A New Beginning?

Hungary in the Era of the Provisional National Assembly, 1944-45



Edited by Róbert Barta & Róbert Kerepeszki

University of Debrecen, Department of History, 2026

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Published by

University of Debrecen
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Institute of History

Refereed & Native language editing by

Thomas Cooper

Desktop editing, layout by

Sándor Ónadi

Cover design by

Nikoletta Sipos

On cover
The lower embankment of Pest in early 1945,
with the Royal Palace of Buda in the background.
Source: Fortepan / Balázs Mihályi, online: https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?id=217833

ISBN 978-963-490-808-1

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RÓBERT KEREPESZKI

Blurred Boundaries: Black Market, Theft, and Policing in Budapest, 1945*

Introduction

Approaching the issue from various perspectives, the secondary literature gives profound insights into how wartime and immediate postwar periods influence and shape the dynamics of crime and law enforcement practices.[1] Budapest's prevailing social and public security conditions at the turn of 1944–1945 provide a striking example of how the war, the modern urban siege, and the ensuing general turmoil became major structural factors in crime and policing. In the Hungarian capital, the joint effect of these events led to a social and public security crisis, fundamentally altering social relations, including many characteristics of metropolitan criminality, which is the primary subject of this study.

During the period under study, criminal activity took a diverse array of forms. Given the wide range of possible civilian crimes, as well as the political and war crimes typical of the period, a more comprehensive and in-depth study would certainly yield interesting findings. However, this study of criminality does not aim to be exhaustive. It focuses, rather, on criminal acts committed against private property. This brief overview also highlights, moreover, the significance of newly formed criminal groups and their main activities during the period in question.

Pursuing this objective, the discussion first considers how wartime urban crime can be understood through the lens of social functioning and individual survival strategies. Although it is not the focus of the present analysis, one soon sees that the crimes discussed here and the activities of individual gangs may overlap with and cannot always be separated from other categories of crime that have been extensively discussed in the secondary literature. The study will argue that some crimes, such as black-market activities and theft, became "nor-

* The paper has been implemented with the support provided by Project no. 152871, the Ministry of Culture and Innovation of Hungary from the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund, financed under the ADVANCED_25 funding scheme.

1 Clive Emsley, "Crime and Policing in Wartime," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Crime and Criminal Justice*, eds. Paul Knepper and Anja Johansen (Oxford University Press, 2016), 519–536.; Rosemary Gartner and Liam Kennedy, "War and Postwar Violence," *Crime and Justice* 47 (2018): 1–67.

mal" due to exceptional circumstances. In contrast, other crimes, like looting and those committed by organized gangs, became an increasingly persistent threat to the population. To arrive at a more nuanced understanding of this complex issue, we first examine the difficulties concerning the available materials, the possible interpretative frameworks, and relevant sources.

Considering the complexity of the subject, the *Alltagsgeschichte* ("history of everyday life") paradigm developed by German historians to describe everyday life in Germany after the Second World War is perhaps the most suitable for this analysis.[2] Using these methodological principles, I present below some distinctive but characteristic patterns of everyday crime along three periods that are difficult to distinguish socially: before, during, and after the siege of the capital. As already indicated, the examples of crime forms presented, including the black market, various kinds of theft, and postwar gang activity, are not intended to be exhaustive. Instead, they are selected to illustrate the predominant types of crime that distinctly reflect that period's public security issues and social experiences.

I examine first the development and functioning of the black market, which had evolved over several decades and reached its full scale during and immediately after the siege of Budapest. Rather than treating it solely as a criminal network, I highlight its role as a multi-actor system embedded in everyday survival strategies. The subsequent section focuses on various forms of theft, interpreting them within the context of the "public security vacuum" that emerged during the siege, where survival was a central but not exclusive motivating factor. The final section turns to the challenges faced by law enforcement during the last phase of the war and the early period of postwar consolidation, with particular attention devoted to the emergence of criminal groups and the difficulties encountered by the newly formed police force in restoring control over urban spaces and rebuilding public trust.

One of the main aims of the study is to provide an interpretation of the socio-historical patterns and conceptual frameworks of crime in the Hungarian capital against the backdrop of the final phase of the Second World War and the few months immediately following it. At the same time, in this context, the study also sheds light on some hitherto underappreciated aspects of the survival strategies used by the civilian population, as well as on the continuities and discontinuities in social relations between peacetime and wartime.

[2] Alf Lüdtke, "Introduction: What Is the History of Everyday Life and Who Are Its Practitioners?," in *The History of Everyday Life. Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, ed. Alf Lüdtke (Princeton University Press, 1995), 3–40; Paul Steege, Andrew Stuart Bergerson, Maureen Healy and Pamela E. Swett, "The History of Everyday Life: A Second Chapter," *The Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 2 (2008): 358–378.

