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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The lower embankment of Pest in early 1945,
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ROLAND PERÉNYI

Extraordinary Circumstances, Everyday Crimes: Budapest 1944–1947*

The siege of Budapest towards the close of the Second World War and the years which came in the wake of the siege can be considered one of the most critical periods in the modern history of the Hungarian capital and perhaps the entire country, when public safety, or more precisely the lack thereof, was a central social issue. From this perspective, the military operations taking place in Budapest and the aftermath of the war cannot be clearly separated from each other, since the former was shaped by the complete collapse of law enforcement and public safety, while the latter was determined by efforts to restore public order. Although it would be difficult to define both the beginning and the end of the period in question precisely, from the perspective of the discussion below, the timespan between the beginning of the siege of the capital, i.e., November 1944,[1] and roughly the end of 1947 can be considered a single phase, forming an arc from the collapse of public security to its gradual restoration. We could also phrase this idea as follows: the Second World War, both in Budapest and in Hungary, did not end with the conclusion of hostilities and the advent of peace, since the consequences of the war, including supply and housing problems and famine, still largely determined the everyday lives of city dwellers in 1946 and even 1947.

This is an extremely interesting period from the perspective of both urban and criminal history, and it is a period that has been relatively little researched to date. Prewar structures were still partially observable in both law enforcement and crime, but at the same time, the war and the changed political and economic environment gave rise to new, previously unseen elements.

Public safety as a central issue seems to be extremely important not only to historians attempting to interpret the era retrospectively. Contemporaries themselves, whether in the press, the government, the city, or law enforcement agencies, also saw the situation in this light. The issue of public order received special attention in the minutes of both the Provisional National Assembly and the Budapest National Committee, as well as in other official documents. Soviet military operations were still in full swing in the country when Béla Miklós Dálnoki,

* 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 See Krisztián Ungváry, *Budapest ostroma* (Corvina, 2013), 11–67.

Prime Minister of the Provisional National Government, highlighted the restoration of property and personal security as the third most important task, alongside the ceasefire and the establishment of the national army.[2]

Efforts to restore public safety in Budapest began during the siege in areas that were gradually being freed by the Soviet Red Army. One interesting source on this subject is the semi-official report by Károly Némethy, the temporarily appointed head of the Buda administration, on the situation after the siege of Buda and the reorganization of the administration in 1945.[3] In Némethy's report, we find the following about public safety:

> Resolving public safety issues was an extremely important task. In this regard, our authorities found themselves in a very difficult situation because they were powerless in the absence of adequate law enforcement, especially since arming the police was out of the question at the time. In many cases, the Russian district commands intervened very forcefully and often earned the gratitude of the population. Looting by the mob did not reach the same extent as on the Pest side. Nevertheless, public safety improved only gradually and slowly.[4]

Just how slow the pace of improvement was even after the siege (if one can speak of improvement during this period), is evidenced by the minutes of the meeting of the Administrative Committee of the capital on 18 September 1945. At the meeting, committee member Vince Nagy added the following comment to the chief of police's August report:

> Dear Administrative Committee! Mayor Vas's proposal [to extend martial law to include perpetrators of murder – R.P.], which we have accepted, proves beyond doubt that none of us is satisfied with public safety in Budapest. Looking at the chief of police's report, I must highlight two figures. According to the report, the number of crimes committed against life and physical integrity—not misdemeanors, but felonies—was 419 in one month. This means that 14 murders or attempted murders occur every day. The number of robberies was 319 in one month, which is more than ten cases per day.[5]

In the discussion below, in the absence of more detailed research on crime history during this period, I offer a general overview of the public safety situation in the Hungarian capital during the period outlined above. My analysis is based on two

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2 Minutes of the meeting of the Provisional National Government on 23 December 1944, in *Dálnoki Miklós Béla kormányának (Ideiglenes Nemzeti Kormány) Minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvei 1944. december 23.–1945. november 15.* A kötet, ed. László Szűcs (Magyar Országos Levéltár, 1997), 86.

3 Budapest Főváros Levéltára (Budapest City Archives, hereinafter referred to as BFL) IV.1420.j. The report, dated April 22, 1945, is published on the website of the project entitled *Women Raped in War*, initiated by the City of Budapest in 2020: HU_BFL_IV_1420_j.pdf (last download: 29 August 2025)

4 BFL IV.1420.j, 11–12.

5 *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 25 September 1945. 636.

main groups of sources: first, press reports and commentaries on public safety, and second, police statistics contained in the monthly and semi-annual reports submitted by the Budapest Chief of Police to the capital's Administrative Committee, which can be supplemented in part by other statistical data published from time to time in the press of the period.

In recent decades, international research on the history of crime has examined the impact of wars on crime from a variety of perspectives.[6] Although social historical research in Hungary has dealt relatively little with the correlations between wartime conditions and crime trends and has tended to focus on politically motivated crimes and war crimes, thanks to contemporary analysts, we have more detailed information about the impact of the First World War on public safety. Several criminal statisticians and criminologists have addressed the issue, but the most detailed treatise on the subject was written by Ervin Pálosi and published in 1927 by the Budapest Statistical Office.[7] With regard to the period following the Second World War, however, no similar research is available, presumably due to the political changes in the wake of the war and the communist takeover of the country. Indeed, no publications providing basic data on crime trends were produced during this period. Although articles dealing with this issue appeared in the press during the war, these articles cannot be considered thorough analyses. They are, rather, discussion papers raising the issue for public debate.[8] Nevertheless, while the circumstances were very different, since in 1918 the capital did not become a battlefield, whereas by the end of the Second World War, Budapest had become the scene of one of the most destructive sieges in modern history, it is nonetheless worth comparing, at least in broad terms, how the two wars affected crime in the capital in 1918 and 1944–1945, despite the lack of detailed sources related to latter period. In the discussion below, I present this comparison.

