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The Guardian mounts defence of British government lies over Skripals

The *Guardian's* June 4 event, *The Skripal case: A new Cold War?* was a blatant attempt to propagandise against Russia in the interests of British imperialism.

The newspaper gave the platform to Anne Applebaum and Luke Harding along with two of its journalists, Caroline Bannock and Steve Morris, who had covered the Skripal story.

All have uncritically regurgitated the British government's unsubstantiated, contradictory and constantly shifting claims that the Russian-British double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Julia were poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent by the Putin regime.

Applebaum now works at the London School of Economics where she heads, appropriately enough, a program on disinformation and 21st century propaganda. She is a virulent anti-communist and a ferocious warmonger, married to the former foreign minister of Poland.

After the Russian annexation of Crimea, she called for "total war" against nuclear-armed Russia in a column in the *Washington Post*. Closely connected to the highest echelons of the US state, she is a member of key foreign policy think tanks and sits on the board of directors of the CIA-linked National Endowment for Democracy.

Harding, long time foreign correspondent for the *Guardian*, appears to have very close links to Britain's security services. He has authored books that can only be described as hatchet jobs on Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, aimed at discrediting them and facilitating their persecution by the US authorities, as well as innumerable propaganda pieces against Russia.

The *Guardian* itself has a long record of dutifully promoting the anti-Russian warmongering of both the US and British political establishments. It supported the Western-backed coup in Ukraine in 2014, using allegations of Russian aggression to press for punitive sanctions against Moscow, British participation in the US intervention in Syria against the Russian-backed regime of Bashar al-Assad, most recently following fake news of a chemical weapons attack on Douma. This is in addition to accepting uncritically the allegations of Russian interference in the US presidential election in 2016.

To underscore the *Guardian's* political loyalties, another invitee, although not on the platform, was Sir David Omand, from whom the *Guardian* has commissioned several articles over the years.

Omand is a former senior civil servant and head of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the intelligence and security organisation responsible for spying on people at home and abroad. He is currently a visiting professor at King's College London and vice-president of the Royal United Services Institute, the leading military think-tank.

It was GCHQ that in 2013 oversaw the operation to destroy the *Guardian's* hard drives and memory cards on two computers containing encrypted files from whistle-blower Edward Snowden, after the British government threatened to jail editor Alan Rusbridger and close the newspaper over its reporting of the Snowden revelations. The *Guardian* accepted this blatant censorship with only token protest.

The newspaper also has form on news control. It stated in 2010 in an infamous editorial about WikiLeaks, which had provided secret US diplomatic cables to the *Guardian* and four other news outlets, that it had only agreed to publish “a small number of cables” to *control* the political fall-out from the details of murder, torture, espionage and corruption they revealed. It added that the newspaper had exercised extreme discretion in the “*editing, contextualising, explanation and redaction*” of the documents. [emphasis added]

The *Guardian* is acutely aware of the widespread and entirely healthy scepticism towards anything the government says on Skripal, in the aftermath of lies such as the existence of Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” in furtherance of Britain's warmongering. Indeed, the week before the June 4 event confirmed the need for the *Guardian's* services in propping up the government's campaign of lies.

The newspaper led on the report of the supposed murder of Russian journalist Arkady Babchenko at his apartment in Kiev as the assassination of yet another Putin critic, only for Babchenko to show up alive and well the very next day at a press conference about his

“murder.” Harding wrote lamenting that the stunt “would allow Russia and other unscrupulous governments to dismiss real events as fake.”

At the event itself, focus was placed for the most part on calls to end Russian money laundering in London and avoiding wherever possible any direct examination of the Skripal case in favour of sweeping generalisations.

Applebaum rejected any possibility that the Kremlin was not involved in the Skripals’ attempted assassination. She insisted that, having done a lot of research on how Russian propaganda works, “this was like watching a replay of MH17,” the Malaysian passenger jet shot down over Eastern Ukraine. In that case, “Russia immediately put out dozens of stories, not just deny it, but using multiple sources, gave out dozens of stories to pollute media with so much nutty stuff in order to make people draw back and say believe it is all unknowable. That is their modus operandi, designed for a Russian audience.”

Applebaum never indicated that the same might be said about the British government’s line on the Skripal case!

Harding said that assassination was a traditional Russian method of dealing with opponents going back to Lenin and Stalin and was resurrected in the 1990s when Putin and ex-KGB people came to power. Unable to cite any example of Lenin assassinating anyone, he roamed willy-nilly through history citing various assassinations by Stalin, including that of Trotsky, and various more contemporary alleged assassinations as “proof” of his argument.

There were, he said, two theories about why Russia had tried to kill Skripal.

The first, which Harding rejected, was that after Skripal was released in a spy exchange, he broke the rules, remained active and embarked on the old spies’ lecture trail. The second, which he “preferred,” is that Skripal was “almost irrelevant”: not so much the target but an instrument to frighten and intimidate anyone thinking of cooperating with the West, especially talking to the Mueller Inquiry in the US into the alleged Russian attempt to subvert the US 2016 election.

After these baseless ruminations, chairperson Mark Rice Oxley asked former GCHQ chief Omand, sitting in the audience, for his thoughts. Omand was enthused. “It’s a great conversation. I agree with Luke’s idea of implausible deniability. Hence the baroque method assassination. The point is to intimidate.

“I know the team that did the assessment of the nerve agent, attributing it to a Novichok agent and the Russian state. It was meticulous, like Sherlock Holmes, eliminating everything.

“No scientific theory is 100 percent reliable, but this was as close as it gets,” he asserted. He then admitted that it was entirely unclear how applying Novichok to a door handle would work!

Omand agreed with Harding that the British government “should go after the money,” urging investigative journalists “to dig,” saying it “would hurt the people in power around Putin.”

Omand, responding to a question from the chair as to whether British public opinion would be in favour of increasing hostility to Russia, revealed the extent of the collaboration between the *Guardian* and Prime Minister Theresa May’s Conservative government.

He said, “You are doing a good job in that regard. My fear is that if things worsen, it would be necessary to explain... The Kremlin could miscalculate, for example with a cyber-attack. We could be moving into a dangerous period.”

Applebaum interrupted, saying, “We know they could do that.”

Some questions from the floor revealed public scepticism towards the government and media’s coverage of the Skripal case.

Answering a question about the government’s use of D-Notices (Defence and Security Media Advisory Notice), Morris tried desperately to excuse press censorship. Contradicting reports that the government had issued two D-notices to prevent the media from identifying British intelligence service personnel Skripal was working with, he said there were “very few that we know about, only one.” D notices had “changed” and are now “advisory.”

Other members of the audience asked where the Skripals were now, reports about them being given US passports and relocated to the US under fake names, the government’s news management, whether it was coincidence that Porton Down, the government’s chemical and biological military research institute, was so close to the incident, and that it had recently received additional funding of £48 million.

One audience member pointed out that since the poisoning had been unsuccessful, Russia might not have been responsible and that the government and media had taken the easy way out by blaming Russia.

This was dismissed without a serious answer. The newspaper of what passes for the “liberal left” instead proceeded to solidify its alliance with the most right-wing layers of the US and British political and intelligence establishment by churning out anti-Russian propaganda of a distinctly McCarthyite character.

