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Central Intelligence Agency

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CIR



Washington, D.C. 20505

1 APR 1987

MEMORANDUM FOR: See Distribution

SUBJECT: The Papal Assassination Conspiracy Trial:
Inconclusive Results [REDACTED]

Attached is a typescript prepared by a member of my staff in response to your request for an assessment of the Papal assassination conspiracy trial. In our view the trial results were inconclusive. While the proceedings yielded little evidence to support assertions of Bulgarian involvement in the Papal shooting, they also failed to exculpate the Bulgarian and Turkish defendants charged with conspiracy. If you or members of your staff have questions or comments concerning the report, please call [REDACTED]

David Cohen
Director of Global Issues

Attachment:
The Papal Assassination Conspiracy
Trial: Inconclusive Results
GI M 87-20061, March 1987, [REDACTED]

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

1 April 1987

The Papal Assassination Conspiracy Trial:
Inconclusive Results

Summary

The Papal assassination conspiracy trial ended in Rome in March 1986 with the acquittal for insufficient evidence of three Bulgarian and three Turkish defendants charged with plotting to kill Pope John Paul II on 13 May 1981. Under Italian law this verdict is the middle ground between conviction and complete absolution: it acknowledges the possible guilt of the defendant but concedes the evidence is inadequate to support a conviction. The court, consisting of two professional and six lay judges, also sentenced Mehmet Ali Agca -- already serving a life sentence for the Papal shooting -- to one additional year of prison on a weapons conviction.

The 10-month-long Papal assault trial -- during which the court questioned witnesses and defendants in some half-dozen countries, including Bulgaria -- was the culmination of a nearly four-year investigation by the Italian judiciary. Despite rigorous efforts to uncover the truth, its results were inconclusive. While the trial yielded little evidence to substantiate allegations of Bulgarian complicity in the attack against the Pope, it also failed to exonerate the Bulgarians -- and the Turkish defendants -- and so has left lingering doubts about their guilt or innocence.

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The Papal Assassination Conspiracy Trial:
Inconclusive Results

The event that had been touted as the "trial of the century" produced more questions than it did answers. In so doing it affirmed the view of many that the truth surrounding the attack against the Pope may never be known.

- o It provided circumstantial evidence highly suggestive of some kind of conspiracy, but failed to prove one.
- o It raised questions as to whether Agca was a shrewd calculating actor, or merely crazy.
- o It failed to clarify the circumstances surrounding the February 1979 murder of Turkish newspaper editor Abdi Ipekci, to which Agca confessed; Agca's escape from a Turkish prison some months later; his written threat against the Pontiff if he visited Turkey in late November 1979, as scheduled; and the relationship of these events, if any, to his eventual attack on the Pope.
- o It failed to uncover the nature of the relationships between and among Agca, the Turkish rightwing extremist organization called the Gray Wolves, the smuggling network known as the "Turkish mafia," and the Bulgarian authorities.
- o It failed to determine Agca's real reasons for trying to kill the Pope, as well as his motives for undermining the trial. It was, after all, Agca's lack of credibility that delivered the fatal blow to the trial proceedings. [REDACTED]

The Trial

The Problem of Uncooperative Witnesses and Fugitives. From the outset the Rome court was hampered by uncooperative participants. The testimonies of important witnesses and key defendants -- such as Turkish gunman Agca and Bulgarian airlines official Sergey Antonov -- were replete with lies, contradictions, retractions, and inconsistencies. Agca repeatedly undermined his own credibility while Antonov, for his part, exercised his legal right to absent himself from more than half of the trial, citing reasons of ill health. [REDACTED]

The court's inability to question alleged coconspirators Oral Celik and Bekir Celenk was a major blow to the proceedings. Celik, identified by Agca on a number of occasions as the second gunman at St. Peter's Square on the day of the Papal shooting, has been wanted by the authorities for some [REDACTED]

GI M 87-20061 [REDACTED]

years. Celenk, the reputed Turkish smuggler whom Agca claimed was his paymaster in the Papal plot and the "link" between his Turkish associates and Bulgarian intelligence officials, died in October 1985, some three months following his departure from Bulgaria where he had been under house arrest since 1982. Shortly after his arrival in Turkey, Celenk told a Turkish military tribunal investigating the murder of Ipeketi that he, Celenk, had been in Sofia during the summer of 1980 -- when Agca claimed to have met him there, that he was a casual acquaintance of alleged conspirator Musa Celebi, but that he did not provide support to Agca in his attack against the Pope. [REDACTED]

Agca's Claims. Despite such obstacles, the court obtained testimony from a number of witnesses and defendants which, in light of clandestine reporting, lent credence to some of Agca's pretrial statements. The would-be assassin's most critical assertion, however -- that he had been in direct contact with Bulgarian officials for the express purpose of conspiring against the Pope -- has remained unproven.

