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The plot against the Pope: fact & fantasy

WASHINGTON — Conservatives are claiming they have succeeded in "punishing" two clandestine CIA operatives for their failure to come up with proof that Bulgaria—and ultimately the Soviet KGB—organized the May 1981 attempt to assassinate Pope John Paul II.

Both the Rome station chief and his deputy are being transferred, according to sources, because of their skepticism about the case drawn up by Italian prosecutor Antonio Albano, who links Turkish assassin Mehmet Ali Agca with three Bulgarians on the day of the crime.

The CIA will not comment on the movements of its clandestine officers, but let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the conservatives are correct, and the two men are indeed being transferred.



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Punishment, in this case, would be doubly unjust. One, it has been Reagan administration policy to keep its hands off the Italian case against the Bulgarians, on the theory that if the CIA gets involved, the plot would be dismissed as a CIA machination.

Two, and more important, the Italian prosecutor's case appears to have a fatal flaw. It rests solely on the unsupported testimony of Agca, a proven liar who said he intended first to kill the Queen of England until he found out she was a woman.

To review the evidence: The central part of the Italian case against the Bulgarians is Agca's claim that he was accompanied to St. Peter's Square on March 13 by Bulgarian diplomat Todor Aivasov, airline official Sergei Antonov, military attache Zhelyo Vasilev and Turkish neo-Nazi Orat Celik.

Celik was allegedly with Agca when he shot and wounded the Pope shortly after 5 p.m. Celik then fled and has not been seen since. The Prosecutor speculates that Celik was smuggled out of the country in a Bulgarian truck containing diplomatic effects, for which the Bulgarians requested unprecedented emergency clearance.

"What was so immensely important and useful in the [truck's] cargo that the Bulgarian Embassy should make such unique demands for urgency—EXACTLY ON MAY 13, 1981?" the prosecutor asks. "We must conclude that on board that truck, hidden among those personal effects, was Orat Celik."

At this point, U.S. intelligence officials say, the Italian prosecutor made two key errors. He asserted that the Bulgarians for the first and last time requested emergency clearance and sealing of a truck on the embassy grounds. And he speculates that Celik must have been inside.

In fact, sources say, the Bulgarians routinely had diplomatic trucks sealed at their embassy. Further, Antonov's defense lawyer has two witnesses: both Italian customs officials, who say the truck was loaded and sealed in broad daylight on a busy street, under their supervision, and they are prepared to swear there was no one inside. They further attest that Aivasov was with them, watching the truck being loaded, at the time Agca claimed Aivasov was in St. Peter's Square.

Antonov, the airline official, denies Agca's charges. Aivasov now has an alibi from the two customs officials. Vasilev has gone back to Bulgaria, and Celik has vanished. That means the case comes down to Agca's testimony alone—and, by the prosecutor's own admission, Agca is a liar.

"The defense would blow this case out of the water in an American court," one American expert noted. "But this is an Italian court. Anything could happen."

WITHIN THE U.S., the case has become highly politicized, with conservatives attacking the Reagan administration for not doing more to help the Italians embarrass the KGB. It has also become politicized within journalism, with some reporters actively trying to prove the case against the Bulgarians, instead of reporting, neutrally, on the evidence.

Those of us who are more skeptical about the Bulgarian plot are accused of closing our eyes to the evil machinations of the KGB and its Bulgarian henchmen. Would the KGB be so evil as to plot to kill the Pope? Sure. Can the Italians