Criminal activities committed during the siege and the period before public order was completely restored can essentially be examined along five main lines. The first, and one of the most important from our perspective, is the trends in violent crime. Partly related to this issue (but definitely to be treated separately from crimes under public law) are politically motivated violence and war crimes. I do not deal with these kinds of crimes here. I focus, rather, on forms of crime that have

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6 For a summary of international secondary literature on this topic, see Clive Emsley, "Future Themes and Research Agendas on Crime and Police in Wartime," *Crime, History & Societies* 21, no. 2 (2017): 77–86.

7 Ervin Pálosi, *Budapest kriminalitása és moralitása az 1909–1925. években* (Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Hivatala, 1927).

8 The best example of this is Esti Ujság's autumn 1944 summary of crime committed during the war. "A háborús társadalom képe a bűnözési statisztika tükrében," *Esti Ujság*, 4 October 1944. 5–6. The contrast is particularly striking when compared to an article published before the German occupation, in January 1944, which summarizes court statistics for the year 1941. The article, published in *Pesti Hirlap* by lawyer and university professor Dr. György Auer, essentially notes an improvement in criminal statistics and even considers the moral state of Budapest to be no worse than that of the rest of the country, while also noting that the majority of crimes were being committed by adults. *Pesti Hirlap*, 19 January 1944. 3.

tended to define everyday criminality in times of peace. Similarly, it would exceed the scope of this study to examine in greater detail the third defining feature of the period, namely economic crimes, which became widespread primarily due to supply difficulties caused by the war. Within the trends of crime, a new phenomenon was an increase of crimes committed by juveniles,[9] and finally, due to the siege and the large number of soldiers stationed in the city after it, the issue of prostitution also came to the fore. I deal with the former only briefly and with the latter in more detail later in this discussion.

Public safety after the siege of Budapest

First, it is worth briefly summarizing the picture that emerges from the contemporary press about the state of public safety in the Hungarian capital. The city infrastructure had been almost completely destroyed during the fighting, the streets were full of rubble, residential buildings had become uninhabitable, and there was a lack of public lighting and public services. These factors all contributed to the breakdown of public order. This was exacerbated by the complete disintegration of the authorities responsible for public order and the total abolition of border controls, which, according to press reports, resulted in thousands of foreign nationals residing illegally in the city, often profiting from smuggling.

In light of this, it comes as no surprise that many firearms remained in private hands after the war, resulting in daily armed clashes and shootings. It was not uncommon for weapons to be used against the police.

At the same time, immediately after the siege ended, the various political forces launched intense political propaganda campaigns, each of which focused on public safety issues, regardless of party affiliation. American films, or more precisely their negative impact on society, were the primary target of this propaganda and its mouthpieces, the party newspapers. Discussion of the negative effects of crime films and pulp fiction was not new, of course, as this subject had already been part of the discourse on crime at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century.[10] It had not been as intense, however, and it had not been part of direct political propaganda. At the same time, between 1945 and 1947 numerous articles appeared in

[9] The problem had already emerged during the war: the aforementioned article in *Esti Ujság*, for example, emphasized the higher rate of crime among young people. "A háborús társadalom képe a bűnüzési statisztika tükrében," *Esti Ujság*, 4 October 1944, 5–6. See also: "Elkallódó magyar lelkek nyomában..." *Friss Ujság*, 5 April 1944. 4.; Dr. Pál Pados, "Utban a jobb élet felé," *Pesti Hirlap*, 21 September 1944. 4. Of particular interest to us is an article published in the daily newspaper *Uj Nemzedék* (New Generation) in 1944 titled "*Budapest élete ma sokkal kedvezőbb, mint az első világháborúban volt*" (Life in Budapest today is much better than it was during the First World War), which draws on a study by statistician Alajos Kovács. Despite its somewhat misleading title, the article also notes signs of crisis, including an increase in crime. "Budapest élete ma sokkal kedvezőbb, mint az első világháborúban volt," *Uj Nemzedék*, 4 May 1944. 7.

[10] See Roland Perényi, *A bűn nyomában. A budapesti bűnözés társadalomtörténete 1896–1914* (L'Harmattan, 2012), 221–223.

various publications (surprisingly, not only as part of the communist propaganda campaign) about the wave of crime sweeping the United States (and, less frequently, Great Britain and Western Europe as a whole). These articles emphasized the alleged moral inferiority of the capitalist-imperialist social system.

