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# Pope John Paul II, the Assassination Attempt, and the Soviet Union

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# Pope John Paul II, the Assassination Attempt, and the Soviet Union

## **Abstract**

“The attempt to murder the pope remains one of the century’s great mysteries,” wrote Carl Bernstein and Marco Politti in their 1996 biography of Pope John Paul II. Indeed, the mystery has remained unsolved since the pope was shot and wounded on May 13, 1981. A recent investigation concluded that the Soviet government was the perpetrator, but the situation should be examined in a broader historical context. What actually happened on May 13, 1981? Was it the sole decision and action of Mehmet Ali Agca, who was expressing his opposition to “Western imperialist policies,” as he had written in a threatening letter to a newspaper in 1979? Or had “someone else commissioned him to carry it out,” as Pope John Paul II alleged in a memoir written in 2005?

Before evaluating the question from an historical standpoint, it is necessary to provide some background in order to establish a potential motive for the Soviet Union to support such an assassination attempt. Was Karol Wojtyla (the Pope’s birth name) really “[their] enemy,” as a party directive warned in 1979? Only then can we evaluate the Soviet Union’s involvement, or whether there was a conspiracy behind the attempted assassination of John Paul II at all. Finally, we should step back and look at the significance of the assassination attempt and the impact of the pope on the Cold War and Soviet dominance of Eastern Europe.

## **Keywords**

Pope John Paul II, assassination attempt, Mehmet Ali Agca, Soviet Union

# POPE JOHN PAUL II, THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT, AND THE SOVIET UNION



DANIEL SCOTTO

“The attempt to murder the pope remains one of the century’s great mysteries,” wrote Carl Bernstein and Marco Politti in their 1996 biography of Pope John Paul II.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the mystery has remained unsolved since the pope was shot and wounded on May 13, 1981. A recent investigation concluded that the Soviet government was the perpetrator, but the situation should be examined in a broader historical context. What actually happened on May 13, 1981? Was it the sole decision and action of Mehmet Ali Agca, who was expressing his opposition to “Western imperialist policies,” as he had written in a threatening letter to a newspaper in 1979?<sup>2</sup> Or had “someone else commissioned him to carry it out,” as Pope John Paul II alleged in a memoir written in 2005?<sup>3</sup>

Before evaluating the question from an historical standpoint, it is necessary to provide some background in order to establish a potential motive for the Soviet Union to support such an assassination attempt. Was Karol Wojtyła (the Pope’s birth name) really “[their] enemy,” as a party directive warned in 1979?<sup>4</sup> Only then can we evaluate the Soviet Union’s involvement, or whether there was a conspiracy behind the attempted assassination of John Paul II at all. Finally, we should step back and look at the significance of the assassination attempt and the impact of the pope on the Cold War and Soviet dominance of Eastern Europe.

## The Rise of Karol Wojtyła

Although he was not elected to the papacy until 1978, Karol Wojtyła first became a concern of the Soviet Union in 1971. As part of a major surveillance initiative across the Soviet Bloc, the KGB monitored the activities of Wojtyła, “whom the Centre considered the leading ideological influence on the Polish Church.”<sup>5</sup> Poland’s equivalent of the KGB, the *Sluzba Bezpieczenstwa* (SB), had considered bringing charges against Wojtyła as early as 1973 under article 194 of Poland’s Criminal Code, forbidding “seditious statements during religious services.” His fame and his status, however, prevented his arrest.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Bernstein and Marco Politti, *His Holiness: John Paul II and the Hidden History of Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 296.

<sup>2</sup> “Alleged Assailant Wrote a Letter Saying He’d Kill John Paul on Trip,” *New York Times*, 14 May 1981, A1.

<sup>3</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 163.

<sup>4</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 192.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 269. This early surveillance of Wojtyła was part of the larger Operation PROGRESS, and this particular initiative was in response to the fall of the Gomulka government in Poland.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew, *The Sword and the Shield*, 509.

