

The legal maxim for judging likelihood, *cui bono* - who benefits - is not much help here. Given the scientific resources necessary to produce the nerve agent, it is highly likely that a state agency was involved - but which state, and at what level? In the murky world of security services, which are effectively above the law in all countries, any of the major powers could be thought to have a motive. Clearly, Russia's Federal Security Service, FSB, and Foreign Intelligence Service, SVR, could have an interest in impressing on any other potential deserters to the West just what the consequences would be.

At the same time, the lurid nature of the attack, the use of such an obscure weapon, the total disregard for civilian lives and the murky relationship of Skripal to the British security services virtually guaranteed that Russia would be blamed. Political assassination on the territory of another sovereign state, using a chemical weapon banned by a treaty signed by nearly all countries, was bound to draw a powerful response.

To whose advantage was that? Coming whilst the Presidential election was underway in Russia it gave Putin an opportunity to pose as the strongman defying the West which always seeks to harm Russia. Equally, those in the West determined to encourage a "Cold War" atmosphere could make a lot of mileage out of these circumstances.

Indeed, it came at an advantageous moment for the beleaguered government of Theresa May. She was on the verge of a major climb down over the transition agreement with the EU, one that would outrage her party's powerful Hard Brexit faction. Now she set out not only to rally her own party around the flag of 'Britain under attack' but to put the leader of 'Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition' on the spot.

So, when Jeremy Corbyn condemned the attack but balked at identifying Russia, asking the UK government to produce the evidence of its complicity and questioning whether it was acceptable for the Tories to be taking donations from oligarchs linked to the Russian government, this provoked a furious reaction on the Tory benches. May retorted, 'I am only sorry that the consensus does not go as far as the right honourable gentleman, who could have taken the opportunity as the UK government has done to

condemn the culpability of the Russian state?.

May was soon joined by the habitual spokespersons of the war party thronging Labour's backbenches. Yvette Cooper, Ben Bradshaw and Hilary Benn, were soon on their feet declaring their solidarity with May to loud Tory cheers.

Theresa May has, of course, used the event to escalate the Cold War with Russia and to blackmail Britain's allies in Europe, the Commonwealth and the USA into joining in by sending Russian diplomats home and announcing that Russia is guilty before definitive evidence has been considered.

The rabid British media campaign, with the BBC leading the pack, is designed to paint Vladimir Putin as uniquely evil and dangerous, in order to create public support for a creeping escalation of the cold war, driven principally by the USA and Britain.

As President of Russia, Putin is certainly ruthless in defending the interests of the corrupt oligarchy that has emerged to rule the country from the chaos of the 1990s. Journalists, opposition activists, rogue oligarchs have all been imprisoned or murdered by his regime. Socialists should utterly condemn these acts and, indeed, Putin's entire regime.

But the Tories, and Labour's Blairite right wing, cannot don the prosecutor's gown against Putin's wickedness. Britain is no less ruthless in pursuing its interests: in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya or with its support for "extraordinary rendition".

In all cases, the interests are those of the capitalist class, the billionaire bankers, etc. There can always find justifications for the threat of war, or war itself, whether it's "weapons of mass destruction" or "fighting Islamic terrorism".

Expelling a few dozen diplomats is relatively trivial. Threatening to boycott the World Cup is laughable, since England always "boycotts" the second round. But economic sanctions, if they seriously hurt another state's economy, are potentially steps towards hot war. All such actions are simply presented by Putin as acts of aggression by the West against Russia's "legitimate interests", reinforcing national chauvinism and hatreds on both sides.

Socialists in Britain oppose all such retaliatory actions because we oppose the motives of "our" government. When they speak of defending the national interest, they really mean the interests of the ruling class, nationally and internationally. Equally, demands that Labour should "put the national interest first" simply mean that Labour should commit itself in government to putting the interests of that super rich elite above the interest of the working class, the actual majority of the nation.

We take no sides in the conflict between the imperialist governments of Russia and the "Western" powers. We do, however, have a duty to expose the hypocrisy of "our" own government's claims to be defending "democracy", and the fact that its rivalry with other powers is only about who will dominate and exploit which parts of the world.

The Tories, and the Labour rebels, seized the opportunity to present Corbyn as disloyal and Labour under his leadership as "not fit to govern". This means no more and no less than that he is not to be trusted with the security of the British imperialist state and its role as an international exploiter and bully. They want people to think Corbyn is a Russian agent or even actually a threat to their own safety.

This is just camouflage for their real concern; that a Corbyn government could not be trusted with oversight of the armed forces, the secret services or participation in military alliances.

In fact it is the security apparatus that cannot be trusted to investigate the Salisbury assassination, or keep us safe. The British army, secret services and judiciary have a long history of committing crimes and injustices against British citizens and lying through their teeth about them. These stretch from the torture and internment without trial of Irish republicans, the countless murders of Black people, the Guildford Four (1975), Orgreave (1985), Hillsborough (1989), Stephen Lawrence (1993), and the assassinations of its own citizens in Gibraltar (1988) and Syria (2015-17).

Conversely those, like Corbyn, with a record of standing up and exposing these crimes and calling for accountability, are the few politicians who can be trusted. That is why they are being targeted.

The secret service will always work against a Labour government that poses even a relatively minor threat to the 'establishment'. It is plain that a Labour government cannot rely on such an agency and should not defend its dirty secrets. On the contrary, it should shine the light of publicity onto its nefarious activities and relations with regimes around the world like the Saudi Royals and the Egyptian dictator.

Labour under Corbyn should not even try to present itself as a loyal defender of the ruling class and its secret state and forces of repression. It should declare itself the loyal defender of the country's great majority, its working people, against the tiny minority of capitalist parasites who exploit them and lead them into wars from which they gain nothing but loss and suffering.

It is Britain's participation in wars, its membership of military alliances and its conflicts with imperialist rivals that today constitute the greatest danger to ordinary people, at home and abroad. Ending those is the first priority of a Labour government committed to peace, and to disarming the states and classes whose rule means terror and exploitation for most of the world.

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