

# THE PERIOD OF BOMB ATTACKS

**Paramilitary Formations and Terrorism in Hungary in the  
First Years of the Horthy-Era, 1922-1924**

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

After World War One, paramilitarism and paramilitary violence, <sup>[1]</sup> mainly committed by demobilised or still active soldiers was an almost natural phenomenon in Hungary, just like in many other countries of Central Europe – mainly in states that were on the losing side <sup>[2]</sup>. Paramilitarism and paramilitary activities are generally defined as military or quasi-military organisations and actions that complemented or replaced conventional military formations. In some cases it was made possible by the temporary or long-term disintegration of the state, in others it was the state itself that used paramilitary units to keep its powers, and in other cases paramilitary formations acted against the state <sup>[3]</sup>. In Hungary, a country that had suffered collapse, civil war and then severe territorial annexation, during the 1920s right-wing paramilitary formations operated as state/quasi-state organisations. After the dissolution of the Austro–Hungarian Empire, the collapse of the Soviet Republic of

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<sup>1</sup> On paramilitarism from the recent literature see: Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Paramilitarism. Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923*, Farrar, Straus and Girou, 2016.; Robert Gerwarth–John Horne, *Paramilitarizmus az első világháború után*, transl. Péter Várady, in *Háború béke idején. Paramilitáris erőszak Európában az első világháború után*, ed. Robert Gerwarth–John Horne, Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2017, 13–32, 13–14.

Hungary, the short-lived communist dictatorship and wave of paramilitary violence called the Red Terror, the new right-wing government establishing its power with the help of the Entente Powers could only difficulty rule the anarchistic conditions. In 1920–1921, Hungary was terrorized by irregular military troops being formally part of the National Army, the right-wing armed force of the new Government (organised on the basis of the armed forces of the disintegrated Austro-Hungarian Monarchy), but they operated independently. This 2-year-long wave of paramilitary violence demanding hundreds of lives delivered by detachments subordinated to influential paramilitary commanders such as First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay or Major Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek is called the Hungarian White Terror <sup>[4]</sup>. Far-right irregular soldiers exploiting the weakness of the state committed crimes like robbery, plunder and murders, frequently by anti-Semitic and anti-communist motives, and they often did it in the disguise of law enforcement, since at the time military units possessed police jurisdictions over civilians to restore the social order. Paradoxically, police-type militias, formally in the service of the state, practically operated as criminal organisations <sup>[5]</sup>. The Government led by Prime Minister Count István Bethlen ceased the terror in 1921, and disbanded/regularized paramilitary formations. The authoritarian conservative Hungarian Government did its best to tranquilize the radical right-wing forces and create social and political peace at last, after the years of war and civil war <sup>[6]</sup>.

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

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

<sup>5</sup> See: Béla Bodó, *Militia Violence and State Power in Hungary, 1919–1922*, *Hungarian Studies Review*, 2006/1–2, 121–156.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit.

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 *Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete (ÉME) – Association of Awakening Hungarians* <sup>[7]</sup>, 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 *Magyar Országos Véderő Egylet (MOVE) – Hungarian National Defence Force Association*, which consisted of mainly radical right-wing, active and demobilised soldiers and officers. The third, and perhaps most important paramilitary formation was the *Kettőskereszt Vészcsovétség (KKVSz) – 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 strongly *Freikorps*-like <sup>[8]</sup> 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. They operated

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<sup>7</sup> On the history of the Association of Awakening Hungarian and its political activity see: Tibor Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

in the same way as the German 'Schwarze Reichswehr' ('Black Army')<sup>[9]</sup>. 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<sup>[10]</sup>.

Secret irregular military formations related to the ÉME, MOVE and KKSz 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, or the very complex crimes of the Kovács brothers including plans of terrorism. All these terrorist incidents and plans were committed by the militiamen of the ÉME who were also irregular soldiers of the Double Cross Blood Union, and paramilitary commanders First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas<sup>11</sup> and Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay<sup>[12]</sup>, 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

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<sup>9</sup> 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

<sup>10</sup> See Balázs Kántás, *Milicisták, puccsisták, terrorfiúk. Művészeti és Irodalmi Jelen Kft., Budapest, 2021.*  
<http://real.mtak.hu/123884/>

<sup>11</sup> On the career of Iván Héjjas see: Béla Bodó, *Iván Héjjas. The Life of a Counterrevolutionary*, East Central Europe, 2010/2–3, 247–279.

<sup>12</sup> On the career of Pál Prónay 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



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 <sup>[13]</sup>. The reconstruction of the above mentioned, internationally 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.

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<sup>13</sup> Op. cit.

## Chapter 2

### The Crimes Committed by the Kovács Brothers and the Controversial Role of the Police

In our case study, we continue our analysis of the domestic political activities of the Double Cross Blood Union whose prominent figures were the Kovács brothers, Árpád, Kornél and Tivadar, three young private officials with military background. Kornél Kovács and Tivadar Kovács had previously served as detectives in the Budapest State Police in the years before and during the Soviet Republic of Hungary, but later, around 1918–1919 – for unknown reasons unknown – left the law enforcement career and took up something completely else <sup>[14]</sup>. The three young brothers were among the founders and main organisers of the Double Cross Blood Union, and they were also among the founders of the *Nemzeti Múltunk Kulturális Egyesület* – *Our National Past Cultural Association*, one of the front organisations of the secret military society <sup>[15]</sup>. In 1922–1923, the Kovács brothers thus created a more restricted sub-organisation within the Blood Union in order to achieve their goals. They had previously been members of the officers' detachment at Hotel Britannia, and they were probably also involved in the irredentistically motivated forgery of Czechoslovakian korona ('sokol') in 1921 the main organiser of which was Gyula Mészáros, a professor of Turkology and close friend of Prime Minister Pál Teleki <sup>[16]</sup>. They may have been involved in the

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<sup>14</sup> [Anonymous author], *Leleplezett ellenforradalmi összeesküvés Budapesten*, Népszava, 10 May 1919, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Serfőző, op. cit. 79.

