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The Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain

The crimes of the most notorious military detachment during the wave of paramilitary violence called the Hungarian White Terror in 1919–1921, and the further life of a radical right-wing paramilitary commander

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Abstract

In 1919–1920s, paramilitary violence was an almost natural phenomenon in Hungary, like in many other countries of Central Europe. After the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire the new right-wing government, establishing its power with the help of the Entente powers, could difficulty rule the quasi anarchistic conditions. In 1919–1921, Hungary was terrorized by irregular military formations that were formally part of the National Army, and radical right-wing soldiers committed serious crimes frequently by anti-Semitic motivations. One of the most notorious military detachment was organised by young first lieutenant of the Air Force Iván Héjjas, who, with the help of his armed militiamen, abusing the anarchistic conditions due to civil war, build up his own quasi private state in the town of Kecskemét and in its neighbourhood, the Great Hungarian Plain. His rule lasted for two years, his subordinates murdered and/or robbed hundreds of people, mainly of Jewish origin, but later they were given amnesty. Héjjas later became an influential radical right-wing politician of the Hungarian political scene in the period between the two world wars. The present research article makes an attempt to reconstruct the wave of paramilitary violence of Iván Héjjas's detachment, and also examines of the further life of a used-to-be radical right-wing paramilitary commander and politician who gradually became member of the Hungarian political elite, despite his notorious past.

Keywords: Paramilitary violence, Hungarian political history, military history, radical right-wing political movements, antisemitism, Horthy-era Hungary.

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Introduction

In the years following World War One, in the 1920s, paramilitarism and paramilitary violence,² mainly committed by demobilised or still active soldiers was an almost natural phenomenon in Hungary, just like in many other countries of Central Europe.³ After the dissolution of the Austro–Hungarian Empire, Hungary sank into civil war, three revolutions followed each other in two years, and after the collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the short-lived communist dictatorship,⁴ a the new right-wing government establishing its power with the help of the Entente states could only difficulty rule the quasi anarchistic conditions of the country. In 1920–1921, Budapest and the Hungarian country were terrorized by irregular military formations that were formally part of the National Army, the new, right-wing armed force of the Government, but often operated completely independently. This 2-year-long wave of paramilitary violence which was delivered by mainly detachments subordinated to influential paramilitary commanders First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay or Major Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek is popularly called the Hungarian White Terror.⁵ Radical right-wing irregular soldiers exploiting the weakness of the government committed several serious crimes like robbery, plunder and even murders, frequently by anti-Semitic motivations, and they did it in the disguise of law enforcement measures, since in this period the military authorities possessed police jurisdictions over civilians as well in order to restore the order.⁶ It was finally the government led by Prime Minister Count István Bethlen who gradually ceased the White Terror in 1921, and disbanded/regularized irregular/paramilitary troops and formations. The otherwise strongly right-wing, authoritarian conservative Hungarian Government finally really did its best to tranquilize the radical right-wing forces and create some kind of social and political peace at last, after the long years of war and civil war, but before that, a 2-year-long period was defined by paramilitary violence.⁷

Iván Héjjas's paramilitary formation, the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain

Iván Héjjas, a key figure in the history of Hungarian paramilitary violence in 1919–1921, the young first lieutenant of the Air Force of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy from a well-to-do peasant family who returned home from the First World War quickly became one of the most notorious commanders of the counter-revolutionary reprisals after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, and perhaps he was the man who was responsible for the most arbitrary murders.⁸ In the spring of 1919, as a soldier who had served on the front, he began to organise his

² On paramilitarism see: Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Paramilitarism. Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.

³ Robert Gerwarth, *Harc a Vörös Szörnyeteggel. Ellenforradalmi erőszak Közép-Európa vereséget szenvedett államaiban*, transl. Péter Várady, in *Háború béke idején. Paramilitaris 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.

⁴ On the history of the Hungarian Soviet Republic see: Pál Hatos, *Rosszfiúk világforradalma. Az 1919-es Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság története*, Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó, 2021.

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

⁶ See Tibor Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989.

⁷ Op. cit.

⁸ Béla Bodó, *Héjjas Iván. Egy ellenforradalmár élete*, 2000, 2010/10.

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detachment near his family's estate in the Kecskemét neighbourhood, with the aim of overthrowing the communist government.⁹ The core of his detachment was made up of members of his Air Force squadron, who had returned home with him from the war, but young people of peasant origin from the area also joined the formation.¹⁰ Most of these insurgents had been served in the army. In April of 1919, the young reserve first lieutenant rose to become the leader of one of the major right-wing uprisings against the communist regime.¹¹

Iván Héjjas was also one of the founders and leaders of the Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete – Association of Awakening Hungarians, one of the most important, politicising radical right-wing movements in Hungary, so this strongly nationalist social association – which was increasingly organised along paramilitary lines at the time, including many WWI veterans – could not have been left out of the rebellion, and in fact, due to the personal overlaps, its early activities were practically inseparable from the operation of the Héjjas's military detachment. After losing a smaller battle in Kecskemét against the communist troops, Héjjas and his armed comrades – including, for example, Sergeant Major Mihály Francia Kiss, another notorious figure of political violence of the era, and the later radical right-wing mayor of Kecskemét, Béla Liszka – eventually joined the right-wing, counter-revolutionary Government that was being organised in Szeged, mainly by conservative politicians and military officers.¹² In April 1919 Admiral Miklós Horthy, the later commander-in-chief of the National Army, and from 1920 head of state of Hungary, personally received Iván Héjjas and commissioned him to operate his detachment as an auxiliary police force of the National Army, and to eliminate the remaining communist groups in his homeland, the Great Hungarian Plain.¹³

