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SUBJECT Attempted Assassination of the Pope

HUGH DOWNS: Two years ago tomorrow, Pope John-Paul II was shot down and nearly killed by an assassin in the crowd in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican.

For two years now, while the Italian police and the security agencies of several countries have investigated, there have been theories, stories of elaborate plots, and finally a strong suggestion which has gained worldwide credence that the shooting of the Pope was ordered by the KGB, the intelligence agency of the Soviet Union, and planned and directed by the Bulgarian government.

Well, for the past four months, a number of ABC News producers and correspondents have examined that theory. This is a unique investigation, and one we're proud of. And here tonight to pull it together is Tom Jariel.

Tom?

TOM JARIEL: Hugh, the investigation took our ABC News team to 12 countries. Our people evaluated all of the theories. We talked with those named in the Communist conspiracy theory. And, more important, we checked their alibis, quite possibly the first journalists ever to do so.

Our investigative team work is called the "Communist Plot Theory," and a very serious question, as you'll see.

Our ABC news team will take you step-by-step through the complicated investigation, beginning with the arrest of the gunman in St. Peter's Square.

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Mammet Ali Agca, a 23-year-old Turk, shot the Pope. He was captured on the spot and made no attempt to deny the shooting. As a matter of fact, he seemed proud of it. But why he did it is the big mystery.

He told police he was a terrorist. Just a terrorist, tied to no group. He said, "I decided to do something to draw the attention of the whole word to me, and so I saw myself forced to kill the Pope." Agca said he acted completely alone.

But there were doubts this young Turk could have traveled as he had from Turkey, to England, to at least eight countries using several passports, without help. One possible explanation, international smuggling techniques.

Drug enforcement experts in Europe have told ABC News Agca's travels would be consistent with those patterns of an international drug smuggler, but there was no evidence of any conspiracy presented at the Agca trial.

Yet, when the time came for sentencing, Judge Severino Santiaopochi(?) startled the court saying this, he was convinced "Agca was just the emerging point of a conspiracy".

Agca was sentenced to life and disappeared into Italian prisons. After 18 months, though, he sent out word that, "yes, there was a conspiracy." He said it was directed by Turkish gun and drug smugglers and by Bulgarian officials in Rome.

This is Agca's current story. He claims that after escaping jail in Turkey, he made his way to Bulgaria. There, he met a Turkish businessman authorities of several countries consider a top smuggler, Bekir Celenk, and later, Musar Celebi, one of Celenk's rightwing contacts.

Eventually, Agca says, Celebi, claiming to speak for Celenk, offered him the equivalent of a million-and-a-half dollars to shoot the Pope. He was given a gun, went to Rome, and there through their contacts met three Bulgarians, two diplomats, Todor Aivazov, and Yeliov Vassilev, and the Rome manger for Bulglarian Airlines, Sergei Antonov.

They all denied being part of a plot and, more significantly, provide alibis. Essentially, it's the case of one man's word against that of others -- Agca's words against those he accuses.

Can this self-styled terrorist be believed?

What kind of a man is he?

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Bill Blakemore, the ABC News Bureau Chief in Rome, looked into Agca's background.

BILL BLAKEMORE: Tom, Mammet Ali Agca comes from a poor family in Eastern Turkey. In 1979, he was arrested for the murder of a well-known Turkish newspaper editor, Abdi Epecci(?). While on trial, he escaped from jail, obviously with outside help and money, and, promptly sent a message to a newspaper saying he would now kill the Pope. Then Ali Agca disappeared until he turned up in Rome a year-and-a-half later.

Today, Ali Agca lives here behind bars in this Rome prison revelling in all the attention he gets. Only one journalist has been permitted to be present during an Agca interrogation, a Turkish newspaper reporter, who described Agca this way for ABC.

UGUR MUNGU: I believe that he is a psychopath. He is a very fast tempered person who is delighted to put his name in the limelight.

BLAKEMORE: He is allowed newspapers and television, and follows his own case with obvious relish.

Italian investigators describe Agca as extremely intelligent, skillfully mixing lies with the truth, always giving them just enough facts to keep them going.

JARIEL: And so, 18 months after the shooting, as a result of Agca's testimony, they arrest a Bulgarian Airlines official, Sergei Antonov. The other two Bulgarian officials Agca named, Vassilev and Aivazov, have already returned to Bulgaria.

In the Italian Parliament, government ministers accused the Bulgarian secret policy of complicity in the plot to kill the Pope. And because Bulgaria is the Soviet Union's most obedient satellite, there was widespread speculation that the Soviets must have been behind the Bulgarian plot.

Why would the Soviets conspire with the Bulgarians to kill the Pope?