<sup>16</sup> Ablonczy, op. cit.

murder of piano manufacturer Jakab Reismann <sup>[17]</sup>, took part in the Uprising of Western Hungary, and then started to raise money for a so-called cultural cause in the name of the Our National Past Cultural Association, but in reality, they acquired large quantities of explosives and firearms. They were conspiring to overthrow the Government, assassinate several members of the government and introduce a military dictatorship, and they were also planning to blow up the Dohány Street Synagogue <sup>[18]</sup>. From among the opposition politicians the Kovács brothers allegedly wanted to murder Vilmos Vázsonyi, Rezső Rupert, Károly Rassay and Győző Drozdy <sup>[19]</sup>, mainly liberal members of the Parliament who had frequently spoken out against far-right organisations and the atrocities they had committed, but their death list also included Prime Minister István Bethlen and former Interior Minister and incumbent Minister for Culture and Education Count Kunó Klebelsberg. The conspiracy of the Kovács brothers could not remain unnoticed by the police, and in June 1923, during a search of the apartment of one of their accomplices, Sándor Czigány, a Christian Socialist representative of the Budapest local government detectives found and confiscated 18 kilograms of explosives <sup>[20]</sup>.

The Kovács brothers repeatedly referred to the High Command as their superior body, by which they obviously meant the higher military command of the Double Cross Blood Union. Sources also testify that the Kovács brothers' military superior was probably General Károly Csörgey, a senior officer of the National Army, which was later, in 1922 reorganised under the name Hungarian Defence Forces. General Csörgey played a significant role in the leadership of the Double Cross Blood

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<sup>17</sup> Kóródi, op. cit. 18.

<sup>18</sup> Serfőző, op. cit. m. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Drozdy, op. cit. 195–196.

<sup>20</sup> [Anonymous author], *Tizennyolc kilogramm ekrazitot találtak Czigány Ferenc pót-városatya lakásán*, Pesti Napló, 23 June 1923.

Union <sup>[21]</sup>. However, highest ranking protector of the Kovács brothers was probably Dr. Károly Andréka, Deputy Police Commissioner Budapest and head of the Hungarian Political Police <sup>[22]</sup> who was himself a member of several far-right organisations, possibly including the DCBU <sup>[23]</sup>. His relationship with Kornél Kovács and Tivadar Kovács presumably dated back to the two young men's past as police detectives. Károly Rassay, a liberal opposition MP, spoke up in the Parliament on the actions of the Kovács brothers <sup>[24]</sup>, and the three young men were eventually detained on the personal orders of Prime Minister Bethlen.

However, Deputy Police Commissioner Andréka himself intervened and made statements to the investigating judge that soon led to the release of the Kovács brothers. Andréka claimed, among other things, that the Our National Past Cultural Association had close links with the DCBU, an organisation with patriotic aims, and that he himself as a senior police officer had been able to rely on the Kovács brothers on numerous occasions when they had been informed of left-wing or legitimist plots, and that they had been very useful informants for the political police for years.

The three Kovács brothers were also accused of conspiracy to counterfeit money, and this is what we know most about: the three brothers and their associates wanted to put counterfeit Czechoslovak koronas into circulation in the Highlands, presumably for diversionary purposes. Investigative testimonies show that Tivadar Kovács received the glass cliché for the forgery, some drawings and 2 banknotes as a sample from a

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<sup>21</sup> [Anonymous author], *Rakovszky belügyminiszter: Andréka Károly holnaptól kezdve nem detektívőnök!*, Magyarország, 6 December 1923, 1–2.

<sup>22</sup> Krisztián Varga, *Ellenség a baloldalon. Politikai rendőrség a Horthy-korszakban*, Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó, 2015, 51–61.

<sup>23</sup> Tibor Wayand, *Önvallatás. Wayand Tibor fogságban írt visszaemlékezései, 1945–1946*, ed. Krisztián Varga, Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára–Kronosz Kiadó, Budapest, 2019, 81.

<sup>24</sup> Rassay Károly felszólalása 1923. november 29-én, *Nemzetgyűlési Napló 1922/XIV.*, 155. Cited by: Serfőző, op. cit. 78.

Hungarian first lieutenant named Jenő Jablonszky who was allegedly an intelligence officer in the Highlands. First Lieutenant Jablonszky suggested that the counterfeit money should be granted to the DCBU who would use it for irredentist purposes in the future, thus causing confusion in Hungarian-populated areas that had been annexed to Czechoslovakia. Tivadar Kovács communicated his intention to counterfeit to a certain Pál Tarnovszky, on the grounds that they wished to implement this plan 'at a higher level'. Tarnovszky had received 150,000 Hungarian koronas from a friend in the Highlands, a certain first lieutenant called Jenő Balázsovich for the material preparations for the forgery. Kovács introduced Tarnovszky to the technical draughtsman János Szalay who was entrusted with the construction, and together Tarnovszky and Szalay they bought the necessary materials. The zinc plate cliché prepared in Szalay's laboratory was sent to military officer Artillery Captain Imre Makay, one of the commanders of the Double Cross Blood Union, but the defendants claimed that they had received instructions that they would not contribute to the forgery of the cliché 'from above', so the cliché and the drawings were destroyed. The 'higher authority' in this case also meant the Command of the Double Cross Blood Union, either Colonel Tihamér Siménfalvy himself or the aforementioned General Károly Csörgey; i.e., the senior officers of the military.

Although the accused withdrew their confessions during the investigation and claimed that the equipment confiscated from them was needed for an experimental photographic procedure, the Royal Criminal Court found them guilty of conspiracy to counterfeit money on the basis of detailed and complementary statements, sentenced them to two months' imprisonment on 22 October 1925, and made their sentences complete with their time spent under arrest <sup>[25]</sup>.

In the same case, the court also tried Kornél Kovács, Árpád Kovács, Tivadar Kovács, István Becker, János Szalay, Aladár Szobodeczky, Szigfrid Umlauf, Pál Tarnovszky, Szavér Sztahó and

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<sup>25</sup> HU-BFL-VII-5-c-10559/1925.

Ede Láng who were accused of conspiracy to violently subvert the law and order of the state and society, but were all acquitted for lack of evidence <sup>[26]</sup>. Interestingly, the trial was held behind closed doors, presumably due to its political importance. In any case, the only physical evidence, the seizure of 18 kilograms of explosive was not sufficient to secure a conviction. Although the indictment submitted by the Royal Prosecutor Dr. Mihály Dolowschiák also included serious charges such as the intention of a bomb raid against the Dohány Street Synagogue, the kidnapping of well-known politicians, the organisation a terrorist groups and the preparation of a bank robbery in Oradea, and the acquisition of various firearms and explosives for the above purposes, the accused were all acquitted and released <sup>[27]</sup>.

