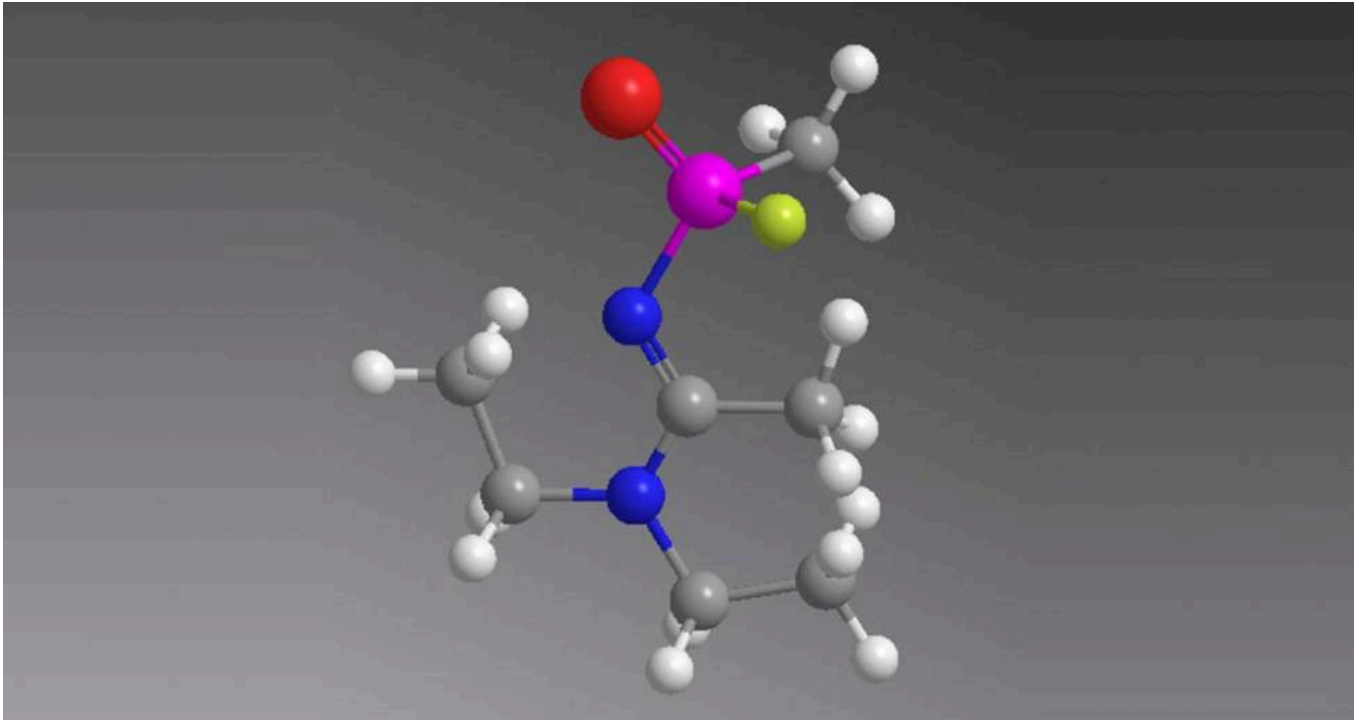


## Politics

# Skripal: A Russian web or a RUSI web?



by **ALEX THOMSON, EASTERN APPROACHES**

Monday, 12th March 2018



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Some contours relevant to understanding the possible roles of certain British intelligence officers in the Skripal case.

This article does not seek to provide a hypothesis regarding what happened to Col. Sergei Skripal and his daughter, who did it or why. Nor does it reveal any intelligence information, although I am a former GCHQ officer who a decade ago was a close to immediate colleague of the whole range of key British and American officers covering the relevant fields (Russian politics; the Russian military; the former Soviet Union; and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) threats). Indeed, I was acknowledged by colleagues as a good non-technical contributor on CBRN issues with a sound overall grasp of the issues.

