

Theses of doctoral (PhD) dissertations

Female Criminals in Budapest Between the Two World Wars

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1. The objectives of the doctoral thesis, the scope of the topic, its significance and challenges

The study of female crime in Budapest between the two world wars is an area that has been little explored in historical research to date. The objective of this research is therefore to address this lacuna and illuminate the specific social, cultural, and historical context of the period. The study focuses not only on specific cases of female criminality, but also on how this phenomenon was shaped by the social expectations of the period, gender role norms, and criminalisation processes.

The chosen topic is of significance insofar as research into the history of crime has traditionally focused on crimes committed by men, thus relegating the analysis of female offenders to the background. However, a historical examination of female criminality is essential for a more profound understanding of marginalised groups in society, as studying them provides just as important insight into the social norms of a given era as studying men.

It is important to note that these norms underwent significant changes during the period under review and in the preceding years, reflecting the tension between modernization and traditional values, especially with regard to the status of women. The political and economic uncertainty following the First World War, in conjunction with the effects of the global economic crisis and changes in social mobility, presented women with new challenges, which in some cases led to criminal behaviour. The interplay between unemployment, the characteristics of social welfare systems and the administration of justice, as well as the economic vulnerability of women, has been identified as a contributing factor to changes in the proportion of female offenders. Furthermore, social discourses on crime and the process of criminalisation have also played a decisive role in shaping social perceptions of female offenders.

The objective of the research is twofold: firstly, to explore specific cases of female criminality, and secondly, to demonstrate the correlation between this phenomenon and the social and economic conditions of the period. The thesis employs a range of contemporary scientific and press sources, statistical data, and case studies to address the following research questions: what types of crimes were most commonly committed by women, what motives and circumstances led to these crimes, and how public opinion and the press and academic discourse that influenced it reacted to this phenomenon. The central objective of this thesis is to situate female criminality within a comprehensive socio-historical framework, with a particular

emphasis on the interplay between modernisation processes, gender roles, and the prevailing discourse within the field of criminology.

The novelty of the research lies in the fact that it is the first comprehensive study of female crime in Budapest between the two world wars, combining a multidisciplinary approach with methods from history, criminology, sociology, psychology, and media history. This approach facilitates a more nuanced interpretation of the social conditions of the era, the situation of women, and the treatment of deviance, while drawing attention to hidden problems such as domestic violence.

The period under study was selected on the basis of the availability of sources and the post-war transformation of women's social roles. The coordination of contemporary press and archival sources is often a challenging endeavour, thereby reinforcing the press-centric approach. Concurrently, the influential role of the media in shaping the social image of female crime must be given due consideration.

The primary challenge encountered in this study pertains to the dearth of personal documentation, such as diaries, letters, and memoirs, which necessitates reliance on institutional documents and press materials as the primary sources. Despite the abundance of sources, it is crucial to recognise the profound influence of power relations and social discourses during that period. Consequently, conducting a thorough and critical examination of these sources is imperative for a comprehensive understanding. The utilisation of crime statistics is constrained by factors including latency, discrepancies in the legal treatment of women, and the absence of regional disaggregations of data.

2. Sources and methods

The methodological framework of the research is based on the combined application of social history, criminology, and feminist theoretical approaches. This diversity of perspectives facilitates a nuanced examination of female criminality in the social context of the period. In the context of feminist theories, postmodern trends proved to be particularly beneficial, as they underscore the heterogeneity of women's experiences and repudiate the notion of a uniform, universal "female experience." This approach has been found to be particularly fruitful when it comes to the historical interpretation of female crime, given that the social perception and experiences of female offenders differ markedly from those of women who conform to norms. This in turn offers new perspectives for examining historical changes in female identity.

