
CBRNE Perspectives and Analysis

The war on the OPCW

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Abstract

For the past five years, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons has been the target of a concerted disinformation campaign. CBRN Perspectives & Analytics looks back on how an institution so central to global counterproliferation came under attack.

In April 2018, Dutch authorities apprehended four men sitting in a grey Citroen car parked in the diplomatic quarter of The Hague. The group had been under police surveillance since flying into the Netherlands from Russia a few days earlier. On searching their vehicle, the Dutch officers found a jumble of electronic equipment, including an antenna hidden under a jacket (1). It was pointed squarely at a nearby building - the headquarters of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

The detained men had entered the Netherlands on diplomatic passports, but their true identities were soon revealed. Alexei Moronets, Yevgeny Serebriakov, Oleg Sotnikov and Alexey Minin were all members of the Russian military's Main Intelligence Directorate, the GRU (2). Their Unit 26165 had sent them to The Hague on an operation aimed at hacking into foreign institutions of interest to the Kremlin. Offshore phishing attempts had failed, so the GRU men needed to conduct "close-access" hacking by getting physically near their target and latching onto vulnerable wifi networks (2).

The OPCW was of primary interest to the GRU because of the investigations being undertaken there. Among other things, the OPCW was probing the use of chemical weapons in Syria, where a multi-factional war had been raging since the failed Arab Spring of 2011 and where Russian President Vladimir Putin had sent air force units to shore up his embattled Syrian client, Bashar al-Assad, in 2015 (3). A key event occurred just outside Damascus the week before the GRU men were apprehended in the Netherlands: the aerial deployment of chlorinated organic chemicals on a civilian residential block in the city of Douma, in which no fewer than 43 people died, and dozens more required hospitalisation (4).

Douma was only one among a litany of chemical weapons attacks conducted by the al-Assad government in the 2010s (5). But it was a watershed moment in a disinformation campaign launched by Assad's strategic patron, Moscow, which entered the war in 2015 with an unrestrained aerial bombing

campaign that targeted Islamist groups, the secular opposition and innocent civilians alike (6). When the attack on Douma occurred, the stories of bereaved families and traumatised survivors were quickly drowned out by a cacophony of conspiracy and obfuscation. The claim that the chlorine attack had been "staged" by a humanitarian group known as the White Helmets was cycled through a nascent propaganda network involving Russian state television, shadow Twitter accounts and fringe English-language media (7).

When a technical group from the OPCW attempted to access Douma in the aftermath of the attack, they were blocked by Russian military police guarding the site (8). Kremlin-affiliated "journalists", however, as well as ideological allies from "alternative" Western outlets, explored the neighbourhood unhindered and quickly declared that no attack had occurred at all (9). Others doubled down on the White Helmets conspiracy theory. An 11-year-old child told *Rossiia-24* that he was "lured with cookies" by White Helmets, who sprayed him with water in a staged response to a "fake" chemical attack (10, 11). The boy was later flown to The Hague and used in a bizarre press conference arranged by Russian representatives to the OPCW, where the White Helmets conspiracy was broadcast to the world from the foyer of the Crowne Plaza Hotel (12). In the ensuing alternate universe, all talk of the Russian military's complicity with the Assad government evaporated into a whirlwind of confusion, claim and counterclaim.

Maskirovka

Just six months prior to the Crowne Plaza press conference, arms control professionals had been celebrating a milestone in counterproliferation: the final destruction of the chemical weapons stockpile Russia had inherited from the Soviet Union. The OPCW hailed the "momentous occasion" of all 39,967 metric tons of chemical weapons declared by Moscow since 1992 finally being consigned to history (13). Lewisite, mustard, phosgene, sarin, soman, and VX

were among the agents disposed of, and a photo opportunity was held. Having conclusively dealt with this dangerous legacy of the Cold War, the OPCW declared it would soon be entering a new era, the “post-chemical weapons destruction phase” of its existence (13).

Barely four months later, the true status of Russia’s chemical weapons arsenal was revealed in gruesome scenes that unfolded in a picturesque English village. Sergei Skripal, a former member of the GRU who had worked undercover for British intelligence in the 1990s, was found alongside his daughter after they were poisoned with a nerve agent from the *novichok* class in Salisbury (14). Both survived after extended treatment in intensive care, but a local resident, Dawn Sturgess, who picked up the perfume bottle in which the nerve agent had been concealed, died after being exposed (15). Two GRU officers, who had been photographed entering Gatwick Airport, were identified by British authorities as those responsible (14). A disinformation campaign of similar tenor to those used in the Syrian battlespace soon erupted, exploiting similar platforms, this time using a contradictory series of counter-accusations: the Skripals had not been targeted by the GRU in revenge for a distant betrayal, they were in fact poisoned by British Intelligence; simultaneously the two Russian agents caught on CCTV were British actors (16). Later, the GRU pair gave an interview claiming they were actually tourists (17). Again, the conspiracy theories found their way onto the internet via Russian state television, cycled through Twitter and rebroadcast through Western fringe media (16).

