Fascist war crime trial in Hungary ends in acquittal

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A Budapest district court has acquitted the 97-year-old Sandor Kepiro, charged with war crimes in relation to a 1942 massacre of Serbs and Jews in the vicinity of Novi Sad. The case against Kepiro, who was indicted as part of the "last chance" campaign conducted by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, was considered one of the last great trials of war criminals from the Nazi era.

In 1942, Kepiro was employed as an officer of the Hungarian police in Vojvodina, which now belongs to Serbia. The area was annexed by Hungary in 1940 with German consent. Hungarian dictator Miklos Horthy was allied with Hitler during the Second World War.

According to official figures, the massacre conducted around Novi Sad by Hungarian troops, police units and members of the fascist Arrow Cross Party, led to the deaths of 1,200 people—mainly Serbs, Roma and Hungarian Jews. Recent research now puts the number of victims at over 4,000. Some historians even put the figure as high as 12,000 deaths in the weeks of "cleansing", which also extended to the town of Becej and surrounding district of Šajkacka.

The prosecutor accused Kepiro of the murder of four people, and aiding and abetting in the murder of 32 others. They refrained from laying further charges.

In January 1944, Kepiro was convicted of the massacre in Novi Sad together with other police officers and was sentenced to ten years in prison by a Hungarian court. However, he never began serving his sentence and was only briefly held under house arrest; when Hitler's army occupied Hungary shortly afterwards and installed a fascist government, the verdict was reversed. Kepiro participated in the deportation of Hungarian Jews to the extermination camps before emigrating to Argentina with German support.

In 1946 in Yugoslavia, he was convicted for the Novi Sad massacre and sentenced to death *in absentia*.

In 1996, after the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe, Kepiro returned home safely to Budapest with the knowledge of the Hungarian authorities. He felt so safe in Hungary that he could even be found in the phone book under his real name.

Kepiro's return received little press attention. Isolated calls for him to be prosecuted for war crimes were answered with the assertion that there was no evidence for this. The social-democratic government, which held office until 2010, also failed to mount any proceedings against Kepiro.

Recently, he lived in an apartment in the Jewish quarter, near the Great Synagogue. He gave brazen interviews to the state television channel and in newspapers, stating that he had only followed orders and had done nothing to regret. He made ??no secret of his fascist opinions.

In 2006, the Simon Wiesenthal Centre called for a trial to be mounted. The Hungarian justice system took its time, however, and it took five years before a trial was launched. Although the Serbian judiciary had opened a case against Kepiro in 2008, domestic political differences quickly meant the investigation of Serbian war crimes was halted.

The Kepiro trial not only involves vital historical questions, it is also politically explosive. The Fidesz government under Prime Minister Viktor Orban, which has a two-thirds majority in parliament, has rehabilitated the Horthy dictatorship, under which Kepiro committed his crimes. And the far-right Jobbik party, with 46 parliamentary deputies, promotes the traditions of the fascist Arrow Cross Party.

During the trial there were repeated expressions of sympathy from Jobbik supporters inside and outside the courthouse for the defendant. The "National Legal

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Foundation" headed by Jobbik parliamentarian Tamas Nagy-Gaudi took over his defence.

Jobbik strives to build a "nationwide gendarmerie" to protect Hungarians from "gypsy crime." This is modeled on the gendarmerie of the 1940s, in which Kepiro served during the massacre at Novi Sad.

Parallel with the Kepiro trial, four men alleged to have carried out attacks against Roma in 2008 and 2009 were also being tried in Budapest. The crime involved the deaths of six Roma, with several also sustaining injuries, including a toddler. Some of the attacks took place where the "Hungarian Guard", Jobbik's paramilitary arm, had recently held parades.

The presiding judge in the Kepiro trial, Bela Varga, made little effort to hide his political preferences. At the May 5 hearing, after a demonstration outside the courthouse, some members of the public entered the courtroom with a Star of David; Judge Varga then ordered the removal of the Jewish symbol. In contrast, at the next hearing, members of the right-wing extremist group Burgkomitate 64 (HVIM) were allowed into court wearing t-shirts with the fascist Arrow Cross symbol. Asked by a reporter about the fascist symbol, he said: "It does not bother me much".

The court acquitted Kepiro for lack of evidence. The legal ruling and verdict dismayed victims' associations and Jewish organizations. The court rejected the use of evidence and documents from the trials of 1944 and 1946, saying that under Hungarian law, no one should be condemned twice for the same crime. As Kepiro avoided serving his sentence thanks to the Nazi invasion, this position is deeply reactionary; it amounts to accepting Nazi and Arrow Cross forces, then engaged in the genocide of the Jews, as legitimate authorities on issues of war crimes.

The court even classified the testimony of a surviving witness as not credible. An old lady testified that she had seen Kepiro beating a child with a rifle. Judge Varga explained that at the time, the police in Novi Sad carried pistols, and so her statement was not credible.

Jobbik celebrated the acquittal as a "victory", and the ruling right-wing nationalist Civic Union (Fidesz) also reacted favourably to the verdict. Leading Fidesz members were somewhat reticent in their comments, but it is no secret that the ruling party has hardly any differences on such issues with Jobbik.

The best example is Zsolt Bayer, a notorious racist and anti-Semite, who in January was awarded the Madach Prize for his cultural contributions by a Fidesz committee. A British critic of Hungary's repressive media laws was described by Bayer in the pro-Fidesz paper *Magyar Hirlap* as "stinking excrement", and he expressed his regret that people like that were not buried in the forest of Orgovany. In this Hungarian village after the First World War, there had been a massacre where hundreds of supporters of the short-lived Soviet Republic, among them many Jews, were killed.

Since taking over the government last year, Orban has ensured that all the important posts in the administration and justice department have been filled with those close to Fidesz.

This most probably influenced the verdict in the Kepiro trial, as Rudolf Gruber from *RP Online* established in one of the few critical comments. "The verdict is politically explosive", he wrote. "Since he took power in May 2010, the nationalist and conservative Prime Minister Viktor Orban has placed all state organs under his purview, including the judiciary."

The acquittal of Kepiro and the rise of the far right in Hungary speak volumes on the "revolution" of 1989. The fall of the Stalinist dictatorship was celebrated as a "democratic revolution" and the beginning of prosperity and freedom. However, the people did not gain freedom and democracy, but capitalism and exploitation. Two decades later, Hungarian society is deeply divided, and the right-wing spectres of the past are returning with a vengeance.

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