

BALÁZS KÁNTÁS

IRREGULAR SOLDIERS IN DEFENCE AND AGAINST HUNGARIAN NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE 1920s



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**NEMZETBIZTONSÁG-TÖRTÉNETI
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THE ACTIONS OF THE IRREGULAR, SECRET-SERVICE-LIKE MILITARY FORMATION SETTLED IN HOTEL BRITANNIA, BUDAPEST AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR, 1919–1921

Introduction

After World War I, in the 1920s, paramilitarism¹ 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

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

² Robert Gerwarth, *Harc a Vörös Szörnyeteggel. Ellenforradalmi erőszak Közép-Európa vereséget szenvedett államaiban*, transl. Péter Várady, in *Háború béke idején. Paramilitáris erőszak Európában az első világháború után*, ed. Robert Gerwarth–John Horne, Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2017, 71–92.

³ About the history of the short-lived Soviet Republic of Hungary see: Pál Hatos, *Rosszifjúk világforradalma. Az 1919-es magyarországi tanácsköztársaság története*, Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó, 2021.

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*

⁴ Ákos Bartha, *Az utolsó csepp a pohárban. Soltra József rendőr meggyilkolása*, in *Csoportosulás, lázadás és a társadalom terrorizálása. Rendészettörténeti Tanulmányok* 2., ed. Orsolya Jámbor–Gábor G. Tarján, Budapest, Rendőrség Tudományos Tanácsa, 2019, 28–44.

⁵ See: Béla Bodó, *The White Terror. Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921*, London, Routledge, 2019.

*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

⁶ On the history of the Double Cross Blood Union see: Balázs Kántás, *The Double Cross Blood Union: Outline of the History of a Secret Military Organisation of Hungary in the 1920s*, ANGLISTICUM, 2021/10, 52–70. <https://www.anglisticum.org.mk/index.php/IJLLIS/article/view/2218/2615>

⁷ City Archives of Budapest, HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923. József Márffy and their associate's trial.

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-

⁸ Tibor Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989, passim.

⁹ The ÉME – *Association of Awakening Hungarians* was the most influential nationalist social association in Hungary after the First World War and the revolutions, maintaining its own auxiliary police militias and paramilitary units in the early 1920s, and exerting a strong influence on party politics. Its members committed a number of notorious anti-Semitic and irredentist crimes, as well as acts of terror. Among its founders and board members there were many politicians and influential military officers such as Pál Prónay, Iván Héjjas or Gyula Gömbös, later Prime Minister. At its peak, its membership was in the hundreds of thousands, and its presidents in the early 1920s were György Szmrecsányi, Tibor Eckhardt and Dezső Buday, members of the parliament. Its importance gradually declined after 1923, with the emergence of the Hungarian National Independence Party (commonly called Race-defending Party) which had split from the governing Unity Party (officially called Christian-National Peasant, Smallholder and Bourgeois Party), and more significantly with the formation of the Western-style Hungarian fascist and national socialist parties in the 1930s, some of whose members were members of the association. The Awakening Hungarians continued to operate alongside various radical right-wing political parties until 1945. About its history see: Tibor

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 Agents¹⁰ under the direction of the Minister of the Interior, a political counter-intelligence organisation of civilians whose task was to

Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923*; Tibor Zinner, *Adatok az Ébredő Magyarok Egyesületének 1918. november–1920. március közötti történetéhez*, Budapest Főváros Leváltára Közleményei, 1978/1, 251–284.

¹⁰ The Organization of State Security Agents was a civilian auxiliary police force and secret service organization founded in August 1919, whose primary task after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary was to monitor communist conspiracies and break possible workers' strikes. Under the control of the Ministry of the Interior, its members wore plainclothes, carried weapons and continued their civilian occupation as auxiliary police officers, and had powers roughly equivalent to those of the professional police. In October 1922, the organisation was formally incorporated into the auxiliary police organisation called the Office of National Labour Protection, but for a while it tried to retain its autonomy. See *Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez 1919–1945. II. A fasiszta rendszer kiépítése Magyarországon 1921–1924*, ed. Elek Karsai-Dezső Nemes, Budapest, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1959, 187–188.

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, Intelligence or Information-gathering) 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 and national security agencies, 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

¹¹ János Suba, *Karbatalmi formációk Magyarországon 1918–1920*, Rendvédelem-történeti Füzetek 2008/18, 131–142.; János Suba, *Polgárőrség szervezése 1919–1921*, Rendvédelem-történeti Füzetek, 2018/56, 131–144.

¹²Tamás Kovács, *A Honvédelmi Minisztérium „T” Szervének létrejötte és működése, avagy elbáritás és kémkedés az I. világháború végétől a bethleni konszolidációig*, Budapest, Nemzeti Közszerológiai Egyetem, 2020.

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

¹³ Tamás Kovács, *A Nemzeti Hadsereg és a tiszti különítmények*, in *Csoportosulás, lázadás és a társadalom terrorizálása. Rendészettörténeti Tanulmányok 2.*, ed. Orsolya Jámbor-Gábor G. Tarján, Budapest, Rendőrség Tudományos Tanácsa, 2019, 151–172.

¹⁴ Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 103.

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

¹⁵ Bartha, op. cit. 28–44, 29.

¹⁶ City Archives of Budapest, HU-BFL-VII-18-d-8963/1925 – Károly Kmetty and his associates's criminal trial.

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 aforementioned 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

¹⁷ [Anonymous author], *Babarczyék a Britanniában. Az Esti Kurir cikksorozata – Megkezdjük a Babarczy-különítmény Britanniabeli életének és élményeinek pontos adatok alapján való közlését*, Esti Kurir, 3 September 1924, 3.

¹⁸ Nigel H. Jones, *Hitler's Heralds. The Story of the Freikorps, 1918–1923*, Dorset, Barns and Noble, 1995.

*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,

¹⁹ Lajos Kerekes, *Olaszország, Magyarország és az osztrák Heimwehr-mozgalom*, Történelmi Szemle, 1961/2, 199–216.

²⁰ Zinner, op. cit. 66.

²¹ A m. kir. kormánynak 1920. évi 4.710. M. E. számú rendelete a katonai hatóságok és közegek, illetőleg katonai nyomozók polgári személyekkel szemben való eljárásának megszüntetéséről, illetőleg korlátozásáról, 1920. június 12., Magyarországi Rendeletek Tára, 1920, 233–235.

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 controversial 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 prosecuted²³ 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

²² HU-BFL-VII-18-d-8963/1925.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Zinner, *op. cit.* *passim*.

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

²⁵ [Anonymous Author], *Megkezdtek a Kmetty-féle atrocitásügyek budapesti tárgyalását*, Az Est, 4 March 1927, 2.

²⁶ HU-BFL-VII-18-d-8963/1925.

²⁷ Ibid.

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

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

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 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

³⁰ Ibid.

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

³¹ Ibid.

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

³² Ibid.

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

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ [Anonymous author], *Két év hat hónapra ítelték Kmetty Károlyt*, Az Est, 17 March 1927, 7.

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 an 1,700-strong armed militia. The newspaper's staff finally reached him in person at a pub, in the company of three decilitres of cheap wine, where he continued to cling to the seriousness of his claims.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

³⁶ László Magyar, *Kétszáz pengős kereseti lehetőséggel beszélgettem poloskairtó ügynököknek a britanniás Kmetty Károlyhoz*, Délmagyarország, 15 July 1928, 3–4.

³⁷ [Anonymous author], *Kmetty Károly sikkasztási pörében tanúkihallgatást rendeltek el*, Délmagyarország, 30 January 1930, 4.

³⁸ [Anonymous author], „Halló, itt Kmetty Károly, a britanniás!”, Délmagyarország, 30 August 1930, 5.

³⁹ [Anonymous author], *Kmetty Károlyt a tábla is elítélte*, Népszava, 30 December 1936, 3.

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-

⁴⁰ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-8821/1920. László Illy and his associates' criminal trial.

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

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

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 Körmendy, Sándor Imre, Mihály Schwicker, László Fekete, Sándor Fekete, László Vanek, Ferenc Illek and György Rigóczky, 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 Rigóczky, 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,

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

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

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

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 Rigócky, 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

⁴⁹ Ibid.

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

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

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 Körmendy, 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 Tőkés, the instigator of the young men who had carried out the attack on Club Café, who already had a serious military background

⁵² Zinner, *op. cit.* 74.

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 Tőkés 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 Rigóczy, 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

⁵³ Ibid.

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

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Zinner, *op. cit.* 74.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Zinner, *op. cit.* 74–75.

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

⁵⁸ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-8821/1920.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

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

⁶⁰ Ibid.

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 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/national security 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/national security 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

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Zinner, *op. cit.* 73–75.

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 declassed 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

⁶³ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-8821/1920.

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.

⁶⁴ 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*, szerk. Robert Gerwarth–John Horne, Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2017, 71–92.; Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War Failed to End*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

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 irregular soldiers in charge of national security tasks

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

⁶⁵ Vö. [Anonymous author], *A britanniás Illy László újabb hazafias üzlete*, Népszava, 7 December 1930, 19.

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-wing detachments as an urgent necessity after the death of the policeman. Imre Nádosy, the Police Commissioner of Budapest, and soon afterwards promoted to National Police Commissioner, and Deputy Police Commissioner Jenő Marinovich⁶⁷ took apparently decisive action, and the Budapest State Police

⁶⁶ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-8821/1920.

⁶⁷ Bartha, *op. cit.*

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

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ HU-BFL-VII-18-d-8963/1925.

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

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Although the information about the composition of the group of three who clashed with the police is contradictory, the investigators identified Imre Mészáros, a demobilised soldier as a member of the three-man group who later beat the wounded police officer József Miklós, Lieutenant László Sesevics and a soldier surnamed Zólyomi, who, according to the sources, was identical to a well-known detachment officer of the period, Second Lieutenant Kálmán Zsabka, who pursued a romantic life and was otherwise active as an actor and poet in civilian life.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

⁷¹ On Kálmán Zsabka's adventurous life see: Ákos Bartha–Nándor Pócs–András Szécsényi, *Egy bosszan „ébredő” túlélőművész: Zsabka Kálmán pályarajza (1897–1971) I. rész*, *Múltunk*, 2019/2, 138–180.

⁷² HU-BFL-VII-18-d-8963/1925.

⁷³ Bartha, op. cit. 36.

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

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Zinner, *op. cit.* 103.

⁷⁶ Bartha, *op. cit.* 36–37.

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

⁷⁷ Zinner, op. cit. 103.

⁷⁸ Bartha, op. cit. 43.

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

⁷⁹ See Béla Bodó, *Pál Prónay. Paramilitary Violence and Anti-Semitism in Hungary, 1919–1921*, The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East-European Studies, No. 2101, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh, 2011, 27–28.

⁸⁰ Pál Prónay, *A határban a halál kaszája. Fejezetek Prónay Pál naplójából*, ed. Ervin PAMLÉNYI–Ágnes SZABÓ, Budapest, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1963, 315.

⁸¹ Zinner, op. cit. 98–101.

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 Tihámér 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

⁸² Zinner, i. m. 98.

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

⁸³ Hungarian Archives of Military History, HU-HL-HM-52110/Eln. C.-192.1. The source is cited by: Tamás Kovács, *A Honvédelmi Minisztérium „T” Szervének létrejötte és működése, avagy elbáritás és kémkedés az I. világháború végétől a bethleni konszolidációig*, 70–71.

⁸⁴ Zinner, op. cit. 99.

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

⁸⁵ Zinner, *op. cit.* 105.

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.

⁸⁶ Zinner, *op. cit.* 103.

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

⁸⁷ Zinner, op. cit. *ibid*.

⁸⁸ Central Archive of the National Archives of Hungary. HU-MNL-OL-K 149-1926-6-4250. Reserved Documents of the Hungarian Royal Ministry of the Interior – Police report about the activities of the secret and semi-secret radical right-wing organisations, 1926.

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 First 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 violent 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.