The Royal Criminal Court of Budapest interrogated Artillery Captain Imre Makay Colonel László Bartha, the members of the higher command of the Double Cross Blood Union as witnesses in the closed trial. The two professional military officers also testified and emphasised the Double Cross Blood Union was a secret state organisation under the control of the Hungarian Army, although its members were mostly unpaid, and that it was used both for internal counter-intelligence against left-wing movements and for irredentist (diversionary) purposes in the neighbouring countries. Both Captain Makay and Colonel Bartha stressed that they were bound by official secrecy regarding the organisational frameworks and the specific activities the secret military formation, and could therefore only speak in general terms, but they emphasised that they both knew the accused, especially the Kovács brothers, and considered them to be reliable men and true patriots, and that they had no knowledge of any conspiracy to subvert the State or social order, but rather that their activities were aimed to defend the Hungarian State and Government. Captain Makay

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<sup>26</sup> [Anonymous author], *Elmaradt a Kovács testvérek képviselőirtó és zsinagógarobbantó szövetkezetének mai tárgyalása*, Az Est, 16 May 1925, 6.

<sup>27</sup> HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923.

also pointed out that the Double Cross Blood Union in the form in which it had previously operated had ceased to exist around 1923, but that it continued to within the frameworks of the National Labour Protection, a strike-breaking auxiliary police organisation under the control of the Ministry of the Interior <sup>[28]</sup>.

Finally, the Kovács brothers and their associates, although they seem to have committed and was planning to commit further serious crimes, – presumably thanks to their patrons and secret irregular military service – received essentially no punishment, but Deputy Police Commissioner Károly Andréka paid with his position for his ongoing collusion with the far right, and was succeeded in the political police leadership by Deputy Police Commissioner Imre Hetényi <sup>[29]</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Krisztián Varga, *Az 1945 előtti politikai rendőrség* Wayand Tibor *detektívfelügyelő önvallomásaiban*, Betekintő, 2009/1.  
[http://www.betekinto.hu/sites/default/files/betekinto-szamok/2009\\_1\\_varga\\_k.pdf](http://www.betekinto.hu/sites/default/files/betekinto-szamok/2009_1_varga_k.pdf)

## Chapter 3

### **Consolidation with Hand-Grenades, that is, The Assassination Attempt in Jászkarajenő**

One of the instances of relatively fortunate outcomes of the radical right-wing political terrorism that spread in Hungary for a short time – uncovered in the preparatory stage – was the 1922 hand-grenade assassination attempt in Jászkarajenő.

István Keő, originally named Kucséra, in some sources called István Keő-Kucséra, a farmer and innkeeper from Jászkarajenő was one of the leaders of the local sub-organisation of the Association of Awakening Hungarians and a well-known local activist of the radical right in the small Pest County village near the Hungarian capital, began to complain strongly to his friends 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 therefore decided to 'teach the local Jews a lesson', to intimidate them in some way, and in any case to carry out some unspecified act of violence against them <sup>[30]</sup>.

As the leader of the Jászkerajenő local sub-organisation of the ÉME, István Keő-Kucséra was a regular guest at the headquarters of the Association of 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 frequently. It was here, on an unspecified day in February 1922, that he met his friend Mihály Gyalay, a radical right-wing journalist and editor of one of the political newspapers of the Awakening movement called *Hazánk* (*Our Homeland*) (the

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<sup>30</sup> HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924. István Keő-Kucséra and his associates' trial.



editorial office was also located in the Awakening headquarters), 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 far-right journalist naturally 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 of Jászkarajenő. Gyalay, in a wine-induced state, suggested that handgrenades should be thrown at the houses of certain Jewish people in Jászkarajenő as a means of intimidation <sup>[31]</sup>. The anti-Semitic rhetoric and the unfolding assassination plans caught the attention of a 21-year-old young man at the next table, József Kovács, an impoverished demobilised soldier and former participant of the Uprising of West Hungary who was in need of money and was now working private official, but who, of course, was also a member of the Awakening Hungarians, and he sat down with the beside the two men who were drunkenly hatching anti-Semitic plans. Kovács himself voiced his agreement <sup>[32]</sup>.

If the archival sources of the case are to be believed, the radical right-wing gentlemen were now drinking wine in a threesome, and their determination to carry out the planned assassination attempt with a grenade seemed to be becoming more and more clear. József Kovács volunteered to carry out the assassination on behalf of István Keő-Kucsera for a fee, and Keő-Kucsera enthusiastically accepted his offer. They agreed that Kovács would travel from Budapest to Jászkarajenő the next day to survey the area, that is, 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 that were necessary to carry out the assassination <sup>[33]</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

The drunken anti-Jewish assassination pans of the radical right-wing young men then took a very serious turn, as József Kovács actually travelled to Jászkarajenő to Keő-Kucsera the next day to survey the targets, including the house of Izsák Fischmann, a local Jewish resident. After the survey, the parties agreed that József Kovács would contact Mihály Gyalay, collect the explosive devices he had promised, and then report back to Keő-Kucsera to discuss the details of the assassination <sup>[34]</sup>.

A few days later, at the beginning of March 1922, József Kovács visited Mihály Gyalay at the Awakening headquarters, in the editorial office of the newspaper *Hazánk*, and asked him for the promised grenades, which Gyalay had not yet obtained. At Kovács's urging, however, Gyalay became active and immediately went from the editorial office to the office of Géza Adorján, a student engineer and leading officer of Awakening Hungarians also located in the headquarters. Despite his young age, Géza Adorján was a relatively influential figure of the radical right-wing movements of the time, deeply involved in a number of political assassinations. He held a leading position in the paramilitary wing of the association, the National Defence Department, and had close ties with the commanders of the notorious (by then disbanded, but still alive in various forms) detachments of the Army, including Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay, who was at the time one of the Vice-President of the Awakening Hungarians and also the Head of the National Defence Department <sup>[35]</sup>. Mihály Gyalay, citing higher orders and patriotic purposes, asked for the support of the National Defence Department through Géza Adorján, and Adorján simply took out two working, German-made, World-War-One hand-grenades from his desk drawer and handed them to the journalist without any further dispute <sup>[36]</sup>. Gyalay thanked him for his support and for the explosive devices he had provided, then

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *Serfőző, A titkos társaságok és a róluk folytatott parlamenti viták 1922–1924-ben*, 75.

<sup>36</sup> HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

walked back to the editorial office of Hazánk, and for safety's sake – like most of the members of his generation, he had served as a soldier himself in the Great War and had basic knowledge of explosives – unscrewed the handles of the grenades, wrapped them in newspaper and handed them over to József Kovács. Kovács put the grenades in his briefcase, received a small sum of money (100 koronas) from Gyalay and left the Awakening headquarters [37].

