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Solving the Plot to Kill the Pope

An editorial review by DAVID SHIFLETT



One intrepid journalist refused to believe that John Paul II's would-be assassin was a loner and a crackpot. Here is the inside story of her dogged investigation and its appalling conclusions.

ON May 13, 1981, in St. Peter's Square, a 23-year-old Turk named Mehmet Ali Agca held a Browning 9-mm. semiautomatic over his head in classic terrorist form, and shot and seriously

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wounded Pope John Paul II. Arrested on the spot, the would-be assassin was soon identified as a convicted murderer who had escaped from a Turkish prison and was connected with a Turkish right-wing terrorist band, the Gray Wolves. With both gunman and gun in police hands, the shooting would apparently be an easy one to solve.

Two days after the assassination attempt, the New York Times reported from Rome: "Police are convinced, according to government sources, that Mr. Agca acted alone." It was soon clear that the Western press, Western governments and their intelligence agencies all seemed eager to accept the conclusion that Agca was a lone gunman, a right-wing crackpot.

Claire Sterling, a well-respected, Rome-based journalist and author of *The Terror Network*, a thorough examination of international terrorist activities, could not accept that seemingly ready-made characterization of Agca. After discussing the case with her, neither could the editors at Reader's Digest, who told Sterling to "take as long as you like, go wherever you please, spend as much as you must to get as close to the truth as you can."

In *The Time of the Assassins*, Sterling tells the story of her investigation. Her findings—first published in the September 1982 Reader's Digest ("The Plot to Murder the Pope") and now expanded and updated—offer strong evidence that the trail ultimately ends inside the headquarters of the Soviet KGB.

Sterling was not altogether alone in her search for evidence. A few other Western reporters also kept digging at the story. So did a discreet but stubborn Italian judge named Ilario Martella. He was charged with investigating Agca's international connections in November 1981, 2½ months after Agca's trial and soon after the Rome Court of Assizes issued a 51-page Statement of Motivation for Agca's life sentence. The Statement was virtually ignored by the world press. It affirmed that Agca had

been dispatched by "hidden minds." He was not a "delirious ideologue" and felt "no hostility" toward the Pope.

Filled with information on Agca's life and political contacts, the Statement portrayed a figure quite different from the one seen in the world press. Among other things, Agca confessed to having received 40 days of guerrilla training in a Palestinian camp south of Beirut, and to have established clandestine relations with six radical underground groups of both the extreme right and extreme left in Turkey. Agca also stated that he had spent 50 days in Bulgaria. There, in Sofia, he had met a fellow Turk named Omer Mersan who, Agca had claimed in an early deposition, helped him obtain a fake Turkish passport.

The Statement of Motivation

provided Claire Sterling with the questions that would direct her investigation:

Who was Mehmet Ali Agca?

Who helped him escape from a Turkish prison, and then supplied cover, fake passports and funds to keep him going?

Why, if he was not a "delirious ideologue," did he shoot the Pope? What "hidden minds" had sent him?

Sudden Spotlight. Sterling began by visiting Agca's hometown of Malatya, Turkey, where the principal of his high school described him as a model student. He was a lonely boy, but, noted his former language teacher, "he always said he'd be famous someday."

Agca was ten years old when Turkey exploded with terrorist violence. But he seemed to be uninterested in politics. "All he cared about was reading," said his mother, who believed the trouble began after he left home in 1976 for the University of Ankara.

He apparently spent two years there. And though the university was a center of terrorism, Sterling and others could find no evidence that Agca was ever involved before transferring to Istanbul University in the autumn of 1978.

Then, in July 1979, Agca abruptly jumped into the international spotlight by confessing—when there was practically no evidence against him—to the murder of Abdi Ipekci, editor of the moderate-left newspaper *Milliyet* and the

most respected commentator in Turkey. Seeking to trace any financial backers the killer—supposedly a penniless student—might have had, Ipekci's family lawyer discovered several bank accounts opened in Agca's name "by somebody forging his signature." Between December 1977 and the end of 1978, \$12,000 was deposited to these accounts.

But that mystery couldn't compare with what happened five months after Agca was imprisoned. On November 25, 1979, clad in an army uniform, Agca escaped from Istanbul's Kartal-Maltepe military prison, walking calmly through eight heavily guarded doors.

Agca's presence in Sofia, Bulgaria, was established from around July 10, 1980, to August 31. He stayed at deluxe hotels like the Vitosha. For the next nine months, Agca traveled to a score of European capitals on a bizarre \$50,000 journey more befitting an Onassis than a poor man from Turkey's Anatolian plains. He shopped at Yves Saint Laurent boutiques, drank champagne and ate smoked salmon with Milan's opera buffs at Biffi's, wintered at elegant resorts in Tunisia's Hammamet and Spain's Palma de Mallorca.

