Carlos Marcello and the Sicilian Mafia in the U.S.

by Cynthia Butler

Carlos Marcello was the epitome of the Sicilian Mafia and its far-reaching "black hand" in the United States. His employment of Mafia strong-arm tactics and the *Omerta* code of silence worked very effectively for him throughout the majority of his long life. This study will explore Marcello's rise to power within the Mafia's ranks and his impact on the New Orleans community during the 1950s and 1960s.

From the latter part of the 19th Century through the early part of the 20th Century, multitudes of Italians immigrated to the United States. By 1910, there were approximately 200,000 Italian immigrants living in New Orleans, alone, but there were also large populations living in other American cities by then as well. [1] Most of these immigrants were single men who had been poor farmers, unskilled laborers, or craftsmen in Italy. They often came to America looking for the economic opportunity that would allow them to save money, return to their mother country, and buy their own farms. The majority were good, law-abiding citizens who enriched America with their colorful Italian culture and love of family, but there was also a small percentage who belonged to the Sicilian Mafioso.[2] This faction brought with them their subversive Mafioso code of conduct. They formed gangs that preyed on their own countrymen's successes by extorting money from neighborhood businesses and others who "paid-up" just to keep from being attacked. These Sicilian extortion gangs and their tactics were known as "the black hand." Their tactics included, but were not limited to: sending letters to victims, threatening bodily harm, kidnapping, arson, and even murder if they were not paid.[3] One of the members of this underworld organization who ascribed to such tactics was New Orleans' mob boss and Sicilian by birth, Carlos Marcello. In the 1930s and 1940s, Marcello quickly rose in the ranks of the Mafioso; by the 1950s and 1960s he was believed to have been directing many nefarious operations in Louisiana and Texas, including drug trafficking, extortion, gambling, and prostitution. Since

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[1] Samuel C. Shepard, *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, Volume XIV*. Lafayette, LA: University of Louisiana Press, 2005, 368.

[2] Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. NY, NY: Bay Back Books, 2008, Ch. 6 & 7; Humbert S. Nelli, *The Business of Crime: Italians and Syndicate Crime in the U.S*. Chicago: IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981, Ch. 1 & 2; Margavio, A.V. Salomone, Jerome. *Bread and Respect: The Italians of Louisiana*. New Orleans, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2014, 21-45.

[3] James Fentress, *Eminent Gangsters: Immigrants and the Birth of Organized Crime in America*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010, vii-xiii; "Black Hand." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*. NY, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015; Nigel Cawthorne. *Mafia: History of the Mob*. London, UK: Arcturus Publishing Ltd., 2012, Ch. 2, Kindle Edition.

Marcello was discreet and a master at destroying evidence, he escaped indictment for these major charges.[4]

Returning our attention to the origins of the Mafia, it is known to have evolved over many centuries. Until the mid-19th century, a long line of foreign invaders ruled Sicily. This caused Sicilians to band together in groups to protect themselves and carry out their own system of justice. The term "Mafioso" initially meant "brave man," and had no criminal connotation. It was also used to refer to a person who was suspicious of central authority. By the 19th Century, some of these groups emerged as private armies, or "*mafie*," who extorted protection money from landowners. They eventually became the violent criminal organization known today as the Sicilian Mafia.

The New Orleans Mafia was a direct offshoot of the Sicilian Mafia. It originated in the late 19th Century when a booming shipping trade between New Orleans and Sicily brought fruit, vegetables, and immigrants to New Orleans. The vast majority of Sicilians who immigrated to Louisiana worked on sugar plantations as cane cutters—they were sponsored by Louisiana planters to fill the labor void left by former slaves who had migrated to northern industrial jobs following the Civil War.[5] A small element among these immigrants, however, were Sicilian mafia members who found their niches by extorting immigrants. Eventually, these *mafioso* controlled the New Orleans docks and shipping trade with Sicily.[6] Being the earliest mafia in the U.S. and maintaining close ties to Sicily, the New Orleans Mafia held an exalted position among the other mafia organizations in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles which had risen to power in the 1920s—the New Orleans Mafia could make decisions on its own without going to the Sicilian Commission.[7] Even though the American Mafia was a separate entity from the Sicilians, they paid deference to the Sicilians and also shared similar rules and traditions. One such tradition was "*omerta*" which was a code of silence, loyalty, and rules that prescribed death if the code were violated.[8]

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[4] John Davis, *Mafia Kingfish*. NY, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1989, 38-44.

[5] Margavio, A.V. Salomone, Jerome. 32-36.

[6] Davis, *Mafia Kingfish*, 7-12; Nelli, *The Business of Crime: Italians and Syndicate Crime in the U.S.*, Ch. 2.

[7] "FBI Report." *La Cosa Nostra File, Bureau No. 92-6054-3176*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972.

