

**THE BOMB ATTACK IN CSONGRÁD. A CASE STUDY OF RADICAL RIGHT-WING PARAMILITARISM AND POLITICAL TERRORISM IN HUNGARY IN THE 1920s**



**History**

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**Abstract**

In the 1920s, paramilitary violence was an almost natural phenomenon in Hungary, like in many other countries of Central Europe. After the Great War and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire the new right-wing government, establishing its power with the help of the Entente powers, could difficultly rule the quasi anarchistic conditions. In 1920–1921, 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. Although paramilitary violence ceased in 1921, the militia movement lived on in the form of secret paramilitary organisations. The government used up these units, since the right-wing elite was afraid of another communist takeover, using them as auxiliary police forces, and they also wanted to circumvent the limitations of armament of the Treaty of Trianon, also aiming to cooperate with Austrian and German radical-right paramilitary groups including Hitler's National Socialist movement as well. Irregular soldiers became concerned in political terrorism, several bomb outrages. Although the police did its best to investigate the cases, most perpetrators interestingly were not sent into prison. The age of the bomb raids, as the press of the opposition called this period, finally ended with the fact that murderous, anti-Semitic terrorists remained at large, and found their places in the authoritarian conservative regime of Hungary of the 1920s. The research article reconstructs certain terroristic crimes committed by the members of irregular military formations via a micro-historical case study, analysing the bomb attack in Csongrád, December 1923, based on archival records of criminal suits. Furthermore, beyond the analysis of the individual cases of three different, but interrelating bomb outrages, it intends to draw general conclusions about the controversial and complex relationship between the early Hungarian paramilitary radical right-wing movements and the government, considering that several paramilitary commanders operated as influential radical right-wing politicians as well.

After World War One, in the 1920s, paramilitarism and paramilitary violence, mainly committed by demobilised or still active soldiers was an almost natural phenomenon in Hungary, just like in many other countries of Central Europe.<sup>1</sup> After the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the collapse of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, the new right-wing government establishing its power with the help of the Entente states could only difficultly 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

<sup>1</sup> Robert Gerwarth, *Harc a Vörös Szörnyeteggel. Ellenforradalmi erőszak Közép-Európa vereséget szenvedett államaiban*, transl. Péter Várady, in *Háború béke idején. Paramilitáris erőszak Európában az első világháború után*, szerk. Robert Gerwarth–John Horne, Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2017, 71–92.

Terror in historical literature.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The government led by Prime Minister Count István Bethlen gradually ceased the White Terror in 1921, and disbanded/regularized irregular/paramilitary troops and formations. The otherwise strongly right-wing, authoritarian conservative Hungarian government 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.<sup>4</sup>

Although paramilitary violence finally ceased, and irregular military formations were formally disbanded, the radical right-wing Hungarian militia movements mainly consisting of World War I veterans, active and demobilised soldiers lived on the form of secret right-wing paramilitary organisations. The influential radical right-wing organization that had a close relation to the Government called *Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete (ÉME) – Association of Awakening Hungarians* which sometimes operated in a similar way to a political party still had a strong paramilitary character, and it had its own irregular militia called *Nemzetvédelmi Főosztály – Department of National Defence*. The Government, mainly the army and the Ministry of Defence still used up Freikorps-like militia units consisting of veterans for two reasons. On the one hand, the right-wing political and military elite was still afraid of another possible communist takeover attempt, and used the radical right-wing militias as auxiliary political police forces, keeping them prepared; on the other hand, the countries of the losing side of World War I were subject to serious limitations of armament. Therefore, the government and the military leadership did its best to circumvent limitations, and treated free-corps-like irregular military formations as secret semi-official reserve forces of the army, preparing for a war in the near future in which the territories that were truncated from Hungary by the Treaty of Trianon were to be reoccupied. Hungarian anti-communist and irredentist troops were coordinated by the secret military organisation called *Kettőskereszt Vérszövetség – Double Cross Blood Union* in the 1920s, which consisted of mainly radical right-wing officers and WWI veterans, and thousands of armed Hungarian people were kept in secret military status, waiting for deployment at the time. The military and the radical right-wing political movements had very strong relations these times due to the historical traumas and hyper-nationalism and *exaggerated* patriotism nearly necessarily and nearly always coupled with violent anti-Semitism.<sup>5</sup>

Some secret irregular military formations, mainly related to the Department of National Defence of the Association of Awakening Hungarians and the Double Cross Blood Union started becoming concerned in political terrorism, like the luckily prevented bomb outrage plan in

<sup>2</sup> Béla Bodó, *The White Terror. Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921*, London, Routledge, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> See Tibor Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> See Balázs Kántás, *Milicisták, puccsisták, terrorfiúk*. Művészeti és Irodalmi Jelen Kft., Budapest, 2021. <http://real.mtak.hu/123884/>