The Royal Romanian Army which occupied a large part of Hungary which was among the losing countries of WWI soon dismantled the remnants of the communist government, and in the summer of 1919 Héjjas's troops were also given the permission by the military authorities of the occupying forces to provide auxiliary police services in the Kecskemét area in order to restore the disintegrated social order. Iván Héjjas, otherwise with the consent of Admiral Horthy and the temporary Hungarian Counter-revolutionary Government of limited jurisdiction, proclaimed himself city commander in Kecskemét, thus soon began the internment and arbitrary execution of those who allegedly held positions during the Soviet Republic or even only sympathized with the short-lived communist government.¹⁴

During October and November 1919, when the Romanian military still kept the Great Hungarian Plain under occupation, the auxiliary police units of Héjjas murdered about a hundred people (and of course took and turned their belongings in their favour) most of whom had nothing to do with the Soviet Republic and the communist wave of violence called the Red

⁹ Ignác Romsics, *A nagy báború és az 1918–1919-es magyarországi forradalmak*, Helikon Kiadó, Budapest, 2018, 108–109.

¹⁰ Rudolf Paksa, *A fehérterror „logikája”. Események, olvasatok, kontextusok*, in *Terror 1918-1919. Forradalmárok, ellenforradalmárok, megszállók*, ed. Rolf Müller–Tibor Takács–Éva Tulipán, Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó, 2019, 217–245.; Béla Bodó, *The White Terror in Hungary. The Social World of Paramilitary Groups*, Austrian History Yearbook, 2011/42, 133–163.

¹¹ Ignác Romsics, *A Duna–Tisza közge hatalmi-politikai viszonyai 1918–19-ben*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982.

¹² Bodó Béla, *Héjjas Iván. Egy ellenforradalmár élete*. op. cit.

¹³ Bodó, op. cit.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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Terror.¹⁵ Iván Héjjas, if the sources are to be believed, took advantage of the nearly anarchistic conditions and operated an almost separate quasi-private state in and around Kecskemét during 1919–1920 under his own de facto leadership the peculiar order of which was maintained by armed men loyal to him as the National Army's auxiliary police forces. Héjjas's fiancée and later wife was Sarolta Papp, daughter of Dr. György Papp, the retired police commissioner of Kecskemét, and Héjjas as city commander together with his armed militiamen controlled the whole town and its neighbourhood. His father, Mihály Héjjas Sr., was the director of the Kecskemét Vineyard Company, a wealthy farmer and vineyard owner, and an influential person in the region, and at the time he was driving a car stolen by his son's militiamen in full public view. The Héjjas family already had extensive connections in and around Kecskemét even before the White Terror, but after the paramilitary armed force was organised, they, in the disguise of a temporary law enforcement agency, started acting like criminals, taking advantage of the anarchistic conditions, claiming themselves to be the representatives of the law and order. There are also indications that the Ministry of Interior and the Hungarian State Police knew a great deal of details about the murders committed in the villages Izsák and Orgovány by Héjjas's militiamen, as well as about other individual robbery murders by members of the detachment, but for some time they delayed taking action against the armed men.¹⁶ It is also certain that the Kecskemét Police knew about the murders committed by members of the Héjjas detachment as early as the end of 1919, as the Commissioner of Police of Kecskemét forwarded a list of about 40 missing persons to Government Commissioner Count Gedeon Ráday (government commissioners were at the time the provisory representatives of the civilian public administration) who also sent a copy of the same document to the General Command of the National Army (the Army did its best to introduce military administration in the whole territory of Hungary).¹⁷ The report of the head of the Royal Public Prosecutor's Office of Kecskemét to the National Chief Public Prosecutor from November 1919 documents roughly similar conditions and the same events, emphasising that Iván Héjjas's detachment was a relatively large and well-armed force, strongly supported by the General Command of the National Army, and therefore, attempts to bring the perpetrators of the atrocities to justice could even result in armed confrontations.¹⁸ It can therefore by no means be claimed that the authorities were unaware of the atrocities committed by Iván Héjjas's detachment in the Danube–Tisza Interfluve. Thus, in addition to exaggerated nationalism, obsessive anti-communism and anti-Semitism, the desire for profit and perhaps the belief in the possibility of rapid social mobility also played a very important role in the actions of Héjjas and his militiamen who invariably robbed their murdered

¹⁵ Győző Drozdy, *Elvelt illúziók. Drozdy Győző emlékiratai*, ed. Zoltán Paksy Zoltán, Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó, 2007, 408–416.

¹⁶ József Halmi, *17699/920 belügyminiszteri akta Héjjas Ivánról. A Bécsi Magyar Újság munkatársától*, in *Magyar pokol. A magyarországi fehérterror betiltott és üldözött kiadványok tükrében*, ed. Györgyi Markovits, Budapest, Magvető Könyvkiadó, 50–53.

¹⁷ *Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez 1919–1945, I. kötet. Az ellenforradalom hatalomra jutása és rémuralma Magyarországon 1919–1921*, ed. Elek Karsai–Imre Kubitsch Imre–Dezso Nemes–Ervin Pamlényi Ervin, Budapest, Szikra Kiadó, 1956, 221–223.

