

Russian Lies and the Skripal Case

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Even before the full details of the poisoning of a former Russian spy in Salisbury, England, are known, there is much speculation that the Russian state – and particularly, President Vladimir Putin – may be responsible. Whether or not this proves to be the case, there are plenty of reasons why the finger of blame has been pointed at Russia, because of a pattern of lies and devious behaviour which has come from the Kremlin in recent years.

As soon as the news broke on 4 March that a former Russian double agent who had spied for Britain had been found poisoned and in a comatose state on a bench in the quiet and beautiful city of Salisbury in the West of England, speculation began that this could be the work of the Russian state.

It wasn't simply because the man who had been attacked, Sergei Skripal, was Russian, or even that he had been convicted in Russia of espionage, jailed, and then released in a spy-swap, although all of this was relevant. More significantly, the Russian state has what the criminal world would call "previous" in this area: there is proof that Russia has gone after its citizens or former citizens who have offended it.

The most infamous case was that of Alexander Litvinenko, a former officer in the KGB and its successor as the Russian secret service, the FSB. Not only did Litvinenko offend the Russian state by fleeing the organisation and the country, but in 2001 he published a book, *Blowing Up Russia*. In the book he accused the FSB and Vladimir Putin specifically, of blowing up apartment blocks in Moscow and other parts of Russia and blaming this on Chechen separatists to give the then Prime Minister Putin the excuse to send troops back into Chechnya and take revenge for the humiliation the Russian Army had suffered there in 1996.

If he wasn't already, from the moment of the publication of the book Mr Litvinenko was a marked man. The FSB bided its time. But in 2006, Litvinenko was poisoned in London using a rare radioactive substance, polonium, by two Russian agents with whom he had a scheduled meeting. The Russian state denied, and continues to deny, any involvement in Litvinenko's murder.

But an enquiry ascertained that there could be no doubt that the blame lay with the two Russians who had met Litvinenko on the day the deadly dose was administered to him. Traces of the polonium were found on the aircraft on which they flew to London; at the hotel where they stayed; in the restaurant where the polonium was put into Litvinenko's tea; even at the Emirates Stadium, where, job done, the two assassins calmly went to watch Arsenal play CSKA Moscow in a European Champions League match that evening.

The Litvinenko case is simply the clearest and most widely publicised case where Russia has gone after one of its people who have betrayed it. The news website, *Buzzfeed*, published the results of a long-running and in-depth investigation in 2017 in which it claimed that there are 14 cases of Russians, or people involved with Russia, who have been murdered in Britain by the Russian state, but which the British authorities have covered up (see https://www.buzzfeed.com/heidiblake/from-russia-with-blood-14-suspected-hits-on-british-soil?utm_term=.bkeJm8opP#.ropGB372Y). The evidence is compelling.

There is a huge problem, however, in persuading the general public to accept this narrative. In Britain, this has a great deal to do with people's perception of "fair play". To many people the idea that the leadership of a huge and apparently civilised and cultured country such as Russia could behave in this way is simply too difficult to contemplate, especially as Russia, of course, not only denies any such involvement in these cases but even makes the gesture of "offering to help with any enquiry". Surely the President of Russia could not lie about such things so openly? Well, guess what: he could, and he does.

There is a crucial point here which is usually overlooked, but which helps to explain why Putin and those around him can lie with impunity. Despite being in charge of Russia for the past 18 years (and probably the next six at least), Putin is not a politician as westerners understand the term: in his mentality and therefore his actions he is still a member of the Russian secret services. Secret service work is often dirty and underhand in a way which goes far beyond the squabbles and intrigues of politics. But this is how Putin and his cronies now run Russia.

One of the most blatant examples of this came in 2014, when Russia violated international agreements and the territory of a neighbouring sovereign state by seizing Crimea by force from Ukraine. In November 1994, Russia, along with Ukraine, the UK and the USA, signed the Budapest Memorandum, guaranteeing the borders of Ukraine as they were at that moment. In return, Ukraine sent to Russia all of the Soviet nuclear weapons which had remained on its territory after the break-up of the USSR in 1991. Ukraine's action was dependent on the terms of the Budapest Memorandum.

In February and March 2014, "little green men" appeared in Crimea: armed soldiers in military uniforms but with no insignia to indicate which country they represented. Putin denied all knowledge of them, suggesting that they were simply Ukrainians who wanted Crimea to be a part of Russia.

A year later, in a television documentary to mark the first anniversary of Russia "reclaiming" Crimea, Putin boasted that after an all-night Russian government session he had given the order for his troops to take Crimea. Unashamedly, he admitted that a year earlier he had lied to the world.

Russian troops followed up the seizure of Crimea by invading Eastern Ukraine and starting a war which still goes on with no sign of ending. The presence of those troops continues to be denied by the Kremlin, despite a vast amount of evidence to the contrary, not least eye-witness reports; social media messages from those troops with photos and "greetings from Ukraine" messages; and hundreds of fresh graves in military cemeteries back in Russia.

As if this were not enough, in July 2014, Russian troops mistook a civilian airliner of Malaysian Airways, flight MH17, for a Ukrainian Air Force 'plane, and shot it down with a BUK surface-to-air missile. The first boastful tweets posted on Twitter by those responsible show this to be the case. (When the truth started to emerge, the tweets were deleted, but had already been saved by some.)

The Kremlin's machine of lies went into overdrive. Over the next few days, they put out a number of different versions of what had happened to try to deflect people from the truth. And too many people, following the "surely they can't tell that many lies" narrative, picked up on these simple but evidence-less explanations. The full story, as unearthed by the investigative organisation, Bellingcat,

took months to piece together, but illustrates step-by-step that there is no doubt that it was Russian troops using a Russian missile which shot down MH17 (there is now so much evidence that this link - <https://www.bellingcat.com/?s=MH17> - leads to multiple pages of incontrovertible evidence).

Whether or not the Russian state and its President is responsible for the potentially lethal attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yuliya, is not yet known for sure. The British police have revealed that “a nerve agent” was used, which suggests the involvement of a government, since such dangerous substances can be created only under careful laboratory conditions, not simply in someone’s kitchen. But even at this stage, this should be a wake-up call to the often too-trusting British population that there is already ample evidence that Russia and Putin (who is almost certain to be President for the next six years following a less-than-democratic election on 18 March) are prepared to go to any lengths to get what they want – and they don’t care what the rest of the world thinks.

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