Upon his election to the papacy in 1978, the SB sent a report to Moscow, noting that Wojtyla held “extreme anti-Communist views” and had accused the Polish government of restricting human rights, exploiting workers, imposing atheism on society, and denying the Catholic Church its traditional role in Polish culture.<sup>7</sup> The *National Review*, a conservative American publication, was prescient in its evaluation of the pope’s election, saying that “the papacy of John Paul II may [open] a huge fault along the Western edge of the Soviet empire, where Catholicism still has immeasurable latent power... the lights must be burning late in the Kremlin.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the Soviet Union feared this very occurrence. The news enraged Yuri Andropov, head of the KGB, who quickly grasped the significance of the selection of a Polish pope. Soon after hearing the news, he called the KGB’s *resident* in Warsaw and angrily asked, “How could you possibly allow the election of a citizen of a socialist country as pope?”<sup>9</sup> Many in the Polish and Soviet governments believed that the United States had conspired to elect Wojtyla to the papacy in order to help undermine the Communist government in Poland.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, one of John Paul’s first actions was to declare his support for universal human rights, with a focus on Poland and Eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup>

The Soviet Bloc was justifiably concerned with the prospect of the new pope’s inevitable return to Poland. Premier Brezhnev suggested that Edward Gierek, the Polish leader, should persuade the pope to contract a so-called “diplomatic illness” in order to prevent him from visiting Poland. This absurd suggestion accurately embodies the sentiments in the Soviet Union: utter disbelief at Wojtyla’s election and confusion about how to tolerate it.<sup>12</sup>

Realistically, it was impossible for the Soviet Union to prevent Pope John Paul II from visiting Poland. He was greeted warmly on June 2, 1979 by 20,000 people at the airport, and 290,000 worshippers heard the pope offer the Pontifical Mass in Warsaw. In his homily, he declared,

The exclusion of Christ from the history of man is an act against man... I am asking all of you, through the great eucharistic prayer, that Christ will not cease to be for us an open book of life for the future, for our Polish future.<sup>13</sup>

In his short homily, John Paul II essentially denounced the communist regime for its exclusion of religion. Soon after, while speaking with Gierek, he announced that “The church wishes to serve people also in the temporal dimension of their life and existence. By establishing a

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 508.

<sup>8</sup> “Pope John Paul II,” *National Review* 30 (10 November 1978), 1392.

<sup>9</sup> George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 279. It is worth noting that, while Andropov’s exasperated question seems to be quite serious, the KGB was most likely not strong enough to be able to affect the election of a pope.

<sup>10</sup> Bernstein, *His Holiness*, 173–4. The Soviets specifically blamed Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, who was President Carter’s national security adviser, an ethnic Pole, and a fierce anti-communist.

<sup>11</sup> “Pope Seeks Universal Respect for Human and Religious Rights,” *The Times (London)*, 21 October 1978, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Bernstein, 191; Andrew, 512.

<sup>13</sup> “Text of Pope’s Homily for Mass,” *New York Times*, 3 June 1979, A12.

religious relationship with people, the church consolidates them in their natural social bonds.” This directly challenged the regime in Poland; one Polish Catholic editor noted that the pope had become “tougher” than he had been in the past.<sup>14</sup>

Formally, the pope was visiting Poland to commemorate the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. Stanislaw, Poland’s patron saint who was martyred for “[daring] to tell the king himself that he was bound to respect the law of God.”<sup>15</sup> In the days before assuming the papacy, Wojtyla’s homilies frequently referenced St. Stanislaw, who had become a symbol of Polish opposition to the communist regime.<sup>16</sup> Even the timing of the visit was political.