This was the other task of the OPCW in 2018, when the organisation was targeted by the GRU hacking team: understanding the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal. The last time a former Russian intelligence officer had been targeted for assassination in the United Kingdom - when former FSB Colonel Alexander Litvinenko was killed after ingesting polonium-210 at a London sushi restaurant - formal attribution had taken nearly a decade (18). This time investigations were moving much quicker, and the OPCW was taking a central role (19).

The disinformation war on the OPCW soon escalated. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov accused the organisation of fabricating the Skripal evidence, asserting that investigators had in fact detected Agent BZ, an anticholinergic repurposed by the U.S. military in the late 1950s for potential offensive use (20). A sustained campaign aimed at undermining the OPCW’s reputation was launched by Russian diplomats, who accused the organisation of suppressing “the true details” of the Skripal investigation (21). Meanwhile, the Russian state used its rights as a full voting OPCW member to obstruct investigations into any incident in which their government, or that of an ally, may be implicated. Russian representatives successfully terminated the OPCW-UN Joint Investigation Mechanism (22), after

it determined the Syrian government had deployed sarin against civilians in Khan Shaykhun back in 2017, killing 90 people, 30 of them children (23, 24). It was the deadliest chemical attack since Ghouta, where more than 1,400 people, including over 400 children, were killed with sarin on 21 August 2013 (25). The attacks continued throughout the period of Russia acting as a “guarantor” for the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile.

In April 2020, the OPCW released the first report of its Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), which had been established, despite Russian objections, to unmask the perpetrators of recent chemical attacks. The first IIT report detailed the use of sarin and chlorine by the Syrian air force in Ltamenah at a time when the Russian Air Force effectively controlled Syrian airspace (26). The Assad government was given 90 days to declare any chemical weapons stocks concealed since their purported destruction years earlier (27). Before that time could barely elapse, the OPCW was confronted with a new crisis: the Russian opposition figure and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny fell violently ill on a flight over Siberia (28). Nearing death, Navalny was medically evacuated to Berlin after fraught negotiations between German and Russian authorities (29). Five OPCW-certified laboratories that analysed the causative agent of his illness soon came to the same conclusion: Navalny had been targeted with a product of the *novichok* group, the signature chemical weapon class of Russian intelligence (30).

“Provocations”

The Skripal and Navalny poisonings provoked the first serious discussions of expelling the Russian Federation from the OPCW. Some felt a strong message needed to be sent, otherwise the organisation might be rendered irrelevant (31). Others argued it was better Russia maintained a stake in the framework of chemical weapons control, lest it be totally unbound (32). In the year following Navalny’s poisoning, however, relations between Moscow and other OPCW members deteriorated further, with *démarche* and counter-*démarche* sent from party to party throughout 2021 (33). As that year drew to a close, Russian delegates to the OPCW were describing the “Skripal fraud” and the Navalny case as “anti-Russian provocations” in increasingly conspiratorial terms (33).

Before the latest incident could come to a head, however, an even larger crisis emerged. In December 2021, as Russian armour gathered on the Ukrainian border, Moscow’s minister of defence, Sergei Shoigu, alleged “tanks filled with unidentified chemical components” were being smuggled into Ukraine by American military contractors “for the purpose of carrying out acts of provocation” (34). Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova insisted that “Ukrainian nationalists” were intent on “preparing a chemical weapons” attack (35). As missiles and

artillery devastated Ukrainian cities, OPCW officials were bombarded by Russian claims of “Ukrainian neo-Nazis” plotting attacks involving chlorine, nitric acid, and tonnes of hexane (36). This disinformation campaign ran parallel to another relating to fictitious biological weapons, in which the US military, the firm Metabiota, and a laboratory housing bats near Kharkiv were all allegedly conspiring to develop “biological warfare agents” on Russia’s doorstep (37).

Paralysed by this torrent of false accusations, the OPCW struggled to discern between real and imagined incidents involving weaponised chemicals as a land war erupted in Europe. In March, Ukrainian and Russian representatives attempting to negotiate a ceasefire fell ill, describing swollen eyes and peeling skin on their hands and faces in an incident that remains unclear (38). In the east of the country, Ukrainian marines claimed that Russian drones were dropping chloropicrin grenades on their positions (39). Civilians were exposed to hazardous chemicals after Russian munitions hit a chemical facility in Sumy (40) and the Azot chemical plant in Sievierodonetsk

(41). As the war entered its second year, video emerged showing phosphorous munitions being used as an anti-personnel weapon in the grinding battle for the eastern city of Bakhmut (42).

In April 2023, the Russian Federation assumed the presidency of the United Nations Security Council. Ukraine’s Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, was quick to describe this development as “the world’s worst April Fool’s joke” (43). Two weeks later, an ambulance was called to the prison cell of Alexei Navalny (44). Having survived the 2020 *novichok* poisoning, the long-time foe of the Kremlin had been arrested the day he returned to Russia and thrown in prison again. Now Navalny’s staff were claiming he had been poisoned a second time, telling international media he was “in a critical situation”, while calling on Russian authorities to allow independent investigators to assess him (45). They wanted to know if he had been subjected to another chemical attack.

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How to cite this article: Joel Keep and David Heslop. The war on the OPCW. *Global Biosecurity*. 2023; 5(1).

Published: June 2023

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