

It Ain't All Good, Fellas.
The Rise and Fall of The Italian Mafia in America.

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Through the 1970s, Italian-American criminal organizations like La Cosa Nostra (also known as the Mafia) thrived by successfully using business negotiations, increased political power, and violence to create a mob empire. However, the 1980s and 90s saw a rise in awareness and resistance from the US government, who worked toward destroying the Mafia's growing power by the early 21st Century, heavily affecting the Bonanno and Gambino crime families. Through dramatic changes in the government's approach to organized crime, law enforcement triumphed over the Mafia, fostering a new era of mob activities, marked by less violence and increased prosecution.

The modern American Mafia originated in Sicily and Southern Italy. As a way to protect Sicilian and Southern Italian cultures from Northern invaders, groups of regional men, both farmers and tradesmen, banded together to form an organization, La Cosa Nostra, that would have a lasting legacy in both Italy and the US. La Cosa Nostra, its roots based in Sicilian history, is marked by a plague, oppression, and invasion, creating a culture heavily reliant on distrust for outsiders and a strengthening of familial bonds¹. For the majority of Sicilian history, daily life and economy was focused around small independently owned farms. However, the dawn of the twelfth century saw a turn in the economics of Sicilian life as these independent farms were bought out by large absentee barons who would use physical force to establish dominance and control their land, contributing to the continuing distrust². This distrust for outsiders reached a peak following the Unification of Italy in 1861, which pieced together the unified northern states of the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia with the Two Kingdoms of Sicily³. The unification led to

¹ Bill Bonanno and Gary M. Abromovitz, *The Last Testament of Bill Bonanno: The Final Secrets of a Life in the Mafia*, (New York, Harper Collins, 2011), 1.

² Ibid., 11-12.

³ Office of the Historian. "Issues Relevant to U.S. Foreign Diplomacy: Unification of Italian States.", para 11.

higher taxes across the country. These taxes impacted poor Sicilian farmers who had been largely neglected by the central government as an Italian colony. Sicily was quickly run over with corruption. Harsh rumors began to spread across the north about Sicily and its people, leading to the creation of La Cosa Nostra, or Our Thing, an organization that acted as the protectors of the people. Breaking the law was not the original intent of the group. Rather, La Cosa Nostra aimed to unify the Sicilian people who had been oppressed by the less rural, more middle and upper class northerners. In response, northern Italians began using the term *Mafia*⁴ to describe any group that opposed the northern monopoly on central government authority. Corruption, oppression, and poverty all blended together to push many Italians to immigrate to the US.

The mid-nineteenth century brought a new wave of Italian immigration that included Southern Italians and Sicilians. After experiencing the oppression caused by the Italian Unification, these groups chose to move to the US in hopes of a better future for themselves and their children. By 1870, around 25,000 Italians, primarily escaping violence in Northern Italy caused by the leaders of the Italian unification, immigrated to the US. By 1880, however, most Italian immigrants were fleeing rural poverty in Southern Italy and Sicily, resulting in over four million people immigrating to the US between 1880 and 1924⁵. While many immigrants settled in ethnic enclaves in Northeastern cities like New York and Philadelphia, many Sicilians moved out west, settling primarily in Louisiana, Texas, and Colorado⁶. For many immigrants, their first experience with organized labor occurred in Colorado mines, where they made up about 40% of

⁴ Bonanno and Abromovitz, *The Last Testament*, 23.

⁵ Wills, Charles A. "Destination America: When Did They Come." PBS, para. 2.

⁶ Bonanno and Abromovitz, *The Last Testament*, 26-27.

union labor⁷. By the end of World War I, big city Italian neighborhoods had begun to spread out, using city unions and La Cosa Nostra as means of assimilating and growing in influence⁸. La Cosa Nostra triumphed and grew in power, and their growth at the turn of the century was not without issues - with growing power came growing tension and violence from mob factions.

