

Did they really pick a pocket or two?

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Destruction in Europe after World War II was not just confined to the physical carnage, but left lingering psychological effects on European populations. *Savage Continent*, by Keith Lowe, addresses some of these effects as a “moral destruction” that allowed for juvenile crime to flourish.<sup>1</sup> The British were aware of this consequence of war as it affected them directly. Delinquency had risen 40% during the war and its effects were felt by the population, enough that it could not be ignored by the *Manchester Guardian* and *The Times*.<sup>2</sup> The diction of the newspapers remains similar to Lowe, the issue was a representation of the moral fabric of society, which was unravelling, as far as they were concerned, from the bottom up. Politicians became involved in the discussion of child crime, addressing what they believed to be the cause, and as time progressed, what the solution was. However, the perceived lower standard of ethics amongst youth was not only due to trauma, but the understanding of the world that children developed over 6 years of war. Violence was the teacher and lessons such as war were not as easily undone when the students were ignored. The confrontation with juvenile crime evolved, as Britain furthered itself from the end of the war, transitioning from intense analysis to journalistic irrelevance.

There were concerns in Britain for the development of children, more specifically teens, during and after the war, that they would be influenced by the destruction they were exposed to. The ramifications of children being raised in this environment were felt for years beyond the war. A case of 3 high school students who murdered a teacher by mistake when apparently attempting

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<sup>1</sup>Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (New York: Picador, 2013) 41.

<sup>2</sup>*Manchester Guardian* [Manchester, UK] May 1945-December 1947. All references to *Manchester Guardian* in this essay are to the copies of the newspaper contained in ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The *Guardian* and The Observer, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/hnpGuardianobserver>; *The Times*, [London, UK] May 1945-December 1947. All references to *The Times* in this essay are to the copies of the newspaper contained in *The Times* Digital Archive 1785-1985, <http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca>.

an attack on the School Master.<sup>3</sup> The apology of the shooter quoted in the article is remorseful for a startling reason; the boy, Frank Edward Gittings, regretted killing the teacher and expressed if he was allowed back at the school he would likely murder the intended target, the school master. This attack, and admission of further violence, was an extreme case but proved a point to society that children of war were dangerous and required attention. Graham Green addresses such concerns in his 1954 short story, *The Destructors*.<sup>4</sup> The members of the fictional juvenile gang were toddlers at the time of the Blitz in London and developed in this environment of devastation. Destruction bred destruction as the boys decided to dismantle a beautiful old property, Old Misery's house, for no reason whatsoever, not even hatred. The boys in this story are an example of what children could become if they were not supervised or corrected early on, just as the court case demonstrated. This focus on the causation and motivation of juvenile crime, even 10 years after the war highlights the awareness of the previous generation. Stories and books that were published even before Greene's, and reviewed in the *Guardian*, reference the "degeneration of civilization" through the spike in juvenile crime and aggressive behaviour.<sup>5</sup> The court case, the reviewed books and Greene's short story were extreme cases of violence-breeding-violence and did not speak for all children, but it indicated long term consequences.

When juvenile delinquency was mentioned in the papers immediately after the end of the war, it was to specifically blame someone or somewhere for the corruption. The *Manchester Guardian* published an article that involved many political figures pointing fingers to the culprit

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<sup>3</sup> "Boys Deny Plot to Shoot Master of Approved School," *Manchester Guardian*, March 12, 1947, 6.

<sup>4</sup> North Dakota State University, "Graham Greene, *The Destructors*," <https://www.ndsu.edu/pubweb/~cinichol/CreativeWriting/323/Graham%20Greene.htm>, Accessed March 2017.

<sup>5</sup> "Future, Past, Present," *Manchester Guardian*, September 16, 1945, 3.

and the general solution.<sup>6</sup> Parents were liable because they were too careless and soldiers on leave took their position too far with girls.<sup>7</sup> When people were not accused, it was Hollywood's fault because their movies were in poor taste, and dance houses, race tracks and pubs, for what they solicited. However, there were gaps in information provided by both papers and their sources, months where little to nothing of substance was published regarding juvenile delinquency aside from repeating that it was an issue. This lends more credibility to the belief that "juvenile crime was the exception and not the rule".<sup>8</sup> The Undersecretary to the Home Office, amongst others, believed it was the natural course for morality, that the spike in crime was a matter of post-war trend rather than an indication of morality.<sup>9</sup> The numbers behind the sudden spikes in crime during and after the war were not as staggering as the public may have been led to believe either, with a rise of only 700 above the 1938 average taken over an entire year.<sup>10</sup> Even here the numbers are influenced because the average regards persons under 21, who are not necessarily children by that age. If the definition of children in all cases is under 21, this renders the culpability of local establishments less likely. By this definition, a person 20 years of age could have been dancing, drinking, betting or engaging with a soldier of the same age, which did not necessarily impart any information of their moral standing. However, saying it is children doing these things is much more shocking and promoted awareness, to a point, but the information given was misleading. This would be the case even when numbers were released in

