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ON PAGE B 7

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Jack Anderson

Moscow's Old Reliable

Because of its alleged connection to the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II, Bulgaria has received more international attention in the past two years than at any time in the nearly four decades that it has been a Soviet satellite.

The fact that it's Bulgaria taking the heat, instead of Big Brother in the Kremlin, does not surprise Western intelligence. Secret intelligence reports warn that Bulgaria will remain what it has always been: the most loyal of the Soviet satellites. For this reason, it is referred to as the 16th republic of the Soviet Union.

One reason for this devotion is historical, a case of Slavic solidarity that dates back long before the Bolshevik revolution.

Evidence of this ethnic kinship is the fact that Sofia, alone among Soviet bloc capitals, boasts a statue of a Russian czar—Alexander II, who in 1878 freed the Bulgarians from five centuries of Turkish rule at a cost of nearly a quarter-million Russian soldiers.

According to a confidential Defense Intelligence Agency appraisal—one of several intelligence documents reviewed by my associate, Dale Van Atta—Bulgarian Communist Party meetings are "little more than replays" of those in the Soviet Union. Bulgarian party leaders constantly seek to affirm "the orthodoxy of Bulgarian socialism and the party's total loyalty and commitment to the U.S.S.R.," the DIA report states.

Much of this is the doing of Bulgaria's Communist boss since 1954, Todor Khristov Zhivkov, the Kremlin's devoted 71-year-old stooge. When he visits Moscow for party get-togethers, a State Department profile points out, Zhivkov always seems "intent on surpassing other leaders in praise of and expressions of fidelity to the Soviet Union"—not an easy task where party rhetoric is concerned.

Bulgaria's slavish servility to the Kremlin has drawn the contempt of other Communist satellites. But it has paid off for Bulgaria, the only Warsaw Pact nation whose economic condition has improved since its association with the Soviet Union.

The Bulgarians get a price break on coal and oil imports from the Soviets, who also provide a steady market for Bulgarian products, which have changed from primarily agricultural to mainly industrial in recent years. As a result of this sweet-heart arrangement, Bulgaria has the healthiest foreign debt structure of any Soviet satellite.

Alone among Warsaw Pact nations, Bulgaria has no Soviet troops stationed on its territory. But a DIA report notes that since 1970 there have been important developments in Soviet-Bulgarian military ties.

During the last decade, for example, the Soviets have set up a new regional military headquarters at Odessa in the Ukraine, with a key supporting staff in Sofia. According to the DIA, the Odessa headquarters "would probably control and coordinate wartime operations against Greece and Turkey carried out by Pact forces from Bulgaria and the Odessa, North Caucasus and Transcaucasus military districts."

Can the Soviets depend on the continued loyalty of 9 million in Bulgaria? The only real challenge to the Soviets is occasional eruptions of Bulgarian nationalism.

Oddly enough, this nascent nationalism was once led by Zhivkov's Oxford-educated daughter, Ludmila Zhivkova. As the member of the Communist Party's Central Committee in charge of cultural affairs, she spent more than a year preparing for the 1,300th anniversary of Bulgarian statehood in 1981.

Western intelligence sources say the Soviets were concerned about Zhivkova's activities, which they felt might encourage nationalistic fervor in Poland. In fact, rumors were rampant among Bulgarian youths and intellectuals that Zhivkova's death at 38 from a brain hemorrhage, in July 1981, was just too convenient not to have been arranged by the Kremlin.

Even if Zhivkov succumbs to his various physical ailments soon, Bulgaria's role as the most loyal of Soviet satellites seems unlikely to change significantly. In short, the Soviets couldn't have found less troublesome scapegoats to take responsibility for the alleged assassination attempt against the pope.

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