[8] *Omertà* implies "the categorical prohibition of cooperation with state authorities or reliance on its services, even when one has been victim of a crime." Even if somebody is convicted for a crime he has not committed, he is supposed to serve the sentence without giving the police any information about the real criminal, even if that criminal has nothing to do with the Mafia himself. Within Mafia culture, breaking omertà is punishable by death. The code was adopted by Sicilians long before the emergence of Cosa Nostra (some observers date it to the 16th century as a way of opposing Spanish rule). It is also deeply rooted in rural Crete, Greece; Fentress, James, 10-30; Brenner, Susan. "Organized Cybercrime? How Cyberspace May Affect the Structure of Criminal Relationships." *North Carolina Journal of Law & Technology, Vol. 4, Issue 1*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Law School, 2002; Dickie, John. *Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia*. NY, NY: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2004, 21-38.

The early 1900s was the perfect time for Mafia members to be immigrating to the United States. On December 18, 1917, the U.S. Senate proposed the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which banned the sale and use of alcohol. The 18th Amendment was ratified on January 16, 1919 which initiated the Prohibition Era. It is possible and highly likely that the Mafia members who had begun immigrating to the U.S. beginning in the 1880s and 1890s knew the 18th Amendment would be their opportunity to begin criminal operations in the United States.[9] They certainly walked right into a perfect breeding ground for the Mafia to grow and thrive.

At the same time the Sicilians were immigrating to America, other Sicilians were immigrating to the Jewish-Italian community of Tunis, a city in the French protectorate country of Tunisia, Africa. Jewish-Italians from the Tuscany region of Italy had established the first Italian community in Tunisia in the 1700s. "At the end of the 19th Century, as a result of economic difficulties and a huge social crisis originating in southern regions of the newly created Kingdom of Italy, Tunis and other coastal cities of Tunisia received the immigration of tens of thousands of Italian peasants, mainly from Sicily and Sardinia. As a consequence, in the first years of the 20th Century there were more than 100,000 Italian residents in Tunisia."[10]

Into this Italian culture in Tunisia, Calogero Minacori was born to Sicilian parents in February of 1910. Just prior to his birth, Calogero's father, Giuseppe Minacori, learned of better opportunities in America and sailed to New Orleans, leaving his pregnant wife, Luigia, behind. Giuseppe secured work on a sugar plantation where his wife and infant son, Calogero, joined him in October of 1910. After immigrating to Louisiana, the Minacoris changed their last name to Marcello and anglicized their first names, Giuseppe becoming Joseph and Luigia becoming Louise. They gave their son Calogero the Spanish name Carlos Marcello[11].

Carlos's father, Joseph, was able to rise from being a cane cutter to owning a small vegetable farm in Algiers, Orleans Parish, Louisiana (now a suburb of New Orleans). Carlos's mother, Louise, never worked, but she helped her husband with their farm.[12] Louise Marcello had eight children born in Louisiana who were citizens by birth. Her oldest child, Carlos, "was never naturalized, an oversight that would later plague him."[13]

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[9] Nelli, *The Business of Crime: Italians and Syndicate Crime in the U.S.*, 100.

[10] Janice Alberti-Russell. *The Italian Community in Tunisia, 1861-1961: A Viable Minority.* NY, NY: Columbia University Press, 1977, 34-37.

[11] "Testimony of Aaron Kohn." *Permanent Investigations Subcommittee, U.S. Senate, 87th Congress Files*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961; Davis, John. *Mafia Kingfish.* (NY, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 10.

[12] Davis, *Mafia Kingfish*, 10-11.

[13] Ibid, 10; Vaccarro, Stefano. *Carlos Marcello: The Man Behind the JFK Assassination*. NY, NY: Enigma Books, 2013, 19-25.

Carlos Marcello dropped out of school when he was only fourteen to help his father with transporting and peddling produce in the New Orleans French Quarter.[14] The French Quarter of New Orleans, to this day, has a large farmers' market where fresh fruits and vegetables are sold daily. It would stand to reason that Joseph transported his fresh produce to the French Quarter and sold it at one of the many tables or counters that lined the French Market on Decatur St. There was also a well-established Italian ethnic community living in the French Quarter by 1924 when Carlos was 14, as well as several Italian grocery stores and restaurants. Carlos Marcello had ample opportunity to become familiar with the French Quarter, its Sicilian residents, and its Mafia members by the time he decided to move there at age 18.

