

IVÁN HÉJJAS (1890–1950) CONTROVERSIAL CAREER OF A RADICAL RIGHT-WING MILITARY OFFICER AND POLITICIAN IN THE HORTHY ERA HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT

The person and actions of Reserve First Lieutenant, later Reserve Captain Iván Héjjas (1890–1950), the main perpetrator of the wave of paramilitary violence that took place between 1919 and 1921 in the Danube-Tisza Interfluve, have become the subject of increasing debate in the politics of memory. The present short monograph does not intend to enter into debates on the politics of memory regarding the assessment of Héjjas's person, but its author, as an academic researcher, undertakes to paint a nuanced picture of First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, a distinctive figure of the political elite of the Horthy Era Hungary (1920–1945), and, more broadly, of the historical period and political system in which the politician whose biography it seeks to reconstruct operated. According to the available data, Iván Héjjas was a central character and cult figure of the Hungarian radical right-wing militia movement that was born in 1920. His political biography between the two world wars is, with some simplification, practically the history of the Hungarian radical right-wing, quasi-state paramilitary formations, troops and militias. In Hungary between 1920 and 1944, Héjjas was primarily the very politician through the person and network of contacts of whom the authoritarian conservative political elite/government and the otherwise heterogeneous, sometimes government-supporting, sometimes government-overthrowing radical right-wing paramilitary organisations and irregular military formations were linked, and through whose mediation the government used these armed formations for its own military purposes that did not fit into official domestic and foreign policy. It was also Héjjas who, of all the detachment commanders of the White Terror between 1919 and 1921, reached the highest social and political level, and therefore, his career certainly deserves unbiased attention.

INTRODUCTION

As the author of the present essay dealt with the topic a lot in his earlier publications, in the years following World War One, in the 1920s, paramilitarism and paramilitary violence,¹ mainly committed by demobilised or still active soldiers was an almost natural phenomenon in Hungary, just like in many other countries of Central Europe.² After the dissolution of the Austro–Hungarian Empire, Hungary sank into civil war, three revolutions followed each other in two years, and after the collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the short-lived communist dictatorship,³ a the new right-wing government establishing its power with the help of the Entente states could only difficulty rule the quasi anarchistic conditions of the country. In 1920–1921, Budapest and the Hungarian country were terrorized by irregular military formations that were formally part of the National Army, the new, right-wing armed force of the Government, but often operated completely independently. This 2-year-long wave of paramilitary violence which was delivered by mainly detachments subordinated to influential paramilitary commanders Reserve First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay or Major/Colonel Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek is popularly called the Hungarian White Terror.⁴ Radical right-wing irregular soldiers exploiting the weakness of the government committed several serious crimes like robbery, plunder and even murders, frequently by anti-Semitic motivations, and they did it in the disguise of law enforcement measures, since in this period the military authorities possessed police jurisdictions over civilians as well in order to restore the order.⁵ It was finally the government led by Prime Minister Count István Bethlen who gradually ceased the White Terror in 1921, and disbanded/regularized irregular/paramilitary troops and formations.

¹On paramilitarism see: Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Paramilitarism. Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.

² Robert Gerwarth, *Harc a Vörös Szörnyeteggel. Ellenforradalmi erőszak Közép-Európa vereséget szenvedett államaiban*, transl. Péter Várady, in *Háború béke idején. Paramilitáris erőszak Európában az első világháború után*, ed. Robert Gerwarth–John Horne, Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2017, 71–92.; Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War Failed to End*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

³ On the history of the Hungarian Soviet Republic see: Pál Hatos, *Rosszfiúk világforradalma. Az 1919-es Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaságtörténete*, Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó, 2021.

⁴ Béla Bodó, *The White Terror. Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921*, London, Routledge, 2019.

⁵See Tibor Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989.

The otherwise strongly right-wing, authoritarian conservative Hungarian Government finally really did its best to tranquilize the radical right-wing forces and create some kind of social and political peace at last, after the long years of war and civil war, but before that, a 2-year-long period was defined by paramilitary violence.⁶

The brutality of soldiers who had returned home from the bloody fronts of the First World War, experiencing political, social and economic collapse, driven by overheated nationalist and strongly anti-Semitic sentiments, resulting in the brutalisation and kidnapping of their freedom, the series of shockingly violent acts that took place between 1919 and 1921 on the Danube–Tisza Interfluve is noteworthy among the events of the White Terror. This series of murders and atrocities can be linked mainly to the person of First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas and his deputy, Sergeant Major Mihály Francia Kiss. However, Iván Héjjas was not only a military officer, paramilitary commander and one of the key figures in the wave of right-wing military violence in Hungary in 1919-1921, but also a member of the radical right-wing mass movements that were highly influential during the first few years of the Horthy Era. He was one of the founders and leaders of the influential radical right-wing movements of the early Hungarian (paramilitary) radical right, the *ÉbredőMagyarokEgyesülete - Association of Awakening Hungarians*, and an emerging and influential backbench politician who found his place very easily in the period of Prime Minister Bethlen's consolidation policy. It is a less known historical fact, but Iván Héjjas was essentially a member of the Hungarian political elite until the German occupation of the country in 1944, a well-paid and influential, high-ranking government official, and, not incidentally, a close confidant of Regent Governor Admiral Miklós Horthy. The present research article is a summary of the monograph published by the author about Iván Héjjas in Hungarian.⁷

The person of Iván Héjjas has recently been the subject of increasing debates on the politics of memory in Hungary, and in the Hungarian right-wing discourse on the politics of memory, some authors have even attempted to rehabilitate him, or even to make him a national hero, because of his role in the uprising of Western Hungary (which was undoubtedly fundamentally patriotically motivated and had tangible results).⁸ The present short, so to say, micro-monograph does not wish to enter into further discussions on the politics of memory regarding the person of Iván Héjjas, even though the author, as an academic researcher, personally believes that the historical person under investigation is completely unrehabilitatable in the light of the available historical data and sources.

However, the work undertakes to paint a nuanced and objective picture on the level of a biographical draft on of Reserve First Lieutenant (later Reserve Captain) Iván Héjjas, based on certain archival and press sources closely connected with the person of Héjjas, a specific figure of the political elite of the Horthy Era, and, in a broader sense, of the historical period and political system in which the politician whose biography I am trying to reconstruct operated.

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF IVÁN HÉJJAS IN THE PERIOD BEFORE THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND THE REVOLUTIONS, 1890–1919

Iván Héjjas was born on 19 January 1890 in Kecskemét, probably originally in a wealthy peasant family with Transylvanian roots, the child of Mihály Héjjas and Teréz Battlay. The family owned 130 acres of arable land and 30 acres of vineyards, and was an influential family in the farming community around Kecskemét. In the 1910s, Mihály Héjjas was also the president of the Kecskemét Cellar Cooperative, and had six sons and three daughters. The Héjjas brothers all graduated from high school, and Iván, Mihály and Aurél of the brothers also fought in the First World War. Mihály Héjjas Jr. died a heroic death in 1916.⁹

Although we know the least about this stage of the later paramilitary commander's life, it is certain that Iván Héjjas graduated from the Arad School of Higher Trade in 1909 with a degree in economics and then, with the help of his godfather, who was the head of the local branch of the People's Bank, he also became a bank official. In 1910 he worked as assistant bookkeeper of the Nagykőrös Economic Bank Limited, and in 1913 he was employed in the same position at the Kecskemét Commercial and Industrial Credit Institute and People's Bank Limited.¹⁰

Although it is not known how much of this is true, since the alleged document was published in the Hungarian Newspaper of Vienna in 1921 by emigrant communist journalists who were negatively biased towards Iván Héjjas, according to an alleged police file, Iván Héjjas allegedly committed embezzlement in 1911 against his mistress, a Jewish woman much older than him, who died soon afterwards under suspicious circumstances.

⁶ Op. cit.

⁷ Balázs Kántás, *Héjjas Iván. Vázlat egy magyar radikális jobboldali katonatiszt-politikus életrajzához és kapcsolatrendszeréhez*, Budapest, Hungarovox Kiadó, 2022.

⁸For example, see journalist and writer László Domonkos's essayistic, personally biased, nearly apologetic monograph of Iván Héjjas: László Domonkos, *A Héjjas-nyárfa árnyékában*, Budapest, Kairosz Kiadó, 2018.

⁹ Domonkos, op. cit.

¹⁰ Ibid.

In order to avoid being charged with embezzlement – and perhaps murder – according to a document allegedly published by émigré communist journalists, Héjjas fled to the Balkans, where he was supposed to have taken part in the Balkan War, which could be interpreted as a precursor to the First World War, as a soldier or intelligence officer of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and in some way became the chief adviser to Wilhelm zu Wied, the German prince who ruled Albania that had become independent of the Ottoman Empire. It was probably at this time that Héjjas was involved in the attempts of the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to colonise the Balkans, and it was probably at this time that he learned the guerrilla warfare style that he later used with pleasure and success, becoming an expert in irregular warfare and a professional military intelligence officer. He served Prince Wilhelm zu Wied for two years and, according to some sources, reached the rank of major in the Albanian Army, although he later reached only the rank of first lieutenant in the Austro-Hungarian Army. For unclear reasons, he left Prince Wilhelm zu Wied and Albania behind in 1916 and returned to Hungary.¹¹

Héjjas volunteered for the regular army of the Monarchy in 1916 and served almost continuously for four years in the 68th Imperial and Royal Infantry Regiment. He was commissioned as a reserve lieutenant in the army and was promoted to reserve first lieutenant on 1 November 1916. At the end of the war, he underwent a number of special training courses and was already a fighter pilot in the Austro-Hungarian Air Force (in the contemporary term, the Airborne Troops), which, as Béla Bodó, the historian who analysed his career in a study with a social history orientation, points out, was a significant achievement for a young reserve officer of peasant origin, given the very limited social mobility of the time. During his service in the field, the young lieutenant of aviation was also the recipient of numerous decorations.

Towards the end of the World War, in 1918, Héjjas finally returned to Hungary, including his hometown of Kecskemét, and after the Hungarian revolution and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, in late November 1918, he travelled to Budapest at the head of a military delegation to offer his services to the new Károlyi Government, which intended to govern according to democratic principles. The military delegation proposed to the Government that the armed forces should be reinforced with additional units known as the National Guard to protect Hungary's eastern and southern borders, but the chaotic political conditions led to a series of bad decisions and the proposal was not well received.¹²

The inertia of the left-wing democratic government probably contributed greatly to the disillusionment and even hatred of Iván Héjjas and his basically right-wing fellow reserve officers with the new Hungarian state system. Under the leadership of Iván Héjjas, 350 reserve officers gathered in Kecskemét on 19 November 1918 to voice their financial grievances and demanded that the government pay them a substantial cash allowance (14-18 thousand koronas, a large sum for the time) after their discharge, depending on their rank and length of service in the field. The officers also demanded, among other things, that preference be given to veterans of the First World War in the labour market, especially for civil service jobs, and that preference be given to demobilised soldiers who had served on the front in the redistribution of large estates.¹³

The mostly young reserve officers who returned from the First World War identified themselves primarily with the peasantry and the rural lower middle class, but the radical left-wing takeover of power in March 1919, which replaced the Government led by Count Mihály Károlyi, predisposed the returning veterans to ally themselves with the old elite in order to overthrow the communist regime.¹⁴

IVÁN HÉJJAS'S QUASI-STATE PARAMILITARY FORMATION, THE BRIGADE OF THE HUNGARIAN PLAIN, 1919–1921

Iván Héjjas, the key figure in the history of the wave of Hungarian paramilitary violence in 1919–1921, a young first lieutenant of the Air Forces of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy who had derived from a well-to-do peasant family and had returned home from the First World War quickly became one of the most notorious commanders of the counter-revolutionary reprisals after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, and perhaps he was the man who was responsible for the most arbitrary murders.¹⁵ In the spring of 1919, as a soldier who had served on the fronts, he began to organise his detachment near his family's estate in the Kecskemét neighbourhood, with the aim of overthrowing the communist government.¹⁶

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Béla Bodó, *Héjjas Iván. Egy ellenforradalmár élete*, 2000, 2010/10.

¹⁶ Ignác Romsics, *A nagy háború és az 1918–1919-es magyarországi forradalmak*, Helikon Kiadó, Budapest, 2018, 108–109.