Interpretative framework, concepts, sources

Some thoughts in the introduction to this discussion suggest that any attempt to deal with such topics must grapple with various theoretical and methodological challenges. The first among these is the dilemma of setting an appropriate timeframe. Namely, when did wartime days begin and end for the people of Budapest? Whether we should take the actual entry of Hungary into the war (June 1941), the German occupation (March 1944), the country's transformation into a theater of war (September 1944), or the beginning of the siege (November 1944) as the starting point is a question that is as much a matter of reflection as the question of how long this state of emergency lasted. The latter aspect is important because essential public services (especially policing, a particularly relevant topic here) were either lacking or functioning poorly for months following the siege of Budapest. Moreover, the institutional infrastructure necessary for "normal" everyday life was also in disarray. Furthermore, the siege of Budapest cannot be understood as a well-defined, one-off event. It was, rather, a gradually evolving process, the starting and ending points of which might have been different for the inhabitants of the city at the time, depending on the conditions under which they lived.[3] These few aspects show that we are dealing with a subject that cannot be confined to a rigid time frame, as the periods before, during, and after the war cannot be sharply separated.[4]

A similar theoretical difficulty arises concerning the concept of everyday delinquency in wartime, especially if we want to interpret it not only from a criminological but also from a sociohistorical perspective. However, the methodological approach I have chosen here mitigates this difficulty, since *Alltagsgeschichte* focuses on life experiences, everyday practices, and the social contexts in which individuals lived. This method places particular emphasis on individual experiences, patterns of socialization, goals, ambitions, challenges, and feelings. Moreover, it focuses on the study of routine activities and community interactions. Although the notion of everyday life is formed by the contexture or interweaving of regular activities and experiences (i.e., lived everyday realities), it is not a static phenomenon but a complex one that is also characterized by routine and change, as well as by the joint effects of the social and cultural context.[5]

During wartime, the social world in which the individual lives becomes uncertain, chaotic and dangerous, disrupting familiar and routine activities. New tasks may replace usual activities that help individuals cope with their changed circumstances. In this context, ordinariness is no longer understood as stability and consistency. It becomes, rather, a set of practices allowing for the "routinization" of uncertainty. People adapt to experiences that compel them to take new measures, often facing new moral dilemmas. As a result, behaviors that may break legal

[3] Krisztián Ungváry, *Battle for Budapest. One Hundred Days in the Second World War*. (I.B. Tauris, 2016), 7–12.

[4] Gartner and Kennedy, "War and Postwar Violence," 5–7.

[5] Lüdtke, "Introduction," 5–7.

norms can sometimes be seen as necessary for individual survival and can even be interpreted as new social requirements. Adaptation to the altered circumstances of everyday life in wartime can consequently lead to the development of new social rules and informal patterns of behavior that can gradually become normalized, i.e., they may acquire an everyday character. This alteration often conceals latent processes generating significant external and internal conflicts, similar to those observed during the transition from war to a more stable state of peace.

It is thus not easy to grasp the everyday nature or ordinariness of social practices and morays that emerge as methods of adaptation in a time of war. At the same time, it is equally challenging to arrive at a clear definition of "everyday crime" for the same period. However, it may be reasonable to ask whether it makes sense to talk about ordinary crime under such extraordinary circumstances. During wartime, the related rules cannot (necessarily) prevail, because, for example, the law enforcement authorities and judicial institutions that are essential to ensure their effectiveness are not functioning. Furthermore, these bodies and institutions are often radically altered following a regime change in the wake of military conflict, as happened in Hungary in the second half of the 1940s.[6]

In addition, interpretations of order and general norms become ambiguous or pliable, for example, because some acts (such as food theft) can be interpreted as crimes that violate legal norms but also as a legitimate part of a survival strategy. The simultaneous presence of several authorities and other bodies further complicates the matter, as such actors often act in opposition to one another, making the correct interpretation of the concepts more uncertain. This was particularly the case during the siege of Budapest in 1944–1945 and the months that followed, when remnants of the "old" Hungarian police, anti-German forces, various German-allied Arrow Cross units, and Nazi and Soviet military authorities patrolled the capital separately.[7] This is vividly reflected in an entry in the diary of a Budapest police officer in early January 1945:

> Now there is no police, no law, no security of life, and no security of property! Now everyone is fair game, and anyone can be murdered with impunity by the so-called law enforcement officers.[8]

It is clear from the discussion above that the dysfunction or radical transformation of institutional policing in wartime also contributed significantly to the destabilization of legal norms. While the exceptional legal measures introduced during the military conflict, such as curfew, internment, and the procedures of military

[6] Tamás Kovács, "Police Officers at a Crossroads: Life-Stories of Hungarian Police Officers after the German Occupation of Hungary," *Istoriva* 42, no. 1 (2024): 135–140.

