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1920’s Research Paper

Organized Crime in the 1920’s

In the history of the United States of America the time period of the 1920’s has come to be known as the roaring 20’s. This era was filled with many new innovations in sports, music, fashion, as well as technology with the development of the automobile. Although this period was filled with many good things such as the economic boom this era was also home to prohibition in the United States. This outlawing of alcoholic beverages in the United States created an opportunity for a mafia to become prominent in the country, creating a system of organized crime. The Mafia that began to come to power was one of the major areas of organized crime with a system of ranking as well as mob bosses, but duos like Bonnie and Clyde also began to rise with organized crime.

The American Mafia was an Italian-American network of organized crime with operations in cities across the United States prominently in New York and Chicago (“Mafia in the”). One of the reasons the Mafia was able to get created was the number of Italians in New York City increased from 20,000 to 250,000 within the course of ten years (“Mafia in the”). When the United States decided to pass the 18th amendment banning the sale, manufacture and transportation of alcoholic beverages it created a new illegal occupation in the Country that the Italian-American gangs were skilled at. These gangs skill sets included smuggling, money laundering, and bribing police and other public officials which allowed them to easily enter the booming bootleg liquor business (“Mafia in the”). These gangs began to transform this illegal business into different sophisticated criminal enterprises. Eventually Sicilian Mafia members began migrating to the United States where they got involved in the bootlegging business and the American Mafia forming (“Mafia in the”). Americans began adopting some of the Sicilian Mafias customs and ranking within the Mafia families. By the late 1920’s there was a central organization created which was called Commission. Its purpose was similar to that of a board of directors but for the Mafia (“Mafia in the”). There was also more than 20 families throughout the country at this time, and New York City had become America’s organized crime capital with five mafia families. While during the 1920’s prohibition was the main fuel for the Mafia’s business, after prohibition was repealed the Mafia began dealing more with illegal gambling, loan-sharking to prostitution rings, labor unions and legitimate businesses (“History of the”). Some of the businesses included construction, garbage collection, trucking, restaurants, nightclubs, and the New York Garment Industry. They were able to get into these areas of business because of their continued ability to bribe corrupt political officials, business leaders, as well as witnesses and juries in the court system (“History of the”). The Mafia was one of the main sources of organized crime in 1920’s America but only rose to power because of the massive increase in Italian immigrants and Prohibition being heavily enforced. The Mafia had a strict system of ranking and membership ceremonies as well as codes every member had to obey by (“Mafia in the”).

The Mafia in the United States prohibition era had five main levels to its ranking system, and very specific and strict membership codes and agreements every member had to abide by. The highest rank within a family was the boss; it was their job to oversee the happenings within the family (“How the Mafia”). Also their position required them to collect most of the money made by family members, and make all decisions relating to their particular family, similar to a CEO of a company. The boss was a well-respected and feared member of the Mafia who was sometimes called the don. The boss had a right hand man who gave the boss advice on what was best for the family known as the Consigliore (“How the Mafia”). Majority of the time this person was the only one who was not afraid to tell the boss news that he didn’t want to hear. Although this person was very important to the family not every family had a Consigliore, and they were often not included in the ranking. The Consigliore was not the second in command in the family but the Underboss was (“How the Mafia”). It was the Underboss’ job to handle disputes without involving the Boss, and was usually in training to become the next boss themselves. The Underboss would only take over when the Boss was no longer able to run the family; most times it was at the time of death of the Boss that the Underboss would then step up (“How the Mafia”). The next level down in the ranking of the American Mafia was the Capos, and while there was only one Boss and Underboss per family the number of Capos per family depended on the size of the family (“How the Mafia”). Each Capos in a family is given a section of the territory and how the sections are split up can be by category or geographically. For example one capo might be in charge of the illegal drug trade, another would be in charge of illegal gambling or, they could split up the territory by giving each Capo a different street within the family limits. Their main responsibility was to make money for the Mafia and while they can keep some for themselves most was to be given the boss (“How the Mafia”). Each capo had soldiers that would report to them and do their bidding and the ugly work for the Mafia. The soldiers were ranked under the capos and it was their job to collect outstanding payments, track down people that had wronged the Mafia, and do whatever it took to protect the higher-ranking members especially the Boss (“How the Mafia”). The soldiers didn’t make a lot of money and didn’t really have a lot of power within the family although their job was important to the security of the Mafia. The lowest rank in the Mafia was the associates. Although they were not legit members of the Mafia they proved to be useful whenever members of the family needed them to help out, or carry out the Mafia’s illegal activities. These people could be called on whenever the Mafia pleased and could be just about anyone (“How the Mafia”). The Mafia had very strict rankings in each family, and each rank had different jobs and expectations to hold, while every member had specific expectations to uphold also. To become a member of the American Mafia there was an initiation ceremony that took place where rituals were performed such as a hopeful member pricking their finger to draw blood while holding a burning picture of a patron saint and reciting an oath of loyalty (“History of the”). There were only two prerequisites that must be filled in order to become eligible for membership; have Italian heritage usually on the father’s said, and most of the time commit a murder to show loyalty to the family (“History of the”). To become a member meant to be committed lifelong to the Mafia and obey the Omerta. The Omerta was a code of secrecy and conduct that also forbid cooperation with the government. This code was adopted into the American Mafia when the Sicilian Mafia members began immigrating to America (“History of the”). Also members had to swear to never assault one another within the family, and to never cheat with another members’ wife or girlfriend. This prevented members from turning on each other and helped to create a sense of unity within the family (“History of the”). Overall the American mafia had a strict ranking system with each rank having specific jobs and responsibilities as well as a membership code that all members had to obey.

