

Review by Robert Derrick Butterfield

## **The Rise of the Mafia-The Definitive Story of Organised Crime' by Martin Short, published by John Blake Publishing Ltd., 2009**

In 1971, the film 'The Godfather' was released, claiming to show the inner workings of an Italian-American Mafia family, the Corleones. It was soon acclaimed as a cinematic masterpiece and an accurate depiction of organized crime in America. It was followed by two sequels and a plethora of gangster films by other directors, notably Martin Scorsese. They all showed tightly-knit Italian-American communities existing within the wider U.S. society, but adhering to their own sets of laws and rules of behaviour, totally at odds with those of the wider society.

These rules included a death sentence for anyone who betrayed the family and its secrets, or who colluded with rival families. There was also *omerta*‘ the vow of silence, in which secrets were kept, even under extreme torture. There was a great deal of intrigue, plotting and bloodletting between the Corleone family and its rival crime families. Orchestrating, controlling and manipulating everything was the Godfather himself, Don Vito Corleone, the head of the family who demanded and got unquestioning obedience. He exercised dictatorial power over the family and its affairs. He had the power to grant favours, to get things done for family members. At the beginning of the film, a poor Italian immigrant comes to him with the sad story of how his daughter has been raped and brutalized by two young boys. The father is poor,

the boys are rich; there is little chance of him getting any justice through the U.S. legal system. The Godfather promises that the boys “will be taken care of”- in return the father has to pledge his loyalty, and promise to pay back the favour when asked.

How true was the film? Was it an accurate portrayal of immigrant life in America? And how is it that the Mafia has managed not only to survive, but to flourish in the United States, in spite of the best efforts of law enforcement agencies to suppress it? British author Martin Short, in his history of the U.S. Mafia tries to answer these questions, and to shed light upon this fascinating subject.

Short cites the amazing fact that organized crime is America’s biggest industry, netting an estimated \$160 billion a year (1) The main source of revenue is narcotics, but there is also loan sharking, gambling, prostitution and protection rackets. There is also legitimate business, but the Mafia’s methods are not. They include extortion, terrorism, intimidation, and tax evasion, and the corruption of public officials, politicians, judges, journalists and policemen is widespread. The main aim is enrichment. A 1967 U.S. Task Force Report on Organized Crime put it thus: “Organized crime is a society that seeks to operate outside the control of the American people and their governments. It involves the thousands of criminals working within

structures as complex as those of legitimate governments. Its actions are not impulsive but rather the result of intricate conspiracies carried out over many years and aimed at gaining control over whole fields of activity in order to amass huge profits.” (my emphasis) (2)

In the film, we see the Corleone family virtually destitute when they reach America, yet extremely wealthy thirty years later. The Mafia is all about making big money.

The Mafia, as is well known, originated in Sicily. Sicily was ruled by a series of despotic foreign powers, and secret societies were formed to fight these oppressors. Later, they turned to crime. Life in Sicily was hard, and thousands of Sicilians were attracted to the idea of emigrating to America to begin a new life. Between 1902-1913, over a million left Sicily and Southern Italy. In America, they faced hostility, prejudice and discrimination. They were uneducated and could only do menial tasks. They formed communities to help each other in this new environment. Some also brought their criminal habits with them. Many put their faith in Mafia organizations, since they believed that this was the way to get on and to prosper in the New World.

The thing that really established the Mafia in America was Prohibition. From 1920 until 1932, it was illegal to drink alcohol in the United States. Most Americans thought the law stupid and obstructive and many broke it with impunity. Many of the police turned a blind eye. This was the era of ‘bootleg liquor’, drink illegally imported from Canada by Al Capone, Joseph Kennedy and many

others. Chicago was the natural centre of this trade and Capone, an Italian-American from New York, ran the city as his personal domain. His gang controlled the import and selling of liquor and made vast fortunes. He rigged elections, intimidated voters and had the local politicians in his pocket. He was vicious, but he knew most of the people were on his side.

“If I break the law, my customers who number hundreds of the best people in Chicago are as guilty as I am.....Everyone calls me a racketeer. I call myself a businessman.” (3)

Capone was responsible for the Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre, when the rival Irish Moran gang was wiped out. Frank Gusenberg, one of the victims, was taken alive to the morgue. Although riddled with bullets and dying, he refused to tell the police anything. Admirable omerta’ Capone’s fall came quickly enough ,however. With the repeal of Prohibition, there was no need for his bootleg liquor. The corrupt politicians who had collaborated with him and shielded him were swept from office. Shorn of their protection, he was vulnerable. He was arrested for tax evasion and died of syphilis in prison , aged only 48.

The next important Mafia figure is Charles ‘Lucky’ Luciano. He is credited with unifying the New York families under his leadership, by brutally murdering all rivals. With his associate, Vito Genovese, he engaged in drug trafficking, and was the first to bring heroin into the U.S. on a large scale. By 1941 he was in jail. The U.S. was also at war at that time with Germany, Italy and Japan, and there were fears for the

security of her Atlantic seaports. The dock labour force was mainly Italian, and some of them might have a loyalty to the old country. It was feared that there might be sabotage, strikes and other forms of disruption that might harm the U.S. war effort. Luciano's thugs controlled the labour unions. He was respected and feared by the Italian-American community. The U.S. Government approached Luciano, who then consulted Albert Anastasia. They assured them that would be no trouble. Later on, when British and American forces invaded Italy, they received considerable help from the local Mafia who hated Mussolini. Luciano helped to arrange this. (4)