[7] Ákos Bartha, "Terrorists and freedom fighters: Arrow Cross Party Militias, »Ragged Guard« and »KISKA« Auxiliary Forces in Hungary (1938–1945)," *Studia Historica Brunensia* 69, no. 2 (2022): 67–89.

[8] *Elfeledett történelem. Fábián Gáspár rendőrtiszt ostromnaplója, Budapest 1944–1945*, eds. Balázs Mihályi and Mihály Rohánszky (Erdélyi Szalon, 2025), 72. (Gáspár Fábián's diary entry from 7 January 1945.)

courts in civilian cases, may suggest tighter institutional control, many factors might have had precisely the opposite effect. For example, the aforementioned curfew during the siege was accompanied by restrictions on street lighting at night. An obvious reason for this measure was to make it more difficult for enemy planes to bomb the capital. The darkness also provided excellent conditions for certain crimes, however, such as burglary. The factors influencing this situation may blur the lines between "order" or "lawfulness" and "disorder" or "lawlessness," along with understandings of everyday crime.[9]

However, these uncertainties do not make efforts to classify certain wartime "everyday crimes" meaningless or irrelevant. Through this approach, we do not aim at creating new categories of offences, but merely to reinterpret some old or conventional categories in the context at the time. Conventional criminal acts are transformed and multiplied and become increasingly "conspicuous" during wartime as a direct consequence of the emerging new perpetrators, both individuals and groups. As a consequence, some of the reinterpreted forms of crime are almost integrated into the set of normal activities of everyday life. On the other hand, it is worth emphasizing that the theory of everyday crime becomes relative in wartime. This means both that certain crimes (such as theft) that had been of lower priority in peacetime might become more significant and also that social disorganization, the increasing inadequacy of law enforcement, and a general lack of security make the population much more vulnerable, which for many people is perceived as a perpetuation or consolidation of instability and a dominant factor of everyday life. The study of everyday wartime crimes requires a sociohistorical approach, which does not aim at normative judgments but seeks rather to explore the kinds of acts committed in these extraordinary times (most often as parts of survival strategies), acts which would probably not have been committed in peacetime under, when legal norms offered more protection.[10]

These phenomena often left only sparse and sometimes distorted traces in the historical sources. Therefore, to get the best possible approximation of the actual situation, we have to rely on different types of sources, which may offer different, sometimes even contradictory perspectives, both separately and complementing each other. One group of sources consists of so-called ego documents,[11] mainly diaries and letters written by civilians during the siege. Many of these sources offer valuable insights from a "bottom-up" perspective. Despite this, most of them must be handled cautiously. These narratives, of course, are shaped by and reflective of potential biases, as well as the tendency to exaggerate or downplay actions taken or experienced. They are also shaped by events which take place during the time

9 Gartner and Kennedy, "War and Postwar Violence," 28–30.

10 On the issue of everyday crime in times of war, see also Clive Emsley, "Future Themes and Research Agendas on Crime and Police in Wartime," *Crime, History & Societies* 21, no. 2 (2017): 78–82.

11 On the concept of ego documents, see Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker, "Jacques Presser, Egodocuments and the Personal Turn in Historiography," *European Journal of Life Writing* 7 (2018): 90–110.

elapsed between a given event and the author's account of the event, as well as hindsight reasoning. Also, care should be taken when using archival documents originating from the police and/or other authorities. While in most cases, these highlight the challenges that law enforcement authorities are obliged to face, some often reflect ideological or formalized perspectives, particularly because of the influence of the occupying powers and the new postwar political order.

At first glance, crime statistics may appear accurate and reliable. Their usefulness, however, is limited. Data collection disruptions, deliberate or accidental distortions, and the selectivity of recorded crimes raise questions about the reliability of the data due to methodological inconsistencies.[12] In support of this, it is worth noticing that while a growing amount of district-related data was registered monthly following the siege of the Hungarian capital, much of this information might be misleading for various reasons. One of the causes of this is that the content of the Chief Commissioner of Police's report changed. Until August 1945, the account informed the Budapest General Assembly about the number of criminal investigations completed by the police every month. From this date on, however, the report focused on the number of investigations initiated upon denunciations filed monthly.[13] The latter account hardly provided a more accurate overview of the actual crime situation and the expected criminal trends in Budapest. This was mainly because many crimes were not reported to the police when they occurred but only when they were noticed. This fact was highlighted in the contemporary press. For example, many people who returned to the capital weeks or months after the siege only then discovered that their homes had been looted,[14] so their reports at that time distorted the picture of crime in that period (e.g. months). Furthermore, in April 1946, the Chief Commissioner of Police of Budapest himself stated that certain persons, especially the victims of crimes committed by fences and other swindlers, had so far been unwilling or afraid to report the perpetrators "partly for reasons of public safety or for certain psychological reasons." However, as the public began to believe that the police had become more active and effective, more and more victims appeared with complaints and charges dating back to earlier periods.[15] This situation in particular distorted crime statistics, because victims reported their grievances during a period when confidence in the police was improving. Although the population took this increased confidence as a key factor influencing public safety and crime trends, it turned out to be misleading regarding the actual criminal conditions.[16]

Finally, the contemporary press is an obvious source, not only as a source of information but also as a means of shaping (and studying) the collective image of

[12] On methodological problems in crime statistics, see Paul Knepper, *Writing History of Crime* (Bloomsbury, 2016), 31–57.