It is evident that the research is grounded in a variety of sources, necessitating the employment of supplementary methodological approaches. Consequently, particular emphasis was placed on the potential offered by historical criminology, quantitative statistical analysis, and discourse analysis. The integration of these methodologies enables a multifaceted examination of female offenders and the social norms of the era. One of the most significant methodological pillars is criminal statistical analysis, which can illuminate quantitative changes in female crime. The present analysis is grounded in the Statistical Yearbooks of the Capital City of Budapest (Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Évkönyvek) and other contemporary crime statistics, which can be utilised to examine changes in the number of female offenders, as well as the types and frequency of crimes. However, it is imperative to exercise critical thinking when analysing statistical sources, given the variability of data collection methodologies and categories across different periods. Additionally, the issue of latency can introduce distortions in the observed crime trends. The figures have the capacity to reveal not only the actual extent of crime, but also the functioning of law enforcement agencies at the time and the social perception of crime.

Another significant methodological element of the thesis is the microhistorical approach, which facilitates the detailed reconstruction of individual criminal cases. Through the analysis of archival investigation and court records, it is possible to map the social embeddedness of a crime, the social profile of the perpetrators and victims, and the mechanisms of the justice system of the era. The microhistorical "deep drilling" method is of particular importance in cases where the criminalisation of female offenders depended not only on the severity of the crime but also on contemporary social norms. The cases examined also provide an opportunity to examine the social narratives that developed about the offenders and their crimes.

The third methodological tool employed is discourse analysis, as formulated by Michel Foucault, which focuses primarily on the examination of contemporary press materials and scientific works. Foucault's approach is particularly useful in the socio-historical study of female crime because it draws attention to what was said about crime in a given era and how these discourses shaped social norms and power relations. Foucault's theory posits that discourses surrounding crime, morality, and gender roles not only reflect reality, but also actively contribute to its shaping. During the interwar period, police and press texts concerning female criminals not only described criminal acts, but also delineated what behaviour was considered acceptable or deviant for women. Discourse analysis facilitates comprehension of the manner in which both public and institutional systems during that period contributed to the social construction of the "criminal woman" as a figure subject to differential judgement, frequently marked by rejection or moral condemnation, in contrast to women who adhered to prevailing norms. The press, as a major arbiter of social norms, also exerted a substantial influence on the portrayal of female criminals. The research maps the narrative patterns that have shaped the portrayal of female perpetrators, as well as the moral and legal discourses that have influenced social reactions. It is important to note that particular attention is given to cases in which the press emphasised the female gender of the perpetrators and evaluated the crimes in line with general gender role expectations.

A comparative analysis, which compares the situation in Hungary with international trends in crime history, also forms an integral part of the methodological framework. The present thesis sets out to compare crime statistics for Budapest with data from two other major European cities, Vienna and Berlin, with a view to exploring the similarities and differences in the development of female crime in the urbanised social environments of the period. Moreover, the author draws on the results of other Western European and American studies, which allow for the interpretation of Hungarian phenomena in a broader international context. This approach facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the crime trends and phenomena of Budapest during the Horthy era, while also enabling the identification of the broader social and cultural mechanisms underpinning female criminality. Another possibility offered by the comparative approach is a comparison of Budapest crime statistics by gender over several years, which highlights changes in the ratio of male and female offenders and gender differences between types of crime.

The case study method is also employed in the thesis, with the aim of conducting an in-depth analysis of individual crimes. As political scientist Gábor Pál has observed, this method has a long tradition in legal history and is closely linked to discourse analysis. In this case, the

approach taken is to utilise the text to provide insight into the criminological, social and legal processes of the time by exploring specific examples of female criminality in detail. The case study examined the circumstances under which female offenders committed crimes, their (confessed) motives, and how contemporary society and the justice system treated them. This method also facilitates the mapping of the patterns employed by contemporary crime reporting and legal systems in the portrayal of female offenders, as well as the social narratives that have developed around each case.

