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Balázs KántásPhD, Senior Archivist and
Senior Principal Research
Fellow, National Archives of
Hungary, Hungary**Corresponding Author:****Balázs Kántás**PhD, Senior Archivist and
Senior Principal Research
Fellow, National Archives of
Hungary, Hungary

The crimes of the irregular military formation settled in Hotel Britannia, Budapest during the wave of paramilitary violence in Hungary after the First World War, 1919–1920

Balázs Kántás**Abstract**

After the collapse of the Hungarian Republic of Councils, the new right-wing government establishing its power with the help of the Entente states could rule the quasi anarchistic conditions of the country. Budapest was terrorized by irregular military formations that were formally part of the National Army, but often operated completely independently. One of the most notorious of these troops was the detachment settling in Hotel Britannia, subordinated to influential paramilitary commanders First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas and Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay. Mainly radical right-wing irregular soldiers exploiting the weakness of the government committed several serious crimes like robbery, plunder and even murders, many times 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. Our research article makes an attempt to reconstruct certain crimes committed by the members of the irregular military formation quartered in Hotel Britannia via micro-historical case studies, mainly based on archival records of criminal suits in the custody of the Budapest City Archive. Furthermore, beyond the introduction of individual cases, it intends to draw general conclusions about the relationship between the early Hungarian (paramilitary) radical right-wing movements and the government/military.

Keywords: Paramilitary violence, anti-semitism, military history, political history of central Europe

Introduction

After World War I, in the 1920s, Paramilitarism^[1] and paramilitary violence was an almost natural phenomenon in Hungary, just like in many other countries of Central Europe^[2]. Hungary was among the loser countries, and after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1918, the newly independent state practically sunk into civil war. The democratic left-wing revolution of 1918 was soon followed by a communist takeover in March 1919, resulting in the establishment Soviet Republic of Hungary^[3]. In the meanwhile, different areas of the country were also invaded by Czecho-Slovakian, Romanian and Serbian troops as well. The short-lived radical left-wing Government soon nearly spontaneously collapsed in August 1919, while in parallel a right-wing counter-revolution broke out. With the support of the victorious powers of the First World War, the right-wing political forces won. However, for a long time after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, the new authoritarian conservative Government of the country, which was being established with the help of the Entente Powers, could only with great difficulty overcome the quasi-anarchistic conditions. Although leading Hungarian politicians feared a new left-wing takeover attempt, the restoration of order was by the end of 1919 severely hindered by paramilitary units and militias, formally mostly belonging to the National Army, the new, right-wing armed force of the independent Hungarian State, mostly based on the enormous disbanded armed forces of the Dual Monarchy, but in practice several units operated without serious state control, and these irregular soldiers committed serious crimes, including political revenge against the communists or at least those whom they considered to be communists^[4]. This wave of paramilitary violence that lasted roughly from 1919 to 1921 is popularly called *the White Terror* in Hungarian historiography^[5]. Since archival sources testify that the semi-secret irregular military organisation called the *Kettőskereszt Vérszövetség – Double Cross Blood Union*^[6] was founded in 1919 on the initiative of the military leadership as the paramilitary umbrella organisation for the unified military control

of the right-wing militias, there are very good reasons to believe that a good part of the militia who committed serious atrocities were (also) members of this organisation [7].

Admiral Miklós Horthy, the Commander in Chief of the National Army, the used-to-be highest ranking Hungarian military officer of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (he had been the Commander in Chief of the Imperial Navy at the end of the First World War) and the *de facto* leading politician of the conservative forces, who was otherwise strongly supported by the Entente Powers as well, and his circle strongly relied on these military units in the beginning to strengthen their power. However, when in March 1920 Admiral Horthy was finally elected by the Parliament as head of state with the title Regent Governor (formally Hungary remained a kingdom, since the republican form of government was popularly connected to communism), the activities of these uncontrolled Hungarian Free Corpses caused serious damage to politicians who were trying to normalise life, consolidate the country and return to constitutional frameworks of life after the war and civil war. The activities of some of these militias were now directed explicitly against the very order that they were in principle supposed to defend [8].

