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Bulgarian ex-spy ties Soviets to pope plot

By Kevin Scott Winter
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PARIS — The former No. 2 man in Bulgaria's state spy service said in an interview published here that he is certain Moscow was behind the attempt to kill Pope John Paul II in the spring of 1981.

"I haven't the least doubt about the participation of the Bulgarians in this plot," said Stefan Svrtlev, who in 1972 became second in command of the Komitet Darzhavna Sigurnost (KDS), Bulgaria's equivalent of the Soviet KGB.

However, the operation wasn't decided by the Bulgarians alone, he added in the interview published in Le Figaro magazine. At that time, Todor Zhivkov, leader of Bulgaria, had no particular reason to eliminate the pope. The Russians were certainly behind it, Svrtlev said.

Svrtlev defected to the West in the late 1970s after participating in an unsuccessful plot to overthrow the

Bulgarian regime — one of six attempts by the military in the last 10 years, according to him. The former colonel said he brought out with him a list of names of Bulgarian spies operating in

espionage — are both completely controlled by Soviet advisers...all the secret services in the Eastern bloc are simply branches of the KGB, which we call the center."

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the West, and he said he had witnessed earlier joint Soviet-Bulgarian operations similar to the attempt on the pope.

Asked if Bulgaria could have undertaken the operation against the pope alone, Svrtlev, answered "absolutely not...the departments I and II — specializing in espionage and counter-

The ex-spy chief explained that John Paul has awakened such enthusiasm around the world that he "became dangerous for Soviet strategic propaganda...and a threat to Soviet imperialist policies."

He said the pope's apparent position as spiritual leader of Poland's Solidarity movement couldn't be other than disagreeable to the Russians and appear as a real danger.

"Based on my experience in the secret service," he said. "I am certain that the plot against the life of John Paul II came from an order from Leonid Brezhnev and was organized by Yuri Andropov, who was then head of the KGB. This isn't in any way the first time such a procedure was followed. There are several precedents, such as the case of the Ukrainian nationalist Stefan Bandera, who was murdered in Munich by a KGB agent."

The use of Bulgaria as an intermediary is a measure of security for the Soviets, he said. "If something goes wrong, as in this case, Moscow can avoid an international scandal. All the condemnation would be directed against the Bulgarian participation, even though their subordination to Soviet command is as clear as spring water to anyone who would go to the trouble of examining the secret services."