The answer suggested, Poland. At the time of the shooting, Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement was at the height of its power. Poland appeared on the verge of bolting from the Eastern Bloc, and the driving force behind this was the Polish-born Pope John-Paul who, Vatican sources tell ABC News, was running Poland from the Vatican and had little time for anything else.

So threatened, the Soviets started a series of menacing military maneuvers on the Polish border.

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The Pope had sent a message to Leonid Brezhnev. Earlier reports pointed to that message as a key motive in the scenario of a Russian plot against the Pope. According to those earlier reports, the letter, in Russian in the Pope's own hand, threatened that if there were an invasion of Poland the Pope would lay down his crown and return to Poland to stand with his compatriots.

But ABC sources, including some at the very highest level of the Vatican say those accounts are wrong. They say there was no letter handwritten in Russian, but rather a spoken message delivered by an intermediary reading from notes, and the message itself was conciliatory, the Pope offering to mediate, urging caution on both sides, and making clear that if there were an invasion, then the Pope's heart would be with his people.

John-Paul did not say he would quit as Pope and return to Poland. All-in-all, a considerably less threatening message.

The Vatican appointed Cardinal John Krol to speak to ABC News on this subject.

CARDINAL JOHN KROL: Not only was there not such a letter, but such a letter from -- directly from the Pope to Brezhnev would be a total departure from all normal procedures. No way could you conceive of the Holy Father saying "I would resign."

JARIEL: What about the alleged Bulgarian-Soviet plot? What's the evidence to prove it?

ABC News correspondent Chris Harper traveled to Bulgaria to talk face-to-face with those Agca accused of complicity. They deny it.

CHRIS HARPER: Tom, Agca names Turkish businessman Bekir Celenk as the mastermind. Now under a form of house arrest in Bulgaria, Celenk is bitter about his detention, scoffing at the accusations that he would set up a plot to kill the Pope.

[INTERPRETER FOR BEKIR CELENK]: What do I have to do with the Pope? The Pope is a religious leader. What business do I have with the Pope? Where is the money?

HARPER: Agca says Turkish rightwing leader Musar Celebi was the man who delivered Celen's orders, and the man who offered him a million-and-a-half dollars to kill the Pope.

Celebi is jailed in Italy now on suspicion of being part of that plot. But before his arrest, he told ABC News

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correspondent Bob Brown that Agca impressed him as a lone gunman seeking attention.

That's what the Turks had to say.

What about Antonov and the other Bulgarians in Rome, the ones Agca says actually participated in the attack on the Pope?

Boyan Trikov(?), a key official in Bulgaria, told ABC News that no Bulgarians were involved in any plot.

It's not surprising that the Bulgarians deny any role, but if Bulgarians were involved they violated basic rules of spycraft.

Why were the Bulgarians still in Rome 18 months after the attempt?

Why was there a planning meeting in the home of a plotter?

Why was there direct contact with the assassin?

JARIEL: The ABC News investigation raises more questions, finding major discrepancies in Agca's testimony describing the days leading up to and including the shooting.

May 10th, 1981. Agca claims he took part in a strategy meeting at the Antonov apartment, in this building, up on the third floor. Agca has described the apartment, and says those who were there included Antonov, his wife and daughter, two other Bulgarians, and four Turks. Agca says Mrs. Antonov served tea.

Our investigation found holes in that story. Chris Harper again.

HARPER: Tom, ABC News has learned that Agca made several mistakes in his description of this apartment. The most important was his description of sliding doors made of woods. Such doors do exist in every other apartment in this building, but not in the Antonovs. Their door was broken and replaced by a curtain main of cloth.

The most interesting discrepancy in Agca's story concerns his claim that Mrs. Antonov and her daughter were in the apartment. She denies it.

[INTERPRETER FOR ROSSITZA ANTONOV]: I learned the name Ali Agca the day they arrested my husband.

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HARPER: She says that she had left Rome two days before the alleged meeting, drove to this border point in Northern Italy, stayed at this hotel in Yugoslavia, and then went on to Bulgaria.

The Bulgarians say this is the register at the hotel in Yugoslavia, and the bill she paid. But any travel documents confirming the date she left Italy are not available.

She says she was in Sofia, hundreds of miles from Rome, when Agca says she was serving tea.

JARIEL: Agca's story continues on May 11th. Agca claimed at first that Antonov and Aivazov went with him to St. Peter's Square on a reconnaissance mission at about 5:00 PM. But, when an Italian Airport official testified that Antonov had been at the airport at that time, Agca changed his story.

Now, it was only Aivazov who went with him to the Square.

Chris Harper again with the ABC News findings.

HARPER: In an exclusive interview with ABC News, Aivozov denied ever meeting Agca. He said that on May 11th he went to this shop south of Rome and bought five bicycles.

[INTERPRETER FOR TODOR AIVAZOV]: It was around 3:30 when we arrived at the store.

