

## Sergei Skripal: A Study of the Covert Operation to Assassinate the Russian Double Agent

DOI: 10.26466/opus.800519

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### Abstract

*Intelligence collection still remains one of the fundamental purposes of the intelligence agencies, which sometimes lead them to get involved in insurgency as a part of their counterinsurgent acts covertly or overtly. Covert operation leading to double agent Sergei Skripal, the Russian double agent who formerly worked for MI6, was such a person whose life along with his daughter was at risk, as they were alleged to be poisoned by Novichok agents. While analysing covert operation in general, this study aims at describing the attack on Skripal, as well as investigating into the fact and present with relevant information regarding the attack. Online-based resources have been used for gathering necessary information on the Skripal attack, and the perception claims made by the disparate authorities have been analysed to reach for the final conclusion. This paper concludes that the Novichok attack was particularly aimed at Skripal in Salisbury, which brought the question of Russian involvement. As it is denied from the beginning by Russia, the UK brought the allegation in their parliament blaming it as use of force by Russia which is a clear violation of the UN Charter.*

**Keywords:** Sergei Skripal, Covert Operation, Double Agent, Nerve Agent, Novichok, Spy.

## Sergei Skripal: Rus Çift Taraflı Ajanına Suikast Amaçlı Örtülü Operasyon Üzerine Bir Çalışma

### Öz

İstihbarat toplama hala istihbarat teşkilatlarının temel amaçlarından biri olmaya devam etmektedir ve bu da bazen onların isyan bastırma eylemlerinin bir parçası olarak gizli veya açık bir şekilde isyana karşımlarına neden olmaktadır. Daha önce M16 istihbaratı için çalışan Rus kökenli ve çift taraflı ajan Sergei Skripal, Novichok ajanları tarafından yapılan gizli bir operasyonla kızıyla birlikte zehirlendikleri iddiasıyla hayatı tehlikeye girmiş bir kişidir. Bu çalışma, örtülü operasyonu genel olarak analiz ederken, Skripal'e yapılan saldırıyı tanımlamanın yanı sıra, olayı araştırmayı ve saldırıya ilişkin gerekli bilgileri sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Skripal saldırısı hakkında gerekli bilgilerin toplanması için açık kaynaklar kullanılmış ve nihai sonuca varmak için farklı otoriteler tarafından yapılan algı iddiaları analiz edilmeye çalışılmıştır. Bu makalede varılan bulgular, Novichok saldırısının özellikle Salisbury'deki Skripal'i hedef aldığı ve bunun da Rus müdahalesi sorununu gündeme getirdiği sonucuna varmaktadır. Rusya'nın başından beri yalanladığı bu olay İngiltere, Rusya'nın güç kullanımı olarak suçlandığı ve BM Sözleşmesi'nin açık ihlali olduğu iddiasını parlamentoya taşımıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sergei Skripal, Örtülü Operasyon, Çift Taraflı Ajan, Nerve Agent (Sinir Bozucu Madde), Novichok, Casus.

## Introduction

Gathering intelligence about the plans and strategies of the foreign countries towards one's own interest, has been an old tactic for the states to secure themselves. Secret intelligence personnel have to perform this crucial task for the state even though their lives are at stake, indicating that collecting intelligence is not an easy task. Intelligence collection nevertheless remains the sole purpose of the security officials or the intelligent agents; it has been believed that they also get involved in insurgency as a part of their counterinsurgent acts covertly or overtly, which otherwise is called 'information and psychological war' (Tagiltseva, 2018, p.92).

During the Cold War, the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had started this massive information collection activity which basically started with the tension and nuclear arms manufacturing competition after the Second World War. In the name of intelligence collection, both the USA and USSR used a different name but similar tactics, like special service, covert operation, secret operation, or counterintelligence etc. Both countries have lists of operational history since the Second World War, but the then USSR and current Russia seem to be confronted more for their covert action (Ilyin, 2019, p.14).

Especially in the current information-psychological war of the western media, particularly by the British media has been aiming at the Russian government for the last decade (Kushneruk, 2018, p.80). Double agent secret operations got prominent for the last few decades as well, which later increased agitation at the administration of the countries like the USA and UK. Agents were exchanged and blamed to be executed in different period of times for spying and betraying own country; Sergei Skripal is such an example for the United Kingdom (Ilyin, 2019, p.25; Krasko and Ivkina, 2018, p.352).

