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A plot on the Pope?

All the public relations gimmicks in the world, though, will not overcome the problem for the Soviets—and for the West—if the Soviet Union is shown to have had a hand in the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II.

If Bulgaria's secret police did indeed engineer the attempt—and there is circumstantial evidence pointing in that direction—then there can be little doubt that the Soviets also were involved. And if the Soviets were involved, the man ultimately behind the plot could have been none other than Yuri V. Andropov, former head of the Soviet KGB and now head of the country. How can the leaders of a predominately Christian and heavily Catholic country deal with a conspirator to murder the Pope? Not very easily, if at all.

That is one reason the Reagan administration is wise to be cautious in assessing the evidence of the Bulgarian connection. This is not a matter to try to turn into a public relations offensive. Its implications are so earth-shaking that U.S. leaders must be certain about it before making public statements or taking action.

The evidence so far is ambiguous and largely circumstantial. It depends heavily on the word of the gunman, Mehmet Ali Agca, whose mental stability and credibility are doubtful. There is also evidence to contradict some of the allegations of conscious Bulgarian involvement in the assassination attempt.

The emphasis, however, should be on *conscious* involvement. It is clear that Bulgarian agents were involved to one degree or another with the gunman and that they were mixed up in a variety of other nefarious schemes ranging from drug smuggling to gunrunning. It is less obvious that Bulgarian—and Soviet—officials were aware that they were assisting in an attempt on the Pope's life.

Some of those who are most familiar with the case say that one plausible explanation is that the would-be assassin was merely one of a number of potential hit men being kept on hold for possible future use. According to that explanation the attack on the Pope was neither planned nor expected, and the Bulgarians were taken completely by surprise.

But that is about as innocent as the Bulgarians can plausibly claim to be, and it is the only explanation that would let Mr. Andropov off the hook. The Soviets certainly had a motive to rid themselves of the Polish Pope, a man who was inspiring religious and nationalistic fervor in their largest and most unstable satellite. If the deed could be done by a citizen of a NATO country with right-wing connections the Soviets might have thought they would be in the clear.

That is not established, however, and perhaps it never will be. If the Italian investigation unambiguously concludes that the Bulgarian connection was real and conscious, and that KGB support was probable, the U.S. and the West in general will have to assess whether it is politically and morally possible to conduct affairs of state with Mr. Andropov. But until such a case is made, it would be unwise to allow the issue to shake the uneasy framework of superpower relations.