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A Look Back at the Skripal Poisoning, One Year Later

What happened in Salisbury — and what comes next?

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Andrew Matthews / PA Images / TASS

On March 4, 2018, former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found unconscious on a park bench in southern England.

After an investigation, British authorities said the two had been exposed to a military-grade nerve agent in an attempted murder carried out by agents of Russia's GRU military intelligence agency — a claim that the Kremlin has since repeatedly denied.

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The incident caused the rift between Moscow and the West to reach its worst point since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

One year after the poisoning, we look back at what happened in Salisbury and what comes next for Russia-U.K. relations.

Who are Sergei and Yulia Skripal?

Sergei Skripal, 67, is a former GRU officer who in 2004 was convicted of treason in Moscow for his work as a double agent for British intelligence. Sentenced to 13 years in a Russian penal colony, he was freed during a spy swap between the United States and Russia. He relocated to Salisbury, England, in 2010.

As a private citizen in Salisbury, Skripal made little effort to hide his identity after having received an official pardon. His daughter, a Russian citizen, had been visiting him at the time of the poisoning.

What happened?

The Skripals spent several weeks in critical condition after coming into contact with the nerve agent. Months later, a British civilian died after handling a perfume bottle laced with the agent.

Amid reports in early 2019 about Sergei Skripal's allegedly declining health, the Russian embassy in London told the state-run TASS news agency it couldn't confirm whether or not the Skripals were alive. On Feb. 26, the British ambassador to Russia told Interfax that the two were alive but had declined repeated requests to meet with diplomats from the Russian embassy.

What happened to the suspects?

British police named two Russian nationals, Ruslan Boshirov and Alexander Petrov, as the main suspects in the investigation. Boshirov and Petrov had entered the U.K. with Russian passports two days before the Skripals were poisoned. In an interview with the Kremlin-run RT news network several months after the incident, the men denied they were Russian agents and claimed they had visited Salisbury as tourists to see its "world famous" cathedral.

In September, Britain charged the two men with conspiracy to commit murder, attempted murder, the use and possession of chemical agents and causing grievous bodily harm. Shortly after, the Bellingcat investigative website said the suspects had worked for the GRU and that their real identities were Anatoliy Chepiga and Dr. Alexander Mishkin.

Both men flew back to Russia on the day of the poisoning. Because Russia's constitution forbids extraditing its citizens to other countries, the U.K. did not apply for an extradition warrant. In December, British officials said they had no way to bring the suspects to trial as long as they remain in Russia.

How did the international community respond?

The United States and Britain's European allies supported London's official assessment of the incident. By the end of March 2018, more than 20 countries had expelled over 150 Russian diplomats — the largest diplomatic expulsion since the height of the Cold War.

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Both the European Union and the United States announced new sanctions against Russia. In January 2019, the EU sanctioned Petrov and Boshirov, as well as Igor Olegovich Kostyukov and Vladimir Stepanovich Alexeyev, two senior GRU officials.

How did Russia respond?

Moscow has repeatedly denied any role in the attack. Russian officials called the poisoning a set-up, while government-affiliated news outlets claimed that Britain had staged the poisoning to rally its allies against Russia.

The Kremlin responded to the expulsion of its diplomats in a tit-for-tat fashion, expelling dozens of foreign diplomats from Russia. Moscow also ordered the British and American consulates in St. Petersburg to close and instructed the British Council to close its Russian offices.

What do Russians think?

According to opinion polls, Russian citizens largely don't believe the attack was ordered by their own government.

A Levada Center survey published in October 2018 said that only three percent of Russians believed this version of events, while 28 percent believed Britain was behind the poisoning. Another 56 percent said that "it could have been anyone."

What comes next?

Russia analysts interviewed by The Moscow Times on the anniversary of the poisoning agree that the incident will remain a major stumbling block for Russia's relations with the West for years to come.

From Moscow's perspective, Britain's lack of evidence, plus Russia's lack of consular access to the Skripals, gives Russia little reason to cooperate with London.

"A year after, the British side hasn't produced any evidence that would stand up to public scrutiny," Alexander Kramarenko, a foreign policy expert who served as an advisor to Russia's ambassador to the U.K. between 2011 and 2017, told The Moscow Times.

"Britain cannot sort out this cruel affair on their own, and as a result, it has become Russia's problem," he added.

Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior associate at the Carnegie Moscow Center, told The Moscow Times that there is little to no chance for improving ties between the two countries.

"Relations are below zero, just like they are with most other Western countries," Kolesnikov said Monday.

"In today's Russia, killers-avengers are treated like heroes. In this context, the situation can't be moved in any constructive direction."

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