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<sup>6</sup> "Problem of Young Offenders," *Manchester Guardian*, November 3, 1945, 3.

<sup>7</sup> "Adult Behavior Blamed for Increase," *Manchester Guardian*, May 21, 1945, 2; "Increased Crime in London," *The Times*, May 16, 1945, 2.

<sup>8</sup> "Less Juvenile Crime," *The Times*, June 7, 1945, 2.

<sup>9</sup> "Problem of Young Offenders,"

<sup>10</sup> "Facts behind the Crime Wave," *Manchester Guardian*, December 16, 1945, 1.

December of 1945, after which, there is relatively little mention of juvenile crime aside from the statistics of crime for that year.<sup>11</sup>

Political figures ranged in their solutions from stricter use of juvenile courts to keeping children out of prison at all costs, the latter being the more popular stance in both newspapers. This was indicated through the expansion of the arguments and plans of action to highlight the appeal of reform. Contrast of this variety was generally used in the *Manchester Guardian* while *The Times* preferred the publication of the favourable stance.<sup>12</sup> Even with equal representation, it is apparent that the *Guardian* leaned in the same direction as *The Times* due to the more detailed responses of reformers. There were still politicians who believed children had to be restricted, which coincides with the perceptions that Lowe noticed in the *Daily Express*.<sup>13</sup> Although it pertains to German children, the sentiment of children being “born [during] the Hitler regime [was] a lost child. It [was] a lost generation”. The generation did get lost, and the issue of juvenile crime was swallowed by the broader topics of legal and educational reform. The repetitive sentiments of any reform, whether legal or educational, that may have happened were hardly associated with juvenile crime. *The Times* addressed a criminal reform code that, although delayed by the war, would improve the treatment of any offender and opted for reform over harsh sentences.<sup>14</sup> The article itself may mention juvenile crime once, but it is tacked onto the end of the piece as an after thought and does not appear relevant in context. As the year progressed, *The Times*, the *Guardian*, and politicians began to address the topic even less, to the

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<sup>11</sup> “Facts behind the Crime Wave,”

<sup>12</sup> “Problem of Young Offenders.”; “Increased Crime in London”

<sup>13</sup> Lowe, *Savage Continent*, 59.

<sup>14</sup> “Problems of the Magistracy,” *The Times*, October 20, 1945, 2.

point of vague generalizations of crime.<sup>15</sup> This transition regards interest in the newspapers but where public interest waned underlying social awareness remained.

Keith Lowe addresses the juvenile crime and morality in the broad context of Europe, where the British injected their thoughts on Continental youth after the war. To some extent, this was what happened domestically. Juvenile crime was a passing issue through the newspapers, commented on but rarely proved to be as large an issue as stated. It can be defined as a transitional topic that allowed for the expansion of a broader subject, such as legal reform. By the end of 1946 Information was generalized, misleading or sensationalized which only gives some indication to the awareness of British citizens. As Undersecretary to the Home Office was quoted in the *Guardian*, by the end of 1946 the relevancy of delinquency would decline to pre-war levels, which meant decline into irrelevance in the press.<sup>16</sup> This projection was generally correct, aside from the case of the teens who murdered a teacher early in 1947, which was an extreme case that was unavoidable by the press. The crime wave was only a concern when the statistics confirmed the levels were above the average of previous year and faded from public attention as they dropped. Despite the journalistic loss of interest in young offenders, the impression of corrupted youth persisted socially, as demonstrated by Graham Greene in *The Destructors*. Once again, this was a demonstration of a more extreme case of juvenile violence, but there had to be a basis for it. If it was not the children who were decaying morally, there remains the possibility it was the adults projecting after the trauma of war.

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<sup>15</sup> “Problems with the Magistracy,” “Combatting Crime,” *The Times*, July 23, 1946, 5; “Future, Past, Present”

<sup>16</sup> “Problem of Young Offenders”

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