[13] *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 25 August 1945. 528; *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 25 September 1945. 634.

[14] *Szabad Magyarország*, 2 September 1945. 4.

[15] *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 27 April 1946. 570.

[16] International comparative studies confirm this. See Gartner and Kennedy, "War and Postwar Violence," 8.

public security. At the same time, changes in political power and different interests, the presence of foreign occupying forces, censorship, and editorial practices tailored to the tastes of the reading public might have significantly impacted the credibility of information from various press organs.[17] This is all well reflected in the contemporary newspapers, as the prewar adjectives and metaphors used to describe crimes and their perpetrators are increasingly associated with the ideological overtones of the postwar world.

The black market in Budapest

The gradual loosening of legal norms under wartime conditions found expression in the rise in crime, particularly in crimes against private property. One must take the relevant wartime conditions into account, which included the rationing system, a shortage of goods, and the decline in the purchasing power of real wages. These factors imposed ever heavier burdens on the population and made it increasingly difficult to maintain previous living standards. More and more people were gradually forced to cross the boundaries of legality to survive. This process is first recognizable through the functioning of the black market.[18]

Black market techniques that develop under wartime conditions became increasingly sophisticated due to the centrally controlled economy, the arbitrary nature of the rationing system, and the shortage of goods. The black market had always been driven by a special "free trade" logic. Prices were determined by the intensity of supply and demand, totally independent of official price controls. The black market is not a typical Hungarian phenomenon. Its operation had a decisive impact on the daily lives of people in the occupied states (e.g. France), areas directly affected by the fighting (see Italy), and even on the countries that were in the war but did not suffer occupation (e.g., Great Britain). In fact, the black market became such a familiar part of everyday life that it continued to pose serious challenges for most countries involved in the war well into the postwar period, whether they ended up on the winning side or the losing side.[19]

In Budapest, the extensive operation of the black market was not a new experience for the population, given that a similar phenomenon had already existed in

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17 On the postwar Hungarian press, see Róbert Takács, "A nyomtatott sajtó a koalíciós időszakban (1944–1948)," in *A sajtószabadság története Magyarországon 1914–1989*, ed. Vince Paál (Wolters Kluwer, 2015), 256–353.

18 Edward Smithies, *Crime in Wartime. A Social History of Crime in the Second World War* (George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 58–77, 201–203.

19 On black-market activities in other countries during and after the Second World War, see Mark Roodhouse, *Black Market Britain 1939–1955* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Malte Zierenberg, *Berlin's Black Market 1939–1950* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015); Stefanos Geroulanos, "An Army of Shadows: Black Markets, Adaptation, and Social Transparency in Postwar France," *The Journal of Modern History* 88, no. 1 (2016): 60–95; Kenneth Mouré, *Marché Noir. The Economy of Survival in Second World War France* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

the Hungarian capital during the First World War.[20] However, several factors impede a more nuanced historical understanding of the black markets in Budapest and other cities. One of the reasons for this lies in the multifaceted, hidden, and informal nature of the black market. In most cases, black market activities remained largely concealed, as this market existed alongside unregulated and unlawful activities. These activities included profiteering, fraud, stockpiling, smuggling, tie-up sale, foreign currency crimes, counterfeiting, adulteration of foodstuffs, unlicensed trade, and chain trade. These were not the practices of individuals acting on their own. Rather, they were carried out mainly within well-organized networks formed by various occasional or professional actors in the black market. In these clandestine networks, producers of the products offered for sale, intermediaries, and final sellers all found a stable place for themselves. Consequently, informal regulation, reputation, trust in personal social networks, and the constant management of the risk of being caught were all part of the specific operating mechanisms of the black market, as were the buyers themselves, who generated, maintained, and fed this illicit flow of goods through their consumption needs.