The core of his detachment was made up of members of his Air Force squadron, who had returned home together with him from the war, but young people of peasant origin from the area also joined the formation.¹⁷ Most of these insurgents had been served in the Austro–Hungarian Army. In April of 1919, the young reserve first lieutenant rose to become the leader of one of the major right-wing uprisings against the communist regime.¹⁸

Iván Héjjas was also one of the founders and leaders of the ÉbredőMagyarokEgyesülete – Association of Awakening Hungarians, one of the most important, politicising, radical right-wing movements in Hungary, so this strongly nationalist social association – which was being increasingly organised along paramilitary lines at the time, including many WWI veterans – could not have been left out of the rebellion, and in fact, due to the personal overlaps, its early activities were practically inseparable from the operation of the Héjjas’s military detachment. After losing a smaller battle in Kecskemét against the communist troops, Héjjas and his armed comrades – including, for example, Sergeant Major Mihály Francia Kiss, another notorious figure of political violence of the era, and the later radical right-wing mayor of Kecskemét, Béla Liszka – eventually joined the right-wing, counter-revolutionary Government that was being organised in Szeged, mainly by conservative politicians and military officers.¹⁹ In April 1919 Admiral Miklós Horthy, the later commander-in-chief of the National Army, and from March 1920 head of state of Hungary, personally received Iván Héjjas and commissioned him to operate his detachment as an auxiliary police/gendarmerie force of the National Army, and to eliminate the remaining communist groups in his homeland, the Great Hungarian Plain.²⁰

The Royal Romanian Army which had occupied a large area of Hungary which was among the losing countries of the First World War soon dismantled the remnants of the communist government presided by Béla Kun, the Hungarian communist politicians gradually started fleeing abroad from the right-wing forces, and in the summer of 1919 Héjjas’s troops were also given the permission by the military authorities of the occupying forces to provide auxiliary police services in the Kecskemét area in order to restore the disintegrated social order. Iván Héjjas, otherwise with the consent of Admiral Miklós Horthy and the temporary Hungarian Counter-revolutionary Government of limited jurisdiction, proclaimed himself city military commander in Kecskemét, thus soon began the internment and arbitrary execution of those who allegedly held positions during the Soviet Republic of Hungary or even only sympathized with the short-lived communist regime.²¹

During October and November 1919, when the Romanian military still kept the Great Hungarian Plain under occupation, the members of the auxiliary police units of Iván Héjjas murdered about a hundred people (and of course took and turned their belongings in their favour) most of whom had nothing to do with the Soviet Republic and the communist wave of violence called the Red Terror.²² Iván Héjjas, if the archival sources are to be believed, took advantage of the nearly anarchistic conditions and operated an almost separate quasi-private state in and around Kecskemét during 1919–1920 under his own de facto leadership the peculiar order of which was maintained by armed men loyal to him as the National Army’s auxiliary police forces. Héjjas’s fiancée and later wife was Sarolta Papp, daughter of dr. György Papp, the retired state police commissioner of Kecskemét, and Héjjas as military city commander together with his armed militiamen fully controlled the whole town and its neighbourhood. His father, Mihály Héjjas Sr., was the director of the Kecskemét Vineyard Association, a wealthy farmer and vineyard owner, and otherwise an influential person in the region independently of his son’s militia activities, and at the time he was driving a car stolen by his son’s militiamen in full public view. The Héjjas family already had extensive connections in and around Kecskemét even before the White Terror, but after the paramilitary armed force was organised, nominally as the auxiliary police company of the National Army, they, in the disguise of a temporary law enforcement agency, started acting like criminals, taking advantage of the anarchistic conditions, claiming themselves to be the representatives of the law and order. There are also indications that the Ministry of Interior and the (official, professional) Hungarian Royal State Police knew a great deal of details about the murders committed in the villages Izsák and Orgovány by Héjjas’s militiamen, as well as about other individual robbery murders by members of the detachment, but for some time they delayed taking action against the armed men.²³

¹⁷ Rudolf Paksa, *A fehérterror „logikája”. Események, olvasatok, kontextusok*, in *Terror 1918-1919. Forradalmárok, ellenforradalmárok, megszállók*, ed. Rolf Müller–Tibor Takács–Éva Tulipán, Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó, 2019, 217–245.; Béla Bodó, *The White Terror in Hungary. The Social World of Paramilitary Groups*, *Austrian History Yearbook*, 2011/42, 133–163.

¹⁸ Ignác Romsics, *A Duna–Tisza köze hatalmi-politikai viszonyai 1918–19-ben*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982.

¹⁹ Bodó Béla, *Héjjas Iván. Egy ellenforradalmár élete*. op. cit.

²⁰ Bodó, op. cit.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gyöző Drozdy, *Elvelt illúziók. Drozdy Gyöző emlékiratai*, ed. Zoltán Paksy, Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó, 2007, 408–416.

²³ József Halmi, *17699/920 belügyminiszteri akta Héjjas Ivánról. A Bécsi Magyar Újságmunkatársától*, in *Magyar pokol. A magyarországi fehérterrorbetiltetésüldözöttkiadványokról*, ed. Györgyi Markovits, Budapest, Magvető Könyvkiadó, 50–53.

It is also certain that the Kecskemét Police knew about the murders committed by members of the Héjjas detachment as early as the end of 1919, as the Commissioner of Police of Kecskemét forwarded a list of about 40 missing persons to Government Commissioner Count Gedeon Ráday (government commissioners were at the time the provisory representatives of the civilian public administration) who also sent a copy of the same document to the General Command of the National Army (the Army did its best to introduce military administration in the whole territory of Hungary).²⁴ The report of the head of the Royal Public Prosecutor's Office of Kecskemét to the National Chief Public Prosecutor from November 1919 documents roughly similar conditions and the same events, emphasising that Iván Héjjas's detachment was a relatively large and well-armed force, strongly supported by the General Command of the National Army, and therefore, attempts to bring the perpetrators of the atrocities to justice could even result in armed confrontations.²⁵ It can therefore by no means be claimed that the authorities were unaware of the atrocities committed by Iván Héjjas's detachment in the Danube–Tisza Interfluvium. Thus, in addition to exaggerated nationalism, obsessive anti-communism and anti-Semitism, the desire for profit and perhaps the belief in the possibility of rapid social mobility also played a very important role in the actions of Héjjas and his militiamen who invariably robbed their murdered victims and used their stolen goods for their own benefit. Their actions were accompanied not only by murders, but also by other acts of violence, such as numerous pogroms involving hundreds of small or large-scale beatings of Jewish people,²⁶ most of which resulted in no deaths but serious injuries – one such atrocity was the large pogrom in Izsák on 17 November 1919.²⁷

Even today, researchers do not have exact numbers and list of names,²⁸ but after the Romanian Army withdrew from the areas eastward of the Tisza in April 1920, between December 1920 and December 1922, Iván Héjjas's men, the detachment called *Alföldi Brigád – Brigade of the Hungarian Plain* may have murdered about 300–400 people.²⁹ Iván Héjjas, if we are to believe the historical sources, was also the deputy military commander of the *KettőskeresztVérszövetség- Double Cross Blood Union*, the very influential secret military organisation that in fact coordinated Hungarian right-wing irregular militias in the 1920s under the control of the General Staff of the National Army, and the main purpose of which was to circumvent the strict limitations of armament of the Peace Treaty of Trianon signed in 1920.³⁰ That is, the Hungarian Government sponsored and maintained radical right-wing irregular military formations, treating and operating them as secret reserve forces of the National Army. Here we may mention that the Double Cross Blood Union to which Iván Héjjas's Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain was a very similar formation to the *German Black Army (Schwarze Reichswehr)*, which were in fact an umbrella organisation that included irregular military troops that were treated by the German Government as the semi-official, secret reserve forces of the German Imperial Army (Reichswehr), and whose main purpose was to circumvent the limitations of armament. Among the militias within the German Black Army, there was also a paramilitary unit, the so-called Organisation Consul, under the command of senior navy officer Corvette Captain Hermann Erhardt, which operated as a secret society and had a secret service character at the same time, and to which several political assassinations were attributed, and whose members often carried out diversionary activities against the Entente States, with the silent assent of the German Government. With some simplification, it can be said that these irregular military units far exceeded the limits of the law even at home, not only abroad. Otherwise with some simplification, the Organisation Consul gradually grew up into the military secret service of National Socialist Germany, the Abwehr, under the command of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris.³¹ That is, based on international, mainly European examples, Iván Héjjas's militia and its superior organ, the Double Cross Blood Union can therefore be compared with other state-maintained or quasi-state paramilitary organisations after the First World War.

The members of the Héjjas Detachment/Brigade of the Hungarian Plain also took an oath, swearing directly to their leader, detachment commander Iván Héjjas.

²⁴ *Iratokazellenforradalomtörténetéhez 1919–1945, I. kötet. Az ellenforradalom hatalomrajutása és rémuralma Magyarországon 1919–1921*, ed. Elek Karsai–Imre Kubitsch–Dezső Nemes–Ervin Pamlényi, Budapest, Szikra Kiadó, 1956, 221–223.

²⁵ *Dokumentumok az 1918/19-es forradalmak Duna–Tisza közistörténetéhez*, ed. Ignác Romsics, Kecskemét, Bács-Kiskun Megyei Levéltár, 1976, 677–685.

²⁶ As for the contemporary situation of the Jewish population of the Danube–Tisza Interfluvium region see: Tamás Róna, *Judaizmusésközösségtörténet. Kecskemét rabbijainak működése történet-szociológiai aspektusból*, PhD-dissertation, Hungarian Rabbinitic and Jewish University, Budapest, 2010.

²⁷ Bodó, op. cit.

²⁸ Máté Kőrödi, *Adattár a Magyar Nemzeti Hadsereg különítményes csoportjai és más fegyveres szervek által elkövetett gyilkosságokról, 1919. augusztus 3.–1921. október 23.*, Budapest, Clio Intézet, Clio Kötetek 2., 2020.

²⁹ Bodó, op. cit.

³⁰ János Gyurgyák, *Magyar fajvédők*, Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2012, 256; József Botlik, *Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa, 1918–1921*, Vasszilvágy, Magyar Nyugat Könyvkiadó, 2012, 123.

³¹ Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism. The Free Corps Movement In Post-War Germany 1918–1923*, New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1969.

The wording of the oath was quite similar to the oath of the Double Cross Blood Union, since the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain, as mentioned above, was evidently part of this irregular military formation:

*'I, XY, a member of the Héjjas Brigade, swear and pledge to work with all my strength to create the greatest fraternal understanding among the members of the organization. I vow and swear that I will obey the orders of the Héjjas Brigade and of my superiors appointed by Commander Héjjas as far as possible under all circumstances. I swear and affirm that I will keep all secrets concerning the corps, and that I will never betray the members of the corps or its commanders to any person. My obligation of secrecy shall survive the termination of the corps. I swear that I will do my utmost to promote the value and public esteem of our organisation through my talents and work. I swear that I am not and will not be a member of any secret or openly destructive association. I swear and affirm that while I am a member of the Héjjas Brigade I will not concern myself with politics or the issue of kingship. I swear that I will keep and maintain the utmost discipline among the members of the Héjjas Brigade. I pledge that I will never associate with our enemies openly or secretly. I will not leave my comrades under any circumstances, alive, wounded, or even dead alone, and I will help them under all circumstances. I submit myself to any punishment by the disciplinary and punitive committee to be elected by the members of the Héjjas Brigade. May God help me.'*³²

Iván Héjjas was thus surrounded by a real cult of personality on the part of his sworn men, and the will of the paramilitary commander was equal to the law for them. They were bound by a serious obligation of secrecy, and if they broke it or disobeyed orders, they could face severe punishment, even death – just as they had to take an oath as members of the Double Cross Blood Union. The members of the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain undoubtedly committed serious crimes during the White Terror between 1919 and 1921, becoming a murderous military formation. Finally, Iván Héjjas and many of his men then joined the Uprising in Western Hungary in the summer of 1921, whereas within the frameworks of an irregular military operation the members of paramilitary group of active, reserve and demobilised soldiers, students and young people of peasant origin, collectively known as the *RongyosGárda – Ragged Guard*, with the silent consent of the Hungarian Government, started fighting against Austrian forces occupying the territory, and they finally played very active role in forcing the referendum in Sopron, as a result of which Sopron, the so-called city of loyalty, remained part of Hungary today, and finally was not annexed to Austria as it was originally prescribed by the Peace Treaties of Paris.³³

POLICE INVESTIGATIONS AGAINST THE PARAMILITARY CRIMINALS, 1919–1922

In order to prevent vigilante justice, it was already the Government of Prime Minister István Friedrich, otherwise with questionable legitimacy due to the Hungarian civil war in progress, who decided as early as 1919 that all persons who had been engaged in any political activity during the Soviet Republic of Hungary should be held accountable, in order to prevent increasing arbitrary atrocities committed by armed groups.³⁴ The Government finally entrusted the prosecution to Deputy Crown Prosecutor Dr. Albert Váry. Many reports were received, resulting in thousands of people being arrested between August and December 1919. From these confessions, reports, accounts and court sentences, the prosecutor compiled his book *The Victims of Red Rule in Hungary*,³⁵ first published in 1922, whose aim was to document the atrocities of the communist Red Terror in an unbiased way. According to this book, there were 587 proven deadly victims of the communist government. At the same time, Albert Váry also began to investigate the crimes committed by nationalist military units after the fall of the communist government. After Miklós Horthy's march into Budapest on 16 November 1919, various right-wing military units intervened in Albert Váry's work. It was mainly the member of the detachments commanded by Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek, Iván Héjjas and Pál Prónay that unlawfully attacked civilians – mainly of Jewish origin – and tried to hinder the investigation.

There was a widespread social protest against the White Terror, which resulted in the draft decree, also attributed to Albert Váry, being adopted by the Government on 12 June 1920 and published in the official gazette on the same day. The decree stated that all military units and detachments were to cease all actions against civilians immediately, and that any soldier who violated the decree was to be arrested immediately. Although the decree was effective, it was greeted with suspicion by right-wing politicians. As a result, on 26 October 1920 Váry was relieved of his position of President of the Royal Prosecutor's Office in Budapest.

The armed militiamen of the Association of Awakening Hungarians – who were also members of Iván Héjjas's paramilitary detachment and presumably of the Double-Cross Blood Union – murdered Adolf Léderer, an Israelite

³² Budapest City Archives, HU-BFL-VII-5-c-198/1940; Cited by: Zinner, op. cit. 568–569.

³³ Imre Tóth, *Két Anschluss között. Nyugat-Magyarországés Burgenland Wilsontól Hitlerig*, Budapest, KronoszKiadó, 2020.

³⁴ Ignác Romsics, *A Horthy-korszak*, Budapest, HelikonKiadó, 2017, 347.

³⁵ Albert Váry, *A vörös uralom áldozatai Magyarországon*, Vác, A Váci Királyi Országos Fegyintézet Könyomdája, 1922.

resident in Solt on 16 August 1921. This caused a great public outcry, and the press demanded that the killers should be brought to justice.

