



E-ISSN: 2706-9117

P-ISSN: 2706-9109

www.historyjournal.net

IJH 2020; 3(2): 90-95

Received: 16-04-2021

Accepted: 25-05-2021

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The crimes of the irregular military detachment commanded by first lieutenant Iván Héjjas in the Danube–Tisza Interfluve during the wave of paramilitary violence in Hungary called the ‘White Terror’ in 1919–1921, and extracts from the afterlife of a radical 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.

Keywords: Paramilitary violence, anti-semitism, military history, political history of central Europe

Introduction

In the years following World War One, in the 1920s, paramilitarism and paramilitary violence ^[1], mainly committed by demobilised or still active soldiers was an almost natural phenomenon in Hungary, just like in many other countries of Central Europe ^[2]. 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 ^[3], 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 ^[4]. 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 ^[5]. 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 ^[6].

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Iván Héjjas, a key figure of post-WWI paramilitary violence in Hungary, a 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 ^[7]. In the spring of 1919, as a soldier who had served on the front, he began to organise his detachment near his farming family's estate in the Kecskemét area, with the aim of overthrowing the Communist Government ^[8]. 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 ^[9]. 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 ^[10].

Héjjas was also one of the founders and leaders of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, so this nationalist social association – which was increasingly organised along paramilitary lines at the time – 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 battle in Kecskemét against the Communist troops, Héjjas and his armed comrades – including, for example, Sergeant Major Mihály Francia Kiss, one of the most notorious soldiers who committed murders during the White Terror, and the later radical right-wing mayor of Kecskemét, Béla Liszka – eventually joined the counter-revolutionary government organising in Szeged ^[11]. In April 1919 Admiral Miklós Horthy, 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 ^[12].

The Royal Romanian Army which occupied a large part of Hungary soon dismantled the remnants of the Communist Government, and in the summer of 1919 Héjjas's troops were also given permission by the military authorities of the occupying army to provide auxiliary police services in the Kecskemét area in order to restore the disintegrated social order. Héjjas proclaimed himself city commander in Kecskemét – also with the approval of the Romanian Army and the Szeged counter-revolutionary government – and 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 ^[13].

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 Terror ^[14]. 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, whose peculiar order 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 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, 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 started to act 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 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 other individual robbery murders by members of the detachment, but for some time they delayed taking action against the armed men ^[15]. 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 who also sent a copy of the same document to the General Command of the National Army ^[16]. The report of the head of the Royal Public Prosecutor's Office of Kecskemét to the Chief Public Prosecutor from November 1919 documents roughly similar conditions and the same events, emphasizing that Iván Héjjas's detachment was a relatively large and well-armed force, and therefore, attempts to bring the perpetrators of the atrocities to justice could even result in armed confrontations ^[17]. 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 the 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 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 Jews, most of which resulted in no deaths but serious injuries – one need only think of the well-known pogrom in Izsák on 17 November 1919 ^[18].

Even today, researchers do not have exact numbers and list of names ^[19], 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 so-called *Alföldi Brigád* – *Brigade of the Hungarian Plain* may have murdered about 400 people ^[20]. The formation of the Double-Cross Blood Union can be dated to sometime during this period as well, the first months of the right-wing counter-revolution, and the organisation was certainly closely overlapping with Ivan Héjjas' detachment. As it was already mentioned above, Héjjas, if we are to believe the sources, was the deputy military commander of the Double Cross Blood Union in the 1920s ^[21].

The members of the Héjjas detachment/Brigade of the Hungarian Plain also took an oath, swearing to their leader, detachment commander Iván Héjjas. The wording of the

oath was quite similar to the oath of the Double Cross Blood Union:

'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' ^[22].