Jászkarajenő in 1922, the bomb outrage of Erzsébetváros that required 8 casualties on 2 April 1922, or the bomb outrage of Csongrád in which 3 people died on 24 December 1923. All the third grave terrorist incidents were committed by the members of the Department of National Defence of the ÉME who were at the same time irregular soldiers of the Double Cross Blood Union, and paramilitary commanders First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas and Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay arose in all the three cases as possible instigators, together with Captain Gyula Gömbös, later Minister of Defence, then Prime Ministers, in this period the leader of the oppositional Party of Hungarian National Independence (popularly called race-defenders), a very influential politician who had very good relationship with Regent Governor Admiral Miklós Horthy.<sup>6</sup>

From among to the above mentioned assassination plan of Jászkarajenő and the really committed bomb outrage against the Democratic Circle in Erzsébetváros, the bomb attack in Csongrád a little later was a very highly publicised terrorist act of the historical period, also committed by radical right-wing militiamen, presumably under the leadership of First Lieutenant János Piroška. On 26 December 1923, the terrorists threw an explosive device into the ballroom of the Hotel Hungarian King in Csongrád at a charity event organised by the local Jewish Women's Association, killing three people and seriously injuring twenty-five others, while fifteen people were injured only slightly. Other people involved in the attack were First Lieutenant János Piroška's brothers István and György, and certain local farmers János Sági and János Kővári, local militiamen of the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain. János Piroška himself had made the explosive device and had also brought it from Budapest.<sup>7</sup>

The assassination was carried out by Miklós Bölöni and László Sinkó, local farmers and WWI veterans. During his interrogation, Sinkó defended himself by claiming that First Lieutenant Piroška had told him in a meeting at his apartment that the bomb was only intended to cause alarm, but that its explosive power was not sufficient to kill a human being. Yet he was reluctant to throw it when they appeared outside the Hotel Hungarian King at midnight. Miklós Bölöni then called László Sinkó a coward, who finally lit the fuse of the bomb with his cigarette and threw it into the crowded ballroom. The bomb exploded immediately, killing Julianna Nagyjános, a maid, Sándor Wolff, a university student, and Balázs Farkas, a gypsy violinist. Other people who sustained life-threatening injuries were: Mrs. Géző Barna, Henrik Barna, Mrs. Henrik Barna, Piroška Barna, Dr. Herman Buk, Margit Buk, Ilonka Buk, József Buk, Mariska Buk, Béla Dékány, Mrs. Mihály Engel, Mrs. István Fehér, László Grósz, Magda Grósz, Sára Grósz, Lajos Kovács, Lenke Kovács, Aladár Béla Krizsán, István Princz and Mrs. Sándor Dr. Vida.

The police put a lot of effort into collecting data, soon caught the perpetrators, and the investigation conducted the next day with the assistance of Jenő Zombori, the Szeged Chief Prosecutor, József Szalay, the District Police Commissioner and Jenő Borbolya, a high-ranking Police Inspector, and so much material evidence was collected that on 30 December 1923 the

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

<sup>7</sup> 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.

perpetrators also 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, including László Sinkó, a farmer, Mihály Zubek, a teacher suspended from his job, Sándor Kasztell, a mechanic, Rókus Sági, a farmer, György Piroska, a merchant, Miklós Bölöni, a young man without a job, and Ferenc Forgó, a farmer. Not surprisingly, it turned out that most of the assassins were also members of the Association of Awakening Hungarians. János Piroska was a professional military officer, so his crimes were subject to military justice, and he was handed over to the Budapest Military Court.

The increasingly high-profile investigation also involved Dr. János Diószeghy, the head of the Public Security Department of the Ministry of the Interior (the position was similar to the National Commissioner of the Police) which was the superior organ of the Hungarian Royal State Police, and it was revealed that the assassins were members of the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain led by Iván Héjjas, and also had close links with the Double Cross Blood Union.<sup>8</sup> In the course of the investigation, János Sági was also found to have a letter of appointment from Iván Héjjas appointing him the local commander of his irregular militia, the *Alföldi Brigád – Brigade of the Hungarian Plain's* battalion in Csongrád.<sup>9</sup> Héjjas and the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain were therefore also there behind the Csongrád bombing, and the Double Cross Blood Union was deeply involved in the case as well – the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain was also a secret reserve force of the Hungarian army the goal of which was to circumvent the limitations of armament conceived by the Peace Treaty of Trianon.