¹⁸ *Dokumentumok az 1918/19-es forradalmak Duna–Tisza közti történetéhez*, ed. Ignác Romsics, Kecskemét, Bács-Kiskun Megyei Levéltár, 1976, 677–685.

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victims and used their stolen goods for their own benefit. Their actions were accompanied not only by murders, but also by other acts of violence, such as numerous pogroms involving hundreds of small or large-scale beatings of Jewish people,¹⁹ most of which resulted in no deaths but serious injuries – one such atrocity was the large pogrom in Izsák on 17 November 1919.²⁰

Even today, researchers do not have exact numbers and list of names,²¹ but after the Romanian Army withdrew from the areas eastward of the Tisza in April 1920, between December 1920 and December 1922, Iván Héjjas's men, the detachment called *Alföldi Brigád – Brigade of the Hungarian Plain* may have murdered about 400 people.²² Iván Héjjas, if we are to believe the historical sources, was also the deputy military commander of the *Kettőskereszt Vérszövetség – Double Cross Blood Union*, the very influential secret military organisation that coordinated Hungarian right-wing irregular militias in the 1920s under the control of the General Staff of the National Army, and the main purpose of which was to circumvent the strict limitations of armament of the Peace Treaty of Trianon.²³ That is, the Hungarian Government sponsored and maintained radical right-wing irregular military formations, treating and operating them as secret reserve forces of the National Army. Here we may mention that the Double Cross Blood Union to which Iván Héjjas's Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain was a very similar formation to the *German Black Army (Schwarze Reichswehr)*, which were in fact an umbrella organisation that included irregular military troops that were treated by the German Government as the semi-official, secret reserve forces of the German Imperial Army (Reichswehr), and whose main purpose was to circumvent the limitations of armament. Among the militias within the German Black Army, there was also a paramilitary unit, the so-called Organisation Consul, under the command of senior navy officer Corvette Captain Hermann Erhardt, which operated as a secret society and had a secret service character at the same time, and to which several political assassinations were attributed, and whose members often carried out diversionary activities against the Entente States, with the silent assent of the German Government. With some simplification, it can be said that these irregular military units far exceeded the limits of the law even at home, not only abroad. Otherwise with some simplification, the Organisation Consul gradually grew up into the military secret service of National Socialist Germany, the Abwehr, under the command of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris.²⁴ That is, based on international, mainly European examples, Iván Héjjas's militia and its superior organ, the Double Cross Blood Union can therefore be compared with other state-maintained or quasi-state paramilitary organisations after the First World War.

¹⁹ As for the contemporary situation of the Jewish population of the Danube–Tisza Interfluvium region see: Tamás Róna, *Judaizmus és közösségtörténet. Kecskemét rabbijainak működése történet-szociológiai aspektusból*, PhD-dissertation, Hungarian Rabbinic and Jewish University, Budapest, 2010.

²⁰ Bodó, op. cit.

²¹ Máté Kóródi, *Adattár a Magyar Nemzeti Hadsereg különítményes csoportjai és más fegyveres szervek által elkövetett gyilkosságokról, 1919. augusztus 3.–1921. október 23.*, Budapest, Clio Intézet, Clio Kötetek 2., 2020.

²² Bodó, op. cit.

²³ János Gyurgyák, *Magyar fajvédők*, Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2012, 256; József Botlik, *Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa, 1918–1921*, Vasszilvagy, Magyar Nyugat Könyvkiadó, 2012, 123.

²⁴ Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism. The Free Corps Movement In Post-War Germany 1918–1923*, New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1969.

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The members of the Héjjas detachment/Brigade of the Hungarian Plain also took an oath, swearing directly to their leader, detachment commander Iván Héjjas. The wording of the oath was quite similar to the oath of the Double Cross Blood Union, since the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain, as mentioned above, was evidently part of this irregular military formation:

*'I, XY, a member of the Héjjas Brigade, swear and pledge to work with all my strength to create the greatest fraternal understanding among the members of the organization. I vow and swear that I will obey the orders of the Héjjas Brigade and of my superiors appointed by Commander Héjjas as far as possible under all circumstances. I swear and affirm that I will keep all secrets concerning the corps, and that I will never betray the members of the corps or its commanders to any person. My obligation of secrecy shall survive the termination of the corps. I swear that I will do my utmost to promote the value and public esteem of our organisation through my talents and work. I swear that I am not and will not be a member of any secret or openly destructive association. I swear and affirm that while I am a member of the Héjjas Brigade I will not concern myself with politics or the issue of kingship. I swear that I will keep and maintain the utmost discipline among the members of the Héjjas Brigade. I pledge that I will never associate with our enemies openly or secretly. I will not leave my comrades under any circumstances, alive, wounded, or even dead alone, and I will help them under all circumstances. I submit myself to any punishment by the disciplinary and punitive committee to be elected by the members of the Héjjas Brigade. May God help me.'*²⁵

Iván Héjjas was thus surrounded by a real cult of personality on the part of his sworn men, and the will of the paramilitary commander was equal to the law for them. They were bound by a serious obligation of secrecy, and if they broke it or disobeyed orders, they could face severe punishment, even death – just as they had to take an oath as members of the Double Cross Blood Union. The members of the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain undoubtedly committed serious crimes during the White Terror between 1919 and 1921, becoming a murderous military formation. Finally, Iván Héjjas and many of his men then joined the Uprising in Western Hungary in the summer of 1921, whereas within the frameworks of an irregular military operation the members of paramilitary group of active, reserve and demobilised soldiers, students and young people of peasant origin, collectively known as the *Rongyos Gárda* – *Ragged Guard*, with the silent consent of the Hungarian Government, started fighting against Austrian forces occupying the territory. Finally played very active role in forcing the referendum in Sopron, as a result of which Sopron, the so-called city of loyalty, remained part of Hungary today, and finally was not annexed to Austria as it was originally prescribed by the Peace Treaties of Paris.²⁶