Undoubtedly, the visit to Poland was wholly unfavorable for the communist leadership in Poland and the Soviet Union. The pope spent much of his nine days in Poland attacking the very foundations of the communist system, declaring that man “could not be regarded only as a ‘means of production.’” The impact was not lost on the media at the time; one article declared that the Pope had “demonstrated that his voice would be a source of enormous influence in Eastern Europe.”<sup>17</sup> And, as unfortunate as the pope’s “triumphant” return to Poland was for both the Polish communist government and the Soviet government, the Polish government itself had further struggles. The Gdansk Accords, signed on August 31, included major concessions to striking workers, were signed. When Lech Walesa, the leader of the movement, signed the Accords, he used a large, gaudy pen, one bearing a portrait of John Paul II.<sup>18</sup> The Polish resistance to Soviet domination now had its spiritual leader (John Paul II) in addition to its official leader (Lech Walesa).<sup>19</sup>

This background is essential to the history of the attempted assassination of John Paul II. It is inconceivable to imagine someone in Soviet Russia or Poland making a rational, calculated decision to order the pope’s assassination without understanding the impact of the pope on Poland and its communist leadership. Jonathan Steele and Eric Abraham noted that “Establishing a motive [on its own]... is not enough to prove that Andropov would have ordered his men to arrange to have the pope killed.”<sup>20</sup> Still, it is necessary to establish a motive before we further examine the assassination attempt.

## **The Assassination Attempt on John Paul II**

While the exact nature and purpose of the attempted murder of John Paul II are in question, the methodology and specific details of it are not. On May 13, 1981, at 5:19 PM, just before

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<sup>14</sup> “Pope Gets Big Welcome in Poland, Offers Challenge to the Authorities,” *New York Times*, 3 June 1979, A1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*; Bernstein, 127.

<sup>16</sup> Bernstein, 127.

<sup>17</sup> “Soviet Avows Atheism After Pope’s Remarks,” *New York Times*, 11 June 1979, A6; “Nine Triumphant Days in Poland,” *New York Times*, 11 June 1979, A1.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew, 516; Maryjane Osa, *Solidarity and Contention: Networks of Polish Opposition*, Social Movements, Protest, and Contention, Volume 18 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 146.

<sup>19</sup> For a more in-depth evaluation of the *Solidarity* movement, see Osa, or Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*, 3rd edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Steele and Eric Abraham, *Andropov in Power* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1983), 134.

the start of his weekly general audience, John Paul II was shot by Mehmet Ali Agca in St. Peter's Square in the Vatican. Agca fired four shots from a 9-millimeter Browning automatic, two of which hit the Pope. Two bystanders were hit in the attack: Anne Odre, a 60-year old American, and Rose Hill, a 21-year old Jamaican. The Pope was seriously wounded in the abdomen and underwent over five hours of surgery, resulting in the removal of part of his intestine. He was also less seriously wounded in his right arm and his left hand.<sup>21</sup> The Pope survived, along with Odre and Hill.

Mehmet Ali Agca's history was retraced soon after the assassination attempt. *The New York Times* compiled a substantial front-page story and demonstrated a link between Agca and the Grey Wolves, a neofascist network in Turkey affiliated with the right-wing National Action Party. While the reconstruction was thorough and justifiable, the major link preceded the failed assassination bid by two years; Agca was involved in the assassination of Abdi Ipekci, a liberal Turkish newspaper editor.<sup>22</sup> Agca also wrote a letter to a newspaper on November 26, 1979 declaring his intent to assassinate the Pope on his visit to Turkey later that year. While under interrogation, he explained that it was simply to create a diversion in order to avoid detection; Agca was nowhere near the Pope during that visit to Turkey.<sup>23</sup>

The information became more complicated in 1983, when stories began to surface about a potential Bulgarian connection to the assassination. Inevitably, any Bulgarian involvement would have implicitly meant Soviet involvement, for Moscow turned to the Bulgarian *Durzharna Sigurnost* (DS) when it needed to accomplish a "wet-op."<sup>24</sup> The most famous "wet-op" was the assassination of Georgi Markov, a Bulgarian dissident living in Britain. In 1978, Markov was lightly stabbed in the leg by an umbrella, which had been modified to inject a small pellet of ricin, a highly toxic poison, into its target. Markov died three days later.<sup>25</sup>

