

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 1

NATION  
6/13 July 1985

# BEAT THE DEVIL THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ALI AGCA

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At precisely the moment the United States is lashing itself into a state of incoherent paranoia about the ambit and menace of terrorism, one of the prime exhibits in the pantheon of "terrorism" is collapsing before the eyes of the world's press assembled in Rome.

From the moment, in September of 1982, that a Bulgarian connection in the bid to kill the Pope was first proposed to a wide American audience by Claire Sterling in *Reader's Digest* and by Marvin Kalb on NBC, the presumed K.G.B.-backed plot has been taken as the weightiest evidence for the existence of a Terror International sourced in Moscow. Agca's "confession" was of immeasurable help to the Reagan Administration in its denunciations of the Evil Empire.

But ever since the most keenly anticipated show trial of our time began in Rome on May 27, what has been emerging in outline is the story not of a K.G.B.-inspired plot but of a right-wing conspiracy to bring off a major propaganda coup in the cold war, throw some more dung on the already putrefying corpse of détente and, specifically, discredit the left in Italy. If the witting executors of this conspiracy are found in official and paragovernmental organizations in Rome and Washington, the unwitting—to put it most charitably—agents are located in the offices of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, NBC, PBS and *Reader's Digest*. It will be instructive to see how all these outfits deal with the proceedings in Judge Severino Santapichi's courtroom in the next few weeks, now that Agca has only to open his mouth for everyone there to start laughing.

What has emerged since the start of the trial? To the mortification of the prosecution, Agca immediately announced that he was Jesus Christ and has most recently proposed that he demonstrate his resurrecting technique for President Reagan, who is, after all, old enough to be interested in such skills. What U.S. newspapers failed to report is that this identification with the Godhead is not some sudden and surprising disturbance in Agca's mental equilibrium. Turkish journalists at his 1980 trial for the murder of the newspaper

editor Abdi Ipecki have stressed that Agca exhibited traits of megalomania and instability. The only person who may not have been discommoded by Agca's claims to be Christ is Claire Sterling, who has always taken his words as gospel and who presumably attributes to divine powers his capacity to move undetected around Europe and across wide bodies of water such as the Mediterranean Sea.

Agca had a second surprise for the eager journalists in court: the disclosure of his direct contact with the K.G.B. in Sofia in July of 1980. The weight of this disclosure was undercut by the fact that he had said this before and had subsequently retracted it. But the explosive aspect of events unfolding in Rome has been the increasing evidence that during the long months of his incarceration, Agca was coached by agents of the highly politicized and rightist SISMI, the military branch of Italian intelligence. This is entirely contrary to the image of Agca's isolation promoted by Sterling and the rest of the conspiracy mongers. By their accounts Agca was held incommunicado in a sterile cell, divulging elements of the great plot which were then patiently corroborated by the tireless Judge Ilario Martella. The purity of Agca's recollection about the Bulgarian connection became virtually an article of faith in much of the Western media, even though he developed these recollections only after spending eighteen months in an Italian jail and though to this day they have never been corroborated by any external evidence.

## Who Coached Agca?

It has already been well established that Agca got much of his "uncanny command of detail" from such useful and unsterile sources as Italian television (available in prison), Italian newspapers (ditto) and a telephone book decently made available to him by his translator. The path to Agca's cell was a well-trodden one, with intelligence emissaries dropping in for a chat without the knowledge of the egregious Martella. But Agca has given detailed descriptions of the Bulgarian Sergei Antonov's apartment and of the physical circumstances of a "plot" to kill Lech Walesa when the latter was visiting Rome. He later retracted the stories (as he has those of plots to kill Queen Elizabeth, Tunisian President Bourguiba and others), explaining that he got the supporting details from the newspapers. But it has been shown that such details had never appeared in the press.