Investigations against the paramilitary criminals

In order to prevent vigilante justice, it was already the Government of Prime Minister István Friedrich, otherwise with questionable legitimacy due to the Hungarian civil war in progress, who decided as early as 1919 that all persons who had been engaged in any political activity during the Soviet Republic of Hungary should be held accountable, in order to prevent increasing arbitrary atrocities committed by armed groups.²⁷ The Government finally entrusted the prosecution to

²⁵ Budapest City Archives, HU-BFL-VII-5-c-198/1940; Cited by: Zinner, op. cit. 568–569.

²⁶ Imre Tóth, *Két Anschluss között. Nyugat-Magyarország és Burgenland Wilsontól Hitlerig*, Budapest, Kronosz Kiadó, 2020.

²⁷ Ignác Romsics, *A Horthy-korszak*, Budapest, Helikon Kiadó, 2017, 347.

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Deputy Crown Prosecutor Dr. Albert Váry. Many reports were received, resulting in thousands of people being arrested between August and December 1919. From these confessions, reports, accounts and court sentences, the prosecutor compiled his book *The Victims of Red Rule in Hungary*,²⁸ first published in 1922, whose aim was to document the atrocities of the communist Red Terror in an unbiased way. According to this book, there were 587 proven deadly victims of the communist government. At the same time, Albert Váry also began to investigate the crimes committed by nationalist military units after the fall of the communist government. After Miklós Horthy's march into Budapest on 16 November 1919, various right-wing military units intervened in Albert Váry's work. It was mainly the member of the detachments commanded by Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek, Iván Héjjas and Pál Prónay that unlawfully attacked civilians – mainly of Jewish origin – and tried to hinder the investigation.

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

The armed militiamen of the Association of Awakening Hungarians – who were also members of Iván Héjjas's paramilitary detachment and presumably of the Double-Cross Blood Union – murdered Adolf Léderer, an Israelite resident in Solt on 16 August 1921. This caused a great public outcry, and the press demanded that the killers should be brought to justice. At the same time, Prime Minister Count István Bethlen announced in the Parliament that he would entrust Albert Váry with the task of apprehending the perpetrators of the murder in Solt. He also announced that in order to investigate the atrocities committed in 1919, 1920 and 1921 on the Danube-Tisza Interfluve and to prevent similar incidents in the future, he would send Váry to the Great Hungarian Plain, reinforced by serious police and gendarmerie escort.²⁹

Among the archival records of the rather belated criminal trial of Iván Héjjas and his associates at the People's Tribunal from 1947–1949, practically one of the most significant documents from the 1920s, from the period when the crimes really happened, about the investigations on the White Terror, is the 1922 summarising report of Albert Váry on the events that took place on the Danube-Tisza Interfluve. In his report of 1922, the prosecutor described much the same things as he told before the People's Tribunal in 1947, twenty-five years later, when he was an elderly man, in the criminal trial of the absent Iván Héjjas and his fellows. His testimony survived in the same case file. According to these archival sources, Albert Váry had indeed been commissioned by the Prime Minister to investigate the atrocities of the White Terror in connection with the murder of Adolf Léderer on 16 August 1921, in Solt. Váry was then the President of the Royal Prosecutor's Office in Budapest, and in the light of his investigations after the perpetrators of the Red Terror, which were largely unbiased, the Government rightfully expected him to investigate the serious abuses of the White Terror. Soldiers, or at least persons dressed in military uniforms who appeared to be

²⁸ Albert Váry, *A vörös uralom áldozatai Magyarországon*, Vác, A Váci Királyi Országos Fegyintézet Könyomdája, 1922.

²⁹ HU-BFL-VII-5-e-1949/20630. – Trial of Iván Héjjas and his associates at the the People's Tribunal p. 282.

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soldiers, were also abducting and robbing civilians in Budapest, and the intervention of the Royal Prosecutor's Office of Budapest seemed increasingly justified, although most of the abducted people were later released by the military authorities in the capital, and the atrocities in Budapest committed by soldiers were much less serious than those committed in the Great Hungarian Plain.³⁰ Finally, the Government clearly abolished the right of the military authorities to take actions against civilians in 1921, and state prosecutor Dr. Péter Kovács was also assigned as the deputy of Dr. Albert Váry to investigate the murders committed on the Danube–Tisza Interfluve, while the Central Investigation Department of the Ministry of the Interior – at that time operating independently of the Royal Hungarian State Police as a central criminal police force with nationwide jurisdiction – also placed a number of detectives at the disposal of the prosecutors.³¹