As La Cosa Nostra gained power throughout the 20th century, tensions between families and family leaders began to rise, temporarily halting their growing success. From 1928-1930, varying factions of the Mafia hailing from the region of Sicily known as Castellammare del Golfo were engaged in a violent power struggle over control of La Cosa Nostra, called the Castellammarese War⁹. A primary cause of this violence was the lack of an organized structure between the existing twenty-six Italian crime families across the US. Without this stability, the Mafia was doomed to fail. After the Castellammarese War, Charlie “Lucky” Luciano, leader of the Luciano Family, addressed this vacuum by establishing the “Commission,” which was a council made up of family heads. The Commission provided the organized structure necessary to stabilize the disconnected twenty-six families. The primary goal of the Commission was to keep Family leaders open and honest with the other leaders. The Commission was a purely American innovation. A similar structure was not established in Italy until 1957¹⁰.

Throughout the beginning of the twentieth century, the first generation of Italian-Americans grew exponentially, leading to a strengthening and growth of power for La Cosa Nostra within Italian neighborhoods in large cities. The so-called “Old World” leaders of La Cosa Nostra found their “community protection” based ideals about Mafiosi leadership being

⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁸ Ibid., 38-39.

⁹ Ibid., 47-48.

¹⁰ Ibid., 72-73.

challenged by younger, more business oriented newcomers. The “boys of the first day,” or the older leaders like Salvatore Maranzano, believed that younger leaders such as Charlie Luciano had never fully lived the Mafiosi traditions of La Cosa Nostra and that they failed to comprehend the true nature of the organization¹¹. More business oriented leaders, like Luciano, frequently clashed heads with Maranzano and others over his “money focused” leadership style and his close association with Jewish mobster, Meyer Lansky. Tensions between Luciano and Maranzano came to a head when Maranzano was assassinated by the Luciano Family, sending other old world mob bosses into hiding¹², creating a permanent rift between older and newer leaders.

Towards the mid-twentieth century, the heads of the major families adopted an approach that combined both old and new world Mafia values of protection, close familial bonds, and successful business, creating a new generation of mob heads, as well as allowing for La Cosa Nostra’s triumph in the business world and the streets. Joe Colombo, head of the Colombo family until the early 1970s, made it his mission to uphold Italian traditions and create a good name for Italian Americans. To do this, he helped organize the Italian-American Civil Rights League and pushed the Department of Justice, under Richard Nixon, to ban the use of the terms Mafia and Cosa Nostra in official proceedings. Unfortunately, Colombo’s new world taste for publicity and notoriety was not well received. In June 1971, during Colombo’s second Italian-American Unity rally, Profaci Family (now under the Colombo name) soldier, “Crazy Joe” Gallo, attempted to assassinate him. The attack left Colombo in a seven-year long coma and ultimately resulted in his death in 1978¹³. Colombo’s death rattled the Mafia system where it was

¹¹ Ibid., 37.

¹² Ibid., 69.

¹³ *Inside the American Mob*. "Stayin' Alive in the '70s." Episode 1. National Geographic Channel, 2013. (6:20-12:10)

commonly accepted that murder jobs or hits, especially of a Boss, needed approval from the Commission¹⁴. Joe Colombo's love for attention was later repeated in Gambino Boss, John Gotti, whose attempts at gaining celebrity, combined with government action, lead to the eventual downfall of Gambino Family power in the 1990s¹⁵.

From the turn of the twentieth century on, the government worked to take down La Cosa Nostra. However, the relationship between the Mafia and the federal government has not always been adversarial, the most prominent example of this occurring during the World War II. After his 1936 conviction and resulting 30-50 year sentence for running a statewide prostitution ring, Luciano continued to run his crime family (which controlled the Brooklyn waterfront) from his prison cell. After the start of the WWII, he used his control of the waterfront to make a deal with the government. Luciano agreed that his Family would protect US naval ships in the New York Harbor in exchange for a transfer from the Dannemora maximum security prison to the minimum security Great Meadow prison¹⁶. As the war continued, Luciano continued to work with the government. In 1943, the government used Luciano as a go between to help assure the cooperation of the Italian Mafia during the Allied invasion of Sicily. After the war, Luciano was released from prison and exiled to Italy as a reward for his help throughout the course of the war. Because of Luciano's work to establish the Commission, as well as his working relationship with the US government, the Mafia was able to grow into a force to be reckoned with by the mid twentieth century.

