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Poisoning suspects 'tourism' claims raise eyebrows even in Russia

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By Theo MERZ, published 14 September 2018 at 13h45.

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Two men identified as Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov said in an interview with Russian channel RT that they had just visited Britain as tourists - © RUSSIA TODAY/AFP HO

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Two Russian men's claims that they were innocent tourists wrongly branded would-be assassins met with mockery in Britain Friday and even raised eyebrows in the usually patriotic

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The men said that far from plotting to poison a turncoat spy with a deadly nerve agent, they were actually just in England to admire the Gothic architecture in the city of Salisbury.

In an interview aired by Russian broadcaster RT on Thursday, the men identified as Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov said they had nothing to do with the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter.

The poisoning on March 4 dragged Moscow's relations with London and other Western powers to a low point not seen since the Cold War.

London said the two men were Russian agents, which Moscow denies.

The interview prompted scorn and mockery in Britain.

"The last time Russian military claimed to be on holiday was when they invaded Ukraine in 2014," Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt tweeted.

In Russia meanwhile, Kommersant newspaper questioned why the men were not able show identification or give further details about their work or private lives.

Petrov and Boshirov said they worked as entrepreneurs in the fitness and supplements industries, but business paper RBK said it had found no business registered under their two names in Russia.

The paper also noted they showed no evidence they had ever made it to Salisbury cathedral,

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on the broadcast: *“An interview, but no information”*.

Social media users in Russia and Britain were scathing of the claims.

“What a bold move, to rely on Sunday trains to get themselves to Salisbury and back and then to Heathrow,” one Twitter user noted, in reference to Britain’s unreliable weekend rail services.

“The Spy Who Went Home Because It Was Cold,” another wrote.

‘Normal pair’

Yet some on the streets of Moscow took the men’s claims at face value.

“I think they’re telling the truth... They’re a normal pair who just got into trouble, I’m sure they feel pretty bad now,” said Leonid, a 58-year-old entrepreneur.

“They explained everything simply and clearly yesterday, why they went there, what they were doing there, what the weather was like,” he told AFP.

The men raised eyebrows when they said they had been to the cathedral city twice in two days because heavy snow forced them to turn back on their first visit.

They reeled off facts about the *“beautiful city”* and the friends’ recommendations that had inspired them to visit.

RT head Margarita Simonyan, who conducted the interview, hinted the men could be a gay

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OK

But Maria Kazimi, a student in Moscow, rejected the idea the pair were either a gay couple or spies on a killing mission.

“Why can’t two friends go to a city and spend time together?” the 18-year-old asked.

“I think they’re just two guys who have been blamed for this — now they’re in shock, they’re scared, they don’t know what to do.”

Asked about apparent inconsistencies in the two men’s story, 44-year-old Muscovite Ivan Raspopov joked: *“You know, Russian tourists often become rather strange in the West.”*

He said only a comedian would be able to properly evaluate the interview.

The Kremlin meanwhile dismissed as *“absurd”* London’s claim that the interview contained *“lies and blatant fabrications”*.

The Russians are accused of putting the nerve agent Novichok on the front door handle of former double agent Skripal in the poisoning attack on March 4.

He and his daughter Yulia became seriously ill, while a police officer on the case was also hospitalised.

They all recovered but a fake perfume bottle containing Novichok was picked up by a local man. He gave it to his girlfriend, who later died.

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