Rather, the below observations are offered to assist readers in piecing together what they themselves consider the likeliest explanations of the baffling events unfolding this week from

Salisbury outwards. Readers are urged to consider and compare a wide range of commentators and whistleblowers whose track record they respect.

## Who has expertise?

Intelligence agencies, and the intelligence profession within the military, do not have the final say in determining the who, what, why, when, where or how of anything.

Rather, via mechanisms which have existed longer in Britain (since the mid-Thirties) than anywhere else in the world, their factual reports and, to the extent that they make such in-house, their assessments are sent up the chain to central government assessors. Britain's version of these are known as the Cabinet Office Assessments Staff (CO AS).



Cabinet Office, 70 Whitehall, London (next to Downing Street) Image: Londoneye ([CC BY-SA 3.0](#))

Their key weekly product is the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) papers, which are sent around key government officials in numbered copies (Copy No. 1 always goes to HM The Queen) every Wednesday after discussion at 70 Whitehall by the heads of agencies. The original drafts of these papers are ably written by CO AS staff and the wording is tweaked before each JIC by the most relevant desk officers who provided the underlying intelligence reporting in the first place.

This is a robust structure and is largely in place even when — as happens far more often nowadays than it ever used to — a Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBR) is called for ministers to be briefed on emergencies and to decide on action. CO AS officials are the *crème de la crème* of the British Civil Service. They are sometimes double-hatted for Royal Household roles, which even concern succession planning. They are treated as the key interlocutors by US, Commonwealth and European governments on intelligence matters.

Crucially, they do not throw their weight around; where desk officers are noted for particular expertise or cogency, as I was, CO AS seniors will openly and generously acknowledge this at important meetings and will cede to those colleagues' judgement. Uniquely, they are not pestered to produce or assist with anything other than the careful digestion of intelligence.

CO AS staff are in post for years and my impression is that they will have continued, in the decade since I left British intelligence, to have resisted the undoubted focused infiltration by Common Purpose and whatever other domestic and foreign nefarious structures have targeted the Cabinet Office for decades.

Where the reputation of the JIC has been sullied, notably by the 2003 Iraq War "dodgy dossier", this has been the consequence of political pressure upon them to give prominence to the assertions of a small clique of politically-allied current and former senior officers of one intelligence service, SIS (MI6). I must emphasise that the bulk of MI6 officers are not involved in such machinations.



MI6 building Vauxhall Cross. Image: Ewan Munro ([CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/))

*Technical* expertise is another matter. Each intelligence agency is by definition the unrivalled expert in its own techniques, and all three need to employ some world-class experts in computing, electronics and some scientific domains in order to attune their own intelligence gathering and reporting.

Where CBRN is concerned (in the Skripal case, the organic chemistry sub-domain thereof), HM Government has a dedicated facility, DSTL, headquartered at Porton Down in Wiltshire, seven or eight miles from the scene of the discovery of the Skripals. (My old Director at GCHQ, Sir David Pepper, is now DSTL's [chairman of the board](#).)

Hence, on CBRN issues, all three British intelligence agencies, and the various disciplines of military intelligence and military technicians and the CBRN specialists of the emergency services, continually liaise laterally with DSTL as they do up the chain to the Cabinet Office and their own governing ministries (the Home and Foreign Offices).

In practice, whenever technical issues feature in a case (as with Skripal), the technical expertise is rarer and reposes in fewer places than the general expertise of other officers and so that is the bottleneck through which all assessments are backcast.



Technical expertise trumps anything else. No generalist (i.e. officer whose trained discipline is anything other than scientific-technical, even if a real genius in most other ways) is going to gainsay a technical officer proper, unless it be in the very rare instance that the generalist knows something of the case background or from wider world knowledge which renders an otherwise viable technical hypothesis highly unlikely.

Consequently, when it comes to an ostensible case of the use of chemical weapons, the groupthink of British intelligence is formed by a very few people, usually a couple of Porton Down staff. It is not an accusation to call it 'groupthink'; competence and confidence are inevitably in short supply. However grand and accomplished the cross-disciplinary team is that British intelligence can assemble ad-hoc, the team will always look to and echo the handful of opinion-formers in its midst, never more keenly so than when chemical substances are the order of the day.