Dr. Váry arrived in Izsák on 29 August 1921 with a large police and gendarmerie escort, but the investigators soon reported to him that many of the individuals suspected of serious crimes had gone to West Hungary to take part in the Burgenland uprising. Policemen and gendarmes arrested 20–22 people, but none of them were later suspected of serious crimes. In Albert Váry's view, the murders of Adolf Léderer of Solt, and Zoltán Pánczél, Sándor Beck and Árpád Schmiedt of Izsák were simple robbery-murders, where the alleged communist sympathies or Jewish origin of the victims were merely a pretext for committing a crime of vile motive, motivated essentially by profit.³² On 19 October 1921, Váry addressed a request to the Commissioner General of the Government of Western Hungary, Count Antal Sigray, to hand over 50–60 persons who had fled there to participate in the Anti-Austrian Uprising and were suspected of murder to the prosecutor's office. Although Albert Váry did not receive any reply from the Government Commissioner, he initiated criminal proceedings and issued arrest warrants against the following persons, mainly demobilised soldiers: Mihály Francia Kiss, Mihály Danics, Ambrus Tóth, Mihály Nagy, Sándor Bán, Gábor Kállai, Rezső Schmidt, József Korom, Aladár Danics, Gábor Király, Nándor Pataki, István Juhász, Kálmán Papp, József Kenei, Gyula Kállai, Sándor Papp, Árpád Rád, Géza Korb, Gergely Tasi, Antal Makai, Lajos Baski.³³ The prosecutor was able to link the murders committed in the Danube–Tisza Interfluve with the activities of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, especially based on the name of First Lieutenant Árpád Raád, who was also one of the notorious soldiers of the White Terror killing several people.³⁴

During his investigations, Albert Váry focused primarily on the murders committed in Izsák, Lajosmizse and Solt, as he was convinced that in these cases there was less political motivation than the simple motive of financial gain.³⁵ The prosecutor could not, however, continue the arrests and on-the-spot interrogations that he had begun for long, since the amnesty order³⁶ of

³⁰ Ibid. 284.

³¹ Ibid. 284.

³² Ibid. 285.

³³ Ibid. 285.

³⁴ Ibid. 286.

³⁵ Ibid. 287.

³⁶ Laura Csonka, *Nemzetközi és hazai fellépés a népbiztosok megkegyelmezése érdekében*, ArchívNet, 2015/3.

https://archivnet.hu/politika/nemzetkozi_es_hazai_fellepes_a_nepbiztosok_megkegyelmezese_erdekeben.html; Péter Konok, *Az erőszak kérdései 1919–1920-ban. Vörösteror–fehérterror*, Múltunk, 2010/3, 72–91, 84.; *Iratok az igazságszolgáltatás történetéhez* 2., ed. Ibolya Horváth–Pál Solt–Győző Szabó–János Zanathy–Tibor Zinner, Budapest, Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1993, 21–42.

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the Regent Governor of 3 November 1921 had virtually nullified his work, or at least reduced it to a symbolic one. At the end of the investigation, he decided to collect the names of the victims of the White Terror after the publication of the list of victims of the Red Rule, but he was unable to complete his work successfully.³⁷ Although he attempted to arrest Mihály Francia Kiss, Mihály Danics and others for simple public offences not covered by the amnesty order, he was instructed by his superiors to keep their arrests pending.³⁸

Finally, Dr. Péter Kovács, the prosecutor previously assigned to be Albert Váry's deputy, was commissioned to complete the investigation, and since the armed militiamen who had served as members of the Héjjas Brigade in the Kecskemét area were legally considered soldiers, he referred the cases to the military authorities.³⁹ In most cases, the investigation was closed by the military authorities,⁴⁰ which had not previously shown much cooperation with Albert Váry, who had approached them in several cases.⁴¹ There was only one case in which the soldiers, who were suspected of the murders and had served as auxiliary police troops mentioned the name of their commanding officer, First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, during their interrogations.⁴² In the end, there was no prosecution, and in 1922 only Mihály Danics, János Zbona and other lower-ranking perpetrators were sentenced to a few years in prison for various public offences.⁴³ Although his detachment had in principle been disarmed by this time, Héjjas initiated a press attack in the summer of 1922 and felt offended that he had been granted amnesty for his actions during the counter-revolution. He also declared that, although he would bow to the Government's will, he had not yet given the final order and that 'if lightning should strike anywhere in the Hungarian sky', he would be the 'God's arrow for Budapest'.⁴⁴ Then, on 20 July 1922, by the intervention of Prime Minister Bethlen, he was briefly detained by the police for attempting to organise and recruit a second uprising in Western Hungary,⁴⁵ but he was soon released.⁴⁶

The pacification and disbandment of Hungarian radical right-wing militias

For the Bethlen Government which was striving for consolidation in domestic and foreign policy as well, the bomb raid of Csongrád on 24 December 1923, which caused a great outcry and claimed the lives of three people was one of the last drops in the glass. Bethlen promised at the parliament on 3 January 1924 that he would personally interrogate paramilitary commander Iván Héjjas about the Csongrád bomb outrage among other things, and if his responsibility was to be found, he would be treated in the same way as anyone else.⁴⁷ Héjjas was also interrogated by the police in

³⁷ HU-BFL-VII-5-e-1949/20630 p. 287.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 287.

³⁹ Ibid. 288.

⁴⁰ HU-BFL-VII-5-e-1949/20630.

⁴¹ *Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez 1919–1945, I. kötet. Az ellenforradalom hatalomra jutása és rémuralma Magyarországon 1919–1921*, ed. Elek Karsai–Imre Kubitsch–Dezső Nemes–Ervin Pamlényi, Budapest, Szikra Kiadó, 1956, 225–228.

⁴² HU-BFL-VII-5-e-1949/20630. p. 287–288.

⁴³ Zinner, op. cit. 174.

⁴⁴ [Anonymous author], *Héjjas Iván ügye a nemzetgyűlésben*, Népszava, 15 July 1922. Cited by Ignác Romsics, *Bethlen István*, Budapest, Helikon Kiadó, 2019, 270.

