

Witness: Ed Stearns
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The Leveson Inquiry into the Culture Practices and Ethics of the Press

This is the exhibit marked 'ES/1' referred to in the statement of Ed Stearns, dated this 30th day of March 2012.



Stephen Glover

Secret courts, the cover-up of a Mafia-style shooting, and a worryingly unaccountable police force

AT AROUND 7.30pm on Tuesday, March 20, a Russian banker was gunned down outside his flat near Canary Wharf in London. German Gorbuntsov remains gravely ill in hospital having been shot three times in the stomach and once in the face.

Attempted assassinations of multi-millionaire Russian oligarchs are, thank goodness, unknown occurrences on British streets. And yet for reasons best known to themselves, officers at Scotland Yard did not immediately inform the media what had happened.

The day after the shooting they put out a bland and disgracefully misleading press release stating that there had been a routine shooting near Canary Wharf. So low-key was this statement that the British media ignored the incident altogether, which one suspects was what Scotland Yard had intended.

Indeed, the police mentioned that Trident Gang Crime Command was investigating the attempted murder, inviting newspapers to conclude that this was just another home-grown crime.

It was only on Friday, three days after the shooting, that the truth finally emerged. The Russian newspaper Kommersant reported that Mr Gorbuntsov had been the victim of an attempted murder in London, and the British media were at last apprised of what had happened.

Over the past few days many details have been filled in. Mr Gorbuntsov was preparing to claim political asylum in Britain. Before amassing his fortune he was jailed for robbery. He was reportedly a witness to a 2009 murder attempt in Moscow on a billionaire banker called Alexander Antonov. Oh, and he has a mistress in London and a wife in Russia.

Isn't it amazing that we should learn about this incident from a newspaper in a country with a long and continuing record of muzzling truth? We would almost certainly still be in the dark were it not for Kommersant. Though we pride ourselves on living in a free country, we are obliged to rely on the media of a gangster state to learn what is happening on our own streets.

But this is not because our media are sleepy. It is because the Metropolitan Police apparently tried to suppress an important story. So long as Mr Gorbuntsov did not die, and his would-be assassin was never apprehended and brought to justice, they would have had no obligation to come clean.

WHY DIDN'T Scotland Yard want us to know? I can think of two possible reasons. The first is that MI5 and/or the Foreign Office wanted it hushed up. If they suspected that the Russian authorities were somehow behind it, they might have their own reasons for keeping schtum for the moment.

More likely, perhaps, the Metropolitan Police did not want the world to know that only a few miles from the Olympic Stadium, and four months before the Games begin, a Russian hoodlum has been spraying around gunfire. It somewhat gives the lie to the notion that London is a safe city.

Whatever the explanation, a cover-up is outrageous. Mr Gorbuntsov's neighbours were kept in the dark, and therefore incapable of estimating the danger they were in. And the wider public were not told that a Russian mafia-style attempted killing had taken place on British soil.

Moreover, it was not until last Saturday — after our media had taken up the Kommersant story — that Scotland Yard confirmed

the victim's name and on Sunday and Monday put out two press releases setting out in fuller detail what had happened, and appealing for witnesses. In other words, the proper administration of justice had been delayed for several days. If it were not for the Russian newspaper, it might have been delayed indefinitely.

The new Metropolitan Police Commissioner Bernard Hogan-Howe should make a statement explaining why his officers appear to have concealed from the media an extremely serious incident about which it was undoubtedly in the public's interest to know.

If we hear nothing from him, we can only assume that Scotland Yard is less convinced than it used to be that it has to account for its actions — and that Mr Hogan-Howe thinks it acceptable to brush the attempted assassination of a Russian oligarch under the carpet.

I believe that what has happened in this case owes a great deal to the changed relations between the police and the media as a result of the Leveson Inquiry. A number of statements by senior officers including Mr Hogan-Howe himself, as well as a preposterous review by former parliamentary commissioner for standards Elizabeth Filkin, have insisted that police officers should be extremely wary of ever talking to the media.

Of course, no one doubts that a few years ago senior journalists

at News International got far too intimate with some senior police officers, and there may have been criminal collusion. If so, prosecutions must follow.

But in one fell swoop we have gone to the opposite extreme, so that police officers are now terrified of talking confidentially even to journalists whom they used to trust. Crime correspondents have testified to the Leveson Inquiry that their police sources have all but dried up.

A year ago, before the current state of affairs, well-placed police officers would have informed their contacts in the Press if a serious crime was being covered up, as the attempted murder of German Gorbuntsov was. Not in those days of greater openness, is it likely that Scotland Yard would have issued the kind of statement it did last Wednesday, which misled the media.

There is another case in which the Metropolitan Police appear to be pushing their luck, and taking refuge in the new more secretive world in which they like to operate. The inquest into the death of Mark Duggan, whose shooting by police in Tottenham was the spark that ignited last summer's riots, may be partly held behind closed doors.

This follows an application from the Independent Police Complaints Commission which says it has findings which should not be disclosed even to the coroner, but there is no doubt the Metropolitan Police

would agree. Secret justice is seldom justice. A killing sets off the worst riots in modern times, and it is seriously suggested by the authorities that people should be kept in the dark. It is a matter of overwhelming public interest that the truth should be ascertained so that the lessons can be learnt.

We don't want a police force that hides its blunders and conceals important crimes. It is certainly not in the interests of justice, but nor is it in the interests of the police themselves to lose trust as a result of concealment, as Mr Hogan-Howe should have the gumption to realise.

COVERING up the attempted murder of a Russian oligarch on a London street is undesirable from every point of view. And the worst of it is that it inevitably engenders the suspicion that there are other cover-ups, other important stories being withheld from the media.

In this case we are indebted to a Russian newspaper, which has sources not controlled by Scotland Yard. But how much more illuminating information is being kept from us of which we are wholly ignorant?

That is the deadly, unanswered question. The less journalists talk to police officers in the know, the more likely it is that we will have a secretive, unaccountable police force.

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