At the same time, Prime Minister Count István Bethlen announced in the Parliament that he would entrust Albert Váry with the task of apprehending the perpetrators of the murder in Solt. He also announced that in order to investigate the atrocities committed in 1919, 1920 and 1921 on the Danube-Tisza Interfluve and to prevent similar incidents in the future, he would send Váry to the Great Hungarian Plain, reinforced by serious police and gendarmerie escort.³⁶

Among the archival records of the rather belated criminal trial of Iván Héjjas and his associates at the People's Tribunal from 1947–1949, practically one of the most significant documents from the 1920s, from the period when the crimes really happened, about the investigations on the White Terror, is the 1922 summarising report of Albert Váry on the events that took place on the Danube–Tisza Interfluve. In his report of 1922, the prosecutor described much the same things as he told before the People's Tribunal in 1947, twenty-five years later, when he was an elderly man, in the criminal trial of the absent Iván Héjjas and his fellows. His testimony survived in the same case file. According to these archival sources, Albert Váry had indeed been commissioned by the Prime Minister to investigate the atrocities of the White Terror in connection with the murder of Adolf Léderer on 16 August 1921, in Solt. Váry was then the President of the Royal Prosecutor's Office in Budapest, and in the light of his investigations after the perpetrators of the Red Terror, which were largely unbiased, the Government rightfully expected him to investigate the serious abuses of the White Terror. Soldiers, or at least persons dressed in military uniforms who appeared to be soldiers, were also abducting and robbing civilians in Budapest, and the intervention of the Royal Prosecutor's Office of Budapest seemed increasingly justified, although most of the abducted people were later released by the military authorities in the capital, and the atrocities in Budapest committed by soldiers were much less serious than those committed in the Great Hungarian Plain.³⁷ Finally, the Government clearly abolished the right of the military authorities to take actions against civilians in 1921, and state prosecutor Dr. Péter Kovács was also assigned as the deputy of Dr. Albert Váry to investigate the murders committed on the Danube–Tisza Interfluve, while the Central Investigation Department of the Ministry of the Interior – at that time operating independently of the Royal Hungarian State Police as a central criminal police force with nationwide jurisdiction – also placed a number of detectives at the disposal of the prosecutors.³⁸

Dr. Váry arrived in Izsák on 29 August 1921 with a large police and gendarmerie escort, but the investigators soon reported to him that many of the individuals suspected of serious crimes had gone to West Hungary to take part in the Burgenland uprising. Policemen and gendarmes arrested 20–22 people, but none of them were later suspected of serious crimes. In Albert Váry's view, the murders of Adolf Léderer of Solt, and Zoltán Pánczél, Sándor Beck and Árpád Schmiedt of Izsák were simple robbery-murders, where the alleged communist sympathies or Jewish origin of the victims were merely a pretext for committing a crime of vile motive, motivated essentially by profit.³⁹ On 19 October 1921, Váry addressed a request to the Commissioner General of the Government of Western Hungary, Count Antal Sigray, to hand over 50–60 persons who had fled there to participate in the Anti-Austrian Uprising and were suspected of murder to the prosecutor's office. Although Albert Váry did not receive any reply from the Government Commissioner, he initiated criminal proceedings and issued arrest warrants against the following persons, mainly demobilised soldiers: Mihály Francia Kiss, Mihály Danics, Ambrus Tóth, Mihály Nagy, Sándor Bán, Gábor Kállai, Rezső Schmidt, József Korom, Aladár Danics, Gábor Király, Nándor Pataki, István Juhász, Kálmán Papp, József Kenei, Gyula Kállai, Sándor Papp, Árpád Rád, Géza Korb, Gergely Tasi, Antal Makai, Lajos Baski.⁴⁰ The prosecutor was able to link the murders committed in the Danube–Tisza Interfluve with the activities of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, especially based on the name of First Lieutenant Árpád Raád, who was also one of the notorious soldiers of the White Terror killing several people.⁴¹

During his investigations, Albert Váry focused primarily on the murders committed in Izsák, Lajosmizse and Solt, as he was convinced that in these cases there was less political motivation than the simple motive of financial gain.⁴² The prosecutor could not, however, continue the arrests and on-the-spot interrogations that he had begun for long, since the amnesty order⁴³ of the Regent Governor of 3 November 1921 had virtually nullified his work, or at least reduced it to a symbolic one.

³⁶ HU-BFL-VII-5-e-1949/20630. – Trial of Iván Héjjas and his associates at the the People's Tribunal p. 282.

³⁷ Ibid. 284.

³⁸ Ibid. 284.

³⁹ Ibid. 285.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 285.

⁴¹ Ibid. 286.

⁴² Ibid. 287.

⁴³ Laura Csonka, *Nemzetközi és hazai fellépés a népbiztosok megkegyelmezése érdekében*, ArchívNet, 2015/3. https://archivnet.hu/politika/nemzetkozi_es_hazai_fellepes_a_nepbiztosok_megkegyelmezese_erdekeben.html; Péter Konok, *Az erőszak kérdései 1919–1920-ban. Vörösteror–fehérterror*, Múltunk, 2010/3, 72–91, 84.;

At the end of the investigation, he decided to collect the names of the victims of the White Terror after the publication of the list of victims of the Red Rule, but he was unable to complete his work successfully.⁴⁴ Although he attempted to arrest Mihály Francia Kiss, Mihály Danics and others for simple public offences not covered by the amnesty order, he was instructed by his superiors to keep their arrests pending.⁴⁵

Finally, dr. Péter Kovács, the prosecutor previously assigned to be Albert Váry's deputy, was commissioned to complete the investigation, and since the armed militiamen who had served as members of the Héjjas Brigade in the Kecskemét area were legally considered soldiers, he referred the cases to the military authorities.⁴⁶ In most cases, the investigation was closed by the military authorities,⁴⁷ which had not previously shown much cooperation with Albert Váry, who had approached them in several cases.⁴⁸ There was only one case in which the soldiers, who were suspected of the murders and had served as auxiliary police troops mentioned the name of their commanding officer, First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, during their interrogations.⁴⁹ In the end, there was no prosecution, and in 1922 only Mihály Danics, János Zbona and other lower-ranking perpetrators were sentenced to a few years in prison for various public offences.⁵⁰ Although his detachment had in principle been disarmed by this time, Héjjas initiated a press attack in the summer of 1922 and felt offended that he had been granted amnesty for his actions during the counter-revolution. He also declared that, although he would bow to the Government's will, he had not yet given the final order and that 'if lightning should strike anywhere in the Hungarian sky', he would be the 'God's arrow for Budapest'.⁵¹ Then, on 20 July 1922, by the intervention of Prime Minister Bethlen, he was briefly detained by the police for attempting to organise and recruit a second uprising in Western Hungary,⁵² but he was soon released.⁵³

THE ACTIONS OF RESERVE FIRST LIEUTENANT KÁROLY KMETTY, IVÁN HÉJJAS'S 'CAR COMMANDER' AND HIS MILITIAMEN, 1921

After the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, the right-wing Government, which was established with the help of the Entente Powers, could only with great difficulty overcome the quasi-anarchistic conditions in the country. Although politicians feared a new left-wing takeover attempt, the restoration of order was severely hampered by paramilitary units and militias, formally mostly belonging to the National Army but in practice operating without state control, whose members committed serious crimes, including political revenge against the communists or at least those whom they considered to be communists.⁵⁴ While in the period following the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, Regent Horthy and his Government still relied on these units, after the election of the Commander in Chief as head of state, the activities of these uncontrolled Free Corps caused serious damage to politicians who were trying to normalise life and consolidate the country. The activities of some of these militias were now directed explicitly against the very order that they were supposed to defend.⁵⁵

At the time of the march of Miklós Horthy and the National Army into Budapest, there were about fifty (!) civilian militias operating in and around the capital, including the National Defence Department of the Association of Awakening Hungarians (ÉME), the influential radical right-wing social organisation of the time, and the paramilitary wing of the association. The officers' detachments commanded by First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, Lieutenant-Colonel Pál Prónay or Major Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek operated alongside these units with state approval but almost without state control (Iván Héjjas and Pál Prónay were also members of the Awakening

Iratok az igazságszolgáltatás történetéhez 2., ed. Ibolya Horváth-Pál Solt-Gyöző Szabó-János Zanathy-Tibor Zinner, Budapest, Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1993, 21–42.

⁴⁴ HU-BFL-VII-5-e-1949/20630 p. 287.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 287.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 288.

⁴⁷ HU-BFL-VII-5-e-1949/20630.

⁴⁸ *Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez 1919–1945, I. kötet. Az ellenforradalom hatalomra jutása és rémuralma Magyarországon 1919–1921*, ed. Elek Karsai-Imre Kubitsch-Dezso Nemes-Ervin Pamlényi, Budapest, Szikra Kiadó, 1956, 225–228.

⁴⁹ HU-BFL-VII-5-e-1949/20630. p. 287–288.

⁵⁰ Zinner, op. cit. 174.

⁵¹ [Anonymous author], *Héjjas Iván ügye a nemzetgyűlésben*, Népszava, 15 July 1922. Cited by Ignác Romsics, *Bethlen István*, Budapest, Helikon Kiadó, 2019, 270.

⁵² Romsics, op. cit. 270.

⁵³ Zinner, op. cit. 173.

⁵⁴ Ákos Bartha, *Az utolsócepp a pohárban. Soltra József rendőrmeggyilkolása, in Csoportosulás, lázadás és a társadalom terrorizálása. Rendészettörténelmi Tanulmányok 2.*, ed. Orsolya Jámor-Gábor G. Tarján, Budapest, Rendőrség Tudományos Tanácsa, 2019, 28–44.

⁵⁵ Zinner, op. cit. passim.

leadership, so there was a significant overlap between their detachments and the paramilitary units of the association, as we have already mentioned it.)

There was also the Civilian Gendarmerie Reserve Force and the National Organisation of State Security Agents⁵⁶ under the direction of the Minister of the Interior, a political counter-intelligence organisation of civilians whose task was to monitor individuals with possible communist bonds – its members carried weapons in addition to their civilian occupation and had the same right to bear and use arms as the police in certain circumstances. In addition, the state railway company and the postal service had their own temporary established institutional police (railway and postal guard),⁵⁷ and the army also organised auxiliary police units made up of university students to support professional police forces. Until 1921, there was also a military investigative and secret service body, the so-called 'T' (T = 'Tájékoztató', meaning roughly Informative or Intelligence) Organisation of the Hungarian Ministry of Defence, which had police powers even over civilians – and which also overlapped closely with the detachments.⁵⁸ That is, the military had its independent police force, primarily for political policing, in addition to the police, the gendarmerie and other auxiliary police forces. This period of confusion, rich in armed corpses for law enforcement purposes, although certainly interesting from the point of view of the history of law enforcement and weak government power, also provided an opportunity for self-proclaimed civilians to join various irregular military formations and at the same time to confer on themselves the powers of authority.⁵⁹

Among the military units operating without any serious state control, one of the most notorious ones was the detachment settling in the Britannia Hotel, in the downtown of Budapest, near the Western Railway Station. This unit formally defined itself as the investigative unit of the 1st Special Battalion under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay, but in practice, like other detachments, it operated without government control, and its members informally regarded Iván Héjjas as their commander. Moreover, the unit was not only made up of right-wing, so-called *white* soldiers, but also an increasing number of common criminals who saw the possibility of easy pickings.⁶⁰ The Government had limited control over the units made up of soldiers demobilised from the recently dissolved Monarchy's enormous military, and as a result several of the units of the National Army operated in an irregular and/or paramilitary framework, without strict military discipline, work culture and well-defined subordination. Often the word of an influential commander with a good personal relationship with the Rgente Governor or the current Minister of Defence, such as First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay, Major Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek, Captain Endre Jankovich-Bésán or Colonel Tihamér Siménfalvy could be enough that a person should be considered a soldier with the rank assigned to him by his commander, 'brought with him' from his previous military service, or perhaps ad absurdum arbitrarily granted to himself. At that time, many things depended on the decisions and influence of the various paramilitary commanders.⁶¹ This was the case even when armed men who had subsequently committed serious crimes and had been prosecuted by the police or the gendarmerie were sought by the military authorities, in order to protect the honour of the National Army, to establish why they were not actually military persons, and their cases were thus referred to the civilian courts. For months, the members of the unit colloquially simply known as '*Britanniások*' – '*Britannians*' roamed the capital at night, committing of extortion, looting, robbery, grievous bodily harm and politically motivated murders.⁶² The situation was therefore quite absurd, with soldiers in uniform, supposedly doing police work, committing the most serious crimes under the guise of law enforcement activity, and sometimes literally reversing the roles of police and criminals.

⁵⁶ The Organization of State Security Agents was a civilian auxiliary police force and secret service organization founded in August 1919, whose primary task after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary was to monitor communist conspiracies and break possible workers' strikes. Under the control of the Ministry of the Interior, its members wore plainclothes, carried weapons and continued their civilian occupation as auxiliary police officers, and had powers roughly equivalent to those of the professional police. In October 1922, the organisation was formally incorporated into the auxiliary police organisation called the Office of National Labour Protection, but for a while it tried to retain its autonomy. See *Iratokazellenforradalomtörténetéhez 1919–1945. II.*, 187–188.

⁵⁷ János Suba, *Karhatalmi formációk Magyarországon 1918–1920*, *Rendvédelem-történetiFüzetek* 2008/18, 131–142.; János Suba, *Polgárőrség-szervezése 1919–1921*, *Rendvédelem-történetiFüzetek*, 2018/56, 131–144.

⁵⁸ Tamás Kovács, *A HonvédelmiMinisztérium „T” Szervének létrejötte és működése, avagy elhárítás éskémkedés az I. világháború végétől a bethleni konszolidációig*, Budapest, NemzetiKözzszolgálatiEgyetem, 2020.

⁵⁹ Tamás Kovács, *A Nemzeti Hadseregés a tiszt ikülönítmények*, in *Csoportosulás, lázadásés a társadalom terrorizálása. Rendészettörténeti Tanulmányok 2.*, szerk. Orsolya Jámbor-Gábor G. Tarján, Budaapest, RendőrségTudományosTanácsa, 2019, 151–172.

⁶⁰ Zinner, op. cit. 103.

⁶¹ Bartha, op. cit. 28–44, 29.

⁶² HU-BFL-VII-18-d-8963/1925 – Károly Kmetty and his associates's criminal trial.