In the history of intelligence collection operation, sometimes the persons, who are commonly called special agents, turn out to act for two (double agent) or more countries. Especially, agents from Russia have been found more in this double agent role in the UK and the US. The problem starts there. Sergei Skripal was such a double agent who was

attacked along with his daughter with a life-ending poison called Novichok, which was invented by a Russian scientist (Krasko and Ivkina, 2018, p.353).

While analysing covert operation in general, this study aims at describing the attack on Skripal, as well as investigating the fact and present with relevant information regarding the attack such as strategies involved to kill, means of killing, the properties of Novichok agent and the investigation of the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia Skripal. This paper relies on secondary sources and some primary sources such as governmental reports. Thus online-based resources have been used to gather the necessary information on the Skripal attack and the perceptions, claims made by the disparate authorities have been analysed to reach the final conclusion about the case.

### *Covert Action*

All the secret services agencies under respective government authority covertly work for the collection of various types of information, which is called *Intelligence*. With the particular aim of collecting intelligence, covert action has been considered an important tool for the government (Cormac et al., 2016, p.14). The activity of covert actions came 'into the forefront of world attention' since 1987 ("Covert Action," 1987, p.63). However, the modern use remains highly classified and often used as an alternative to full-scale war. The history of the use of covert action thus remains a state's act that is specially designed to bring an outcome by not revealing its involvement to the public (Kearns, 2016, p.277). In order to understand the fundamentals of covert action, one should know what intelligence and its importance to the countries is; the following paragraph will shed light on it.

The term intelligence, on the other hand, covers a range of activities that are quite different from the other government functions. This can be justified in two different ways, firstly the nature of it which remains secret as the government tries to collect secret information of other governments and secondly, this particular secret information can create confusion or uncomfortable situation amongst the citizens of the country (Lowenthal,

2009, p.22). For example, the UK started its first intelligence collection business (the Secret Intelligence Services MI6 - SIS) back in 1909 with an attempt to handle the German invasion in the European region, which started the First World War (*SIS – Our History*, n.d.). In comparison, the US counterparts started their activities mostly after the Second World War through the National Security Act 1947, giving birth to the CIA (Rudgers, 2000, p.249). The former Soviet Union also did not fall behind in this competition as they had started long before the others, which started with its secret operation to counter the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 in the name of 'Cheka' (Haslam, 2016, p.13).

In the Russian system, the definition of intelligence is clearly defined along with its collection procedures and the extent to which an intelligence collection officer could go. According to the Federal Law of 10 January 1996 N 5-Φ3 "On Foreign Intelligence", Article 2 describes intelligence as the process of: "obtaining and processing information about the real and potential opportunities, actions, plans and intentions of foreign states, organizations and individuals ... that affect the vital interests of the Russian Federation".

The Federal Law further discusses the power of the intelligence collection agencies in Article 6, where it states that the foreign intelligence agencies would try and maintain confidentiality and take appropriate measure to collect information and secure them. Subsection 4 and 9 of article 6 authorizes counterintelligence activities and interaction with the foreign intelligence bodies to secure important information as well.

The concept of special operations or secret actions may have surfaced long before the development of the discourse in the ancient periods. However, as a structured and important decision maker and also as a role player in world politics, it resurfaced after the second world war and with the start of the Cold War period (Rosenbach & Peritz, 2009a, p.33). After WWII, the United States, the United Kingdom and USSR both fell into their own power game where one always tried to remain top of the others. The concept of special secret operation later converted into covert operation with an intention to collect information and counterintelligence activities and especially to 'avoid strategic surprise' (Lowenthal, 2009, p.24).

Terminologically, intelligence could be a vague concept, but the common agreement about its main feature of information is true. As per Britovšek (2018, p.165), intelligence has three major concerns, which are collection, analysis and counterintelligence (in order to prevent someone from accessing it or try to destroy it). The definition of intelligence does not only confine itself into data collection and processing acts but also has extra-terrestrial activities. Warner (2008) stated in his paper (which was published on the CIA website) that intelligence is “secret, state activity to understand or influence foreign entities”, which denotes that apart from espionage, some secret service agencies can also conduct a covert operation to create influence among other political entities. As per the third concern of intelligence, counterintelligence, therefore, may have been used for creating influence or covert actions in the form of sabotage or terrorism (Van Cleave, 2013, p.58).