¹⁴ Ibid., 12:40-16:10.

¹⁵ Raab, Selwyn. "John Gotti Running The Mob." *New York Times* (New York, NY), April 2, 1989, para 88.

¹⁶ John H. Davis, *Mafia Dynasty: The Rise and Fall of the Gambino Crime Family*, (New York, Harper Paperbacks, 1994), 61.

The golden age of the Mafia began to wane in the 1970s as law enforcement began to deploy new tools in the war against organized crime, ranging from the increased use of informants to the implementation of the RICO statute. This resulted in a turn in the tables from a triumphant Mafia to a triumphant law enforcement.

Historically, the bosses of New York's crime families prohibited Family members from selling drugs. This was because of a fear that if someone in the family was arrested for drug charges, they would be more inclined to become government informants in order to avoid jail time. An example of this is Paul Castellano, head of the Gambino Family in the 1970s and 80s. Under Castellano's rule, no one in the Family was permitted to get involved in drug trafficking or dealing. Because drug convictions carried heavy sentences, Castellano worried that if anyone from the Gambino Family was arrested for drug related crimes, they would be more likely to make deals with the government in order to avoid hefty prison sentences. To enforce his rules, he handed out death sentences to anyone in his family who dealt with drugs¹⁷. Castellano's successor, Gotti, didn't subscribe to the same rules around drugs. Instead, he created a celebrity persona for himself while openly meeting with known drug traffickers, creating the story that the Gambino family now endorsed drug trafficking¹⁸. As result, a whole generation of Mafia turncoats were created, ultimately helping the government takedown of the mob.

At the same time, the FBI welcomed a new generation of Italian-American agents, many from the same neighborhoods as rising Mafia leaders. One agent in particular, Joe Pistone, became the first federal agent to infiltrate a mob family. Beginning in 1976, Agent Joe Pistone went undercover, entering the mob scene as a budding jewel thief for six years to investigate the

¹⁷ Raab, "John Gotti", para 58.

¹⁸ Ibid, para 88.

Colombo and Bonanno Families, operating under the alias of Donnie Brasco. Pistone began as an associate for the Colombo Family, and he soon became a massive Family money-maker and an open ear to extensive mob information for the FBI¹⁹. After developing a close relationship with members of the Colombo family, Pistone moved over and began to infiltrate the Bonannos, the most violent crime family in New York²⁰. Over the next few years, he built a close relationship to Bonanno associate, Benjamin “Lefty Guns” Ruggiero and collected enough evidence to support two-hundred federal indictments, resulting in over one-hundred mob convictions²¹.

At the same time, the FBI was able to take advantage of new laws specifically designed to take down the Mafia. In 1970, the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization (RICO) Act was passed, allowing law enforcement to charge anyone who not only perpetrated crimes in relation to organized criminal organizations, but the leaders who planned or associated with the organization, so long as the crimes impacted interstate commerce²². RICO gave the FBI the ability to wiretap common mob hangouts. When paired with increasingly hefty prison sentences, federal investigators were able use wiretapped conversations as well as informant testimonies to take down important mob leaders. Using RICO, the government saw one of its greatest successes in the early 1990s when the boss of the Gambino Family, John Gotti, and his underboss, Frank Locascio, were hit with charges ranging from racketeering to illegal gambling to murder. Prior to that, Gotti had successfully defended himself in three previous trials. The fourth time would be different because this time prosecutors had access to hundreds of hours of wiretapped phone

¹⁹ *Inside the American Mob*. "Stayin' Alive in the '70s." (24:00-29:45)

²⁰ *Inside the American Mob*. "Operation Donnie Brasco." Episode 2. National Geographic Channel, 2013. (3:40-3:55)

²¹ *Ibid.*, (43:00-43:15)

²² *Criminal Resource Manual*. United States Department of Justice, n.d. Rule 109.