The crimes committed by the soldiers of Hotel Britannia were so much in the public consciousness in the capital that a few years later, in September 1924, the daily newspaper *Esti Kurir* published a series of fact-finding articles, based largely on anonymous reports by former detachment members, which included crimes that were probably never investigated prosecuted. The newspaper had to stop the series of articles, because the people involved had threatened to file a press lawsuit against the editorial staff.⁶³

During the beginning of 1920s the radical right-wing political forces increasingly dissatisfied with Regent Governor Miklós Horthy and Prime Minister Count Pál Teleki, launched an attack on two fronts against the emerging political establishment. The Association of Awakening Hungarians increased pressure on the Government through various actions (e.g. squatting, organising strikes and intensive radical right-wing political campaign), while the paramilitary units closely linked to it were mainly settled in Budapest. These armed men, who looted, kidnapped people for ransom and ran riots in the streets at night, were the paramilitary wing of the early Hungarian far-right movement, and their mentality, activities and overall operation were similar to those of the *Freikorps*⁶⁴ and *Heimwehr*⁶⁵ militias in Germany and Austria, which were mainly made up of World War I veterans. They took advantage of the weakness of the young independent Hungarian State, which was recovering from the collapse of the war and the civil war, and were very powerful units compared to the small and weak professional state armed forces and law enforcement bodies. Not to mention that in a very confused legal and social situation, as mentioned above, they built up aquasi-parallel law enforcement apparatus, and committed their illegal acts against ordinary citizens, mostly under the guise of official action.⁶⁶ Although the Prime Minister's Decree No. 4710/1920 ME of 12 June 1920 clearly stated that all military corps and their investigators were to cease their actions against civilians, and that the investigative units were to be merged into the military judicial organisation, the de facto situation did not change much for some time.⁶⁷ Because of their large numbers, their armaments, strength and their good personal relations with the high-ranking officers, the Budapest police also tried to avoid confrontation with the various detachments. At the same time, the conservative right-wing political group around Regent Horthy, mainly marked with the names of Count István Bethlen and Count Pál Teleki, believed – not without reason, given the many later coup plans of the period, mainly linked to military circles – that the radical right was slowly trying to bring about a change of regime through the armed militias being organised around Héjjas and Prónay.⁶⁸

One of the most prominent figures in the series of crimes committed by the officers of Hotel Britannia was perhaps reserve First Lieutenant Károly Kmetty, who committed several serious crimes and served as the 'car commander' of Iván Héjjas's detachment in Kecskemét, which roughly meant that the paramilitary commander, who was a resident of Kecskemét but was also vividly present in the capital after Horthy's march into Budapest, entrusted him to requisition cars and petrol from civilians for the irregular military unit. From October 1920, about a dozen of cases were prosecuted⁶⁹ against Károly Kmetty and his associates, and it may be assumed that they committed many more crimes than the authorities discovered, since only a fraction of the victims dared to report and give detailed testimony against the soldiers who were receiving considerable government support and who were robbing and severely abusing them.⁷⁰ The young officer had already committed serious crimes even before the White Terror, if sources are to be believed, he had shot a young teacher dead in December 1918, but somehow managed to escape punishment.⁷¹

Károly Kmetty, a student of mechanical engineering in civilian life, who fought as a reserve first lieutenant in the First World War, was in his twenties – who otherwise came from an family of intellectuals and was the nephew of the professor of law of European fame with the same name – and, together with the irregular soldiers under his command, for example, on 20 May 1920 kidnapped postal officer Lajos Pongrácz held him captive for days in the Albrecht Garrison, where the soldiers severely beat him and took away his valuables.⁷²

⁶³ [Anonymous author], *Babarczyék a Britanniában. Az Esti Kurircikksorozata – Megkezdjük a Babarczy-különítmény Britanniabeli életének és élményeinek pontos adatai alapján való közlését*, *Esti Kurir*, 3 September 1924, 3.

⁶⁴ Nigel H. Jones, *Hitler's Heralds. The Story of the Freikorps, 1918–1923*, Dorset, Barns and Noble, 1995.

⁶⁵ Lajos Kerekes, *Olaszország, Magyarország és az osztrák Heimwehr-mozgalom*, *Történelmi Szemle*, 1961/2, 199–216.

⁶⁶ Zinner, op. cit. 66.

⁶⁷ A m. kir. kormánynak 1920. évi 4.710. M. E. számú rendelete a katonai hatóságok és közegek, illetőleg katonai nyomozók polgári személyekkel szemben való eljárásának megszüntetéséről, illetőleg korlátozásáról, 1920. június 12., *Magyarországi Rendeletkötet*, 1920, 233–235.

⁶⁸ HU-BFL-VII-18-d-8963/1925.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Zinner, op. cit. passim.

⁷¹ [Anonymous Author], *Megkezdtek a Kmetty-féle atrocitásügyek budapesti tárgyalását*, *Az Est*, 4 March 1927, 2.

⁷² HU-BFL-VII-18-d-8963/1925.

On May 22, 1920, István Tóth, a car driver – for reasons that are not completely clear – was also taken by the same military unit to the Albrecht Garrison, where he was brutally beaten with a whip.⁷³

Also in May 1920, Károly Kmetty borrowed a car from Mátyás Perlesz, the director of Újpest Passenger Transport Ltd., which he eventually practically stole and sold to a certain Andor László, a resident of Szeged, for 70,000 koronas. In addition, the military detachment seized ten barrels of petrol from Mátyás Perlesz, and the soldiers took him to the Britannia Hotel, where Károly Kmetty blackmailed him into releasing him only if he employed him as a technical director of his company, for a salary of 50,000 koronas a year, without doing actual work. Like this Károly Kmetty, in addition to his military activities in the detachment, was nominally appointed technical director of Újpest Personal Transport Ltd., where he received a high salary and probably embezzled further 46,000 koronas from the company's budget.⁷⁴

József Doór, a transport enterpreneur and car owner bribed the Romanian soldiers occupying, and then withdrawing from Hungary who had previously seized his truck, to return the car to him when they left. However, Károly Kmetty and his associates, identifying themselves as military investigators forcibly seized József Doór's truck, while other agencies of the Ministry of Defence temporarily requisitioned it for the army.⁷⁵

Also on 3 May 1920, Károly Kmetty, accompanied by five non-commissioned officers, appeared at the garage of Miklós Feiler, a car mechanic, and as a military investigator, he apparently investigated the origin of the motorcycles in Feiler's possession, and when the car mechanic complained about his actions, they took him to Albrecht Garrison, where, according to his own testimony, he was not assaulted, but was released only on surrender of one of his motorcycles. The victim finally got his motorbike back on 10 May, presumably due to some intervention by the military authorities. However, Feiler's affair with the detachment soldiers did not end there, as Károly Kmetty, accompanied by a non-commissioned officer, appeared at his home the next day, on 11 May, with the pretext that he was visited because he had not handed back a valuable artillery periscope bac to the army. Kmetty then confiscated practically all valuables, including workers' and soldiers' uniforms, a bag made of leather, a small-calibre Flober pistol and its ammunition, a pair of boots, motorcycle tyres, etc., and had his men load them into his car. The artillery periscope in question was not however found, and car mechanic Feiler was taken by the soldiers to Albrecht Garrison, where he was locked in a cell for the night. Feiler's mother eventually found the artillery periscope and sent it to the garrison, but even then the mechanic was not released, and he was brutally beaten by the soldier. First Lieutenant Kmetty demanded one of the motorcycles he had seen in the workshop from Feiler in exchange for his release once again, but Feiler replied that, although it was not his property, he would try to arrange for Kmetty to receive the vehicle for his use. Miklós Feiler was finally released from the garrison after being beaten by the soldiers, without any meaningful interrogation or record.⁷⁶

On 28 July 1920, Károly Kmetty went into Mrs. Ferenc Grigár's coffee shop on the pretext that he had heard that the coffee shop owner had some petrol for sale, and said that he would buy it, but the incident ended with the violent seizure of the available petrol, after which the victims lodged a complaint against the reclaiming and looting first lieutenant.⁷⁷

On October 2, 1920, First Lieutenant Károly Kmetty, in the night hours – presumably in an intoxicated state – drove a car with some of his fellow soldiers with his headlights off through the Buda Castle Tunnel, where he was stopped by Mihály Egedi, a police officer on duty, who asked him to turn on his headlights. However, instead of identifying himself, Kmetty pointed a revolver at the policeman, saying that he was a military officer of police duty, and that the police were under military control, so he was in fact the superior of the policeman, but refused to identify himself. The policeman and the aggressive, drunken first lieutenant ended up pointing their weapons at each other, and the conflict did not end in bloodshed only because the noise caused a large crowd to gather around the car, including dr. Kázmér Vay, a high-ranking police officer directly in the service of the Ministry of the Interior who forcefully called on Károly Kmetty to put away his weapon, because, according to his legal knowledge, Mihály Egedi was acting legally against him and called him up to identify himself to the policeman in the name of the law. Shortly afterwards, police officers László Varró and Menyhért Kerekes also arrived as reinforcement, having noticed the grouping and the noise, and this created a police-overwhelming force which the detachment officer did not dare to resist. Kmetty finally identified himself to the police with his military identity card, who then dismissed him from the scene, but the drunken first lieutenant threatened police officer Egedi and his colleagues who had taken legal action against him, once again, and openly swore revenge against them.⁷⁸

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

The cases briefly described above are only a selection of the criminal record of First Lieutenant Károly Kmetty and the irregular soldiers under his command. In almost all cases, the scenario was very similar – Károly Kmetty and his men showed up at someone's home, or even stopped the victims on the street pretending to act as authority, dragged them to the Hotel Britannia or the Albrecht Garrison, where they would usually assault them and take their money and other valuables, or demanded additional money or valuables (such as a car, vehicle elements, petrol, etc.) as ransom for their release. Most of the victims, having no other choice, handed over what they could to the soldiers, and only a few of them agreed to confess much later, when the criminal proceedings against First Lieutenant Kmetty and his minions were already in progress, and the prosecutors and the police were searching for the victims of the individual crimes. Persons who were genuinely Israelite or identified as Jews were treated with particular cruelty by the soldiers of Hotel Britannia. The abuse often caused serious and long-lasting injuries to the victims, not to mention verbal humiliation, that is, in addition to material gain, the perpetrators' motives clearly included religious and ethnical hatred and anti-Semitism.⁷⁹ Károly Kmetty's men were also involved in the case of the murder of police patrolman József Soltra, on 10 November 1920, which will be discussed in a later chapter of the present long research article.⁸⁰

As for the afterlife of First Lieutenant Károly Kmetty, he, like many other radical right-wing soldiers who had committed serious crimes, escaped punishment. He fled the criminal proceedings against him to Italy, where, among other things, he worked for a time as a pilot in an aircraft factory for the Fascist Government under Mussolini, and the charges against him were gradually dropped, as the Regent Governor's amnesty decrees were gradually implemented. In 1925, however, he returned home, was arrested in become the subject of a series of new prosecutions, some for older offences and others for more recent ones. Finally, on 17 March 1927, the Székesfehérvár Military Court (interestingly enough, some of the offences he had committed were already under the jurisdiction of the military courts) sentenced him to two years and six months of imprisonment, of which two years and two months were already taken to have been completed by the time that he spent under arrest.⁸¹

Little is known about the rest of Károly Kmetty's life, but it is certain that he settled in Szeged for a time, where he started various businesses (including the trade of insecticide and rodenticide)⁸² that did not live up to his hopes. The former 'Britannian' soldier's career went down the river, and in 1930 he was prosecuted for embezzlement of a typewriter he had borrowed and then pawned – a typewriter he had allegedly borrowed to write his memoirs of Hotel Briannia.⁸³ In late August 1930, Kmetty called the editorial office of the daily newspaper *Délmagyarország* under his own name by telephone, presumably in a drunken state, and threatened that if there was any disorder among the workers on 1 September, he would intervene as the head of an 1,700-strong armed militia. The newspaper's staff finally reached him in person at a pub, in the company of three decilitres of cheap wine, where he continued to cling to the seriousness of his claims.⁸⁴ In the middle of the 1930s, we may also meet a radical right-wing journalist of the same name in the newspaper of one of the Hungarian National Socialist parties, the Hungarian National Socialist Peasants' and Workers' Party led by Zoltán Meskó, the *NemzetSzava* (Word of the Nation).⁸⁵ Among other things, we know about the author's press lawsuits. Knowing the later life and extreme right-wing career of many radical right-wing detachment officers of the 1920s, one can strongly suspect that the very same person was involved.

A TURNING POINT FOR THE RADICAL RIGHT-WING MILITIA VIOLENCE AND IVÁN HÉJJAS'S PARAMILITARY GROUPS – THE MURDER OF POLICE OFFICER JÓZSEF SOLTRA, 1921

The action against the Club Café, which ended in a double murder, was not much later followed by the death of József Soltra, a policeman shot dead in the line of duty by individuals in military uniform. On Wednesday, 10 November 1920, at around 2.30 a. m., uniformed police inspector József Miklós, who was on duty in the Oktogon area, the downtown of Budapest, heard cries for help. On one side of Oktogon Square he noticed a group of young men in army uniforms assaulting and beating a printer. When the group noticed the policeman, they stopped beating the man and left in the direction of the Western Railway Station. The cries for help coming from the West were also noticed by József Soltra, a pedestrian police patrol officer, who encountered the same group of soldiers at the corner of Aradi Street and Teréz Boulevard. An exchange of words broke out between the policeman and the

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ [Anonymous author], *Kétév hat hónapraitélték Kmetty Károlyt*, *Az Est*, 17 March 1927, 7.

⁸² László Magyar, *Kétszázpengős kereseti lehetőséggel beszéltem poloskairtó ügynöknek a britanniás Kmetty Károlyhoz*, *Délmagyarország*, 15 July 1928, 3–4.

⁸³ [Anonymous author], *Kmetty Károly sikkasztási pörében tanúkihallgatást rendeltek el*, *Délmagyarország*, 30 January 1930, 4.

⁸⁴ [Anonymous author], „*Halló, itt Kmetty Károly, a britanniás!*”, *Délmagyarország*, 30 August 1930, 5.

⁸⁵ [Anonymous author], *Kmetty Károlyt a tábla is elítélte*, *Népszava*, 30 December 1936, 3.

detachment officers, and Inspector Miklós rushed to Soltra's aid, trying to persuade him to leave the scene with him and not to confront the outnumbered soldiers alone.

