

On the Trail of Turkey's Terrorist Grey Wolves

From the Archive: Turkey, as a NATO country near Russia's border, developed a powerful "deep state" where intelligence operatives, terrorists and gangsters crossed paths and shared political alliances, a grim reality that author Martin A. Lee explored in 1997 and a dark legacy that reaches to the present.

By Martin A. Lee (Originally published in 1997)

In broad daylight on May 2, 1997, 50 armed men set upon a television station in Istanbul with gunfire. The attackers unleashed a fusillade of bullets and shouted slogans supporting Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister Tansu Ciller. The gunmen were outraged over the station's broadcast of a TV report critical of Ciller, a close U.S. ally who had come under criticism for stonewalling investigations into collusion between state security forces and Turkish criminal elements.

Miraculously, no one was injured in the attack, but the headquarters of Independent Flash TV were left pock-marked with bullet-holes and smashed windows. The gunfire also sent an unmistakable message to Turkish journalists and legislators: don't challenge Ciller and other high-level Turkish officials when they cover up state secrets.

For several months, Turkey had been awash in dramatic disclosures connecting high Turkish officials to the right-wing Grey Wolves, the terrorist band which has preyed on the region for years. In 1981, a terrorist from the Grey Wolves attempted to assassinate Pope John Paul II in Vatican City.

But at the center of the mushrooming Turkish scandal is whether Turkey, a strategically placed NATO country, allowed mafiosi and right-wing extremists to operate death squads and to smuggle drugs with impunity. A Turkish parliamentary commission is investigating these new charges.

The rupture of state secrets in Turkey also could release clues to other major Cold War mysteries. Besides the attempted papal assassination, the Turkish disclosures could shed light on the collapse of the Vatican bank in 1982 and the operation of a clandestine pipeline that pumped sophisticated military hardware into the Middle East – apparently from NATO stockpiles in Europe – in exchange for heroin sold by the Mafia in the United States.

The official Turkish inquiry was triggered by what could have been the opening scene of a spy novel: a dramatic car crash on a remote highway near the village of Susurluk, 100 miles southwest of Istanbul. On Nov. 3, 1996, three people were

crushed to death when their speeding black Mercedes hit a tractor and overturned.

The crash killed Husseyin Kocadag, a top police official who commanded Turkish counter-insurgency units. But it was Kocadag's company that stunned the nation. The two other dead were Abdullah Catli, a convicted fugitive who was wanted for drug trafficking and murder, and Catli's girlfriend, Gonca Us, a Turkish beauty queen turned mafia hit-woman.

A fourth occupant, who survived the crash, was Kurdish warlord Sedat Bucak, whose militia had been armed and financed by the Turkish government to fight Kurdish separatists. At first, Turkish officials claimed that the police were transporting two captured criminals.

But evidence seized at the crash site indicated that Abdullah Catli, the fugitive gangster, had been given special diplomatic credentials by Turkish authorities. Catli was carrying a government-approved weapons permit and six ID cards, each with a different name. Catli also possessed several handguns, silencers and a cache of narcotics, not the picture of a subdued criminal.

When it became obvious that Catli was a police collaborator, not a captive, the Turkish Interior Minister resigned. Several high-ranking law enforcement officers, including Istanbul's police chief, were suspended. But the red-hot scandal soon threatened to jump that bureaucratic firebreak and endanger the careers of other senior government officials.

Grey Wolves Terror

The news of Catli's secret police ties were all the more scandalous given his well-known role as a key leader of the Grey Wolves, a neo-fascist terrorist group that has stalked Turkey since the late 1960s.

A young tough who wore black leather pants and looked like Turkey's answer to Elvis Presley, Catli graduated from street gang violence to become a brutal enforcer for the Grey Wolves. He rose quickly within their ranks, emerging as second-in-command in 1978. That year, Turkish police linked him to the murder of seven trade-union activists and Catli went underground.

Three years later, the Grey Wolves gained international notoriety when Mehmet Ali Agca, one of Catli's closest collaborators, shot and nearly killed Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981. Catli was the leader of a fugitive terrorist cell that included Agca and a handful of other Turkish neo-fascists.