Another major focus of public safety concerns was the increase in the numbers of female offenders. The press was keen to emphasize that women were becoming criminals at a much higher rate than earlier and, they added, were also involved in a surprisingly high proportion of violent crimes. The issue had already been on the agenda during the war. As early as 1944, the political daily newspaper *Nemzeti Ujság* (National Newspaper) had drawn attention to the fact that, as the author of the article put it, the rise in crime among women was a "symptom of war."[11] According to an article published in the 20 June 1947 issue of *Népszava* (People's Voice) on summary proceedings announced in October 1945 to improve public safety and speed up judicial proceedings, 28 percent of the criminals were women.[12] This information alone does not necessarily prove that the proportion of female criminals actually increased significantly, as women have always been underrepresented in terms of lawbreaking compared to their proportion within the population as a whole. If we try to compare this data with earlier periods, we can rely on the research done by Nikoletta Sipos, who provides statistics on crimes committed by women during the Horthy era. Sipos' research shows that while there was relatively high fluctuation in the proportion of female offenders in the 1920s and 1930s, this proportion remained mostly below 20 percent, and only after the First World War did it approach the proportion reported in *Népszava*. In the 1920s, the highest rates of crimes committed by women were 24.2 percent in 1920 and 24.4 percent in 1925.[13] Compared to this, the proportion of female perpetrators after 1945 cannot be considered exceptionally high, but at the same time it seems to support the assumption that both World Wars had the same effect on the gender ratio of offenders. Furthermore, if we examine the high crime rate among women from the perspective of the war years, we see a slow downward trend. Although no relevant data are available for the Second World War, it can be assumed that, due to similar trends in the gender ratio of the population (with men being sent to the front), we would see processes identical to those observed during the First World War. During the years of the First World War, the proportion of female offenders was well above one-third, significantly higher than the abovementioned figure.[14]

From press reports, we can also draw conclusions about the spatial patterns of crime. First, contemporary newspaper reports clearly show that crime was linked to specific urban spaces and concentrated in certain areas. Second, there was some continuity with earlier periods. Some of the same urban spaces remained as critical in terms of crime as they had been before the war and even at the turn

11 "A nők bűnözésének meglepő számadatai," *Nemzeti Ujság*, 22 March 1944. 5.

12 "A bűnhullám csökkenését reméli a statáriális bíróság," *Népszava*, 20 June 1947. 2.

13 Nikoletta Sipos, "Nagyvárosi női bűnözés Budapesten az 1930-as években," *Múltunk* 69, no. 3 (2024): 215–235.

14 Ibid. 222.

of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such areas included certain parts of Józsefváros (the VIIIth district of the city), Teleki Square, and some suburbs.[15] At slum settlements originally built as temporary military barrack hospitals during the First World War, the situation became even more dire than it had been before the war. This is evidenced by a six-hour police raid organized on 20 February 1946 at the Mária Valéria settlement, in which 300 police officers, 400 detectives, and 50 Soviet soldiers took part. During the raid, law enforcement completely surrounded the settlement and went from house to house, arresting a total of 71 people, including several burglars and murderers who had escaped from the Markó Street prison during the siege or in the chaotic period that followed.[16] Police mostly tried to improve public safety in the city through raids involving large numbers of officers, mostly supported by the Soviet army, and the so-called "R(aid)-group" established within the police force in early 1946 also primarily attempted to address the situation using this method.

Another frequently discussed topic in the postwar press which also posed a major threat to public order was prostitution and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases associated with it. According to the 7 December 1945 issue of the democratic daily newspaper *Szabadság* [Freedom], "from the moral security standpoint, the situation in the capital is catastrophic—50,000 clandestine prostitutes are infecting the population." But the spread of prostitution was not only a topic in the news. The chief of police also spoke of tens of thousands of clandestine prostitutes (meaning prostitutes not under the control of the police) in Budapest in his report, emphasizing that the spread of prostitution was mainly due to women who had come to the capital from other parts of the country in search of som source of incomeseeking an opportunitys.

Those were the main issues of public safety in the capital that dominated the press discourse. The tone and style of press coverage were very similar to the tone and style of articles in the prewar press on the issue of crime. However, the fact that the relationship between the press and the police, and thus public communication about crime as a social problem, would soon change significantly in parallel with changes in the political system is foreshadowed to a certain extent by the critical remarks made by the police concerning primarily the print media. A good example of this criticism is János Soproni's article "Murder and the Press," published in 1947 in *Magyar Rendőr* (Hungarian Policeman), a police journal containing numerous propaganda pieces when it was relaunched two years after the war.[17] Soproni did not dispute that crime had increased as a result of the war, but he considered

[15] On 6 October 1945, the police attempted to eliminate the underworld presence on Teleki Square. During the raid, which involved 1,800 police officers (almost the entire police force at the time), 200 people were arrested. Ferenc Szilvási, *Rendőrlaktanya a Mosonyiban (1886–1986)* (BM Könyvkiadó, 1986), 60.

[16] "Határás razzia volt ma hajnalban vetkőztető banditák, gyilkosok, betörők és tolvajok után," *Világosság*, 20 February 1946. 2. Similar large-scale raids were carried out later in other slums as well. See, for example, "Hatalmas éjszakai razzia a Mária Valéria- és az Auguszta-telepen," *Kis Ujság*, 9 May 1946.

[17] János Soproni, "A gyilkosságok és a sajtó," *Magyar Rendőr*, 1947. no. 3. 6.

the way in which this development was presented by the press important from the perspective of "building democracy and developing morality." He believed that the main problem was that the press largely dealt with more serious crimes, "as it did ten or twenty years ago."[18] Soproni found this worrying, because the emphasis on sensational elements and the (in his assessment) "misguided reporting" distorted reality and, at the same time, "appeal to the lesser instincts of the public, thereby coming into conflict with the interests of society."[19] In his opinion, this could encourage many readers to commit crimes, much as crime films and detective novels allegedly encouraged people to commit crimes. Soproni therefore urges the press to provide objective reporting and to educate its readership.