Most contemporary diaries, memoirs, newspaper articles, and official reports acknowledged the existence of the black market as a separate entity in a normative and general way but rarely shed light on its actual social and economic causes and/or spatial dynamics. In addition, many accounts suggested, overtly or implicitly, that some of the authorities supported the existence of the black market and even participated directly or tacitly in its maintenance, either for survival or for personal enrichment. This kind of "institutionalized concealment" was already evident in Budapest during the First World War,[21] and examples from other countries show that the police and other public services often played a tolerant, even supportive role in the operation of the informal and clandestine economy.[22]

In the years of the Second World War in Hungary, restrictions imposed during wartime economic management, including price regulation and the introduction of a new rationing system, significantly impeded the capacity of wage earners and the economically disadvantaged to meet their basic needs. Concurrently, the wealthier social groups were able to access most goods through the black market, which was experiencing robust growth. This situation gave rise to heightened tensions between social classes, and by 1942, the authorities themselves acknowledged their inability to regulate the black market effectively, which had permeated virtually every sector of the economy. This was despite the fact that the Hungarian government had repeatedly increased the penalties for black-market activities. Furthermore, during the siege of Budapest, various military authorities imposed

[20] Laura Umbrai, *Az éhes Budapest. A lakosság élelmezése a fővárosban az első világháború alatt* (Budapest Főváros Levéltára, 2024), 55–58.

[21] Zsombor Bódy, "Élelmiszer-ellátás piac és kötött gazdálkodás között a háború és az összeomlás idején," in *Háborúból békébe: a magyar társadalom 1918 után*, ed. Zsombor Bódy (MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, 2018), 164–166.

[22] Norman Lewis, *Naples '44. A World War II Diary of Occupied Italy* (Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1978), 109–110.

capital punishment by hanging for certain black-market activities.[23] Following the conclusion of the Second World War, those found to be perpetrators of such abuses remained subject to capital punishment.

In addition to the implementation of stringent legislation, law enforcement agencies sought to combat the black market by conducting regular raids[24] at railway stations, major markets (such as those on Garay Square and Teleki Square), and entertainment venues. However, in reality, black market trade was often not linked to these urban areas. Numerous sources reveal that efforts were made to circumvent official controls with the assistance of various front organizations, commercial establishments, and offices. Even in 1946, the situation in Hungary remained critical (exacerbated by lower-than-expected crop yields) to the extent that, in winter, the population was able to address one third of its needs by making purchases on the black market.[25]

'Public security vacuum' and the thefts

By the second half of 1944, wartime mobilization and the Soviet Red Army's encirclement of Budapest created increasingly severe living conditions for the population. The state infrastructure providing public utilities (gas, electricity, and water) gradually became inoperable. By the turn of 1944–1945, the siege had created such a chaotic situation that the capital's population had become increasingly vulnerable to improvised and informal solutions for survival. This structural crisis, which affected all aspects of metropolitan life, created a public security vacuum in which there was almost no institutional guarantee of protection. A key aspect of this process was the gradual cessation of police surveillance in the fundamental social spaces of the city, that is, on the streets and squares,[26] where the local Budapest police patrols were replaced by German, Soviet, and Hungarian soldiers, as well as by violent Arrow Cross terror squads. As a result, where written and unwritten social norms had once prevailed, the absence of law enforcement control created zones of anarchic abandonment, hopelessness, arbitrary looting, and occasional violence.[27]

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[23] *Elfeledett történelem*. 72. (Gáspár Fábián's diary entry from 7 January 1945.)

[24] On the Hungarian police raids at the time, see János Molnár, "Razziák a fővárosban. A Gazdasági Rendőrség tevékenysége 1945–1948 között," *Múltunk* 55, no. 4 (2010): 46–64; Ildikó Cserényi-Zsitnyányi, *A politizált gazdasági rendőrség. A Gazdaságrendészeti Osztály, 1945–1948* (Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, 2015), 55–71.

[25] Péter Gunst, "Mezőgazdaság és élelmezés Magyarországon a II. világháború folyamán," *Agrártörténeti Szemle* 24, no. 3–4 (1982): 369–378; Gyula Erdmann, *Begyűjtés, beszolgáltatás Magyarországon 1945–1956* (Békés Megyei Levéltár, 1992), 47–48.

[26] For more on the importance of police surveillance of streets in general, see Roland Perényi, "Urban Places, Criminal Spaces: Police and Crime in Fin de Siècle Budapest," *Hungarian Historical Review* 1, no. 1–2 (2012): 134–165.

[27] Ungváry, *Battle for Budapest*, 216–236.

The collapse of law and order, together with the cessation of police control in public spaces, meant not only the collapse of formal law and order institutions but also the transformation of informal norms of social coexistence. One spectacular sign of this was that some members of the population lost so much trust in traditional law enforcement agencies that they took the protection of their immediate surroundings into their own hands. "To avoid unpleasant burglaries, the male members of the house keep watch from 9 p.m. to 7 a.m.," a young Budapest girl wrote in her diary in January 1945, reflecting how certain residents' communities were trying to regain some control of their surroundings and restore some measure of law and order through self-organization.[28] This show of self-defense can be understood as a simultaneous social response to the loss of a legitimate state presence and the imminent direct threat of a state of complete disorder in which crime would become more common.