I found Porton Down staff in my day to be as varied, competent, patriotic and non-conspiratorial as at any other government department or agency. However, there is always the phenomenon which cannot be discounted of certain key staff being nobbled by an agenda, special interest or clique. (This can affect certain key officers at other agencies, particularly MI6, which I again stress is staffed by people as worthy as at any other agency.) These agendas can reside partly or mostly off the official books of government and have more to do with tax-exempt foundations, think tanks, the financial world and third-sector priorities than with serving the public.



Former Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond speaking at the Royal United Services Institute in 2015.  
Image: RUSI ([CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/))

Such nobbled people can be highly winsome among their colleagues. They can shape the collective view of crack teams with remarkable ease, particularly when they have the ring of authenticity that comes from believing in the parallel agenda to which they are committed (such as universal disarmament, world government, population reduction, technocratic rule or cultural revolution). They have no need to disclose certain knowledge or intent among government colleagues if that knowledge or intent reposes in one of the side initiatives to which they belong.

In hindsight, I suspect that one characterful DSTL man who took a shine to me a decade ago was one such. I reach this view by comparing my impressions of him with those of similar character archetypes encountered in maturer years. By affable behaviour and repartee at conferences and on away days, he boosted the esteem which I had among intelligence officers involved in CBRN. The thing he seemed keenest to impress upon me (as he could see my mind turning, I think) was that Britain and to some extent the United States had given up on biological weapons in the 1950s. He notably did not touch upon the possibility of our having outsourced that effort to client states in ways which [Dilyana Gaytandzhieva](#) has recently been investigating. (The Skripal case, for clarity's sake, is a *chemical* weapons case, not biological.)

I also note in passing that a conference my team hosted at GCHQ on strategic CBRN analysis, for which we were supposed to be managing the guest list ourselves, was gatecrashed on the day by a senior police officer representing what was then ACPO (now the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#)). The officer was of course security-cleared, but how had he got wind of it and what was his need to know? I was then unaware that ACPO was a private body.

## What are the challenges?

Manufacture per se of an organophosphate for attacks on humans is not nearly as great a challenge as are those of stable storage, safe transportation, reliable weaponisation (the effective dissemination of the agent from a purpose-built device) and above all not breaking the Eleventh Commandment of spooks: *Thou shalt not get found out* (alias plausible deniability).

Any reasonably competent organic chemist working from reasonably well-written recipes, in reasonably competent lab facilities, can undertake the manufacture of an agent whose properties are in the public domain. Manufacture proper is a red herring; the issue is *identifying the strain* of an agent used in an ostensible attack, and often *identifying the means of application*. These are highly specialist domains in which the word of a very few technical experts at institutes such as DSTL, and non-governmental institutes besides, carries all the weight.

Knowledge of strains (actually a biological term; 'signature' would be more appropriate in a chemical case) and of effective weaponisation is the most tightly-held domain of secrets in CBRN. It is also the most sought-after domain of secrets on the black market and by groups of non-governmental people or groups overlapping in membership with government.

How do we know, for example, that it truly was an umbrella tip which delivered the fatal dose of ricin to [Georgi Markov's](#) leg in London in 1978 and not an air pistol?

Sham stories are highly useful in this field, as in many fields of intelligence and security, and governments actively maintain them for decades to preserve the currency of their assets. The technical knowledge that can resolve these questions is heavily compartmentalised at each intelligence agency in every country with serious capability. Desk officers covering the relevant countries and themes are not party to it, nor are their chains of command.

Even once one has identified a strain and a means of application in a particular case with reasonable certainty, the *provenance of the material* is a huge challenge to ascertain. What batch or year of production does the material used have? What is its chain of possession and storage? Did anyone bring it over to another side in a previous defection, for money, blackmail, ideological conversion, due to having been confidence-tricked, or for any other reason?