At this point, however, a group of three soldiers pulled out their guns, fired several shots at József Soltra and ran away. Soltra was lifted up by the inspector and laid down on a trolley in front of the Edison Café, where he the inspector started chasing the perpetrators. József Miklós fired at the fleeing soldiers, but they turned back and fired at him, and the police inspector was also seriously wounded. József Miklós also fell down to the ground as the soldiers gathered around him, wrested his service weapon from his hand and ran away after assaulting the wounded man. József Soltra was so badly wounded by several shots that he died before a doctor arrived. József Miklós survived the conflict with the soldiers with severe gunshot and stabbed wounds. There were several eyewitnesses of the murder who identified the perpetrators as members of the military unit settled at Hotel Britannia, and several witnesses also clearly saw the murderous soldiers running into the nearby hotel.⁸⁶

The murder of police officer Soltra caused great outrage and social protest, and Regent Horthy saw the disarmament of the various radical right-wing detachments as an urgent necessity after the death of the policeman. Imre Nádosy, the Police Commissioner of Budapest, and soon afterwards promoted to National Police Commissioner, and Deputy Police Commissioner Jenő Marinovich⁸⁷ took apparently decisive action, and the Budapest State Police began to investigate the perpetrators with large forces.⁸⁸ First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, the influential paramilitary commander of the era, who after his activities in Kecskemét and Horthy's invasion of Budapest, had partly moved his headquarters to the capital and was informally considered by the otherwise four, difficultly separable military detachments as their commander, was irritated to learn that his subordinates had murdered a policeman, and he was preparing to defend the buildings occupied by his forces even with arms. The gates of Hotel Britannia were barricaded, machine guns were set up behind them, and the soldiers were given ammunition and grenades. However, the regular units of the National Army that were loyal to the Government and a large number of police troops were deployed outside Hotel Britannia next day in the morning. The only reason why there was finally no armed conflict and gunfight was that Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay, commander of the 1st Hunter Battalion of Szeged, the members of which in principle the soldiers headquartered in Hotel Britannia were, who had played a key role in the organisation and recruitment Hungarian free corps, and who was highly respected by their members, appeared on the scene and gave the decisive order to Héjjas and his units to cooperate with the authorities.⁸⁹

The police, together with regular soldiers of the army invaded the hotel where the identification of the persons involved in the murder of the police officer began. This was only partially possible, however, because some of the perpetrators escaped immediately after the events, aided by military leaders. However, police detectives were eventually able to pick out not only the gunmen involved in the Soltra murder, but also the suspects of long-running cases of robbery, torture, assault and kidnapping. Héjjas himself made a testimony in the case, and distanced himself sharply from both the gunmen who murdered József Soltra and the detachment led by Hussar Captain Jenő Babarczy, whose officers were accommodated in Hotel Britannia as well. Although Héjjas admitted that during the Soviet Republic of Hungary he had organised a right-wing militia in Kecskemét to overthrow the communist government, which had participated in the counter-revolution as an auxiliary unit of the National Army, he categorically denied that he had any control over his own detachment at the moment. In any case, the composition of the troops stationed in Hotel Britannia is illustrated by the fact that the vast majority of the people arrested were, at least according to the interpretation of law of the military authorities, no longer actual soldiers, but civilians wearing military uniforms, including a large number who had left the military after the First World War, but had continued to serve in some detachment voluntarily, possibly with the permission of paramilitary commanders.⁹⁰

Although the information about the composition of the group of three who clashed with the police is contradictory, the investigators identified Imre Mészáros, a demobilised soldier as a member of the three-man group who later beat the wounded police officer József Miklós, Lieutenant László Sesevics and a soldier surnamed Zólyomi, who, according to the sources, was identical to a well-known detachment officer of the period, Second Lieutenant Kálmán Zsabka, who pursued a romantic life and was otherwise active as an actor and poet in civilian life.⁹¹ Zsabka was otherwise born in Zólyom county, this might have been the origin of the pseudonym he used at the time. Lieutenant Sesevics, who was of Serbian descent, managed to flee the country, and returned to his homeland which already belonged to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.⁹²

⁸⁶ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-8821/1920.

⁸⁷ Bartha, op. cit.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ HU-BFL-VII-18-d-8963/1925.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ On Kálmán Zsabka's adventurous life see: Ákos Bartha-Nándor Pócs-András Szécsényi, *Egy hosszán „ébredő” túlélőművész. Zsabka Kálmán pályarajza (1897–1971) I. rész*, Múltunk, 2019/2, 138–180.

⁹² HU-BFL-VII-18-d-8963/1925.

Although the police inspector who survived the shooting, József Miklós clearly identified Kálmán Zsabka as one of the officers who opened fire on Soltra and himself, only Imre Mészáros was finally charged with the murder, who was judged by the military authorities to be no longer an active soldier, but merely a demobilised civilian still in uniform, and otherwise a tinker by trade. His case was therefore tried by a civilian court martial to save the honour of the army.⁹³ Imre Mészáros, who was hiding under the pseudonym István Hatala in the downtown of Budapest, was arrested by the police at dawn, on 22 November. At first Mészáros denied everything, then finally admitted that he had fired two shots at József Soltra. However, he defended himself by saying that his shots had missed and that the person who had shot at the policeman slightly before him was probably the killer.⁹⁴ Antal Gellért, a medical student, Lajos Vágner, a private official, Aladár Micsinai, a student at the School of Applied Arts, who belonged to Kálmán Zsabka's circle of friends, and medical students Károly Váraljai Kővári and János Farkas also testified against Mészáros. Mészáros was sentenced to death by hanging with rope by the civil court martial on 18 December 1920, and was hanged a day later.⁹⁵

Of course, it cannot be excluded at all that Mészáros was merely a scapegoat in the case, even if he was really involved in the Soltra murder, since it was not one single soldier who was responsible for Soltra's death. We can agree with the assumption of Ákos Bartha, who has thoroughly researched the subject and published a detailed research article, that the case was investigated by the police under controlled circumstances, and that certain political and military circles tried to 'save the day' and sacrifice the less important person, and that the final outcome of the case was decided at the highest possible level (in the Ministry of Defence or even at the Regent Governor's residence?).⁹⁶

It is a rather suspicious circumstance that the documents of Imre Mészáros's criminal trial have disappeared, at least they are not in the custody of the Budapest City Archives, where they should be, and we only know about the fact of the swift execution of the execution from the contemporary press and the Mészáros's prison records.⁹⁷ With some malice, we can even doubt the fact of the alleged policeman killer's execution, as there was a rumour in Budapest at the time that Imre Mészáros was seen 'walking freely and gladly' in the streets of the capital after his execution. Of course, all this is now a matter of legend, but in his memoirs, it is Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay himself who not only knew a lot about the crimes committed by some of the detachments, but in some cases could even have intervened in the administration of justice, expresses his doubts on this matter, although in his memoirs he inaccurately identifies the executed perpetrator of the Soltra's murder as a soldier named Horváth. Ákos Bartha notes with justifiable irony that in all probability Kálmán Zsabka, László Sesevics and Imre Mészáros themselves could not have told which of their guns fired the bullet that killed the Soltra – to say it colloquially, someone had to take the blame, and the person who was least important was certainly sacrificed.⁹⁸

Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay realised the seriousness of the situation after the murder of the policemen, and he had no intention of taking an open conflict with Horthy or the Government, so he took personal responsibility for some officers, including Iván Héjjas himself,⁹⁹ but the others were disarmed by the police, and some of them were arrested.¹⁰⁰

In the following days, the police continued to raid hotels occupied by irregular soldiers, arresting around fifty persons and confiscating many weapons. At the same time, in Budapest, the regular units of the police and the National Army loyal to Horthy occupied the main intersections and traffic junctions, and started filtering the uniformed people. The police also visited the Budapest bars and pubs, where they also arrested a number of people. Thanks to the forceful action of the authorities, Iván Héjjas's paramilitary units began to disband, and many of the detachment soldiers changed into civilian clothes and tried to leave Budapest as quickly as possible.¹⁰¹

At dawn on 12 November, the government troops also attempted to take possession of the Garrison at Ehmantelep, a suburb of Budapest, where the free troops of the Hussar Captain Jenő Babarczy operating under the pseudonym of Jenő Bogáti, formally the workers' battalion of the Budapest City Command, but in reality, a completely irregular and arbitrarily operating military unit of about 1,200 men were quartered.

⁹³Bartha, op. cit. 36.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Zinner, op. cit. 103.

⁹⁶Bartha, op. cit. 36–37.

⁹⁷Zinner, op. cit. 103.

⁹⁸Bartha, op. cit. 43.

⁹⁹ See Béla Bodó, *Pál Prónay. Paramilitary Violence and Anti-Semitism in Hungary, 1919–1921*, The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East-European Studies, No. 2101, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh, 2011, 27–28.

¹⁰⁰Prónay, op. cit. 315.

¹⁰¹Zinner, op. cit. 98–101.

Here, however, the law enforcement troops met serious resistance, and a gunfight broke out which resulted in numerous casualties on both sides. The police and the regular military, however, eventually won the battle, and the surviving irregular soldiers were arrested.¹⁰²

Captain Jenő Babarczy escaped with the help of Héjjas and Prónay, and was hiding for a while in Kecskemét, where he tried to organise another detachment of local gunmen, but was soon captured by the gendarmerie of Adony. However, most of the members of the irregular military formation in Ehmannel also escaped further prosecution, because on the orders of Minister of Defence General István Sréter, Colonel Tihamér Siménfalvy, commander of the Double Cross Blood Union ordered the territorially competent military command to release the members of the military formation which had been organised for irredentist purposes, primarily for an attempted break-in in the Hungarian Highlands that now belonged to Czechoslovakia. It was even suggested by Colonel Tihamér Siménfalvy that irregular soldiers who had been unjustly treated by the police and regular military units might later be compensated.¹⁰³ The controlling role of the influential secret military organisation, the Double-Cross Blood Union over the operation of the various irregular, sometimes self-organising, but still state-supported military formations and their close connection with the highest military leadership seems provable from this very fact.

At the end of the period of the White Terror, it was the first wave of the dismantling of the various irregular military formations which also realised two important political objectives of the Regent Governor and the Government. On the one hand, it clearly restored the monopoly on the use of force by the state and the organisations under its control; on the other hand, it prevented the Association of Awakening Hungarians from gradually becoming a modern radical right-wing political party supported by an armed paramilitary force which could even threaten the power of the incumbent Government.¹⁰⁴

József Soltra was then declared a hero and hearse in the courtyard of the Mosonyi Street Police Garrison. A number of public organisations and private companies sent wreaths to his burial. The policeman was buried with the highest degree of state reverence on 16 November 1920 in the Kerepesi Street National Cemetery, in a special grave donated by the local government of Budapest. The ceremony was attended by the Regent Governor himself who personally expressed his condolences to Soltra's parents and his fiancée.¹⁰⁵ The event was of course covered in detail by the press.

Although the death of policeman József Soltra and the subsequent investigation gave the Government a significant incentive to dismantle or at least bring the various irregular formations under closer government control, and at the same time to reduce the conditions that were reminiscent of a civil war, the activities of the various (semi-)military formations were indeed reduced, but not completely eliminated. For example, Iván Héjjas's paramilitary unit, the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain and the closely overlapping National Defence Departments of the Association of Awakening Hungarians continued to operate, although they increasingly avoided publicity. However, the fact that the military units ceased law enforcement activities and lost the right to take official action against civilians was officially returned to the law enforcement agencies under the Ministry of the Interior, primarily the police and the gendarmerie, was an undoubtedly important step towards political consolidation.

As it was already mentioned above, irregular soldiers who committed and were prosecuted for various serious crimes were in many cases acquitted, or at least received light sentences in relation to the gravity of their crimes, which suggests that seemingly low-ranking, insignificant individuals had relatively high-level, influential patrons.¹⁰⁶ Among the paramilitary leaders of the period, we can once again highlight Iván Héjjas and Pál Prónay, who, in addition to their military activities, were also members of the leadership of the Association of Awakening Hungarians and ambitious politicians of the early Hungarian radical right-wing movement. Their merits in building up the counter-revolutionary regime and their political connections, including their personal relationship with the Regent Governor gave them some influence and several times protected them from prosecution, although their names were very clearly linked to a number of illegal actions, such as coup plots, crimes which claimed people's lives or sometimes even aimed at overthrowing the state. Their influence was by no means infinite, but they were not only able to escape punishment themselves, sometimes at the cost of compromise, but also to achieve impunity, or at least mild punishment in the criminal cases of many of their followers and subordinates.

It is a telling case, for example, that First Lieutenant Attila Rumbold, also an officer of Hotel Britannia who had committed serious crimes including robbery and assault and had been arrested in connection with the Soltra murder, was sentenced to death in the first instance, and in the second instance to 15 years of imprisonment by the

¹⁰²Zinner, op. cit. 98.

¹⁰³ HU-HL-HM-52110/Eln. C.-192.1. The source cited by: Tamás Kovács, *A Honvédelmi Minisztérium „T” Szervének létrejötte és működése, avagy elhárítás éskémkedé sz I. világháború végétől a bethleni konszolidációig*, 70–71.

¹⁰⁴Zinner, op. cit. 99.

¹⁰⁵Zinner, op. cit. 105.

¹⁰⁶Zinner, op. cit. 103.