Testifying in September 1985 as a witness at the trial of three Bulgarians and

four Turks charged with complicity in the papal shooting in Rome, Catli (who was not a defendant) disclosed that he gave Agca the pistol that wounded the pontiff. Catli had previously helped Agca escape from a Turkish jail, where Agca was serving time for killing a national newspaper editor.

In addition to harboring Agca, Catli supplied him with fake IDs and directed Agca's movements in West Germany, Switzerland, and Austria for several months prior to the papal attack. Catli enjoyed close links to Turkish drug mafiosi, too. His Grey Wolves henchmen worked as couriers for the Turkish mob boss Abuzer Ugurlu.

At Ugurlu's behest, Catli's thugs criss-crossed the infamous smugglers' route passing through Bulgaria. Those routes were the ones favored by smugglers who reportedly carried NATO military equipment to the Middle East and returned with loads of heroin. Judge Carlo Palermo, an Italian magistrate based in Trento, discovered these smuggling operations while investigating arms-and-drug trafficking from Eastern Europe to Sicily.

Palermo disclosed that large quantities of sophisticated NATO weaponry – including machine guns, Leopard tanks and U.S.-built Cobra assault helicopters – were smuggled from Western Europe to countries in the Middle East during the 1970s and early 1980s. According to Palermo's investigation, the weapon deliveries were often made in exchange for consignments of heroin that filtered back, courtesy of the Grey Wolves and other smugglers, through Bulgaria to northern Italy.

There, the drugs were received by Mafia middlemen and transported to North America. Turkish morphine base supplied much of the Sicilian-run "Pizza connection," which flooded the U.S. and Europe with high-grade heroin for several years.

[While it is still not clear how the NATO supplies entered the pipeline, other investigations have provided some clues. Witnesses in the October Surprise inquiry into an alleged Republican-Iranian hostage deal in 1980 claimed that they were allowed to select weapons from NATO stockpiles in Europe for shipment to Iran.

[Iranian arms dealer Houshang Lavi claimed that he selected spare parts for Hawk anti-aircraft batteries from NATO bases along the Belgian-German border. Another witness, American arms broker William Herrmann, corroborated Lavi's account of NATO supplies going to Iran.

[Even former NATO commander Alexander Haig confirmed that NATO supplies could have gone to Iran in the early 1980s while he was secretary of state. "It

wouldn't be preposterous if a nation, Germany, for example, decided to let some of their NATO stockpiles be diverted to Iran," Haig said in an interview. For more details, see Robert Parry's *Trick or Treason*.]

A Vatican Mystery

Italian magistrates described the network they had uncovered as the "world's biggest illegal arms trafficking organization." They linked it to Middle Eastern drug empires and to prestigious banking circles in Italy and Europe.

At the center of this operation, it appeared, was an obscure import-export firm in Milan called Stibam International Transport. The head of Stibam, a Syrian businessman named Henri Arsan, also functioned as an informant for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, according to several Italian news outlets.

With satellite offices in New York, London, Zurich, and Sofia, Bulgaria, Stibam officials recycled their profits through Banco Ambrosiano, Italy's largest private bank which had close ties to the Vatican until its sensational collapse in 1982. The collapse of Banco Ambrosiano came on the heels of the still unsolved death of its furtive president, Roberto Calvi, whose body was found hanging underneath Blackfriar's Bridge in London in June 1982.

While running Ambrosiano, Calvi, nicknamed "God's banker," served as advisor to the Vatican's extensive fiscal portfolio. At the same time in the mid- and late 1970s, Calvi's bank handled most of Stibam's foreign currency transactions and owned the building that housed Stibam's Milanese headquarters.

In effect, the Vatican Bank – by virtue of its interlocking relationship with Banco Ambrosiano – was fronting for a gigantic contraband operation that specialized in guns and heroin. The bristling contraband operation that traversed Bulgaria was a magnet for secret service agents on both sides of the Cold War divide.

Crucial, in this regard, was the role of Kintex, a Sofia-based, state-controlled import-export firm that worked in tandem with Stibam and figured prominently in the arms trade. Kintex was riddled with Bulgarian and Soviet spies – a fact which encouraged speculation that the KGB and its Bulgarian proxies were behind the plot against the pope.

But Western intelligence also had its hooks into the Bulgarian smuggling scene, as evidenced by the CIA's use of Kintex to channel weapons to the Nicaraguan Contra rebels in the early 1980s. The Reagan administration jumped on the papal assassination attempt as a propaganda opportunity, rather than helping to

unravel the larger mystery.

