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THE 'BULGARIAN CONNECTION'

THE PRESS, THE K.G.B. AND THE POPE

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The papal reign of John Paul II has coincided with the onset of a new cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Because of the entrance of the Pope and, more generally, the Roman Catholic Church into arenas that are central in this conflict—Poland, the arms race, liberation struggles in Central America—his papacy has become inextricably linked with heightening East-West tension.

Another feature of the renewed conflict is the Reagan Administration's claim that machinations of the Soviet Union and its allies are behind each disturbance of the status quo. "Terrorism" is the catchword for all acts of political violence repugnant to the West, behind which we are likely to find the hand of the K.G.B. This propaganda campaign has been effective. It is widely accepted in the "free world" that the Russians and their "proxies" are the root of much of the world's turmoil.

One of the most dramatic contemporary acts of political violence was the attempted assassination of the Pope by a young Turk in 1981. Initially interpreted by the Western media as the work of a right-wing fanatic, the assassination attempt is now seen as having been directed from the Kremlin and implemented through a "Bulgarian Connection." In their new book, *Pontiff*, Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan-Witts center their story around the shooting in St. Peter's Square. Nowhere do they question the validity of the K.G.B. root of the plot.

We believe that the Bulgarian Connection theory, as delineated in *Pontiff* and in the mass

media, is incompatible with many known facts and is speciously argued. The book displays the main features of a growing body of pseudoscientific writing that serves President Reagan's political objectives by portraying the Soviet Union as the locus of terrorism. *Pontiff* thus provides a useful illustration of the character, the genesis—and the infirmities—of a politically convenient untruth.

It took little time after Mehmet Ali Agca shot the Pope in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981, for the world to learn much about his background. One of Turkey's most notorious terrorists, Agca had assassinated the editor of a leading Turkish newspaper two years earlier. Moreover, he was associated with a local fascist movement, the Nationalist Action Party (NAP), and its affiliate, the Grey Wolves, whose leaders had been arrested in late 1980 and charged with hundreds of political murders. Their 945-page indictment, which was handed down in Turkey two weeks after Agca's assassination attempt, contained much information on NAP's extensive domestic and European networks.

Most Western correspondents, including Marvine Howe and R.W. Apple of *The New York Times*, did not hesitate to describe the attempt on the Pope's life as the work of the extreme right, and to suggest that there were links between Agca and NAP's more than 100 European branches. While his motive was obscure, it was thought to be related to ultra-chauvinism and anti-Westernism, both characteristic of Turkish fascism, an ideology in which Agca had been immersed since high school. Lending credence to that theory was NAP's part in engineering Agca's escape from a Turkish prison in November 1979, which occurred when he was being tried for murder. Immediately afterward, Agca wrote to an Istanbul newspaper announcing his intention to shoot the Pope, whose visit to Turkey was then imminent. The deed, of course, was postponed to another day.

Agca's brief trial in Italy for the papal shooting, in July 1981, left many questions unanswered. Where did he get his gun and false passport? Who helped him during his fifteen-month flight throughout Europe following his escape from the Turkish prison? Where exactly had he gone, and who

provided him with traveling money—totaling \$50,000, according to Western intelligence estimates? Finally, did he have any accomplices on the day of the shooting? While substantial evidence that Agca was part of a conspiracy was offered in court and in press reports, the nature and members of that conspiracy remain in doubt.

These matters stood until the publication of an article by Claire Sterling in the September 1982 *Reader's Digest*. Sterling's article, and a September 21, 1982, NBC "White Paper" narrated by Marvin Kalb, asserted that Agca's apparent connections to the right were only a cover, and that his actual "control" was the K.G.B. The main evidence sup-

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