The DS dealt with a critical defection: that of Jordan Mantarov. The March 23, 1983 edition of the *New York Times* ran a story about Mantarov, who supposedly reported to French intelligence that the KGB and DS had collaborated on the plot to assassinate the pope. According to the defector, Soviet intelligence indicated that the pope was "the keystone of a United States effort to subvert the Polish Government" and move it away from the Communist bloc. An investigation conducted by the *Times* concluded that Agca had *some* connection to the Bulgarians, including the Bulgarian secret police. The information came from someone close to Bekir Celenk, a Turkish smuggler who Agca claimed had offered him a substantial sum of money to kill the pope.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> These were the details, as report in the *New York Times'* cover story on May 14, 1981. Most of the original account is undisputed, and there were many witnesses. "Pope is Shot in Car in Vatican Square," *New York Times*, 14 May 1981, A1.

<sup>22</sup> "Gunman in Istanbul Kills a Leading Editor," *New York Times*, 2 February 1979, A5.

<sup>23</sup> "Trail of Mehmet Ali Agca: 6 Years of Neofascist Ties," *New York Times*, 25 May 1981, A1; Bernstein, *His Holiness*, 305-6.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Secret History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 639-40. The term "wet-op" referred to operations in which Moscow would prefer to avoid direct involvement due to the potential international or local ramifications.

<sup>25</sup> Yveta Kenety, "The Poison Umbrella," *New Presence: The Prague Journal of Central European Affairs* 7 (Winter 2006): 46-48. The Markov story is a very famous one and surfaced a lot in the last few years with the fear of ricin and bioterror.

<sup>26</sup> "Three Bulgarians Linked to Shooting of Pope," *Washington Post*, 8 December 1982, A1; "The Attack on the Pope: New Link to Bulgarians," *New York Times*, 23 March 1983, A1.

The problem was that Mantarov's story was based on hearsay; he had no direct involvement in the plot to kill the pope. Moreover, Bulgarian officials immediately refuted the story, claiming that Mantarov was a maintenance mechanic rather than the deputy commercial attaché as he had alleged.<sup>27</sup> Though confirmed in *Time* magazine, it does not eliminate the possibility that Mantarov could have still accessed the information. In his account, Mantarov stated that he had learned about the plot from a close friend in the DS. Further complicating matters, Bulgarian émigrés insisted that Mantarov had defected one month *prior* to the assassination attempt rather than several months after it, as the *Times* article had alleged. The head of French intelligence dispatched a warning to the Vatican in the weeks prior to the assassination attempt, based on his claim that he had "solid evidence in late April 1981 that an assassination attempt against the Pope was imminent." This tip possibly could have come from Mantarov.<sup>28</sup>

It is difficult to know which story to accept, because each side had compelling reasons to hide the truth. Bulgaria wanted to hide any connection to the reviled assassination of a religious figure, and Mantarov could have thought that giving France more interesting and pertinent stories would earn him a better arrangement as he defected.

Agca's story has changed many times; he has blamed the Bulgarian government and radical Islam, among other causes. Yet it might not be worthwhile to evaluate Agca's testimony as important evidence at all. The pope's spokesman, Dr. Joaquin Navarro-Valls, noted that Agca probably did not know the details of the conspiracy if there even was a conspiracy, because "it was done by professionals and professionals don't leave traces." One of the prosecutors, Antonio Marini, noted that "Agca manipulated us all, telling hundreds of lies, continually changed his story; we have been forced to open tens of different investigations."<sup>29</sup>

The fact that Agca had announced his intent to assassinate the pope two years before the assassination attempt occurred is a strong point against a conspiracy. It is possible, however, that Agca told the truth about that part of his story. Perhaps his goal was to create a diversion. In looking to execute the directive from Sofia, Agca might have been recruited simply because the letter to the newspaper could serve as a "cover-story" in the event of Agca's capture, in addition to later providing evidence supporting the theory that Agca operated alone. Additionally, assuming a conspiracy, one has to consider the reasons behind the selection of Agca over someone else. He took four shots from a very short distance (less than ten feet away) only to hit his main target with two, failing to accomplish his objective.<sup>30</sup> It is possible, then, that Agca was chosen not because of his prowess as a gunman, but rather because of his optimal "cover-story."