⁴⁵ Romsics, op. cit. 270.

⁴⁶ Zinner, op. cit. 173.

⁴⁷ *Nemzetgyűlési Napló, 1922–1926/XVIII*, 337–338. Lajos Serfőző, *A titkos társaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban*,

Kántás, B. (2021). The Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain The crimes of the most notorious military detachment during the wave of paramilitary violence called the Hungarian White Terror in 1919–1921, and the further life of a radical right-wing paramilitary commander. *Journal of Human Sciences*, 19(1), 1-16. doi:[10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205](https://doi.org/10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205)

connection with the Csongrád bomb explosion and the conspiracies of nationalist secret societies and paramilitary groups in general, in the presence of the National Police Commissioner Imre Nádosy himself, but in the end it was not proven that he was personally involved in any criminal activity.⁴⁸ Of course, this was certainly nothing more than a bargain between the paramilitary commander and the Government, possibly including Regent Governor Miklós Horthy himself.⁴⁹ Besides Horthy, Gyula Gömbös, who later, in 1932 became Prime Minister of Hungary, must have played a major role in the fact that Héjjas was never brought to trial during the Horthy Era, and was never seriously prosecuted for the acts committed by him and others under his command, even though his crimes were obvious to many people.⁵⁰ The example of Iván Héjjas described earlier tells us a great deal about the relationship between radical irredentist-nationalist associations, secret societies and the paramilitary units with countless links to them and the Hungarian Government. Not only did the former paramilitary commander not have to answer for his actions before the judiciary system, but he later received Vitéz's title,⁵¹ a kind of specific Hungarian knighthood that provided certain social advantages, earned a doctorate in law for his book on aviation law, became a member of Parliament and was later a well-paid and respected official of the Hungarian State. Iván Héjjas's and Gyula Gömbös's examples also illustrate well how (in the 1920s fairly) young, ambitious military officers could quickly become influential politicians of the radical right, rising to the level of the Hungarian political elite.

Of all the paramilitary commanders who shared a common past and common crimes, and once practiced formidable power, it was Pál Prónay who was the most unable to achieve any kind of consolidation. Because of his failure to show sufficient loyalty to the Regent Governor on the occasion of King Charles IV's second attempt of return, and because the brutal activities of his detachment, his arbitrary assassinations and adventurer-like political actions he became increasingly burdensome for the Bethlen Government,⁵² and he was eventually forced to retire, become sidelined, and was also expelled from the Union of Etelköz, the pro-government political secret society of the era.⁵³ Lieutenant Colonel Prónay, a nobleman and the member of one of the ancient landowner noble families of Hungary, who was practically by birth a member of the social and political elite, is, on the other hand a good counter-example how someone could gradually lose his elite status due to his extreme radicalism.⁵⁴ Prónay originally, in the beginning of the right-wing counter-revolution, perhaps had the good chance to rise among the most senior military officers (he could have easily reached the rank of General or might have become Minister of Defence as well) with the support of Admiral Horthy if he had had the capability of consolidating and moderating himself to some degree. However, due to his extreme radicalism and brutality, he could not fit into the consolidated political system of Prime Minister Bethlen at all, so he quickly lost his influence became a marginal figure in the radical right.

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⁴⁸ Serfőző, op. cit. 36.

⁴⁹ Bodó, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Bodó, op. cit.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Péter Konok, *Az erőszak kérdései 1919–1920-ban*, 84.

⁵³ Prónay, op. cit 322–324.

⁵⁴ On Prónay's political downfall see: Bodó, Pál Prónay. *Paramilitary Violence and Antisemitism in Hungary, 1919–1921*.

Kántás, B. (2021). The Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain The crimes of the most notorious military detachment during the wave of paramilitary violence called the Hungarian White Terror in 1919–1921, and the further life of a radical right-wing paramilitary commander. *Journal of Human Sciences*, 19(1), 1-16. doi:[10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205](https://doi.org/10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205)

In the spirit of consolidation, the paramilitary formations and national defence militias still operating in various areas of the country, such as the Héjjas Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain and other armed units of the Association of Awakening Hungarians were then essentially disarmed and regularised, and their law enforcement and military powers which could be traced back to the turbulent civil war, were definitely and unequivocally abolished. At the same time, a paramilitary organisation, the Office of National Labour Protection was set up under the control of the Ministry of the Interior, primarily to break strikes and labour movement organisations. It was a kind of white, right-wing volunteer workers' militia whose members were equipped with handguns and had the same powers of action and use of weapons were the same as those of the police, but it was rather an auxiliary police rather than a military force.⁵⁵ The majority of its members practiced their civilian professions, but occasionally were called into duty.

