

**CONSOLIDATION WITH GRENADES,
THAT IS, THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT IN
JÁSZKARAJENŐ, 1922**
A CHAPTER OF POLITICAL TERRORISM IN HUNGARY



History

Keywords: political terrorism, anti-Semitism, paramilitary violence, radical right-wing movements, Hungarian political 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 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 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 article reconstructs certain terroristic crimes committed by the members of irregular military formations, mainly the fortunately prevented grenade assassination plan of Jászkarajenő via a micro-historical case study, 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.

In the years following the Great War, in the 1920s, paramilitarism and paramilitary violence was an almost natural, but at least very widespread phenomenon in Hungary, just like in many other countries of Central Europe, mainly delivered by demobilised and still active soldiers.¹ After the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the collapse of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, the new right-wing Hungarian 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 armed force of Hungary which certainly was based on the remains of the enormous army of the Dual Monarchy, but these paramilitary troops very often operated completely independently of any central commandment. This 2-year-long wave of paramilitary violence which was committed by mainly detachments subordinated to influential, radical right-wing paramilitary commanders First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, Lieutenant

¹Robert Gerwarth, *Harc a VörösSzörnyeteggel. EllenforradalmierőszakKözép-Európavereségetszenvedettállamaiban*, transl. PéterVárady, in *Háborúbékeidején. ParamilitáriserőszakEurópábanazelsővilágháborúútán*, szerk. [Robert Gerwarth–John Horne](#), Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2017, 71–92.

Colonel Pál Prónay or Major Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek is popularly called the White Terror in Hungarian historical literature.² Radical right-wing irregular soldiers exploiting the weakness of the Government committed several serious crimes like robbery, plunder and even hundreds of 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.³ The Government led by Prime Minister Count István Bethlen gradually ceased the White Terror by 1921, and made steps to disband/regularise irregular/paramilitary troops and formations. The otherwise strongly right-wing, authoritarian conservative Hungarian Government who in the beginning had used these military units to consolidate its powers later 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.⁴

Although paramilitary violence finally ceased in 1921, and irregular military formations were formally disbanded, the radical right-wing Hungarian militia movement 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 irregular armed militia called *Nemzetvédelmi Főosztály–Department of National Defence*. The government, mainly the army and the Ministry of Defence secretly 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, and thousands of armed people were kept in secret military status, waiting for deployment. The military and the radical right-wing political movements had very strong relations these times due to the historical traumas, hyper-nationalism and extreme patriotism nearly necessarily coupled with violent anti-Semitism.⁵

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

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

⁴ Op. cit.

⁵ See Balázs Kántás, *Milicisták, puccsisták, terrorfiúk*. Művészeti és Irodalmi Jelen Kft., Budapest, 2021.

<http://real.mtak.hu/123884>

Some secret irregular military formations, mainly related to the Department of National Defence of the ÉME and the Double Cross Blood Union gradually started becoming concerned in political terrorism, like the luckily prevented bomb outrage plan in 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 Double Cross Blood Union, and paramilitary commanders First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas and Lieutenant Commander 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).⁶ Despite the fact that Gyula Gömbös had left the governing party and become a politician in the opposition, and his relation to Prime Minister Count Bethlen deteriorated due to his large-scale ambitions and radicalism, he was still a very influential politician in the right wing, since he had a very good relation with the head of the state, Regent Governor Admiral Miklós Horthy who was strongly supported by the conservative political circles as well as radical right-wing political movements and paramilitary formations.

