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‘The Terror of the People’: Organised Crime in Interwar London

In the 1920s and 1930s the London and national press reported extensively on what appeared to be outbreaks of gang crime bearing a similarity to the forms of organised crime that had recently been reported in Italy and North America. At the start of the 1920s, home-grown gang violence had been mainly confined to the racecourses and cast largely as an unwelcome development of traditional forms of racecourse criminality. By the middle of the decade the incursions of the racing men onto the London streets provoked intense reportage.² In London, violent street conflicts were characterised by press, police and politicians as a form of terrorism. The Evening Standard, for instance, described a tense search for ‘racecourse terrorists’ in the West End, ‘While Scotland Yard is thus rigorously engaged in hunting down the terrorists, the “enemy” is employing a sort of secret service to ascertain the movements of detectives.’³ The Daily Mail presented the conflicts as an underworld threat, levying fear on the lives of civilians, ‘There are many people walking about London maimed because they fell foul of the gangs.’⁴ Moreover, ‘terrorism’ and organised crime would be linked in reports of illicit gambling economies and violent street gangs in other British cities in this period.⁵ Most notably, from the later 1920s, the ‘reign of terror’ associated with the violent conflicts between Glasgow’s street fighting gangs would lead to inauspicious comparisons with Chicago.⁶ Despite the connections made by the press, the gang violence of the 1920s was largely territorial and limited in its impact. These were internecine battles with the battle lines, at least superficially, drawn on the competition over dominance of the south-east racecourses. The activity on the racecourses gave the men an identity in the press, and the conflicts involved groups of men from different parts of the country with confrontations frequently taking place on
the racecourse, or in close proximity to them. Nevertheless, many of
the events described and further investigated by the police took place
in local pubs, clubs and streets in London. Indeed, despite the connec-
tion to the racecourse, the violence was overwhelmingly perceived as
metropolitan.

This chapter will focus on the development of the forms of
racecourse-related crime in London and the south-eastern courses in the
interwar period. The first part of the chapter will consider the debates
about modern definitions of British organised crime cultures in rela-
tion to the racecourse wars and provide a brief chronological account
of the key events and individuals associated with the gangs. The most
well known of the racecourse gangs, the Sabinis, were a family-based
organisation from the Anglo-Italian community of Clerkenwell. Whilst
our understanding of the involvement of the Sabini family is unavoid-
ably shaped by press and police construction of these events, a core
focus of the chapter will be an exploration of kin, residence and occu-
pations, revealing how the racing men were anchored into local com-
munities and economies. Thus, despite the presentation of ‘racecourse
ruffianism’ as something unprecedented and external (for example, as
an incursion of ‘alien’ and ‘foreign’ criminals), the familial, ethnic and
criminal networks which shaped the racing men (or at least versions of
them) had long been part of metropolitan working-class and plebeian
culture. The final part of the chapter will focus in more detail on the
issue of territory. The reach of the racecourse gangs from their cus-
tomary metropolitan territories to the outer environs of London and
the south east was arguably one of the factors which led to extensive
press reporting of the racecourse wars. Thus, the racing men might
have come from areas that had older traditions of territorial street con-
licts, but it would be their ability to move beyond the confines of the
streets of London that troubled contemporaries. The Sabini gang, their
confederates and rival gangs arguably had much in common with the
‘traditional’ street gangs of Victorian and Edwardian London. Not least
in the shared topography of streets with which the racecourse gangs
would be associated in the interwar period. Nevertheless, these ‘new’
criminal communities combined the territorial street violence of the
Victorian and early-Earwoodian gangs with a criminal career that took
advantage of the black economies that would flourish after the First
World War. Whilst the racketeering, protectionism and gambling that
were bread and butter to the interwar gangs were not an innovation
of this period, the combination of the traditional street fighting gangs
with organised forms of these activities arguably were.