From whom, then, did he get those details? On June 16 the Italian magazine *L'Espresso* announced that it was about to publish some startling assertions by Giovanni Pandico, the state's main witness in a trial in Naples against the Mafia. Pandico asserted that Pietro Musumeci, deputy chief of military intelligence (SISMI), had used a Mafia chieftain to approach Agca in the Ascoli Piceno prison in March 1982 to offer him his freedom in return for implicating the Soviet bloc in the plot to kill the Pope. (Agca began to recall the Bulgarian connection shortly after that date.) *L'Espresso* reported Pandico's story in its issue appearing on June 17.

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The same day, Agca, reacting to Judge Santiapichi's call for *pazienza* ("patience"), announced that Francesco Pazienza had visited him at Ascoli Piceno and offered him his freedom in return for evidence of the K.G.B.-Bulgarian connection. It was at this point that John Tagliabue, one of the *New York Times* reporters covering the trial, conceded in an offhand way that the Ascoli Piceno prison is notoriously "porous," although *The Times* has for months been featuring Claire Sterling, who claims just the opposite. Through his lawyers in New York City, Pazienza has laughed off Agca's allegations.


### The Rome-Washington Connection

SISMI, Musumeci and Pazienza bring us to one of the widest and most sinister postwar Italian conspiracies. Pazienza, a businessman with close ties to the Mafia and to SISMI, was involved in Propaganda Doue, or P-2, the quasi-Masonic lodge headed by the fascist Licio Gelli, which, in the words of an Italian parliamentary inquiry, had come close to achieving "surreptitious and complete control" of the Italian state apparatus by the time it was exposed in 1981. The purpose of this control, stretching across the judiciary and government agencies, including security forces, was to thwart any opening toward the left and establish permanent right-wing control of the state.

The politically well-connected Pazienza was a close associate of the former head of SISMI, Gen. Guiseppi Santovito, and of Musumeci; and the three of them belonged to an inner *camarilla* at the organization, known as Super-S, which indulged in freelance black-bag operations and disinformation projects. Just five days after Agca wounded the Pope, on May 13, 1981, SISMI put out a story saying that the assassination bid had been inspired by the Warsaw Pact powers in a meeting attended by Soviet Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov and that the plan had been to wound His Holiness in order to intimidate Solidarity. The first public suggestion of a Bulgarian connection was made by the Italian Minister of Defense on British television in November 1981. Paul Henze, of whom more later, was the first American to hint at a K.G.B. connection, in a column that October in *The Wall Street Journal*.

Pazienza was also a friend of Michael Ledeen. In Ledeen, we encounter a particularly unattractive freebooter in the new cold war, one of the most dedicated architects of Terror International. He studied for some years in Italy, contributed to the right-wing paper *Il Giornale Nuovo* and came home in the late 1970s to roost at the Georgetown

Center for Strategic and International Studies (C.S.I.S.), where he helped produce the *Washington Quarterly*. He was the ideological gopher for Henry Kissinger's NBC series on the Eurocommunist menace and ended up working for Alexander Haig at the State Department's Office of Security before returning to more strictly private enterprise. Subsequently, he contracted with the State Department to evaluate and anthologize documents captured by the United States during the invasion of Grenada and, most recently, entered negotiations in Hollywood for a movie about the Bulgarian connection.

 If the deal goes through, Ledeen may have some problems with location filming. According to the Italian press, last summer Adm. Fulvio Martini, a clean-broom boss of SISMI, told a parliamentary committee that Ledeen was persona non grata in Italy as "an intriguer." The press also raised questions about possibly well-paid contractual work that Ledeen, through Pazienza, did for SISMI. Ledeen has denied receiving any money. According to one account, he had the code name Z-3 in SISMI. In the wake of the revelations of the P-2 scandal, the comfortable world of SISMI fell apart. Pazienza faced charges of fraud. He left the country and is being held for extradition in New York City. Pazienza helped Ledeen in setting up Billy Carter in the Billygate affair—a story on which Ledeen worked with Arnaud de Borchgrave just before the 1980 election.

