

Britain admits to Cold War-style espionage using fake rock

LONDON — In a rare acknowledgment of espionage reminiscent of the Cold War, a former British government official admitted that a fake rock discovered in 2006 by the Russian FSB secret service in a Moscow park concealed a listening device planted by British spies.

Speaking on a three-part BBC documentary starting Thursday — “Putin, Russia and the West” — Jonathan Powell, chief of staff at the time to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, said, “The spy rock was embarrassing, they had us bang to rights. Clearly they had known about it for some time and had been saving it up for a political purpose.”

Hidden Russian TV cameras recorded video of the rock and of men handling it. The video was widely broadcast at the time along with footage showing the rock being taken apart to reveal the delicate listening mechanism inside.

The Russian regime waited for some time before claiming publicly that it was a British device. Russian leader Vladimir Putin ordered a crackdown on several foreign-funded organizations, claiming they were a front for Western government intervention in Russia’s internal affairs. A Russian-British diplomatic row followed.

Tony Brenton, British ambassador to Moscow at the time, said in a BBC radio interview Thursday that the rock episode was “a considerable headache.”

“The Russians chose their time carefully and it was politically very damaging,” Brenton said. “It was unfortunate that one of the people involved was also dealing with our relations with Russian nongovernmental organizations and therefore the Russians were able to use the rock incident to launch accusations against the support we were giving to Russian nongovernmental organizations.”

Brenton added that British-Russian relations were deteriorating at the time and the incident “led us down the route which led us to the Litvinenko murder ... to attacks on me personally, to attacks on BP and Shell.”

In November 2006, Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian security service officer turned investigative journalist, died in a London hospital of radiation poisoning. His reporting targeted corruption inside the Russian government. In a deathbed statement he accused Putin of being involved in his poisoning.

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