The Brigade of the Plain, the State Security Agents and the national defence militias of the Awakening Hungarians were also integrated into this organisation, so they were under much more serious government control, but could essentially continue to operate.⁵⁶ The Double Cross Blood Union also continued its activities within the framework of the National Labour Protection, but it is interesting to note that General Kálmán Shvoy wrote in his diary that the DCBU was founded under this name in 1923, as a kind of successor organisation to the Brigade of the Great Plain led by Iván Héjjas, and that it allegedly continued its activities under the codename *Főtartalék – Main Reserve*⁵⁷ as a secret special operations military unit, formally within the Ministry of the Interior and the National Labour Protection, but in reality subordinated to the Ministry of Defence. Shvoy thus dates the genesis of the organisation itself to this period, to the end of 1923. This is evidently a mistake made by the General, since the Double Cross Blood Union really ceased to exist under its former name by 1923–1924. There is also an archival source about the integration of the DCBU into the Office of National Labour Protection: a confidential circular from the Ministry of the Interior from 1926 which forbids the members of the National Labour Protection to refer to the new strike-breaking auxiliary police force as the 'Double Cross Blood Union' even among themselves, as it is associated with rather bad public memories.⁵⁸ The National Labour Protection was a strike-breaking auxiliary police force and a de facto covert military reserve force at the same time. Although it obviously had no significant combat value, its tens of thousands of members who were otherwise civilians in their daily occupations, but who owned firearms and were trained and could be mobilised to a certain extent, made a significant contribution to circumvention of the serious military restrictions imposed by the Trianon Peace Treaty. In this way, it also helped to pacify the former (in some cases irregular) soldiers of the National Army, which had once numbered over 100,000 and was reduced to a maximum of 35,000 after 1921. In this strange, voluntary auxiliary police and reserve military status many people still felt useful and being in the

⁵⁵ 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.

⁵⁶ Dósa, op. cit. 151–152.

⁵⁷ *Csak szolgálati használatra! Iratok a Horthy-hadsereg történetéhez, 1919–1938*, ed. Tibor Hetés–Tamásné Morva, Budapest, Zrínyi Katonai Könyv- és Lapkiadó, 1968, 499–500.

⁵⁸ HU-MNL-OL-K 149-1926-6-3473.

Kántás, B. (2021). The Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain The crimes of the most notorious military detachment during the wave of paramilitary violence called the Hungarian White Terror in 1919–1921, and the further life of a radical right-wing paramilitary commander. *Journal of Human Sciences*, 19(1), 1-16. doi:[10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205](https://doi.org/10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205)

service of the state. That is, the Hungarian radical right-wing militia movement thus continued to exist partly within the framework of this organisation, in a, so to say, domesticated form.⁵⁹

The testimony of General Count Károly Csáky, Minister of Defence in the bombing trial of József Márfy and his associates, one of the most important archival documents of the history of the Double Cross Blood Union already cited earlier also testifies that the DCBU was established after the fall of the Soviet Republic with the aim of bringing paramilitary organisations operating in the capital and the countryside under unified (state and military) control in order to restore the order, presumably sometime around 1919-1920, on the initiative of General Béla Berzeviczy, Chief of General Staff. It was then dissolved in 1923 in the form in which it had previously operated, and Minister Csáky presumably means the integration of the DCBU into the National Labour Protection which officially took place towards the end of 1922, but in practice perhaps it happened somewhat later, in several steps.⁶⁰

In parallel with the integration of the different militias into the National Labour Protection, the Government Decree No. 7502 of 19 October 1923 prohibited the participation of state employees, including members of the armed forces and law enforcement agencies to be members in associations whose activities were against or incompatible with the lawful order of the state, or which did not have a constitution approved by the Minister of the Interior. That is, it was essentially the membership in secret societies that become prohibited for state employees.⁶¹ In reality, of course, it was still not easy for the state to check – if it really wanted to check in the case of right-wing, pro-government organisations – who was a member of what kind of association or with whom, how and for what purposes cooperated, especially if the given secret organisation produced no written documents for conspiratorial reasons. In this way, although the Double Cross Blood Union officially ceased to exist in 1923, its members, in some form, were still partly in the service of the state, and they could continue their activities to achieve the goals which they thought to be patriotic.

The afterlife of a radical right-wing paramilitary commander – becoming the member of the Hungarian political elite

In parallel with the pacification of the Association of Awakening Hungarians and the disbandment/regularisation of radical right-wing militias, Iván Héjjas, one of the key figures of the White Terror and the leader of the atrocities committed on the Danube–Tisza Interfluve, who played a leading role in the Hungarian radical right-wing militia movement with close overlaps with the regular military, was also – apparently – finally consolidated and pacified. He was able to avoid punishment throughout the Horthy Era, mainly thanks to his relationship with Regent Horthy and Gyula Gömbös, the influential radical right-wing politician of the era, who in 1928 returned to the governing United Party, became Minister of Defence, then in 1932 became the Prime Minister of Hungary. From among all of the former detachment commanders involved in the White Terror, it was perhaps Héjjas who achieved the highest social and political status. Between 1927 and 1931, he was a member of parliament for the Kunszentmiklós constituency of Gömbös's Party of

⁵⁹ Dósa, op. cit. 134.

⁶⁰ HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923.

⁶¹ Budapesti Közlöny, 24 October 1923.

Kántás, B. (2021). The Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain The crimes of the most notorious military detachment during the wave of paramilitary violence called the Hungarian White Terror in 1919–1921, and the further life of a radical right-wing paramilitary commander. *Journal of Human Sciences*, 19(1), 1-16. doi:[10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205](https://doi.org/10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205)

Hungarian Independence (commonly known as the Race-defending Party), that had earlier split from the ruling United Party. On 16 June 1929, in a grandiose ceremony held on Margaret Island, Regent Governor Miklós Horthy conferred the title of Vitéz, a kind of specific Hungarian knighthood that provided certain social advantages on Iván Héjjas, his brother Aurél Héjjas, Gyula Gömbös and dozens of other former and active soldiers.⁶² Iván Héjjas's and Gyula Gömbös's examples also illustrate well how (in the 1920s fairly) young, ambitious military officers could quickly become influential politicians of the radical right, rising to the level of the Hungarian political elite.