Henceforth, it is quite clear that every country has its own special intelligence collection unit with a unique feature of collecting secret security information to avoid future trouble from different countries. The use of intelligence agencies was largely found after the Cold War period. For instance, the United States used its specialised organisation for intelligence collection and counterinsurgency, the CIA, to conduct special mission during the Cold War period against the USSR spectre, which was termed as ‘Covert Action’ (Rudgers, 2000, p.249). The confusion, tension of potential USSR subversive activities raised complexity in the international arena, which, after all, pushed the UK and the US to conduct joint covert operations, and alongside that, the USSR began the era of information warfare (Manoilo, 2019). At this current age of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the activities and functions of the intelligence agencies have increased with broadened dimensions. Nevertheless, its ultimate usage lies in the decision-making processes of the politicians. In 2012, UK GCHQ’s cyber operation showed their presence in the covert activities in the recent period of time which the British authority claims to conduct for information gathering and surveillance for future security threats (Cormac, 2014).

According to western media and claims made by UK officials, Russia has been conducting a covert operation to assassinate its agents in the UK. However, Russia has been saying it as a planned operation and a

propagation of the British media and political actors 'anti-Russian hysteria' (Krasko and Ivkina, 2018; K, 2019). At this stage, it is needed to know what 'covert operation' refers to. On the other hand, the United States military identifies covert operation as "an operation that is so planned and executed as to conceal the identity of or permit plausible denial by the sponsor" (*Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 2010, p.68). The covert operation thus is a tool widely used in the intelligence community with different purpose like clandestine operation, especially by the US (Rosenbach & Peritz, 2009b). In the history of 21<sup>st</sup>-century intelligence, numerous examples can be found where country agents have used this tool to eliminate a possible threat such as spies with valuable secret information as well as gathering information about the foreign nation. Russia has always remained at the top of the talk in this aspect. However, the covert operation has also been defined as a set of coordinated coercive tactics used by one state to affect the sovereign affairs of another state without resorting to direct armed assault (Berkeley La Raza Law Journal, 1984).

As per the conceptual and organizational view, covert operation as an important tool in intelligence emerged after World War II. To be more specific, the United States gave birth to its modern and intellectual child, the CIA, in 1947. Clark Clifford was the responsible person to draft the legislation for it, who kept a provision called "other functions and duties" in the draft of National Security Act, 1947 (Rudgers, 2000, pp. 249–262). As per the National Security Act of 1947, a covert operation is such: "...an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly..." (United States Codes, 1947).

Ever since the development of the US intelligence agency, the CIA, covert action has been an important political operation sanctioned by the White House but conducted secretly to hide the identity and at the same time have a deniable scope. Though sometimes it has been seen that the agency failed to do its duty and brought unintended consequences, which brought disgrace for the U.S.

Covert operations are mainly conducted as intelligence and counterintelligence tool, but its methods and means are not clearly stated

in the US and UK laws. Russia, on the other hand, has stated the techniques and the procedures of intelligence collection activity in its Federal Law "On Foreign Intelligence". Article 13 of the law actually allows its intelligence agencies to use any kind of 'methods and means' which may include secretly using the audio-video documentation technique and necessary other means to collect information which "should not harm the life and health of people and harm the environment" (*Federal Law of January 10, 1996, N 5-Φ3 "On Foreign Intelligence, n.d.*). After the breaking of the USSR and forming new Russia, the new government formed its Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia, which is also a predecessor of KGB and has been operating in this modern era quite successfully, e.g. in 2015, the special forces unit of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Zaslou helped rescue employees of the US Embassy from Sana which is the capital of Yemen (Egor, 2018).

The basic types of covert action are propaganda, political/ economic action, paramilitary operations, and lethal action (Lowenthal, 2009, p.32). Consequentially, the secret agents have to plan, procure, analyse the intelligence and then execute its covert operation and perform its counterinsurgency acts.