The story of Luciano illustrates the strong links between the Mafia and U.S. politicians that existed during the war. There is strong evidence to suggest that there was Mafia involvement in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1962. The Kennedy family fortune was based on the bootleg liquor that Joe Kennedy, his father, brought into Chicago during Prohibition. He could not have done this without collaborating with Al Capone and his henchmen. When it came to the election of his son in 1960, there is considerable evidence that Sam Giancana, the head of the Chicago Mafia did much to make sure Chicago voted for Kennedy. It was a vital win that ensured Kennedy the presidency. However, the Kennedy brothers did not exactly repay Giancana for his help. Instead John appointed his brother, Bobby as Attorney-General. The first thing Bobby did was to arraign Jimmy Hoffa, the head of the Teamsters (truck drivers) union who was corrupt and had links with the

Mafia. The murder of the president on 22<sup>nd</sup> of November, 1963 stopped this investigation in its tracks. Bobby lost his job. Thus, the Mafia had a strong motive for killing the president. The subsequent murder of the suspected assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby was further evidence. Ruby was a minor Mafia associate from Chicago, who spent many years as a bagman (debt collector) for the mob.

Gambling has always been a lucrative Mafia activity. As Short points out, in the majority of states most forms of gambling are illegal. It goes against the Protestant work ethic on which the New England colonies were founded. Yet, Americans love to gamble. An estimated \$20 billion on legal gambling and \$50 billion on illegal gambling is spent by Americans every year (5) As the chairman of the 1976 commission on Gambling in America put it, "How can any law which prohibits what 80 per cent of the people approve of be enforced?" (6)

Meyer Lansky, an associate of Luciano, set up casinos in Cuba in the thirties, with the approval of the dictator, Batista. He knew the Mafia would ruthlessly control this activity. This was all terminated by Fidel Castro's revolution in 1959. Another Jewish gangster, Benjamin 'Bugsy' Siegel opened the first casino, 'The Flamingo' in Las Vegas, Nevada in 1945. Siegel had the foresight to see that Las Vegas, a small desert town had the potential to become a gambling capital. Siegel was murdered in 1947, but this did not stop other Mafia families from moving in. Today, there are over ninety casinos generating \$2 billion dollars a year which yield 40% of Nevada's state revenue.

(7) We see this all in Godfather II, when the Corleone family moves into the gambling business in Cuba and Las Vegas.

Stars and celebrities have often been attracted to gangsters. The actor, George Raft, who specialized in gangster roles, was a personal friend of Siegel, while Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra were in Las Vegas too. Sinatra was on very friendly terms with the Gambino family and often performed cabaret shows at Mafia-owned casinos. This link with show business is seen in 'The Godfather'. Johnny Fontaine, one of the family wants a part in an upcoming movie. Don Vito arranges this by intimidating the film's director, by killing his favourite racehorse and placing its head in his bed. Much of this is thought to mirror Sinatra's early career. Many recent Hollywood films, such as 'Bugsy' and 'Hoffa', which dealt with the careers of Siegel and Hoffa portray them in a positive light as glamorous figures, and underplay their violent and corrupt aspects.

Narcotics are the main source of the Mafia's wealth today. Since the days of Luciano and Genovese, there has been an explosion in Americans' use of drugs. It is estimated today that two million Americans use heroin, five million use cocaine and thirty million use marijuana. (8) The Mafia still dominate the heroin trade. The drug as morphine, comes from Asia to Sicily, where it is processed into heroin. However, Latins dominate the cocaine trade, from Colombia coming into the U.S. through Florida. The trade is worth \$90 billion a year and is still expanding. (9)

How is it that the Mafia has survived and flourished? In the first place, it is a rich and powerful entity deeply entrenched in the U.S. business world. It operates like a large corporation, like Ford or Intel, except that its activities are mostly illegal. As Joseph Valachi testified in 1963, it is very tightly organized nationally and has powerful allies within the U.S. business community. (10)

Its wealth also gives it political power. The Luciano episode showed how even the U.S. government was willing to form an alliance with organized crime to fulfill its aims. The death of JFK showed how that power could go right up to the presidency. The Mafia has friends in high places. Paul Laxalt was one of President Reagan's chief advisors in the 80's. Earlier, he was a casino owner and Mafia associate in Las Vegas.

There has never been a concerted effort to uproot the Mafia. Individuals, such as Thomas Dewey, Senator Estes Kefauver and Bobby Kennedy have tried to break the power of the mobs, but have achieved only limited results. J. Edgar Hoover's FBI ruthlessly hunted down and killed non-Italian gangsters, but left the Italians untouched. Hoover frequently asserted that organized crime did not exist in America. His policy seemed to be, 'Let sleeping dogs lie.'

Another reason for the Mafia's survival is that they have always given Americans what they wanted. During Prohibition, the legislators decided that Americans should not drink. Americans generally thought that they were entitled to drink, and cheerfully broke the law. The Mafia provided

them with the liquor to do so. Similarly with gambling and drugs. There is, says Short, 'the gap between public morality and personal conduct.'(11) Americans put a strong emphasis on personal freedom and are mistrustful of too much government interference in their personal lives. The Mafia has always pandered to this urge. In addition, there is the American reverence for the maverick,

the rebel, the person who refuses to conform. Many see gangsters in this light. This may help to explain the glamour and romantic cachet that has led so many American celebrities to associate with hoodlums and thugs. The Mafia is part and parcel of American life—that is why it is not going to disappear.

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## Reference

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Peter, M. (1968). *The Valachi Papers*. New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons.

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