Here events took another surprising turn, as József Kovács seemed to have lost his courage with two working handgrenades in his briefcase, and just a few hundred metres away from the Awakening headquarters on Sörház Street, on Kálvin Square, he called to István Pikola, a police officer on duty, and told him that he had found grenades on the train, and that he thought they were dangerous and wanted to hand them over to the police as soon as possible [38]. 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 by detectives, and the hand-grenades were seized by the police and handed over to the military body responsible for collecting military equipment left over from the World War, mainly in the possession of demobilised soldiers. The military officers in charge quickly established that the German-made military grenades were really functional, dangerous and unreliable, and destroyed them within a short time, drawing up a detailed report about their annihilation [39].

At first, József Kovács tried to maintain his earlier story to the detectives that he had found the two grenades on the train during his journey, but later he broke down and confessed everything to the police, who soon opened an investigation for conspiracy to commit murder. István Keő-Kucsera, Mihály Gyalay and Géza Adorján were soon arrested by the police in

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

March 1922, and based on the detailed testimonies of József Kovács who had been broken, renounced the assassination attempt and cooperated with the authorities to a great extent, they were soon suspected of having formed an alliance to prepare the assassination [40].

József Kovács's testimony and the operability of the hand-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.

István Keő-Kucsera denied everything during the investigation and the inquiry, and did not even admit that he knew József Kovács at all, let alone that he had commissioned him to throw grenades at the houses of Jewish people he did not like in exchange for money. All he admitted was that although he did not remember it exactly, he thought it possible that he had in front of Mihály Gyalay while drinking wine and in a very drunken state berated the Jewish residents of Jászkarajenő whom he considered to be unpatriotic, and even hinted at teaching them a lesson in front of his friend. However, he stated that he had said this out of impulsiveness at most, without any specific plans or aims [41].

Mihály Gyalay, a radical right-wing journalist proved to be somewhat more cooperative than his friend who incited József Kovács to the assassination, and admitted that he had heard Keő-Kucsera speaking several times about committing atrocities against the Jews of Jászkarajenő, and he himself also supported the idea to some extent. Finally, Keő-Kucsera clearly instructed Kovács to carry out the assassination, they agreed on the details, Kovács travelled to Jászkarajenő and together they carried out a number of preparatory acts, for example, a detailed survey of the houses on which it was planned to throw grenades to intimidate the people living there. Gyalay, of course, in order to save himself, did not admit unequivocally

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

that he himself had acquired the explosive devices and handed them over to József Kovács, but defended himself by claiming that he had acquired the grenades for patriotic purposes, for the purpose of carrying out possible military (irredentist?) acts against an unspecified enemy (in the territory of neighbouring states). Vaguely, the same argument was made as in many similar criminal cases that the militias of the Association of Awakening Hungarians mainly composed of demobilised soldiers were in fact auxiliary units of the Hungarian Defence Forces, and therefore operated legally, with the knowledge and consent of the Government, and as such, the people involved would have been serving their country and could not be considered criminals, terrorists or individuals plotting against the established order of the State <sup>[42]</sup>. Although the investigation, the inquiry and the trial did not unequivocally reveal the involvement of the Double Cross Blood Union, the highly influential secret irregular military unit of the era, the role of Géza Adorján, his close ties to Prónay's detachment, and the extensive overlaps between the national defence militias of the Awakening and the Blood Union also suggest the involvement of the DCBU in this case. In addition, Mihály Gyalay was found to be a member of the Double Cross Blood Union's leadership in a somewhat later case of concealment of weapons in 1924, so it seems clear that the secret military organisation may have been behind the assassination attempt in Jászkarajenő as well <sup>[43]</sup>. Gyalay made contradictory statements during the investigation, and he tried to defend himself and his group by claiming that the grenades he had received from Géza Adorján were not operational, and he strongly doubted that the devices taken over and destroyed by the military authorities were the same as those he had received from Géza Adorján and handed over to József Kovács who eventually brought the whole company to the police.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> [Anonymous author], *A Kettős Kereszt Vérszövetség tulajdona volt a lefoglalt fegyverkészlet*, Friss Újság, 22 January 1924, 1.

Géza Adorján, an officer of the National Defence Department of the Awakening Hungarians and close subordinate of Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay denied all along that he knew anything about the assassination attempt of István Keő-Kucséra and József Kovács against Jewish residents in Jászkarajenő. He only admitted that Mihály Gyalay, citing superior orders and patriotic purposes (by superior orders Gyalay probably meant Lieutenant Colonel Prónay, Adorján's military superior and one of the main organisers of the nationalist militias of the time), which he naively provided to the newspaper reporter. However, he denied that he had any discussions with István Keő-Kucséra and József Kovács about the specific use of the grenades, nor did he believe that the grenades he had given him were not operational <sup>[44]</sup>.

However, the testimony of József Kovács, who was probably only pretending to take the execution of the assassination because of his financial difficulties, but who quickly backed away from it and revealed the whole affair in detail to the authorities, was in contrast to all of them. Kovács's testimony was consistent, thoroughly detailed, and he fully admitted his own role in the prepared crime, while his confession's consistency and credibility contrasted sharply with the confused, contradictory and repeatedly changing details of the testimonies of the other three defendants <sup>[45]</sup>.

After the indictment, the Royal Criminal Court of Budapest finally heard the case of the Jászkarajenő bombing plot, a little late, between 11 and 18 June 1924, with the presidency of Judge Dr. Achil Schirill. 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 <sup>[46]</sup>.

During the trial, the defence tried to confuse the criminal court, citing trumped-up charges and patriotic reasons, but could use

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<sup>44</sup> HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

only inconsistent arguments against the full confession of the accused József Kovács and Captain Pál Reinhardt, Chief Artillery Foreman, according to which the German-made military hand-grenades were clearly functional and dangerous devices, capable of killing human life. The defendants' position was further aggravated by the testimony of Rezső Balácsi, a member of the Association of Awakening Hungarians who, according to his own statement, was also present when Mihály Gyalay handed over the hand grenades he had received from Géza Adorján to József Kovács. Balácsi distinctly recalled that one of them, presumably Gyalay, had said: 'the newspapers will write a lot about this, we will seriously disturb the Jews'. So, not only had the grenade attack been carefully planned by the radical right-wing young men with terrorist tendencies, but they had also anticipated its public impact and possible press coverage. It seems that they would have been delighted if it had been able to create fear among Jews in the whole country <sup>[47]</sup>.