THE PLAN OF THE WHITE INTERNATIONALE SECRET HUNGARIAN–BAVARIAN–AUSTRIAN– RUSSIAN MILITARY NEGOTIATIONS AND ATTEMPTS OF FORMING A MILITARY LEAGUE TO REVISE THE PEACE TREATIES OF PARIS, 1919–1923

Introduction

After the end of World War One and the signing of the Peace Treaty of Versailles that formally ended the war as well, some politicians of the defeated states, mainly those in Germany and in the successor states of the disintegrated Austro–Hungarian monarchy were unsatisfied with the defeat and the considerable territorial losses of their homelands, and sought the possibility of revision, including the help of possible military allies. From 1919 onwards, Hungary's new, authoritarian conservative political leadership continued to actively seek contacts with German-speaking, mainly German-Bavarian and Austrian radical right-wing political forces and military-paramilitary formations associated to them. On the Bavarian side, General Erich Ludendorff, Colonel Max Bauer and the then young and emerging radical right-wing politician Adolf Hitler wished to set up an international revisionist military organisation at the end of 1919. The German radical right-wing politicians would have seen the possibility of changing the political situation mainly in the coalition of the so-called *Freikorps* – *Free Corpses*, quasi-stata militias connected to the

regular armed forces, which were very numerous in both Germany and Austria and mainly consisted of First World War veterans. The plan envisaged by General Ludendorff would have consisted of an agreement between the Bavarian-German Free Corpses, the Austrian extreme right militias called *Heimwehr* and the leaders of the right-wing counter-revolutionary Hungarian Government and participants of the paramilitary wave of violence called White Terror⁸⁹ in Hungary, with the aim of a violent takeover of political power in both Germany and Austria as soon as possible. In the case of Hungary, it was already foreseeable that political power would permanently be in the hands of the right-wing politicians of the counter-revolutionary Government of Szeged and the commander-in-chief of the right-wing National Army, Admiral Miklós Horthy who were strongly supported by the Entente powers, mainly by England and France. Admiral Horthy was really soon elected as head of state of Hungary under the title Regent Governor in 1920,⁹⁰ since formally the country preserved its form of government as kingdom, although practically it was a much more similar regime to the Republic of Weimar of Germany, realising a strongly conservative, limited democracy with regulated parliamentarism.

The Plans of the White Internationale – 1919–1921

⁸⁹ Béla Bodó, *The White Terror. Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921*, London, Routledge, 2019.

⁹⁰ Dávid Turbucz, *Horthy Miklós*, Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó, 2011, 66–92.

In the winter of 1919, General Erich Ludendorff and Colonel Max Bauer sent Ignác Trebitsch, the Hungarian-born international spy and adventurer to Hungary with the task to make an attempt to persuade Hungarian right-wing government circles to support the so-called Kapp–Lüttwitz Putsch in Germany, a coup d'état formally led by Prussian civil servant and nationalist politician Wolfgang Kapp, but in reality mainly organised by General Ludendorff and his followers.⁹¹ The contact with the Bavarian and Austrian radical right-wing organisations was sought primarily by a group of strongly nationalist military officers linked to the Double Cross Blood Union, the very influential Hungarian secret military organisation under the direct control of the Hungarian General Staff and the Minister of Defence. Trebitsch and Colonel Bauer, for example, negotiated with Lieutenant Colonel Baron Pál Prónay, one of the most notorious paramilitary commanders of the Hungarian right-wing counter-revolution during their first visit to Hungary.⁹² Prónay also belonged to the circles of radical right-wing officers who commanded the Double Cross Blood Union, and at the time the secret military organisation and its commanders had a certain degree of influence on Hungarian foreign policy for a while, although moderate conservative politicians tried to prevent them from leading Hungary into

⁹¹ About the Kapp–Lüttwitz Putsch see in more details: *Der Kapp-Lüttwitz-Ludendorff Putsch. Dokumente*, ed. Erwin Könneman–Gerhard Schulze, Berlin, Olzog, 2002.

⁹² Bernard Wasserstein, *Az igazi Trebitsch. Az átváltózművész*, trans. György Molnár, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2016, 217–238.

hazardous political actions.⁹³ In this period Regent Horthy, a military officer himself was strongly influenced by his radical fellow officers, and listened less to moderate conservative politicians.

The radical right-wing forces eventually made an attempt to take power in Germany in March 1920, but the Kapp–Lüttwitz Putsch, due to the hesitation of the German Imperial Army, which did not support the coup, but did not defend the legitimate German Federal Government either, initially led to the Government's escape from Berlin, but within a few days it was overthrown by the general strike that followed the coup and the resistance of the bankers and the industrialists. In May 1920 Ignác Trebitsch together with Colonel May Bauer and Captain von Stefany travelled to Budapest once again to deliver Ludendorff's letter, and they personally visited Admiral Miklós Horthy who had by then been elected Regent Governor of Hungary by the Parliament. The German radical right-wing politicians and the newly elected Hungarian head of state discussed the possibility of a possible German–Austrian–Hungarian right-wing alliance, mainly of military nature. It should be added that the parties did indeed negotiate with the serious desire to cooperate, and General Ludendorff considered it entirely feasible at that time, and he called the initiative of the

⁹³ About the activities of the radical right-wing Hungarian secret military organisation the Double Cross Blood Union see: Balázs Kántás, *The Double Cross Blood Union. Outline of the History of a Secret Military Organisation of Hungary in the 1920s*, Anglisticum, 2021/6, 52–70.
<https://www.anglisticum.org.mk/index.php/IJLLIS/article/view/2218>

cooperation between the right-wing forces of Central Europe the *White Internationale*. In his cordial letter, Ludendorff called Hungary the saviour of the nationalist idea and asked for financial support for Bavarian revolutionary organisations as well.⁹⁴

The Germans offered Hungary a very detailed cooperation plan consisting of the following main points:

1. secret irregular military units would travel from Germany to Hungary.
2. these men would be trained in secret camps in Hungary.
3. the Hungarian Government will raise the necessary funds for training by printing and distributing counterfeit Russian rubels.
4. Bavarian military units trained in Hungary secretly infiltrate Vienna and overthrow the Austrian social democratic Government in due course.
- 5 After the capture of Vienna, the Bavarian-Hungarian-Austrian coalition troops attack Czechoslovakia.
6. The above-mentioned troops then occupy Prussia where Ludendorff establishes a military dictatorship.

⁹⁴ *Horthy Miklós titkos iratai*, ed. Miklós Szinai Miklós-László Szűcs, Budapest, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1962, 33–38; Ildikó Szerényi–Zoltán Viszket, *Buzgó Mócsing, az igazi Trebitsch*, Archivnet, 2006/3.
http://www.archivnet.hu/kuriozumok/buzgo_mocsing_az_igazi_trebitsch.html

7. Thus strengthened, the governments and armies of the White Internationale unleash a white revolution in Soviet Russia and overthrow the communist government.

8. After the successful right-wing restoration of Russia, the member states of the White Internationale declare war on the Entente, and the winners redraw the map of Europe, returning the territories of Hungary annexed by the Treaty of Trianon.⁹⁵

It is also worth mentioning here that the Ludendorff and his companions had particularly high hopes for the participation of the monarchist Russian forces fighting against the Bolshevik Government in the White Internationale, since the outcome of the Russian civil war was not yet a decided in 1919, and hundreds of thousands of tsarists, or at least Russian citizens who were not sympathetic to the Bolshevik Government had left their country since the outbreak of the communist revolution. The largest group of the so-called White Russian emigrants had settled in Germany, and there were still many Russian prisoners of war who refused to return to Soviet Russia, and several tsarist Russian generals considered it possible to overthrow the Bolshevik regime with the help of the above mentioned soldiers.⁹⁶ Ludendorff

⁹⁵ László Gulyás, *A Horthy-korszak külpolitikája 1. Az első évek, 1919–1924*, Máriabesenyő, Attraktor Kiadó, 2012, 42–43.

⁹⁶ About the Russian aspects of the White Internationale see: Attila Kolontáry, *Alekszej von Lampe, Vrangél báró katonai képviselője*

also contacted, through Ignác Trebitsch and Colonel Bauer, Russian tsarist General Vassily Biskupsky who himself had visited to Budapest in June 1920 and took part in negotiations between the German, Austrian and Hungarian right-wing political forces.⁹⁷

The negotiations also resulted in memoranda of detailed plans, but actual cooperation with the White Russian forces fighting against the Bolshevik Army, which were otherwise very fragmented and poorly organised, could not really take place on the part of the planned participants in the *White Internationale* from Central Europe, mainly due to the great geographical distances.⁹⁸

The negotiations between the European nationalist political and military forces, mainly based in Budapest, could not have been conducted under complete secrecy, of course, as the French and British intelligence services were also informed about them, and the Entente powers expressed their strong objections, which warned the Hungarian Government to be cautious in the field of diplomacy and foreign policy.⁹⁹ In parallel with Bavarian nationalist forces, the Hungarian Government also sought contact with Austrian radical right-wing political forces and paramilitary

Magyarországon, Pécs, PTE BTK Történettudományi Intézet–Modernkori Oroszország és Szovjetunió Történeti Kutatócsoport, MOSZT-füzetek 1., 2015

⁹⁷ Wasserstein, op. cit. 254–255.

⁹⁸ Wasserstein, op. cit. 255.

⁹⁹ Elek Karsai, *Számjeltávirat valamennyi magyar királyi követségnek*, Budapest, Táncsics Kiadó, 1969, 63–64.

organisations in the 1920s, in the hope of establishing the same Central European white coalition. The Hungarian Government and military leadership, in close cooperation with them Hungarian nationalist social organisations, played a contradictory game, as their plans included assistance to overthrow Austria's elected left-wing government and to bring local right-wing and radical right-wing political forces to power, including even through Hungarian military intervention.¹⁰⁰ Hungarian radical right-wing military officers also drew up a plan for a military operation under the codename 'Remény' – 'Hope', which was certainly never realised.¹⁰¹ The Austrian right-wing paramilitary organisations were also in close contact with the Bavarian nationalist circles led by General Ludendorff, so the secret negotiations were not only conducted between the Hungarian and the Austrian side, but also involved the competent Bavarian politicians. The Hungarian General Staff, due to the weakness of the Austrian paramilitary organisations and the military preparations of Czechoslovakia, considered a possible intervention against Austria to be feasible only with the support of Bavarian irregular military units.¹⁰² The Bavarian–Hungarian–Austrian secret negotiations, which were intensively conducted during 1920, were personally led by Prime

¹⁰⁰ Katalin G. Soós, *Burgenland az európai politikában 1918–1921*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1971, 90.

¹⁰¹ Archives of Hungarian Military History, HU-HL-VKF-1920-II-21197.

¹⁰² G. Soós, op. cit. 90–91.

Minister and Foreign Minister Count Pál Teleki and by Colonel Tihamér Siménfalvy, commander of the secret military organisation Double Cross Blood Union and close friend to Regent Governor Horthy on the Hungarian side; on the Bavarian side, Rudolf Kanzler, leader of the right-wing militia ORKA (Organisation Kanzler),¹⁰³ and Georg Heim, a politician of the Bavarian Peasant Party; and on the Austrian side, mainly members of the radical right wing of the Christian Socialist Party, for example, by Prince Johannes von Liechtenstein. On 25 and 26 August 1920, the parties met at Hungarian Prime Minister Teleki's house in Budapest.¹⁰⁴ It should be stressed that while in the case of Bavarian and Austrian politicians the negotiators were mainly members of political movements aspiring for power, in the Case of Hungary, the representatives of the Government and the Army took part in the negotiations, although there were certainly tensions between the moderate conservative and the radical nationalist wings of the governing United Party and the political and military elite. However, in this period the Hungarian head of state Admiral Horthy, who was himself a high-ranking military officer and hero of the Great War very similar to General

¹⁰³ As for the history of ORKA and other radical right-wing German paramilitary organisations see: John T. Lauridsen, *Nazism and the Radical Right in Austria, 1918–1934*, Copenhagen, The Royal Library–Museum Tusculanum Press, 2007.

¹⁰⁴ G. Soós, op. cit. 91.