At the time, the blockaded and besieged city of Budapest became an uncontrolled area for plunder, where the boundaries between public and private property had become blurred and where, for many soldiers, civilians, and destitute people, stealing other people's property was a way to survive. Several sources reveal that various forms of theft became relatively normal parts of everyday life, and that society's moral perception of the perpetrators had also changed. The need to survive simply overrode moral inhibitions and fears of being caught in the act. On 25 January 1945, a boy in Budapest wrote the following in his diary: "I have put the principle of 'stealing food is not a crime' into practice. If I see a jar of jam anywhere, even in a stranger's house, I take out my spoon and eat it until someone enters the room."[29]

As previously noted, moral assessments of peacetime crimes committed as a way to survive during the siege during this period changed. One finds clear examples of this change in the explanations given by perpetrators of their crimes. This change is also captured in the diary of another boy from Budapest, written at the end of January 1945:

> My tour took me past a stationer's shop window shattered by an explosion. [...] Among pencils and other office supplies, I saw a thick notebook. I decided to take it for myself. I planned to write my poems in it. I didnt consider it theft because nobody owned it anymore under the war conditions. That's what I thought.[30]

Among the kinds of theft during the period, one form common in Budapest deserves mention. It is difficult to understand today and indeed may have been hard for people at the time to understand. During the siege of Budapest, people made so-called "air-raid bags," into which they packed their most essential belongings. These bags were always easy to carry in case one had to take refuge at an air-raid

[28] Eszter Juhász, "Ostromnapló," in *Naplók az óvóhelyről. Budapest ostroma civil szemmel*, eds. Barbara Bank, Balázs Mihályi and Gábor Tóth (Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, 2021), 401.

[29] Miklós Marót, "Naplótöredék," in *Naplók az óvóhelyről*, 241.

[30] János Tolnai, "Naplórészletek," in *Naplók az óvóhelyről*, 149–150.

shelter. Some thieves specialized in seeking places in air-raid shelters where no one knew them. Then, after a bombing raid, they would take advantage of the confusion to steal other people's air-raid bags, hoping to get valuable loot.[31] During the turbulent months following the siege, car theft became a prominent profession of sorts in the "theft-industry," mainly due to the lack of police registration and control. In his memoirs, the Soviet city commander of Budapest recalled that the perpetrators of car thefts had become so bold in the second half of 1945 that even the vehicles of officers of the Allied Control Commission were not safe from them.[32] The two phenomena vividly illustrate how theft had become a way of life for members of some social strata, and not only a means of survival for those in need.

Consequently, theft cannot be considered a single, simple, discrete category, because there is a substantial difference between theft committed as part of a survival strategy and theft committed simply as a means of gaining wealth. The wartime circumstances and the immediate postwar world created new opportunities for people to steal the belongings of others, and it also made it more tempting to do so, since moral and thus psychological limitations had been loosened. As a consequence of the siege, apartments remained without doors and windows, which might have made them seem abandoned. Consequently, many might have thought that what was left inside was unowned and, therefore, could be taken as booty. Offences against property became so widespread and commonplace that theft was often not considered a serious criminal act. This opinion was strengthened by the frequent experiences of the civilian population, who clearly saw that soldiers from the various belligerents, whether they were defenders, attackers, or occupiers, and even members of the local law enforcement agencies were often involved in theft and looting. This observation indirectly normalized theft and also tacitly emboldened people to steal other people's belongings. Furthermore, there were other moral justifications offered for stealing the property of others. If the stolen goods came from the enemy's stocks, for instance, the theft could even be seen as serving a "higher" purpose.[33]

Finally, theft can also be interpreted as a psychological response to the traumatic experiences of war. It offered a kind of compensation that may have partly alleviated the experience of material and human loss, as well as the hardships of long-term deprivation and the constant fear of death and vulnerability during the siege. However, it is important to stress that these motives were only seldom clearly separated from one another in the practice. There were often several motives behind an act of theft. Survival, moral insecurity, the breakdown of community norms, psychological traumas, and the feebleness of law enforcement often

[31] Csilla Markója and István Bardoly, "'Kegyetlenebb, mint bármelyik országban.' Wilde Margit és Ferenc Wilde Jánosnak írt párhuzamos levélnaplói 1944-ből," *Enigma* 23 (2016): 118.

[32] Ivan Tyerentyevics Zamercev, *Emlékek, arcok, Budapest… Egy szovjet városparancsnok visszaemlékezései* (Zrínyi, 1969), 63–64.

