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REUTERS
6 March 1985

BITOV
MOSCOW

A Soviet literary magazine editor who resurfaced in Moscow after defecting to Britain said today he was kidnapped to make him testify against a Bulgarian accused in the murder plot against Pope John Paul.

Oleg Bitov, 53, wrote in the weekly Literaturnaya Gazeta that Western secret service agents seized him in Italy after he uncovered signs that the West was behind the assassination attempt on the pope two years earlier.

Bitov disappeared while covering the Venice film festival in 1983 and arrived in Britain. Last September he suddenly appeared at a Moscow news conference, alleging the British had abducted him after mistaking him for a spy.

He has since written in Literaturnaya Gazeta, for which he is cultural editor, that he was given mind-bending drugs and forced to write anti-Soviet articles for the British press.

Bitov said the Western agents wanted him to testify against Sergei Antonov, an official of Bulgaria's state airline in Rome, who was arrested in 1982 on suspicion of complicity in the May 1981 murder attempt on the pope.

Bitov wrote today: "Antonov's case is a villainous provocation organised by the CIA in alliance with the reactionary press and supported by efforts of Western special services to hide their involvement in the preparation of the attempt to assassinate Pope John Paul II."

He said inquiries made by Literaturnaya Gazeta and Bulgarian officials into the true circumstances had driven the plotters to the brink of exposure.

"So they then resorted to a new gangster-like method. They abducted the magazine's correspondent and for almost a year held him so as to force or bribe him to testify against Sergei Antonov and to slander socialist countries," he added.

The article appeared to be a response to reports in some Western publications that while in Britain Bitov was summoned for questioning in the pope plot and that this was connected with his return to Moscow.

Bitov wrote that Antonov was in poor health in prison and alleged the Bulgarian was being given the same psychedelic drugs that he himself had been administered by British agents.

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