One of the instances of relatively fortunate outcomes of the radical right-wing political terrorism that spread in Hungary for a short time – uncovered in the preparatory stage – was the 1922 hand grenade assassination attempt in Jászkarajenő. István Keő, originally named Kucsera, in some sources called István Keő-Kucsera, a farmer and innkeeper from Jászkarajenő, in a small town near the Hungarian capital, Budapest, was one of the leaders of the local sub-organisation of the Association of Awakening Hungarians and a well-known local activist of the radical right began to complain strongly in February 1922 to his friends that another catering establishment in the village which happened to be owned by a Jewish person was generating more turnover than his pub. He, therefore, decided to teach the local Jews a lesson, to intimidate them in some way, and in any case to carry out some unspecified act of violence against them.⁷

As the leader of the Jászkerajenő local sub-organisation of the ÉME, István Keő-Kucsera was a regular guest at the headquarters of the Association of Awakening Hungarians at 3 Sörház Street in the downtown of Budapest, and in connection with this he also visited the pub at the bottom of the building frequently. It was here, on an unspecified day in February 1922, that he met his friend Mihály Gyalay, a radical right-wing journalist and editor of one of the political newspaper of the Awakening movement called *Hazánk (Our Homeland)* (the editorial office was also located in the Awakening headquarters), and complained to him that, in his opinion, the Jews of Jászkarajenő were plotting against the local Awakening activists. That is, the local Jewish restaurant owner was spoiling his business – and Keő-Kucsera suggested that this should be tackled. The far-right journalist naturally agreed with his friend and Awakening brother, and the more wine the two men drank, the louder they became about their aversion to the Jews of

⁶ Op. cit.

⁷ Budapest City Archives, HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924. István Keő-Kucsera and his associates' trial, 1924.

Jászkarajenő. Gyalay, in a wine-induced state, suggested that hand-grenades should be thrown at the houses of certain Jewish people in Jászkarajenő as a means of intimidation.⁸ 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, an impoverished demobilised soldier who was in need of money and was now working private official, but who, of course, was also a member of the Awakening Hungarians, and he sat down with the beside the two men who were drunkenly hatching anti-Semitic plans. Kovács himself voiced his agreement.⁹

If the archival sources of the case are to be believed, the radical right-wing gentlemen were now drinking wine in a threesome, and their determination to carry out the planned assassination attempt with a hand-grenade seemed to be becoming clearer. József Kovács volunteered to carry out the assassination on behalf of István Keő-Kucsera for a fee, and Keő-Kucsera enthusiastically accepted the offer. They agreed that Kovács would travel from Budapest to Jászkarajenő the next day to survey the area, that is, in order to inspect the specific house on which he would have to throw grenades. At the same time, Mihály Gyalay took it upon himself to acquire the grenades needed to carry out the assassination.¹⁰

The drunken anti-Jewish assassination plans of the radical right-wing young men then took a very serious turn, as József Kovács actually travelled to Jászkarajenő to Keő-Kucsera the next day to survey the targets, including the house of Izsák Fischmann, a local Jewish resident. After the survey, the parties agreed that József Kovács would contact Mihály Gyalay, collect the explosive devices he had promised, and then report back to Keő-Kucsera to discuss the details of the assassination.¹¹

A few days later, at the beginning of March 1922, József Kovács visited Mihály Gyalay at the Awakening headquarters, in the editorial office of the newspaper *Hazánk*, and asked him for the promised hand grenades, which Gyalay had not yet obtained. At Kovács's urging, however, he became active and immediately went from the editorial office to the office of Géza Adorján, a student engineer and leading officer of Awakening also located in the headquarters. Despite his young age, Géza Adorján was a relatively influential figure on the far-right movements of the time, deeply involved in a number of political assassinations. He held a leading position in the paramilitary wing of the association, the National Defence Department, and had close ties with the commanders of the notorious (then disbanded but still alive in various forms) detachments of the army, including Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay, who was at the time one of the vice-president of the Awakening and also head of the National Defence Department.¹² Mihály Gyalay, citing higher orders and patriotic purposes, asked for the support of the National Defence Department through Géza Adorján, and Adorján simply took out two working, German-made, World War I grenades

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Serföző, *A titkos társaságok és a róluk folytatott parlamenti viták 1922-1924-ben*, 75.