conversations that had been collected by the FBI to be used against him²³. The tapes of Gotti and his crew had been recorded on a small electronic recording device planted by the FBI in the apartment above the Ravenite Club, the Gambino headquarters located on Mulberry Street in Manhattan's Little Italy²⁴. Gotti's conviction would have never been possible had it not been for the work of New York's Organized Crime Strike Force, a group of prosecutors dedicated to the destruction of New York's Five Families²⁵. In April 1992, Gotti was convicted of thirteen different charges, including racketeering, murder, gambling, obstruction of justice, and fraud²⁶. On June 24, 1992, Gotti was sentenced to life in prison with no possibility of parole, where he died in 2002. Similarly to Joe Pistone's destruction of the Bonanno Family, the fall of John Gotti led to a dramatic decline in the overall power of the Gambino Family.

With Gotti's conviction came a new era of mob dealings. Despite dramatic decline in power at the end of the 20th century, New York's five families still exist today in a form that could be unrecognizable to the Mafia's Five Families of the 1970s. After John Gotti's death in 2002, Gambino underboss, Arnold Squitieri, took over the role of acting boss of the Gambino Family²⁷. After less than three years in power, the Gambino leadership was brought down by an undercover agent who had infiltrated the Family for two and a half years. The investigation resulted in extortion charges against Squitieri, as well as other associates²⁸. More recently, at least eight members of the Bonanno and Gambino families were arrested in 2014 for creating a

²³ Davis, *Mafia Dynasty*, 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵ Raab, "John Gotti", para 52.

²⁶ Lubasch, Arnold H. "Gotti Sentenced to Life in Prison without the Possibility of Parole." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 24, 1992, para 13.

²⁷ Julia Preston. "Guilty Plea Is New Blow to the Once-Feared Gambinos." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 21, 2006, para 4.

²⁸ Julia Preston. "Undercover Operation Leads to Mob Arrests." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), March 10, 2005, para 1-4.

scheme to smuggle drugs from South America to the southern tip of Italy²⁹. The 21st century has proved Paul Castellano right: given the chance, many members of the mob will rat out on others to save themselves from long prison sentences. Increasingly, federal investigators have been able to rely heavily on undercover informants for information used to charge mob members.

Aggressive prosecution has made it increasingly difficult for the mob. According to Massachusetts State Police Lt. Det. Bob Long, “the Mafia is breathing its last breaths. They are so desperate for new talent they are even making undercover cops soldiers in the Mob”³⁰.

The mob might be breathing its last breaths, but its legacy lives on, though forever changed by the law enforcement successes of the late 20th century. Because of dramatic improvements in how local police departments, as well as the Department of Justice, approach organized crime, the government has been able to marginalize the Mafia. While their work was not perfect, and there are still mob related murders, like the murder of reputed Bonanno associate, Sylvester Zottola, outside of a McDonalds³¹ in the Bronx in October 2018, mob violence has decreased alongside mob power, a major win for the government. Indictments and legal precedent have now exceeded the abilities of the mob, permanently hindering the growth of the organization, allowing for a triumphant law enforcement to muster on.

²⁹ Marzulli, John. "Gambino, Bonanno Family Mobsters Arrested in Connection to Italian Mafia: FBI." *New York Daily News* (New York, NY), February 12, 2014, para 3-7.

³⁰ Michele McPhee. "'Everyone Is a Rat These Days': What the American Mob Looks like in 2017." *Newsweek*, November 24, 2017, para 18.

³¹ Ali Watkins and Emily Palmer. "Hunted for Months, Reputed Mobster Is Gunned Down at McDonald's." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), October 4, 2018, para 1-3.

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This is a primary source document written by a former Bonanno Family head, Bill Bonanno. It discusses the history of the Sicilian mafia and leads into the history of the early American mafia. This source will be used to provide historical background in the introduction.

Criminal Resource Manual. United States Department of Justice, n.d. Accessed March 3, 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/jm/criminal-resource-manual-109-rico-charges>.

