

Zhores Medvedev

1925-2018

Zhores was a friend of the Russell Foundation for many years. With Roy, his twin brother, he informed our work on the Soviet Union and Russia, going back to the 1970s. This proved particularly helpful during the European Nuclear Disarmament campaign in the 1980s, which called for the dismantling of Soviet and US theatre nuclear weapons. In January 1980, E.P.Thompson wrote to Ken Coates at the Russell Foundation saying ‘I think your idea about a European meeting in London is not only a good one but an urgent one’, mentioning that Zhores might be asked to join the platform. Several years later, in 1986, at the END Convention near Paris, Zhores spoke about the older emergency workers deployed to try to deal with the nuclear explosion at Chernobyl. As a biologist with a particular interest in ageing, he explained that older people were less likely to live long enough to develop illnesses associated with exposure to contamination. A scientific sleuth, he had Sherlock Holmes’ eye for detail. Thus, at an early date, he scrutinised the available evidence and pointed out that there were two attempts to poison Alexander Litvinenko in 2006. More recently, he turned his attention to the Skripals, who were poisoned in Salisbury in March 2018. On 15 October, he emailed *The Spokesman* saying he had written

‘an essay-review on Mark Urban’s book “The Skripal Files” which will be published in Russian weekly in New York and in some other Russian journals. You can use it in any way. This case was critical for British-Russian relations in 2018.’

Zhores died at home in London on 15 November 2018, a day after celebrating his 93rd birthday with family.

Mysterious assassination

*Notes about the
book by
Mark Urban*

Zhores Medvedev



*Zhores on his North
London allotment*

Bestseller project

In early 2017, Mark Urban, journalist, BBC reporter and one of the best documentary writers in the UK, chose as the subject for his twelfth book the story of the famous exchange of ten Russian illegals, arrested in June 2010 in the United States, for four Russian citizens accused of espionage on behalf of the United States and Britain. No books about this event, unique in the history of international espionage, had yet appeared, and Urban, not without reason, believed his work would be a bestseller.

On 9 July 2010, the four Russians were taken directly from prison to Vienna, where the exchange took place. Two chose residence in the United States. The other two, computer scientist Igor Sutyagin and Sergey Skripal, former Colonel in the GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate), settled in England. Sutyagin, an active 45-year-old scientific researcher, was given a position at one of the institutes in London. Skripal, who was 59 years old, had the opportunity to live the quiet life as a pensioner. The British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) acquired a two-storey house with garden in Salisbury, 78 miles south west of London, for the Skripal family. The house was deemed a gift inherited by Mr Skripal. Salisbury is located in that part of England which has the best climate. Skripal's wife Lyudmila, his son Alexander and daughter Yulia soon moved from Moscow to join him in Salisbury.

In June 2017, when Mark Urban first came to Salisbury to talk to Sergey Skripal, the life of the former Colonel had changed a lot. In 2012, his wife died of cancer. His

daughter, fluent in English and Spanish, returned to Russia in 2014, settling in Moscow where she found a job. Alexander, Skripal's son whom Urban met on his first visit to Salisbury, was seriously ill. Salisbury is a city where retired British secret service staff are fond of retiring. Sergey Skripal had a British passport and could travel to other countries on various matters.

New bestseller

On Sunday 4 March 2018, Sergey Skripal was poisoned with a nerve agent. His daughter had arrived in Salisbury the day before. This quickly became a world sensation, which inevitably changed Urban's plans. The exchange of spies, which had taken place long ago, became irrelevant. The whole world watched to see what would happen to Sergey and his daughter, whose lives hung by a thread. Doctors used a wide range of modern medicine, but success was not guaranteed. This affair, which quickly developed into the biggest international crisis, was discussed every day on the front pages of the world's press.

Mark Urban inevitably changed his plan. He understood that his book should confine itself to the problems of Sergey and Yulia Skripal. As diplomatic editor of the BBC Television's *Newsnight* programme, which millions of Britons watch every evening, Urban received a wealth of information on every aspect of the problem. Information came to BBC Television Centre from the British Government, from Parliament, from MI6, from the hospital in Salisbury, from Scotland Yard (the British police), and from many other services, not only British, but also international. On the basis of all this extensive material, Urban began to prepare a new book, a guaranteed bestseller.

