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The British report on Novichok and the Kremlin's state responsibility



A public inquiry in London has concluded that the **2018 Salisbury nerve agent attack** was a Russian state operation and could only have been carried out with the approval of the highest leadership in Moscow.

With this finding, the case of Dawn Sturgess is no longer seen as the tragic result of a single incident but as evidence that a military nerve agent reached British territory through state action.

In response, the British government sanctioned the entire Russian military intelligence service, the GRU, and for the first time formally designated a foreign service as the institution responsible for the use of a chemical agent on United Kingdom territory.

The story begins in March 2018. **Sergei Skripal**, a former GRU officer convicted in Russia of espionage for the benefit of the British service and later exchanged in a deal between Moscow and London, and his daughter Yulia were found unconscious on a bench in Salisbury.

The investigation determined that the Novichok nerve agent had been applied to their front door handle. Skripal and his daughter survived, as did police officer Nick Bailey, but all were in critical condition for months.

A few months later, the story took a tragic turn that, politically, remained in the shadow of the original attack for a long time. In Amesbury, a few weeks after the attack on Sergei and Yulia Skripal, **Dawn Sturgess** came into contact with a bottle of perfume containing the Novichok nerve agent.

Sturgess applied the substance to her skin, believing it was perfume. Shortly afterwards, she developed severe symptoms of poisoning and died, while her husband survived with permanent consequences.

A clear logical chain

In 2018, British authorities publicly accused

Russia of the attack and identified three GRU operatives who had entered the United Kingdom under false names before fleeing.

Meanwhile, journalistic investigations were published that reconstructed their identities and their connection to the Russian military intelligence service. Russia formally denied responsibility and it described the incident as a "provocation".

The legal and political significance of the case increased when a formal public inquiry under the **Inquiries Act** was launched in 2022, focusing on the death of Dawn Sturgess and the broader context of the use of chemical weapons on British soil.

Lord Anthony Hughes, a former judge of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, led the inquiry. His report, published on 4 December 2025, leaves little room for ambiguity.

Hughes uses the term "morally responsible" when referring to Vladimir Putin's role in the death of Dawn Sturgess

It states that the attack was an operation of the Russian state, carried out by members of the GRU, and that the attempt to kill Skripal "must have been authorised at the highest level", specifically the President of Russia.

Hughes uses the term "morally responsible" when referring to Vladimir Putin's role in the death of Dawn Sturgess. Although this is not a criminal qualification in the strict sense, it represents the extent to which a public inquiry can proceed without direct criminal charges.

The investigation establishes a clear logical chain: Putin approved the GRU operation to eliminate the double agent in the UK; the operatives used a military nerve agent, left a contaminated bottle in a public space, and thereby created a foreseeable risk that an innocent person would be killed; that is precisely how Dawn Sturgess died.

A broader pattern of Russian hostile foreign intervention

From the perspective of international law, this effectively equates a covert operation with a state act of using chemical weapons on the territory of another state.

In rhetoric, it is not labelled state terrorism, but the elements are similar: political motive, use of a highly toxic agent prohibited by the Chemical Weapons Convention, endangerment of civilians, and clear state sponsorship.

The difference is that London is choosing to present the incident as part of a broader pattern of Russian "hostile foreign intervention" rather than as an isolated attack.

This was followed by the British government's response. Almost on the same day the report was published, London introduced a **new package of sanctions**.

For the first time, the entire GRU was targeted – not just individual officers, but the entire Russian military intelligence service as an entity.

In the report of the public inquiry, Lord Hughes described the actions of GRU operatives as "astonishingly reckless", emphasising that the way the nerve agent entered the public space created a foreseeable risk that could have resulted in civilian casualties.

The GRU and the named individuals will be banned from entering the UK, and their assets will be frozen

The **United Kingdom government**, in its response to the report, assessed that this was an "ongoing campaign of hostile activities by Russia" and stated that the **findings of the investigation** are a "grave reminder of the Kremlin's disregard for innocent lives".

In addition to the service itself, the list includes eleven individuals: eight cyber officers and **three operatives accused of operations in Ukraine** and in European countries, including planning attacks on Ukrainian supermarkets.

Technically, the consequences of the sanctions are standard. The GRU and the named individuals will be banned from entering the UK, and their assets will be frozen.

In practice, many assets formally registered to the GRU are unlikely to be found in London.