Ludendorff, strongly supported the adventurous plans of radical officers and politicians.¹⁰⁵

By August 1920, the Hungarian Government had abandoned their plans of the military intervention against Austria due to the international situation, but they continued to do its best to ensure that a right-wing government would come to power in the forthcoming Austrian parliamentary elections, so they tried to intervene in the internal affairs of the new Austrian State by conspiratorial means. At the same time, the Hungarian military intervention was no longer approved by the Bavarian paramilitary leader Rudolf Kanzler either. Furthermore, there were significant conflicts of interest between the Bavarian, Hungarian and Austrian sides, for example, they could not agree on the issue of the king and the future territorial status of Western Hungary, which was an important element of Hungarian–Austrian relations. In the end, the Hungarian Government only signed an agreement with the radical right-wing political forces in Bavaria on the supply of a substantial amount of weapons, to which the Bavarian Provincial Prime Minister Gustav von Kahr who was also strongly right-wing and on good terms with Ludendorff, subsequently agreed.¹⁰⁶

In parallel, there were also lively negotiations between the Austrian and Bavarian right-wing forces in progress the main aim of which was the unification of the Austrian right-wing paramilitary organisations under

¹⁰⁵ Turbucz, *op. cit.* 66–92.

¹⁰⁶ G. Soós, *op. cit.* 92.

German command and the unification of the German-speaking states with their cooperation. However, there were significant conflicts of interest and differences of opinion between the German-speaking parties as well. On 6 and 7 September 1920, further negotiations took place in Vienna between Bavarian and Austrian radical right-wing organisations, presumably with the participation of the Hungarian Ambassador in Vienna, Gusztáv Gratz where the parties agreed to mutually support each other's anti-communist aims, but at the same time Austrian Christian Socialist politicians abandoned at the last moment their plans to overthrow the Austrian Government by force. The leaders of the Austrian *Heimwehr* militias¹⁰⁷ said that they could not provide the armed forces that would have been necessary to overthrow the social democrat Government by military means, but that they would do everything in their power to ensure that a right-wing government of their own design would come to power in Austria in the forthcoming elections.

The Hungarian Government primarily provided financial support to the Austrian *Heimwehr* organisations, in the hope that it would be able to use them for its future foreign policy goals.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, in Bavaria, General Ludendorff and his very radical circle were no longer willing to hear the much more sensible scenario agreed on at the

¹⁰⁷ As for the history of the Austrian paramilitary Heimwehr movement see: Lajos Kerekes, *Olaszország, Magyarország és az osztrák Heimwehr-mozgalom*, Történelmi Szemle, 1961/2, 199–216

¹⁰⁸ G. Soós, op. cit. 93.

earlier September talks. They committed themselves to military action in any case, by the rapid establishment of a military alliance called the *League of the Oppressed Peoples*, to be set up by the countries that had lost the First World War. Furthermore, General Ludendorff once again requested financial support from the Hungarian Government, not for the first time and not for the last.¹⁰⁹ By this time, however, Teleki was explicitly opposed to the Hungarian financial support for the Bavarian radical right, and the Hungarian Government saw the participation in the *League of Oppressed Peoples* and thus a possible new military conflict as increasingly risky.¹¹⁰

The Hungarian Government was, by this time, of course, cautious, and realistic political considerations finally seemed to prevail over the despair coming from the huge territorial losses and the resulting radicalism, but they did not explicitly reject the possibility of joining the *League of Oppressed Peoples*, which was rather only a conceptual cooperation, and in their reply to Ludendorff and his circle they wrote that they would continue to maintain good relations with the Bavarian nationalist organisations. Teleki also indicated that Austria, which geographically separated Hungary and Germany, should in any case be put at the service of their own political and military aims, but not by an immediate military intervention.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ HU-HL VKF-1920-II-23152.; G. Soós, op. cit. 94.

¹¹⁰ G. Soós, op. cit. 95.

¹¹¹ Central Archives of the National Archives of Hungary, HU-MNL-OL-K 64-1922-20-1920/384.

The relations between the Austrian counter-revolutionary political and paramilitary groups and the Hungarian Government were strongly spoiled by the fact that the two largest successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy failed to reach an agreement on the question of the belonging of Western Hungary, and the issue was to be decided by the victorious Entente powers, primarily by France.¹¹² The question remained unresolved for some time, but it worsened the relations with both the official Austrian Government circles and the Austrian radical right-wing movements which were fuelled by aspirations for power, and the parties tried to obtain a decision from the great powers that was as favourable as possible for them.

In October 1920, the Social Democrat Karl Renner was replaced by the Christian Socialist Michael Mayr as Chancellor (Prime Minister) of Austria, but the Hungarian Government, or at least the radical right-wing Hungarian military circles close to the Government were still secretly considering the possibility of military intervention against Austria again. In November, the Hungarians again contacted Ludendorff through their military attaché in Munich, Colonel Béla Janky, and in January 1921, on the orders of Minister of Defence General Sándor Belitska. The Hungarian General Staff, which was at the time operating

¹¹² Katalin G. Soós, *Magyar-bajor-osztrák titkos tárgyalások és együttműködés, 1920–1921*, Acta Universitatis Szegediensis de Attila József Nominatae. Acta Historica, 1967/Tomus XXVII., 3–43, 23.

under secrecy due to the strict limitations of armament of the Peace Treaties of Paris over the defeated countries, drew up a plan for military intervention against Austria in the event of a communist takeover in the neighbouring country and the coming to power of a radical left-wing government.¹¹³ After the plan had been worked out, Count Gedeon Ráday travelled to Munich on behalf of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss the details of the possible action with Bavarian Provincial Prime Minister Gustav von Kahr and paramilitary commander Rudolf Kanzler. On 16 January 1921, at a secret meeting held in the presence of Regent Governor Horthy, the Hungarian Government decided that any military action against Austria could only take place with German (Bavarian) participation.¹¹⁴ The Hungarian Government's decision also implied that if the Bavarian political forces saw the need for military intervention in Austria of their own accord and carried it out, Hungary would support them, providing them primarily with material support, equipment and munitions, and Hungarian irregular military units would also volunteer to help the Bavarian forces. These Hungarian units would have been provided by the secret irregular, reserve-force like military organisation, the Double Cross Blood Union under the command of Colonel Tihamér Siménfalvy,¹¹⁵ which, as it was already mentioned above,

¹¹³ HU-HL VKF-1921-1-266. Cited by G. Soós, op. cit. 25.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ HU-HL VKF-1921-1-266.

played a very important role in the clandestine revisionist negotiations, and in fact, from the Hungarian side, it was precisely the radical right-wing military officers of the Blood Union who were the main promoters of such a military cooperation.

The plan for military cooperation against communism in Central Europe was not looked upon too favourably by the Entente powers, especially France and Britain, mainly because the Austrian and Bavarian positions also strongly implied the intention of unifying Austria and Germany, the so-called Anschluss. At the end of January 1921, Gusztáv Gratz, the former Hungarian ambassador in Vienna, and by then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, had a great deal of diplomatic information and tried to dissuade the Hungarian Government from even the idea of participating in any reckless military action. He indicated that Britain and France would regard the Hungarian–German–Austrian anti-Bolshevik league as a pretext for the territorial revision of the peace treaties of Paris, and that in his opinion there was a real danger that in the event of any Hungarian military action against Austria, the neighbouring Little Entente states, Czechoslovakia, Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes would also intervene against Hungary.¹¹⁶

Bavarian Provincial Prime Minister Kahr was increasingly losing ground against France in the international diplomatic arena, and the Bavarian side gradually passed the

¹¹⁶ HU-MNL-OL-K 64-1921-41-34.

right to negotiate to Rudolf Kanzler. In February 1921, Count Gedeon Ráday and the Bavarian paramilitary commander also signed a cooperation agreement between the Hungarian Government and the Bavarian ORKA militia, but this was mostly a symbolic declaration. The parties agreed that if the opportunity arose, the ORKA would attempt to 'restore order' in Austria, with the Hungarian Government providing financial assistance, and that if the ORKA were successful, the Trianon Peace Treaty would be declared invalid. However, Kanzler asked the Hungarian Government for too much money, a sum of 4,5 million German marks, to organise the very risky operation, which the Hungarian side refused to provide, and for this reason no actual agreement was reached between the parties.¹¹⁷

The Second Phase of Austrian–Hungarian–German Negotiations, 1921–1922

All in all, the idea of military intervention against Austria was unrealistic in the given political situation, and the parties finally realised this in the first half of 1921. Although Austria's new Chancellor was a right-wing Christian Socialist politician, he belonged to the more moderate wing of the party, and the Hungarian Government was moving closer to the radical wing of the Austrian Christian Socialists. Very close links existed between the Austrian Heimwehr militias and the radical wing of the governing Christian Socialist

¹¹⁷ HU-MNL-OL-K 64-41-72.

Party, and the possibility of overthrowing the moderate Mayr Government was soon raised. Instead of a Hungarian or Bavarian military intervention, however, the new negotiations were dominated by the idea that the Austrian right-wing paramilitary organisations should themselves force a change of government in Austria, and the Austrian side was represented by General Josef Metzger and the later Chancellor Ignaz Seipel on behalf of the Heimwehr organisations of Vienna and Lower Austria. The Austrians expected the Hungarian Government to provide financial support for the major arming of the Heimwehr militias, and the Hungarian Government demanded in return that if the Austrian radical right-wing forces succeeded in bringing to power a government of their own design in Vienna, Austria should temporarily give up the territory of Western Hungary, and negotiations should continue until the new Austrian Government was able to settle the question of Western Hungary in a way that was favourable to the Hungarian side. Although the leadership of the Austrian Heimwehr organisations and the group led by Seipel were by no means free from the idea of royalism, the attempted return of King Charles IV of Habsburg to Hungary at the end of March 1921 also made the idea of a Habsburg restoration in Austria completely unrealistic. On 31 March 1921, the Hungarian Ambassador in Vienna, Szilárd Masirevich reported to Minister of Foreign Affairs Gusztáv Gratz that he had personally negotiated with Seipel who was deeply shocked by Charles IV's decisive removal from Hungary. Certainly, the Entente powers did not allow any

attempts of restoration of the House of Habsburg in any successor states of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy, therefore, the Hungarian Government had decisively denied Charles IV to return to the throne of Hungary. Among other things, this was the moment that made Seipel realise the extent of the political and military influence of the Entente powers in the region, and that an armed change of government in Austria with the help of the *Heimwehr* militias was as unrealistic as the Habsburg restoration itself.¹¹⁸ In Austria, the attempted return of Charles IV to Hungary was followed by vivid political debates, and Federal Chancellor Mayr expressed in Parliament his firm belief that he considered the republican form of government laid down in the Treaty of Saint Germain to be obligatory on Austria, and that he would defend it by all means against any legitimist-monarchist plotting.¹¹⁹ Although Seipel came to power shortly afterwards, he himself was forced to adapt to the interests of international politics and to consolidate. Furthermore, the attempted return of Charles IV caused a domestic political crisis in Hungary as well, with the resignation of Gustáv Gratz, the Minister of Foreign Affairs who was a well-known legitimist on 4 April 1921, followed by the resignation of Prime Minister Count Pál Teleki on 8 April. Teleki was succeeded as Prime Minister by Count István Bethlen, and Gratz was replaced by Count Miklós Bánffy. Although the period of Bethlen’s policy of

¹¹⁸ G. Soós, op. cit. 35.