The structure of the thesis is determined by the complex, interdisciplinary approach of the research, which applies both quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysis draws upon a range of methodological approaches, including statistical studies, microhistorical analysis, discourse analysis, and comparative historical methods. Consequently, the research provides numerical data on female crime between the two world wars, whilst also exploring its social and cultural implications, thus contributing to a nuanced historical interpretation of female criminality during this period. The fundamental objective in developing the structure was to establish a logical and coherent scientific system that integrates modern historical and criminological approaches, ensuring a multi-level and multi-directional approach to the topic.

In addition to defining the subject and objectives of the research, the introductory chapter briefly reviews the relevance and novelty of the topic. This is followed by a comprehensive historiographical overview, which presents the most significant international and domestic research on the history of crime. The study pays particular attention to the antecedents of female crime, changes in research directions, and paradigm shifts that approach female criminality from the perspective of social, cultural, and economic embeddedness. In presenting the history of historiography, the emphasis is placed on changes in research methods and interpretative frameworks. It is highlighted how the study of female crime has become a significant issue at the intersection of history and criminology.

Subsequent to the historiographical chapter, a discrete subchapter delineates the historical context of the research, with a particular emphasis on the social, economic, and urbanisation processes in Budapest between the two world wars. The text demonstrates how increasing social mobility, new labour market opportunities, and the growing presence of women in the city transformed the city's structure and everyday life. The analysis indicates that public spaces, nightlife and urban entertainment venues presented new livelihood strategies, but also carried social risks, especially for women on the margins of society. This section underscores the notion that the study of female criminality is inextricably linked to the challenges posed by urban modernity and the emergence of novel forms of social control.

The subsequent major chapter is founded upon an analysis of quantitative sources. It presents contemporary crime statistics, the specific features and limitations of data collection methods, and historical factors affecting data trends, such as the social consequences of World War I and the effects of the global economic crisis. The analysis of numerical data is not an end in itself, but rather serves to provide a framework for qualitative studies and to highlight the social processes behind the trends.

The central section of the thesis examines contemporary discourses on female criminality. The following distinction is made between two major groups of sources: firstly, medical and law enforcement literature reflecting professional thinking, and secondly, representations appearing in the press. In the realm of professional sources, police publications assume a position of notable prominence. These publications have been instrumental in the systematisation of professional knowledge pertaining to crime, often manifesting in the form of monographs or extensive studies. Conversely, the chapter analysing press discourse focuses on shorter, frequently topical, journalistic writings that played a significant role in shaping public opinion. Despite the presence of overlaps between the two groups of sources, the separation is justified by the significant disparities in their genre characteristics, target audience, and communication function. The analysis of press representations is complemented by international comparisons, with particular emphasis on cases that were also reported in the Hungarian press.

The content section concludes with a comparative case study based on the processing of court records found in the Budapest City Archives. In this section, press materials are presented as supplementary sources, with the analysis focusing on specific criminal cases. The objective of the case study is to present a comprehensive analysis of the motivations and social background of female offenders, and to examine the attitude of the justice system towards them. It should be noted that this assessment was not only a legal but also a cultural issue.

The final chapter of the thesis offers a concise summary of the analysis' findings, highlighting the scientific contributions of the research and outlining potential avenues for further investigation. The structure facilitates an examination of the topic across both the macro and micro levels. Furthermore, the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods ensures a comprehensive interpretation of female crime within a historical context.

3. A summary of the new scientific findings presented in the dissertation

The amalgamation of crime history research and social history facilitates the interpretation of female offenders not solely in the context of legal categories, but also within a social framework, thereby reflecting contemporary norms, expectations, and shifts in gender roles. The fundamental thesis of the dissertation is that the assessment and criminalisation of female offenders was significantly related to the socio-economic processes of the era. Furthermore, it is argued that the transformation of female roles had a significant impact on the assessment of crime and the social perception of offenders.

A fundamental tenet of this thesis is that the evolution of female criminality is inextricably linked to the socio-economic shifts that characterised the period under scrutiny. In the aftermath of the First World War, Budapest's urban society experienced substantial transformations. The repercussions of the global economic crisis, the escalating rate of unemployment, and the erosion of conventional family and social structures exerted a direct influence on female offenders. In this context, the thesis examines the extent to which these difficulties increased the number of female offenders, particularly in relation to crimes against persons and property, which were closely linked to the loss of financial security.