The Royal Criminal Court of Budapest finally accepted as true and credible the repentant and detailed confession of József Kovács, the expert opinion of military expert Captain Pál Reinhardt and the incriminating testimony of witness Rezső Balácsi. The court also took into account the strong anti-Jewish sentiments and radical anti-Semitism of the accused, the fact that they themselves did not deny their strong anti-Jewish sentiments and political views for a single moment, and on the basis of all these factors, the court decided to convict the accused in 1924. 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. The court finally sentenced Keő-Kucsera to four months of imprisonment, Gyalay to three months of imprisonment and József Kovács to two months of imprisonment, and also ordered them to pay the costs of the criminal process. However, the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

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 [48].

Although the Awakening Hungarian activists who prepared the grenade raid in Jászkarajenő which fortunately was never carried out were found guilty and convicted by the court in their criminal trial, in this case too, they received surprisingly light sentences compared to the gravity of their actions. The prosecutor appealed, of course, and the criminal case of István Keő-Kucsera and his fellows continued at the second instance, but the Budapest Royal Court of Appeal and the Judicial Council presided by judge Dr. István Gadó did not significantly increase the sentence of the terrorists of Jászkarajenő. The second instance judgment of 14 October 1925 largely upheld the provisions of the first instance judgment of the Royal Court of Budapest, adding only that the defendants had to pay compensation of 1,000,000 koronas to Izsák Fischmann, the victim, an Israelite resident of Jászkarajenő and his family, whose house had been designated by István Keő-Kucsera as the target of the hand-grenade attack by József Kovács [49].

István Keő-Kucsera, the local paramilitary leader in Jászkarajenő was not only known for the assassination attempt that ended up in court. As the leader of the local sub-organisation of the Awakening Hungarians, he had been linked to a number of violent atrocities like beating Jewish people and illegal acts disguised as auxiliary police activities of the Army in 1920–1921, during period of the White Terror. Several official investigations were carried out against him, and it seems clear that not only Géza Adorján, but also Keő-Kucsera himself had very close links with the former detachments and detachment members associated with Pál Prónay and Iván Héjjas, as well as

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



with radical right-wing paramilitary groups that were still active in 1922–1923 <sup>[50]</sup>.

By the way, the criminal case of the terrorists from Jászkarajenő did not end completely with the second instance verdict. Namely, with the help of their defence lawyer Dr. Kálmán Fehérvári, István Keő-Kucsera and Mihály Gyalay filed a nullity complaint to the Hungarian Royal Curia (Supreme Court) after the second instance verdict was delivered, so the case reached the third instance, the highest Hungarian judicial forum. The nullity complaint was heard by the Curia on 27 September 1927, more than five years after the hand grenade assassination in Jászkarajenő, and in its order of the same day it rejected the defendants' nullity complaint <sup>[51]</sup>.

It can be seen as a symbolic gesture of justice that the Hungarian Supreme Court also ruled – now irrevocably – that the radical right-wing activists 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, refrained from carrying out the assassination attempt and disclosed the preparations to the investigating authorities in detail. In spite of this, the Awakening terrorists of Jászkarajenő 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 as a sentence commensurate with the act of murdering people which endangered human life. It is also suspicious that Géza Adorján, an officer of the Association of Awakening Hungarians who had been involved in higher military and political circles and had organised paramilitary units, and whose name was associated with many other serious politically motivated crimes after 1922,

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<sup>50</sup> [Anonymous author], *A szolnoki ügyészség újabb vizsgálatot rendelt el Keő-Kucsera „kilengései” ügyében*, Pesti Napló, 4 November 1924, 7.

<sup>51</sup> HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

was acquitted of all charges against him, and he was not even given a symbolic sentence.

There is usually no clear evidence or no written source of this kind available to researchers, but based on the often very similar outcomes of similar criminal cases in the 1920s, we can 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 close acquaintance with paramilitary commanders Pál Prónay and Iván Héjjas that makes us draw the conclusion that certain influential political and military circles may have been also involved in the case of the Awakening terrorists of Jászkarajenő, and they somehow managed to ensure that the young men with radical right-wing affiliations who had prepared for an undoubtedly serious crime received the minimum possible punishment for their actions, even though it was proven that they had conspired to carry out actions that could have resulted in serious injuries or deaths <sup>[52]</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> Zinner, op. cit. 159–160.

# Chapter 4

## The Bomb Attack in Erzsébetváros

The struggle of the Hungarian political parties before the parliamentary elections in 1922 was disrupted by a series of events that also provided the state with another opportunity to take stronger action against political extremism. In the spring of 1922, the members of the District 9 National Defence Department of the Association of Awakening Hungarians – despite the government's measures to disarm various militias in several stages, the Awakening Hungarians were still operating such armed paramilitary units, which were operating practically without any real state control – decided to commit a bomb outrage against the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros, a liberal political-social organisation at 76 Dohány Street, presided by opposition liberal MP Vilmos Vázsonyi, thereby killing several people they considered enemies of the nation. The assassination and the subsequent trial of the alleged perpetrators 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 <sup>[53]</sup>. Unsurprisingly, the name of the Double Cross Blood Union also appears here, and the documents of the criminal trial include one of the most valuable and fundamental archival sources of history of the secret military organisation's activities. This document is the testimony of the Hungarian Minister of Defence, General Count Károly Csáky <sup>[54]</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923. József Márffy and his associates' trial.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

On 2 April 1922, a bomb exploded at a meeting of the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros, killing eight and seriously wounding twenty-three people. Given the extreme political situation of the time, assassinations of Jews and of persons and institutions considered to be pro-Jewish by radical right-wing persons, and the fact that behind them there was the Association of Awakening Hungarians in nearly each cases, and, more specifically, the figures of Iván Héjjas and Pál Prónay, the bomb raid of Erzsébetváros was no longer tried alone, but was finally tried in a triple indictment, together with other serious anti-Semitic and anti-Entente crimes:

1. The explosion the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros was linked to an attempted pogrom against the Újpest Synagogue, planned by two young individuals associated with the Association of Awakening Hungarians named Tivadar Péter and János Salló, but it was not finally carried out.
2. There was also an attempted bomb attack on the Courts Palace of Koháry Street and the French and Czechoslovak embassies in Budapest, and it was only by luck that these bombs finally did not explode.
3. Liberal newspaper owner and journalist Andor Miklós and Károly Rassay, a liberal politician and member of the Parliament, well-known opposition politicians of the time, were sent packages containing grenades, and it was also only by luck and the vigilance of those present that these bombs did not explode when opening. At the same time, the Headquarters of the Hungarian State Police in Budapest, the Speaker of the National Assembly and the French Embassy received a life-threatening letters signed by unknown people under the name of the 'Committee 101'.