## The Estonian connection

In 2007, [Kommersant](#) — actually the most pro-Western of Russia's quality newspapers — claimed that there was an Estonian angle to the Skripal backstory. Skripal was recruited for MI6 (or, one may believe, a clique within MI6 with distinct aims) by one Pablo Miller, who now resides in Salisbury and whose idea it may well have been for Skripal to come and live there too. Miller is Christopher Steele's colleague, both from Steele's days running MI6's Russia desk (2006–2009) and from subsequent consultancy work with Orbis Business Intelligence. Good current reporting on this by previously-vindicated sources is widespread, including by [Meduza](#), [Craig Murray](#) and [Consortium News](#).

Below is my full translation of Vladislav Trifonov's article in *Kommersant* of a decade ago, when Col. Skripal was still nothing more than a sideshow in the scandal which broke surface in 2006 as "[Moscow Rocks](#)". This whole complex of cases really centred around a far more significant traitor to Russia, [Igor Sutyagin](#). Sutyagin is one of those scientific-technical experts in the penumbra of the intelligence world which as a class I discuss above. Strikingly, he now [works for the Royal United Services Institute](#), a club which has as little to do with the British military as ACPO/NPCC has with British policing. RUSI and NPCC are groups with private agendas, which draw their membership from the retired senior ranks. They present themselves with ready-made policies to government and the public, as if they spoke in the good name of the uniform itself.



Dr Igor Sutyagin, now a Senior Research Fellow on Russian Studies at RUSI in London.

Image: Bordzgor ([CC BY-SA 3.0](#))

### Tax policeman recognised his recruiter

*He turned out to be an old acquaintance of FSB [Russian security service] counter-intelligence agents*

*16 August, 2007*

There was a new development yesterday in the spy scandal between Britain and Russia. The FSB Office of Public Relations made public the name of an employee of MI6 who allegedly

recruited the former major of the Tax Police, Vyacheslav Zharko. The recruiter, according to the Chekists [*derogatory reference to Russian intelligence*], is an intelligence personnel officer, Pablo Miller [*based as a British diplomat in Estonia at the time of this article*], whom Russian counter-espionage officers assess to be a Russia hand.

Former tax police major Vyacheslav Zharko turned to the FSB in early July this year. He stated that he had been recruited by the British intelligence service MI6. According to Mr Zharko, it was political emigre Boris Berezovsky and ex-FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko who introduced him to the agents of that intelligence service in 2003. Vyacheslav Zharko claimed that his recruitment had been handled by several MI6 employees, including a certain Paul [*name cited in English form*], whom he had repeatedly met in London and Istanbul. Paul, according to the retired tax policeman, was interested in major Russian companies; information on the FSB's possible influence over non-governmental organisations (NGOs); and on a Russian intelligence "mole" who had allegedly turned up [*as a locally-engaged employee*] at the British Embassy in Moscow. Mr Zharko added that he had decided to turn to the FSB after watching a television report on the press conference held by Andrei Lugovoy, whom British law enforcement suspect of having poisoned Alexander Litvinenko. According to Vyacheslav Zharko, once he learned from the TV report about the machinations of MI6, he began to worry profoundly for his safety.

Yesterday, the FSB Office of Public Relations revealed the surname of this recruiter: it was MI6 personnel officer Pablo Miller, well-known to Russian intelligence (and who yesterday was even one of the most frequently-mentioned people on Russian TV news; see article elsewhere on this page). This British intelligence officer was, according to the Chekists, identified by Mr Zharko in the course of the investigation into the case that was launched by the FSB Investigation Department as part of their [counter-]espionage effort.

The FSB Office of Public Relations revealed nothing about how the recruitment had come to light. However, it was pointed out that the recruiter, Miller, had already been involved repeatedly in spy scandals involving Russians. For instance, in 2001, Lieutenant-Colonel (Reserve) Valeri Ojamäe [*an ethnic-Estonian Russian*] was uncovered by Russian counter-intelligence and subsequently sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for treason. Engaged in business after his retirement [from the service], he repeatedly visited [the Estonian capital,] Tallinn, where, according to the FSB, he was recruited by the British intelligence resident officer Pablo Miller, who at that time officially held the post of First Secretary at the British Embassy in Estonia. As Russian intelligence later found out, Mr Miller closely collaborated with the host country's security police (Kaitsepolitsei), whose Zoja Tint, of the First Main Bureau, supervised the spy. British intelligence allegedly tasked Ojamäe to collect compromising matter on Russian politicians, to ascertain the names of Russian agents in the UK, and the like.