At the time of the march of Miklós Horthy and the National Army into Budapest, in November 1919, there were about fifty civilian militias operating in and around the Hungarian capital, including the National Defence Department of the *Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete – Association of Awakening Hungarians* (ÉME) [9], the influential radical right-wing social organisation of the time, and the paramilitary wing of the association. The officers' detachments of the National Army commanded by paramilitary commanders First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay or Major Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek operated alongside these units with state approval, but almost without real state control. (Héjjas and Prónay were also members of the ÉME leadership, functioning as ambitious radical right-wing politicians beside their military status, so there was a significant overlap between their detachments and the paramilitary units of the association.) There were also the Civilian Gendarmerie Reserve units and the National Organisation of State Security Agents [10] under the direction of the Minister of the Interior, a political counter-intelligence organisation of civilians whose task was to monitor individuals with 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 Hungarian State Railway Company and the postal service had their own temporarily established institutional police (railway and postal guard) [11], and the National 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*, roughly meaning Informative or Intelligence) organisation of the Hungarian Ministry of Defence, which had police powers even over civilians – and which also overlapped closely with the officers' detachments of the above mentioned paramilitary commanders [12]. That is, the military had its own independent police force, primarily for political policing, in addition to the police, the gendarmerie and other auxiliary 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 and demobilised WWI soldiers to join various irregular military formations and at the same time to confer on themselves the powers of authority [13].

Among the military units operating without any serious state control, one of the most notorious was the detachment settling in the Britannia Hotel near the Western Railway Station in the downtown of Budapest, which 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 real government control, and its members informally regarded First Lieutenant 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 acquisition of different goods [14]. The Government had limited control over the units made up of soldiers who had been demobilised from the recently dissolved Monarchy's enormous military, and as a result, several units of the National Army operated in irregular and/or paramilitary frameworks, without strict military discipline, work culture or well-defined relations of subordination. Often the word of an influential commander with a good personal relationship with Regent Governor Admiral Horthy (who was a high-ranking military officer himself) or the current Minister of Defence, such as Iván Héjjas, Pál Prónay, Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek, Count 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 direct commander, 'brought with him' from his previous military service. At this time many things depended on the decisions and influence of the various paramilitary commanders [15]. 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 settled in Hotel Britannia colloquially simply known in Budapest as 'the Britannians' roamed the capital at night, committing extortion, looting, robbery, grievous bodily harm and even politically motivated murders [16]. 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. 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' (Night Courier) 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 [17].

During the beginning of 1920s the radical right, increasingly dissatisfied with Regent Governor Admiral Miklós Horthy and Prime Minister Count Pál Teleki, launched an attack on two fronts against the emerging political establishment. The

forementioned Association of Awakening Hungarians increased pressure on the Government through various actions (e.g. squatting, organising strikes and intensive 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* ^[18] and *Heimwehr* ^[19] militias in Germany and Austria, which were mainly made up of World War I veterans. These armed units 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 powerful and well-equipped units compared to the small and weak professional state armed forces. Not to mention that in a very confused legal and social situation, they built up a quasi-parallel law enforcement apparatus, and committed their illegal acts against citizens, mostly under the guise of official action ^[20]. Although the Prime Minister's Decree No. 4710/1920 ME of 12 June 1920 clearly stated that all military units and their investigators were to cease their actions against civilians and that the investigative corps were to be merged into the military judicial organisation, the de facto situation did not change much for some time ^[21]. Because of their large numbers, their armaments, strength and their good personal relations with the army's senior 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 movement was slowly trying to aim a change of regime through the armed militias organised around Héjjas and Prónay ^[22].

The actions of reserve First Lieutenant Károly Kmetty and his associates

One of the most notable figures in the series of crimes committed by the soldiers 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 prosecuted ^[23] 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 ^[24]. 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 ^[25].

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 ^[26].

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 ^[27].

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 ^[28].

József Doór, a transport entrepreneur 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 ^[29].

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^[30].

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^[31].

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 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^[32].

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^[33]. 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 monograph^[34].

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^[35].

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)^[36] that did not live up to his hopes. The former 'Brtinannian' officer'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^[37]. 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 a 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^[38]. 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 *Nemzet Szava* (Word of the Nation)^[39]. 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.

