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DELINQUENCY IN EUROPE AFTER WORLD WAR II

F. E. Louwage

The author is Inspector General of the Belgian Ministry of Justice at Brussels, and President of the International Commission for Criminal Police. He has recently visited the United States. His impressions of some of our institutions, especially of our police, will be published in this *Journal*.—EDITOR.

Delinquency in the majority of the European States took on exceptional aspects after the end of World War II, and particularly in occupied countries after their liberation by the Allied armies.

The etiology of the crimes committed after this period is rather complex. A great number of these countries were entirely or partially occupied during the war, with the result that the political, economical and moral life of their population was greatly disturbed.

When the armies of the enemy were occupying a large part of Europe, food became scarce; industry and business were almost paralyzed and a great many of the population were unemployed; a colossal number of houses, sometimes whole cities, had been destroyed and the problem of housing was unsolvable; unrest resulted from the political or economical collaboration with the enemy by some individuals; families were broken by the detention of a great number of war prisoners, the deportation in enemy territories of a mass of workmen and the arrest or execution of a considerable number of patriots belonging to the resistance forces or the allied intelligence services; women were compelled to work and to leave their children; police forces were extremely reduced and hesitated to investigate many cases of thefts and assaults, because numerous of these acts were committed for patriotic reasons, and also because, when the authors were arrested they were often taken over by the Gestapo. Such an outcome the national criminal police wanted to avoid. For patriotic reasons, also, many citizens had received falsified identity papers. Moreover a few weeks before the liberation or the end of the war, a considerable number of weapons were dropped by parachute in the fields, in order to arm the resistance forces. A large number of them fell into the hands of people for whom they were not intended. Many criminals and others who were inclined toward criminal action succeeded in obtaining stenguns or automatic pistols, even handgrenades, while the police forces, who were always suspected and watched by the occupation authorities, had neither arms nor vehicles.

Such was the situation in the European occupied countries directly after their liberation or at the armistice. In the central States the same circumstances arose and were sometimes worse. No wonder that, in

such condition, criminality rose and expanded. We shall examine the sorts of crimes which resulted from the above mentioned facts.

The scarcity of food was due, on one hand, to the abusive requirements of the enemy, who not only required his armies to subsist as far as possible on the stocks of the occupied countries, but carried off a considerable amount of food to his own population, the *Herrenvolk*. The local and enemy authorities imposed rations, which were extremely reduced and absolutely insufficient for the subsistence of the native population. Conscienceless businessmen concealed and stocked food for the black-market, and this was the origin of extensive criminality. A large number of people stopped working and gained either a fortune or a cell in prison; others stole food, sometimes by aid of firearms. They sold their booty to the population, which regarded the smugglers as benefactors, notwithstanding their shameless exploiting. The result was that the smugglers and the monopolists forgot that work and honest business are the only legal means to earn a livelihood, and that even theretofore honorable persons, as well as the smugglers, contracted the habit of disrespect for legal regulations of all kind.

It became necessary for national authorities to help the mass of unemployed persons, for several reasons: first, it was inhuman to allow workmen deprived of employment to starve; 2nd, the national authorities feared that workmen, in desperation, would work for the enemy; 3rd, their situation became worse as the cost of living rose. Therefore the allowances of these persons were greatly increased; but, being so highly remunerated, a large number of these people, even after the liberation, deliberately went about it to obtain the allowances under pretense of inability to find work; many young people not only did not work but determined never to work at all. Some of them sought an income by commission of crimes.

The problem of housing the population became very acute. This was due to the destruction of a considerable number of houses and by the requisition of accommodation for enemy troops and services. Some houses formerly occupied by one family now contained five or more families with many children. Promiscuity and bad conditions of habitation brought with them a recrudescence of criminality, especially amongst the youth.

Political and economical collaboration with the enemy brought unrest amongst the patriotic population. Assaults and sabotage took place, with the result that retaliation and arrests were made by the enemy, and that many persons, acting with patriotic intentions, learned to make explosives and to handle them.

On the first days after the liberation, resentment and demand for punishment burst out in allied countries against those who collaborated politically or economically with the enemy. The authorities were compelled to arrest those who had committed such crimes against the security of the State, and those whose activity was of a suspicious nature in order to prevent the population from committing assault against their lives or their property. Masses of arrests took place in all occupied countries and the authorities had quickly to organize concentration camps or to transform buildings into provisional penitentiaries, because the existing prisons had no room for the mass of arrested people. This overcrowding was so acute that the situation became critical: judiciary and penitentiary authorities were compelled to relax punishment of a considerable number of prisoners under restraint for common-law crimes and many of the so-called *incivics*.

The detention, deportation and execution of a considerable mass of people, broke up their families. The father was absent, the mother was compelled to work, the children were temporarily abandoned. The youth were in a constant state of vagrancy. Boys from 12 to 16 years of age were especially inclined to crime. They felt the impulse to take the place of the father, to be hostile towards their mother; to grumble, to swear, to be independent, to wander away and to possess money by any means, especially by larceny and black-marketing; gangs of boys appeared everywhere and some of them, having stolen or purchased weapons, committed crimes. Women were not able to work or to earn a sufficient wage to support their children. Many resorted to adultery, prostitution, abortion and larceny. Especially in Germany, owing to the considerable mass of prisoners in foreign lands and men killed in the war, the number of women highly exceeded the number of men. Besides the crimes mentioned, homosexuality was rife.

As we have already said, during the war and during several months after the liberation or the end of the war, the action of the police was very ineffective against certain crimes, owing (1) to the reduction of the forces, (2) to the wish to avoid denunciation of persons who committed acts in aid of the Gestapo, (3) to the absence of weapons, vehicles and other technical material. Identification of a certain number of delinquents was made difficult by the false identity papers and the lack of communications: telephone and telegraph lines and stations were almost completely destroyed.

We have also mentioned that a great many of the parachuted weapons destined to the resistance forces, fell into the hands of individuals inclined to crime or of recidivists, while the law-abiding people and

the police had no weapons for their own defense. Robberies, assaults, bank and postoffice burglaries with the use of arms were committed on a large scale.

Immigration of people, escaping or pretending to escape for political reasons and the scarcity of workmen brought into certain States a number of foreigners, who were not able or not willing to work. Some of them were professional criminals who committed crimes of all kinds. On arrest, identification could hardly be accomplished, because the foreign delinquents had either no papers or false papers. On the other hand the International Commission for Criminal Police, which had not reassembled at that time, could supply no information for identification, and criminal records could be exchanged.

When you consider all the circumstances we have mentioned and the conditions in which the population lived during the war and the months following the end of it, you will not be surprised to learn that in 1945 and 1946 criminality rose in Europe to unusual proportions. This is partly due to the fact that the troops in allied and enemy countries provided new opportunities to individuals who were inclined to crime: thefts of goods belonging to the army-stocks, black-market for cigarettes, food and garments, prostitution with all its consequences, traffic in weapons and thefts of drugs.

Fortunately, 1948 saw a serious regression of criminality. Houses were rebuilt or reconditioned, in order that more and decent habitations could be provided for the working class. Food and clothes were imported; industry and trade started on a new basis, and large numbers were employed. The prisoners of war and deported persons returned to their family, schools were reopened, and official and private organizations looked after abandoned youth. The police received reinforcements in men, weapons, vehicles and other materials. The International Commission for Criminal Police reorganized the exchange of police information and the international cooperation. Prisons were able to operate normally again and the national government took adequate measures to restore law and order.

Criminality is still alarmingly high in countries where the situation has not, even to this day, brought back the conditions which existed before the war. I feel sure that delinquency will become normal with the general restoration of these countries.