An „epoch-defining" offence: stripping

In the modern history of crime, there are few types of offences that occur in a concentrated manner in terms of both time and space. The so-called "stripping" was a type of crime that was particularly common in the few years under discussion here, and it was also particularly common in the Budapest area. Although the sources contain a few references to similar cases in Debrecen after the Second World War and some Budapest cases after the First World War, these were exceptions. Stripping, simply, was a special type of offence in the modern history of crime in Hungary. It was a specific type of property crime that could be classified as robbery, as it was not simply a case of street theft, because the method of committing the crime was usually accompanied by physical violence, even when the victim did not resist. The main feature of this type of crime is that the perpetrators strip the victims of their clothes and other valuables, such as watches or jewelry.

The modus operandi of strippings is perhaps most authentically summarized by Andor Fóti, a former member of the aforementioned R-group of the police, which was set up after the siege to restore public order. Fóti, who wrote several books about his memories of the police after the end of his career, describes strippings as follows: "The robbers usually caught their victims in front of ruined residential buildings. Their area of operation was half the distance between street corners. They tended to "work" in places with limited visibility and opportunities to escape. They usually worked where they had limited visibility and possible escape routes. They rarely attacked more than two people. They usually attacked in groups of four, and these attacks took one or two minutes."[20] Fóti's article, published twenty years later in a series of the illustrated weekly magazine *Lobogó* (Flag), which presented Fóti's police memories in a somewhat embellished form, includes a description of a specific case in which members of the R-group successfully set a trap for a gang of criminals committing strippings.

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Andor Fóti, "A sokbillentyűs telefon 3," *Lobogó*, 2 March 1966. 4–5.

This description clearly shows that stripping was an offence the circumstances of which were determined by the conditions following the siege: residential buildings in ruins, debris in the streets, lack of public lighting, etc.

The prevalence of strippings after the war is illustrated by the fact that in the first part of 1946 there were more than 40 such cases per month in the capital.[21] The situation had not improved significantly by the end of the year, at least according to the minutes of the meeting of the capital city's Legislative Committee held on 27 November, in which committee member Sándor Aradi addressed an interpellation to the mayor, calling on the city leader and the chief of police to take further measures to curb the spread of strippings.[22]

Strippings are also discussed in an article written by police Lieutenant Colonel Dr. János Zilahy in the aforementioned journal *Magyar Rendőr*. In the article *Rablások* (Robberies), Zilahy makes the following statement: "We are currently living in an era of strippings."[23] He also explains the reason for this: "The perpetrator inevitably gains unlawful possession of the stolen goods, which he can sell easily, anytime, anywhere, for a large sum of money. He does not need to resort to the help of a professional dealer."[24] Zilahy sees only one possible solution to prevent strippings: constant surveillance and prevention. In his opinion, the best tools for this were "a well-functioning R-group and vigilant security guards."[25] While Zilahy was optimistic about the solvability of the problem, he indirectly criticized the press: "No one is doing anyone any favors by exaggerating this problem or presenting it in a humorous manner."[26]

The spread of gangsterism

Several sources on the state of the capital after the siege mention that, in addition to the old, "seasoned" professional criminals, new groups of mostly younger criminals had emerged, organized into gangs which were not afraid to use weapons against the police.

The main characteristics of the new postwar underworld were also summarized by police major István Bálint in the *Magyar Rendőr* column *Bűnügyi lélektan*

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

[22] Minutes of the regular meeting of the Budapest Capital City Council held on 27 November 1946. Interpellation by committee member Sándor Aradi. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 21 December 1946. 1381–1382.

[23] Lajos Zilahy: "Rablások," *Magyar Rendőr*, 1947. no. 1. 7–8.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid. The reference to humor is no coincidence, as several jokes and caricatures appeared during this period in connection with the strippings. A good example of this is the caricature published in the satirical magazine *Ludas Matyi*, in which a man wrapped in a sheet is waiting at a tram stop. The dialogue accompanying the caricature reads as follows: "What happened to you, Mr. Jegenye?" "I'm waiting for tram No. 6 and I don't want to arrive at the Kossuth Bridge without my clothes." See "A cautious man," *Ludas Matyi*, 10 February 1946. 6.

(Criminal Psychology). It is worth quoting at length from the essay "A bűnözők alvilága" (The Underworld of Criminals), because Bálint aptly described the changes that had taken in the world of professional crime after the war.[27] The war's "power to disrupt everything and shake things up from the ground up," he wrote, "also loosened social structures," and this naturally influenced the composition of the criminal society. It "expanded the society of social outcasts with new elements and brought about fundamental change among criminals," and it also brought them closer from the periphery of the city. "[It] brought them from the periphery of Angyalföld and Ferencváros," Bálint wrote, "into the heart of the city, but the inhabitants of the new underworld do not sneak around in the twilight, hiding behind the walls of houses, nor do they hide their secrets in the secluded corners of abandoned lots, but rather they frequent the Grand Boulevard, Nagymező Street, and its surroundings, the bars and coffee houses of the city center."[28] In addition to greater visibility and a more intense presence, gangsterism was also allegedly a symptom of Americanism, the negative influence of detective films, and the pursuit of an ideal of an easy, carefree life. According to Bálint, war was clearly the primary cause of all this:

> The loosening of moral and economic laws in the postwar period provided a favorable opportunity for the development of this new type of gangster. The economic turmoil of inflationary times meant a period of easy money and easy opportunities, and those who had become accustomed to the easy life and easy money found it difficult to give it up. If they could not create a way to live the easy life for themselves within the limits of the law, they tried to create it by committing acts that went beyond the limits of the law. These new types of gangsters were involved in everything from breaking and entering to textile smuggling and other activities, and with the power of their ill-gotten gains, they created a new kind of life for themselves, becoming the so-called 'emperors' of nightlife, whose subjects consisted of loose women and various types of people who made up the slag of American and European cities.[29]

Due to the public supply shortages, which persisted for a long time after the siege, smaller and larger organized criminal groups committing primarily economic crimes gathered mainly in the city's luxury entertainment venues. Examples of such venues were the Shanghai nightclub and "dancing bar" on Móricz Zsigmond Square, which was the regular haunt of Dezső Sántha, known as "Angelo." Sántha was one of the most famous representatives of this new type of gangster in Budapest. Alongside István Mészáros, who became notorious as Hekus Dönci, Sántha was the most notorious criminal of this period.[30]

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27 István Bálint, "A bűnözők alvilága," *Magyar Rendőr*, 1 December 1947. 12.