¹¹⁹ G. Soós, op. cit. 36.

consolidation had begun, the secret negotiations between Hungary, Bavaria and Austria on the establishment of a possible anti-communist and revisionist alliance still continued for some time. While the parties continued to agree on the main points of the earlier negotiations, relations between Austria and Hungary became even more negative, partly because of the attempted legitimist coup in Hungary. Alongside the Bavarian Kanzler, the Austrian radical right was represented at this stage of the negotiations mainly by politicians from Styria, such as the Styrian Provincial Prime Minister Anton Rintelen who later became Austria's Federal Minister of Education. During these negotiations, the leadership of the Bavarian ORKA organisation argued for the general invalidity of the Paris Peace Treaties and urged the Austrian and Hungarian sides to settle the dispute over the territorial integrity of Western Hungary within the framework of a friendly agreement.¹²⁰ However, given that Austria was then only represented in the negotiations by politicians with local influence, their position on the issue was of no importance as for international politics. Both the Austrian and German radical right-wing organisations asked for additional financial support from the Hungarian Government, and there was rivalry beginning between them. From May 1921 onwards, representatives of the Hungarian side – with the Government's knowledge and authorisation – were present at the negotiations, and Colonel Tihamér Siménfalvy asked the ORKA militia to try to involve not

¹²⁰ HU-MNL-OL-K 64-1922-20-1921/198.

only the Styrian radical right forces but all similar organisations in Austria, especially influential Viennese politicians, in the cooperation.¹²¹ During the negotiations, the question was raised whether Austria would be prepared to make concessions to Hungary on the issue of Western Hungary if the ORKA succeeded in bringing a radical right-wing government to power in Austria, to which Styrian Prime Minister Rintelen could not give a definite answer. General Josef Metzger attempted to reconcile the differences between the parties, but he failed. In May 1921, Ervin Morlin, the official of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the Hungarian Government that even Anton Rintelen himself did not seriously believe that he could replace the Mayr Government with the men of the ORKA.¹²² The activities of the Bavarian and Austrian radical right-wing organisations became more and more limited to obtaining more and more financial support from the Hungarian Government, but they did less and less political activity in their own countries that was of any use to the Hungarian Government. At the end of May 1921, Hungarian military diplomat Colonel Boldizsár Láng informed the Hungarian Government about the fragmentation and poor equipment of the Austrian Heimwehr organisations.¹²³ At the same time, Bavaria was experiencing a huge economic and social crisis, and the local

¹²¹ HU-MNL-OL-K 64-1922-20-1921/199.

¹²² HU-MNL-OL-K 64-1921-41-221.

¹²³ HU-MNL-OL-K 64-1922-20-1921/244.

government could less and less afford to pursue a foreign policy that differed from that of the Federal Government, while there was also a disunity between the various radical right-wing paramilitary organisations, and their political activities were increasingly confined to the provincial borders of Bavaria. The rise to power of the Bavarian and Austrian radical right then and there was becoming more and more the simple daydream of a few politicians who unable to accept the changes that had taken place after the end of the First World War rather than a real political possibility.

Hungary was not able to reach a compromise with the Austrian side either through the secret negotiations with the radical right which was trying to rise to power or through formal diplomatic negotiations with the legitimate Government of Austria. The dispute over the status of the region of Western Hungary which had been debated since the disintegration of the Monarchy in 1918 was not solved. Although the peace treaties of Paris eventually awarded the territory to Austria, the Hungarian Government refused to evacuate and hand over the area called Burgenland by the Austrians as long as possible. Since peaceful negotiations reached no results, by the summer of 1921, irregular military units were already being organised, with the strong but silent support of Prime Minister Bethlen himself to break in the region shortly afterwards.¹²⁴ In the autumn of 1921, the so-

¹²⁴ G. Soós, *op. cit.* 42.

called Uprising of Western Hungary¹²⁵ finally broke out, and Hungarian irregular military units, with the silent consent of the Government, marched in Western Hungary and prevented Austrian troops to occupy the region. This action finally deteriorated the otherwise tense relationship between Austria and Hungary to an unresolvable degree, both between official government circles and secretly negotiating radical right-wing movements. Apart from the international political situation itself, it was a further reason why the Hungarian–Bavarian–Austrian secret negotiations gradually became symbolic, and the political situation of Central Europe was completely determined by the Entente powers, mainly England and France by 1922.

Although Hungarian domestic policy was fully determined by British and French interests after the signing of the Peace Treaty of Trianon, secret negotiations with radical right-wing German and Austrian organisations still continued for a time in 1922, but with much less intensity than before. The Bethlen Government carefully continued to maintain moderate contacts with German radical right-wing politicians, including former Bavarian Prime Minister and later Commissioner General Gustav von Kahr, General Erich Ludendorff and Adolf Hitler, who was then an emerging young far-right politician in Munich, the centre of the German radical right-wing movements. In the spring of

¹²⁵ About the Uprising of Western Hungary see: József Botlik, *Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa, 1918–1921*, Vasszilvágy, Magyar Nyugat Könyvkiadó, 2012.; Imre Tóth, *Két Anschluss között. Nyugat-Magyarország és Burgenland Wilsontól Hitlerig*, Budapest, Kronosz Kiadó, 2020.

1922, Hungarian Prime Minister Bethlen sent the influential Hungarian background politician Miklós Kozma, then the director of the Hungarian Telegraph Office to Munich to negotiate, gather information and to revive Bavarian–Hungarian political relations, which had been declining since the end of 1921.¹²⁶ Kozma also personally negotiated with General Ludendorff, a leader of the German radical right about a possible Bavarian–Hungarian cooperation initiative, in which the Hungarian Government circles would have bought weapons from Germany, for example. The German general complained to him that his political influence had recently declined considerably within the Weimar Republic, and even within Bavaria, the centre of the radical right-wing movement, and that there was such a great disunity among Bavarian right-wing politicians that they essentially did not agree with each other on anything.¹²⁷ Bethlen, informed by Miklós Kozma and Gyula Gömbös, Chairman of Hungarian Defence Force Association (MOVE) and a prominent politician of the Hungarian radical right (who was then still a member of the governing United Party), concluded that the Hungarian Government could not hope for any useful cooperation with the Bavarians, and negotiations on such cooperation were temporarily suspended.¹²⁸ Behind the negotiations, of course, the name of the secret military organisation, the Double Cross Blood Union was involved,

¹²⁶ Mária Ormos, *Egy magyar médiavezér. Kozma Miklós*, 110–113.

¹²⁷ Ormos, op. cit. 112.

¹²⁸ Ormos, op. cit. 113.

since among others, Colonel Tihamér Siménfalvy, the head of the organisation was one of the influential figures on the Hungarian Government side who had previously encouraged the maintenance of lively relations with the Bavarian and Austrian far-right movements.¹²⁹

As we have mentioned above, from 1922 onwards, Bethlen's consolidation policy led to a decline in attempts of cooperation between the Hungarian Government and the German-Austrian far-right organisations. At the same time, the nationalist-irredentist organisations, which were increasingly opposed to the Hungarian Government, though sometimes united with it in common interests, especially the then still influential Association of Awakening Hungarians which had considerable political influence and a large number of members, and the radical circles of military officers that were also part of its leadership, continued to actively seek international cooperation with organisations on a similar ideological platform. In 1921 the Awakening Hungarians represented the Hungarian radical right in the international Anti-Semitic congress in Vienna where the idea of forming an International Anti-Semitic League was raised.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Nándori, *A Marseilles-i gyilkosság nemzetközi jogi vonatkozásai*, 24–25.

¹³⁰ Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege*, 111.

The Unofficial Continuation of the White Internationale – the ‘Hungarian Beer Hall Coup’¹³¹

As mentioned above, the first years of consolidation in Hungary realised by Prime Minister Count István Bethlen continued to be characterised by a social and economic situation that favoured political extremism. Several politicians played with the idea of attempted coups. The failed revisionist right-wing military alliance, the White Internationale was the predecessor of such an adventurous coup plan, which nevertheless attracted great political and press attention, and was put forward by Dr. Béla Szemere, a hospital director, the commander of the auxiliary police militia known as the *National Organisation of State Security Agents*, a Hungarian-born American architect Titusz Bobula, and Dr. Ferenc Ulain, a lawyer and radical right-wing member of the Parliament who had left the governing United Party and was the confidant of Gyula Gömbös, the leading politician of the Hungarian radical right movements and later Prime Minister of Hungary. Since the three gentlemen planned to overthrow the Bethlen Government by force and with the armed support of the German National Socialist movement led by Hitler and Ludendorff, wishing to carry out their plans in parallel with the Beer Hall Putsch, their coup plan may and ironically be named the ‘Hungarian Beer Hall Putsch’.

¹³¹ On the Hungarian Beer Hall Coup see the research article of the present paper: Balázs Kántás, *The Hungarian Beer Hall Putsch. The Szemere–Bobula–Ulain Coup Plan*, *Anglisticum*, 2021/6, 32–45.

The preparations for the coup begun sometime in early August 1923, when a young German man named Friedrich ‘Fritz’ Döhmel appeared in Budapest, introducing himself as the representative of the Hitler–Ludendorff-led Bavarian National Socialist movement, and approached several Hungarian far-right organisations. One of Döhmel’s first trips, whose motives were not entirely clear, led to the headquarters of the *Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete – Association of Awakening Hungarians*, which had maintained very good relations with the German nationalists. Döhmel finally reached Titusz Bobula, the Hungarian-born architect who had returned from the United States of America and who held a confused radical right-wing perspective, and his friend, Dr. Béla Szemere, a doctor and hospital director. Szemere was commander of the State Security militia, while Bobula provided financial support to the Hungarian radical right.¹³²

Döhmel finally approached Bobula who rented a suite in the Gellért Hotel at the end of October 1923, and Bobula almost immediately called Szemere to him as well. Negotiations began in German language, and Döhmel asked how many people Szemere as former commander of the State Security Agents could call into arms in the event of a takeover attempt. Szemere replied that although the State Security Agents had not previously been set up for the purpose of conspiring against the Government, there would

¹³² HU-BFL-VII-18-d-1923-03/0610. Ferenc Ulain and his associate’s trial.

certainly be some people willing to join the cause. Soon afterwards, the radical right-wing Member of Parliament Dr. Ferenc Ulain was brought into the plotting, since he himself had long been in contact with German nationalist organisations, including a close acquaintance with Hitler. On Döhmél's initiative, the parties also drew up a treaty in German on how the Bavarian State (which was to be established as an independent state leaving Germany) and the Hungarian State (which would be led by a new, radical right-wing government) could cooperate in the realisation of their irredentist and anti-Semitic goals.

Ulain had already held meetings with Hitler and Ludendorff in the summer of 1923. Bavaria, which had a high degree of autonomy within the Weimar Republic, was at this time in a very turbulent political situation with severe social discontentment that favoured radical politicians. Such forces included the NSDAP, that is, the National Socialist German Workers' Party. Political power was exercised by the former Bavarian Provincial Prime Minister Gustav von Kahr who at the time was the Extraordinary Commissioner of the German Federal Government with provisory powers and had been given a mandate to solve the political and economic problems.¹³³

Hitler and Ludendorff feared that although the power in Bavaria had been taken over by their fellow nationalist politicians, they would be ignored by them. Therefore, in early November 1923 they organised a coup

¹³³ Mária Ormos, *Hitler*, Budapest, T-Twins Kiadó, 1994, 73–86.

d'état and tried to seize power by force. The so-called Beer Hall Putsch began in the *Bürgerbräukeller*, the large beer hall in Munich where Gustav von Kahr was addressing a speech to his supporters, and where Hitler and his armed men stormed in on the evening of 8 November and declared the arrest of the politicians in power. To demonstrate the seriousness of the situation, the building was surrounded by some 600 militiamen, and Commissioner Kahr, under the threat assured Hitler and his men of his support. Hitler, a politician with outstanding oratory skills, made an incendiary speech at the same venue, and within moments he had persuaded the thousands of people gathered to stand by his side. The National Socialist militia then mounted an operation to seize Munich's government buildings, and later that night Hitler, believing they no longer needed Kahr, released the Commissioner.¹³⁴

The Nazi Party's militiamen were rioting on the streets of Munich, but the police did not stand by and support the Nazis at all. On the following morning, 9 November, Hitler and his gunmen took the Bavarian Provincial Government hostage, and at the suggestion of General Ludendorff, 2,000 armed men marched to occupy the building of the Bavarian Ministry of Defence, but at the Odeonplatz in Munich Hitler and his militiamen were confronted by the armed forces loyal to Kahr and the Federal Government, and a gunfight broke out. Sixteen coup fighters and four policemen were fatally wounded, and

¹³⁴ Ormos, op. cit. *ibid*.