How could this be? Who could arrange for Agca to stay in Bulgaria for 50 days when visiting Turks are officially restricted to a 30-hour stay? His mysterious bank accounts, his ready admission in the Ipekci killing, his escape, his travels, all

indicated to Sterling an operation with far more savvy than local terrorists could manage.

The Bulgarian Connection. Sterling shuttled between Rome and Munich, Bonn, Hamburg, Ankara and Istanbul, making side

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trips to Malatya, Vienna, Frankfurt, Zurich, Tel Aviv, Tunis, Washington and Paris. She battled unwilling or hostile officials, conflicting stories and outright lies, collecting notebooks full of information and searching for Agca's accomplices.

Finally, early in 1982, a breakthrough came from *Milliyet's* correspondent in West Germany, Orsan Oymen. An old friend of the slain editor Ipekci, Oymen had collected information indicating that Omer Mersan—who, according to Agca, had helped procure a fake Turkish passport for him in Bulgaria—was a "contact man" for Abuzer Ugurlu, who in turn was a top boss of the Turkish Mafia, a smuggling ring operating out of Sofia. Sterling was discovering the link that would become known as the Bulgarian Connection.

As the name of Abuzer Ugurlu kept cropping up, Sterling sensed she was getting closer. According to a letter from a jailed drug runner for Ugurlu: "The Bulgarian secret service has annexed the Turkish Mafia in the tightest way. Because in Bulgaria, everything—from cigarettes to heavy weapons—is sold to smugglers by the state company Kintex . . . essentially a branch of the Bulgarian secret service."

Then came another breakthrough. During a trip to Washington, Sterling was "given the gist" of a confidential dossier on Kintex by a member of a U.S. intelligence agency: Kintex's personnel, he told her, were "clearly members of the Bulgarian secret service. By mid-1982 numerous Soviet advisers held positions in Kintex at all levels, including senior posts."

Further information in the dossier tied the knot tight: "Starting around 1969, Ugurlu worked with Bulgaria. In exchange for services rendered, he was allowed to run

smuggling operations from Varna. In 1974 he was recruited as an agent of the Bulgarian secret service."

Sterling already knew of the close ties between the Bulgarians and the KGB. (Striking confirmation came later from Col. Stefan Sverdlev, the highest-ranking Bulgarian secret-service officer ever to defect, who told her that an estimated 400 KGB officers are stationed in the Bulgarian secret-service command and in all its departments.) Agca was now linked to Mersan, Mersan to Ugurlu, Ugurlu to the Bulgarian secret service, the Bulgarians to the KGB. Coincidence? Not in Sterling's opinion.

Her article in the September 1982 Reader's Digest presented her documented revelations about the Bulgarian Connection for the first time. Agca worked for the Turkish Mafia, which was controlled by the Bulgarian secret service, which in turn was intimately linked to the KGB. At the time of the shooting in May 1981 the KGB was directed by Yuri Andropov, who in November 1982 went on to become the leader of the Soviet Union.

Cold Shoulder. The Communist bloc, and especially Bulgaria, was enraged by *The Digest's* article. Beginning with a communiqué on September 8, 1982, and culminating in a 177-page broadside entitled "Dossier on the Anatomy of a Calumny," the Bulgarians systematically attempted to strip Sterling of all credibility. The whole affair, said a Bulgarian official at an international press conference on December 17, was part of an "anti-Bulgarian campaign" that began "three months ago with an article in Reader's Digest."

In the meantime, Agca—who dropped only hints of the truth after his arrest—had begun confessing in full, implicating his Bulgarian contacts. As a result, in late November and early December 1982, Judge Martella signed warrants for the arrest of three Bulgarians: Sergei Antonov, deputy director of the Bulgarian state airline in

Rome, Todor Aivasov, former treasurer of the Bulgarian embassy in Rome, and Zelio Vasilev, former aide to the embassy's military attaché. Antonov was taken into custody in Rome; the other two had already skipped to Bulgaria.

But for the most part, the Sterling revelations and other accumulating evidence pointing to Bulgaria were downplayed or ignored by the Western media. The *New York Times* ran a story in December citing Israeli and West German intelligence sources who were "skeptical of charges of a Bulgarian connection" and claimed the Italian secret service was not "of the highest standard." And reporters weren't the only ones who cold-shouldered the disclosures. Denial after denial came from official Western sources of any Eastern-bloc complicity in the shooting. "It is an Italian matter," a senior U.S. intelligence officer told the *New York Times*, "and it would be inappropriate for the United States to interfere."

Yet the CIA later did interfere—to take the Bulgarian line. On March 23, 1983, Jordan Mantarov, a defector from the Bulgarian secret service, was reported by the *New York Times* as saying that Agca was picked by the Bulgarians as the hit man after discussions with the KGB "because he was known as a rightist and had no links with any communist country." But the May 28, 1983, *Los Angeles Times* reported that CIA director William Casey had

ruled out Mantarov's admissions and reverted to the earlier view of CIA professionals that "the Bulgarians very probably did not direct Agca to shoot the Pope."