Regent Governor's pardon.¹⁰⁷ However, after a short time of imprisonment, he was released as a free man following the amnesty proclaimed on 3 November 1921. From the end of the 1920s onwards, the radical right-wing Hungarian militia movement, closely overlapping with the Association of Awakening Hungarians, the Hungarian National Defence Forces Association and, of course, the still active Double Cross Blood Union which was founded on the initiative of the Government, continued to exist in the form of various armed units increasingly operating in secret until the middle of the 1920s, and its relationship with the Government and the Regent Governor remained complex and ambivalent all the time.¹⁰⁸

Although the prominent Hungarian historian Ákos Bartha calls the assassination of József Soltra the last drop in the grass in the title of his thorough research paper, we must unfortunately disagree with him about the fullness of this imaginary glass. We have to dispute that the right-wing paramilitary wave of violence that had been raging in Hungary since 1919 would have culminated in the death of police officer József Soltra, because although the activity of irregular military units, self-organising armed groups and detachments undoubtedly decreased as a result of the decisive government measures that followed, it was by no means completely eliminated. The Soltra murder was followed by a number of other politically motivated crimes that caused great public outcry and received press coverage, such as the bomb outrage of Erzsébetváros on 3 April 1922, the bomb attack of Csongrád on 26 December 1923, the coup d'état plan of reserve Firts Lieutenant Viktor Apor, the head of the National Defence Department of the Awakening Hungarians and his fellows, the coup plan of the race-defending member of the Parliament and close ally to Gyula Gömbös, Dr. Ferenc Ulain, or the series of crimes committed by the former 'Britannian' soldiers, the Kovács brothers, who comminted their actions by irredentist and anti-Semitic motivations...

The open street violence was followed by a period of radical right-wing coup plans that mostly aimed at military dictatorship and political terrorism, which briefly spread also in Hungary. It was only Count István Bethlen, who succeeded Pál Teleki as Prime Minister in 1921 and who was increasingly determined to consolidate Hungary's foreign and domestic policy, succeeded in dismantling the various irregular armed groups in several stages, around 1924–1925, and pacified the radical right for a time. Nota bene, the political crimes that followed the Soltra assassination had in common that the perpetrators were all closely linked to the Association of Awakening Hungarians and the influential paramilitary commanders who played leading roles in it, Iván Héjjas and Pál Prónay – and indirectly to the leading figure of the radical right, the later Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös, who acted as a political mastermind in the background –, and the criminal proceedings against them ended either with acquittals or surprisingly mild sentences in relation to the gravity of the actions.

POLITICAL TERRORISM IN HUNGARY IN THE 1920S STRONGLY CONNECTED TO IVÁN HÉJJAS'S PARAMILITARY FORMATIONS

Although paramilitary violence ceased, and irregular troops were formally disbanded, the radical right-wing Hungarian militia movement consisting of World War I veterans, active and demobilised soldiers lived on the form of secret paramilitary organisations. The main representatives of Hungarian paramilitarism were basically three organisations which are otherwise internationally not very well-known. The first of them is the *Association of Awakening Hungarians*, the influential radical right-wing mass organization that had a very close relation to the Government, operated similarly to political party and had strong paramilitary character, having its own armed militia called *Nemzetvédelmi Főosztály – Department of National Defence*. The second important organisation was the – *Hungarian National Defence Force Associaton*, which consisted of mainly radical right-wing, active and demobilised soldiers and officers. The third, and perhaps most important paramilitary formation was the above mentioned *Double Cross Blood Union* that was a state-established, clandestine military organisation coordinating Hungarian anti-communist and irredentist troops which consisted of radical right-wing soldiers and veterans. The three organisations were closely interlinked. After signing of the Peace Treaty of Trianon in 1920, thousands of armed people were kept in secret military status, waiting for deployment, however, the state was not always able to control their operations. The Government used these *Freikorps*-like¹⁰⁹ militias basically for two purposes. On the one hand, the right-wing political and military elite was afraid of another possible communist takeover attempt, and right-wing militias were treated as auxiliary political police forces, kept prepared; on the other hand, the countries of the losing side of World War I were subject to serious limitations of armament.

¹⁰⁷Zinner, op. cit. ibid.

¹⁰⁸HU-MNL-OL-K 149-1926-6-4250.

¹⁰⁹ On the German Freikorps militias see: Nigel H. Jones, *Hitler's Heralds. The Story of the Freikorps, 1918–1923*, Dorset, Barns and Noble, 1995. On the similarities between the German Freikorps and the Hungarian militias see: Béla Bodó, *The Rise and Fall of Paramilitary Violence in Hungary, 1919–1922*, East European Quarterly, 2004/3.

They operated in the same way as the German ‘Schwarze Reichswehr’ (‘Black Army’).¹¹⁰ The Government and the military leadership did its best to circumvent limitations, and treated irregular troops as semi-secret, semi-official reserves of the army, preparing for a war in the near future in which the territories that were annexed from Hungary by the Treaty of Trianon were to be reoccupied. That is, the armed forces and the radical right-wing political movements had very strong relations due to traumas, and hyper-nationalism and exaggerated patriotism coupled with violent anti-Semitism.¹¹¹

Secret irregular military formations mainly under the command of First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas started becoming concerned in terrorist actions like the luckily prevented bomb outrage plan in Jászkarajenő in 1922, the bomb outrage of Erzsébetváros (8 killed) on 2 April 1922, or the bomb outrage of Csongrád (3 killed) on 24 December 1923. All the three terrorist incidents were committed by the militiamen of the Awakening Hungarians who were also irregular soldiers of the Double Cross Blood Union, and paramilitary commanders First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas and Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay, at the same time emerging, ambitious far-right politicians of the era arose in each cases as possible instigators, together with Captain Gyula Gömbös (president of the Hungarian National Defence Force Association, later Minister of Defence and Prime Minister) in this period, the leader of the oppositional Party of Hungarian National Independence (popularly called race-defenders), the influential politician who was still close to the Government and had a very good relationship with Regent Governor Miklós Horthy.¹¹² The reconstruction of the above mentioned, less known terrorist deeds offers a micro-historical lens to investigate broader issues, to define or redefine the controversial relationship of Hungarian militias and the (newly created) Hungarian State in the 1920s.

One of the instances of radical right-wing terrorism that spread in Hungary for a short time, mainly due to the activity of the members of First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas’s irregular military formations – uncovered in the preparatory stage – was the 1922 hand-grenade assassination plan in Jászkarajenő. István Keő-Kucsera, a farmer, innkeeper and paramilitary commander from Jászkarajenő, was the leader of the local sub-organisation of the Association of Awakening Hungarians and a well-known local activist of the radical right in the Pest County village, began to complain in February 1922 that another catering establishment in the village which happened to be owned by a Jewish person was generating more turnover than his pub. He decided to “teach the Jews a lesson”, to intimidate them in some way, and in any case to carry out some unspecified act of violence.¹¹³

As the leader of the Jászkerajenő sub-organisation of the Awakening, Keő-Kucsera was a regular guest at the headquarters of the Awakening Hungarians at 3 Sörház Street in the downtown of Budapest, and in connection with this he also visited the pub at the bottom of the building. It was here in February 1922 that he met his friend Mihály Gyalay, a radical right-wing journalist and editor of the political newspaper of the Awakening movement called *Hazánk (Our Homeland)*, and complained to him that, in his opinion, the Jews of Jászkarajenő were plotting against the local Awakening activists. That is, the local Jewish restaurant owner was spoiling his business – and Keő-Kucsera suggested that this should be tackled. The journalist agreed with his friend and Awakening brother, and the more wine the two men drank, the louder they became about their aversion to the Jews. Gyalay, in a wine-induced state, suggested that grenades should be thrown at the houses of certain Jewish people in Jászkarajenő.¹¹⁴ The anti-Semitic rhetoric and the unfolding assassination plot caught the attention of a 21-year-old young man at the next table, József Kovács, a demobilised soldier who was in need of money, and of course, was also a member of the Awakening. He sat down beside the two men who were drunkenly hatching anti-Semitic plans.¹¹⁵

The radical right-wing gentlemen were now drinking wine in a threesome, and their determination to carry out the assassination seemed to be becoming clearer and clearer. József Kovács volunteered to carry out the assassination on behalf of Keő-Kucsera for a fee, and Keő-Kucsera accepted the offer. They agreed that Kovács would soon travel from Budapest to Jászkarajenő in order to inspect the specific house on which he would have to throw grenades. At the same time, Mihály Gyalay took it upon himself to acquire the grenades.¹¹⁶

A few days later József Kovács visited Mihály Gyalay at the Awakening headquarters, and asked him for the promised grenades. At Kovács’s urging, Gyalay immediately went to the office of Géza Adorján, a student engineer and leading officer of the Awakening. Géza Adorján was an influential figure of the far-right movements of the time, involved in a number of political assassinations.

¹¹⁰ See: Jun Nakata, *Der Grenz- und Landesschutz in der Weimarer Republik 1918–1933. Die geheime Aufrüstung und die deutsche Gesellschaft*, Rombach Verlag, Freiburg im Breisgau, 2002

¹¹¹ See Balázs Kántás, *Milicisták, puccsisták, terrorfiúk*, Művészeti és Irodalmi Jelen Kft., Budapest, 2021.

<http://real.mtak.hu/123884/>

¹¹² Op. cit.

¹¹³ City Archives of Budapest, HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924. István Keő-Kucsera and his associates’ trial.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

He held a leading position in the paramilitary wing of the association, had close ties with the commanders of the notorious detachments of the army, including First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay, who were at the time one of the vice-presidents of the Awakening and also heads of the National Defence Department, changing each other.¹¹⁷ Adorján handed two grenades to the journalist.¹¹⁸ Gyalay then gave the grenades to Kovács to execute the assassination.¹¹⁹

Here events took a surprising turn, as József Kovács seemed to have lost his courage with two grenades in his briefcase, and a few hundred metres from the Awakening headquarters, he turned to a police officer, and told him that he had found grenades on a train, and that he thought they were dangerous and wanted to hand them over to the police.¹²⁰ However, the policeman became suspicious of the young man's story and brought Kovács to the police station of District 4 where he was interrogated. The grenades were seized by the police and handed over to the military body responsible for collecting military equipment left over from the World War. The military experts established that the grenades were functional, dangerous and unreliable, and destroyed them within a short time, drawing up a detailed report about their annihilation.¹²¹

At first, Kovács tried to maintain his earlier story that he had found the two grenades in the train during his journey, but later he broke down and confessed everything to the police, who soon opened an investigation for a conspiracy to commit murder. Keő-Kucsera, Gyalay and Adorján were soon arrested in March 1922, and based on the detailed testimonies of Kovács who had been broken, had renounced the assassination attempt and had cooperated with the authorities to a great extent, they were soon suspected of forming an alliance to prepare the assassination.¹²²

József Kovács's testimony and functionality of the grenades were enough evidence for the prosecution to accuse all four radical right-wing men, and the indictment also included a conspiracy to commit murder.

After the indictment, the Royal Criminal Court of Budapest finally heard the case of the Jászkarajenő bombing plot between 11 and 18 June 1924. The accused had been at liberty for some time, having spent only a few months, mostly between April and June 1922, in pre-trial detention.¹²³ During the trial, the defence tried to confuse the court, citing trumped-up charges and patriotic reasons, but could use only inconsistent arguments against the confession of the accused József Kovács and Captain Pál Reinhardt, Chief Artillery Foreman, according to which the German-made grenades were clearly functional and dangerous devices, capable of killing human life. The Criminal Court of Budapest finally accepted as true and credible the repentant and detailed confession of József Kovács and the opinion of military expert Pál Reinhardt. In its judgment of 18 June 1924, the court found István Keő-Kucsera István first, Mihály Gyalay second and József Kovács third guilty of the crime of conspiracy to commit murder, and finally sentenced Keő-Kucsera to four months of imprisonment, Gyalay to three months of imprisonment and József Kovács to two months of imprisonment. However, the court acquitted Géza Adorján, the fourth defendant of the charge of conspiracy to commit murder, since it was not clearly established that he had been aware of the fact that Mihály Gyalay had asked him for the hand grenades in order to carry out an anti-Semitic motivated assassination.¹²⁴

Finally, it may be seen as a symbolic gesture of justice that the Royal Hungarian Supreme Court also ruled that the far-right militiamen István Keő-Kucsera, Mihály Gyalay and József Kovács were guilty of the crime of conspiracy to commit murder, and it was only by luck that József Kovács changed his mind before it was too late and disclosed the preparations to the authorities in detail. In spite of this, the terrorists were not punished in any meaningful way, and the prison sentence of a few months imposed on the three defendants part of which the court of first instance took to be completed by pre-trial detention cannot be regarded serious punishment compared to the act of preparing for murder. There is no clear evidence or written source of this kind, but based on the very similar outcomes of similar criminal cases in the 1920s, we may perhaps allow ourselves some generalisations and draw some conclusions based on the network of contacts of the accused. Especially it is the socially highly mobile Géza Adorján and his acquaintance with paramilitary commanders Prónay and Héjjas that makes it possible to draw the conclusion that influential political and military circles may have been involved in the case of the terrorists of Jászkarajenő, and they managed to ensure that the men with radical right-wing affiliations preparing for a serious crime received the minimum possible punishment, although it was legally proven that they had conspired to carry out murders.¹²⁵

¹¹⁷Serfőző, *A titkostársaságok és a róluik folytatott parlamenti viták 1922–1924-ben*, 75.

¹¹⁸HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰Ibid.

¹²¹Ibid.

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴Ibid.

¹²⁵Zinner, *op. cit.* 159–160.

The very aggressive struggle of the parliamentary elections 1922 was disrupted by a series of events that also provided the State with another opportunity to take stronger actions against political extremism. In the spring of 1922, the young militiamen of the National Defence Department of the Association of Awakening Hungarians of District 9 of Budapest – despite the measures to disarm various militias in several stages, the Awakening Hungarians were still operating such armed units without any real state control – decided to commit a bomb attack against the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros, a liberal political and social organisation at 76 Dohány Street, presided by opposition liberal Member of Parliament Vilmos Vázsonyi, thereby killing several people they considered the enemies of the nation. The assassination and the subsequent trial of the perpetrators who were in fact irregular, quasi-state soldiers was one of the most shocking and publicised events of the 1920s, and was largely referred to in the press as the ‘bombing trial’ and the ‘Márffy trial’ after the accused number one called József Márffy, a young veteran soldier, military sergeant major in the First World War.¹²⁶

On 2 April 1922, a bomb exploded at a meeting of the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros, killing eight people and wounding twenty-three. Given the extreme political situation of the time, assassinations of Jews and of persons and institutions perceived to be pro-Jewish, and the fact that behind them there was the Association of Awakening Hungarians, mainly Iván Héjjas and Pál Prónay, the bomb raid of Erzsébetváros was finally tried together with other anti-Semitic and anti-Entente crimes.