- o In early December 1985, Italian customs officials testified that they had received a considerable sum of money in exchange for not sealing the Bulgarian TIR truck Agca claims was to have spirited him and his accomplice out of Italy following the shooting. This testimony adds credibility to Agca's pretrial statements that Sofia had agreed to help Agca leave Italy following the assassination attempt.
- o Omer Bagci's testimony confirmed many of Agca's pretrial statements regarding his acquisition of the weapon used in the shooting. Bagci affirmed that he had traveled from Dulliken, Switzerland, to Milan, Italy, to deliver to Agca four days before the shooting the Browning pistol he used against the Pontiff. [REDACTED]

Unresolved Issues. The trial was unsuccessful, however, in its efforts to resolve a number of fundamental questions concerning a conspiracy in the Papal shooting. It is highly questionable, moreover, whether these will ever be answered satisfactorily.

- o Agca's connections to a number of Turkish rightists. The trial produced a great deal of information regarding Turkish rightwing circles associated with Agca. These revelations brought Magistrate Ilario Martella's pretrial investigation under heavy criticism for inadequately exploring the so-called "Turkish connection," and led to the formation of a new team of magistrates charged with pursuing the Turkish role in the Papal assassination conspiracy. Their investigation is still underway.

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- o The number and identities of those persons who were with Agca in St. Peter's Square on the day the Pope was shot. Presiding Magistrate Severino Santiapichi has asserted that the pretrial investigation did not firmly establish such basic facts of the crime.
- o The whereabouts of the Bulgarian defendants on the day of the shooting. Prosecutor Antonio Marini accused the defendant Antonov of having lied when he told Italian investigators that he was not present when the Pope was shot; the Prosecutor also charged Bulgaria with having destroyed documents needed to substantiate Antonov's version of events.
- o The personal details Agca provided about Bulgarian defendants who claim they never met Agca. The court has not resolved how Agca was able to provide such information. During the course of an investigation into charges that Agca had been coached by Italian security services into implicating the Bulgarians, Magistrate Franco Ionta found insufficient evidence that former officials of the Italian Military Intelligence Service had given Agca such information.
- o The disposition of the funds allegedly paid to the Turkish gunman and his accomplices. No trace of the money was ever found by the court or pretrial investigators.
- o The numerous meetings Agca said had taken place between him and the Bulgarian defendants. No independent corroboration of such contacts surfaced in the courtroom.

Post-Trial Developments

The Matter of Appeals. All of the acquittals for insufficient evidence rendered in the Papal assault trial were subsequently appealed either by the trial prosecutor or the Bulgarian defendants. Prosecutor Marini announced his decision to appeal the intermediate verdicts handed down to the three Turkish defendants soon after the trial's conclusion. He had specifically requested life imprisonment for two of the Turks, and a 24-year sentence for the third in his recommendation to the Rome court prior to its in camera deliberations; in the case of the three Bulgarian defendants the Prosecutor had recommended acquittal for insufficient evidence. For their part, all three Bulgarian defendants appealed the verdicts. None of the appeals have been placed on the court's docket. [REDACTED]

The Justification of Sentence. An Italian court document made public in November 1986 contends that the three Bulgarian defendants provided suspicious alibis which failed to refute evidence that Agca had had dealings with them before the Papal

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shooting, according to press reports. The document, required under Italian law, is a "justification of sentence" that explains how the court assesses evidence during a trial and reaches a verdict. [REDACTED]

This particular document, signed by Presiding Magistrate Santiapichi, concluded that while no firm evidence emerged to link the alleged coconspirators to an assassination plot, there were solid indications that Agca had not acted alone. The document maintains that Agca willfully destroyed his own credibility as a witness, seemed intent on protecting his accomplices, and might have had reason to believe that he would be helped to escape from prison if he was successful in sabotaging the prosecution's case. It advocated extreme caution in evaluating the trial evidence because of Agca's courtroom behavior and his penchant for retracting testimony. The document concluded by attributing some credibility to the hypothesis that Turkish alleged coconspirators were "commissioned" by "another group" that wished to "disguise the political" motivation of the act. [REDACTED]

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