

Lynch Mob Mentality. The Boshirov and Petrov story

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I was caught in a twitterstorm of hatred yesterday, much of it led by mainstream media journalists for daring to suggest that the basic elements of Boshirov and Petrov's story do in fact stack up. What became very plain quite quickly was that none of these people had any grasp of the detail of the suspects' [full twenty minute interview](#), but had just seen the short clips or quotes as presented by British corporate and state media.

As I explained in my last post, what first gave me some sympathy for the Russians' story and drew me to look at it closer, was the raft of social media claims that there was no snow in Salisbury that weekend and Stonehenge had not been closed. In fact, Stonehenge was indeed closed on 3 March by heavy snow, as confirmed by English Heritage. So the story that they came to Salisbury on 3 March but could not go to Stonehenge because of heavy snow did stand up, contrary to almost the entire twittersphere.

Once there was some pushback of truth about this on social media, people started triumphantly posting the CCTV images from 4 March to prove that there was no snow lying in Central Salisbury on 4 March. But nobody ever said there was snow on 4 March - in fact Borisov and Petrov specifically stated that they learnt there was a thaw so they went back. However when they got there, they encountered heavy sleet and got drenched through. That accords precisely with the photographic evidence in which they are plainly drenched through.

Another extraordinary meme that causes hilarity on twitter is that Russians might be deterred by snow or cold weather.

Well, Russians are human beings just like us. They cope with cold weather at home because they have the right clothes. Boshirov and Petrov refer continually in the interview to cold, wet feet and again this is borne out by the photographic evidence - they were wearing sneakers unsuitable to the freak weather conditions that were prevalent in Salisbury on 3 and 4 March. They are indeed soaked through in the pictures, just as they said in the interview.

Russians are no more immune to cold and wet than you are.

Twitter is replete with claims that they were strange tourists, to be visiting a housing estate. No evidence has been produced anywhere that shows them on any housing estate. They were seen on CCTV camera walking up the A36 by the Shell station, some 400 yards from the Skripals' house, which would require three turnings to get to that - turnings nobody saw

them take (and they were on the wrong side of the road for the first turning, even though it would be very close). No evidence has been mentioned which puts them at the Skripals' House.

Finally, it is everywhere asserted that it is very strange that Russians would take a weekend break holiday, and that if they did they could not possibly be interested in architecture or history. This is a simple expression of anti-Russian racism. Plainly before their interview – about which they were understandably nervous – they prepared what they were going to say, including checking up on what it was they expected to see in Salisbury because they realised they would very obviously be asked why they went. Because their answer was prepared does not make it untrue.

That literally people thousands of people have taken to twitter to mock that it is hilariously improbable that tourists might want to visit Salisbury Cathedral and Stonehenge, is a plain example of the irrationality that can overtake people when gripped by mob hatred.

I am astonished by the hatred that has been unleashed. The story of Gerry Conlon might, you would hope, give us pause as to presuming the guilt of somebody who just happened to be of the “enemy” nationality, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Despite the mocking mob, there is nothing inherently improbable in the tale told by the two men. What matters is whether they can be connected to the novichok, and here the safety of the identification of the microscopic traces of novichok allegedly found in their hotel bedroom is key. I am no scientist, but I have been told by someone who is, that if the particle(s) were as the police state so small as to be harmless to humans, they would be too small for mass spectrometry analysis and almost certainly could not be firmly identified other than as an organophosphate. Perhaps someone qualified might care to comment.

The hotel room novichok is the key question in this case.

Were I Vladimir Putin, I would persuade Boshirov and Petrov voluntarily to come to the UK and stand trial, on condition that it was a genuinely fair trial before a jury in which the entire proceedings, and all of the evidence, was open and public, and the Skripals and Pablo Miller might be called as witnesses and cross-examined. I have no doubt that the British government's desire for justice would suddenly move into rapid retreat if their bluff was called in this way.

As for me, when I see a howling mob rushing to judgement and making at least some claims which are utterly unfounded, and when I see that mob fueled and egged on by information from the security services propagated by exactly the same mainstream media journalists who propagandised the lies about Iraqi WMD, I see it as my job to stand in the way of the mob and to ask cool questions. If that makes them hate me, then I must be having some impact.

So I ask this question again – and nobody so far has attempted to give me an answer. At what time did the Skripals touch their doorknob? Boshirov and Petrov arrived in Salisbury at 11.48 and could not have painted the doorknob before noon. The Skripals had left their house at 09.15, with their mobile phones switched off so they could not be geo-located. Their car was caught on CCTV on three cameras heading out of Salisbury to the North East. At 13.15 it was again caught on camera heading back in to the town centre from the North West.

How had the Skripals managed to get back to their home, and touch the door handle, in the hour between noon and 1pm, without being caught on any of the CCTV cameras that caught them going out and caught the Russian visitors so extensively? After this remarkably invisible journey, what time did they touch the door handle?

I am not going to begin to accept the guilt of Boshirov and Petrov until somebody answers that question. Dan Hodges? David Aaronovitch? Theresa May? Anybody?

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