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## *The Skripal Poisonings and the Ongoing Vilification of Putin*



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Sergei Skripal and his daughter were poisoned by a nerve agent on March 4 on a park bench in Salisbury, England.

Skripal had been a Russian double agent, a spy who turned over 300 names of Russian spies to British intelligence from 1995 to 2004. He was (not so surprisingly) arrested in

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Russia in 2004 and sentenced to thirteen years in prison. He was released in a spy-swap in 2010, settled in the UK and became a British citizen.

I see no reason to judge his moral character, although some might reflect that in Kantian general terms what he did was rather bad. (In precisely the same sense that it would be bad for a British citizen to become a double agent for Russia.) Double agents are often punished harshly; this is the way of the world.

Skripal posed no further threat to the Russian state. There is at least one report that he sought to return to Russia recently. It's hard to comprehend why at this time Moscow would poison him and his young daughter visiting from Russia with a nerve agent (Novichok) created in the USSR from the 1970s but subsequently banned and destroyed under international supervision. *Cui bono?* Who profits from these poisonings?

In all the outrage, expressed in Britain and elsewhere, about this attack, there is precious little analysis. The Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has said, "This is nonsense. This has nothing to do with us." The group of military-grade nerve agents called Novichok have been described in academic literature such that many different actors could produce Novichok. The Russians say they have long since destroyed their stocks and suggest the Czech Republic could be the source of the substance used.

But this attack on Skripal and his 33-year-old daughter (by somebody) is highly useful to those who want to vilify Vladimir Putin, just as the use of chemical weapons in Syria last April (by somebody) was useful for those wanting to further vilify Bashar Assad and justify a U.S. missile strike. Have you noticed that we live in an age of constant disinformation, misinformation and "fake news"?

The most annoying thing is, once these unproven causal relations are posited, embraced by cable news directors, such that they become Truth, discussion centers solely on how the U.S. and allies should respond. Why, pundits ask, didn't Trump raise the issue in his last chat with Putin? Why is Britain's Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn skeptical about the Russia link, suggesting the Novichok could have been possessed by East European mafia? Why isn't everyone on board the *obvious* conclusion that Russia did it?

Which would mean: Putin—facing no threat from this traded ex-spy or his innocent daughter—ordered their killing, not because they threatened him, but rather to manifest his deep cruelty and evil to the world and his willingness to invite more and more sanctions against Russia. It doesn't make much sense.

Putin is ex-KGB. Very rational and calm. He knows all about agents and double agents. I doubt that he is morally judgmental; he understands why people do what Skripal did. He

made a deal for the man's release eight years ago. His only motive to kill him at this point would be to punish Skripal for past sins and warn others not to ever sell secrets. But why would such a rational person incur global outrage by using a banned agent to attempt to murder a British citizen and his Russian daughter, for no compelling reason?

There are international legal processes for investigating charges of use of chemical weapons. Russia has asked Britain to observe them, providing evidence, samples, details. It urges adherence to rules established by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to establish the facts. But London has merely announced it knows Putin was responsible for the state of these two on that park bench.

So the grand narrative now includes: Russian invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 (somehow becoming in the process "adversaries" of the U.S.); alleged "threats" against the Baltic states; multiple political assassinations; dictatorial control of the Russian polity, economy and media; the accumulation of billions in illicit wealth. To say nothing of his brash exposure of his naked chest to his fandom, his judo, his hunting, his annoyingly high approval ratings.

I don't know who attacked these two who now struggle for their lives in hospital. But I know that the response means nothing good for Russia, or the world. It is just another short chapter in the new Cold War, and like the old war, basically irrational. What is Putin's motive? Fareed Zakaria says he's trying to "undermine democracies" although why anyone would want to do that in principle puzzles me. Putin is not the Heath Ledger's Joker in the *Dark Knight* Batman film, just spreading chaos for its own sake.

Putin is not interested in heading a European movement towards isolationist nationalisms but rather in thwarting NATO expansion plans, which any rational Russian leader would want to do. To use the strange Skripal incident as a rationale for further Cold War-type confrontation is more than sad. Yet in a supposed display of solidarity with Britain, which has kicked out Russian diplomats in response, the U.S. has suddenly expelled 60 Russian diplomats and closed down the Russian consulate in Seattle. Trump, under constant criticism for not criticizing Putin, and not bringing up election meddling or the Skripal affair in his recent phone call, has approved the move without commenting on it.

If Trump planned for better relations with Russia to be a hallmark of his presidency, he has been stymied by his foes' insistence that he express the traditional knee-jerk hostility. Why, they keep asking, when he criticizes his own cabinet members, does he never say anything bad about Putin? And from there, they proceed to the conclusion that the

Russians have stuff on Trump and are blackmailing him...into not being default-mode hostile.

Trump is an ignorant man, uninterested in the world intellectually, unable to invest time in reading, clueless about the historical context of current crises. Part of his candidate persona was opposition to recent U.S. wars (not so much because they've killed hundreds of thousands of people, but because they have been expensive and not resulted in the U.S. taking the oil). But he loves men in uniform, surrounds himself with them, relies on them. These are men who grew up during the Cold War and can't kick it from their minds. Baby-sitting what they surely see (with McMaster) as a "moron," "idiot," "dope," "kindergartner" they see their minimal task the responsibility to remind him that Russia is an *adversary*.

And so without even ascertaining the facts of the Skripal incident, Washington expels all these diplomats. TV pundits applaud: "absolutely the right thing to do, to defend western values" etc. , the system succeeds in maintaining, even strengthening, Cold War Russophobic mentality. The Skripal incident was a blessing to Trump's critics, who want him with his child-mind to embrace this mentality. We have to support Theresa May in Britain, they told him. This was the first offensive use of a nerve agent in Europe since World War II, they told him; very, very serious. A Russian attack on the UK.

Whoever administered that agent triggered a wave of sanctions on Russia, adding to those earlier imposed after the 2014 coup in Ukraine and the Russian response. Russia will respond proportionately. Whoever did this forces Trump to harden a political line against Russia. As his presidency teeters in the winds of scandal, he is prone to more crazy moves like the appointment of John Bolton. Trump's sole saving grace in his campaign was his advocacy of better ties with Russia. This immediately upon his election became his chief fault. Pundits demand that he abandon any hope for cordial relations with Putin's Russia and properly denounce him for multiple crimes.

Maybe that's what's in store. Trump's unpredictable. He agrees to meet Kim Jong Un then appoints Bolton (advocate of war with North Korea, removed from negotiations with the DPRK after Pyongyang called him "human scum") as national security advisor. And why follow up that cordial call to Putin with the expulsion of so many diplomats? What the hell. Doesn't make sense.

Had Hillary won, I would probably have found some logic and predictability in her evil. With Trump the evil unfolds erratically. He drops a MOAB on Afghanistan (or his generals do, without necessarily consulting). He attacks a Syrian army base in response to

an unproven sarin attack. His cabinet members contradict him, espousing the gospel truth that Russia and its allies such as Syria are threats to U.S. national security, whatever that is. One feels that as his personal situation deteriorates, the president will be more prone to lean on his generals, and listen to their advice while also heeding the horrific Bolton. This is a very bad situation.