Minister of Defence General Károly Csáky in order to save the honour of the Hungarian army achieved – otherwise not for the first time in his career – by creating confusion that First Lieutenant János Piroska should not be officially considered a professional soldier in the legal sense. The army argued that First Lieutenant Piroska had previously been the subject of ethics proceedings after he had continued to harass and threaten his former fiancée, who was otherwise of Jewish origin and had broken off her engagement to him, and Piroska had been forced to retire from the military as a result. There were various versions of where János Piroska ended up working, as a teacher of drawing at the College of Fine Arts or the Bocskay Educational Institute, but he was eventually tried as an accused with his accomplices in a civil court. The case was finally heard by the Royal Court of Szolnok, where one of the defendants was Dr. Ferenc Ulain, a leader of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, a race-defending member of the parliament involved.<sup>10</sup>

The main trial of the bomb case took place in the Royal Criminal Court of Szolnok between 17 and 26 September 1924. The defendants spent relatively little time in prison, as they were released on high bail well before the trial. Lawyers Dr. Ferenc Ulain and Dr. István Széchényi argued the patriotic merits of the defendants, in particular First Lieutenant János

<sup>8</sup> Csongrád County Archive of the National Archives of Hungary, HU-MNL-CSML-IV-401-a-24/1923.

<sup>9</sup> Serfőző, op. cit. 97.

<sup>10</sup> Nemzetgyűlési Napló 1922–1926/XVIII., 344–345. Cited: Serfőző, op. cit. 100.

Piroska in the establishment of the counter-revolutionary regime, stating that among others it was Piroska who, as a member of the paramilitary formation of Iván Héjjas reorganised the gendarmerie from volunteers in Csongrád after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, and as the local commander of this paramilitary auxiliary police unit he had made major contribution to the restoration of state and social order. In his defence, Dr. Széchenyi went so far as to say that certain prominent members of the local Jewish community, including a certain lawyer, Zoltán Kalmár harboured grievances against First Lieutenant Piroska who had expelled Kalmár from the Csongrád volunteer gendarmerie force at the time because of his indiscipline, drinking and gambling. The defence lawyer also expressed his strong opinion that János Piroska and the members of the local Awakening militia were not anti-Semites, and that the Jewish-Christian conflict was mainly fuelled by the representatives of the Jewish community in Csongrád who had also tried to influence the investigation of the bomb raid against the Hotel Hungarian King in order to shift suspicion to local Christian nationalist political activists.

The defendants defended themselves, among other things, by claiming that they had been abused by the police during the investigation, and that this was the only reason why they had confessed earlier. The Royal Criminal Court of Szolnok found the witnesses mostly untrustworthy, the investigation insufficiently thorough, the evidence presented insufficiently conclusive and tended to the conclusion that the defendants may have been tortured into confessing during the investigation.<sup>11</sup> Consequently in its judgment of 26 September 1924, the Judicial Committee headed by judge Dr. Gyula Fuchs acquitted László Sinkó, Miklós Bölönyi, first degree, and Andor Fülöp, György Piroska, János Piroska, János Sági and Rókus Sági, second degree of three counts of murder and twenty-five counts of attempted murder. It is highly likely that influential military and political circles intervened to help the defendants, and the acquittal in this case was not a coincidence in this case either.<sup>12</sup>

The probable mastermind behind of the bomb attack of Csongrád, János Piroska, who was a drawing teacher and painter by his civilian profession, later became fully consolidated and started a political career.<sup>13</sup> He graduated in law in 1930, became the chief notary and then mayor of Csongrád in 1933, and during his tenure large-scale construction projects were started in the city. In 1945, after the Second World War he was arrested and tried in the People's Tribunal for war crimes and crimes against the people, but was acquitted of all charges.<sup>14</sup> Even so, all his family's property and estates were confiscated and they were kept under constant police surveillance. In 1952 János Piroska was also briefly interned in the forced labour camp at the Great Hungarian Plain, Hortobágy.<sup>15</sup> In 1956, he took part in the Hungarian Revolution against the occupying Soviet Union, and after the fall of the revolution and war for freedom he was briefly

<sup>11</sup> [Anonymous Author], *Egy felmentő és egy marasztaló ítélet*, Világ, 28 September 1924.

<sup>12</sup> Kálmán Shvoy, *Shvoy Kálmán titkos naplója és emlékirata 1920–1945*, ed. Mihály Perneki, Budapest, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1983, 97.

<sup>13</sup> Péter Erdélyi, *Képviselőtestületi választások 1929-ben Csongrádon*, Múzeumi Kutatások Csongrád Megyében 2003, ed. Péter Erdélyi–Judit Szűcs, Szeged, Móra Ferenc Múzeum, 2002, 119–125.