In the meantime, Héjjas had obtained a degree and a doctorate in law with his book on aviation law⁶³, and as a former fighter pilot and otherwise competent expert of aviation, he worked as a senior civil servant in the 1930s in the Transport Policy Department of the Ministry of Trade and Transport. From 1940 he was the head of the Department of Public Aviation, adviser to the minister, later promoted to titular state secretary,⁶⁴ and at the same time a member of the board of directors of the state-owned Hungarian Air Traffic Company, and the governor also promoted him from first lieutenant to captain. Officially, he was responsible for the supervision and organisation of civil aviation, but as a former fighter pilot he also played a role in the organisation and development of the Air Force of the Hungarian Home Defence Forces.⁶⁵

With the death of his friend and protector, Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös, in 1936, Héjjas suffered a great loss politically, but his position and influence remained stable as an unstinting supporter of the Regent Governor. In 1938, following in the footsteps of the former Race-defending Party, he founded a new radical right-wing party under the name of the National Association of Hungarian Race-defenders,⁶⁶ which, however, kept strictly aloof from the Arrow Cross Party and other Hungarian fascist and national socialist parties organised on the Western model, and acted mainly as a loyal opposition to the authoritarian conservative government, thus failing to become a significant force on the Hungarian far-right.⁶⁷

With the Government's knowledge and consent, Héjjas was also able to return to military/paramilitary activities for a time during the Second World War, when Hungary entered the war and committed itself to the German policy of aggression. In 1938, under the direction of former Interior Minister Miklós Kozma (at that time President and CEO of the Hungarian Telegraphic Office, later Governor of Transcarpathia), he participated as one of the leaders of the reorganised (second) Ragged Guard in the Transcarpathian diversionary operation, which prepared the reoccupation of Transcarpathia which had been annexed to Czechoslovakia in 1920 under the Trianon Peace Treaty, with German assistance.⁶⁸

⁶² Bodó, op. cit.

⁶³ Iván Héjjas, *Légi jog*, Kecskemét, Első Kecskeméti Hírlapkiadó- és Nyomda Rt, 1934.

⁶⁴ Central Archive of the National Archives of Hungary, HU-MNL-OL-K 27-1942. 02. 08.-26.

⁶⁵ *Horthy Miklós titkos iratai*, ed. Miklós Szinai Miklós-László Szűcs, Budapest, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1962, 33–38, 194–197.

⁶⁶ The fragmented fond of the records produced by the party is in the custody of the Central Archive of the National Archives of Hungary: HU-MNL-OL-P 2249-81.

⁶⁷ Bodó, op. cit.

⁶⁸ Mária Ormos, *Egy magyar médiavezér. Kozma Miklós*, Budapest, PolgArt Kiadó, 2001, 549–571.

Kántás, B. (2021). The Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain The crimes of the most notorious military detachment during the wave of paramilitary violence called the Hungarian White Terror in 1919–1921, and the further life of a radical right-wing paramilitary commander. *Journal of Human Sciences*, 19(1), 1–16. doi:[10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205](https://doi.org/10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205)

Furthermore, Héjjas also probably played a role in organising the election of Miklós Horthy's son, István Horthy as Deputy Regent Governor.⁶⁹ At the end of 1943, General Ferenc Szombathelyi, the Chief of the General Staff of the Hungarian Defence Forces entrusted Colonel Gyula Kádár to organise an irregular military force of 5,000 men, in which Héjjas also participated as a reserve captain and as an expert in diversionary/irregular warfare, on the Regent Governor Horthy's order.⁷⁰ Secretly, these times Héjjas served at the Special Operations Group of the General Staff of the Hungarian Defence Forces, and the aim of the establishment of this irregular military formation was to create a troop that is exclusively loyal to Regent Governor Horthy, to help Hungary get out of the world war, and to oppose the German invasion of Hungary in the event of a German invasion, which was foreseeable at the time. As a former race-defender, Héjjas was exclusively loyal to Regent Governor Horthy, and at the same time, he was gradually becoming strongly anti-German, who refused to join the pro-German Arrow Cross movement. Although he was a radical right-wing soldier and politician, he never became a Nazi collaborator.⁷¹ His military unit, however, ultimately played no role in the military events in Hungary, and in 1945 Héjjas fled the advancing Soviet troops to Germany, and then to Spain, where he settled in Vigo, Galicia, with the knowledge and consent of the right-wing dictator Francisco Franco who was glad to give shelter to German war criminals and their allies. Although Iván Héjjas was finally sentenced to death in absentia by the People's Tribunal on 25 August 1949, mainly for the murders committed in Orgovány during the time of the White Terror, in 1919–1921, the former militia commander finally died in Spanish exile in 1950, aged 60, presumably of natural causes.

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⁶⁹ Lajos Olasz, *A kormányzóhelyettesi intézmény története, 1941–1944*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2007.

⁷⁰ Bodó, op. cit.

⁷¹ Ákos Bartha, *Véres város. Fegyveres ellenállás Budapesten, 1944–1945*, Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó, 2021, 23–26.

Kántás, B. (2021). The Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain The crimes of the most notorious military detachment during the wave of paramilitary violence called the Hungarian White Terror in 1919–1921, and the further life of a radical right-wing paramilitary commander. *Journal of Human Sciences*, 19(1), 1–16. doi:[10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205](https://doi.org/10.14687/jhs.v19i1.6205)

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