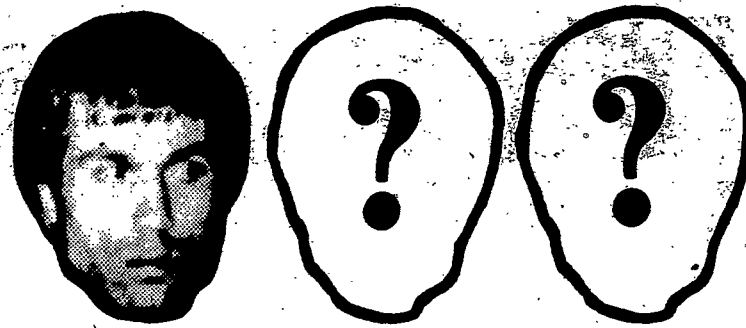


THE PLOT THICKENS

Was Kremlin Involved In Plot to Kill Pope?



MEHMET AGCA

By Jerry Filleau
NC News Service

When Mehmet Ali Agca tried to kill Pope John Paul II, police immediately theorized that there may have been an international terrorist conspiracy behind him. But it is only now, a year and a half after the deed, that substantial evidence is surfacing which could link Agca, through the Bulgarian secret police, to an alleged plot by top Soviet officials to eliminate the pope.

Italian investigators, apparently acting on new confessions by Agca, have arrested or are seeking four Turks and three Bulgarians on charges of complicity in the assassination attempt. If it can be proved that the Bulgarian secret police were the movers behind the conspiracy, Western intelligence analysts argue, this would place ultimate responsibility right on the doorstep of the Kremlin's top leadership.

On May 13, 1981, the young Turkish terrorist fired at least two shots at Pope John Paul in St. Peter's Square. One pierced the pope's abdomen, nearly killing him.

Agca, then 23, was caught at the scene and freely admitted his guilt. He was identified as a convicted killer facing a death sentence in Turkey for the assassination of a prominent liberal editor there two years earlier. He had escaped from prison in November 1979 and just after his escape wrote a letter to a Turkish newspaper threatening to kill the pope during his visit to Turkey.

Agca's confessed murder in

Turkey established rightwing credentials but investigators also quickly gathered evidence of his links to Palestinian terrorists of the left, suggesting that Agca could have been for hire to whomever wanted him. He also is a Moslem, and apparently a devout one, giving rise to the theory that he was motivated by religious fanaticism rather than politics.

When he was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, the conspiracy theory was relegated to a secondary place to the trial itself. But the final written verdict of the jury, issued two months later, called him "only the visible part of a conspiracy whose other members are unfortunately not identified."

More than a year followed with few signs of official progress, although two separate reports by journalistic investigators concluded that Agca's attempt had been directed by Moscow through the Bulgarian secret police. Claire Sterling, an expert on international terrorism, made that claim in the Reader's Digest and NBC-TV reported the same conclusion.

Both Ms. Sterling and NBC's Marvin Kalb theorized that Moscow sought the pope's death because it saw its Eastern European hegemony threatened by Pope John Paul II's charismatic influence in his native Poland, where the independent labor union Solidarity was then a rapidly growing force.

But Agca refused to talk, allegedly as part of an agreement with those who

hired him and who had promised to break him out of jail if he were caught. But recently, according to Italian press reports, he has begun to cooperate with the investigators.

On Nov. 25, the Italian investigative team headed by Judge Ilario Martella made the first of a series of spectacular moves that indicated it had made a major breakthrough. They arrested Sergei Ivanov Antonov, 35-year-old head of the Rome office of Balkan Air, the Bulgarian state-run airline. He was charged with "active complicity" in the plot to kill the pope.

Other actions quickly followed:

— On Nov. 27, arrest warrants were issued to two Turks, Oral Celik and Bekir Celenk. At the time, the whereabouts of both were unknown, but on Dec. 9 Bulgarian police announced that they had arrested Celenk and would conduct their own investigation. Extradition seemed doubtful, since Italy and Bulgaria do not have judicial reciprocity agreements.

— In subsequent days, Martella moved against two other Bulgarians allegedly involved with Agca. He issued an arrest warrant for Vassiliev Kolev, a longtime military attaché at the Bulgarian embassy in Rome who had left that post six months earlier and no longer enjoyed diplomatic immunity. He asked the Italian Foreign Ministry to revoke the diplomatic immunity of Teodorov Ayvazov, a cashier at the embassy who had

returned to Bulgaria in November.

— In a separate investigation, police on Dec. 9 confiscated the records of Balkan Air's Rome office, where Antonov worked. That action was taken by police investigating alleged Bulgarian links to Italian leftist Luigi Scricciolo, who was involved in the 1981 kidnapping of U.S. Brig. Gen. James Dozier. According to information leaked to the Italian press, Scricciolo has

admitted that Bulgarian agents tried to recruit him to assassinate Polish labor leader Lech Walesa. Although Scricciolo has not been linked directly to the papal plot, it has served to highlight the extent to which Italian authorities think Bulgarian operatives may be involved in terrorism in Italy.

— In the face of growing diplomatic crisis, Bulgaria recalled its ambassador to Italy and Italy did likewise.

Both governments said their ambassadors had been called home for consultations.

— On Dec. 10, Turkey asked Bulgaria to extradite Celenk to Turkey, where is wanted on charges of smuggling and violating foreign exchange laws. According to the Italian press, Agca has fingered Celenk as the one who offered him three million German marks (about \$1.25 million) to assassinate the pope.

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VERA TRABOLD

Regional Meetings on the Family Ministry Task Force Report for Parish and Regional Leaders

See bishop's letter on Page One.

AUDIENCE

Parish Staff
Parish and Regional leadership people, including:
Parish Council members
Parish Committee members
Regional Officers

TIMING AND LOCATIONS:

DATE/TIME	REGIONS	PARISH	TOWN
Sunday, Feb. 20 2-5 p.m.	Yates/Ontario/Wayne	St. Mary's	Canandaigua
Friday, Feb. 25 7-10 p.m.	Southeast, Southwest	St. Anne's	Rochester
Tuesday, March 1 7-10 p.m.	Chemung/Schuyler, Tompkins/Tioga	Ss. Peter & Paul	Elmira
Sunday, March 6 2-5 p.m.	North, Northwest, Northeast	St. Stanislaus	Rochester
Wednesday, March 9 7-10 p.m.	Livingston, Steuben	St. Mary's	Dansville
Sunday, March 13 2-5 p.m.	Seneca/Cayuga	St. Mary's	Auburn

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