The contracts which the author signed, not only with the British but also with the American, German and other publishers, set publication for end September 2018. The German edition, *Die Akte Skripal*, came out simultaneously with the English one. This meant a finished manuscript, even for the express edition, by mid-August. September/October is the customary time to publish and sell serious books. In the summer the British are resting, and during November bookshops begin to fill with gift editions for Christmas.

By the end of September it was already established that Sergey and Yulia Skripal had been poisoned with 'novichok', a nerve-paralytic agent spread on the door handle of the entrance to their house in Salisbury. But the criminals, who are supposedly agents of the Kremlin, have not yet been found. In England, the prosecutor's office makes an accusation of crime

only against specific persons. Such charges had not been brought at the time of publication of Urban's book and the express translations. One of the last chapters of his book, the twentieth, the author entitled 'The Investigation Falters', probably not without some regret. However, the chronology and methodology of the crime committed on Sunday 4 March 2018 were already well established.

Front door handle

During the first two weeks of the investigation the main problem for the police was to determine where, when and how the poisonous substance got into the bodies of two people at the same time. After discounting many options, the official conclusion was that the poison in the form of an ointment or gel was applied to the handle of the front door, which had to be touched and pressed downwards to open the door when returning home. The movements of Sergey and his daughter were established relatively quickly. Yulia flew from Moscow to London on Saturday 3 March. In the morning of 4 March, father and daughter drove to a local cemetery to visit the graves of Lyudmila and Alexander. Sergey visited the graves of his wife and son every Sunday, leaving flowers. It was a compulsory ritual. As Mark Urban wrote in his book, the Skripals:

' .. came home briefly and then went out again at about 13.00. In as much as as Sergei had a regular "pattern of life", a Sunday-morning visit to the London Road cemetery was part of it. So had the poison been delivered while he was out by somebody who knew he would not be back for a while? ... The absence of contamination at the cemetery gave some weight to the idea that the Novichok was placed while they were there, not before.' (Pages 258-259)



Urban's assumption seems logical. Houses in England usually have a large window in the main room on the ground floor, through which visitors can be seen approaching. In the Skripals' house such a window was to the left of the front door. The attacker who put novichok on the door handle could realize his plan only when he was sure the owner would not see it. The Skripals had to touch the front door handle when they returned from the cemetery, some time between 11 o'clock in the morning and noon. This is the time the English traditionally drink tea at home or in their offices – the 'tea break'. Undoubtedly, Sergey opened the front door. It was not essential to touch the outer door handle when leaving the house.

Not all English houses have entrance door handles. They are necessary for doors opening outward. But most English houses have front doors that open inwards and the door handle is therefore inside. Opening the door outwards is impossible as it would hit a visitor in the face. On the outer side of the door there is only a bracket above the latch of a large letterbox, which is opened by the postman. Not only letters, but also newspapers and books are posted through the letterbox. On Sunday, however, mail is not delivered in England. Such a system is available, for example, on all houses in the London street where the author of this present essay lives. But the Skripals' house, like some others, has a second entrance-porch with a new glass door. This slightly increases the area of the house, improves thermal insulation, and creates a 'hallway'. Here there is a second door, which opens outwards. When preparing their attempted assassination of Sergey, the attackers had to know beforehand the door handle features of his unique door system and prepare accordingly. It's now impossible to check the Scotland Yard version about the door handle. In May or June 2018, the entire door system of the house was removed, taken away, and replaced with a shield.

The weather was cold on that day in March 2018. Snow had fallen the day before and had not melted everywhere. In England during such weather many people wear leather gloves. Personally, for me, this is the rule. Sergey Skripal, who was driving his air-conditioned BMW, could manage without them. This would also have been known to those studying the crime scene.

The poisoners are found. The problem of time

As is well known, the Skripals' poisoners were identified in early September, when Mark Urban's book was already printed in a large edition. On 5 September 2018, Theresa May, the British Prime Minister,

announced in Parliament that two Russian intelligence officers were formally accused of carrying out the poisoning of the Skripals in Salisbury. She said:

'... the police have set out how the two Russian nationals travelled under the names of Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov – names the police believe to be aliases. They arrived at Gatwick Airport at 3pm on Friday 2nd March, having flown from Moscow on flight SU2588.'

Petrov and Boshirov had been abroad before, but this was their first visit to England. Prior to Theresa May's statement, using video cameras, railway tickets, and information from the hotel and from airports, all the movements of Petrov and Boshirov were reconstructed. They made two short visits to Salisbury. Video cameras recorded their arrival at Salisbury Railway Station and pictured them walking in the city centre. Apparently, there were no surveillance cameras in Christie Miller Road, the residential street where Sergey Skripal lived at no.47. No direct evidence was presented of Petrov and Boshirov's appearance in the street. However, their arrival at Salisbury Station, a walk in the city centre, and then their quick departure from Salisbury to London could be traced quite accurately.