The British had built their agency long before the US did, back in 1909. They also found to have a different name for their covert operations called Special Political Action (SPA) or Disruptive Action. In contrast, the Soviets found to use Active Measure, which includes both covert and overt actions (Scott, 2004). The agencies main target was to support the government by implementing policy goals. The British politician believed that they need to look for diplomatic solutions that will neither make them involved in a violent war nor let them do nothing while the security was at stake (Lowenthal, 2009, p.251).

Apart from the collection of secret information, this particular tool has also been used to assassinate targeted people, specially rebels, spies or double agents. The case of Sergei Skripal is not an exception to this. He and his only daughter Yulia Skripal were exposed to a lethal chemical agent, which hospitalized them in the UK. This covert operation has been revealed by the UK agencies in front of the world. The next section of this paper will discuss the method of the covert operation along with a brief



description of the lethal chemical weapon used in his attempted assassination (*SIS – Our History*, n.d.).

### *The Case of Sergei Skripal*

Sergei Skripal, born on 23 June 1951, grew up in the period of the USSR near the Baltic Sea. He started working for Russian military intelligence Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), posted to Malta and later posted to Spain. During the Boris Yeltsin regime, the agents working abroad were “not paid for long periods”, which made him look for economic opportunities (Connor, 2018). Looking for better opportunities made him meet with his MI6 handler to whom he revealed his identity as a GRU agent. As a Russian double agent, while working for the UK, he received the code name "Forthwith" (Lamont, 2018) and provided valuable information to the agents. Afterwards, he found himself with a health issue, for which he went back to his Moscow GRU headquarters and was diagnosed with diabetes. In 2000 he resigned from GRU but joined Moscow local government office to continue his spy duty. However, he was still collecting his payment from MI6. In 2004 he was singled out by the Federal Security Service (FSB) as a suspect of a double agent, and following that, in 2006, he was convicted for 13 years under the crime of spying for the United Kingdom. The accusation against him was that he passed secret information to the UK back in the 1990s, worked for MI6, and also used to give lectures on the Russian military about their working methods and intelligence collection procedures in order to counteract them (Fakhrutdinov, 2018). Later on, with the help of the US government's agents swap attempt agreement with Russia, he was pardoned and then decided to settle in Salisbury, the UK (Connor, 2018; Lamont, 2018).

Skripal bought a two-story building in Salisbury, where he brought his wife Liudmila and two children in 2011 (Lamont, 2018). He lost his wife in 2012 and son Alexander in 2017, and his only daughter Yulia used to visit him frequently after she moved back to Russia (Tikhomirov, 2018). After the death of his two family members, he was living a normal life, joined a local club in Salisbury and passing his times with his cat. Just after a year of his son's death, he and Yulia got attacked at Salisbury park in 2018.

Newspapers based in the UK started covering the story of the covert operation just after the attack was revealed by the UK government. The UK police and investigative department had rushed into the scene to discover the fact behind the assassination attempt. Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia Skripal were discovered unconscious in a park in Salisbury, England on 4 March 2018 according to claims in the media and remained unconscious for weeks. Their primary reason for unconsciousness could not be identified immediately. They were medicalised and then got released on 9 April 2018. After the attack on 7 March 2018, the UK authority disclosed that Skripal and his daughter were exposed to lethal 'nerve agent', which was specified by Theresa May on 12 March 2018, as she shared in the House of Commons that the nerve agent was nothing but "Novichok (A-234)" (Clarke & Vaal, 2018; Haynes et al., 2018; Vale et al., 2018). The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) on 12 April 2018 confirmed its identity. The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL), Porton Down, did the laboratory test for OPCW, and they confirmed that the toxic chemical has 'high purity' Novichok (Connor, 2018; *OPCW Issues Report on Technical Assistance Requested by the United Kingdom*, 2018; "Spy Poisoning: Highest Amount of Nerve Agent Was on Door," 2018).

Sir Mark Sedwill (the UK National Security Adviser) regarding the Salisbury attack stated that the DSTL has managed to identify the location of the nerve agent. According to their findings, the nerve agent was detected in the highest amounts on the doorknob of Mr Skripal's front door, which was identified as a liquid state (Vale et al., 2018). Sir Sedwill added more on the issue on 13 April 2018, as he said, "We, therefore, continue to judge that only Russia has the technical means, operational experience and motive for the attack on the Skripals and that it is highly likely that the Russian state was responsible. There is no plausible alternative explanation" (Sedwill, 2018).