The Double Murder at Club Café

The paramilitary political violence reached a new level on 27 July 1920, when an anti-Semitic mob fight provoked by young militiamen also linked to the detachment at Hotel Britannia tragically ended in a double murder. As mentioned above, anti-Semitically motivated street violence was common in Budapest at the time, and the young militiamen of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, at a propaganda meeting of the Association's local sub-organisation of District 5 of Budapest, decided – presumably several of them were drunken – to smash up the equipment of the Club Café and physically assault the guests whom they thought to be Jews and traitors of their homeland^[40]. At the propaganda event of the radical right-wing association in the Berzenczey Street Elementary School on 27 July 1920, in the evening hours, a group consisting of 25–30 young men in civilian clothes and

military uniforms gathered. The event was fundamentally determined by anti-Semitism, with speakers mostly making anti-Jewish slurs at the audience – probably including Gusztáv Meczner, the president of the local sub-organisation of District 5 of the Awakening Hungarians, a well-known political activist of the radical right of the time, who also inflamed the mood of the audience ^[41].

Most of the young people present were armed with sticks, some of them had handguns, and, according to archival sources of the case, a man wearing white clothing, who was never clearly identified, and slightly older than the audience of teenagers and men in their twenties, allegedly appeared at the meeting and clearly started inciting violence against Jews. He claimed that an anti-national, anti-Hungarian, Zionist meeting was taking place in the basement of the Club Café, where people of Israelite faith were being organised against the Association of Awakening Hungarians and the National Army, and they were thus threatening the Christian Hungarian State. The person in white, who was allegedly the instigator of the action, introduced himself to members of the group as Gusztáv Meczner, the president of the 5th District sub-organisation of the ÉME, but was later identified by several as Károly Tőkés, a restaurant owner and reserve military officer ^[42].

The strikingly young László Illy who was then only nineteen years old, but had a significant criminal, military and militia background compared to his age, began to act as a spokesman of a narrower group, and, following the instructions of the man in white, and he told the young men in the corridor of the elementary school that a big fight was being planned that evening in the nearby Club Café, and specifically pointed out that anyone who might be afraid of the consequences had better leave immediately ^[43]. László Illy's inner circle consisted of certain young men named Sándor Körmeny, Sándor Imre, Mihály Schwicker, László Fekete, Sándor Fekete, László Vanek, Ferenc Illek and György Rigóczy, of whom László Vanek was frightened and left the group, but the others, led by László Illy, started towards the Club Café at around 10 p.m. to carry out the violent act they had planned. It is a sign of careful planning that László Illy, who was the spokesman, sent György Rigóczy, Mihály Schwicker and Sándor Imre ahead to cut the wires of the telephone at the Club Café so that the people there could not inform the police in time after the fight broke out ^[44].

The group of radical right-wing young men had already insulted a group of people sitting peacefully in Berzenczey Street, very close to the spot of the propaganda meeting, who did not provoke the militiamen, but were identified by them as Jews, and a man named Arnold Hofmann, was beaten and injured in the head ^[45].

On the basis of contradictory sources, the testimonies of the witnesses and accused, it is unclear how the incident actually happened, but the self-proclaimed commander of the hastily formed anti-Semitic action group, László Illy later claimed that the group briefly entered the nearby restaurant of the man in white, Károly Tőkés, in Wahrmann Street (today Victor Hugo Street, District 13 in Budapest), to discuss the matter once more, and that the members of the group also consumed some alcohol there ^[46].

After the street atrocity and alcohol consumption, the group continued their way to Club Café as if nothing special had happened, and when they arrived, some of them went into the establishment at 8 Lipót Boulevard (now Szent István

Boulevard) and ordered something, pretending to be simple guests, while others stayed outside as observers ^[47].

László Illy, the self-styled commander, went around before the action began, consulted with his fellows both in the café and on the street, and then shouted "Hit the Jew! ", whereupon the radical right-wing young men from the street poured into the Club Café, and those already inside became active and started beating the guests and the staff indiscriminately with sticks, belts and other café equipment they could get their hands on, vandalising the equipment. The owner of the café, Gyula Krammer who was otherwise of Christian religion, was also severely assaulted by the anti-Semitic young men, despite his repeated pleas and statements that he was not Jewish and that most of his customers were not Jewish either ^[48].

After smashing up the café and severely assaulting the customers, many of the young men fled the scene, split into several smaller groups and continued their rampage and violence in the surrounding streets. All of this resulted in the death of bank manager Arthur Verebély, who was stabbed in the chest with a bayonet by one of the radical young men, presumably György Rigóczy, a volunteer soldier of Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay's battalion, and the victim died almost instantly ^[49].