Another thesis of the paper is that contemporary criminological discourses and crime statistics on female offenders reflect not only actual crimes but also society's perceptions of gender roles. Expectations of women, which placed significant emphasis on morality, motherhood and subordination, determined which types of crimes were considered particularly problematic at the time and which perpetrators became notorious cases in the press and public opinion. In consideration of this, the thesis undertakes a thorough analysis of press narratives concerning female criminality, substantiated by meticulous case studies and microhistorical research.

A further salient finding was that the structural characteristics and trends of female crime differed from those of male crime. This difference was reflected not only in statistical data but also in contemporary criminological and legal analyses. The present paper sets out in detail the most common types of crimes committed by female offenders, with particular attention to homicide, property crimes, and violations of the law. Furthermore, the study examined how female offenders differed from their male counterparts in terms of their motivations, methods of committing crimes, and the treatment they received from the justice system. The thesis's central argument is that female crime can be considered a specific socio-historical phenomenon, and that its analysis can contribute to a deeper understanding of gender relations and social

changes during the Horthy era. Drawing upon the aforementioned case study and employing microhistorical "deep drilling," this study explores the portrayal of female criminals in the press of the era, highlighting the individual and structural factors that were identified as contributing to their criminal activities.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **Sipos, N.:** A két világháború közötti női bűnözés sajtónarratívái.
In: Korszakokról korszerűen : A 2022. április 29/30-án megrendezett Modernkortörténeti Doktorandusz Konferencia tanulmányai I.. Szerk.: Püski Levente, Ónadi Sándor, Schrek Katalin, Sipos Nikoletta, Debreceni Egyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar Történelmi Intézet, Debrecen, 209-228, 2023. ISBN: 9789634905608

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (2)

2. **Sipos, N.:** Nagyvárosi női bűnözés Budapesten az 1930-as években.
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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.56944/multunk.2024.3.7>
3. **Sipos, N.:** "Asszony vagy szörnyeteg?": Női bűnelkövetők és sajtónarratívák egy Horthy-kori férjgyilkosság példáján keresztül.
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Hungarian conference proceedings (1)

4. **Sipos, N.:** A "Nagy Háború" és Trianon hatása a női bűnözésre kvantitatív szempontból.
In: Trianon Doktorandusz Konferenciasorozat Tanulmánykötet. Szerk.: Molnár Dániel; Molnár Dóra, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége (DOSZ), Budapest, 7-25, 2023. ISBN: 9786156457295

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5. Szerk. Püski, L., Ónadi, S., Schrek, K., **Sipos, N.:** Korszakokról korszerűen: A 2022. április 29/30-án megrendezett Modernkortörténeti Doktorandusz Konferencia tanulmányai I. Debreceni Egyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar Történelmi Intézet, Debrecen, 343 p., 2023. ISBN: 9789634905608





Hungarian book chapters (4)

6. **Sipos, N.:** A jó kutatási téma.

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7. **Sipos, N.:** Oral history interjúk.

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In: A Rendőrákadémiától az egyetemig : Rendészettörténeti tanulmányok. Szerk.: Jámbor Orsolya Ilona; Lénárt Máté Gábor; Tarján G. Gábor, Rendőrség Tudományos Tanácsa, Budapest, 227-240, 2019. ISBN: 9786158056779

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (5)

10. **Sipos, N.:** Közelítések a két világháború közötti nagyvárosi női bűnözés társadalomtörténetéhez - Budapest példáján.

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11. **Sipos, N.:** Női bűnözés történelmi perspektívában.

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12. **Sipos, N.:** Trianon 1920-2020. Some Aspects of the Hungarian Peace Treaty of 1920 (Eds. Róbert Barta and Róbert Kerepeszki).

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