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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Alex Lantier

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London, NATO step up war threats against Russia over Skripal poisoning

Over the weekend, war tensions in Europe continued to rise as UK authorities escalated accusations that Moscow poisoned British spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Julia. UK and NATO authorities issued a barrage of political and military threats at Russia, a major nuclear-armed power, without providing a shred of tangible evidence to support their allegations.

On Saturday, British Prime Minister Theresa May noted Moscow's response to Britain's "suspension of all planned high-level contact between the UK and the Russian Federation."

Moscow had just communicated its response to Britain's expulsion of 23 Russian diplomats from Britain, and its threats to expel Russian media and freeze Russian assets. It expelled 23 British diplomats and threatened to suspend British cultural institutions' operations in Russia. The Russian embassy in London issued a statement calling British policy "totally unacceptable, unjustified and shortsighted. ... All the responsibility for the deterioration of the Russia-UK relationship lies with the current political leadership of Britain."

Nonetheless, May brushed aside Moscow's concerns and alleged that in the Skripal case "there is no alternative conclusion other than that the Russian state was culpable. It is Russia that is in flagrant breach of international law and the Chemical Weapons Convention."

This is a travesty: It is Britain and NATO that are leading a reckless, aggressive charge against Moscow. Britain has refused to provide any evidence to support its accusations. Remarkably, two weeks after the alleged poisoning of the Skripals, UK authorities still have not provided samples of the poison used against them to Russia, as required by the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), or to the UN Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

Nonetheless, UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson yesterday charged again that the trail in the Skripal poisoning case "leads inexorably to the Kremlin." He alleged that Russia had stockpiled large reserves of a "novichok" nerve agent that London claims Moscow used to target the Skripals. Johnson told the BBC, "We actually have evidence within the last 10 years that Russia has not only been investigating the delivery of nerve agents for the purpose of assassination, but has also been creating and stockpiling novichok."

Johnson did not make clear what this evidence was, however. Nor did he provide any explanation for London's failure to provide samples of the "novichok" allegedly used against the Skripals. He said only that London would provide samples to Russian and OPCW officials in the future, and that OPCW officials would arrive today to investigate the scene of the poisoning.

Johnson laid out a schedule for continued British and NATO actions against Russia. He said that UK national security officials would meet this week to decide "what further measures" Britain would take, again underscoring that Britain views the case as a military matter. He also predicted that EU ministers would support a draft EU statement condemning Russia in the Skripal case at a meeting today.

General Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), one of Britain's main intelligence agencies, reported it is preparing for cyber-war with Russia and alleged that Russia is attacking UK infrastructure with computer viruses and malware. GCHQ's National Cyber Security Center is working with banks, energy companies and utilities and monitoring "very large volumes" of cyberattacks, former GCHQ director Robert Hannigan told the *Observer*.

And in Germany's *Die Welt am Sonntag*, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg demanded that the incoming conservative/social-democratic Grand Coalition government in Germany prepare for stepped-up action against Russia. Insisting that the Skripal case shows that Russia is now "more aggressive," Stoltenberg told *Die Welt*: "I think Chancellor Merkel and her colleagues will face new decisions at the Nato summit in July in Brussels. We must be alert and resolute."

Stoltenberg also made the incendiary claim that this raises "the danger that the Russian government could move gradually from conventional attacks in the direction of attacks with nuclear weapons."

Stoltenberg provocatively argued on this basis for a more aggressive NATO nuclear posture aimed at Russia. Noting that Russia, China and North Korea have "significant nuclear weapons arsenals," he said: "As long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO must remain an alliance with nuclear weapons." He supported Washington's plans to modernize its arsenal of B-61 nuclear bombs in Europe, claiming it was "important to make sure that these weapons are safe and effective."

These remarks underscore that powerful sections of the European ruling class are seizing upon the murky events in Salisbury to launch a major war drive. The response of NATO and London, who have failed to present any serious evidence against Russia, underscores that seriously investigating the Skripal attack is at best extremely low on their list of priorities.

They aim mainly to whip up a climate of war hysteria and shift the political atmosphere to the right, resolving explosive issues like the stationing of US nuclear bombs in Europe—or US-led confrontations with Russia, China, North Korea, or Russian-backed Middle East states like Syria—on the most aggressive basis.

Another major concern in London and Washington is to maintain the unity of NATO by whipping the European Union (EU) countries into line behind the anti-Russian campaign developing in Britain and in much of the US political establishment.

Last month, at the Munich Security Conference, German and French officials announced that they would mount a major military build-up, spending hundreds of billions of euros, to develop an independent military machine from Washington. Several EU powers including Paris signaled their intention to develop economic ties to Russia and scale back economic sanctions imposed on Russia at US behest. A major element of the NATO-UK handling of the Skripal case is an attempt to cut across attempts by a Berlin-Paris axis to move closer to Moscow.

Berlin and Paris joined London and Washington in signing a declaration indicting Moscow for the attacks on Thursday, underscoring their complicity in the imperialist campaign against Russia. But British and NATO officials are nonetheless still engaged in a major diplomatic campaign, pressing European officials to take an even harder line against Russia.

Right after the attack, the *Financial Times* noted, British officials were concerned that “Emmanuel Macron’s French administration and Federica Mogherini, the EU’s top diplomat, both condemned the attack—but didn’t echo the [UK’s] concerns about Russia.” In the run-up to today’s EU meeting, the British *Guardian* wrote yesterday, “British officials have won strong support in the past few days over a hardening of the initial EU draft from the French and from UK’s traditional group of allies in northern Europe, including the Baltics. EU politicians are united in their opposition to the attack, but some right-wing populists, such as the AfD in Germany and La Lega in Italy, flatly refuse to blame [Russian President Vladimir] Putin.”

The groundless, trumped-up character of London’s charges against Moscow in the Skripal case, as well as the deep inter-imperialist tensions underlying the anti-Russian campaign, both emerged in the extraordinary remarks of Sigmar Gabriel last week in *Die Welt*. Having just been removed from his post as foreign minister as the new Grand Coalition government was assembled, he launched a bitter tirade against London’s handling of the Skripal case.

“Someone is innocent until the contrary is proven,” Gabriel said. He called the allegations against Russia “scurrilous accusations” and “conspiracy theories.” A man who until a few days ago led German diplomacy declared that the atmosphere in Europe over the Skripal case “reminds you of a really bad James Bond movie.”