from his desk drawer and handed them to the journalist without any further ado.¹³ Gyalay thanked him for his support and for the explosive devices he had provided, then walked back to the editorial office of Hazánk, and for safety's sake – like most members of his generation, he had served as a soldier himself in the First World War and had basic knowledge of explosives - unscrewed the handles of the grenades, wrapped them in newspaper and handed them over to József Kovács. Kovács put the grenades in his briefcase, received a small sum of money (100 koronas) from Gyalay and left the Awakening headquarters.¹⁴

Here the events took another surprising turn, as József Kovács seemed to have lost his courage with two working hand-grenades in his briefcase, and just a few hundred metres from the Awakening headquarters on Sörház Street, on Kálvin Square, he called to István Pikola, the police officer on duty, and told him that he had found grenades on the train, and that he thought they were dangerous and wanted to hand them over to the police as soon as possible.¹⁵ However, the policeman became suspicious of the young man's story and brought Kovács to the police station of District 4, where he was interrogated by detectives, and the hand-grenades were seized by the police and handed over to the military body responsible for collecting military equipment left over from the First World War, mainly in the possession of demobilised soldiers. The military officers in charge quickly established that the German-made military hand-grenades were really functional, dangerous and unreliable, and destroyed them within a short time, drawing up a detailed report about their annihilation.¹⁶

At first, József Kovács tried to maintain his earlier story to the detectives 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 conspiracy to commit murder.

István Keő-Kucsera, Mihály Gyalay and Géza Adorján were soon arrested by the police in March 1922, and based on the detailed testimonies of József 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 having formed an alliance to prepare the assassination.¹⁷

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

István Keő-Kucsera denied everything during the investigation and the inquiry, and did not even admit that he knew József Kovács at all, let alone that he had commissioned him to throw grenades at the houses of Jewish people he did not like in exchange for money. All he admitted was that although he did not remember it exactly, he thought it possible that he had in front of

¹³ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Mihály Gyalay while drinking wine and in a very drunken state berated the Jewish residents of Jászkarajenő whom he considered to be unpatriotic, and even hinted at teaching them a lesson in front of his friend. However, he stated that he had said this out of impulsiveness at most, without any specific plans or aims.¹⁸

Mihály Gyalay, a radical right-wing journalist proved to be somewhat more cooperative than his friend who incited József Kovács to the assassination, and admitted that he had heard Keő-Kucsera speak several times about committing atrocities against the Jews of Jászkarajenő, an idea he himself also supported to some extent. Finally, Keő-Kucsera clearly instructed Kovács to carry out the assassination, they agreed on the details, Kovács travelled to Jászkarajenő and together they carried out a number of preparatory acts, for example, a detailed survey of the houses on which it was planned to throw grenades to intimidate the people living there. Gyalay, of course, in order to save himself, did not admit unequivocally that he himself had acquired the explosive devices and handed them over to József Kovács, but defended himself by claiming that he had acquired the grenades for patriotic purposes, for the purpose of carrying out possible military (irredentist?) acts against an unspecified enemy (in the territory of neighbouring states). Vaguely, the same argument was made as in many similar criminal cases that the militias of the Association of Awakening Hungarians mainly composed of demobilised soldiers were in fact auxiliary units of the Hungarian Defence Forces, and therefore operated legally, with the knowledge and consent of the government, and as such, the people involved would have been serving their country and could not be considered criminals, terrorists or individuals plotting against the established order of the state.¹⁹ Although the investigation, the inquiry and the trial did not unequivocally reveal the involvement of the Double Cross Blood Union, the highly influential secret irregular military unit of the era, the role of Géza Adorján, his close ties to Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay's detachment, and the extensive overlap between the national defence militias of the Awakening and the Blood Union also suggest the involvement of the Double Cross Blood Union, the very influential secret military organisation of the era in this case. Mihály Gyalay was otherwise found to be a member of the Double Cross Blood Union's leadership in a somewhat later case of arms concealment in 1924, so it seems clear that the organisation may have been behind the assassination attempt in Jászkarajenő as well.²⁰ Gyalay made contradictory statements during the investigation, and he tried to defend himself and his group by claiming that the grenades he had received from Géza Adorján were not operational, and he strongly doubted that the devices taken over and destroyed by the military authorities were the same as those he had received from Géza Adorján and handed over to József Kovács who eventually brought the whole company to the police.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ [Anonymousauthor], *A Kettős Kereszt Vérszövetség tulajdona volt a lefoglalt fegyverkészlet*, Friss Újság, 22 January 1924, 1.