Nor, as the FSB Office of Public Relations yesterday insisted, was the high-profile case of retired GRU Colonel Sergei Skripal devoid of Miller's involvement. In 2006, Skripal was convicted to 13 years' imprisonment for spying for Britain. The former military intelligence officer was arrested on Osenniy Boulevard in Moscow in December 2004, shortly after returning from Britain. During the [subsequent] investigation, it turned out that the colonel had been recruited by Pablo Miller in 1995, who was at the time using the persona of Antonio Álvarez de Hidalgo. While still serving, Mr Skripal had provided MI6 with information about GRU [Russian military intelligence] agents operating in European countries. At that time, the FSB considered the



damage caused by former Colonel Skripal comparable to that inflicted by Oleg Penkovsky, who around half a century ago [*in the build-up to the Cuban Missile Crisis*] betrayed the GRU stations in Britain and the United States to British intelligence. However, it should be noted that a year ago, when commenting on the case of the former intelligence officer Skripal, the FSB did not mention the name of the British resident officer Miller, alias de Hidalgo, in connection with it.

The [British] Embassy declined to comment on the statements by the FSB Office of Public Relations.

This report focuses our attention on the presence of at least one MI6 officer, Miller, in Tallinn in the crucial years of destabilisation of post-Soviet Russia, 1993–95. Miller is well tied in to an agenda which has since emerged through the Litvinenko and Berezovsky cases and the Fusion GPS scandal. Estonia has long been a Western, and particularly a British, bridgehead for operations against Russia, as currently evidenced by the [setting-up of a NATO-allied hacking centre there](#) and the presence of, albeit ludicrously small, [British military contingents there on roulement](#).

To understand this angle better, we have to turn from the western to the southern periphery of Russia, and to another small nation of equally intense patriotism. Besides this, the Chechens and Estonians have equally intense resentment of the unspeakable traumas visited upon them under Stalin. This deep well of national resentment has proven highly useful to the agenda within the West to destabilise Russia.

## The Chechen connection

My contention is that a whole group, largely of now-former MI6 officers, which turned Skripal — and which managed previous high-profile, obsessively anti-Kremlin defectors such as Alexander Litvinenko and Boris Berezovsky — has a node of past activity in Estonia (around the peak years of 1993–95). This may overlap with the evidently-used strategy of using Chechens, and getting Estonians to use Chechens, to destabilise Russia.

The aspects of this wider Chechen angle (as distinct from the black operation proper) of which I am aware from open sources and unclassified encounters are:

- In autumn 1990, Dzhokhar Dudaev, a Chechen and the commander of a garrison of [Red Army rangers in Estonia](#) as Estonia was on the threshold of regaining its independence, disobeyed his orders to use his many men to shut down the very weakly-guarded television tower in Tallinn, which had begun broadcasting patriotic appeals to the Estonian people. He thereby gained abiding popularity among the Estonians, as did the Chechen separatist cause, and he was quickly reposted away from Estonia thereafter. Dudaev later became president of the separatist entity known as the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

I have never personally believed that Dudaev's stand-down in Estonia was motivated by sheer noble sympathy for the national cause there. In particular, I do not believe that because of the publicly-documented, ill-concealed, heavy military support which the US- and UK-backed Shevardnadze and Saakashvili governments in Georgia provided to Dudaev's rebel state (which I and a former housemate personally witnessed). Witness also the massive PR and celebrity support which Dudaev's statelet (continuing years after the Russians managed to liquidate Dudaev himself) received in London, co-ordinated by the notorious PR firm (or something darker) Bell Pottinger, whose founder (Lord) Tim Bell was the brains of the Thatcher-era

Conservative Party election campaigns, and which [may soon be wound up after having been caught stirring the racial pot in South Africa](#).

