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Glasgow's 'Reign of Terror': Street Gangs, Racketeering and Intimidation in the 1920s and 1930s

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Abstract

The Glasgow gangs of the 1920s and 1930s were widely viewed as fighting gangs rather than as criminal gangs in any wider sense. Retrospective accounts frequently suggest that the gangs only fought each other, leaving 'ordinary' residents of the city's working-class districts safe from the threat of robbery or random assault. This article offers an alternative perspective. It examines widespread reports of extortion by the gangs, whose 'protection' rackets targeted traders in both the legal and illicit sectors of the local economy. It further explores allegations that the gangs mounted a 'Reign of Terror' in the city's East End and South Side. Gang members demanded contributions from local residents towards bail monies and fines, and used violence and intimidation to deter victims and witnesses from testifying to crimes of theft as well as violence in court.

Notes

[1] [Humphries](#), Hooligans or Rebels; [Pearson](#), Hooligan; [Sindall](#), Street Violence; [Weinberger](#), 'L'Anatomie de l'Antagonisme Racial'; [Davies](#), 'Youth Gangs, Masculinity and Violence'.

[2] [Emsley](#), 'History of Crime and Crime Control Institutions', 227.

[3] [Samuel](#), East End Underworld.

[4] [Jenkins and Potter](#), 'Before the Krays'; [Chinn](#), Better Betting; [Hobbs](#), 'Professional and Organised Crime'.

[5] Jenkins and Potter, 'Before the Krays', 212.

[6] [Davies](#), 'Street Gangs, Crime and Policing'.

[7] Sunday Dispatch, 10 March 1935. Sheffield witnessed a violent struggle between two gangs for control of the pitch and toss ring at 'Sky Edge' on the outskirts of the city centre during the 1920s, but no evidence has thus far been uncovered of a pattern of on-going gang formation in the city during the 1920s and 1930s. See [Bean](#), Sheffield Gang Wars.

[8] Evening Citizen, 4 August 1930.

[9] For example, the South Side Stickers boasted a dedicated 'housebreaking section', Weekly Record, 7 March 1931.

[10] [Davies](#), 'Street Gangs, Crime and Policing'.

[11] [Damer](#), 'No Mean Writer?'

[12] [McArthur and Kinglsey](#) Long, No Mean City, 139-40.

[13] [Sillitoe](#), Cloak Without Dagger, 127-33.

[14] [Sillitoe](#), Cloak Without Dagger, 127–33, 128. In fact, Fullerton had a series of convictions for assault: Sunday Dispatch, 10 March 1935; Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Cab.9B/236/1.

[15] Evening Citizen, 17 January 1955. Despite Fullerton's claims, some members of the Billy Boys possessed serial convictions for housebreaking: PRONI, Cab.9B/236/1.

[16] Evening Times, 30 July 1980. For a similar account, see the Evening Times, 3 January 1987.

[17] [Farley](#), Up Oor Close, 100–101.

[18] Farley, Up Oor Close; [Hood and Joyce](#), 'Three Generations'.

[19] [Roberts](#), A Woman's Place, 183–201.

[20] Hood and Joyce, 'Three Generations', 142–50.

[21] Farley, Up Oor Close.

[22] Sunday Mail, 10 October 1920; Sunday Mail, 30 July 1939.

[23] Evening Citizen, 4 August 1930.

[24] [Gallagher](#), Glasgow, 152.

[25] [Murray](#), Old Firm.

[26] Sillitoe, Cloak Without Dagger; [Davies](#), 'Sectarian Violence and Police Violence'.

[27] [Davies](#), 'Street Gangs, Crime and Policing', 255.

[28] Glasgow Herald, 29 June 1928; Evening Citizen, 17 April 1930, 10 January 1955.

[29] Evening Citizen, 6 August 1930.

[30] For example, Billy Fullerton, born in 1907, led the Bridgeton Billy Boys during the 1930s. See Sillitoe, Cloak Without Dagger, 127–33.

[31] See the Weekly Record, 28 June, 5 July 1930 for a first-hand account by an 'ex-gangster'.

[32] [McAllister](#), Shadows on a Gorbals Wall, 28.