Skeptics in the press and elsewhere even disregarded a public confession by Agca. "Yes, I said the attempt on the Pope was done by the Bulgarian secret service," he told reporters on July 8, 1983, as he was being led to a police van. "Yes, I said I have been trained specially by the KGB."

But Sterling's position gradually gained converts. Former CIA director Richard Helms asserted the papal shooting "had all the earmarks

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of a KGB operation." Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national-security adviser, was more direct: "It takes an act of faith not to believe the Bulgarians were involved."

Behind the Curtain. On January 16, 1984, Istanbul's martial-law court issued a 56-page indictment for a new trial in the Ipekci case. The indictment indicated that Ipekci was killed at the instigation of Abuzer Ugurlu to prevent the editor from exposing Ugurlu's ties to the Turkish Mafia and to the Bulgarians.

Then on May 8, Italian state prosecutor Antonio Albano filed a 78-page report, based on some 25,000 pages of documentation gathered by Judge Martella, which confirmed everything Sterling had uncovered, and more.

It asserted that the legal recognition of the Solidarity movement in Poland in August 1980 and "consequent social convulsions" were perceived as "a mortal danger" to Eastern Europe, and "the Polish rebellion might be greatly weakened and fragmented" by the "elimination" of the Polish Pope who was the movement's spiritual father. Although mentioning no names, the report stated that "some political figure of great power took note of this most grave situation and, mindful of the vital needs of the Eastern bloc, decided it was necessary to kill [the] Pope."

"Every declaration of Agca's, every circumstance and detail, was checked and investigated," the prosecutor's report said. "Agca is convincing in his reconstruction of the crime." The report noted as well that "Agca participated in the murder of the Turkish editor Abdi Ipekci on orders from Ugurlu." His escape from prison was thanks to "the power of money and the efficiency of the Turkish Mafia."

In Sofia during the summer of 1980, the report said, Agca was given money on the orders of Ugurlu and furnished documents allowing him the unusually long stay in Bulgaria. Also in Sofia at

this time were Oral Celik, a Turk who was a leader of the Gray Wolves, and one "Sotir Kolev," a Bulgarian secret-service agent who would turn out to be Todor Aivasov.

The plot, says the report, was set up like this: The Bulgarian secret

service contracted with Agca and Oral Celik "for the organization and execution of the plan." In return, the Bulgarians would pay Agca, Celik and Musa Serdar Celibi* three million deutsche marks, roughly \$1.7 million. Their escape from Italy would be carried out by diplomatic vehicle or TIR (Transport International Routier) truck, which could pass through custom checkpoints with little or no inspection.

Why didn't the plot come off?

Celik, who accompanied Agca to St. Peter's Square on the day of the shooting, was supposed to set off two "panic bombs," perhaps to cover Agca's escape. But Celik also carried a gun to St. Peter's, leading investigators to speculate he was supposed to use the bombs as cover while he shot Agca. Whatever the case, just after he shot the Pope, Agca was grabbed by a tenacious nun who held him until help arrived. Celik was probably taken out of Italy in the TIR truck that left the Bulgarian embassy grounds in Rome just after the shooting. He has not been seen since.

Albano's report shattered the alibi of Bulgarian agent Sergei Antonov, repudiating his claimed activities on the day of the shooting as well as his supposed inability to speak English with Agca. The alibis of the other two Bulgarians came off

no better. "Aivasov's alibi has not only proved unverifiable but has been denied by witnesses and incontestable documents," the report states. The same held true for Vasilev. In fact, the report states that evidence points to the Bulgarian embassy's active involvement in the plot to kill the Pope.

In conclusion Albano asked for the formal indictment and trial of Antonov, Aivasov and Vasilev, and the Turks who had been implicated, including Omer Mersan, Musa Serdar Celibi, Oral Celik and Agca himself (on new charges).

THE MOST DISTURBING QUESTION about the assassination plot is: why such silence from so many for so long? Former CIA official Harry Gelman stated in the *Washington Post* that "to many in the West, the consequences of concluding that the Soviets took part in the plot to kill the Pope are so appalling that the matter will simply not bear thinking about."

Like the Italian judicial authorities, Sterling chose a different track. Realizing that she "was making grave charges against a superpower with which the United States and its Western allies had to maintain civilized relations," she nonetheless decided that uncovering the truth was the best policy.

"To my mind," she wrote, "the best way to dissuade Soviet leaders from still more dangerous secret ventures was to see to it that they knew that we knew." *****

*Celibi was the Gray Wolves' leader in West Germany. According to plans, his organization would provide Agca with safe houses and cash for any eventualities in Europe.