

[Originally published in *Comment* (Montclair State College, NJ), Vol. 2, no. 1 (1983), 15-18.]

The Politics Behind the Shooting of the Pope

Grover Furr

English Department, Montclair State College

The "Bulgaria-KBP plot" account of why Pope John Paul II was shot on May 13, 1981 by a young Turkish assailant has dominated discussion in the U.S. media since Claire Sterling's article in *The Readers Digest* of September 1982 and Marvin Kalb's NBC television special of September 15 of the same year. Yet a very little research is more than enough to show that the evidence points not towards the Soviets but in quite the opposite direction.

On November 26, 1979 Mehmet Ali Acga, the confessed murderer of a newspaper editor, escaped from a Turkish prison. A letter published among the exhibits of the Istanbul trial of 200 members of the National Action Party (NAP), of whose military "Grey Wolves" wing Acga has long been a member, shows that Acga undertook this murder at the behest of the NAP's founder, Col. Arpaslan Turkes. The day after his "escape" (in fact Acga was simply released by NAP contacts among the police) the Turkish paper *Milliyet* published a threat by Acga to kill the Pope as "an agent of Russian and U.S. imperialism." After the shooting Acga at first denied his fascist NAP ties and said he was a "Palestinian communist comrade." Acga shot the Pope from the midst of a huge crowd; he knew, therefore, that he would be caught. His letter, and his masquerading as a Palestinian, suggest that he had been told to implicate the Soviet bloc. But by whom?

Eight days after the Pope was shot Cedar Celebi, head of the NAP in West Germany, held a new conference in which he blamed the Soviet Union for the shooting. Next day the NAP newspaper *Tercuman* published the new "Soviet plot" theory. Arrested in West Germany on November 1, 1982, Celebi is now in an Italian prison charged with giving Acga money and weapons to kill the Pope.

Other documents from the Istanbul trial include a letter from Celebi's West German affiliate of the NAP to Turkes revealing NAP contacts with West German intelligence. Among these contacts was Hans-Eckhardt Kannapin, a city official in the Christian Democratic Party and personal friend of former Turkish premier Demirel, whose vice-premier Turkes had been. Kannapin has been "frequently accused of assisting Turkish right-wing groups" (*New York Times*, 5/19/81). Kannapin in turn introduced NAP officials in West Germany to "the head of the Turkish division" of West German intelligence. Often called the "Gehlen organization" after its founder, it was formed by the U.S. after World War II from ex-Nazis and members of Hitler's intelligence corps (military intelligence, or *Abwehr*; Nazi Party intelligence, or *Sicherheitsdienst*; state intelligence, or *Gestapo*). The main task of the "Gehlen" organization is anti-Soviet espionage. It has always worked closely with the CIA.

The trial documents also show the NAP has been involved with Turkish ex-members of the Nazi SS battalions (the Nazis had several such made up of Turkic fascists, which they used in World War 2 against the USSR). The West German NAP, based in the large Turkish "guest-worker" communities, has often been accused of harboring right-wing killers, including Acga.

Last September (1980), the police in Mainz arrested Uzeyir Bayrakli, who is wanted in Ankara in connection with the murder of a Turkish professor and is now awaiting extradition. In 1979 West German border officials seized Nasibullah Turker, who is also suspected of being a killer for extremist right-wing groups. (New York Times, *ibid*)

All this strongly suggests the involvement of Western intelligence in Acga's act. But there is more.

Organs and writers with well-known CIA connections picked up the "Soviet plot" story. *Il Giornale Nuovo*, a Milan newspaper that began touting the story in May, 1981, long boasted of having Michael Ledeen as an associate. A specialist on Italy, Ledeen is openly spoken of in the Italian press as a CIA officer. He is now at the Georgetown Institute for Strategic and International Studies, an expert on Soviet terrorism, and adviser to President Reagan. Last summer Ledeen promoted the "Soviet plot" tale before Senator Denton's Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, as did Robert Moss and Claire Sterling. Sterling's 1980 book *The Terror Network*, which blames the Soviets for all terrorist violence in the world while explicitly refusing to discuss CIA terrorism, uses as its main evidence "Western intelligence sources", including Ledeen's articles in *Il Giornale Nuovo* and Moss' stuff in the *Economist* Foreign Report (which Moss then edited; he has since been fired). Finally, Marvin Kalb, who brought the tale to TV, wrote with brother Bernard a hero-worshipping biography of Henry Kissinger some years ago. Kissinger is no mean terrorist himself – witness his plotting to overthrow the Allende government in Chile, or the "secret" bombing of Laos – but you'll find nothing about that in the Kalbs' book. Officially the CIA is downplaying the "Soviet plot" story, while Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, assorted Soviet and Polish émigrés, and Senator Alphonse D'Amato of New York promote it in the press. Any CIA attempt to openly push this story would, of course, call it into question.

What is the "Soviet plot" theory? Basically, that the Kremlin wanted John Paul II out of the way because, in August 1980, the Pope reportedly sent a handwritten note to Soviet boss Brezhnev threatening to abdicate and personally lead the fight against any Russian invasion of his Polish homeland (for what it is worth, the Vatican denies any such note was ever sent). In general, the Pope's support for the *Solidarnosc* union in Poland supposedly provided the motive for a Soviet attempt to kill him.