[33] *Elfeledett történelem.* 114–115, 136–137, 174–176, 227. (Gáspár Fábián's diary entries from 29 January, 8 February, 26 February and 30 March 1945.)

appeared simultaneously and reinforced one another. In more than one case, theft became a permanent way of life, especially for those whose survival had depended on robbery or trading on the black market during the war and whose survival strategy had not been made obsolete or unnecessary by the gradual restoration of state order and something resembling normal life after the battles had ended.[34]

Gangs of Budapest

Even long after the siege, the persistent public security vacuum fostered the emergence of different criminal communities, which structurally opened a new chapter in the history of crime in the capital. In this period, many violent and often randomly organized gangs threatened the people of Budapest. These groups did not require sophisticated methods. Instead of a long-term operation, their only aim plunder and steal as quickly as possible, often by using brutal methods and means. One of their most typical methods was the so-called "undressing," meaning, essentially, mugging but also stripping the victims of (and stealing) their clothing. The Hungarian word used in the discourse of the time was "vetkőztetés," which emphatically refers to this act of stripping the victim of his or her clothes. One observer offered the following description of this crime: "It was not advisable to go out in the evening because the so-called 'undressers' were there. They would attack you, rip your clothes and shoes off, and take them. If you tried to defend yourself, they hit you on the head."[35]

In August 1945 alone, 319 robberies (an average of more than ten cases a day) were reported in Budapest, many of which were these kinds of muggings, and the number of cases that went unnoticed by the authorities is incalculable.[36] The prevalence of this method is well illustrated by the fact that a gang of muggers ("undressers") which operated in the neighborhoods around the railway stations and was arrested in January 1946 admitted that they had robbed 36 victims in this manner, in addition to having committed other crimes.[37]

These examples indicate that the practices of the gangs operating in Budapest after the siege differed from those of organized criminal groups in peacetime.[38]

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[34] Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent. Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (St. Martin's Press, 2012), 44–47.

[35] "Rille Teréz későbbi visszaemlékezése," in *Naplók az óvóhelyről*, 272.

[36] *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 25 September 1945. 634.

[37] *Magyar Nemzet*, 4 January 1946. 3.

[38] The literature on the activities of various criminal organizations points out that the operation of such communities depends on three key factors in addition to their social environment: structure, cohesion, and coordination. In other words, if the bonds between the members of a criminal group (unity, discipline, mutual trust, etc.) are strong (which is particularly important given the inherently illegal nature of their activities) and if there is a common purpose and a focused division of labor, as well as efficient and well-organized cooperation, the group may be viable in the longer term, or more precisely, more likely to avoid detection by law enforcement agencies. In the classical sense, the gangs typically operated with a less formal structure than

In 1945–46, unemployed civilians, demobilized soldiers, deserters, and frequently former criminals released or escaped from jails during the war, who hardly knew one another or were even complete strangers to one another, formed such gangs or spontaneously joined smaller or larger criminal groups. These criminal communities, which were quite mixed in terms of their social composition, were characterized not only by the use of violence in their crimes but also by their lack of organizational structure. Even at the time of their formation, they did not set up internal rules or a formal hierarchy, and they did not define long-term goals. Their primary goal was not to survive or to fit into the world of urban crime but to obtain immediate and preferably maximum material gain. It was easier for them to use violence than it would have been in times of peace, given the vast amount of weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment left behind in the city after the siege, which was easily accessible to the newly formed gangs. Compared with peacetime underworld criminal groups, these ad hoc gangs had a far more threatening toolset at their disposal. They had weapons, often complemented by Soviet or Romanian military uniforms and police armbands, and this gave them a striking advantage over the newly formed law enforcement agencies and the civilian population, an advantage that both accelerated and reflected the collapse of the informal peacetime criminal "rules" as well.[39]

The organization of criminal gangs was also facilitated by the fact that law enforcement agencies were severely weakened, having lost much of their former prestige and control over public spaces during the war. In 1945 and even in the following year, atrocities were committed regularly against the police, and according to some sources, it was not uncommon for police officers to be involved in exchanges of gunfire in six to eight places in one night.[40] During the wartime period, several physical and social spaces emerged in the Hungarian capital that became particularly favorable to the reemergence of crime. The streets remained without public lighting at night. Districts that been partly deserted and destroyed

other organized criminal groups with hierarchical, almost ritualistic rules, such as the Italian mafia. Their internal regulation system was looser and less sophisticated. They had less control over their members, but group cohesion may also lead to long-lasting cooperation between them over time. These gangs did not shrink from making their operations public. They therefore predominantly appeared and committed their crimes in public places, nightclubs, railway stations, and marketplaces, and they let their presence be known to the widest layers of society. A multitude of historical examples show that the emergence and proliferation of such gangs are most often bound to periods when the state's policing capacity has been weakened, regardless of whether this was a consequence of war, political transition, or economic instability. Scott H. Decker and David C. Pyrooz, "Gangs. Another Form of Organized Crime?," in *The Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime*, ed. Letizia Paoli (Oxford University Press, 2014), 270–278, 283; Catherine Denys, "Geography of Crime. Urban and Rural Environments," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Crime and Criminal Justice*, eds. Paul Knepper and Anja Johansen (Oxford University Press, 2016), 96–101.