28 Ibid.

29 Bálint concludes his article with an optimistic prediction, stating that there is no doubt "which side will emerge victorious from this struggle, and there is no doubt that order will be restored: the democratic social order of the Hungarian people." Ibid.

30 For a short summary of the case see Péter Dulai, "Szőkített hajjal akasztották fel," *Amerikai Magyar Népszava – Szabadság*, July-December 2017. 21.

Public safety in the capital, reflected in the figures

First, it is worth considering how crimes against persons and property developed in the period following the siege based on data from available police reports. However, before analyzing the figures, it is important to note that police data coverage after 1945 essentially extended to the area of Greater Budapest, which was only established administratively in 1950. At its meeting on 2 March 1945, the Budapest National Committee passed a resolution (No. XVII/.1945) authorizing chief of police László Sólyom, to bring under the jurisdiction of the Budapest police all settlements in the Pest area that had "turned to him in order to maintain public safety." Then, on 25 September, decree Nr. 8490/1945. ME, titled *On the Organization of the Budapest Headquarters of the Hungarian State Police and the Regulation of Certain Issues Concerning the State Police*, precisely defined the suburban zone attached to the capital city for police purposes: "Greater Budapest includes the territory of the capital city, as well as the towns of Budafok, Kispest, Pestszenterzsébet, Pestszentlőrinc, Rákospalota, and Újpest, and finally the villages of Albertfalva, Békásmegyer, Budatétény, Csepel, Mátyásföld, Nagytétény, Pesthidegkut, Pestszentimre, Pestújhely, Rákoscsaba, Rákoshegy, Rákoskeresztúr, Rákosliget, Rákosszentmihály, Sashalom, and Soroksár."[31] Thus, the extension of the jurisdiction of the Budapest city police essentially completed a process that had begun in the last decade of the nineteenth century, which involved the gradual expansion of police control to the suburban zone prior to the creation of Greater Budapest.[32] Although the measure seems logical and necessary, as police control of the areas surrounding the city was also necessary to prevent economic and other crimes, it made the work of the police force, which was already understaffed, undergoing reorganization, and forced to work with inadequate equipment and supplies, even more difficult.

For these reasons, among others, it is worth treating the statistical data presented here with caution, because due to the organizational disarray of the law enforcement forces, staff shortages, and the political influence that emerged almost immediately after the end of the war, the reports may not necessarily reflect the actual state of public safety.[33] Thus, for this period, the statement that crime statistics reflect perceptions of crime rather than the reality of criminal activities is even more valid.[34] The data shown here are certainly a suitable source, however, for consideration of how the authorities themselves pictured the public security situation in Budapest between 1945 and 1947, at least.

If we first look at the two main types of offences, crimes against persons and crimes against property, and compare the trends in relation to each other, we see

[31] "Az ideiglenes nemzeti kormány 1945. évi 8.490. M. E. számú rendelete" in *Magyarországi rendeletek tára, 1945. I-VI. füzet* (Belügyminisztérium, 1946), 737.

[32] See Perényi, *A bűn nyomában*, 183–196.

[33] On the postwar reorganization of the police, see Gábor Tarján G., "Az első lépések. Adalékok a budapesti rendőrség 1945. évi működéséhez," *Belügyi Szemle* 64, no. 5 (2016): 20–39.

[34] See Perényi, *A bűn nyomában*, 101–103.

that while the number of crimes against persons (i.e., crimes involving physical violence) appeared to decline by 1946, while the number of crimes against property first increased and then stabilized in the second half of 1946.