Another part of the group got into an argument in Szemere Street with a group of wealthy citizens returning from a boat trip, and László Illy provocatively asked the lawyer Dr. Géza Varsányi who was walking with his wife and friends whether he was Jewish or Christian, to which Dr. Varsányi replied that he was Christian and a lawyer. The presumably drunken László Illy was not satisfied with this and demanded that lawyer Varsányi pull down his trousers and show him his penis, because if he saw that it was not circumcised, he would believe him that he was not Jewish. Lawyer Dr. Varsányi replied that he would not pull down his trousers in the company of ladies, and the young men around him led him a few steps away and demanded that he should prove that he was Jewish or Christian in the very vulgar way mentioned above, which the lawyer refused to do a second time. László Illy then aggressively slapped Varsányi, whereupon several of the young men present began to beat him. It is not clear what exactly happened in this case either, but – according to László Illy's testimony at the main hearing before the court at least – a young man called Ferenc Illek hit Varsányi on the head with the Frommer pistol he was carrying, the accidentally (?) fired, and the bullet wounded the lawyer in the head, and he died after being taken to hospital ^[50].

At the same time, in the nearby Baron Aczél Street, the militiamen stabbed a completely innocent bystander named Mihály Polgár in the side who escaped with relatively minor injuries. Due to the large number of people involved in the series of violent acts, the identity of the perpetrator could not be clearly established later ^[51].

The anti-Semitic double murder and the attempted murder in and around the Club Café quickly resulted in social outrage and prompted the authorities to act at last. The perpetrators, several of whom, including the spokesman László Illy, were members of the right-wing irregular military units active at the time, and sought refuge in Hotel Britannia Hotel at the detachment under the command of Pál Prónay, where they really received help. The Frommer pistol that took Géza Varsányi's life was taken by a certain Lieutenant Zgroch, and First Lieutenant Dénes Bibó, a

notorious White Terror detachment officer acquired new clothes for László Illy, Ferenc Illek and three other volunteers. The young men spent the night at Hotel Berlin which was also occupied by irregular units of the National Army, and the next day they went to see Dr. Sándor Dániel, a trainee lawyer and member of the leadership of the Association of Awakening Hungarians to ask for his help in escaping. Ferenc Illek managed to escape, and for a time, with the help of First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas and other Awakening leaders, he was presumably hiding in the countryside, but László Illy was soon caught by the police and became the first defendant in the criminal case that followed the actions against the Club Café ^[52].

The Royal Prosecutor's Office in Budapest classified the actions of the young men – most of them under twenty – as sedition, which, under the laws of the time and due to the uncertain situation after the war and the civil war, led to a trial by martial law. The Royal Criminal Court of Budapest, acting as a court of summary jurisdiction, held a trial after only three days of trial in 1920. In its verdict of 19 August, most of the accused were found guilty of the crime of sedition, and László Illy, the first accused, was sentenced to 13 years of imprisonment; Sándor Körmeny, the second accused, to five years of imprisonment; Imre Sándor third defendant to six years of imprisonment; Schwicker Mihály fourth defendant to ten years of imprisonment; Fekete László fifth defendant to ten years of imprisonment; and Fekete Sándor sixth defendant to six years of imprisonment. At the same time, Károly Tökés, the instigator of the young men who had carried out the attack on Club Café, who already had a serious military background and, of course, an extensive network of radical right-wing military contacts, was acquitted of all charges against him, because his testimony was contradicted only by that of László Illy, claiming that Tökés had been the man in white who incited violence against a supposed Zionist rally that was allegedly taking place in the café. The Royal Criminal Court of Budapest also acquitted Gusztáv Meczner, the president of the District 5 sub-organisation of the Awakening Hungarians of the charges against him, and even stated in its judgment that the bloody action probably took place without his knowledge or consent. The court took it into account as a mitigating circumstance for most of the defendants that their actions were not motivated by malice but by mere 'youthful blindness', but considered it as an aggravating circumstance that László Illy was a leading figure in the company that planned and carried out the violent atrocities, and that his actions were committed after deliberate planning. The court also considered it as an aggravating circumstance that the surprisingly young militiamen had given a negative public image to the Association of Awakening Hungarians and to the National Army ^[53].