Hitler fled the scene. The coup attempt failed, and Hitler was arrested in a few days.¹³⁵

Although the Bavarian Beer Hall Putsch, just like the Hungarian Beer Hall Putsch which had no serious background and was essentially devoid of armed forces, failed, both far-right political actions pointed out in the first half of the 1920s what crises and traumas were at work in the societies of the states that had lost the First World War.

As for the Hungarian plotters, Ferenc Ulain left by train on the eve of the Munich Beer Hall Putsch as planned, but never arrived in Munich, so he was unable to meet the Bavarian nationalist politicians who were preparing for the Beer Hall Putsch. Namely, at Hegyeshalom, on the Austro-Hungarian border, he was stopped by the police. It became clear to amateur political conspirators that their planning had not escaped the attention of the authorities, and archival sources make it clear that the Hungarian police had been watching the group's activities for weeks when Ulain departed to Munich. Szemere, Bobula and Ulain were eventually charged with forming an alliance to incite rebellion. The case of MP Ulain's immunity was discussed also by the Parliament's Committee of Immunity in the end of November 1923. The race-defending MPs led by Gyula Gömbös sought to excuse Ulain, emphasising their opinion that Ulain was the victim of an agent provocateur hired by the police. On 24 January 1924, the Royal Criminal Court of Budapest conceived the first-instance verdict, sentencing all

¹³⁵ Ormos, *op. cit.* *ibid.*

three defendants to 45 days in prison. The defendants were released in December 1923.¹³⁶

Although Szemere, Bobula and Ulain were eventually found innocent by the Hungarian Supreme Court, and their coup attempt with German collaboration was undoubtedly frivolous, it caused a major political scandal in 1923. Furthermore, it raises many questions up even today. The largest question mark is, of course, the identity and motives of Fritz Döhmel who approached the plotters, tricked them into planning a coup, and presumably to mislead everyone. The historical literature on the Szemere–Bobula–Ulain conspiracy is generally of the opinion that Fritz Döhmel was probably nothing more than an agent provocateur hired by the Government to use him to political discredit and isolate Gyula Gömbös's far-right race-defending faction of MPs,¹³⁷ or historians are content with the simple explanation that Döhmel was in fact an agent of Hitler, and that there was some real connection between the German and Hungarian organisations.¹³⁸ It is true that Ferenc Ulain and the race-

¹³⁶ HU-BFL-VII-18-d-1923-03/0610.

¹³⁷ Lajos Serfőző, *A titkos társaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban*, Acta Universitatis Szegediensis de Attila József Nominatae. Acta Historica, Tomus LVII, 1976, 3–60, 17–27.; Prónay, op. cit. 210.

¹³⁸ Mária Ormos, *Kozma Miklós. Egy magyar médiavezér*, 113; Ungváry, op. cit. 111.; Romsics, op. cit. 128.; *Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez 1919–1945. II. A fasiszta rendszer kiépítése Magyarországon 1921–1924*, 7–120, 110.; József Zakar, *Fajvédők az 1920-as évek Magyarországon*, in *Tanulmányok a Holokausztól V.*, ed. Randolph L. Braham, Budapest, Balassi Kiadó, 2011, 52–111, 89.

defending faction of Members of Parliament leaving the governing United Party which not much later became an independent party caused inconvenience to the Bethlen Government by disclosing several corruption cases connected to the Government. Ulain himself had interpellated in the Parliament on various corruption cases, thereby discrediting Bethlen's Government.¹³⁹ That is, Ulain had a great deal to do with the breakout of one of the most important corruption scandals of the Horthy Era. Therefore, it may have been Bethlen's interest to discredit his political opponents, but based on the historical sources it is doubtful that Döhmél was simply an agent provocateur hired by the Hungarian Government to fulfil this task.

Examining the testimony of Deputy Police Commissioner Imre Hetényi who investigated the case, the report sent to the Budapest Police Commissioner and the testimony of Detective Inspector Jenő Seibold, it turns out that Fritz Döhmél was probably in Budapest and was already seeking contacts with Hungarian far-right organisations as a representative of Hitler's Bavarian nationalist organisation before his activities came to the attention of the police. Döhmél later did indeed become an agent of the Hungarian police for a short time, as Döhmél and Hetényi made the same confession. Döhmél reported to the authorities on the activities of the conspirators, mainly in order to gain financial benefits, but initially he seems to have sought contact with them independently, without the knowledge of

¹³⁹ Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege*, 112.

the Hungarian authorities. Döhmel was possibly indeed acting as an agent of the German radical right-wing political forces, but that he had already reported also to the German authorities in August 1923 that the Bavarian radical right was preparing to enter into international cooperation with its Hungarian counterparts.¹⁴⁰

The question may be asked whether or not it is possible that a strange situation could have arisen in which the Hungarian Police and Iván Rakovszky, the Minister of the Interior would have recruited a person who was apparently a native German speaker to act as a mole for the conspirators, by the authorities conspiratorially pretended that they had only learned of his activities later, after Döhmel had already incited the Szemere–Bobula–Ulain group, which really wanted to overthrow the Government, to some degree of action. The answer is, of course, it is possible, but is hardly likely or realistic.

It is also possible that Fritz Döhmel may have secretly been hired by another Hungarian state agency, at the order of the Bethlen Governmentin, for example by the military secret service, the Department 2 of the General Staff, which was operating under secrecy at the time because of the restrictions of armament on Hungary, to discredit Ferenc Ulain and his associates, but the likelihood of this is also small. The idea sounds impossible and irrational

¹⁴⁰ PA-AA-(B)-R 30531-Bd. 1. Cited by: István Németh, *Német haditengerészeti és légügyi lépések a versailles-i békeszerződés kijátszására a weimari köztársaság (1919–1933) éveiben*, Acta Academiae Agriensis. Sectio Historiae, 2017/XLIV, 523–534.

because, if the sources are to be believed, Döhmel originally approached Szemere and Bobula who were thinking about the possibility of overthrowing the Government completely independently of Döhmel, and Ulain as an MP with some political influence and a person with links to Bavarian nationalists was involved in the conspiracy only later. That is, when Döhmel contacted Szemere and Bobula, he possibly did not know that an MP would soon become a key figure in the conspiracy. In fact, it seems that Döhmel was not the agent of the Hungarian Government, but acted independently, it is not known exactly on whose behalf, and only later did he start reporting to the Hungarian police. Certainly, it is also possible that Döhmel was really an agent of the German nationalist organisation – it is the most likely scenario –, but later he became self-employed and sold out the conspiracy and the information he possessed, primarily for financial gain.

However, the first-instance judgment of the Royal Criminal Court of Budapest also conceives interestingly, writing that Döhmel's identity is a mystery even to the Hungarian state authorities, and although it is likely that the circles behind him are to be sought abroad, they are certainly not in Bavaria, and Döhmel badly misled both the participants in the Hungarian Beer Hall Putsch and the Hungarian authorities.¹⁴¹ Abroad but not in Bavaria could also mean – although we do not have to agree with the criminal court in the absence of written evidence – that the

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

mysterious young man in question was an agent of the secret services of a foreign state who was instructed to try to sabotage the attempts of cooperation between German and Hungarian far-right organisations and to discredit them in the eyes of each other.

If we allow ourselves to speculate, we could ask the logical question of which state or states had an interest in preventing the emerging German paramilitary far-right organisations from building international links during this period. The answer is quite obvious: France, Austria, or even the Weimar Republic itself. Indeed, in the relatively recent past, in 2009, a French intelligence report was discovered in the National Archives of France and received some press coverage according to which the French intelligence service had been monitoring the emerging National Socialist leader and his circle, and which painted Hitler as a politician with the oratorical qualities and charisma similar to that of Mussolini.¹⁴² The same could also be true of the neighbouring Little Entente states which also clearly did not want Hungarian political forces to have serious foreign allies for their revisionist ambitions, so they cannot be excluded from such assumptions either.

Furthermore, there was also Austria that had newly become and independent and as one of the successor states

¹⁴² Vö. Thomas Wieder, *Genre fasciste. Dans les années 1920, Adolf Hitler était surveillé par les services français. La fiche rédigée sur le futur Führer dort dans une armoire des Archives nationales*, Le Monde, 2009. november 20. https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2009/11/19/adolf-hitler-genre-fasciste_1269349_3214.html

to the Austro–Hungarian Empire, was struggling with serious domestic political and economic problems as well. The crisis after the loss of the First World War provided an excellent breeding ground for political extremism here as well, and the Government faced the real danger that Germany would eventually annex Austria in order to restore the unity of Germany, as the National Socialist German Regime under Hitler really did it fifteen years later in 1938. National Socialist-style, pro-Anschluss movements had already made their appearance here early, and it was therefore not in the interest of the Austrian State that the Hitler–Ludendorff circle should build successful international cooperation with politicians from other nations with similar ideological platforms.¹⁴³

Finally, there was the Republic of Weimar itself there, then under the leadership of President Friedrich Ebert and Federal Chancellor Gustav Stresemann, which, as the biggest loser of the First World War, was also struggling with huge economic and social crises as the empire was transformed from a monarchy into a republic. It was precisely these crises and the growing discontent that increased the popularity of demagogic politicians such as Hitler and the National Socialists who professed and promoted extremist ideas. It is certain that the secret services of the Weimar Republic had undercover agents in radical political movements, since it is a less known fact of

¹⁴³ See: Róbert Fiziker, *Habsburg kontra Hitler. Legitimisták az anchluss ellen, az önálló Ausztriáért*, Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó, 2010.

Adolf Hitler's life that the later German dictator himself initially came into contact with National Socialism after the defeat of the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919 as an officer of the German Army's intelligence and propaganda unit in Bavaria. Hitler's task was to gather information on organisations and individuals propagating political extremism and to carry out vigorous anti-communist propaganda. One such radical organisation monitored by German military intelligence was the then insignificant DAP, the German Workers' Party, which Hitler managed to infiltrate so well that he soon became its leader and, within a few years, had organised it into a nationwide political movement under the name NSDAP, the National Socialist German Workers' Party. The predominantly liberal and social-democratic Government of the Weimar Republic thus understandably had no interest that the National Socialist movement should build up significant international relations and fought against political extremism within Germany in much the same way as the consolidationist Bethlen Government did in the Hungarian context. There are also indications that Döhmle was in contact with the German state security services as early as August 1923, and that he reported to them that Bavarian and Hungarian far-right organisations were trying to re-establish contact and revive the cooperation that had been initiated earlier.¹⁴⁴ It also seems certain that Döhmle was indeed originally in

¹⁴⁴ PA AA (B)-R 30531-Bd. 1. Cited by: István Németh, *A Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország, I. rész*, 80.

contact with Hitler and his circle, as a Hungarian detective had followed him to Bavaria on behalf of Deputy Police Commissioner Imre Hetényi and checked if Döhmél had really in connection with the National Socialists. Although Hungarian historian István Németh has also published some German diplomatic documents in his extensive source publication on German–Hungarian relations in connection with the Ulain case as well, primarily from the correspondence between the Hungarian and German law enforcement and diplomatic services, these do not, of course, reveal the true identity of the German key figure in the conspiracy, Fritz Döhmél. All that is known is that in November 1923, Deputy Police Commissioner Hetényi informed the German Embassy in Budapest that Döhmél had been under surveillance by the Hungarian police for some time and that dozens of young German men were in Budapest to initiate a cooperation agreement between the Hungarian and German far-right organisations.¹⁴⁵ The scarce German sources of the case reveal that Döhmél's motives were not known to German authorities, and mention that Gerhard Köpke, an official of the German Foreign Ministry wrote to the Imperial Commissioner for the Supervision of Public Order and asked information of him about the case. A few days later, the Foreign Ministry sent a summary of the case to the representative of the

¹⁴⁵ PA-AA-(B)-R-30531-Bd. 1. István Németh, *Magyarok és németek*, 384; *A Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország. Német diplomáciai iratok Magyarországról (1918–1934). I. kötet. Az 1920-as évek*, 346.

