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Parents Charged in Bryansk Missing Child Tragedy

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The father of a toddler in Bryansk has admitted to killing the child and staging her abduction, investigators said.

The announcement brings a tragic conclusion to a case that commanded national attention and drew thousands of volunteers to help in the search.

Alexander Kulagin, 31, told investigators that he seriously injured nine-month-old Anna Shkaptsova on March 2 when he threw her out of her stroller after beating her mother, Svetlana Shkaptsova, the Investigative Committee said in a statement Friday.

Kulagin then refused to let Shkaptsova, his 19-year-old live-in girlfriend, take the child for medical attention, leaving her to die the following day, the statement read.

The next day, Kulagin burned the body, then allegedly hatched a bizarre plan with Shkaptsova

to fake a kidnapping.

On March 11, Shkaptsova left an empty stroller outside a pet store in Bryansk. Kulagin, dressed in a wig and women's clothing, snatched the buggy and dumped it outside a nearby apartment building. Shkaptsova then reported to police that her child had been taken.

This triggered a wide-scale search. More than 700 officers and 1,300 volunteers joined in a daily hunt for clues, garnering national media attention, Gazeta.ru reported.

But investigators said they never ruled Shkaptsova out as a suspect because she had acted too calmly for a mother who had lost her child.

"For 2 1/2 weeks, investigators have looked at different scenarios, but everything pointed to the fact that the kidnapping was staged by the parents," the investigator's statement read.

What really raised suspicions was when Shkaptsova abruptly left town for two days with her legal husband, whom she had told police she was estranged from, and ignored all phone calls, Gazeta.ru reported.

A police source told Interfax that Kulagin was also immediately suspected and put under police surveillance because he has a history of violent, drunken behavior.

"Practically from the very start, there was no doubt that Kulagin was involved in the disappearance," the source said. "The investigators knew that the suspect regularly overused alcohol, entering states of uncontrolled drunken aggression."

"Seeing statements in the media that the loss was not being connected with him, Kulagin calmed down and began to let his guard down," the source added.

Kulagin's ex-wife, Svetlana Kulagina, told Izvestia that she was not surprised by his alleged role in the child's death because he had been abusive during their marriage, even threatening to set her on fire.

"I lived for nine years with him, and I have nothing good to say about him," she said. "He is a terrible person, especially when he's drunk."

Police say Shkaptsova admitted to her part in the crime and was arrested.

Kulagin was arrested early Friday and admitted to killing Anna and burning her remains, Interfax reported. Kulagin later brought investigators to the burial place.

If convicted, they face maximum punishment of life in prison.

The case sparked public fury at all levels. The Liberal Democratic Party demanded a repeal of Russia's moratorium on the death penalty for grave crimes, including murders of children and drug trafficking, Interfax reported.

A senior representative of the Russian Orthodox Church said Friday that the media share part of the fault for the Bryansk tragedy.

"The mass media have been reporting about horrible crimes as something common lately,"

Vsevolod Chaplin said, Interfax reported. "What happened in Bryansk is by all appearances a result of people's mistaken understanding of such dreadful things as something normal."

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