One of the most notorious mob bosses of the 1920’s was Al “Scarface” Capone, who was born to Italian immigrants in Brooklyn New York, 1899. His family was poor at this time, living in a New York tenement house with the eight children (“Al Capone”). Capone had a normal life without any gang influence up until the 6th grade when he began falling behind and had to repeat the grade (“Al Capone”). Eventually he began skipping school and started hanging out at the Brooklyn docks where he was introduced to gang life. The reason Capone never returned to school was because of an incident in which he hit his teacher and was in return beaten by the principle (“Al Capone”). After this incident the family had enough money to move to a better home in the outskirts of Park Slope, but Capone began running small errands for Johnny Torrio a powerful member of the American mafia. Although Torrio left for Chicago in 1909 the two remained close, and Capone worked legitimate jobs while keeping gang association to a minimum (“Al Capone”). 1917 Torrio introduced Capone to Frankie Yale who gave Capone a job as a bartender and bouncer at the Harvard Inn, an establishment dealing with the mafia. Capone earned his nickname “Scarface” while working here after an incident that left him with 3 facial scars (“Al Capone”). At age 19 Capone married Mae Coughlin only weeks after their son Albert Francis was born. Capone wanted a good life for his family and he moved to Baltimore away from the mafia and got a job as a bookkeeper for a construction company (“Al Capone”). In 1920 Capone’s father died and Torrio invited Capone to Chicago and Capone took the opportunity to get involved in the mafia. As a former thug and bookkeeper Capone had experience with numbers and also had street smarts. Torrio recognized this immediately and promoted Capone to a partner where he began to develop a reputation as a drinker and a trouble-maker (“Al Capone”). Eventually Capone was arrested for driving drunk and Torrio had to use his connections to get Capone off. But when Capone’s family joined him in Chicago he decided to straighten up a little and bought a modest house in a middle-class community for his wife, son, mother and younger brothers and sisters to live with him in (“Al Capone”). Capone was now into the Mafia with Torrio so when a reformist mayor stated that he wanted to get rid of the corruption in the city Capone had to move the base beyond with city limits to Cicero. After this Capone and Torrio began an effort the day of the election to get their candidate elected using intimidation (“Al Capone”). In 1925 there was an attempt on Torrio’s life causing him to turn the entire business over to Capone while he returned to Italy (“Al Capone”). Torrio’s parting advice to Capone was to keep a low profile, but Capone began living lavishly and the press began to fall in love with him. He began to be thought of as a Robin Hood Figure impacting the 1920’s society (“Al Capone”). Having a person being compared to Robin Hood allowed society to allow and fall in love with the idea of the mafia. Also having a person perceived as good associated with the mafia made them seem less frightening and more relatable. This effected society by allowing the mafia to continue to exist because everyone loves them. Since the mafia continued to grow in power and numbers it also impacted the various illegal businesses allowing them to grow and become more widely known. Also the mafia’s handle in the bootlegging business caused people to allow the mafia to continue to exist because people still wanted the alcohol, going against the 18th amendment. Overall Al Capone was a notorious mob boss of the 1920’s who became an idol to society and allowed the Mafia to continue growing its strength impacting society as a whole (“Al Capone”).

While Al Capone was an idol to the society, there was also a famous duo known as Bonnie and Clyde who became idols to society as well. The dynamic duo were not always criminals together, both had records before they met each other. Bonnie had served time for a bank robbery at age 22, and Clyde served time for stealing turkeys in Texas at age 17 (“The Legendary”). There is reason to believe that while Clyde was in prison he was abused and that’s why he was a notorious outlaw after he formed the legendary “Barrow Gang”. The Barrow gang included Clyde’s brother and sister-in-law along with other criminals that he and Bonnie knew through their contacts in the criminal world (“The Legendary”). The gang was involved with many crimes on and off before the famous string of bank robberies from 1932 – 1934. Although Bonnie and Clyde were criminals they had managed to capture the public, and had a huge fan club. Similar to Al Capone, Bonnie and Clyde were able to reach that place in the public mind that loved notorious criminals (“The Legendary”). When the duo would enter a bank the people saw them as stars while they were held at bay and the gang gathered the money. This showed how the duo had affected society because people were so captured by Bonnie and Clyde that they supported the robbing of banks and on a larger scale organized crime. Sometimes the gang would take hostages, but instead of treating them badly the gang would treat them like family and eventually release the hostages after they made their escape. The gang would sometimes give the hostages money before they released them (“The Legendary”). The pleasant treatment of the hostages would mean that word would spread that the duo were good people also increasing the tolerance for organized crime, promoting the two during this time. The dynamic duos days of crime came to an end on May 23rd, 1934 when they were killed by the police (“The Legendary”). Overall Bonnie and Clyde impacted the society by capturing the hearts of Americans, becoming idols and promoting organized crime during the 1920’s era.

The 18th amendment to the American constitution allowed for organized crime to rise in the United States. The Mafia rose to power doing this time mainly through the business of bootlegging illegal liquor, but began to gain power in other illegal areas. This era known as the roaring twenties gave way to many new innovations, revolutionary to the common person but also increased organized crime. Overall organized crime during the 1920’s whether it was mafia related or just dynamic duos captured the hearts of America and affected the society of the time.

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