Although the CIA's link to the arms-for-drugs traffic in Bulgaria was widely known in espionage circles, hard-line U.S. and Western European officials promoted instead a bogus conspiracy theory that blamed the papal shooting on a communist plot.

The so-called "Bulgarian connection" became one of the more effective disinformation schemes hatched during the Reagan era. It reinforced the notion of the Soviet Union as an evil empire. But the apparent hoax also diverted attention from extensive – and potentially embarrassing – ties between U.S. intelligence and the Turkey's narco-trafficking ultra-right.

Fabrication of the conspiracy theory might have even involved suborning perjury. During his September 1985 court testimony in Rome, Catli asserted that he had been approached by the West German BND spy organization, which allegedly promised him a large sum of money if he implicated the Bulgarian secret service and the KGB in the attempt on the pope's life.

Five years later, ex-CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman disclosed that his colleagues, under pressure from CIA higher-ups, skewed their reports to try to lend credence to the contention that the Soviets were involved. "The CIA had no evidence linking the KGB to the plot," Goodman told the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Friends of the Wolves

Duane "Dewey" Clarridge, the CIA station chief in Rome at the time of the papal shooting, had previously been posted in Ankara. Clarridge was the CIA's man-on-the-spot in Turkey in the 1970s when armed bands of Grey Wolves unleashed a wave of bomb attacks and shootings that killed thousands of people, including public officials, journalists, students, lawyers, labor organizers, social democrats, left-wing activists and ethnic Kurds. [In his 1997 memoirs, *A Spy for All Seasons*, Clarridge makes no reference to the Turkish unrest or to the pope shooting.]

During those violent 1970s, the Grey Wolves operated with the encouragement and protection of the Counter-Guerrilla Organization, a section of the Turkish Army's Special Warfare Department. Headquartered in the U.S. Military Aid Mission building in Ankara, the Special Warfare Department received funds and training from U.S. advisors to create "stay behind" squads comprised of civilian irregulars.

They were supposed to go underground and engage in acts of sabotage if the Soviets invaded. Similar Cold War paramilitary units were established in every

NATO member state, covering all non-Communist Europe like a spider web that would entangle Soviet invaders. But instead of preparing for foreign enemies, U.S.-sponsored stay-behind operatives in Turkey and several European countries used their skills to attack domestic opponents and foment violent disorders.

Some of those attacks were intended to spark right-wing military coups. In the late 1970s, former military prosecutor and Turkish Supreme Court Justice Emin Deger documented collaboration between the Grey Wolves and the government's counter-guerrilla forces as well as the close ties of the latter to the CIA.

Turkey's Counter-Guerrilla Organization handed out weapons to the Grey Wolves and other right-wing terrorist groups. These shadowy operations mainly engaged in the surveillance, persecution and torture of Turkish leftists, according to retired army commander Talat Turhan, the author of three books on counter-guerrilla activities in Turkey.

But the extremists launched one wave of political violence which provoked a 1980 coup by state security forces that deposed Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit. The Turkish security forces cited the need to restore order which had been shattered by rightist terrorist groups secretly sponsored by those same state security forces.

Cold War Roots

Since the earliest days of the Cold War, Turkey's strategic importance derived from its geographic position as the West's easternmost bulwark against Soviet communism. In an effort to weaken the Soviet state, the CIA also used pan-Turkish militants to incite anti-Soviet passions among Muslim Turkish minorities inside the Soviet Union, a strategy that strengthened ties between U.S. intelligence and Turkey's ultra-nationalists.

Though many of Turkish ultra-nationalists were anti-Western as well as anti-Soviet, the Cold War *realpolitik* compelled them to support a discrete alliance with NATO and U.S. intelligence. Among the Turkish extremists collaborating in this anti-Soviet strategy were the National Action Party and its paramilitary youth group, the Grey Wolves.

Led by Colonel Alpaslan Turkes, the National Action Party espoused a fanatical pan-Turkish ideology that called for reclaiming large sections of the Soviet Union under the flag of a reborn Turkish empire. Turkes and his revanchist cohorts had been enthusiastic supporters of Hitler during World War II.