The investigation was led by Dr. József Sombor-Schweinitzer, the prominent and very talented, highly professional leader of the Hungarian political police of the era, and the Criminal Court of Budapest accused the young militiamen on the basis of documents seized from the Awakening that they ‘had deviated from the national defence objectives, prepared anti-social attacks, and sought to make it impossible for citizens of the Israelite religion to remain in Hungary by so-called Jewish beatings and bomb raids.’¹²⁷ József Márffy and his associates were also accused of organising a so-called blood court, an internal, arbitrary judiciary body of the organisation, which was to impose death sentence in the event of disobedience. Márffy used intimidation and death threats to persuade his accomplices to help organise and carry out the assassinations.

The political gravity of the case is highlighted by the fact that Minister of Defence General Count Károly Csáky and Prime Minister Count István Bethlen themselves were called as witnesses. The complex and controversial relation of the State and the militias was well explained by Minister Csáky’s testimony,¹²⁸ in which he publicly told that after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary and during the civil war in 1919–1920, Hungary had no regular army, and in addition to the semi-irregular National Army organised by Admiral Miklós Horthy (from March 1920 Head of State as Regent Governor of Hungary), there were about fifty militias in Budapest as well. Among these were the troops of the Awakening Hungarians. In this chaotic situation, the consolidating new Hungarian Government needed the paramilitary units to maintain order, and in 1919–1920 Chief of the General Staff Béla Berzeviczy brought the militias under the control of the Army. This led to the formation of the Double Cross Blood Union as an umbrella organisation for the irregular military formations under the control of the military. The Minister also stressed that although the militias were under military control, the army had no influence on personnel matters, including the composition of the national defence militias of the Awakening Hungarians, and the members were not seriously trained or armed by the regular military, but they were treated as reserve military forces which could be deployed if necessary to restore the fragile order.¹²⁹ Although the militias were not under strict state control, they operated as quasi-state armed organisations. However, according to the Minister’s interpretation, these units had no real authority in the legal sense, but they had arbitrarily authorised themselves to do act as police-like forces, and the members of the various troops were only actually called in one occasion, on 23 October 1921, during King Charles of Habsburg IV’s second attempt to return, and the men were mobilised, given weapons and salary for only that period. After that, the Government no longer needed irregular military units. By 1922, a new communist takeover was not a real threat, so paramilitary units consisting of radical right-wing young men became superfluous for the Horthy–Bethlen Government which was seeking to normalise Hungary’s relations with foreign countries after signing the Peace Treaty of Trianon. It was because some of its members had committed crimes that the Government had to disband the Double Cross Blood Union in 1923. At the time of the bomb attack of Erzsébetváros, the members of the National Defence Department of the Awakening Hungarians were operating as a self-proclaimed civilian militia without any state control or instruction.

Prime Minister István Bethlen appeared as a witness before the court less because of the political implications of the case rather than clearing himself as a private citizen.¹³⁰ Namely, József Márffy, in order to show off his own influence, had claimed to his militiamen that he was on good personal terms with the Prime Minister, he had played

¹²⁶ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923. József Márffy and his associates’ trial.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 457–469.

¹²⁹ Tibor Zinner, *Adatok a szélsőjobboldali egyesületek megalakulásának körülményeihez*, *Történelmi Szemle*, 1979/3-4, 562–576; 566–567.

¹³⁰ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923.

tennis with Bethlen's sons and that he had often travelled in the PM's car. Bethlen, on the other hand, categorically denied that he or any of his family members knew Márffy.

The Márffy trial was necessitated by foreign pressure for the Hungarian State to demonstrate to the Entente, especially to France that revolutionary and civil war years following the Great War were over.¹³¹ The Government wanted to prove that political and social order had been restored, Hungary accepted the territorial losses imposed by the Trianon Peace Treaty, and that the process of consolidation had finally begun. Nevertheless, it cannot be claimed that the bomb outrage against the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros was not organised or carried out by József Márffy and the militiamen of the Awakening Hungarians, as there was a lot of convincing evidence in this case, as the record of the trial in the first instance testifies. However, it seems highly probable that other crimes attributed to them were arbitrarily linked to them for political purposes, and the prosecution and the courts also linked these crimes to the bomb attack perpetrated by Márffy's group under political pressure. Although Márffy was sentenced to death in the first instance, neither he nor his fellow prisoners who were also sentenced to death were ever executed. The trial continued at the Royal Court of Appeal in Budapest and at the Royal Hungarian Curia, and ended with much lighter sentences.

József Márffy served most of his prison sentence in the prison of Vác.¹³² He was released on parole in 1929 after being diagnosed with lung disease. He then settled in Kőszeg where he had family ties. At first he worked as the local party secretary of the governing United Party and later, in the 1930s he became the local leader of the Hungarian national socialist, pro-German Arrow Cross Party. At the end of the Second World War, he participated in anti-Semitic atrocities as member of the Arrow Cross militia. After the war he was interned for a short time, but was not accused. Finally, he deceased in 1971, in Kőszeg at the age of 73 as a pensioner.¹³³

In addition to the bomb attack in Erzsébetváros, the bomb outrage Csongrád a little later was another highly publicised terrorist act committed by far-right militiamen, under the leadership of First Lieutenant János Piroska, a professional army officer. On 26 December 1923, the terrorists threw an explosive device into the ballroom of the Hotel Hungarian King in Csongrád at a charity event organised by the local Jewish Women's Association, killing three people and seriously injuring twenty-five others. Other people involved in the attack were First Lieutenant János Piroska's brothers István and György, and certain local farmers János Sági and János Kővári. Piroska himself had made the explosive device and had brought it from Budapest.¹³⁴

The assassination was carried out by Miklós Bölöni and László Sinkó, local farmers and WWI veterans, militiamen of the Awakening Hungarians and the Double Cross Blood Union. During his interrogation, Sinkó defended himself by claiming that First Lieutenant Piroska had told him that the bomb was only intended to cause alarm, but that its explosive power was not sufficient to kill a human being. Yet he was reluctant to throw it when they appeared outside the Hotel Hungarian King at midnight. Miklós Bölöni then called László Sinkó a coward, who finally lit the fuse of the bomb with his cigarette and threw it into the ballroom. The bomb exploded immediately, killing three people.

The police put serious efforts into collecting data, soon arrested the perpetrators, and the so much material evidence was collected that on 30 December 1923 the suspects confessed. The police also arrested their accomplices, almost the entire local group of the radical right-wing Race-defending Party, 25 young men in all. It turned out that most of the suspects were also members of the Awakening Hungarians. Being a professional officer, János Piroska's crimes were subject to military justice. He was handed over to the Budapest Military Court

The increasingly high-profile investigation also involved Dr. János Diószeghy, the head of the Public Security Department of the Ministry of the Interior,¹³⁵ and it was revealed that the suspects were members of the *Alföldi Brigád – Brigade of the Hungarian Plain*, a secret irregular military unit commanded by Iván Héjjas, part of the Double Cross Blood Union.¹³⁶ In the course of the investigation, János Sági was also found to have a document from Iván Héjjas appointing him the local commander of his militia's battalion in Csongrád.¹³⁷

¹³¹ Zinner, *Az ébredőkfénykora*, 172.

¹³² HU-BFL-VII-101-c-fegyenc-I-8184. József Márffy's prison record.

¹³³ [Anonymous author], *Halálozás*, Vas Népe, 1971. 08. 23. Furthermore, the death records in custody of the Vas County Archive of the National Archives of Hungary verify that the man called József Márffy who deceased in 1971 is the same person involved in the bomb trial.

¹³⁴ Lajos Serfőző, *A titkostársaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban*, Acta Universitatis Szegediensis de Attila József Nominatae. Acta Historica, Tomus LVII, 1976, 3–60.

¹³⁵ The position was very similar to the National Commissioner of the Police, it was a type of State Secretary of Law Enforcement.

¹³⁶ Csongrád County Archive of the National Archives of Hungary, HU-MNL-CSML-IV-401-a-24/1923.

¹³⁷ Serfőző, op. cit. 97.

Héjjas was also there behind the assassination, the Double Cross Blood Union was deeply involved in the case, and the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain was one of the secret reserve units of the Hungarian Army, the goal of which was of course to circumvent the limitations of armament.

Minister of Defence General Károly Csáky, to save the honour of the Army, achieved by creating confusion that Frist Lieutenant Piroska should not be officially considered a professional soldier. The military authorities argued that he had previously been the subject of ethics proceedings for private reasons and had been forced to retire from military service. There were various versions of where Piroska ended up working as a drawing teacher, but he was eventually tried together with his accomplices in a civil court. The case was finally heard by the Royal Court of Szolnok, where one of the defence councils was Dr. Ferenc Ulain, friend of Iván Héjjas and Gyula Gömbös, one of the leaders of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, and a race-defending member of the parliament.¹³⁸

The trial of the bomb case took place between 17 and 26 September 1924. The defendants spent little time in prison, as they were released on high bail before the trial. Lawyers Dr. Ulain and Dr. Széchenyi argued the patriotic merits of the defendants, in particular János Piroska in the establishment of the right-wing, counter-revolutionary regime, stating that it was him who, as a member of the paramilitary formation of Iván Héjjas reorganised the gendarmerie from volunteers in Csongrád after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary in 1919, and as the local commander of this auxiliary police unit he had made major contribution to the restoration of state and social order. In his defence speech, Dr. Széchenyi went so far as to say that prominent members of the local Jewish community harboured grievances against Piroska who had expelled them from the volunteer gendarmerie because of their indiscipline, drinking and gambling. The defence lawyer also expressed his opinion that Piroska and his militiamen were not anti-Semites, and that the Jewish-Christian conflict was fuelled by the representatives of the Jewish community in Csongrád who had also tried to influence the investigation in order to shift suspicion to local Christian nationalists.

The defendants claimed that they had been beaten by the police during the investigation, and this was the only reason why they had confessed earlier. The Court of Szolnok found the witnesses mostly untrustworthy, the investigation insufficiently thorough, the evidence insufficiently conclusive, and tended to the conclusion that the defendants may have been tortured.¹³⁹ Consequently, on 26 September 1924 the court acquitted the accused of all charges. It is likely that influential military and political circles intervened to help the defendants, and the acquittal in this case was not a coincidence.¹⁴⁰

The mastermind behind of the bomb attack of Csongrád, János Piroska, who was a drawing teacher and painter by his civilian profession, then started a political career.¹⁴¹ He graduated in law in 1930, became the chief notary and then mayor of Csongrád in 1933, and during his tenure large-scale construction projects started in the town. In 1945, after the Second World War he was tried in the People's Tribunal for war crimes, but was acquitted of all charges.¹⁴² Even so, all his family's property and estates were confiscated, and they were kept under constant police surveillance. In 1952 Piroska was also briefly interned in the forced labour camp at the Great Hungarian Plain, Hortobágy.¹⁴³ In 1956, he took part in the revolution against the occupying Soviet Union, and after the fall of the revolution and war for freedom he was briefly arrested again. Then he retired from public life and deceased in 1987 at the age of 92. János Piroska lived a very controversial life, and during his political career, he indeed did a great deal for the development of his hometown, where today the main square is named after him.¹⁴⁴

THE FINAL PACIFICATION HUNGARIAN RADICAL RIGHT-WING MILITIAS, 1924–1925

For the Hungarian Government led by Prime Minister Count István Bethlen which was striving for consolidation in domestic and foreign policy as well, the bomb raid of Csongrádon 24 December 1923, which caused a great outcry and claimed the lives of three persons was really one of the last drops in the glass. Bethlen promised at the parliament on 3 January 1924 that he would personally interrogate paramilitary commander Iván Héjjas about the Csongrád bomb outrage and other terrorist actions among other things, and if his responsibility was to be found, he would be treated in the same way as anyone else.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁸ Nemzetgyűlési Napló 1922–1926/XVIII., 344–345. Cited by: Serfőző, op. cit. 100.

¹³⁹ [Anonymous author], *Egy felmentő és egy marasztalóútelet*, Világ, 28 September 1924.

¹⁴⁰ Kálmán Shvoy, *Shvoy Kálmán titkosnaplója és emlékirata 1920–1945*, ed. Mihály Perneki, Budapest, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1983, 97.

¹⁴¹ Péter Erdélyi, *Képviselőtestületi választások 1929-ben Csongrádon*, Múzeumi Kutatások Csongrád Megyében 2003, ed. Péter Erdélyi–Judith Szűcs, Szeged, Móra Ferenc Múzeum, 2002, 119–125.

¹⁴² Csongrád County Archive of the National Archives of Hungary, HU-MNL-CSML-XXV-8-5-d-NB-148/1945.

¹⁴³ Martin Gulyás, *Az 1945-ös csongrádiföldosztásvesztései*, Emlékeztető, 2016/1–2, 52–68.

¹⁴⁴ Attila Tóth, *Piroska János életeésfestészete*, Csongrád, [Private Edition], 2009.

¹⁴⁵ Nemzetgyűlési Napló, 1922–1926/XVIII., 337–338. Lajos Serfőző, *A titkos társaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban*, 36.

Héjjas was also interrogated by the police in connection with the Csongrád bomb explosion and the conspiracies of nationalist secret societies and paramilitary groups in general, in the presence of the National Police Commissioner Imre Nádosy himself, but in the end it was not proven that he was personally involved in any criminal activity.¹⁴⁶ Of course, this was certainly nothing more than a bargain between the paramilitary commander and the Government, possibly including Regent Governor Miklós Horthy himself.¹⁴⁷ Besides Horthy, Gyula Gömbös, who later, in 1932 became Prime Minister of Hungary, must have played a major role in the fact that Héjjas was never brought to trial during the Horthy Era, and was never seriously prosecuted for the acts committed by him and others under his command, even though his crimes were obvious to many people.¹⁴⁸ The example of Iván Héjjas described earlier tells us a great deal about the relationship between radical irredentist-nationalist associations, secret societies and the paramilitary units with countless links to them and the Hungarian Government. Not only did the former paramilitary commander not have to answer for his actions before the judiciary system, but he later received Vitéz's title,¹⁴⁹ a kind of specific Hungarian knighthood that provided certain social advantages, earned a doctorate in law for his book on aviation law, became a member of Parliament and was later a well-paid and respected official of the Hungarian State. Iván Héjjas's and Gyula Gömbös's examples also illustrate well how (in the 1920s fairly) young, ambitious military officers could quickly become influential politicians of the radical right, rising to the level of the Hungarian political elite.

