

# The rise of the american mafia history essay



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The mafia has long been in the American conscious since the 1920s. People think of smooth-talking, scar-faced, ruthless criminals inhabiting the dark corners of society. While this may have been the case of many of these Mafiosi, not many people know how the Mafia has risen to its prominence. We can thank the simple economic concept of “ supply and demand” for that: the Prohibition of 1920. We can look back to this “ noble experiment and say that this was the reason for the rise of the American Mafia, and for the problems we now face. After carefully looking at what has become of our nation since then, I have come to the conclusion that Prohibition was a failure from the start. We are the reason for such issues today; I only hope that we approach the next “ noble experiment” cautiously.

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#### Introduction

Prohibition has long been thought to have been the cause of the Mafia in America, though in reality it was the catalyst for bringing the mafia to the public's perception. It also changed how the government fought organized crime. The Mafia first came to America in the first wave of 800 000 Italian immigrants at the end of the nineteenth century (Dickie, 2004). The second wave of immigrants came in the nineteen twenties after Benito Mussolini declared war on the Mafia and forced hundreds of criminals to leave the country. This wave of Mafia immigrants coincided with the 18th Amendment. While Prohibition did not give birth to the Mafia in America, it did aid in the growth of organized crime, which was a more advanced form of the Mafia. Prohibition left a black spot in America's history which can never be erased. It was during this era that the Mafia ceased to be just an Italian gang. The Mafia become an organization; its own government. While the US has publicly condemned the mafia in higher courts, various acts, and the use of its FBI, it also has a history of working with the American Mafia; much like

the Sicilian mafia did with the Italian government in its early days. And it led to more violent forms of organized crime that the US government continues to fight to this day.

### The Mafia's Beginnings

As background, the name “ mafia” was first used by Nicolo Turrisi Colonna. But before him, there was no name for this group of people. One of the earliest known persecutions by the mafia was recorded by a group called Gaspare Galati, a surgeon in the countryside (Dickie, 2004). He owned a fruit farm which he abandoned after much abuse by what seemed to be the entire town. After this, more documented persecutions began revealing themselves. This, in turn, led to political scandals and corruption. From 1876 to 1890, the Italian government was seemingly split on the issue of the mafia till Representative Diego Tajani called out the Right wing for supporting the crime in the past and the Left wing for using the mafia as well (Dickie, 2004). Since then, the Italian government has a long history of corruption, inept policing, and failed attempts at stopping the mafia. Now the mafia was not always about running alcohol. Rather, they were a form of protection service, albeit a corrupted one. For example, a store owner could be paying for protection of his goods from thieves, while those same thieves are paying for protection from the police to steal from the store owner, while the police were receiving a cut to look the other way and paid to secure their jobs. It was effective, and there were few outspoken complaints. It was also a well structured organization, much like a government in its own right.

Government, by definition, is “ the form or system of rule by which a state, community, etc., is governed.” (Unknown, 2010) There are associates: corrupt officials and prospective Mafiosi. Then soldiers: they are the lowest on the totem pole, as they do the majority of the dirty work. They can be broken up into groups of ten called decinas. A caporegime, or capodecina, was the head of these soldiers. They were much higher in rank and reported directly to the underboss or boss. The underboss was second in command of the family. He would be poised to take over should the boss die or be tossed in prison for a while, to keep the family together. The boss was the head of the family. They rule by respect and fear, much like a CEO. A boss would also have a consigliere to assist them. The consigliere was considered an advisor, and was highly trusted. (Unknown, Mafia Structure and Definitions, 2008)

Only Sicilian men could be in the Sicilian mafia, and it was rare to see women operating in a man’s role. This structure is important, as it helps to understand their mentality. Members of the mafia would have to be extremely loyal to their family or cause. In order to gain admission, they were required to commit a murder, as it was a way of ensuring their silence, or omerta. (Dickie, 2004)

Like any government, there had to be money to support their operations, foreign and domestic. America was rumored to be a land ripe with opportunity at this time. Once the mafia began to emigrate, America would face similar challenges that the Italian government had.