HARPER: The owner remembers the sale, and ABC News has obtained a copy of the bill. Aivazov says he then went to the airport to ship the bicycles to Sofia. He claims the shipment was made at 4:30, roughly the same time Agca says they met in the center of Rome, 20 miles away.

ABC News has obtained a copy of the shipping bill with what appears to be Aivazov's signature. The bill does not record the time of the shipment.

JARIEL: The next day was May 12th. Originally, Agca told investigators that he had a rendezvous at around noon with Antonov and Aivazov. But, when three Italian police officers testified that they saw Antonov here in a small office off the courtyard at the Bulgarian Embassy at that very time, then Agca changed his testimony again.

No, he said this time, it was only Aivazov that he met.

Again, Chris Harper with the ABC News findings.

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HARPER: Tom, Aivazov maintains he was at this Italian customs office to clear a shipment. He said he met a Mrs. Catina. Mrs. Catina was the customs official here at the time, but she told us she had too many meetings to recall one in particular.

But ABC News has learned that another Italian official has confirmed Aivazov's story.

JARIEL: May 13th, the day Agca shot the Pope. Agca claims that he was picked up here at the Piazza della Ricuberca(?) at about three in the afternoon by Antonov and Aivazov. He says they then drove to Aivazov's apartment where they picked up two pistols and a panic bomb and then went to St. Peter's Square.

Again, Chris Harper with the ABC News findings.

HARPER: Antonov maintains he was in this Bulgarian Airlines office at the time of the shooting. Nine Bulgarians and one Italian have testified to that, but the Italian cannot be sure of the time she spoke to Antonov.

Aivazov says he was in the Bulgarian Embassy when two men came to his office about 45 minutes before the Pope was shot. One was a Bulgarian magician. The other was the owner of this Italian nightclub, Luigi Marceo. He told us that he visited the Embassy that day, but did not meet Aivazov.

So, the two Bulgarians have alibis, but they are not air-tight.

JARIEL: There are other apparent discrepancies.

Item: How did the alleged conspirators communicate?

Agca says he spoke to Antonov and Aivazov in English, but an Italian police official says that at the time of his arrest, Agca was able to speak only a little English, and both Antonov and Aivazov insists they speak no English.

Item: Agca once claimed this man pictured running from St. Peter's Square after the shooting was Aivazov. Then Agca again changed his story. He said it was a close Turkish friend he would never identify.

Those are some of the most contradictory details about Agca's testimony we've been able to get from sources close to the investigation.

The only man to support Agca's claim of a plot was a Bulgarian defector in Paris, Iordan Mantarov. He told us

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through intermediaries that a month before the shooting he warned French authorities about a Bulgarian plot to assassinate the Pope.

However, American intelligence sources say he didn't tell his story until nine months after the shooting.

In any case, Italian investigators tell us they're not particularly interested in Mantarov because his knowledge of any plot is only hearsay.

And so, the spotlight comes back, as it always does, to Agca, and we're left to speculate, based on the information we know.

Theory Number One: He is, as he now claims, a professional killer, a gunman hired by the Bulgarians or others to kill the Pope. His participation in the murder of the Turkish newspaper editor, Eppeci, is certainly a credential.

Theory Number Two: Agca was indeed connected to the ring leader he named, Bekir Celenk, and to the Bulgarians. But his role was only that of a functionary in their business of smuggling drugs and guns between Turkey, Bulgaria and Italy. But he was either a courier or an enforcer for them. This theory would help explain how Agca was able to name Celenk and identify the Bulgarians from a photo album shown him by the police.

So, according to Theory Number Two, Agca was involved with Turkish and Bulgarian smugglers, but he decided entirely on his own, for his own tortured reasons, to come to this very spot to shoot the Pope.

And, there is a third possibility.

Theory Number Three: Agca was, as he described himself at first, a lone fanatic who decided to assassinate a famous figure to attract attention. The proof is hard to come by, but strong opinions are not difficult to find about who was involved in the shooting of the Pope.

ABC has been told it's the CIA's position. The evidence so far does not prove any Bulgarian involvement. Top officials at the U.S. Embassy in Bulgaria do not think there was such a plot.

Two of Italy's policemen most knowledgeable on the subject also have serious doubts about any Bulgarian plot.

However, at the Vatican, the attitude is different. The Pope's closest aides and, we're told, the Pope himself, are

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convinced there was a Russian-Bulgarian plot. In a series of interviews with ABC News, they agreed they had no doubts about conspiracy. But they also agreed they had no hard evidence to support it, and probably never will.

DOWNS: Agca, it seems, is very inventive, Tom. Is he still talking?

JARIEL: I believe so, Hugh, because if he ever stops talking and stops giving investigators leads to check out he'll be returned to the general prison population where he'll probably be killed.

DOWNS: Interesting. Thank you, Tom.

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