

Historians, diplomats cast doubts on KGB plot

BUCHAREST, Romania – Historians and communist-era diplomats have cast doubts on a former Romanian general's claim that he helped with a KGB plot to portray Pope Pius XII as a Nazi sympathizer in order to weaken the Catholic Church.

Gen. Ion Mihai Pacepa, a Romanian intelligence chief under dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, said that between 1960 and 1962 he recruited three Romanian spies to disguise themselves as priests and gain access to the Vatican Secret Archives. Their objective was to steal documents for the KGB, the former Russian secret police and intelligence agency, so the documents could be manipulated as evidence against Pope Pius, who died in 1958, said Mr. Pacepa.

Mr. Pacepa, who defected to the United States in 1978, said these documents also contributed to a devastating anti-Pope Pius play, "The Deputy," which opened in Berlin in 1963. He said a KGB chief of disinformation created an outline for the first draft of "The Deputy," which helped popularize the notion that Pope Pius supported Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler. Forgeries based on the stolen documents were part of the play's "historical appendix."

His claims were included in an article, "Moscow's Assault on the Vatican," posted in late January on the National Review Online.

Attempts by Catholic News Service to reach the general, directly or through his National Review Online editors, were unsuccessful. Erica Stalnecker at the National Review magazine told CNS that Mr. Pacepa refuses all requests for interviews or more information. He does not allow his contact information, including e-mail address, to be distributed.

Jesuit Father Peter Gumpel, a historian and the coordinator of work supporting Pope Pius' sainthood cause, told CNS there was a "deliberate effort on the part of the Russians to discredit Pope Pius XII" but that there is no evidence that anyone managed to get and manipulate the documents.

Father Gumpel noted that, during the time Mr. Pacepa referred to, all of the documents on Pope Pius' pontificate were in the archives of the Vatican Secretariat of State - not in the Vatican Secret Archives.

Ronald Rychlak, an adviser to the Vatican's delegation to the United Nations, is one of the few Americans given access to the Vatican's confidential six-volume report, the "Positio on Pius XII," completed in 2004. It includes sworn testimony from witnesses, historical documents, and a review of all literature, neutral and negative, pertaining to the Vatican's actions during World War II.

Mr. Rychlak called Mr. Pacepa's article "shocking." He said nothing in the positio suggests individuals gained access to the archives as part of an organized plot.

"The idea that the Soviets, or their satellites, were able to get three agents into the archives is a very serious breach of security," he told CNS in a telephone interview.

Mr. Rychlak, the author of two books on Pope Pius and World War II, said he thinks Mr. Pacepa's account needs to be verified in the Soviet archives.

"Pacepa's timing is questionable. Why hasn't this story been revealed until now? I hope the United States government will declassify any information it has on this important matter, to spare the time a Freedom of Information Act request takes," said Mr. Rychlak.

John Cornwell, the British author of a 1999 book, "Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII," told CNS he has never heard the claims described by Mr. Pacepa and considers them "most unlikely."

"As a supporter of NATO and the Western Alliance, it's not inconceivable the pope could have been targeted (by the KGB). But I haven't seen any credible documents indicating anyone doctored material," said Mr. Cornwell, whose book was criticized by church officials for its negative portrayal of Pope Pius.

Former colleagues of Mr. Pacepa, 79, expressed doubts about his story.

"Between 1960 and 1962, when he pretends he ran Vatican spies, he was in Bucharest, assigned as a deputy in the techno-scientific section of Securitate (the Romanian secret police), where he stayed until he defected in 1978," said a former

high-ranking Securitate officer who would not allow his name to be used.

"In the chain of command he would not have had direct communication with the KGB generals. If he did, that would make him a Soviet agent, not a Romanian one," the source added.

"In 1959, Pacepa was in Germany under diplomatic cover. He was a captain in Cologne with a degree in chemistry and belonged to the techno-scientific section. Again, the KGB generals wouldn't have taken him into consideration," said the source, who believes Mr. Pacepa is trying to build a "mysterious aura" for himself in his later years.

"Why did he wait 29 years (since his defection) to reveal this? If it's true, it would have made so much sense to put it on the table in 1981, after the Soviet-Bulgarian plot to assassinate Pope John Paul II," the source said.

A former Romanian diplomat of the communist era, who has advised the U.S. government, expressed "deep doubts" about the account.

"Pacepa is not a serious source," said the former diplomat. "His book 'Red Horizons' (1988) is about one-third fiction. He takes some real facts, and then invents.

"I'm afraid he is just trying to bring attention to his persona. He invokes the Vatican because the Romanian Securitate has been exhausted and is a marginal issue," he added.

"Pacepa does not document. Given the gravity of the affirmations he makes, in order to be credible, he must unveil the source, himself, or otherwise it is fiction," said the retired diplomat.

William Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, said Mr. Pacepa's story "could do more to clear the name of Pius XII than any other account."

"We need more information, though," he added. "There is no question that everything related to this incident should be declassified, from the CIA and the KGB. We need to know exactly what the Romanian intelligence knows, too."

Contributing to this story was Jonathan Luxmoore in England.