[33] [Davies](#), 'Street Gangs, Crime and Policing'; 'Sectarian Violence and Police Violence'.

[34] Scottish Temperance Reformer, 15 August 1930; Glasgow Weekly Herald, 18 June 1932; Sunday Mail, 13 May 1934; Sunday Dispatch, 10 March 1935; Spectator, 25 December 1936.

[35] Spectator, 18, 25 December 1936.

[36] Evening Times, 13 May 1930; Weekly Record, 20 December 1930; Sunday Mail, 10 July 1932; Sunday Dispatch, 10 March 1935; Sunday Mail, 16 August 1936.

[37] The levying of 'protection' from illicit businesses was rarely highlighted in the local press for obvious reasons. Those targeted could hardly bring criminal charges, and journalists were unlikely to crusade on their behalf. For a hint of extortion from gaming houses, see the Evening Citizen, 30 January 1928, for a report of a police raid which was greeted with relief after the doorkeeper initially feared the intruders to be gang members. For accounts of extortion from bookmakers, see the Weekly Record, 12 July 1930; Sunday Dispatch, 10 March 1935; Sunday Mail, 16 August 1936. For a fictional depiction of gangs targeting brothel keepers, see [McArthur and Watts](#), *No Bad Money*. [Forbes](#) and Meehan claimed that the gangs with greater criminal ambitions organised shebeens, *Such Bad Company*, 65.

[38] Evening Times, 13 May 1930.

[39] Glasgow Weekly Herald, 18 June 1932.

[40] Weekly Record, 20 December 1930.

[41] Weekly Record, 17 May 1930, 20 December 1930.

[42] Evening Times, 30 May 1930.

[43] Sunday Dispatch, 10 March 1935.

[44] Glasgow Weekly Herald, 18 June 1932.

[45] Weekly Record, 12 July 1930.

[46] [Chinn](#), *Better Betting*, 233-6; [Davies](#), 'Police and People', 101-2.

[47] For a suggestive account of interwar Glasgow, see McArthur and Watts, *No Bad Money*. On East London, see Samuel, *East End Underworld*.

[48] *Sunday Dispatch*, 10 March 1935.

[49] Davies, 'Sectarian Violence and Police Violence', 50.

[50] *Daily Record*, 11 August 1936.

[51] *Sunday Mail*, 16 August 1936.

[52] *Evening Citizen*, 26 August 1926; *Evening Times*, 29 June 1934.

[53] *Evening Citizen*, 8 June 1927.

[54] *Evening Citizen*, 31 March 1932. Four years previously, Dinnen had been convicted of extorting money from bookmakers at Firhill greyhound racecourse: *Evening Citizen*, 11 June 1928.

[55] *Weekly Record*, 21 March 1931; Grant, *Thin Blue Line*, 52; Pieri, *Big Men*, 33.

[56] *Weekly Record*, 17 May 1930.

[57] *Pieri*, *Big Men*, 126–8.

[58] *Weekly Record*, 12 July 1930; *Sunday Dispatch*, 10 March 1935; *Sunday Mail*, 16 August 1936. Here my analysis diverges from that of Carl Chinn, *Better Betting*.

[59] Mitchell Library, Glasgow, Archives and Special Collections, D-HEW 18/3/20, case no. 2904.

[60] *Evening Times*, 24 April 1934; See also Chinn, *Better Betting*, 227–30; Davies, 'Police and People', 99–100.

[61] Prendergast, *Edge Up*, 36–40, 55, 92.

[62] Burrowes, Benny, 105.

[63] Burrowes, Benny, 105, 104–5.

[64] *Belfast Telegraph*, 5 June 1935. See also Chinn, *Better Betting*; Prendergast, *Edge Up*, 39.

[65] Behr, Prohibition.

[66] Evening Citizen, 8 June 1927, 21 September 1928, 28 August 1930.

[67] Glasgow Weekly Herald, 18 June 1932.

[68] Glasgow Weekly Herald, 18 June 1932

[69] Sunday Mail, 19 June 1932.

[70] John Bull, 25 June 1932.

[71] John Bull, 25 June 1932

[72] Sunday Mail, 10 July 1932.