"The Turkish race above all others" was their Nazi-like credo. In a similar vein, Grey Wolf literature warned of a vast Jewish-Masonic-Communist conspiracy and its newspapers carried ads for Turkish translations of Nazi texts.

The pan-Turkish dream and its anti-Soviet component also fueled ties between the Grey Wolves and the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations (ABN), a CIA-backed coalition led by erstwhile fascist collaborators from East Europe.

Ruzi Nazar, a leading figure in the Munich-based ABN, had a long-standing relationship with the CIA and the Turkish ultra-nationalists. In the 1950s and 1960s, Nazar was employed by Radio Free Europe, a CIA-founded propaganda effort.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the shifting geopolitical terrain created new opportunities – political and financial – for Colonel Turkes and his pan-Turkish crusaders. After serving a truncated prison term in the 1980s for his role in masterminding the political violence that convulsed Turkey, Turkes and several of his pan-Turkish colleagues were permitted to resume their political activities.

In 1992, the colonel visited his long lost Turkish brothers in newly independent Azerbaijan and received a hero's welcome. In Baku, Turkes endorsed the candidacy of Grey Wolf sympathizer Abulfex Elcibey, who was subsequently elected president of Azerbaijan and appointed a close Grey Wolf ally as his Interior Minister.

The Gang Returns

By this time, Abdullah Catli was also back in circulation after several years of incarceration in France and Switzerland for heroin trafficking. In 1990, he escaped from a Swiss jail cell and rejoined the neo-fascist underground in Turkey.

Despite his documented links to the papal shooting and other terrorist attacks, Catli was pressed into service as a death squad organizer for the Turkish government's dirty war against the Kurds who have long struggled for independence inside both Turkey and Iraq.

Turkish Army spokesmen acknowledged that the Counter-Guerrilla Organization (renamed the Special Forces Command in 1992) was involved in the escalating anti-Kurdish campaign. Turkey got a wink and a nod from Washington as a quid pro quo for cooperating with the United States during the Gulf War.

Turkish jets bombed Kurdish bases inside Iraqi territory. Meanwhile, on the ground, anti-Kurdish death squads were assassinating more than 1,000 non-combatants in southeastern Turkey. Hundreds of other Kurds "disappeared" while in police custody. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the European Parliament all condemned the Turkish security forces for these abuses.

Still, there was no hard evidence that Turkey's security forces had recruited criminal elements as foot soldiers. That evidence surfaced only on Nov. 3, 1996,

when Catli died in the fateful auto accident near Susurluk.

Strewn amidst the roadside wreckage was proof of what many journalists and human rights activists had long suspected – that successive Turkish governments had protected narco-traffickers, sheltered terrorists and sponsored gangs of killers to suppress Turkish dissidents and Kurdish rebels.

Colonel Turkes confirmed that Catli had performed clandestine duties for Turkey's police and military. "On the basis of my state experience, I admit that Catli has been used by the state," said Turkes. Catli had been cooperating "in the framework of a secret service working for the good of the state," Turkes insisted.

U.S.-backed Turkish officials, including Tansu Ciller, Prime Minister from 1993-1996, also defended Catli after the car crash. "I don't know whether he is guilty or not," Ciller stated, "but we will always respectfully remember those who fire bullets or suffer wounds in the name of this country, this nation and this state."

Eighty members of the Turkish parliament urged the federal prosecutor to file charges of criminal misconduct against Ciller, who was serving as Turkey's Foreign Minister, as well as Deputy Prime Minister. They asserted that the Susurluk incident provided Turkey "with a historic opportunity to expose unsolved murders and the drugs and arms smuggling that have been going on in our country for years."

The scandal momentarily reinvigorated the Turkish press, which unearthed revelations about criminals and police officials involved in the heroin trade. But journalists also were victims of death squads in those years. The violent attack on Independent Flash TV was a reminder. Prosecutors have faced pressure, too, from superiors who are not eager to delve into state secrets. [Ultimately, the corruption case against Ciller was covered up.]

Across the Atlantic in Washington, the U.S. government did not acknowledge any responsibility for the Turkish Frankenstein that U.S. Cold War strategy helped to create. When asked about the Susurluk affair, a State Department spokesperson said it was "an internal Turkish matter." He declined further comment.

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