Géza Adorján, an officer of the National Defence Department of the Awakening Hungarians and close subordinate of Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay denied all along that he knew anything about the assassination attempt of István Keő-Kucsera and József Kovács against Jewish residents in Jászkarajenő. He only admitted that Mihály Gyalay, citing superior orders and patriotic purposes (by superior orders Gyalay probably meant Lieutenant Colonel Prónay, Adorján's military superior and one of the main organisers of the nationalist militias of the time), which he naively provided to the newspaper reporter. However, he denied that he had any discussions with István Keő-Kucsera and József Kovács about the specific use of the grenades, nor did he believe that the grenades he had given him were not operational.²¹

However, the testimony of József Kovács, who was probably only pretending to take the execution of the assassination because of his financial difficulties, but who quickly backed away from it and revealed the whole affair in detail to the authorities, was in contrast to all of them. Kovács's testimony was consistent, thoroughly detailed, and he fully admitted his own role in the prepared crime, while his confession's consistency and credibility contrasted sharply with the confused, contradictory and repeatedly changing details of the testimonies of the other three defendants.²²

After the indictment, the Royal Criminal Court of Budapest finally heard the case of the Jászkarajenő grenade plot, a little later, between 11 and 18 June 1924, with the presidency of Judge Dr. Achil Schirilla. 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.²³

During the trial, the defence tried to confuse the criminal court, citing trumped-up charges and patriotic reasons, but could use only inconsistent arguments against the full confession of the accused József Kovács and Captain Pál Reinhardt, Chief Artillery Foreman, according to which the German-made military hand grenades were clearly functional and dangerous devices, capable of killing human life. The defendants' position was further aggravated by the testimony of Rezső Balázsi, a member of the Association of Awakening Hungarians who, according to his own statement, had been present when Mihály Gyalay handed over the hand grenades he had received from Géza Adorján to József Kovács. Balázsi distinctly recalled that one of them, presumably Gyalay, had said: 'the newspapers will write a lot about this, we will seriously disturb the Jews'. That is, not only had the grenade attack been carefully planned by the radical right-wing young men with terrorist tendencies, but they had also anticipated its public impact and possible press coverage. It seems that they would have been delighted if it had been able to create fear among Jews in the whole country.²⁴

²¹ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

The Royal Criminal Court of Budapest finally accepted as true and credible the repentant and detailed confession of József Kovács, the expert opinion of military expert Pál Reinhardt and the incriminating testimony of witness Rezső Balázsi. The court also took into account the strong anti-Jewish sentiments and radical anti-Semitism of the accused, the fact that they themselves did not deny their strong anti-Jewish sentiments and political views for a single moment, and on the basis of all these factors, the court decided to convict the accused in 1924. In its judgment of 18 June 1924, it found István Keő-Kucsera first accused, Mihály Gyalay second accused and József Kovács third accused guilty of the crime of conspiracy to commit murder. The court finally sentenced Keő-Kucsera to four months of imprisonment, Gyalay to three months of imprisonment and József Kovács to two months of imprisonment, and also ordered them to pay the costs of the criminal process. However, the 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, potentially deadly assassination.²⁵

Although the Awakening Hungarian activists who prepared the grenade raid in Jászkarajenő which fortunately was never really carried out were found guilty and convicted by the court in their criminal trial, they received surprisingly light sentences compared to the gravity of their actions. The prosecutor appealed, of course, and the criminal case of István Keő-Kucsera and his fellows continued at the second instance, but the Budapest Royal Court of Appeal and the Judicial Council presided by Judge Dr. István Gadó did not significantly increase the sentence of the terrorists of Jászkarajenő. The second instance judgment of 14 October 1925 largely upheld the provisions of the first instance judgment of the Royal Court of Budapest, adding only that the defendants had to pay compensation of 1,000,000 koronas to Izsák Fischmann, the victim, an Israelite resident of Jászkarajenő and his family, whose house had been designated by István Keő-Kucsera as the target of the hand grenade attack by József Kovács.²⁶