[73] Sunday Mail, 10 July 1932

[74] Evening Times, 13 July 1932.

[75] Evening Times, 13 July 1932

[76] Evening Times, 13 July 1932

[77] Sunday Mail, 9 August 1936.

[78] Evening Citizen, 12 August 1936.

[79] Glasgow Herald, 22 August 1936

[80] Glasgow Herald, 2 September 1936.

[81] Sunday Post, 30 August 1936.

[82] Pieri, Big Men, 29, 33-4, 126-8.

[83] Sillitoe, Cloak Without Dagger, 129.

[84] Glasgow Herald, 23 August 1934.

[85] Sunday Mail, 1 July 1928; Evening Times, 11 August 1936; Evening Citizen, 11 January 1955.

[86] Evening Citizen, 13 April 1931.

[87] Glasgow Herald, 17 March 1936.

[88] Evening Citizen, 11 January 1955.

[89] Weekly Record, 17 May, 28 June 1930; Sunday Dispatch, 10 March 1935.

[90] Evening Times, 26 December 1929. The Depute Fiscal, leading the prosecution, showed less knowledge of Irish history than the accused. He described them as members of the 'Eminent Gang'.

[91] Evening Times, 26 December 1929. The Depute Fiscal, leading the prosecution, showed less knowledge of Irish history than the accused. He described them as members of the 'Eminent Gang'

[92] Glasgow Herald, 27 June 1939.

[93] Evening Citizen, 6 March, 24 June, 11 July 1930; Glasgow Herald, 28 June 1939.

[94] Evening Times, 30 March 1934; reproduced in The Vanguard, 11 April 1934.

[95] Evening Times, 30 March 1934; reproduced in The Vanguard

[96] Evening Citizen, 13 May 1930.

[97] Glasgow Herald, 25 February 1937.

[98] Sunday Mail, 13 May 1934.

[99] Evening Citizen, 9 May 1930; Bulletin, 5 June 1933.

[100] Evening Citizen, 14, 21 June 1929.

[101] Sunday Mail, 10 July 1932; Evening Times, 17 December 1929.

[102] Glasgow Herald, 7 July 1936.

[103] Evening Citizen, 23 October 1929.

[104] Glasgow Herald, 23 August 1934.

[105] Weekly Herald, 12 May 1928.

[106] Weekly Herald, 18 June 1932.

[107] Glasgow Herald, 5 March 1936.

[108] Evening Citizen, 6 March 1930.

[109] Evening Citizen, 1 October 1931.

[110] Evening Citizen, 14 December 1926; 8 November 1928; Evening Times, 12 February 1929; Evening Citizen, 17 January 1930.

[111] Evening Citizen, 10, 12 February 1930.

[112] Evening Citizen, 19 November 1929. For a similar account from the 1950s, see Henderson, *Finding Peggy*, 46-7.

[113] Attitudes towards gang fighting among the wider populations of districts such as the Gorbals are difficult to discern. Not surprisingly, many passers-by appear to have been terrified. Others, however, appear to have regarded fights between rival gangs as providing a worthwhile spectacle. See the Evening Citizen, 6 August 1930.

[114] Glasgow Herald, 12 July 1930.

[115] Evening Citizen, 11 December 1930.

[116] Evening Citizen, 16 December 1930.

[117] Evening Citizen, 16 December 1930

[118] National Archives of Scotland, JC34/1/79, 56. See also the Glasgow Herald and The Times, 1 May 1934.

[119] National Archives of Scotland, JC34/1/79, 58.

[120] Evening Times, 20 June 1934.

[121] Davies, 'Youth Gangs, Masculinity and Violence'.

[122] Davies, 'Street Gangs, Crime and Policing'.

[123] Samuel, *East End Underworld*.

[124] Bean, *Sheffield Gang Wars*.

[125] Patrick, *Glasgow Gang Observed*.

Additional information

Notes on contributors

Andrew Davies

Andrew Davies is senior lecturer in modern British social history at the University of Liverpool.

Related Research Data

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Source: Unknown Repository

[The Police and the People: Gambling in Salford, 1900–1939](#)

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