György Rigóczky, who – at least according to the current interpretation of law of the military authorities – was an active duty soldier, was found guilty in the murder of bank director Arthur Verebély by a military court in a separate military prosecution process, and his conviction saved László Illy and other militiamen from being charged with murder and mutiny ^[54].

The military leadership did its best to keep the National Army out of the affair as well, although the overlap between the paramilitary units of the Awakening Hungarians and the army was obvious to many ^[55]. Hungarian historian of the period Tibor Zinner, among others, points out that in the

Club Café case, the Intelligence Department of the Budapest Military City Command (one of the military intelligence services of the time, operating in a rapidly changing organisational framework) conceived the opinion that the censorship should not have allowed the press to link such atrocities in any way with the National Army and the officers ^[56]. Although there were attempts to portray the action as the work of hot-headed young men aged 18–20 who entirely civilian persons and in no way connected with the army, it was clear that the Intelligence Department of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, a quasi-state body under the control of military officers the member of which included László Illy and Ferenc Illek, and thus the National Army itself and its detachments were deeply involved in the events ^[57].

In order to understand both the social and political motivations of the radical right-wing young men who joined the paramilitary units of the Association of Awakening Hungarians and participated in various serious atrocities, and the complexity of the overlaps between the various irregular armed groups and the organs of the Hungarian State, it is worth examining in more detail the biography and social background of László Illy, the figure who emerged as the main character of our micro-historical case study.

László Illy was born in Szeged in 1901, the son of a poor, down-and-out lower middle class family, and he was the son of a trade school teacher and later a railway official who later became unemployed and a heavy drinker. He lost his mother at an early age, his father remarried, and it is also known that during Illy's adolescence practically none of the family members worked ^[58]. Illy's father was a man of strong anti-Semitic sentiments, and anti-Semitism was practically the first political idea that Illy was introduced to as a child, as his father's life consisted of little more than drunkenly berating the Jews and blaming them, among others, for his and his family's bad financial conditions. Illy's mother and several of his siblings died of tuberculosis, and in the 1910s the family's only source of income came from piano lessons given by Illy's only living sister to her private pupils. However, László Illy once so severely assaulted a Jewish young man on the streets of Szeged. The family's aggressive anti-Semitism soon became known among the local residents, and finally no-one wanted to take piano lessons at Illy's ^[59].

The family lived through the First World War in extreme poverty. László Illy stole from his own family several times, for which he was briefly sent to a reformatory. Meanwhile, his father died of liver disease, presumably closely linked to alcoholism, and his relationship with his stepmother deteriorated as well. After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, during the Soviet Republic of Hungary, the young man was finally forced to join the Hungarian Red Army, allegedly because he had beaten up the newsboy of the Communist Vörös Újság (Red Newspaper), and was threatened by the local representatives of the communist government that he would be tried by a revolutionary tribunal if he did not take military service ^[60]. It cannot be reconstructed to what extent László Illy's entry into the Hungarian Red Army was voluntary or forced, but it is certain that he was a prisoner of war in Romania and joined the National Army in his hometown of Szeged in 1919, during the right-wing counter-revolutionary wave. László Illy became a member of Lieutenant Colonel Prónay's detachment and served in the National Army as a

military investigator/intelligence and counter-intelligence officer. The young man, who had led a lively sexual life, also learned in 1919 that he was suffering from latent syphilis, which caused health problems including frequent headaches to him. It was a sign of his unstable personality that he attempted to commit suicide with a pistol on 12 May 1920 because his military superior questioned the authenticity of his intelligence reports. Discharged from the National Army in April 1920 for syphilis-related corneal inflammation, he continued to be employed as a civilian military investigator, and at least according to his his own confession at the court, his intelligence activities in the first half of 1920 were mainly against the Romanians ^[61]. Illy had arrived in Budapest from Szeged shortly before the Club Café murders, where he tried to rejoin Prónay's detachment, but for some time the question whether to take the young man back into the battalion remained undecided. In any case, accommodation and a livelihood were found for him: trainee lawyer Dr. Sándor Dániel, one of the organisers of the paramilitary National Defence Department of the Awakening Hungarian who had distant family ties to Illy, arranged for the young man to be recruited to the Intelligence Department of the Association of the Awakening Hungarians. In the confused social and political situation after the civil war, this organisation was an armed unit with secret service character an uncertain legal status, but led by influential army officers (Pál Prónay, Iván Héjjas). László Illy received a service identity card and a service gun here, and because of this and his previous military service of secret service and police character, he could rightly believe himself to be the legitimate representative of the then new, still fragile Hungarian State ^[62]. With this rather troubled past, a nineteen-year-old young man found himself in Budapest in the summer of 1920, controlled by the National Army and the militias associated to it, in a rather uncertain irregular military status that also opened up opportunities of social mobility and seemed to him a way out of his declassified social background. The forensic medical report on him also shows that László Illy, who had been through a number of negative and violent experiences in his youth, was a man of low intellectual and reasoning abilities, pathologically over-confident and was prone to grandiose whims and violence ^[63]. Given this background and his unique characteristics, there can be no doubt that as a member of an irregular military unit operating without serious state control, driven by intolerant, radical political ideas and armed with a gun, László Illy was a serious threat to the contemporary society. The threat represented by him and his fellow militiamen was finally fulfilled by a politically motivated double murder, a hate crime in which Illy, although he was not its sole perpetrator or executor, undoubtedly played a significant role.