The investigation was personally led by Dr. József Sombor-Schweinitzer, one of the prominent leaders of the political police of the era, and the Royal Criminal Court of Budapest accused the young national defence militiamen on the basis of

documents seized from the Awakening Hungarians that the militiamen 'had deviated from the central 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.'<sup>[55]</sup> 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, desertion or any acts judged as treason by its members, and József Márffy, in turn, used intimidation and death threats to persuade his accomplices to help him organise and carry out the assassinations. This is however contradicted by the fact that, according to the documents, József Márffy only ordered the establishment of the blood court on 14 April 1923 when many of the crimes charged had already been committed. The political gravity of the case is illustrated by the fact that Minister of Defence General Count Károly Csáky and Prime Minister Count István Bethlen were called as witnesses at the main trial. As Károly Csáky told in his testimony<sup>[56]</sup>, after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, during the turbulent civil war, Hungary had no unified regular army, and in addition to the semi-irregular National Army organised by Admiral Miklós Horthy there were about fifty civilian militias operating in Budapest alone. Among these were the national defence units of the Association of Awakening Hungarians. In this chaotic situation, the consolidating new Hungarian Government needed these armed paramilitary units to maintain order, and in 1919–1920 Chief of the General Staff General Béla Berzeviczy tried to bring these militias under the control of the Hungarian Army. Among other things, this led to the creation of the Double Cross Blood Union as an umbrella organisation for the various irregular military formations under the control of the army. In order to preserve the honour of the military, the Minister of Defence also

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 457–469.

stressed in his testimony that although the various militias were under some military control, the Army had no influence on personnel matters, including the composition of the national defence militants of the Awakening Hungarians, and the members were not seriously trained and armed by the professional military but they were rather treated as a kind of reserve military force which could be deployed if necessary to restore the very fragile order <sup>[57]</sup>. According to the Minister's interpretation, they basically had no authority in the legal sense, at most they had arbitrarily authorised themselves to act as an authority, and the members of the various national defence militias were only actually called in one time, on 23 October 1921, during King Charles IV's second attempt to return, and the militiamen mobilised were only given weapons and salary for that short period. After that, the Ministry of Defence no longer needed the various irregular military units. The restoration of the Soviet Republic of Hungary and a possible new communist takeover were no longer a real threat to the Government by 1922, so paramilitary units such as the national defence militias of the Awakening Hungarians that mostly consisted of radical right-wing young men became superfluous for the consolidating Horthy-Bethlen government and the Kingdom of Hungary which was seeking to settle its good relations with foreign countries after the Trianon Peace Treaty was signed. It was precisely because some of its members had committed serious crimes that the government had to disband the Double Cross Blood Union in 1923. By the dissolution of the Double Cross Blood Union, Károly Csáky most probably meant the dissolution and/or regularisation of the various paramilitary units and the creation of an auxiliary police force called the earlier mentioned National Labour Protection on their basis. At the time of the bomb outrage Erzsébetváros, the members of the National Defence Department of the Awakening Hungarians of District 9 of Budapest led by József Márffy were

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<sup>57</sup> Tibor Zinner, *Adatok a szélsőjobboldali egyesületek megalakulásának körülményeihez*, Történelmi Szemle, 1979/3-4, 562-576; 566-567.

already operating as a self-proclaimed civilian militia without any serious military control or instructions, and what they did was done of their own free will.

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 <sup>[58]</sup>. Namely, József Márffy, in order to show off his own importance and influence, had claimed at an early stage that he was on good personal terms with the incumbent Prime Minister and his family, that he had played tennis with István Bethlen's sons and that he had often travelled in the Prime Minister's car. Bethlen, on the other hand, categorically denied before the court that he or any of his family members knew Márffy even superficially. The Márffy trial, in Tibor Zinner's correct view, was primarily necessitated by foreign pressure for the Hungarian State to demonstrate to the Entente, and especially to France that the revolutionary and civil war years following the First World War were over <sup>[59]</sup>. 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, we cannot and do not intend to claim that the bomb outrage the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros was not organised and carried out by József Márffy and the militiamen of the national defence unit of District 9 of the Awakening Hungarians, as there is a lot of convincing direct and indirect evidence in this case, as the record of the main trial in the first instance testifies. However, it seems highly probable that the other crimes attributed to them were arbitrarily linked to them by the police for political purposes, and the prosecution and the courts also to linked these crimes to the horrific bombing perpetrated by Márffy and his associates under political pressure. Although Márffy was sentenced to death in the first instance, neither he

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<sup>58</sup> HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923.

<sup>59</sup> Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 172.

nor his fellow prisoners who were also sentenced to death were ever really executed. The trial was continued at the Royal Court of Appeal in Budapest and at the Royal Hungarian Curia, and ended up with much lighter sentences.

The Budapest Royal Court of Appeal sentenced József Márffy, the first defendant, to 6 years of imprisonment as the main punishment and obliged him to pay 1,500,000 koronas as a subsidiary punishment.

The Royal Supreme Court sitting in third instance, sentenced József Márffy to 8 years of imprisonment as the principal punishment and also obliged him to pay a fine of 1,500,000 koronas as a subsidiary penalty, while the other pleas of nullity were rejected or dismissed.

József Márffy died in 1971 in Kőszeg at the age of 73 as a pensioner <sup>[60]</sup>. He served most of his prison sentence in the prison of Vác <sup>[61]</sup>. He was released on parole in 1929 after being diagnosed with severe lung disease. He then settled in Kőszeg where he had family ties, and began a political career. At first, he was the local party secretary of the ruling United Party, but later became one of the local leaders of the National Socialist Arrow Cross Party. Márffy never denied his identity or his past in prison, although he never publicly admitted to the acts, he had previously been accused of either.

The afterlife of the bomb outrage also includes a propaganda publication in the form of a small booklet by the Associations of the Awakening Hungarians, published by the unknown author under the pseudonym Dr. Benevolus (Dr. Benevolent), entitled *The real perpetrators of the Dohány Street bomb raid*. The author of the publication has not been clearly identified, but we can only suspect László Budaváry, Ferenc Ulain, Mihály

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<sup>60</sup> [Anonymous author], *Halálóvás*, Vas Népe, 23 August 1971. 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.

<sup>61</sup> HU-BFL-VII-101-c-fegyenc-I-8184. József Márffy's prison record.