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<sup>27</sup> "Bulgaria Says Defector Was Only a Mechanic," *New York Times*, 24 March 1983, A5.

<sup>28</sup> James Kelly, "The Undiplomatic Bulgarian," *Time* 121 (4 April 1983): 38-9.

<sup>29</sup> Bernstein, 299; "Ali Agca revient à la liberté avec ses secrets," *Liberation.fr*; 12 January 2006, (accessed from <http://www.liberation.fr/page.php?Article=350162>), writer's translation with assistance from Altavista: "Agca Asserts KGB Aided in Pope Plot," *New York Times*, 9 July 1983, 1.

<sup>30</sup> "The assassination conspiracy: Evidence suggests the KGB and Bulgarian secret services plotted John Paul's death," *Ottawa Citizen*, 3 April 2005, A10. This article was the first one that I read that presented the distance. It said "three metres," which converts to roughly 9.8 feet.

There is also evidence that there was a sharp rise in communications between Bulgaria and contacts in Italy in the months prior to the assassination. Moreover, communications suddenly dropped off in the two weeks before it occurred. While on its own, this could be considered merely coincidental, the fact that there are communications anomalies in addition to the other evidence implies that it was related to the assassination attempt.<sup>31</sup>

Recent evidence and conclusions have proven more damning towards the Soviet Union's involvement, while also implicating East Germany's infamous intelligence organization, the Stasi. Documents released by *Stasi* provide background about Agca's history before the assassination. Agca was trained at a guerrilla camp operated by the renowned international terrorist Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, also known as "Carlos the Jackal." Sanchez was affiliated with the Soviet Bloc through his Separat terrorist network, which was partially sponsored by the KGB and *Stasi*. According to Italian Senator Paolo Guzzanti, chairman of a recent investigative commission, all of "the [Separat] meetings at which terrorism attacks were planned were held in the presence of officers of the KGB and the Stasi."<sup>32</sup> The same article called Agca's murder of Abdi Ipekci a "contract killing" through the Separat network, rather than an ideologically motivated one or one due to his support for right-wing causes.

More recently, the Mitrokhin Commission, an Italian parliamentary commission investigating the situation, declared that the Soviet Union assisted in the assassination, using the descriptive legal phrase "beyond any reasonable doubt." This accusation was based on new analysis of photographic evidence. The new evidence indicated that Sergei Ivanov Antonov, a Bulgarian accused of hiring Agca in the first place, was in St. Peter's Square during the assassination attempt. Antonov's alibi was that he had been in his office during the attempted assassination, but the new evidence "decisively" disproves that.<sup>33</sup> The Commission's conclusions, however, must be analyzed with a certain degree of skepticism. A London newspaper report of the commission's findings provided the necessary caution, noting,

... the credibility of the report was open to doubt because its author is a close ally of the Prime Minister. In the past the work of the commission, named after the KGB double-agent Vassily Mitrokhin who fled to Britain in 1992, has been seen as a sophisticated effort to stigmatise Italian Communists—once closely linked to the Soviets—as enemies of Italy and of the Catholic Church. . . . Mr Berlusconi is in the habit of stigmatising his opponents, political and judicial, as "communists," and with a finely balanced general election due in a month, an authoritative-sounding denunciation of communist perfidy is grist to the electoral mill.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Bernstein, 303.

<sup>32</sup> "The Assassination Conspiracy," *Ottawa Citizen*, A10.