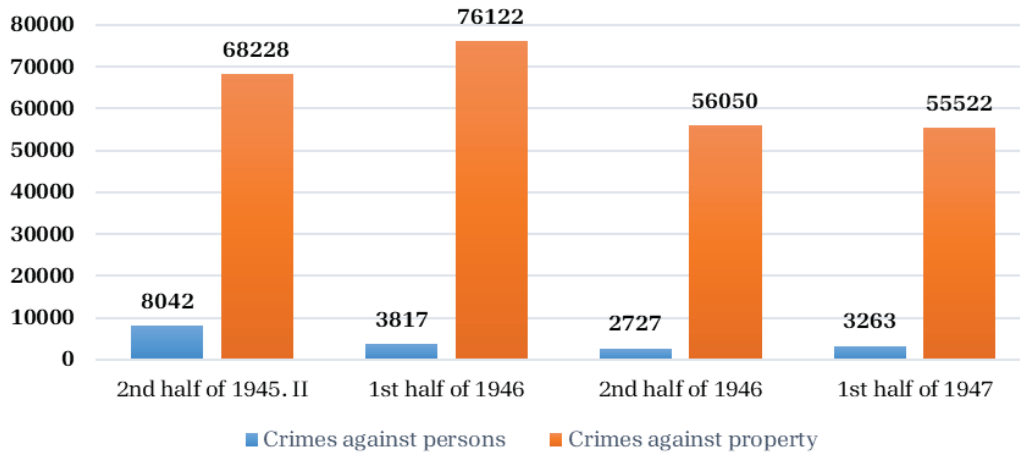


Table 1: Police statistics on crimes against persons and property, 1945–1947

Of course, these figures alone do not tell us very much, so it is worth comparing them with statistics from another period of crisis, the years following the First World War and the subsequent revolutions of 1918–1919, to see how well-founded the authorities' concerns were. If we compare the figures for the period immediately following the siege, i.e., the second half of 1945, with the averages for the period between 1920 and 1924, the gravity of the situation becomes clear.[35] Crimes committed against individuals in 1945 were more than twice the average for the years following the First World War, within the space of six months. Although the number of crimes against property was not higher than in the 1920s (which reveals the severity of the economic situation after the First World War), it was still almost one and a half times higher than before the war. And even in the first peacetime year 1946, the public security situation did not improve significantly. The number of violent crimes decreased (6,544 cases), but the number of property crimes remained essentially unchanged (132,172 cases). Thus, compared to the period following the First World War, the situation was worse in both categories in the period after Second World War.

[35] For more on the public security situation following the First World War, see also Róbert Kerepeszki, "Deviance in Budapest before and after the 'Great War.' Major tendencies and general features", in *Trianon 1920-2020. Some aspects of the Hungarian peace treaty of 1920*, eds. Róbert Barta, Róbert Kerepeszki and Krzysztof Kania (University of Debrecen, 2021), 87–99.

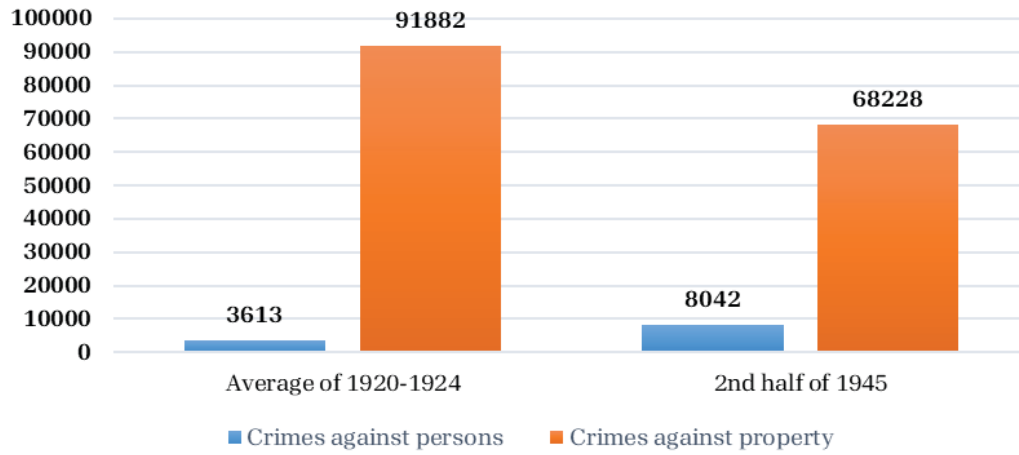


Table 2: Crimes against persons and property in the second half of 1945, compared to the average for the years 1920–1924

Although the available sources do not allow for more in-depth analysis and the data must be treated with considerable caution, it can nevertheless be stated with relative certainty that the prolonged state of war, the destruction caused by the siege, and the state of the law enforcement agencies' staffing and equipment had a serious impact on the development of crime in Hungary, particularly violent crime. This remains true even when relating crime statistics to population changes, since while Budapest had a population of 930,000 at the time of the first census after the First World War in 1920,[36] by the period following the siege, according to the 1941 census, the population of approximately 1,200,000 had fallen to around 1 million as a result of the war, according to contemporary estimates.[37] The change in population size cannot therefore be considered a significant influencing factor, so we can conclude that, compared to the First World War and the revolutionary period that followed, the conditions after the siege during Second World War, the events of the war, the politically motivated street violence, the daily, direct experience of this violence by the city's inhabitants, and the supply difficulties experienced during and after the siege for months on end all contributed to the indicators of both main types of crime in Budapest (crimes against property and crimes against persons), reflecting these extraordinary circumstances. In his April 1946 report, the chief of police also sought to explain the increase in violent crime primarily as a consequence of the war:

[36] *Az 1920. évi népszámlálás előzetes eredményei* (Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Hivatala, 1921), 1.

[37] *Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Havifüzetei*, 1 October 1945.

> There were 17 investigations into murders, nine of which were committed by the perpetrator in public places. Although this is still a regrettably high number, when compared to the serious economic situation, the decline in morale caused by the war, and the monthly murder rates in other European cities, it is no worse than those and cannot be attributed any special significance from a public safety perspective. The monthly rate of 17 murders exceeds the peacetime rate in Budapest by 100 percent. This 100 percent increase is explained, however regrettable it may be, by the loosening of moral standards caused by the war and by poverty.[38]