Of all the paramilitary commanders who shared a common past and common crimes, and once practiced formidable power, it was Pál Prónay who was the most unable to achieve any kind of consolidation. Because of his failure to show sufficient loyalty to the Regent Governor on the occasion of King Charles IV's second attempt of return, and because the brutal activities of his detachment, his arbitrary assassinations and adventurer-like political actions he became increasingly burdensome for the Bethlen Government,¹⁵⁰ and he was eventually forced to retire, become sidelined, and was also expelled from the Union of Etelköz, the pro-government political secret society of the era.¹⁵¹ Lieutenant Colonel Prónay, a nobleman and the member of one of the ancient landowner noble families of Hungary, who was practically by birth a member of the social and political elite, is, on the other hand a good counter-example how someone could gradually lose his elite status due to his extreme radicalism.¹⁵² Prónay originally, in the beginning of the right-wing counter-revolution, perhaps had the good chance to rise among the most senior military officers (he could have easily reached the rank of General or might have become Minister of Defence as well) with the support of Admiral Horthy if he had had the capability of consolidating and moderating himself to some degree. However, due to his extreme radicalism and brutality, he could not fit into the consolidated political system of Prime Minister Bethlen at all, so he quickly lost his influence became a marginal figure in the radical right.

In the spirit of consolidation, the paramilitary formations and national defence militias still operating in various areas of the country, such as the Héjjas Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain and other armed units of the Association of Awakening Hungarians were then essentially disarmed and regularised, and their law enforcement and military powers which could be traced back to the turbulent civil war, were definitely and unequivocally abolished. At the same time, a paramilitary organisation, the Office of National Labour Protection was set up under the control of the Ministry of the Interior, primarily to break strikes and labour movement organisations. It was a kind of white, right-wing volunteer workers' militia whose members were equipped with handguns and had the same powers of action and use of weapons were the same as those of the police, but it was rather an auxiliary police rather than a military force.¹⁵³ The majority of its members practiced their civilian professions, but occasionally were called into duty.

The Brigade of the Plain, the State Security Agents and the national defence militias of the Awakening Hungarians were also integrated into this organisation, so they were under much more serious government control, but could essentially continue to operate.¹⁵⁴ The Double Cross Blood Union also continued its activities within the framework of the National Labour Protection, but it is interesting to note that General Kálmán Shvoy wrote in his diary that the Double Cross Blood Union was founded under this name in 1923, as a kind of successor organisation to the Brigade of the Great Plain led by Iván Héjjas, and that it allegedly continued its activities under the codename

¹⁴⁶Serfőző, op. cit. 36.

¹⁴⁷Bodó, op. cit.

¹⁴⁸Bodó, op. cit.

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

¹⁵⁰Péter Konok, *Az erőszak kérdései 1919–1920-ban*, 84.

¹⁵¹Prónay, op. cit 322–324.

¹⁵²OnPrónay's political downfall see: Bodó, *Pál Prónay. Paramilitary Violence and Antisemitism in Hungary, 1919–1921*.

¹⁵³HU-MNL-OL-K 26-XXII-6010; 5.818. M. E. számú rendelet a nemzeti munkavédelmi intézmény fegyverhasználati jogáról, 1923. augusztus 2., Magyarországi Rendeletek Tára, 1923, 274.

¹⁵⁴Dósa, op. cit. 151–152.

*Fő tartalék – Main Reserve*¹⁵⁵ as a secret special operations military unit, formally within the Ministry of the Interior and the National Labour Protection, but in reality subordinated to the Hungarian General Staff and the Ministry of Defence. General Shvoy thus dates the genesis of the organisation itself to this period, to the end of 1923. This is evidently a mistake made by the General, since the Double Cross Blood Union really ceased to exist under its former name by 1923–1924. There is also an archival source about the integration of the Double Cross Blood Union into the Office of National Labour Protection: a confidential circular from the Ministry of the Interior from 1926 which forbids the members of the National Labour Protection to refer to the new strike-breaking auxiliary police force as the ‘Double Cross Blood Union’ even among themselves, as it is associated with rather bad public memories.¹⁵⁶ The National Labour Protection was a strike-breaking auxiliary police force and a de facto covert military reserve force at the same time. Although it obviously had no significant combat value, its tens of thousands of members who were otherwise civilians in their daily occupations, but who owned firearms and were trained and could be mobilised to a certain extent, made a significant contribution to circumvention of the serious military restrictions imposed by the Trianon Peace Treaty. In this way, it also helped to pacify the former (in some cases irregular) soldiers of the National Army, which had once numbered over 100,000 and was reduced to a maximum of 35,000 after 1921. In this strange, voluntary auxiliary police and reserve military status many people still felt useful and being in the service of the state. That is, the Hungarian radical right-wing militia movement thus continued to exist partly within the framework of this organisation, in a, so to say, domesticated form.¹⁵⁷

The testimony of General Count Károly Csáky, Minister of Defence in the bombing trial of József Márfy and his associates, one of the most important archival documents of the history of the Double Cross Blood Union already cited earlier also testifies that the Double Cross Blood Union was established after the fall of the Soviet Republic with the aim of bringing paramilitary organisations operating in the capital and the countryside under unified (state and military) control in order to restore the order, presumably sometime around 1919–1920, on the initiative of General Béla Berzeviczy, Chief of General Staff. It was then dissolved in 1923 in the form in which it had previously operated, and Minister Csáky presumably means the integration of the Double Cross Blood Union into the National Labour Protection which officially took place towards the end of 1922, but in practice perhaps it happened somewhat later, in several steps.¹⁵⁸

In parallel with the integration of the different militias into the National Labour Protection, the Government Decree No. 7502 of 19 October 1923 prohibited the participation of state employees, including members of the armed forces and law enforcement agencies to be members in associations whose activities were against or incompatible with the lawful order of the state, or which did not have a constitution approved by the Minister of the Interior. That is, it was essentially the membership in secret societies that become prohibited for state employees.¹⁵⁹ In reality, of course, it was still not easy for the state to check – if it really wanted to check in the case of right-wing, pro-government organisations – who was a member of what kind of association or with whom, how and for what purposes cooperated, especially if the given secret organisation produced no written documents for conspiratorial reasons. In this way, although the Double Cross Blood Union officially ceased to exist in 1923, its members, in some form, were still partly in the service of the state, and they could continue their activities to achieve the goals which they thought to be patriotic.¹⁶⁰

THE FURTHER LIFE OF A RADICAL RIGHT-WING POLITICIAN AND PARAMILITARY COMMANDER – IVÁN HÉJJAS BECOMING THE MEMBER OF THE HUNGARIAN POLITICAL ELITE

In parallel with the pacification of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, Iván Héjjas, a key figure of the White Terror and the leader of the atrocities committed on the Danube–Tisza Interfluve, who played a leading role in the Double Cross Blood Union, was also – apparently – consolidated and pacified. He was able to avoid punishment throughout the Horthy Era, mainly thanks to his relationship with Regent Horthy and Gyula Gömbös. From among all of the former detachment commanders involved in the White Terror, it was perhaps Héjjas who achieved the highest social and political status. Between 1927 and 1931, he was a member of parliament for the Kunszentmiklós constituency of Gömbös’s Party of Hungarian Independence (commonly known as the Race-defending Party), that had earlier split from the governing United Party.

¹⁵⁵ *Csak szolgálati használatra! Iratok a Horthy-hadsereg történetéhez, 1919–1938*, ed. Tibor Hetés–Tamásné Morva, Budapest, Zrínyi Katonai Könyv- és Lapkiadó, 1968, 499–500.

¹⁵⁶ HU-MNL-OL-K 149-1926-6-3473.

¹⁵⁷ Dósa, op. cit. 134.

¹⁵⁸ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923.

¹⁵⁹ Budapesti Közlöny, 24 October 1923.

¹⁶⁰ On the further life of Hungarian paramilitary formations see Nándor Pócs, *Varjú sereg. Kováts Tivadar és a magyar fajvédelem láthatatlan útjai*, Budapest–Pécs, Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára–Kronosz Kiadó, 2022.

On 16 June 1929, in a grandiose ceremony held on Margaret Island, as it was already mentioned, Regent Governor Miklós Horthy conferred the title of Vitéz, a specific Hungarian knighthood on Iván Héjjas, his brother Aurél Héjjas, Gyula Gömbös and dozens of other former and active soldiers.¹⁶¹

In the meantime, Héjjas had obtained a degree and a doctorate in law with his book on aviation law,¹⁶² was promoted honorary professor of law, and as a former fighter pilot and otherwise partly competent aviation expert, he worked as a senior civil servant in the 1930s in the Transport Policy Department of the Ministry of Trade and Transport. From 1940 he was head of the Department of Public Aviation, adviser to the minister, later promoted to titular state secretary,¹⁶³ and at the same time a member of the board of directors of the state-owned Hungarian Air Traffic Company, and the governor promoted him from first lieutenant to captain. Officially, he was responsible for the supervision and organisation of civil aviation, but as a former fighter pilot he also played a role in the organisation and development of the Air Force of the Hungarian Home Defence Forces.¹⁶⁴

With the death of his friend and protector, Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös, in 1936, Héjjas suffered a great loss politically, but his position and influence remained stable as an unstinting supporter of the Regent Governor. In 1938, following in the footsteps of the former Race-defending Party, he founded a new radical right-wing party under the name of the National Association of Hungarian Race-defenders,¹⁶⁵ which, however, kept strictly aloof from the Arrow Cross Party and other Hungarian fascist and national socialist parties organised on the Western model, and acted mainly as a loyal opposition to the authoritarian conservative government, thus failing to become a significant force on the Hungarian far-right.¹⁶⁶

With the Government's knowledge and consent, Iván Héjjas was also able to return to military/paramilitary activities for a time during the Second World War, when Hungary entered the war and committed itself to the German policy of aggression. In 1938, under the direction of former Interior Minister Miklós Kozma (an influential politician of the era close to Regent Horthy, at that time President and CEO of the Hungarian Telegraphic Office, later Governor of Transcarpathia), he participated as one of the leaders of the reorganised (second) Ragged Guard in the Transcarpathian diversionary operation, which prepared the reoccupation of Transcarpathia which had been annexed to Czechoslovakia in 1920 under the Trianon Peace Treaty, with the assistance of the German military.¹⁶⁷

Furthermore, Héjjas also probably played a role in organising the election of Miklós Horthy's son, István Horthy as Deputy Regent Governor.¹⁶⁸ At the end of 1943, General Ferenc Szombathelyi, the Chief of the General Staff of the Hungarian Defence Forces entrusted Colonel Gyula Kádár to organise an irregular military force of 5,000 men, in which Héjjas also participated as an expert in diversionary/irregular warfare, on the Regent Governor's personal order.¹⁶⁹ Secretly, these times Héjjas served at the Special Operations Group of the General Staff of the Hungarian Defence Forces, and the aim of the establishment of this irregular military formation was to create a troop that is exclusively loyal to Regent Governor Horthy, to help Hungary get out of the world war, and to oppose the German invasion of Hungary in the event of a German invasion, which was foreseeable at the time. As a former race-defender, Héjjas was loyal to Regent Governor Horthy, and at the same time, he was gradually becoming strongly anti-German, who refused to join the pro-German Arrow Cross movement. Although he was undoubtedly a radical right-wing soldier and politician, he never became a Nazi collaborator, and finally belonged to the anti-German wing of the Hungarian radical right-wing scene, which cooperated with/worked for the Government and the Regent Governor in order to try to get out of the Second World War.¹⁷⁰ However, the German troops finally occupied Hungary in March 1944, and Héjjas's irregular military force ultimately played no role in the military events that took place in Hungary. Finally, Iván Héjjas himself in 1945 escaped from the advancing Soviet troops to Germany, and then migrated to Spain, where he settled in Vigo, Galicia, with the knowledge and consent of the right-wing dictator Francisco Franco who was glad to give shelter to German war criminals, their allies and other conservative and radical right-wing exiles who had fled from the Soviet-occupied countries of Europe.

Although Iván Héjjas was finally sentenced to death in absentia by the strongly Soviet-influenced Hungarian People's Tribunal on 25 August 1949, mainly for the murders committed in Orgovány during the time of the White

¹⁶¹ Bodó, op. cit.

¹⁶² Iván Héjjas, *Légi jog*, Kecskemét, Első Kecskeméti Hírlapkiadó- és Nyomda Rt, 1934.

¹⁶³ HU-MNL-OL-K 27-1942. 02. 08.-26.

¹⁶⁴ *Horthy Miklós titkos iratai*, ed. Miklós Szinai-László Szűcs, Budapest, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1962, 33–38, 194–197.

¹⁶⁵ The fragmented fond of the records produced by the party is in the custody of the Central Archive of the National Archives of Hungary: HU-MNL-OL-P 2249-81.

¹⁶⁶ Bodó, op. cit.

¹⁶⁷ Mária Ormos, *Egy magyarmédiavezér. Kozma Miklós*, Budapest, PolgArtKiadó, 2001, 549–571.

¹⁶⁸ Lajos Olasz, *A kormányzóhelyettesi intézménytörténete, 1941–1944*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2007.

¹⁶⁹ Bodó, op. cit.

¹⁷⁰ Ákos Bartha, *Véres város. Fegyveres ellenállás Budapesten, 1944–1945*, Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó, 2021, 23–26.

Terror, in 1919–1921, the former militia commander and radical right-wing politician finally died in Spanish exile in 1950, aged 60, presumably of natural causes.¹⁷¹

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¹⁷¹ Domonkos, op. cit.

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