Kmoskó or another enthusiastic contemporary leader and propagandist of the far-right mass association. The severely libellous and provocative pamphlet, for which the Awakening Hungarians were granted a distribution licence for only three months, claims nothing less than that it was radical Jews who killed or had killed their own fellows of religion in order to frame the assassination of decent, Christian Hungarians, and that behind the whole Dohány Street bomb raid there was nothing other than a well-organised Zionist conspiracy. As it is typical of the anti-Semitic propaganda literature of the time, this piece of writing begins its own narrative with citing the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, while at the same time it calls on the Jews of Hungary to take action, to join with Associations of the Awakening Hungarians and help Hungary recover from the shameful situation to which their fellow believers had led it through the First World War, the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Soviet Republic of Hungary and the Trianon Peace Treaty. The scandalous pamphlet caused outrage among many people and disillusioned many former supporters of the Associations of the Awakening Hungarians.

# Chapter 5

## The Bomb Outrage of Csongrád

In addition to the bomb outrage against the Democratic Circle in Erzsébetváros, the bomb attack in Csongrád a little later was another highly publicised terrorist act of the period, also committed by radical right-wing militiamen, presumably under the leadership of First Lieutenant János Piroska. 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, while fifteen people were injured only slightly. 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, local militiamen of the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain. János Piroska himself had made the explosive device and had also brought it from Budapest <sup>[62]</sup>.

The assassination was carried out by Miklós Bölöni and László Sinkó. During his interrogation, Sinkó defended himself by claiming that First Lieutenant Piroska had told him in a meeting at his apartment 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 crowded ballroom. The bomb exploded immediately, killing Julianna Nagyjános, a maid, Sándor Wolff, a university student, and

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<sup>62</sup> Serfőző, op. cit. 98.

Balázs Farkas, a gypsy violinist. Other people who sustained life-threatening injuries were: Mrs. Gézán Barna, Henrik Barna, Mrs. Henrik Barna, Piroska Barna, Dr. Herman Buk, Margit Buk, Ilonka Buk, József Buk, Mariska Buk, Béla Dékány, Mrs. Mihályn Engel, Mrs. István Fehér, László Grósz, Magda Grósz, Sára Grósz, Lajos Kovács, Lenke Kovács, Aladár Béla Krizsán, István Princz and Mrs. Sándor Dr. Vida.

The Hungarian State Police put a lot of effort into collecting data, soon caught the perpetrators, and the investigation conducted the next day with the assistance of Jenő Zombori, the Szeged Chief Prosecutor, József Szalay, the District Police Commissioner and Jenő Borbolya, a high-ranking police inspector, and so much material evidence was collected that on 30 December 1923 the perpetrators also confessed. The police also arrested their accomplices, almost the entire local group of the Race-defending Party, 25 young men in all, including László Sinkó, a farmer, Mihály Zubek, a teacher suspended from his job, Sándor Kasztell, a mechanic, Rókus Sági, a farmer, György Piroska, a merchant, Miklós Bölöni, a young man without a job, and Ferenc Forgó, a farmer. Not surprisingly, it turned out that most of the assassins were also members of the Association of Awakening Hungarians. János Piroska was a professional military officer, so his crimes were subject to military justice, and he was handed over to the Budapest Military Court

The increasingly high-profile investigation also involved János Diószeghy, the head of the Public Security Department of the Ministry of the Interior which was the superior organ of the State Police, and it was revealed that the assassins were also all the members of the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain led by Iván Héjjas, and also had close links with the Double Cross Blood Union, the controlling body of the Hungarian militia movement as well <sup>[63]</sup>. In the course of the investigation, János Sági was

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<sup>63</sup> Az eset részleges rekonstruálására leginkább Csongrád megye főispánjának iratai alkalmasak. HU-MNL-CSML-IV-401-a-24/1923.

also found to have a letter of appointment from Iván Héjjas appointing him commander of the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain's battalion in Csongrád <sup>[64]</sup>. Héjjas and the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain were therefore also there behind the Csongrád bomb attack, and the Double Cross Blood Union was clearly deeply involved in the case as well.

Minister of Defence General Károly Csáky in order to save the honour of the military, achieved – not for the first time in his career – by creating confusion that First Lieutenant János Piroska should not be considered a professional soldier in the legal sense. The Army argued that First Lieutenant Piroska had previously been the subject of ethical proceedings after he had continued to harass and threaten his former fiancée, who was otherwise of Jewish origin and had broken off her engagement to him, and Piroska had been forced to retire as a result. There were various versions of where János Piroska ended up working, as a teacher of drawing at the College of Fine Arts or the Bocskay Educational Institute, but he was eventually tried as an accused together with his accomplices in a civil court. The case was finally heard by the Royal Court of Szolnok, where one of the counsel for the defendants was Dr. Ferenc Ulain, a leader of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, a race-defending member of the Parliament involved in the above discussed 'Hungarian Beer Hall Putsch' <sup>[65]</sup>.

The main trial of the bomb case took place in the Royal Criminal Court of Szolnok between 17 and 26 September 1924. The defendants spent relatively little time in prison, as they were released on high bail well before the trial. Lawyers Dr. Ferenc Ulain and Dr. István Széchényi argued the patriotic merits of the defendants, in particular First Lieutenant János Piroska in the establishment of the counter-revolutionary regime, stating that among others it was Piroska who, as a member of the paramilitary unit of Iván Héjjas reorganised the gendarmerie from volunteers in Csongrád after the fall of the Soviet Republic

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<sup>64</sup> Serfőző, op. cit. 97.

<sup>65</sup> Nemzetgyűlési Napló 1922–1926/XVIII., 344–345. Cited: Serfőző, op. cit. 100.

of Hungary, and as the local commander of this paramilitary auxiliary police unit had made a major contribution to the restoration of state and social order. In his defence, Dr. Széchenyi went so far as to say that certain prominent members of the local Jewish community, including a certain lawyer, Zoltán Kalmár harboured grievances against First Lieutenant Piroška who had expelled Kalmár from the Csongrád volunteer gendarmerie force at the time because of his indiscipline, drinking and gambling. The defence lawyer also expressed his definite opinion that János Piroška and the members of the local Awakening militia were not anti-Semites, and that the Jewish–Christian conflict was mainly fuelled by the representatives of the Jewish community in Csongrád who had also tried to influence the investigation of the bomb raid against the Hotel Hungarian King in order to shift suspicion to local Christian nationalist political activists.