<sup>33</sup> "Pope's Shooting Laid to Soviets By Italian Panel," *New York Times*, 2 March 2006, 6.

<sup>34</sup> "Italy Blames KGB for Plot to Kill Pope John Paul," *The Independent (London)*, 3 March 2006, 23.

This is an important aspect of the situation: even the “fact-finders” and investigators can have biased interpretations and hidden agendas. The results of the commission should not be ignored; rather, in conjunction with the rest of the evidence, they should be seriously considered. Still, Berlusconi’s electoral considerations and strategies should not be overlooked in the analysis.

One conspiracy theory that Bernstein and Politti discussed and which was posed by several intelligence professionals was the “Becket scenario,” in which an Eastern European security service ordered the assassination because of the repeated complaints in the Soviet government. This patterned the relationship between King Henry II, an English monarch from the twelfth century, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket. Henry II became intensely frustrated with an increasingly intractable Becket who was more eager to defend the Church than to support Henry II. He expressed his outrage in the presence of four knights, bellowing, “Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?” or some variation of that exclamation. The knights interpreted this as an order and assassinated Becket, against the will of King Henry II. In a “Becket scenario,” Bulgarian intelligence would have independently planned an assassination attempt without the explicit consent of Soviet intelligence due to the Soviet Union’s increasing consternation with John Paul II.<sup>35</sup> Although this theory is certainly interesting, the DS was essentially subordinate to the KGB and it is unlikely that it would have operated on its own. Additionally, investigations implicate the Soviet Union more directly, and, while the Becket scenario seems to tie things together neatly, to disregard Soviet complicity completely is too great a simplification.

It is possible that the original story of Agca’s firm ties to the neofascist Grey Wolves motivated the assassination. It is also possible that Bulgarian and Soviet denials of involvement are acceptable and factual. There is too much evidence, however, that indicates a conspiracy of some sort: Agca’s built-in alibi/justification of his newspaper letter, the Soviet Union’s history of reliance on Bulgaria’s DS for its “wet-ops,” the communications anomalies between Bulgaria and Italy, the Mantarov defection, and the recent findings of the Mitrokhin commission. The Soviet Union also had a clear motive in desiring to eliminate the pope. It could be said that the Solidarity movement, which was becoming a proverbial thorn in the side of the Soviet Union, was a direct outgrowth of the Pope’s visit in 1979. Walesa’s use of the pen with the Pope’s likeness in signing the Gdansk Accords accentuates this point.

So, what forces were actually at work on May 13, 1981? In an article in *Time Magazine* from 1983, a top aide to the pope claimed, “The Soviet intention was to cut off the head of Polish nationalism.”<sup>36</sup> The aide’s conclusion is rational. The Soviet Union was growing increasingly desperate and dismayed from John Paul II’s popularity and impact in an

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<sup>35</sup> Bernstein, 300. For a dramatic interpretation of this story, see Jean Anouilh, *Becket or the Honor of God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996). There remains a debate as to whether or not Henry II was ordering an assassination, but the historical consensus is that it was not intended.

<sup>36</sup> Kelly, “The Undiplomatic Bulgarian,” *Time* 121 (4 April 1983): 38-9

increasingly discontented Poland. They had also interpreted John Paul's election as part of an American conspiracy. From the Soviet perspective, the pope, who was causing great trouble in Poland, was not an independent religious figure. He was a mere pawn of Washington, which was aggressively trying to dislodge Poland from the Soviet Bloc. The humble priest from Poland was shaking the foundations of the Soviet Empire, something that the Soviet Union could not accept benignly. Somehow, Poland's independence movement had to be suppressed, and various international agreements (Helsinki Accords) and the Gdansk Accords made it increasingly difficult to repress the movement militarily.<sup>37</sup> Quietly, the Soviet Union sought to eliminate the pope to "decapitate" the movement by removing what it saw as the movement's spiritual and symbolic leader.