We can therefore see that the difference between the period that came in the wake of the First World War and the period following the second was particularly marked in the area of crimes committed against individuals, i.e., crimes involving physical violence. If we want to examine the data on crimes committed against the person in more detail, we find information on the relationship between homicides and murders in the reports of the chief of police. However, before moving on to the statistics, it is important to note that it is not easy to draw a clear distinction between murder and manslaughter. The difference between murder and manslaughter is defined in criminal law by intent. The Hungarian criminal code adopted in 1878, which was still in force in the era in question, defines murder as follows: "Anyone who kills another person with premeditation commits murder and shall be punished by death."[39] In contrast, the law provides a more complex interpretation of murder and its penalties. While the punishment for murder, if not premeditated (thus, second-degree murder), was 10 to 15 years in prison, the punishment for murder committed against relatives, spouses, or multiple people was life imprisonment. The criminal code further details the category of manslaughter, stipulating that murder committed in the heat of the moment and carried out immediately is punishable by 10 years' imprisonment, and if the heat of the moment was caused by violence directed by the person killed at the perpetrator or his relatives, then it is punishable by up to 5 years' imprisonment.[40] It is thus clear that the distinction between first-degree and second-degree murder is complex and even at times arbitrary, left to the discretion of those involved in the administration of justice (police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges), which may be especially true at a time when both law enforcement and the justice system need are in a state of disarray.[41] Therefore, when analyzing data on these two types of crimes, the observation that statistics reflect less the reality of crime and more the functioning of the authorities and their perceptions of public safety is perhaps even more valid.

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38 *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 23 May 1946, 640.

39 Law V of 1878, Chapter XVIII., 278.§

40 Ibid. 280–281.§

41 Historians analyzing longer-term trends in the social history of crime tend to treat the two most serious types of crime (first-degree and second-degree murder) as one and the same, due to their varying definitions across different periods and countries.

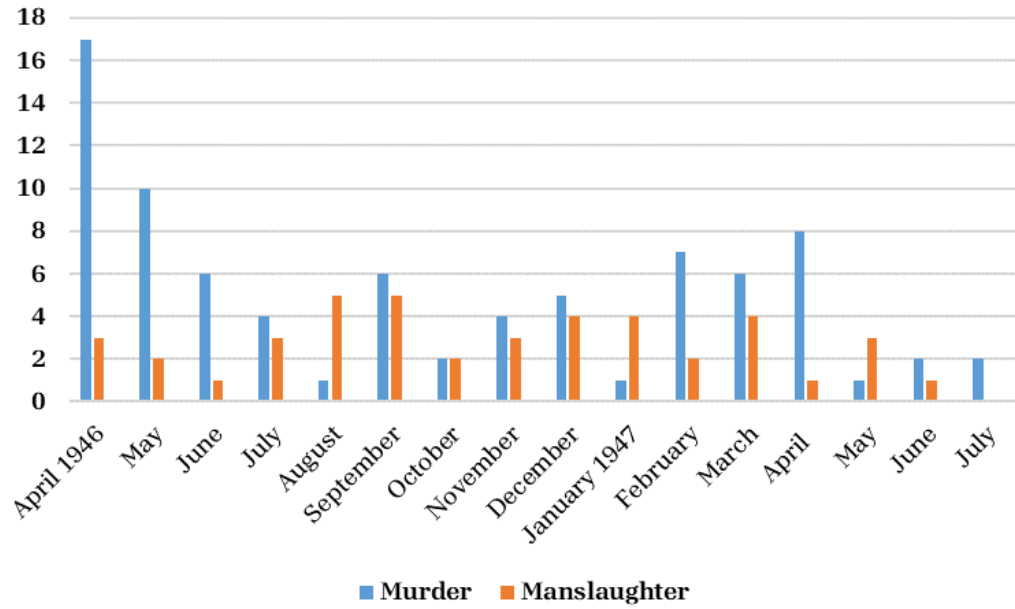


Table 3: Number of murders and homicide per month, 1946–1947

If we look at the data published in the chief of police's monthly report, we see that, in addition to the fluctuations in crimes involving homicide and their high number compared to "peacetime," there is a high proportion of premeditated murders compared to second-degree murders. The latter is particularly interesting, because, in the period between the two World Wars, the number of second-degree murders committed in Budapest in a year was five to eight times higher than the number of first-degree murdeers. In stark contrast, between April 1946 and the same month of the following year, 69 first-degree murders and 38 second-degree murders were recorded by the authorities.

How should we interpret this anomaly? Does the spread of violence, especially premeditated acts of violence, reflect the fact that law enforcement agencies were deliberately classifying the majority of perpetrators as having committed crimes that were more serious in order to improve public safety through the supposed deterrent effect of harsher penalties? Could it be that the authorities acted in a politically motivated manner in order to emphasize that even tougher measures were needed to eliminate the remnants of the previous social and political system? Was the sudden increase in the number of premeditated murders simply a symptom of the devastating psychological effects of war? Based on the current state of research, there is no clear answer to this question, but it is likely that, to varying degrees, these factors all contributed to the phenomenon. In any case, the period following the end of the war was clearly characterized by a complete collapse of the social and moral barriers that would have better prevented the taking of human life. This is also supported by data relating to the period following the First World War. If we can believe the statistical data provided by Ervin Pálosi (which are presumably also significantly distorted by

the fact that reporting was suspended during the Hungarian Soviet Republic), then a similar situation can be observed in 1919. In the year of the Soviet Republic and the White Terror, 121 premeditated murders were recorded, in addition to 106 second-degree murders.[42] In comparison, in 1920, authorities uncovered 60 premeditated murders and 195 second-degree murders, and a year later, they uncovered 40 second-degree murders and "only" 10 premeditated murders. If we add to this the fact that in 1938, the last year of peace before the outbreak of the Second World War, the combined number of murders and homicides was 75 (and a third category, infanticide, was included in this figure), we see that serious crimes against persons were on the decline, a trend that was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War and the siege of the city.