- In winter 1993–94, a Chechen who had been in Britain attempting on Dudaev's behalf to raise funds for the entity of Ichkeria by selling its stamps to philatelists was found by Greater Manchester Police chopped up in the boot of a car. I am aware of a single contemporary BBC radio news report on this grisly find, which afterwards seems to have had a D-notice placed upon it. The story was carried at the time as a falling-out among thieves of an exotic and no doubt warlike nationality that no-one had heard of.
- According to MI6 whistleblower Richard Tomlinson, as best summarised in the first chapter of Daniel Estulin's *The Tavistock Institute*, no less a figure than future President Vladimir Putin nearly met the same fate at the hands of a clique within British intelligence in 1994 when he was almost enticed to come to Britain while in financial dire straits (following his resignation from the KGB). British intelligence contacts had allegedly offered him a job teaching German in Britain, but he got cold feet at the last minute when advised by associates that he was going to be dismembered rather than given a new life there.

Tomlinson's version of events is that Putin had been an asset of John Scarlett's (later 'C', the director of MI6, and since knighted) since 1979. Tomlinson's analysis is that rather than being assets for MI6 or the British Government proper, Putin and his associates had been serving private interests, among whom he identifies a senior strand of Freemasonry and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. (Tavistock can best be described as a psychological intelligence centre serving very major Western corporate and financial clients, which Dr John Coleman in his own book on the Tavistock Institute alleges have included the Bank for International Settlements, the central bankers' central bank.) I have been assured by a measured former housemate of Tomlinson's that while Tomlinson may be given to dramatic wording, he is no liar.

- Also in 1994, Estonian former special forces airdropped supplies to Dudaev's troops in the Chechen mountains on the eve of the First Chechen War. It is not evident who thought up, commanded and equipped these airdrops.
- In 1999, on the eve of the presidential elections which brought Putin to office, there was a series of bombings of apartment buildings in Russian cities. Even Craig Murray (linked above) accepts that these were most probably perpetrated by elements of Russian intelligence. The question, however, is *who instructed* those elements to do so, and whether the aim was to *promote* Putin's chances of election (as is usually claimed) or rather to have a *hold* over him.
- In the early 2000s, Chechens, including those living overtly in Britain, were involved in supplying the "Chechen Republic of Ichkeria" terrorists. These men were now in mountain hiding and in exile, following their two resounding military defeats in the lowland cities of Chechnya (the First and Second Chechen Wars). In spring 2003, when Russian public annoyance about Georgian and Azerbaijani succour of these Chechen terrorists was at its height and was being derided by the British and American governments, I personally fell into conversation with a young Chechen in an Internet café in Baku. He frankly admitted to me that between semesters at the University of Durham, where if I recall right he had a scholarship, he came out to Azerbaijan to help his uncle treat Chechen terrorists medically evacuated from the theatre of war (a term for which Russian has a specific concept, *рпз-199* ['cargo type 199']). I subsequently verified his account.
- In early August 2008, according to a former British soldier who spoke to me some years after the event, and who provided verifying details which satisfied me, a group of ex-military snipers including that source was taken to Tskhinvali to provoke Georgia's war with Russia over South

Ossetia. They were commanded by a former very senior MI6 officer whose name he disclosed to me. The commander in question had recently beforehand been in the direct chain of authority between Sir John Scarlett and Christopher Steele.



Image: Yana Amelina ([CC BY-SA 3.0](#))

It would be tempting to end this article with some rhetorical flourish or grand claim but I simply do not have the information to permit the making of one. I must leave it to the reader to add the above to his stock of knowledge and suspicions in the Skripal case.

In closing, I must of course express the fervent wish that we avoid a third world war and reiterate the fine patriotism of the overwhelming majority of British intelligence officers at all agencies. To any current staff of the intelligence agencies, I would say: Don't take a single larger-than-life colleague's or senior's word for *anything* pertinent to your quarries. Above all, learn — outside work — enough of our history and constitution to be able to work conscientiously and lawfully, which is a very different kettle of fish from observing mere "legalities".



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