István Keő-Kucsera, the local paramilitary leader in Jászkarajenő was not only known for the assassination attempt that ended up in court. As the leader of the local subdivision of the Awakening Hungarians, he had been linked to a number of violent atrocities like beating Jewish people and illegal acts disguised as auxiliary police activities of the Army in 1920-1921, during period of the White Terror. Several official investigations were carried out against him, and it seems clear that not only Géza Adorján, but also Keő-Kucsera himself had very close links with the former military detachments and detachment members associated with the above mentioned paramilitary commanders Pál Prónay and Iván Héjjas, as well as with radical right-wing paramilitary groups that were still active in 1922–1923.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ [Anonymous author], *A szolnoki ügyészség újabb vizsgálatot rendelt el Keő-Kucsera „kilengései” ügyében*, Pesti Napló, 4 November 1924, 7.

By the way, the criminal case of the terrorists from Jászkarajenő did not end completely with the second instance verdict. Namely, with the help of their defence lawyer Dr. Kálmán Fehérváry, István Keő-Kucsera and Mihály Gyalay filed a nullity complaint to the Hungarian Royal Curia (Supreme Court) after the second instance verdict was delivered, so the case reached the third instance, the highest Hungarian judicial forum. The nullity complaint was heard by the Curia on 27 September 1927, more than five years after the hand grenade assassination in Jászkarajenő, and in its order of the same day it rejected the defendants' nullity complaint.²⁸

It can be seen as a symbolic gesture of justice that the Hungarian Supreme Court also ruled – now irrevocably – that the radical right-wing activists István Keő-Kucsera, Mihály Gyalay and József Kovács were guilty of the crime of conspiracy to commit murder, and it was only by luck that József Kovács changed his mind before it was too late, refrained from carrying out the assassination attempt and disclosed the preparations to the investigating authorities in detail. In spite of this, the Awakening terrorists of Jászkarajenő were not punished in any meaningful way, and the prison sentence of a few months imposed on the three defendants part of which the court of first instance took to be completed by pre-trial detention cannot be regarded as a sentence commensurate with the act of murdering people which endangered human life. It is also suspicious, that Géza Adorján, an officer of the Association of Awakening Hungarians who had been involved in higher military and political circles and had organised paramilitary units, and whose name was associated with many other serious politically motivated crimes after 1922, was acquitted of all charges against him, and he was not even given a symbolic sentence.

There is usually no clear evidence or no written source of this kind available to researchers, but based on the often very similar outcomes of similar criminal cases in the 1920s, we can perhaps allow ourselves some generalisations and draw some conclusions based on the network of contacts of the accused. Especially it is the socially highly mobile Géza Adorján and his close acquaintance with paramilitary commanders Pál Prónay and Iván Héjjas that makes us draw the conclusion that certain influential political and military circles may have been involved in the case of the Awakening terrorists of Jászkarajenő, and they somehow managed to ensure that the young men with radical right-wing affiliations who had prepared for an undoubtedly serious crime received the minimum possible punishment for their actions, even though it was proven that they had conspired to carry out actions that could have resulted in serious injuries or deaths.²⁹ Although the influence of the radical right-wing in Hungary in the first years of the 1920s was not unlimited at all, it certainly existed, and radical military officers and politicians – also as the members of the oppositions who turned against consolidationist Prime Minister Bethlen – still could enforce their own interests, and, to say it with certain irony, imagined to realise political consolidation with the use of hand-grenades...

²⁸ HU-BFL-VII-1-d-10935/1924.

²⁹ Zinner, *op. cit.* 159–160.

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