### The Gray Wolves of Georgetown

So, if the Bulgarian connection is falling apart, an Italian-U.S. connection in the manufacture of Agca's Communist backing is now coming into increasingly high profile.

The U.S. functionaries in the conspiracy are a tightly knit lot: Sterling, Henze, Ledeen, de Borchgrave, Kalb. Kalb, Henze and de Borchgrave were on the C.S.I.S. steering committee on terrorism which issued a report at the end of last year anticipating courtroom proof of the Bulgarian connection and drawing suitably apocalyptic conclusions. And these zealots for the K.G.B.-Bulgarian plot have been the "authorities" to whom the U.S. media have regularly turned for analysis.

Claire Sterling is perhaps the best known example here. Ever since she expounded the "connection" in *Reader's Digest*, she has been, for all intents and purposes, a member of the prosecution. Nonetheless, she has doubled up as a supposedly unbiased reporter for *The New York Times* and as a commentator for various network news programs. Even more amazing has been the progress of Paul Henze. This man has actually been named in *The Times* as the C.I.A.'s station chief in Turkey and has had a long career in U.S. agitprop for, among others, Radio Free Europe, where he worked in Munich from 1952 to 1958. Despite this *curriculum vitae*, which might be thought damaging to his credentials as an objective commentator on a K.G.B.

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"plot," and despite his clear self-interest as the author of a book on the "plot," Henze has been retained as a consultant by *Reader's Digest*, *The Times*, NBC and *Newsweek*. Both he and Sterling have appeared on *The MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour*, with no hint of their compromised positions and with no "balance" to contest their assertions. The show has not even bothered to respond to complaints about its bias.

It was to another "objective" source, the novelist Arnaud de Borchgrave, that the Italian prosecutors went in search of testimony about the K.G.B. terror agenda, and it was de Borchgrave whom these same prosecutors proclaimed to be a man of unimpeachable reliability. De Borchgrave told them that an associate in French intelligence, Alexandre de Marenches, had vainly attempted to warn the Vatican of Agca's impending attack. But according to Italian reports, de Marenches is a friend of Paziienza and of the people in SISMI, and thus it is likely that, once more, "independent testimony" turns out to be the endlessly recycled disinformation of the right-wing conspirators. Finally, Ledeen wrote an article in *Commentary* in June 1983 furiously denouncing liberal journalists for failing to attach proper credence to the great conspiracy first proposed by Santovito's SISMI, with which he had a close relationship.

### **Burn, Baby, Burn**

At this point, *The New York Times*, NBC and others have become so heavily committed to the Bulgarian connection that it is difficult for them to extricate themselves from the wreckage without grave loss of credibility. Meanwhile, the premise and bogus methodology of the "terror connection" have taken firm hold. The terror model to which the media automatically turn in their hour of need is the one fashioned by the ideologues of the new cold war, with special input from Israel in such forums as the Jonathan Institute.

Part of the problem is that too many careers and reputations, including those of almost everyone who ever buffed Kissinger's boots at C.S.I.S., depend on the terror connection and on punditry about "terrorism," the new mother lode of grant contracts and gravy by the barrel. This industry will survive despite Agca's collapse.

"Terrorism" has been a central preoccupation of the Reaganites. The concept is truly totalitarian. It avoids moral responsibility (who was the greater "terrorist" in El Salvador or South Lebanon?), rejects logic (the "terrorist act" never has a cause) and, in the end, produces the mentality and morality of the war criminal, as was made apparent in the disgusting June 19 CBS documentary, "Terrorism: War in the Shadows." Kissinger henchman Lawrence Eagleburger called for assassination to become official U.S. policy, and Robert Kupperman (C.S.I.S.) said that the war against terrorism would involve "charred babies." These charred babies would be on TV. "Can we withstand that?" asked Kupperman. "Do we have enough confidence in ourselves as a nation and are [we] willing to take enough risks, and don't have this incredible guilt from Vietnam days?" Mr. Rambo, please light the grill.