The two World Wars, thus, were immediately followed by similar circumstances (economic and supply problems, problems of daily subsistence, political chaos, the disorganized state of law enforcement agencies, and in both cases the presence of an occupying army), and these circumstances had a demonstrable effect on everyday crime.

Dealing with the press, we have already mentioned that one of the main motifs in the descriptions of the public security situation following the end of the siege was the spread of prostitution, which allegedly was "like an epidemic." But what do the chief of police reports reveal in this regard?

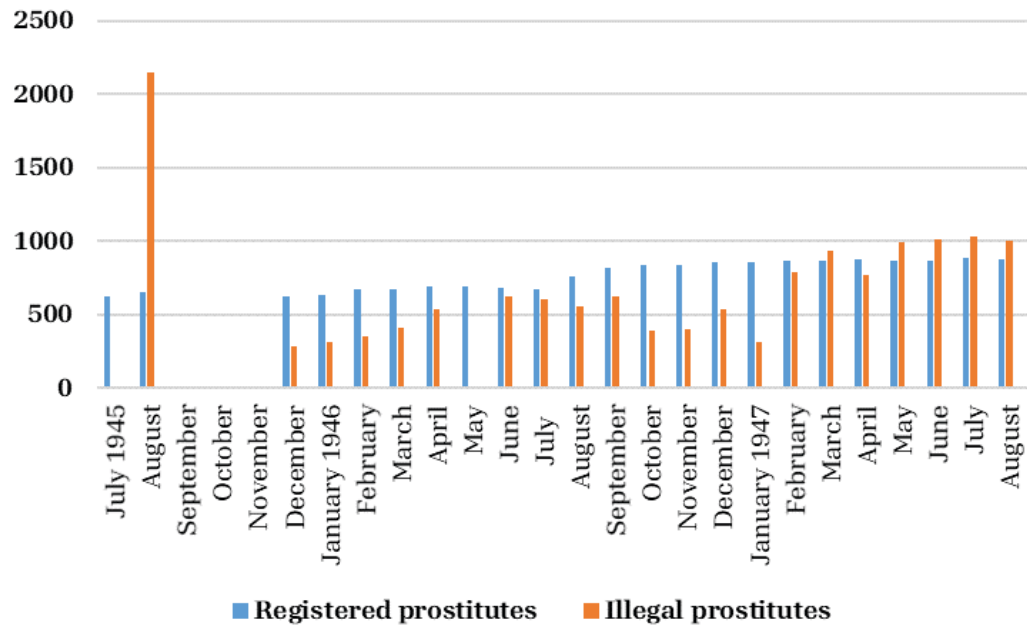


Table 4: Monthly report on registered prostitutes and illegal prostitutes who fell under arrest (1945–1947)

[42] Pálosi, *Budapest kriminalitása*, 32.

At first glance, these incomplete reports do not necessarily support the above characterization, although the graph clearly shows that there were shortcomings in data collection and reporting, particularly in 1945, which means that the data may be significantly distorted. The only year in this period for which complete data is available is 1946, when police took action in a total of 5,330 cases of secret solicitation. This does not necessarily support the estimate of tens of thousands of prostitutes working illegally in Budapest, despite the undetected cases that are not included in the statistics (and there were probably quite a few of these, perhaps even more than in previous decades), since a woman working as a prostitute without a license was likely to come to the attention of the police on multiple occasions. At the same time, the number of prostitutes monitored by the police gradually rose from around 600 to over 800. But still, what should we make of these figures? Was prostitution really such a big problem in postwar Budapest? To answer this question, it is worth referring back to data from previous periods. While at the turn of the century the number of registered prostitutes rose slowly but surely from around 500 to over 2,000 in the years leading up to the First World War, a slow decline can be observed after the war. Between 1920 and 1922, for example, the average number of prostitutes under police control was 1,922, and the average number of women arrested by the police for illegal prostitution between 1920 and 1924 was 1,415 per year.[43] It is worth adding to the latter data that the number of women subjected to police measures due to illegal prostitution clearly increased during the First World War (from an average of 250 in the prewar years to 1,863 between 1914 and 1918).[44]

It is therefore clear that the period of war and its aftermath (in the case of Budapest, the period preceding consolidation after the siege) did indeed bear witness to an increase in prostitution, primarily illegal prostitution. Although contemporary experts could only rely on estimates regarding the actual extent of illegal prostitution, the number of illegal prostitutes who came to the attention of the police suggests that, while regulated prostitution also increased to a lesser extent, illegal prostitution did indeed increase significantly, thus explaining the moral panic with which the press reacted to the phenomenon. The “boom” in prostitution during and after the war can be clearly explained by increased demand: the return of the male population from the front and the large number of soldiers stationed in the city explain the spread of such services. Unregulated prostitution was a major concern for the authorities, primarily because of the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, which posed a serious public health risk at a time when the health care system, severely damaged during the war, had to cope with the burden of an increase in venereal diseases.

Overall, as shown by the data presented above, in the modern history of the Hungarian capital, which began with its unification in 1873, it was the three years between 1944 and the end of 1947 when public safety in the city reached a histor-

[43] Ibid. 88.
[44] Ibid. 89.

ic low. However, if we seek a more nuanced picture of the impact of the war and the subsequent reconstruction process on crime trends in Budapest, further research and comparative studies would be necessary, both in relation to the capital and the rest of the country and in comparison with other large cities.