39 Budapest Főváros Levéltára (Budapest City Archives, hereinafter referred to as BFL) XV.9, 28. Rezső Huszti, "A fővárosi közbiztonság alakulása 1945–1975. között," 10; BFL VI.12.a.1. 203/1945. Report by Police Chief László Sólyom for May 1945, 9 June 1945.

40 BFL XV.9, 28. Rezső Huszti, "A fővárosi közbiztonság alakulása 1945–1975. között," 10.

by bombing provided targets for looting. Public utility sites that had fallen out of use, such as empty waterworks, power stations, and public sewer tunnels, offered hiding places. The neighborhoods around passenger and freight railway stations also became chaotic areas rife with crime, mainly because of attacks on freight trains and the activities of smugglers, as well as bustling black trade in market halls. The rapid reopening of nightclubs and other places of entertainment posed a particular threat to public safety. In a climate of social disintegration, these became hybrid sites. They served as places of collective oblivion, trauma processing, identity search, and informal networking. Such entertainment blocks were particularly concentrated in places where disturbances of social mobility, bustling traffic at transport hubs, and weak state control were combined (e.g., around major railway stations). The partially urbanized natural areas of the capital also contributed to the deterioration of public safety in their peculiar way. Among them, the large parks that were particularly difficult to police, such as Népliget and Városliget, along with other public green areas, were of outstanding significance. Most of these places had provided temporary shelter for marginalized people trying to hide from the authorities. In many cases, the hidden places served as excellent stages for specific crimes. From the point of view of public order and moral regulation, the riverside was a similarly dangerous zone, where abandoned shipwrecks and quayside buildings could function as "bases" for various criminal groups or as hiding places for stolen goods.[41]

Journalists covering crime regularly reported on the capture of some gangs. One of the most famous of these was the case of the so-called Márfi (in other sources Márfy) Gang, the members of which were arrested after a long gun battle at the end of December 1945. The group of twelve members, two of whom were women, was equipped with two submachine guns, five revolvers, four hand-grenades, a police armband, and Russian military uniforms. The members of the gang confessed to two murders, three attempted murders, thirteen robberies, and eighteen burglaries. It is surprising to say the least that they started their activity only in November 1945, just one month before their capture.[42] The example of the Márfi gang, however, not only demonstrates the new aspects of postwar armed violence. It also points to another phenomenon that is at least equally disturbing: among the gang members, there were five juvenile offenders. This was by no means an isolated case, and sources dating back to before the siege period highlight the problems affecting teenagers, which prompted many of them to enter the world of crime.

41 Ibid. 21.

42 *Magyar Nemzet*, 30 December 1945. 1.

Conclusion

The importance of the period analyzed in this study goes far beyond the individual crimes and criminal groups that emerged in the wartime context and after the siege of Budapest. The collapse of public security, the violent appropriation of urban space, and the temporary absence of state order and control were defining social experiences and fundamentally reshaped the framework and attitudes of the public discourse on crime. In the months following the war, there was also an increasing ideological shift as certain crimes came no longer to be interpreted purely in criminological terms but also in political ones. In the public discourse, the boundaries between wartime crimes, political crimes, and everyday crimes gradually blurred, and this became a basis for new ways of exercising power later on.[43]

The aim of this study was twofold: first, to explore the patterns of crime in Budapest during and after the war using new sources and case studies and, second, to examine crime as a sociohistorical indicator. The examples highlighted, such as the functioning of the black market, the normalization of theft, the emergence of violent gangs, and the challenges of reorganizing the police, demonstrate that the forms and dynamics of crime are linked not only to political systems but also to deeper social processes, adaptive constraints, and specific social-spatial contexts. Additionally, numerous international parallels in the literature illustrate that the erosion of social norms, the blurring of the lines between formal and informal order, and the intertwining of crime and survival were not unique to Budapest in the postwar moment. Instead, these trends represent a social phenomenon which appears in various locations during historical crises. By studying the example of the Hungarian capital, we thus contribute to a more nuanced understanding of everyday life in times of war and sociohistorical reinterpretations of the concepts of crime and order.

[43] *Szabad Szó*, 4 January 1946. 1. Unsurprisingly, there was a similarly politicized, ideological interpretation of everyday crime in postwar Germany. See Richard Bessel, "Policing in East Germany in the Wake of the Second World War," *Crime, History & Societies* 7, no. 2 (2003): 8.