As it had done in the case of other "wet-ops," the Soviet KGB assigned the operation to the Bulgarian DS. In its planning, the DS located an assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, whose credentials were bolstered by a history of support for right-wing causes, his assassination of a prominent Turkish liberal, and his published death threat against the pope. Most likely, Agca was not supposed to survive the mission. The back-story would have provided sufficient motive in a posthumous investigation: Agca was a mere deranged right-wing terrorist with a personal mission to assassinate the pope.<sup>38</sup>

The plan clearly failed. The goal in this mission would have been for two deaths, Pope John Paul II and Mehmet Ali Agca, but neither figure died. The investigations have consistently confirmed Bulgarian involvement, and it is too difficult to envision a scenario in which the Bulgarian DS would have acted against the wishes of the KGB. While it is quite possible that the truth could differ from this interpretation, the evidence points in favor of a broad conspiracy in the attempted assassination of John Paul II.

## **The Triumph of Wojtyła and the Lessons of Involvement**

Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis is quick to credit Pope John Paul II with catalyzing the fall of communism in Poland.<sup>39</sup> Biographers Bernstein and Politti take a more guarded view, agreeing with the pope's assessment that communism had imploded due to its own weaknesses.<sup>40</sup> Still, it can be seen that the worst fears of the communist leadership, for one reason or another, had been realized: the system collapsed, and John Paul II and Poland were among the major contributors to that collapse.

It is easy to criticize the so-called "conspiracy theories" of a Soviet-driven assassination plot against the pope because, on the surface, the assassination attempt does not seem like a

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<sup>37</sup> The Soviet Union signed the Helsinki Accords in 1975, which were in the spirit of the détente movement. The agreement called for greater respect for human rights and stronger recognition of national sovereignty, among other clauses.

<sup>38</sup> Kelly, "Undiplomatic Bulgarian," 38-9. In the article, Kelly writes, "According to Mantarov, the Turk was to meet his own fate there as well: he was supposed to be killed immediately after shooting the Pope."

<sup>39</sup> Gaddis, 193.

<sup>40</sup> Bernstein, 482.

rational action. Yet the evidence appears to indicate that the Soviet Union had a clear, rational motive for eliminating the pope: its own survival. The fact that the Soviet Union collapsed merely ten years after the failed assassination is compelling in its own right; in a way, it proves that the accuracy of their political calculation. In the mind of the Soviet leadership, the pope constituted a direct threat to its Communist bloc, and the only way to address the problem was to eliminate him.

The conclusions of recent investigations, even with their political motivations, should not be ignored. Evidence existed long before investigations concluded a Soviet-led conspiracy. Furthermore, Agca's links to Bulgaria have been established. There was a clear motive for the Soviet Union to address the situation violently, as they viewed the Pope's agenda as a critical threat to their position. Finally, there was precedent for the Soviet Union addressing its "stickiest" problems by sending its "wet-ops" to Bulgaria's DS.

In a court of law, it would be difficult to prove Soviet involvement in the attempted assassination of the pope. Historically, however, the facts appear to support Soviet involvement, at least on some level. Accepting Soviet involvement in a plot is beneficial for analyzing certain aspects of the Soviet government, like how Soviet concerns in Politburo meetings possibly translated into covert activity, or how the Soviet government viewed the Solidarity movement, or how officials miscalculated American capabilities, or how officials underestimated John Paul II individually.

The attempted assassination of the pope appears to have been sanctioned by the Soviet Union as a way to combat the "counter-revolution" in Poland. It was an act of desperation, but, considering the impact of the pope and the Polish crisis, from the Soviet perspective it is certainly understandable.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> It is worth crediting Tom Clancy, a fiction author, for inspiration in writing this paper. Clancy's *Red Rabbit* was a fictional portrayal of the attempted assassination of the pope, and, while it initially seemed very far-fetched, in doing the research, his story was strikingly plausible. See Tom Clancy, *Red Rabbit* (New York: C.P. Putnam's Sons, 2002).