The “ Noble Experiment”

One cannot look at Prohibition without looking at organized crime. Yet one must also realize the short amount of time that the Mafia has been in existence, especially the American Mafia, and its rise in popular culture was only encouraged by the 18th Amendment. On January 16, 1920, the 18th Amendment to the United States Constitution went into effect. (Mintz, 2007) This amendment was known as Prohibition, the “ noble experiment.” This was a law forbidding the making or selling of alcoholic beverages. (Congress, 2004) Prohibitionists, supporters of the 18th Amendment, were confident that the new law would be the cure for all of the social ills in America. They assumed that the devil was in the alcohol. Also, it can be said that it was a form of cultural control, particularly against the Irish. (Yablon, 2006) Those against the amendment feared that crime would explode out of control, causing illegal establishments to rise and home breweries to increase (Franklin, 1922). And, not surprisingly enough, Prohibition did just what its opponents said. In addition to the fostering of corruption and causing law enforcement agencies to be open to bribes, prohibition contributed to the full development of organized crime in America. Before prohibition, the Mafia gangs’ operations were violent crimes, prostitution, and acting as bullies for political machines. These operations were slowly dying down by the time prohibition was established. Gangs were in search for other ways to profit. Prohibition provided these criminal organizations with a way to profit by selling illegal liquor. Speakeasies, which were illegal clubs serving alcoholic beverages, sprang up all over the country and were under the Mafia’s control. To supply these clubs, bootlegging organizations were needed. Bootleggers and rumrunners brought the illegal liquor from outside of the United States’ borders. This illegal activity was quite profitable for those who

ran the organization. The lure of easy money caused many gangs, which were once only interested in robberies and murder, to become active in the illegal business of smuggling and selling alcohol. Before prohibition, politicians had controlled the gangsters. However, with the new found wealth they had because of prohibition, gangsters were able to give the orders. The Mafia soon found that they could corrupt federal agents, police, politicians and even judges. There seemed to be no end to the power that their illegal money could provide. By 1928, a large part of the American population realized that Prohibition had to end. Prohibition was a tremendous mistake.

### Iconic Mobsters

The Prohibition Era spawned some of the most prominent gangsters in history. Chicago's Al Capone dominated Chicago's mob scene from 1925 to 1931. While the public called him "Scarface" the FBI called him Public Enemy Number One. The estimation of his earnings alone from bootlegging and rum-running was \$60 million. Capone is remembered as the most brutal and most flamboyant of the underground bosses—the mold for other gangsters. Another of Prohibition's famous gangsters was the rebellious Charlie "Lucky" Luciano. Luciano led a rebellion in the underworld in order to have peace among the families so that crime could be organized the way they felt it should be. Luciano, together with Frank Costello, Meyer Lansky, and Benny "Bugsy" Siegel, formed the methods they felt were necessary to achieve this organization: strong arm persuasion, disciplined action and, most important, planned organization and expansion patterned after the operations of a legitimate big business. Luciano used Prohibition to his advantage. By the time Prohibition was over, Luciano was the new crime

boss and had formed alliances with non-Italian gangsters as well. This was the true birth of organized crime.

### U. S. Response

After America's revelation that Prohibition was doing more harm than good to America, President Hoover, in 1931, established a commission to study Prohibition. Prohibition was found to be unenforceable (Franklin, 1922) but the commission recommended that the 18th Amendment remain in effect. Finally, however, on December 3, 1933, Prohibition was repealed by the passage of the 21st Amendment. Prohibition was the only amendment to ever be repealed. The effects of Prohibition did not end with the repeal, as the citizens had hoped. The powerful gangs had become so powerful that they simply moved to new businesses, like gambling, which received public approval. Prohibition had provided Mafia families with a way to get the money and the power they wanted. Bloody wars were fought among the Families. Repealing the 18th Amendment had been easy compared to the termination of the Mafia and the illegal activities that were brought about by Prohibition.

The fact that the government spurred on the mafia can be mind-boggling in itself. Yet we should have expected no less, as it was a direct attempt by the government to control the morals of a nation. Prohibition was the result of the temperance movement back in the 1800s. It can be noted that alcohol consumption had dropped for a short term period following the enactment of Prohibition (Tyrell, 1997); cirrhosis levels in men dropped nearly 20 percent to 10.7 percent per 100 000 in 1929, down from 29.5 percent per 100 000



in 1911 (Mintz, 2007). However, speakeasies were quickly growing; by 1927, there were 30 000 illegal speakeasies, which was more than twice the amount of legal bars before Prohibition (Tyrell, 1997). That figure is only an estimate, as many citizens would make their own beer and wine in basements.

### What Now?

Today, the United States is doing its best to restrict the flow of illegal drugs into the country, as well as curtail illegal and legal drug abuse stateside. Opponents argue that a national prohibition amendment against drugs will render the same results as that of the first Prohibition. Roger Pilon argued