German Federal Government in Munich, requesting further information, in particular on the links between Hungarian and German radical right-wing organisations. However, the German Imperial Commissioner for the Supervision Public Order, who was practically the head of the German federal political police service interestingly confused the issue even further by not providing the Foreign Ministry with any relevant information, and in his reply expressed the opinion that Fritz Döhmel had really no connection with the National Socialists, and, referring to a rather unreliable press source, the issue of the daily newspaper titled *Germania* of 25 November 1923, claimed that he was in fact a communist.¹⁴⁶ Although this is all in the realm of conjecture, it cannot be excluded that Fritz Döhmel, among his other motives and activities, possibly in conjunction with his earlier actual National Socialist involvement, was an agent of the German secret services whose aim was to disrupt the activities of the National Socialists, especially their international relations, and that the German political police and secret services were therefore not interested in exposing his true identity.

Although Hitler issued a press statement in the Hungarian radical right-wing newspaper called *Szózat* (*Voice* or *Speech*) in which he denied that Döhmel was his or his party's agent, and it was also stressed by National Socialist politicians Alfred Rosenberg and Anton Drexler, this proves

¹⁴⁶ István Németh, *Magyarok és németek (1914–1934)*, 385.

nothing.¹⁴⁷ Hitler had just been arrested for a coup attempt, and he did not want to add to his difficult situation by admitting that he would have wanted to carry out the Bavarian Beer Hall Putsch with some international involvement, or that he would have interfered in the internal affairs of another country. That is, Döhmél may well have been in contact with the Hitler–Ludendorff circle in some way, as his knowledge of the Bavarian domestic political situation and his ability to convince Ferenc Ulain who was indeed in contact with Hitler would suggest. Döhmél’s unusually high level of education and diplomatic skills may also be indicated by the fact that he put his somewhat absurd but nevertheless professional draft treaty about the Bavarian–Hungarian political cooperation on paper without drafting.

While it is also possible that Döhmél was a simple swindler driven purely by the desire of financial gain, his high-level disinformation activities may suggest an international game of secret services in the background. Of course, Döhmél’s true identity will possibly never be completely known, even after a hundred years, so we can only rely on what seems to be logical theories. Whatever the truth about the Hungarian Beer Hall Putsch is, it is certain that, like the much more serious Bavarian Beer Hall Putsch, it failed at the very beginning. The White Internationale

¹⁴⁷ [Anonymous author], *Hitler nyilatkozata az Ulain-ügyben. Sohasem akart beleavatkozni a magyar ügyekbe Döhmél, köpenicki diplomata*, Szózat, 23 December 1923, 7.

between the radical right-wing forces under General Ludendorff's leadership did not come into being, and just as the German Federal Government succeeded in marginalising the radical right for a time, so by the end of 1923 the Bethlen Government succeeded in isolating the radical right in Parliament and in marginalising to some extent their political activities which were dangerous to consolidation.

EXPLODING PATRIOTISM? QUASI-STATE PARAMILITARY FORMATIONS OF THE DEEP STATE OF AND THE WAVE OF TERRORISM IN HUNGARY IN THE FIRST YEARS OF THE HORTHY-ERA, 1922–1924

Introduction

After World War One, paramilitarism and paramilitary violence,¹⁴⁸ mainly committed by demobilised or still active soldiers was a nearly natural phenomenon in Hungary, just like in many other countries of Central Europe – mainly in states that were on the losing side.¹⁴⁹ Paramilitarism and paramilitary activities are generally defined by researchers 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 and government, in others, it was the state/government itself that used paramilitary units to keep its powers; and in other

¹⁴⁸ On paramilitarism from the recent literature see: Üngör, *Uğur Ümit, Paramilitarism. Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁴⁹ Gerwarth, Robert, 'Harc a Vörös Szörnyeteggel. Ellenforradalmi erőszak Közép-Európa vereséget szenvedett államaiban', in Robert Gerwarth, and John Horne, eds, *Háború béke idején. Paramilitáris erőszak Európában az első világháború után*, (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2017), 71–92.

cases, paramilitary formations acted against the existing state with the intention to violently overthrow the government.¹⁵⁰ 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 Hungary, the short-lived communist dictatorship and wave of paramilitary violence called the Red Terror, the new, strongly right-wing, authoritarian conservative 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 that were 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 Monarchy), but they often operated independently, without real state control. 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, Major Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek or Colonel Tihamér Siménfalvy is called the Hungarian White Terror.¹⁵¹ Far-right irregular soldiers exploiting the weakness of the state committed serious

¹⁵⁰ Gerwarth, Robert, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923*, (Farrar: Straus and Girou, 2016).

¹⁵¹ Bodó, Béla, *The White Terror. Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921*, (London: Routledge, 2019).

crimes like robbery, plunder and murders, frequently by anti-Semitic and in parallel 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 in order to restore the disintegrated social order. Paradoxically, police-type militias, formally in the service of the state, practically operated more and more like criminal organisations.¹⁵² The Government led by Prime Minister Count István Bethlen ceased the White Terror in 1921, and disbanded/regularized different paramilitary formations. The authoritarian conservative Hungarian Government really did its best to tranquilize the radical right-wing forces and create social and political peace at last, after the years of war and the subsequent civil war.¹⁵³

Although paramilitary violence ceased, and irregular troops were formally disbanded, the radical right-wing Hungarian militia movement consisting of World War I veterans, active and demobilised soldiers lived on the form of secret paramilitary organisations. The main representatives of Hungarian paramilitarism were basically three organisations which are otherwise internationally not very well-known. The first of them is the *Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete (ÉME)* – *Association of Awakening Hungarians*,¹⁵⁴ the

¹⁵² See: Bodó, Béla, 'Militia Violence and State Power in Hungary, 1919–1922', *Hungarian Studies Review*, 25/1–2 (2006), 121–156.

¹⁵³ Bodó, 'Militia Violence and State Power in Hungary'.

¹⁵⁴ On the history of the Association of Awakening Hungarian and its political activity see: Zinner, Tibor, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923*, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989).

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 their 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 Vérszövetség (KKVSz) – Double Cross Blood Union* that was a state-established, clandestine irregular military organisation coordinating Hungarian anti-communist and irredentist troops which consisted of radical right-wing soldiers and veterans. The three organisations were closely interlinked. After signing of the Peace Treaty of Trianon in 1920, thousands of armed people were kept in secret military status, waiting for deployment, however, the state was not always able to control their operations. The Government used these *Freikorps*-like¹⁵⁵ 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

¹⁵⁵ On the German *Freikorps* militias see: Jones, Nigel H., *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: Bodó, Béla, 'The Rise and Fall of Paramilitary Violence in Hungary', 1919–1922, *East European Quarterly*, 38/3, (2004).

hand, the countries of the losing side of World War I were subject to serious limitations of armament. They operated in the same way as the German ‘Schwarze Reichswehr’ (‘Black Army’).¹⁵⁶ 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.¹⁵⁷

Secret irregular military formations related to the ÉME, MOVE and KKV Sz started becoming concerned in terrorist actions like the luckily prevented bomb outrage plan in Jászkarajenő in 1922, the bomb outrage of Erzsébetváros (8 killed) on 2 April 1922, or the bomb outrage of Csongrád (3 killed) on 24 December 1923. All the three terrorist incidents were committed by the militiamen of the ÉME who were also irregular soldiers of the Double Cross Blood Union, and paramilitary commanders First

¹⁵⁶ See: Nakata, Jun, *Der Grenz- und Landesschutz in der Weimarer Republik 1918–1933. Die geheime Aufrüstung und die deutsche Gesellschaft*, (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach Verlag, 2002).

¹⁵⁷ See Kántás, Balázs, *Milicisták, puccsisták, terrorfiúk* (Budapest: Művészeti és Irodalmi Jelen Kft., Budapest, 2021).

Lieutenant Iván Héjjas¹⁵⁸ and Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay,¹⁵⁹ at the same time emerging, ambitious far-right politicians of the era arose in each cases as possible instigators, together with Captain Gyula Gömbös (president of the Hungarian National Defence Force Association, later Minister of Defence and Prime Minister) in this period, the leader of the oppositional Party of Hungarian National Independence (popularly called race-defenders), the influential politician who was still close to the Government and had a very good relationship with Regent Governor Miklós Horthy.¹⁶⁰ The reconstruction of the above mentioned, less known terrorist deeds offers a micro-historical lens to investigate broader issues, to define or redefine the controversial relationship of Hungarian militias and the (newly created) Hungarian State in the 1920s. It is an interesting turn in Hungarian military and political history that while between 1919 and 1921 'terror', i.e. violence used by the state, or at least tolerated by it, was the main form of political violence in Hungary, after 1921-1922 'terror' gradually turned into terrorism, i.e. a wave of political violence began, the indirect target of which was the

¹⁵⁸ On the career of Iván Héjjas see: Bodó, Béla, 'Iván Héjjas. The Life of a Counterrevolutionary', *East Central Europe*, 35/2–3 (2010), 247–279.; Kántás, Balázs, *Héjjas Iván* (Budapest: Hungarovox Kiadó, 2022).

¹⁵⁹ On the career of Pál Prónay see: Bodó, Béla, *Pál Prónay. Palamilitary Violence and and Anti-Semitism in Hungary, 1919–1921*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2011).

¹⁶⁰ Bodó, Pál Prónay. *Palamilitary Violence and and Anti-Semitism in Hungary, 1919–1921*.

state/political establishment itself. The history of the radical right-wing, quasi-state militias and irregular military formations in Hungary between 1919 and 1925 thus illustrates perfectly how state, or at least quasi-state, political violence gradually turned into political violence against the state itself, with the perpetrators being essentially linked to the same political and military formations. To put it simply, the consolidating government of the Horthy Era was fighting a power struggle beneath the surface with its own increasingly uncomfortable and dangerous deep state.

The anti-Semitic assassination plan in Jászkarajenő¹⁶¹

One of the instances of radical right-wing terrorism that spread in Hungary for a short time – uncovered in the preparatory stage – was the 1922 hand-grenade assassination plan in Jászkarajenő. István Keő-Kucsera, a farmer, innkeeper and paramilitary commander from Jászkarajenő, was the leader of the local sub-organisation of the Association of Awakening Hungarians and a well-known local activist of the radical right in the Pest County village, began to complain in February 1922 that another catering establishment in the village which happened to be owned by a Jewish person was generating more turnover than his pub. He decided to “teach the Jews a lesson”, to intimidate them

¹⁶¹ On the Jászkarajenő bomb attack see in detail: Kántás, Balázs, 'Consolidation with Grenades, that is, the Assassination Attempt in Jászkarajenő, 1922: 'A Chapter of Political Terrorism in Hungary', *Anglisticum*, 9/10 (2021), 26–36.

in some way, and in any case to carry out some unspecified act of violence.¹⁶²

As the leader of the Jászkarajenő sub-organisation of the Awakening, Keő-Kucsera was a regular guest at the headquarters of the Awakening Hungarians at 3 Sörház Street in the downtown of Budapest, and in connection with this he also visited the pub at the bottom of the building. It was here in February 1922, that he met his friend Mihály Gyalay, a radical right-wing journalist and editor of the political newspaper of the Awakening movement called *Hazánk* (*Our Homeland*), and complained to him that, in his opinion, the Jews of Jászkarajenő were plotting against the local Awakening activists. That is, the local Jewish restaurant owner was spoiling his business – and Keő-Kucsera suggested that this should be tackled. The journalist agreed with his friend and Awakening brother, and the more wine the two men drank, the louder they became about their aversion to the Jews. Gyalay, in a wine-induced state, suggested that grenades should be thrown at the houses of certain Jewish people in Jászkarajenő.¹⁶³ The anti-Semitic rhetoric and the unfolding assassination plot caught the attention of a 21-year-old young man at the next table, József Kovács, a demobilised soldier who was in need of money, and of course, was also a member of the Awakening.

¹⁶² City Archives of Budapest, HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924. István Keő-Kucsera and his associates' trial.