The accused defended themselves, among other things, by claiming that they had been abused by the police during the investigation, and that this was the only reason why they had confessed earlier. The Royal Criminal Court of Szolnok finally found the witnesses mostly untrustworthy, the investigation insufficiently thorough, the evidence presented insufficiently conclusive and tended to the conclusion that the defendants may have been tortured into confessing during the investigation <sup>[66]</sup>. Consequently, in its judgement of 26 September 1924, the Judicial Committee headed by judge Dr. Gyula Fuchs acquitted László Sinkó, Miklós Bölönyi, first degree, and Andor Fülöp, György Piroška, János Piroška, János Sági and Rókus Sági of the charges of three counts of murder and twenty-five counts of attempted murder. It is highly likely that influential military and political circles intervened to help the defendants, and the acquittal in this case was not a coincidence in this case either <sup>[67]</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> [Anonymous Author], *Egy felmentő és egy marasztaló ítélet*, Világ, 28 September 1924.

<sup>67</sup> Shvoy, op. cit. 97.

The probable mastermind behind of the Csongrád bomb attack János Piroška, who was a drawing teacher and painter by his civilian profession, later became fully consolidated and started a political career <sup>[68]</sup>. 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 were started in the city. In 1945, after the Second World War he was arrested and tried in the People's Tribunal for war crimes and crimes against the people, but was acquitted of all charges <sup>[69]</sup>. Even so, all his family's property and estates were confiscated and they were kept under constant police surveillance. In 1952 János Piroška was also briefly interned in the forced labour camp at Hortobágy <sup>[70]</sup>. In 1956, he took part in the Hungarian Revolution against the occupying Soviet Union, and after the fall of the revolution and war for freedom he was briefly arrested once again. He then retired from public life for ever, spent most of his time with painting, and finally deceased in 1987 at the age of 92. János Piroška lived a very controversial life, and during his political career, he indeed did a great deal for the development of Csongrád. Therefore, today there is a square named after him in his hometown <sup>[71]</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> Péter Erdélyi, *Képviselőtestületi választások 1929-ben Csongrádon*, Múzeumi Kutatások Csongrád Megyében 2003, ed. Péter Erdélyi–Judit Szűcs, Szeged, Móra Ferenc Múzeum, 2002, 119–125.

<sup>69</sup> HU-MNL-CSML-XXV-8-5-d-NB-148/1945.

<sup>70</sup> Martin Gulyás, *Az 1945-ös csongrádi földosztás vesztesei*, Emlékeztető, 2016/1–2, 52–68.

<sup>71</sup> Attila Tóth, *Piroška János élete és festészete*, Csongrád, Magánkiadás, 2009.

# Chapter 6

## The Transformation the Quasi-State Armed Organisations into Real State Law Enforcement Bodies

For the Bethlen Government which was striving for consolidation in domestic and foreign policy as well, the bomb raid of Csongrád on 24 December 1923, which caused a great outcry and claimed the lives of three people was 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 among other things, and if his responsibility was to be found, he would be treated in the same way as anyone else <sup>[72]</sup>. 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 <sup>[73]</sup>. Of course, this was certainly nothing more than a bargain between the paramilitary commander and the Government, possibly including Regent Governor Miklós Horthy himself <sup>[74]</sup>. 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

<sup>72</sup> Nemzetgyűlési Napló, 1922–1926/XVIII, 337–338. Lajos Serfőző, *A titkos társaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban*, 36.

<sup>73</sup> Serfőző, op. cit. 36.

<sup>74</sup> Bodó, op. cit.

command, even though his crimes were obvious to many people <sup>[75]</sup>. 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 <sup>[76]</sup>, 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 Lieutenant Colonel 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 <sup>[77]</sup>, 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 <sup>[78]</sup>. 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

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<sup>75</sup> Bodó, op. cit.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Péter Konok, *Az erőszak kérdései 1919–1920-ban*, 84.

<sup>78</sup> Prónay, op. cit 322–324.



elite status due to his extreme radicalism <sup>[79]</sup>. 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 Héjjas's 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 <sup>[80]</sup>. 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

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<sup>79</sup> On Prónay's political downfall see: Bodó, Pál Prónay. *Paramilitary Violence and Antisemitism in Hungary, 1919–1921*.

<sup>80</sup> HU-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.

more serious government control, but could essentially continue to operate <sup>[81]</sup>. 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 DCBU was founded under this name in 1923, as a kind of successor organisation to the Brigade of the Great Plain commanded by Iván Héjjas, and that it allegedly continued its activities under the codename *Főtartalék – Main Reserve* <sup>[82]</sup> 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 Ministry of Defence. 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. Anyway, the former quasi-state paramilitary organisations which rooted in civil war times were finally officially reorganised as a state law enforcement (auxiliary police-type) agency, becoming part of the new, consolidated Hungarian State.

That is, although the paramilitary formations involved in crime and terrorism officially ceased to exist, in fact, the quasi-state militias were transformed into a real state armed force. There is also an archival source about the integration of the Double Cross Blood Union militias 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 <sup>[83]</sup>. The National Labour Protection was a strike-breaking

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<sup>81</sup> Dósa, op. cit. 151–152.

<sup>82</sup> *Csak szolgálati használatra! Iratok a Horthy-hadsereg történetéhez, 1919–1938*, ed. Tibor Hetés–Tamásné Morva, Budapest, Zrínyi Katonai Könyv- és Lapkiadó, 1968, 499–500.

<sup>83</sup> HU-MNL-OL-K 149-1926-6-3473.

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 Hungarian 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 [84].

The testimony of General Count Károly Csáky, Minister of Defence in the bombing trial of József Márffy 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 DCBU 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 DCBU 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 [85].

In parallel with the integration of the different militias into the National Labour Protection, the Government Decree No. 7502

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<sup>84</sup> Dósa, op. cit. 134.

<sup>85</sup> HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923.

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 [86]. 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.

That is, the Hungarian radical right-wing militia movement thus continued to exist within the framework of this organisation, in a domesticated form, even until 1938, when Hungary was involved in World War Two, and the state needed no more concealed military forces, since the armament of the Hungarian Army publicly began [87]. As Béla Bodó argues, Hungarian militias of the 1920s were as dangerous and incalculable as mafias [88]. By 1922–1923, they were endangering the safety of the very State that they should have formally protected. Yet the Hungarian State did not get rid of them completely and definitely, but rather integrated them into the new social and political order, so to say, ‘sparing’ the militias for its short- and long-term aims.

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<sup>86</sup> Budapesti Közlöny, 24 October 1923.

<sup>87</sup> Dósa, op. cit. 134.

<sup>88</sup> Bodó, *Militia Violence and State Power in Hungary, 1919–1922*, 156.

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