In fact Acga had threatened to kill the Pope in November 1979 – nine months before *Solidarnosc* even existed. And there are few reasons for the Soviets to be displeased with John Paul II. He and his agents in Poland – formerly Cardinal Wysinski, now Cardinal Glemp – tried (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) to restrain the fascist leaders of *Solidarnosc* (for the fascist character of this union, see my essay in the last issue of *Comment*), giving upwards of \$40 million to the Polish union to strengthen Vatican influence. The Church has been a moderating force throughout, urging non-violence and cooperation with the Polish government. Cries of "betrayal" have at times been hurled at the Church from militants within *Solidarnosc*.

In addition, the Pope has made vaguely pro-labor and pro-union statements (such as the encyclical "On Human Work," of September 1981, which infuriated *Fortune* magazine). He has held talks with the PLO; has shown increased toleration for the activist clergy of Central America; has agreed to visit Nicaragua although the five priests who hold cabinet positions in the pro-Soviet Sandinista government

still reject his demand that they resign; has always maintained close though secret contact with Moscow. The Pope recently created the first Soviet Cardinal (Vaivods of Lithuania) acceptable to the Kremlin and resident within the USSR.

This "Ostpolitik" angers many in the Vatican and around the world who thought they had a right to expect virulently anti-Soviet behavior from the doctrinally conservative, very nationalistic Cardinal Wojtyla. Thus the secret Catholic order *Opus Dei*, described as "fascist" by *The Wall Street Journal* (they should know), reportedly helped Wojtyla become Pope, attracted by his very conservative views.

John Paul II has been far too accommodating to the Soviet Union for the taste of many "ultra-conservative" and neo-fascist forces in Europe and, for that matter, in the U.S. The Vatican has clearly opted for a policy of long-time coexistence and cooperation with pro-Soviet, phony "communist" regimes. This reflects a broad trend among the European political and economic elite to abandon the illusion of overthrowing or even rolling back Soviet power, and to move instead towards neutrality vis-à-vis the U.S. Still other forces in Europe and the U.S. vigorously oppose this trend and insist on the "hard line" against Moscow. In Western Europe these latter forces are strong in the Christian Democratic parties as well as the intelligence services of West Germany and Italy; in the U.S., the "hard line" is associated with the Reagan administration.

It is these forces that are making hay from the "Soviet plot" story. The new Soviet chief Andropov headed the KGB (Soviet secret police) in May, 1981, and so – according to the "Soviet plot" theory – would have overseen the plot to kill the Pope. How can you trust such an evil man? is the imprecation hurled by the delighted Reaganuts (like William Safire of *The New York Times*) and assorted "hard-liners" against those, centered around the Council on Foreign Relations, who are for serious arms reduction talks with the "businesslike" and "flexible" Andropov.

It is most likely, therefore, that West German or U.S. intelligence hired the Turkish NAP thugs to shoot the Pope, unless the NAP had reasons of their own for the deed. This is conceivable, since the NAP and the Vatican support competing sides in the international heroin traffic. Of the NAP's role in this trade much has been said in the media. The NAP are basically the revived "French Connection" of a dozen years ago, now using a route through Sofia, Bulgaria to supply the burgeoning European heroin market. They are, according to the Rome newspaper *La Repubblica* of March 1, 1982, in "direct competition" with the major heroin suppliers to the U.S. through Latin America, the Italian-American mafia. Michele Sindona, "God's banker" before Roberto Calvi, owed his meteoric rise in the financial world to his personal friendship with Pope Paul VI. Three Vatican Cardinals volunteered to testify for Sindona at his New York trial in 1980. Yet, according to Carlo Bordoni, Sindona's co-defendant, Sindona "was (and still is) one of the mafia's bankers, the route through which organized crime money passes across the Atlantic." Ex-*New York Times* reporter Richard Hammer revealed in *The Vatican Connection* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982) how, in 1971, Pope Paul VI's closest associate, Eugène Cardinal Tisserant, set up a \$950 million phony securities fraud with mafia help; Cardinal Marcinkus, head of the Vatican Bank, was the "bag-man." The examples could be multiplied; Vatican links to the mafia are commonly discussed in the Italian press (but never in the U.S.!).

Thus the Turkish fascist NAP could have had their own reasons for wanting to see the Pope – head of a competing gang, in a way – out of action. But the Vatican is at basis a political rather than an economic

power. It seems more likely that the shooting of the Pope originated in the fierce struggle now rending Europe over what attitude to adopt towards the Soviet Union. This conflict finds its sharpest expression in the battles over Cruise missile deployment, arms reduction talks, and the role of NATO, but it includes important economic issues of East-West trade (e.g. over the Soviet natural gas pipeline). As posed by Seweryn Bialer (*Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1982/83), this is the question of whether coexistence with the Soviets, under conditions of "regulated" (i.e. normal, capitalist) competition, is possible. The Reagan Administration, together with many among the Western European elites, is opposed to this stance. But the bulk of Europe's economic and political elite seems to have opted for it. Evidently the Vatican is following their lead. More violent events may be expected as this process develops further.

The Soviets are surely capable of murdering the Pope, or anyone else who stands in their way: witness the slaughter in Afghanistan, to take only the latest example. But in this case the evidence all points towards a Western culprit. It is interesting, if not surprising, to witness the contortions of the "free press" in the U.S. as it avoids even the most superficial examination of the evidence at hand. Thomas Jefferson said somewhere that he pitied the man who read newspapers and thought that he knew something about what was happening in the world. It is a lesson to be learned again and again.

Sources: The Italian, U.S., and West German press; the Sterling and Hammer books mentioned in the text; Henrik Kruger, *The Great Heroin Coup* (Boston, 1980).