Petrov and Boshirov arrived in Salisbury for the first time on 3 March. But an hour later, having walked around the city centre, they returned to the station and left for London. The next day they returned to Salisbury and CCTV cameras recorded their passage to the station forecourt from the platform through the control gate at 11.48am. At 13.05, they were near shops in the centre of Salisbury, and at 13.50 they had already left again for London. Scotland Yard assumes that between 12 and 12.30 they could have approached Skripal's house and put novichok on the front door handle. On the evening of the same day, Petrov and Boshirov flew from London to Moscow.

This schedule of Petrov and Boshirov's possible actions contradicts the documented account given in Mark Urban's book. Between 12.00 and 12.30 Sergey Skripal and his daughter were at home, having returned from the cemetery. Their house was in a small cul-de-sac and it would have been impossible for two tall men wearing bright jackets and carrying backpacks to approach unnoticed. Those approaching the house were visible through the window to the left of the door. At 13.00, the Skripals left their home and went to the pub and then to an Italian restaurant, Zizzi. The exit door to their house was opened from the inside outwards. The door was then slammed and locked with a key. The Skripals never returned home.

The first person to try to open the outer door of N° 47 was Police Sergeant Nick Bailey, who came in the early evening to inspect the house. The Skripals were already in hospital. But the front door was locked and the Sergeant was able to enter the house through the back door from the kitchen to the garden, the inside of which was not closed. Trying initially to open the front door, novichok contaminated Sergeant Bailey's gloves, it is assumed. Taking off his gloves after entering the house, Sergeant Bailey touched the poison. The poison penetrated his skin. Two or three hours later, he felt unwell, fainted and had to go hospital. But the dose he received appeared to be small. He spent only about a week in the hospital. The fate of his leather gloves, supposedly contaminated with novichok, remains unknown. Whilst there, it is unclear why the Police Sergeant did not let out of the house Sergey's beloved black Persian cat, which Yulia brought from Russia. During the next two weeks, the police guarded Skripal's house, but did not search it. No one was interested in his home computer. When the police eventually reopened the guarded house, the cat was still alive, but very weak. It was decided to put the cat to sleep; its body was cremated without conducting any tests. Two guinea pigs, which lived in the house annexe, died of starvation. Their bodies were also cremated.

Scotland Yard's theory about novichok on the door handle, which became the government's official line, was criticized in the press primarily because it did not explain the simultaneous poisoning of two people, father and daughter. It was suggested that the Italian restaurant was the most probable location where the poisoning took place. But if that was so, there were no 'Kremlin clues'.

In the golden cage

Yulia Skripal was discharged from hospital about a month before her father and sent to a 'safe house' somewhere in London's leafy suburbs. Her father soon joined her. They were not allowed to contact the outside world by phone or e-mail. Nor could they leave the 'safe house'. Mark Urban wanted to meet them, but was not given permission to do so. He writes in his book, clearly on the basis of information from the secret services:

'In their safe house Yulia and Sergei had access to TV, the internet, and a phone. They were in contact with some friends but even so it was a form of isolation. They could not simply head up to London to have dinner and see a movie.'

There are many reasons why the police and intelligence people sought to keep it that way, even if ultimately they recognized the moment would come when the Skripals, particularly Yulia, might want to move on. There was still a sense of guilt in British officialdom that he had not been properly protected on 4 March, nobody wanted to be accused of that again; they didn't want any trial jeopardized by public statements; while they were still recovering they didn't want father and daughter doorstepped by the media; and lastly, if Sergei Skripal was to opt for long-term 'witness-protection'-style security he would have to disappear, severing any contacts he had with his old life, maybe moving to another country.' (page 291).

Mark Urban's assertion that the Skripals have access to the phone and internet seems to me to be incorrect. No calls were received from them and no one could call in. They are also unable to use e-mail. They do not have a postal or e-mail address, not even a numbered subscription box. Personally, I doubt that they receive newspapers, the front pages of which carry numerous and varied speculations about the poisoning of the Skripals.

Translated by Tony Simpson

Mark Urban, The Skripal Files, The Life and Near Death of a Russian Spy, Macmillan, London, 2018, £20