¹⁶³ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

He sat down beside the two men who were drunkenly hatching anti-Semitic plans.¹⁶⁴

The radical gentlemen were now drinking wine in a threesome, and their determination to carry out the assassination seemed to be becoming clearer and clearer. József Kovács volunteered to carry out the assassination on behalf of Keő-Kucsera for a fee, and Keő-Kucsera accepted the offer. They agreed that Kovács would soon travel from Budapest to Jászkarajenő in order to inspect the specific house on which he would have to throw grenades. At the same time, Mihály Gyalay took it upon himself to acquire the grenades.¹⁶⁵

A few days later József Kovács visited Mihály Gyalay at the Awakening headquarters, and asked him for the promised grenades. At Kovács's urging, Gyalay immediately went to the office of Géza Adorján, a student engineer and leading officer of the Awakening. Géza Adorján was an influential figure of the far-right movements of the time, involved in a number of political assassinations. He held a leading position in the paramilitary wing of the association, had close ties with the commanders of the notorious detachments of the army, including First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay, who were at the time one of the vice-presidents of the Awakening and also heads of the National Defence Department, changing each

¹⁶⁴ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

¹⁶⁵ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

other.¹⁶⁶ Adorján handed two grenades to the journalist.¹⁶⁷ Gyalay then gave the grenades to Kovács to execute the assassination.¹⁶⁸

Here events took a surprising turn, as József Kovács seemed to have lost his courage with two grenades in his briefcase, and a few hundred metres from the Awakening headquarters, he turned to a police officer, and told him that he had found grenades on a train, and that he thought they were dangerous and wanted to hand them over to the police.¹⁶⁹ However, the policeman became suspicious of the young man's story and brought Kovács to the police station of District 4 where he was interrogated. The grenades were seized by the police and handed over to the military body responsible for collecting military equipment left over from the World War. The military experts established that the grenades were functional, dangerous and unreliable, and destroyed them within a short time, drawing up a detailed report about their annihilation.¹⁷⁰

At first, Kovács tried to maintain his earlier story that he had found the two grenades in the train during his journey, but later he broke down and confessed everything to the police, who soon opened an investigation for a conspiracy to commit murder. Keő-Kucsera, Gyalay and

¹⁶⁶ Serfőző, Lajos, 'A titkos társaságok és a róluk folytatott parlamenti viták 1922–1924-ben', *Párttörténeti Közlemények* 22/3 (1976), 69–113, 75.

¹⁶⁷ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

¹⁶⁸ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

¹⁶⁹ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

¹⁷⁰ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

Adorján were soon arrested in March 1922, and based on the detailed testimonies of Kovács who had been broken, had renounced the assassination attempt and had cooperated with the authorities to a great extent, they were soon suspected of forming an alliance to prepare the assassination.¹⁷¹

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

After the indictment, the Royal Criminal Court of Budapest finally heard the case of the Jászkarajenő bombing plot between 11 and 18 June 1924. The accused had been at liberty for some time, having spent only a few months, mostly between April and June 1922, in pre-trial detention.¹⁷² During the trial, the defence tried to confuse the court, citing trumped-up charges and patriotic reasons, but could use only inconsistent arguments against the confession of the accused József Kovács and Captain Pál Reinhardt, Chief Artillery Foreman, according to which the German-made grenades were clearly functional and dangerous devices, capable of killing human life. The Criminal Court of Budapest finally accepted as true and credible the repentant and detailed confession of József Kovács and the opinion of military expert Pál Reinhardt. In its judgment of 18 June 1924, the court found István Keő-

¹⁷¹ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

¹⁷² HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

Kucsera István first, Mihály Gyalay second and József Kovács third guilty of the crime of conspiracy to commit murder, and finally sentenced Keő-Kucsera to four months of imprisonment, Gyalay to three months of imprisonment and József Kovács to two months of imprisonment. However, the court acquitted Géza Adorján, the fourth defendant of the charge of conspiracy to commit murder, since it was not clearly established that he had been aware of the fact that Mihály Gyalay had asked him for the hand grenades in order to carry out an anti-Semitic motivated assassination.¹⁷³

Finally, it may be seen as a symbolic gesture of justice that the Royal Hungarian Supreme Court also ruled that the far-right militiamen István Keő-Kucsera, Mihály Gyalay and József Kovács were guilty of the crime of conspiracy to commit murder, and it was only by luck that József Kovács changed his mind before it was too late and disclosed the preparations to the authorities in detail. In spite of this, the terrorists were not punished in any meaningful way, and the prison sentence of a few months imposed on the three defendants part of which the court of first instance took to be completed by pre-trial detention cannot be regarded serious punishment compared to the act of preparing for murder. There is no clear evidence or written source of this kind, but based on the very similar outcomes of similar criminal cases in the 1920s, we may perhaps allow ourselves some generalisations and draw some conclusions based on

¹⁷³ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

the network of contacts of the accused. Especially it is the socially highly mobile Géza Adorján and his acquaintance with paramilitary commanders Prónay and Héjjas that makes it possible to draw the conclusion that influential political and military circles may have been involved in the case of the terrorists of Jászkarajenő, and they managed to ensure that the men with radical right-wing affiliations preparing for a serious crime received the minimum possible punishment, although it was legally proven that they had conspired to carry out murders.¹⁷⁴

The bomb attack in Erzsébetváros, Budapest¹⁷⁵

The struggle of the parliamentary elections 1922 was disrupted by a series of events that also provided the State with another opportunity to take stronger actions against political extremism. In the spring of 1922, the members of the National Defence Department of the Association of Awakening Hungarians of District 9 of Budapest – despite the measures to disarm various militias in several stages, the Awakening Hungarians were still operating such armed units without any real state control – decided to commit a bomb attack against the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros, a liberal political and social organisation at 76 Dohány Street, presided by opposition liberal MP Vilmos Vázsonyi, thereby

¹⁷⁴ Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923*, 159–160.

¹⁷⁵ On the bomb attack in Erzsébetváros see in detail: Kántás, Balázs, 'The Bomb Outrage in Erzsébetváros: An Action of Political Terrorism in Hungary', 1922, *Anglisticum*, 9/9 (2021), 71–79.

killing several people they considered the enemies of the nation. The assassination and the subsequent trial of the 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.¹⁷⁶

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

The investigation was led by Dr. József Sombor-Schweinitzer, the prominent leader of the political police of the era, and the Criminal Court of Budapest accused the young militiamen on the basis of documents seized from the Awakening that they ‘had deviated from the national defence objectives, prepared anti-social attacks, and sought to make it impossible for citizens of the Israelite religion to remain in Hungary by so-called Jewish beatings and bomb raids.’¹⁷⁷ 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

¹⁷⁶ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923. József Márffy and his associates’ trial.

¹⁷⁷ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923.

death sentence in the event of disobedience. Márffy used intimidation and death threats to persuade his accomplices to help organise and carry out the assassinations.

The political gravity of the case is highlighted by the fact that Minister of Defense General Count Károly Csáky and Prime Minister Count István Bethlen themselves were called as witnesses. The complex and controversial relation of the State and the militias was well explained by Minister Csáky's testimony,¹⁷⁸ in which he publicly told that after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary and during the civil war in 1919–1920, Hungary had no regular army, and in addition to the semi-irregular National Army organised by Admiral Miklós Horthy (from March 1920 Head of State as Regent Governor of Hungary), there were about fifty militias in Budapest as well. Among these were the troops of the Awakening Hungarians. In this chaotic situation, the consolidating new Hungarian Government needed the paramilitary units to maintain order, and in 1919–1920 Chief of the General Staff Béla Berzeviczy brought the militias under the control of the Army. This led to the formation of the Double Cross Blood Union as an umbrella organisation for the irregular military formations under the control of the military. The Minister also stressed that although the militias were under military control, the army had no influence on personnel matters, including the composition of the national defence militias of the Awakening Hungarians, and the members were not seriously trained or armed by the regular

¹⁷⁸ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923 p. 457–469.

military, but they were treated as reserve military forces which could be deployed if necessary to restore the fragile order.¹⁷⁹ Although the militias were not under strict state control, they operated as quasi-state armed organisations. However, according to the Minister's interpretation, these units had no real authority in the legal sense, but they had arbitrarily authorised themselves to do act as police-like forces, and the members of the various troops were only actually called in one occasion, on 23 October 1921, during King Charles of Habsburg IV's second attempt to return, and the men were mobilised, given weapons and salary for only that period. After that, the Government no longer needed irregular military units. By 1922, a new communist takeover was not a real threat, so paramilitary units consisting of radical right-wing young men became superfluous for the Horthy–Bethlen Government which was seeking to normalise Hungary's relations with foreign countries after signing the Peace Treaty of Trianon. It was because some of its members had committed crimes that the Government had to disband the Double Cross Blood Union in 1923. At the time of the bomb attack of Erzsébetváros, the members of the National Defence Department of the Awakening Hungarians were operating as a self-proclaimed civilian militia without any state control or instruction.

¹⁷⁹ Zinner, Tibor, 'Adatok a szélsőjobboldali egyesületek megalakulásának körülményeihez', *Történelmi Szemle* 22/3–4 (1979), 562–576, 567.

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.¹⁸⁰ Namely, József Márffy, in order to show off his own influence, had claimed to his militiamen that he was on good personal terms with the Prime Minister, he had played tennis with Bethlen's sons and that he had often travelled in the PM's car. Bethlen, on the other hand, categorically denied that he or any of his family members knew Márffy.

The Márffy trial was necessitated by foreign pressure for the Hungarian State to demonstrate to the Entente, especially to France that revolutionary and civil war years following the Great War were over.¹⁸¹ The Government wanted to prove that political and social order had been restored, Hungary accepted the territorial losses imposed by the Trianon Treaty, and that the process of consolidation had finally begun. Nevertheless, it cannot be claimed that the bomb outrage against the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros was not organised or carried out by József Márffy and the militiamen of the Awakening Hungarians, as there was a lot of convincing evidence in this case, as the record of the trial in the first instance testifies. However, it seems highly probable that other crimes attributed to them were arbitrarily linked to them for political purposes, and the prosecution and the courts also linked these crimes to the bomb attack perpetrated by Márffy's group under political

¹⁸⁰ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923.

¹⁸¹ Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923*, 172.

pressure. Although Márffy was sentenced to death in the first instance, neither he nor his fellow prisoners who were also sentenced to death were ever executed. The trial continued at the Royal Court of Appeal in Budapest and at the Royal Hungarian Curia, and ended with much lighter sentences.

József Márffy served most of his prison sentence in the prison of Vác.¹⁸² He was released on parole in 1929 after being diagnosed with lung disease. He then settled in Kőszeg where he had family ties. At first he worked as the local party secretary of the governing United Party and later, in the 1930s he became the local leader of the Hungarian national socialist, pro-German Arrow Cross Party. At the end of the Second World War, he participated in anti-Semitic atrocities as member of the Arrow Cross militia. After the war he was interned for a short time, but was not accused. Finally, he deceased in 1971, in Kőszeg at the age of 73 as a pensioner.¹⁸³

The bomb attack in Csongrád¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² HU-BFL-VII-101-c–fegyenc-I–8184. József Márffy's prison record.

¹⁸³ [Anonymous author], *Halálozás*, Vas Népe, 1971. 08. 23. Furthermore, the death records in custody of the Vas County Archive of the National Archives of Hungary verify that the man called József Márffy who deceased in 1971 is the same person involved in the bomb trial.

¹⁸⁴ On the bomb attack of Csongrád see in detail: Kántás, Balázs, 'The Bomb Attack in Csongrád: A Case Study of Radical Right-Wing Paramilitarism and Political Terrorism in Hungary in the 1920s', *Anglisticum*, 9/10 (2021), 31–39.

In addition to the bomb attack in Erzsébetváros, the bomb outrage Csongrád a little later was another highly publicised terrorist act committed by far-right militiamen, under the leadership of First Lieutenant János Piroška, a professional army officer. On 26 December 1923, the terrorists threw an explosive device into the ballroom of the Hotel Hungarian King in Csongrád at a charity event organised by the local Jewish Women' Association, killing three people and seriously injuring twenty-five others. Other people involved in the attack were First Lieutenant János Piroška's brothers István and György, and certain local farmers János Sági and János Kővári. Piroška himself had made the explosive device and had brought it from Budapest.¹⁸⁵

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

¹⁸⁵ Serfőző, Lajos, 'A titkos társaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban', *Acta Universitatis Szegediensis de Attila József Nominatae. Acta Historica*, LVII (1976), 3–60.

it into the ballroom. The bomb exploded immediately, killing three people.