Iván Héjjas was thus surrounded by a 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 DCBU. The members of the Brigade of the Hungarian Plain, which operated as a separate unit of the Double-Cross Blood Union, undoubtedly committed serious crimes during the White Terror between 1919 and 1921. Iván Héjjas and some of his men then joined the uprising in West Hungary, where as the members of paramilitary group of active, reserve and demobilised soldiers, students and young people of peasant origin, known as the *Rongyos Gárda – Ragged Guard*, they played an 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 ^[23].

At the same time, in order to prevent vigilante justice, the Government of István Friedrich, with its questionable legitimacy, 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 ^[24]. The Government entrusted the prosecution to Deputy Crown Prosecutor 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* ^[25], first published in 1922, which sought to document the atrocities of the 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 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 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 Interfluvium and to prevent similar incidents in the future, he would send Váry to the Great Plain, reinforced by serious police and gendarmerie escort ^[26].

In 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 very period when the crimes really happened, about the investigations or the White Terror, is the 1922 summarising report of Albert Váry on the events that took place on the Danube-Tisza Interfluvium. 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 soldiers, were also abducting 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 ^[27]. Finally, the Government clearly abolished the right of the military authorities to take actions against civilians in 1921, and prosecutor Dr. Péter Kovács was also assigned as the deputy of Dr. Albert Váry to investigate the murders committed on the Danube-Tisza Interfluvium, 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 – placed a number of detectives at the disposal of the prosecutors [28].

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 [29]. On 19 October 1921, Váry addressed a request to the Commissioner General of the Government of West Hungary, Count Antal Sigray, to hand over 50–60 persons who had fled there 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 [30]. 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 [31].

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 [32]. The prosecutor could not, however, continue the arrests and on-the-spot interrogations that he had begun for long, since the amnesty order [33] of 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 [34]. 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 [35].

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 region were legally considered soldiers, he referred the cases to the military authorities [36]. In most cases, the investigation was closed by the military authorities [37], which had not previously shown much cooperation with Albert Váry, who had approached them in several cases [38]. 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 [39]. 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 [40]. 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' [41]. 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 [42], but was soon released [43].

In parallel with the pacification of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, Iván Héjjas, a key figure of the Hungarian White Terror and the leader of the bloody atrocities committed on the Danube–Tisza Interfluve, who played a leading role in the DCBU, was also – apparently – consolidated and pacified. He was able to avoid punishment throughout the Horthy Era, mainly thanks to his relationship with Regent Horthy and Gyula Gömbös. 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 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 on Iván Héjjas, his brother Aurél Héjjas, Gyula Gömbös and dozens of other former and active soldiers [44]. Iván Héjjas's and Gyula Gömbös's example 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 law [45], and as a former fighter pilot and otherwise competent aviation expert, 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 head of the Department of Public Aviation, adviser to the minister, later promoted to titular state secretary [46], and at the same time a member of the board of directors of the state-owned Hungarian Air Traffic Company, and the governor promoted him from reserve first lieutenant to reserve captain. Officially, he was responsible for the supervision and organisation of civil aviation, but as a former fighter pilot and expert of military aviation, he also played a role in the organisation and development of the Air Force of the Hungarian Home Defence Forces [47].

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 [48], 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^[49].

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 and Italian policy of aggression. In 1938, under the direction of former Interior Minister Miklós Kozma (an influential politician of the era and also a used-to-be soldier personally close to Regent Governor Horthy, 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 subverting operation, which prepared the reoccupation of Transcarpathia which had been annexed to Czechoslovakia in 1920 under the Peace Treaty of Trianon, with the assistance of the German military^[50].

Furthermore, Héjjas also probably played a role in organising the election of Miklós Horthy's son, István Horthy as Deputy Regent Governor^[51]. Héjjas and the son of the Regent Governor also had a personal good relations, since István Horthy was an air force officer and served as a fighter pilot as well. Furthermore, 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 an expert in diversionary/irregular and 'ungentlemanly' warfare, on the Regent Governor's order^[52]. This irregular military unit, however, ultimately played no role in the military defence of 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 and radical right-wing politician finally died in Spanish exile in 1950, aged 60, presumably of natural causes.

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