However, when the new package of sanctions is considered alongside the measures introduced against Russian banks, state-owned companies, and political influencers since 2022, a clearer picture of London's intentions emerges.

The UK is seeking to create a consistent framework in which responsibility for the operations of Russian services is not treated as an isolated incident but as part of a broader national pattern.

This increases the political and financial pressure on the structures the Kremlin uses for operations abroad. Foreign banks, trusts, and intermediaries now have military intelligence explicitly identified as a risky client and partner in their sanction compliance procedures.

A message directed not only at Moscow but also at allies

The political significance of the move far outweighs the financial restrictions themselves. London is publicly and formally stating what has long been assumed in security circles: the GRU is not a disobedient part of the state but an instrument of the Russian president's personal decisions.

Thus, responsibility for secret operations is no longer left in a grey area but is linked directly to the highest level of the state.

The move comes as the UK seeks to maintain a hard line towards Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine. Keir Starmer's government is clearly using the inquiry's findings to demonstrate continuity: the country that used a nerve agent in Salisbury is the same country destroying Ukrainian cities.

A similar approach could be applied to the intelligence agencies of other countries that use comparable methods

The message is directed not only at Moscow but also at allies in the EU and NATO, as a reminder that Russian covert operations are not a separate issue but part of the broader security puzzle.

Another, less explicitly stated, goal is to deter other adversaries. If the UK is now sanctioning the entire Russian military intelligence service for the 2018 operation, it logically follows that a similar approach could be applied to the intelligence agencies of other countries that use comparable methods.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC), the Chinese Ministry of State Security (MSS), and certain structures in North Korea have been in this category for years. London is signalling its readiness to extend individual responsibility to the institutional level.

An important shift in political vocabulary

What distinguishes the British response from those of other countries is not just the use of sanctions, which have become routine since 2014.

The decisive change is the public, legally articulated decision that it is possible to name a foreign head of state as the person who authorised the use of chemical weapons on UK territory, even if this does not result in a formal indictment before an international court.

This marks an important shift in political vocabulary. For years, there has been talk of "strong suspicion", "high probability", or "regime responsibility"; now it is stated clearly that **Putin** approved the specific operation that led to the death of a British citizen.

The investigation concludes that there was a risk to Skripal that was not adequately assessed

However, this decision also raises the question of what the British state itself is prepared to do about its own shortcomings. The investigation concludes that there was a risk to Skripal that was not adequately assessed and that the state could have done more in training emergency services, providing public information, and shaping attitudes towards victims.

The **family of Dawn Sturgess** openly criticised the authorities after the release of the report, claiming that the state had not learned the right lessons from her death and that the recommendations were insufficient.

Further outrage arose when local police highlighted Dawn Sturgess's history of drug addiction in the early stages of the case, which the family saw as an attempt to downplay the seriousness of her death.

A model for a wider Western policy towards covert operations

For London, the most politically convenient part of the response is clearly defining Russian responsibility. The most difficult aspect is its own willingness to change how it protects people who, because of the nature of their former work, are legitimate targets of foreign services.

The question is how much the report will actually lead to procedural changes and how much will remain a symbolic framework for sanctions and strong rhetoric.



The sanctioning of the entire GRU after the investigation into the death of Dawn Sturgess becomes more than a belated response to a single attack

Looking at the longer time frame, from the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko with radioactive polonium in 2006, through the attempted assassination of Skripal and his daughter in 2018, to the war in Ukraine from 2022, this latest move by London appears to be an attempt to formally close that sequence.

The British state now has a clear narrative: the Kremlin uses special services for assassinations and intimidation, ranging from discreet poisoning to mass wartime violence.

The sanctioning of the entire GRU after the investigation into the death of Dawn Sturgess thus becomes more than a belated response to a single attack.

It is a message about how the UK will in future interpret any covert operation that bears the signature of Russian military intelligence.

It remains an open question how well this approach will be accepted by others. Some members of the European Union have balanced economic cooperation with Russia and security obligations for years, and there are several countries outside Europe that continue to buy Russian weapons and energy products.

For them, the British decision is a signal, but not an obligation. If the GRU sanctions remain predominantly a British instrument, they will have more symbolic than practical impact.

If, however, they become a model for wider

Western policy regarding the covert operations of authoritarian regimes, the Dawn Sturgess report may prove to be a more important document than it first appears.