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Bringing in the wolves

Mehmet Ali Agca, who pumped a couple of 9mm slugs into Pope John Paul II in 1981, initially claimed to have acted alone. That lie didn't stand, and with the indictments last week of four Turks and three Bulgarians, the haze surrounding this case continues its slow evaporation.

Fading fast are claims that Agca shot John Paul because of "religious extremism" or political resentments. As investigators have discovered, Agca is not a religious man, nor has he ever indicated any strong political feelings, despite his relationship with both right- and left-wing organizations. Instead, he was a hired killer, having proved himself in an earlier (successful) shooting. The overriding question has to do with his employer.

The answer is, well, involved. Agca's story has changed since he got life for the shooting, and understandably. After his first murder, he was sprung from jail — not a country club lockup, but a Turkish military prison. He might have expected the same in Italy, but in May 1982, seeing that he was abandoned, he began to sing.

Agca maintains that he was directed by members of the Bulgarian secret service, and an Italian prosecutor says the order was

issued by the Soviet KGB, at the time under the direction of Yuri Andropov. Investigating Judge Ilario Martella stops short of accusing the Soviets, but he does claim to have verified one central fact: that an international conspiracy placed Mehmet Ali Agca and a Browning semi-automatic within yards of the pope. One suggested motive was to crush Poland's rising Solidarity movement, which the Polish pope supported. Last week's "liquidation" of another pro-Solidarity priest suggests that such thoughts do cross some minds.

In the first surprise of what will doubtless be one of the century's more sensational trials (and certainly its most politically sensitive), Judge Martella has revealed that Oral Celik, who is said to have planned Agca's escape from the Turkish prison, not only accompanied the would-be assassin to St. Peter's Square, but pulled off a shot himself. Like many of the other suspects in the case, Mr. Celik is at large. If he's in Bulgaria, he may be having a hard time purchasing life insurance. Elsewhere, the Soviets are saying it's all a CIA plot, but the mounting evidence points increasingly to the East.