<sup>14</sup> HU-MNL-CSML-XXV-8-5-d-NB-148/1945.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Gulyás, *Az 1945-ös csongrádi földosztás vesztesei*, Emlékeztető, 2016/1–2, 52–68.

arrested once again. He then retired from public life for ever 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 the town, and today there is a square named after him in his hometown.<sup>16</sup>

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 First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas about the Csongrád bomb outrage among other things, and if his responsibility was to be found, he would be treated in the same way as anyone else.<sup>17</sup> Héjjas was also interrogated by the police in connection with the Csongrád bomb explosion and the conspiracies of nationalist secret societies and paramilitary groups in general, in the presence of the National Police Commissioner Imre Nádosy himself, but in the end it was not proven that he was personally involved in any criminal activity.<sup>18</sup> Of course, this was certainly nothing more than a bargain between the paramilitary commander and the government and possibly Regent Governor Miklós Horthy himself.<sup>19</sup> Besides Horthy, Gyula Gömbös, who later became Prime Minister, 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.<sup>20</sup> The example of Iván Héjjas described earlier tells us a great deal about the relationship between radical irredentist-nationalist associations, political secret societies and the paramilitary units with countless links to them and the Hungarian government. Not only did the former paramilitary commander not have to answer for his actions before the judiciary system, but he later received Vitéz's title,<sup>21</sup> a kind of specific Hungarian knighthood that entailed several 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. He owed his political rise to Gömbös who became Prime Minister of Hungary a few years later in 1932.

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 the brutal activities of his detachment, his arbitrary assassinations and adventurer-like political actions he became increasingly burdensome for the Bethlen government,<sup>22</sup> and he was eventually forced to

<sup>16</sup> Attila Tóth, *Piroska János élete és festészete*, Csongrád, [Private Edition], 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Nemzetgyűlési Napló, 1922–1926/XVIII, 337–338. Lajos Serfőző, *A titkos társaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Serfőző, op. cit. 36.

<sup>19</sup> Bodó, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Bodó, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Péter Konok, *Az erőszak kérdései 1919–1920-ban. Vörösteror–fehérterror*, Múltunk, 2010/3, 72–91, 84.

retire, become completely sidelined, and was also expelled from the Union of Etelköz, the pro-government political secret society of the era.<sup>23</sup>

In the spirit of consolidation, the paramilitary formations and national defence militias still operating in various areas of the country, such as the Héjjas's Brigade of the Great Hungarian Plain and other armed units of the Association of Awakening Hungarians were then essentially disarmed and regularised, and their law enforcement and military powers which could be traced back to the turbulent civil war, were definitely and unequivocally abolished. At the same time, a paramilitary organisation, the Office of National Labour Protection was set up under the control of the Ministry of the Interior, primarily to break strikes and labour movement organisation. It was a kind of white, right-wing workers' militia whose members were equipped with handguns and had the same powers of action and use of weapons were the same as those of the police, but it was rather an auxiliary police rather than a military force.<sup>24</sup> 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 tighter government control, but could essentially continue to operate.<sup>25</sup>

The Double Cross Blood Union, the strongly influential secret military organisation of the era 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*<sup>26</sup> as a secret special operations military unit, formally within the Ministry of the Interior and the National Labour Protection, but in reality subordinated to the Ministry of Defence. Shvoy thus dates the genesis of the organisation itself to this period, to the end of 1923. There is also an archival source about the integration of the Double Cross Blood Union into the Office of National Labour Protection: a confidential circular from the Ministry of the Interior from 1926 which forbids the members of the National Labour Protection to refer to the new strike-breaking auxiliary police force as the 'Double Cross Blood Union' even among themselves, as it is associated with rather bad public memories.<sup>27</sup> 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

<sup>23</sup> Pál Prónay, *A határban a halál kaszál. Fejezetek Prónay Pál naplójából*, ed. Ervin Pamlényi–ÁgnesSzabó, Budapest, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1963, 322–324.

<sup>24</sup> HU-MNL-OL-K 26-XXII-6010; 5.818. M. E. számú rendelet a nemzeti munkavédelmi intézmény fegyverhasználati jogáról, 1923. augusztus 2., Magyarországi Rendeleték Tára, 1923, 274.

<sup>25</sup> Rudolfné Dósa, *A MOVE. Egy jellegzetesen magyar fasiszta szervezet*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1972, 151–152.

<sup>26</sup> *Csak szolgálati használatra! Iratok a Horthy-hadsereg történetéhez, 1919–1938*, ed. Tibor Hetés–Tamásné Morva, Budapest, Zrínyi Katonai Könyv- és Lapkiadó, 1968, 499–500.

<sup>27</sup> HU-MNL-OL-K 149-1926-6-3473.

pacify the former (in some cases irregular) soldiers of the National Army, which had once numbered over 100,000 and was reduced to a maximum of 35,000 after 1921. In this strange, voluntary auxiliary police and reserve military status many people still felt useful and being in the service of the state. That is, the Hungarian radical right-wing militia movement thus continued to exist partly within the framework of this organisation, in a, so to say, domesticated form.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Dósa, op. cit. 134.



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