It is strongly believed by the Russian counterpart that it was simply British propaganda against Russia, who by fabricating the case, tried to divert the attention from the US election scandal and put pressure on Moscow (Ilyin, 2019, p. 25; Krasko & Ivkina, 2018; Tagiltseva, 2018). Another Russian web-based news portal shared that British secret services had been preparing the Skripals' case since 2015 (Kamran, 2019).

The Skripals' case has been treated as an attempt to murder where the father and daughter are believed to come in contact with the nerve agent while at their home's front door. According to investigators, the other exposed places where traces of Novichok were evident are the Mill and Zizzi, a place where the victim spent their last afternoon before the attack ("Russian Spy Poisoning," 2018). In order to secure other people from being exposed and other evidence, police cordoned off Skripal's home and nearby children's playground. BBC news further stated that, for better investigation and safety, the UK authority engaged 250 counter-terrorism officers and about 180 military personnel just after the incident.

The primary investigation concentrated on the following items before 14 March 2018: Skripal's home, his BMW car, the places they went to eat, and the bench where he and his daughter lost their consciousness (Morris, 2018). On 14 March 2018, the military recovered a vehicle and later removed it from Gillingham in Dorset as they suspected it could be affected by the poison (*Police Cordon off Road in Gillingham Following Poisoning in Salisbury*, 2018; Trim, 2018). On the other side, the media had different news concerning the source of the poison. The British media speculated that Novichok might have been planted in any of the belongings of Yulia Skripal while she was travelling from Moscow to London (Mendick et al., 2018), whereas the US media expressed the agent would have been planted in Skripal's car (Association, 2018).

Tom Lamont (2018), in his online-based article, in - *The Poison War*, introduced an intelligence historian named Boris Volodarsky, who was present while spy swap of Skripal. Volodarsky shared with Lamont that the covert operation would have needed a big team in order to do their background study about the possible location of Skripal and population behaviour in the locality, as well as get their job done. Volodarsky also shared that to apply the nerve agent, it would have also required professional and technical expertise (Connor, 2018).

The UK authority did its best to identify the suspect and resolve the case as early as possible. Despite the warning provided by British Prime Minister Theresa May, Russia did not respond accordingly. However, the UK intelligence identified two Russian nationals, Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov ("Salisbury Novichok Poisoning: Russian Nationals Named as Suspects," 2018), who were suspected to be related to the

assassination and also found they were an active intelligence officer in Russian Military Intelligence (GRU) (Pérez-Peña & Barry, 2018).

According to Bellingcat, an investigative website which claimed to identify two agents on 26 September 2018, Ruslan Boshirov as Colonel Anatoliy Chepiga (RFE/RL, 2018) and the other suspect Alexander Petrov who is an alias of Alexander Mishkin, a doctor, both of them worked for Russian intelligence since 2010 (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2018b). According to the evidence available at the hand of the UK, it suggested Chepiga was active in covert operations, and that's why due to his service, he got awarded from Russian President Putin. As per the UK official, he was alleged to involve in the Salisbury mission, to which the Bellingcat referred that the covert operation had been ordered "at the highest level" (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2018a).

The British authority on 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2018 submitted an extradition request to Moscow in order to apprehend two suspects who were alleged to be involved in the Salisbury attack. The UK police force gathered witnesses and Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) footage across the nation to identify the suspect (Hopkins et al., 2018). The UK government considered this incidence as an act of 'Use of Force' which might be a violation UN Charter and they were also looking for a legal answer as a consequence of this violation (Lewis, 2018, pp. 10,12).

After examination of the blood samples from the Skripals at the OPCW, Porton Down, experts found the presence of agent which is a derivative of Soviet-born nerve agents, developed in the 1980s in the cold war period. Novichok in Russian means "the new kids on the block"(Krasko & Ivkina, 2018). Novichok (A-234 agent) can be available in liquid form, which if deployed can be immersed through the skin. It starts its action by creating problems in the neural transmission system and the muscles. The reaction of the patient starts with light-headedness and then it turns to strained breathing and finally loses one's sense (Connor, 2018).