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

The increasingly high-profile investigation also involved Dr. János Diószeghy, the head of the Public Security Department of the Ministry of the Interior,¹⁸⁶ and it was revealed that the suspects were members of the *Alföldi Brigád* – *Brigade of the Hungarian Plain*, a secret irregular military unit commanded by Iván Héjjas, part of the Double Cross Blood Union.¹⁸⁷ In the course of the investigation, János Sági was also found to have a document from Iván Héjjas appointing him the local commander of his militia's battalion in Csongrád.¹⁸⁸ Héjjas was also there behind the assassination, the Double Cross Blood Union was deeply involved in the case, and the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain

¹⁸⁶ The position was very similar to the National Commissioner of the Police, it was a type of State Secretary of Law Enforcement.

¹⁸⁷ Csongrád County Archive of the National Archives of Hungary, HU-MNL-CSML-IV-401-a-24/1923.

¹⁸⁸ Serfőző, 'A titkos társaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban', 97.

was one of the secret reserve units of the Hungarian Army, the goal of which was of course to circumvent the limitations of armament.

Minister of Defence General Károly Csáky, to save the honour of the Army, achieved by creating confusion that Frist Lieutenant Piroška should not be officially considered a professional soldier. The military authorities argued that he had previously been the subject of ethics proceedings for private reasons and had been forced to retire from military service. There were various versions of where Piroška ended up working as a drawing teacher, but he was eventually tried together with his accomplices in a civil court. The case was finally heard by the Royal Court of Szolnok, where one of the defence councils was Dr. Ferenc Ulain, friend of Iván Héjjas and Gyula Gömbös, one of the leaders of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, and a race-defending member of the parliament.¹⁸⁹

The trial of the bomb case took place between 17 and 26 September 1924. The defendants spent little time in prison, as they were released on high bail before the trial. Lawyers Dr. Ulain and Dr. Széchényi argued the patriotic merits of the defendants, in particular János Piroška in the establishment of the right-wing, counter-revolutionary regime, stating that it was him who, as a member of the paramilitary formation of Iván Héjjas reorganised the gendarmerie from volunteers in Csongrád after the fall of

¹⁸⁹ Nemzetgyűlési Napló 1922–1926/XVIII., 344–345. Cited by Serfőző: 'A titkos társaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban', 100.

the Soviet Republic of Hungary in 1919, and as the local commander of this auxiliary police unit he had made major contribution to the restoration of state and social order. In his defence speech, dr. Széchenyi went so far as to say that prominent members of the local Jewish community harboured grievances against Piroska who had expelled them from the volunteer gendarmerie because of their indiscipline, drinking and gambling. The defence lawyer also expressed his opinion that Piroska and his militiamen were not anti-Semites, and that the Jewish–Christian conflict was fuelled by the representatives of the Jewish community in Csongrád who had also tried to influence the investigation in order to shift suspicion to local Christian nationalists.

The defendants claimed that they had been beaten by the police during the investigation, and this was the only reason why they had confessed earlier. The Court of Szolnok found the witnesses mostly untrustworthy, the investigation insufficiently thorough, the evidence insufficiently conclusive, and tended to the conclusion that the defendants may have been tortured.¹⁹⁰ Consequently, on 26 September 1924 the court acquitted the accused of all charges. It is likely that influential military and political circles intervened to help the defendants, and the acquittal in this case was not a coincidence.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ [Anonymous Author], *Egy felmentő és egy marasztaló ítélet*, Világ, 28 September 1924.

¹⁹¹ Shvoy, Kálmán, *Shvoy Kálmán titkos naplója és emlékirata 1920–1945*, Perneki, Mihály, ed (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1983), 97.

The mastermind behind of the bomb attack of Csongrád, János Piroska, who was a drawing teacher and painter by his civilian profession, then started a political career.¹⁹² He graduated in law in 1930, became the chief notary and then mayor of Csongrád in 1933, and during his tenure large-scale construction projects started in the town. In 1945, after the Second World War he was tried in the People's Tribunal for war crimes, but was acquitted of all charges.¹⁹³ Even so, all his family's property and estates were confiscated, and they were kept under constant police surveillance. In 1952 Piroska was also briefly interned in the forced labour camp at the Great Hungarian Plain, Hortobágy.¹⁹⁴ In 1956, he took part in the revolution against the occupying Soviet Union, and after the fall of the revolution and war for freedom he was briefly arrested again. Then he retired from public life and deceased in 1987 at the age of 92. János Piroska lived a very controversial life, and during his political career, he indeed did a great deal for the development of his hometown, where today the main square is named after him.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Erdélyi, Péter, 'Képviselőtestületi választások 1929-ben Csongrádon', in *Múzeumi Kutatások Csongrád Megyében 2003*, Péter Erdélyi, and Judit Szűcs, eds., (Szeged, Móra Ferenc Múzeum, 2002), 119–125.

¹⁹³ HU-MNL-CSML-XXV-8-5-d-NB-148/1945.

¹⁹⁴ Gulyás, Martin, 'Az 1945-ös csongrádi földosztás vesztesei', *Emlékeztető*, 1/1–2 (2016) 52–68.

¹⁹⁵ Tóth, Attila, *Piroska János élete és festészete*, (Csongrád: Private Edition, 2009).

The demobilisation and pacification of Hungarian right-wing militias, transforming 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 in Csongrád in 1923, which caused a great outcry, 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, and if his responsibility was to be found, he would be treated in the same way as anyone else.¹⁹⁶ Héjjas was interrogated by the police in connection with the Csongrád bomb explosion and the conspiracies of far-right, quasi-state 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 involved in criminal activities.¹⁹⁷ Probably it was nothing more than a bargain between the paramilitary commander and the Government, and possibly Regent Governor Miklós Horthy himself.¹⁹⁸ Besides Horthy, Gyula Gömbös, who later returned to the governing party and in 1928 became Minister of Defence and in 1932 Prime Minister, must have played a major role in the fact that Iván Héjjas was not brought to trial during the Horthy Era, and was not seriously prosecuted for the acts committed by him and others under

¹⁹⁶ Serfőző, 'A titkos társaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban', 36.

¹⁹⁷ Serfőző, 'A titkos társaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban', 36.

¹⁹⁸ Bódó, *Pál Prónay. Paramilitary Violence and Anti-Semitism in Hungary, 1919–1921*.

his command, even though his crimes were obvious to many.¹⁹⁹ The example of Iván Héjjas tells us a lot about the relationship between radical nationalist paramilitary units and the Hungarian Government. These troops were not only operating as state, or at least quasi-state organisations in the 1920s, but if their members were involved in crime and terrorism, they were even defended by leading military and political circles. As the personal example of Iván Héjjas shows, not only did the former paramilitary commander not have to answer for his actions, but he later received Vitéz's title,²⁰⁰ a kind of specific Hungarian knighthood that entailed several social advantages, earned a doctorate in law for his book on aviation law, was promoted to honorary professor of the Budapest Science University, became a member of parliament and was later promoted a well-paid and respected official of the Hungarian State. He owed his political rise to Gömbös, who became Prime Minister of Hungary.

Of all the paramilitary commanders who shared a common past and common crimes, and once possessed 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 of the brutal activities of his detachment, his arbitrary

¹⁹⁹ Bódó, Pál Prónay. *Paramilitary Violence and Anti-Semitism in Hungary, 1919–1921*.

²⁰⁰ Bódó, Pál Prónay. *Paramilitary Violence and Anti-Semitism in Hungary, 1919–1921*.

assassinations and adventurer-like political actions he became increasingly burdensome for the Bethlen Government,²⁰¹ and he was forced to retire, become sidelined, and was also expelled from the *Etelközi Szövetség – Union of Etelköz*, the pro-government political secret society of the era.²⁰²

In the spirit of consolidation, the paramilitary formations, such as the Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain and armed units of the Association of Awakening Hungarians were then disarmed or regularised, and their law enforcement and military powers which could be traced back to the civil war, were definitely abolished. However, at the same time, a paramilitary organisation, the Office of National Labour Protection was set up, formally under the control of the Ministry of the Interior, primarily to break strikes and labour movement organisation. It was a type of white, right-wing workers' militia whose members were equipped with handguns and had the same powers of action and use of weapons as those of the police. Officially, it was a voluntary, part-time auxiliary police force, but under secrecy it was under dual control, and the Ministry of Defence controlled it as secret reserve force of the Army

²⁰¹ Konok, Péter, 'Az erőszak kérdései 1919–1920-ban. Vörösteror–fehérterror', *Múltunk*, 22/3 (2010), 72–91, 84.

²⁰² Prónay, Pál, *A határban a halál kaszája. Fejezetek Prónay Pál naplójából*, Ervin Pamlényi, and Ágnes Szabó, eds (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1963), 322–324.

under limitations of armament.²⁰³ The Brigade of the Hungarian Plain and the national defence militias of the Awakening Hungarians were integrated into this organisation, so they were under much tighter government control, but could essentially continue to operate.²⁰⁴ The Double Cross Blood Union, the influential secret military organisation also continued its activities within the framework of the National Labour Protection, within which there was a secret, elite special operations military unit called *Főtartalék – Main Reserve*, which was used up, among others, for sabotage and terrorist actions, i. e. special military operations in the neighbouring Little Entente countries.²⁰⁵ The former quasi-state paramilitary organisations which had rooted in civil war times were like this 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 record about the

²⁰³ Central Archive of the National Archives of Hungary, 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.

²⁰⁴ Dósa, Rudolfné, *A MOVE. Egy jellegzetesen magyar fasiszta szervezet* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1972), 151–152.

²⁰⁵ Hetés, Tibor, and Tamásné Morva, eds, *Csak szolgálati használatra! Iratok a Horthy-hadsereg történetéhez, 1919–1938* (Budapest: Zrínyi Katonai Könyv- és Lapkiadó, 1968), 499–500.

transformation of the DCBU into the National Labour Protection: a confidential circular from the Ministry of the Interior from 1926 which forbids the members of the NLP to refer to the strike-breaking auxiliary police force as the 'Double Cross Blood Union' even among themselves, as it is associated with rather bad memories.²⁰⁶ The National Labour Protection was a de facto covert military reserve force. Although it had no significant combat value, its tens of thousands of members who were otherwise civilians in their daily occupations, but who possessed 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 Treaty of Trianon. In this way, it also helped to pacify the former 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 voluntary auxiliary police and reserve military status many men still felt useful and being in the service of the State. 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.²⁰⁷ As Béla Bodó argues, Hungarian militias of the

²⁰⁶ HU-MNL-OL-K 149-1926-6-3473.

²⁰⁷ Dósa, *A MOVE. Egy jellegzetesen magyar fasiszta szervezet*, 134.

1920s were as dangerous and incalculable as mafias.²⁰⁸ 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, but rather integrated them into the new social and political system, so to say, ‘sparing’ the militias and their radical veteran members for its short- and long-term aims.

²⁰⁸ Bodó, ‘Militia Violence and State Power in Hungary, 1919–1922’, 156.

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In Hungary in the 1920s, in addition to the official national security organizations operating under the law, there were a bunch of semi-official, secret service-type military organizations that worked in secret. Although the government only exercised partial control over them, these militia organizations were part of the national security system during the Horthy era. The newly established authoritarian conservative government used militias made up of veterans, mainly to fight left-wing and other opposition movements, and treated them as hidden, semi-official auxiliary units of the armed forces, which were subject to severe restrictions after World War I, semi-official auxiliary units, which it deployed against neighbouring, quasi-hostile countries, primarily for disruptive military operations. The various irregular military units were somewhere between the armed forces, law enforcement agencies, national security organizations, and criminal organizations. After a while, they began to pose a threat to the state and national security of the political system they were originally supposed to defend. This contradictory situation is well illustrated by some interesting case studies that show how, in some cases, representatives of national security became a national security risk.