This source is a primary source from the Justice Departments Criminal Resource Manual. Rule 109 on RICO Charges will be used to help define what the RICO Act is and how it works.

Lubasch, Arnold H. "Gotti Sentenced to Life in Prison without the Possibility of Parole." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 24, 1992. Accessed March 1, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/24/nyregion/gotti-sentenced-to-life-in-prison-without-the-possibility-of-parole.html>.

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Marzulli, John. "Gambino, Bonanno Family Mobsters Arrested in Connection to Italian Mafia: FBI." *New York Daily News* (New York, NY), February 12, 2014. Accessed February 1, 2019. <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/nyc-crime/30-mobsters-nabbed-connection-italian-mafia-article-1.1609347>.

This is a primary source newspaper article discussing how associates from both the Gambino and Bonanno Families were arrested for creating a drug trafficking scheme. This will be used to show the modern application of certain bosses drug policies, as well as the contradiction between families.

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This is a primary newspaper article discussing the change in leadership of the of the Gambino Family in 2015. This was used to provide context for the modern version of the Mafia, however it was only used in research and not the final paper.

Preston, Julia. "Guilty Plea Is New Blow to the Once-Feared Gambinos." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 21, 2006. Accessed January 9, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/21/nyregion/guilty-plea-is-new-blow-to-the-oncefeared-gambinos.html>.

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This primary source article only focused on a 2005 undercover operation that took out the new leadership of the Gambino Family after the death of John Gotti.

Raab, Selwyn. "John Gotti Running The Mob." *New York Times* (New York, NY), April 2, 1989. Accessed November 16, 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/04/02/magazine/john-gotti-running-the-mob.html>.

This article is a secondary source from the late 1980s about the rise of John Gotti's power in the Gambino Family. It includes information about family businesses, the RICO act, and law enforcement opinions about Gotti. It will be used for background as well as evidence for a section on government investigations.

Watkins, Ali, and Emily Palmer. "Hunted for Months, Reputed Mobster Is Gunned Down at McDonald's." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), October 4, 2018. Accessed December 14, 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/04/nyregion/sylvester-zottola-dead-bonanno-bronx.html>.

This is a primary source article from the NY Times announcing the murder of a Bonanno associate, Sylvester Zottola. It is going to be used to analyze the current state of the American Mafia, specifically the Bonanno family.

Secondary Sources

Davis, John H. *Mafia Dynasty: The Rise and Fall of the Gambino Crime Family*. New York, NY: Harper Paperbacks, 1994.

This source is a secondary source about the history of the Gambino Family and their downfall at the hands of John Gotti. It is going to be used for historical background as well as evidence of cooperation between mob leaders and the US government.

Inside the American Mob. "Operation Donnie Brasco." Episode 2. National Geographic Channel. First broadcast July 28, 2013. Produced by Ken Druckerman, Banks Tarver, and Devon Schnieder. Accessed October 24, 2018.

This documentary goes more in depth about the operation Donnie Brasco, as well as breaking down the history of the Bonanno Family. Like the first episode, this uses primary source footage as well as first hand accounts from Joe Pistone (Donnie Brasco), other law enforcement agents, and members of the mafia.

Inside the American Mob. "Stayin' Alive in the '70s." Episode 1. National Geographic Channel. First broadcast July 28, 2013. Produced by Ken Druckerman and Banks Tarver. Accessed October 19, 2018.

This source is a documentary series focusing on the golden age of the American Mafia. It highlights the beginning of the Donnie Brasco infiltration as well as the power shift in the Colombo family, using primary source footage as well as interviews with members of law enforcement and the mafia.

McPhee, Michele. "'Everyone Is a Rat These Days': What the American Mob Looks like in 2017." *Newsweek*, November 24, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2019.
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Wills, Charles A. "Destination America: When Did They Come." PBS. Last modified September 2005. Accessed February 14, 2019.
https://www.pbs.org/destinationamerica/usim_wn_noflash_5.html.

This source was used to gather more information about the immigration of Southern Italians to the United States during the late 19th- early 20th centuries. The page is a part of PBS's series, Destination America.