Nerve agents are highly hazardous organophosphorus chemicals that were originally created in Germany in the late 1930s and 1940s, which later became available in many other countries after World War II (Marrs et al., 2007). But the question is: what is Novichok? As Vale et. al. described in their article (Vale et al., 2018), Novichok is the fourth-generation type of nerve agent which was developed at the State Institute for Organic

Chemistry and Technology at Shikhany, near Volgograd in the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Vale et al also refer to Mirzayanov who explained the nature of the agent. Mirzayanov said that these compounds “were the springboard for the development and testing of the Novichok binary weapons” (Mirzayanov VS, Dismantling the Soviet/Russian chemical weapons complex: an insider’s view. quoted in Smithson et al., 1995). Here the term “binary weapons” denotes that the Novichok agents have two basic components which if mixed together can become the active nerve agent (Vale et al., 2018).

Both the Skripals suffered badly as they remained unconscious at the hospital for weeks. After a month Yulia and about two months or more Sergei was got released from the hospital when the doctor announced them out of critical condition (“Ex-Spy Skripal Discharged after Poisoning,” 2018; *Russian Spy: Yulia Skripal Discharged from Hospital - BBC News*, 2018) . Now they have been moved into a protected secret location, but their life is still at risk. On the other hand, the suspects are still at large as Russia has denied their involvement and refused to hand over them to the UK. But this attack has started another version of the cold war where around 30 countries including the UK and US have expelled around more than 150 Russian diplomats. Tension has been rising as no one from the Russian government is willing to cooperate with the UK’s demand. Russia, on the other hand, kept refusing the allegation and kept saying that it is the British media who laid down the foundation for believing the Russian poisoning story (Ilyin, 2019).

## Conclusion

With the advent of modern technologies, countries have been drawn into a war of information, which might give them tactical advantages over one another. Intelligence gathering through a human agent is the first of its kind which is probably going to be replaced with other technological developments, but human intelligence will always have its importance. The 20<sup>th</sup> century had been full of the warlike events which gave birth to the need and use of intelligence. The Cold War period added a new dimension and speed in the collection of intelligence. Therefore, covert operation as an important counterintelligence tool has been leading

agencies to events such as spying over government security programs, double agents acting against own government, arresting and assassinating of the agents of other countries etc.

Though the complete system of intelligence collection is mainly based on the notion of saving one's country from enemies' ill attempt to sabotage or jeopardize the country's security as well as stability. However, it is observed that most secret service agencies ultimately have resorted to covert operation as per their counterintelligence actions. Agents of different security services of different countries thus found to be victims of this covert operations from time to time. Lethal Novichok poison attack on double agent Sergei Skripal was one of them. After few months of hospitalization both Skripals survived but the bi product of the event has been still carried on being discussed in the international arena.

The Skripal attack has been condemned by the UK, the US and also European Union as all of these countries blame Russia for this attack. However, Russia seems to be more adamant on their position in refusing the blame for which they blame the western media and the UK officials. But an attack on the English soil has raised another question of violation of UN charter of Use of Force which made the UK official angry at their Russian counterpart. Even though Russian media has been naming Skripal as a traitor to their motherland, the Russian government continuously refused to accept the blame which is made by the UK and western countries.

Skripal at his old age, leaving all his previous intelligence business behind, tried to settle down with his family. Unfortunately, he couldn't because soon after he moved to Salisbury, his wife and son passed away and after that he with his daughter got attacked with Novichok agent. They made it out of the hospital, but the case was not solved. The UK officials were investigating the case and pointed to the involvement of Russia in this attack. Russia on the other hand denied the accusation since its inception in the western media. Finally, it seems obvious that the task of intelligence collection specially when it is covert in nature, will remain pretty much hazardous and complicated for the agents, who put their lives on the line for securing their government.

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#### **Kaynakça Bilgisi / Citation Information**

Talukder, M. I. A. (2021). Sergei Skripal: A study of the covert operation to assassinate the Russian double agent. *OPUS–International Journal of Society Researches*, 17(38), 5525-5544. DOI: 10.26466/opus.800519