Many of the young militia members of the Association of Awakening Hungarians who were later prosecuted for various violent crimes, had lower-middle or working-class background, and they could not rely on any significant social or financial advancement, especially in a period of deep post-war social and economic crisis. At the same time, they were often characterised by immense arrogance and sense of importance that presumably derived from membership of the radical right-wing militia movement and the firearms they were given. Robert Gerwarth vividly and precisely describes how the paramilitary violence of post-World War One Central Europe brought together a

generation of veterans who were still young and the so-called war youth, who had not yet served as soldiers in the world war because due to their age, but who were very enthusiastic and become very brutal in the paramilitary movements that proliferated in the civil wars afterwards ^[64]. The accused in the criminal trial following the murders at the Club Café, including László Illy, and of course other young militiamen of the Awakening Hungarians certainly also suited to these conclusions.

As for the afterlife of the perpetrators of the Club Café murders, it should be stressed that László Illy, the main person responsible for the case, like the perpetrators of other similar crimes, did not spend a long time in prison. He had to enjoy the hospitality of the Hungarian prison service for only one and a half years of his thirteen-year-long sentence. In 1922, after several previous unsuccessful appeals of retrial, his case was finally retried following Regent Governor Horthy's amnesty order of November 1921, and on 19 January 1922 he was acquitted of all charges. The young man, like many of his fellow militiamen, was released from prison as a free man, and in the 1920s and 1930s he was prosecuted for a number of public offences, mostly for fraud ^[65].

The murder of police officer József Soltra by paramilitary soldiers

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 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 ^[66].

The murder of police officer Soltra caused great outrage and social protest, and Regent Horthy saw the disarmament of

the various radical right-Qing 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 Marinovich^[67] took apparently decisive action, and the Budapest State Police began to investigate the perpetrators with large forces^[68]. First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, the influential paramilitary commander of the era, who after his activities in Kecskemét and Horthy's invasion of Budapest, 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^[69].

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^[70].

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 Eservecics 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^[71]. 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^[72]. 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^[73]. 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^[74]. 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^[75].

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?)^[76].

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^[77]. With some malice, we can even doubt the fact of the alleged police 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 ^[78].

Lieutenant Colonel 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 ^[79], but the others were disarmed by the police, and some of them were arrested ^[80].

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 ^[81].

At dawn on 12 November, the government troops also attempted to take possession of the Garrison at Ehmann-Telep, 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. 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 ^[82].

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 Ehmann-telep 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 Siménfalvy that irregular soldiers who had been unjustly treated by the police and regular military units might later be compensated ^[83]. The controlling role of 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

Hungarian 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 ^[84].

József Soltra was then declared a hero and hearsed 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 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 ^[85]. The event was of course covered in detail by the press.

Concluding remarks

Although the murder 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, and these jurisdictions were officially returned to the law enforcement agencies subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior, primarily the Royal Hungarian State Police, the Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie and the Royal Hungarian River Police (otherwise it was the concealed river fleet of the armed forces), 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 ^[86]. 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 Regent Governor's pardon^[87]. 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^[88].

Although Ákos Bartha calls the assassination of József Soltra the last drop in the glass 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' officers, the Kovács brothers, who comminted their actions by irredentist and anti-Semitic motivations. These cases shall be discussed in the further chapters of our monograph.

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.

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