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JEFFREY HART

A Soviet plot to kill the pope - II

In a recent column I noted that Claire Sterling, the author of *The Terror Network* and a recognized authority on 20th century political terrorism, has established persuasively in a major article in the current *Reader's Digest* that Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish terrorist who tried to kill Pope John Paul II, was programmed by the Soviet KGB through its Bulgarian catpaw to do exactly what he tried to do. I said that, outside of the *Reader's Digest*, this blockbuster story had received little or no coverage in the major media.

I stand corrected. Information reaching me from Dallas, Tex., indicates that the story has received full coverage there, at least, as it has in major European newspapers, and if it has been covered in Dallas it has probably been covered also in other cities across the country.

In the Boston-New York-Washington media corridor, however, it has met with silence. It has not been dealt with by CBS-TV or the other major networks (although an NBC White Paper titled *The Man Who Shot the Pope — A Study in Terrorism* is scheduled to air Sept. 21). It has been downplayed by the *New York Times* and relegated to back pages. It has not made a splash in the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, or the *Chicago Tribune*.

There is an ancient saying, certainly redolent of regional chauvinism, but containing some truth, that if it is not reported in the *New York Times*, it didn't happen. As far as the eastern corridor brand of major media is concerned, the Soviet plot to murder the pope didn't happen.

Now, of course, the *Reader's Digest* has 12 million readers, no insignificant segment. Those readers, if they have read Claire Sterling's piece,

now know the facts. But, though much of its audience is serious and intelligent, the *Reader's Digest* does not count for much in so-called "opinion-making" circles. And these have definitely laid off the pope assassination story.

Why? In effect, the story has so far been "spiked." In the best-selling novel called *The Spike*, Robert Moss and Arnaud de Borchgrave posit an actual communist apparatus in the major media that "spikes" — kills — crucial anti-Soviet stories.

I myself do not necessarily believe that theory.

In the present case the KGB killing attempt upon the pope, if it came to light, would have been a major Soviet disaster.

There are hundreds of millions of people around the world, including the Third World, who believe that the pope is the Vicar of Christ. If a communist plot, directed from Moscow, to kill the pope ever became widely credible, it would be a psychological catastrophe. In launching this assassination operation, the Soviets were terribly provincial and Euro-centered. They were thinking specifically of Poland and secondarily of Turkey.

What seems to me to be the case here is that the major media have an investment in the idea that the Soviet Union is a "normal" country, and that "normal" countries just do not program a Turkish terrorist to kill the pope. This conception took precedence over the facts in the specific case, which therefore became "unimportant" just not "news."

Come to think of it, "The Plot to Kill the Pope" would make a fine movie. Mehmet Ali Agca was recruited and equipped and pointed toward the pope with his Bulgarian-supplied Browning automatic and his \$50,000 in cash. He thought he was going to shoot and escape. Two henchmen were to create a disturbance, which would give Agca a

chance to run for it. The Soviets did not want it that way. The shots were fired, and the two henchmen left him in the lurch to be captured. They were photographed running away, one jumping on a bus. The Soviets wanted Agca captured, because he is a Turk — thus making Turkey seem less desirable as a NATO ally, an unstable terrorist country. No doubt, the Soviets hoped he would be killed in Vatican Square, his last political service.

But, Agca lives on in jail. He has given Claire Sterling just enough correct information to indicate that he can give a lot more. He has escaped from jail before. Stay tuned.

Jeffrey Hart, an English professor at Dartmouth College, is a syndicated columnist.