Carlos Marcello's first criminal act after moving to the French Quarter was a bank robbery, which he plotted with some younger teenagers. They also held up a grocery store and made their get-away in a stolen car. These charges were dropped in 1929. A year later, he was convicted on yet another assault and robbery charge and sentenced to 9 to 14 years of hard labor.[15]

Even though Marcello served almost five years in Angola Penitentiary, neither the crime nor the incarceration appears on his record. This occurred due to Marcello's partnership with Peter Hand, a member of Louisiana's State Legislature, but also an owner and operator of two profitable bookie joints. Hand collaborated with New York City mob boss, Frank Costello, who about this time needed a young man in New Orleans that knew the Algiers section and could handle the slot machines in that area. Marcello fit the bill. Even though Peter Hand had never directly met the young man, he took on the task of getting Marcello out of prison, "Just before Peter Hand died, he explained how he obtained a full pardon for Marcello. "'Oscar Allen was governor, and favors were very easy to get for a fellow like me. I was a good administration man … I just went in to Governor Allen. I told him I've known this boy's people for so many years and it was the first time he was in trouble. It took me about five minutes [to get him out of prison].' So Marcello was released from prison, went to work with the Costello-Kastel combine, and learned all the tricks of the trade. He also dabbled in narcotics on the side."[16] Having these charges expunged taught Marcello the value of criminal-politician alliances. He later used this knowledge very effectively in springing

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[14] Vaccara, *Carlos Marcello: The Man Behind the JFK Assassination*, Ch. 2.

[15] Brendan McCarthy, "Carlos Marcello: The Times Picayune Covers 175 Years of New Orleans History." New Orleans, LA: Times Picayune Newspaper, 2012; "Testimony of Aaron Kohn before the McClellan U.S. Senate Committee." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959-1961; Stefano Vaccara, Ch. 2; Davis, *Mafia Kingfish*, 21-24.

[16] "New Orleans: Cosa Nostra's Wall Street." *Saturday Evening Post, Vol. 237, Issue 8*. (Philadelphia, PA: Curtis Publishing Co., 1964). Retrieved from Texas Woman's University Blagg-Huey Library; "Testimony of Aaron Kohn before the McClellan U.S. Senate Committee." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959-1961.

his own employees from prison and in forming relationships with many high-ranking politicians, including several Louisiana governors.[17]

It was after this prison term that Marcello became part of Sylvestro "Silver Dollar Sam" Carolla's New Orleans crime organization.[18] He moved up in the ranks very quickly due to marrying the daughter of Carolla's underboss, Frank Todaro. By 1938, Marcello was in trouble with the law again after being arrested and charged with the drug trafficking of 23 pounds of marijuana, the biggest marijuana bust in New Orleans history at that time. Marcello spent only 10 months in prison this time due to Carolla's connections and influence in the State of Louisiana.[19]

By the 1940s, Marcello was a major player in illegal rackets. The U.S. government was successful in having Sam Carolla deported to Palermo, Sicily in 1947, so the big mob bosses in the other cities of the U.S. were looking for the right person to replace him. After Carlos was released from prison, he was contacted by Frank Costello who had taken control of Louisiana's gambling network after Carolla was deported. Through Costello, Marcello began to associate with Meyer Lansky, the mob's accountant who owned casinos all over the world. Costello and Lansky bought the most important casinos in New Orleans and made Carlos the boss.[20] Marcello was also closely associated with Sam Giancana, the mob boss of Chicago, Santo Trafficante, the mob boss of Florida and Havana, Cuba, and Jimmy Hoffa, the president of the Teamster's Union.[21]

In 1947, Marcello became the undisputed Mafia boss of the South "in a back-room ceremony at the Black Diamond Nightclub at Conti and North Galvez streets in New Orleans."[22] It was common knowledge for those who lived in and around the New Orleans area that Carlos Marcello indirectly owned or funded many businesses. Some of the well-known places were Mosca's Restaurant on the west bank of the Mississippi River near New Orleans, the Southern News Service and Publishing Co., the Beverly Club, New Southport Club, Elmwood Plantation Restaurant, Town and Country Motel, the New Garden Club in New Orleans, numerous clubs and bars on Bourbon Street,

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[17] *Saturday Evening Post,* 1964.

[18] Ibid.

[19] *Saturday Evening Post,* 1964; "Aaron Kohn Testimony before the Permanent Investigations Subcommittee." Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office 1961.

[20] "Aaron Kohn Testimony before the Permanent Investigations Subcommittee." Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office 1961; Vacarro, *Carlos Marcello: The Man Behind the JFK Assassinaton*, Ch. 5.

[21] McClellan Senate Committee Report, 1959; Kroth, Jerry. *Conspiracy in Camelot: The Complete History of the Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy*. (NY, NY: Albora Publishing, 2003), 103-118, Kindle Edition; Vaccara, *Carlos Marcello: The Man Behind the JFK Assassinaton,* Ch. 5.

[22] Davis, *Mafia Kingfish*, 44-51.

and several buildings in the French Quarter.[23] Carlos Marcello's income was estimated at over 1 billion dollars per annum during the 1950s and 1960s.[24]

When he was trying to escape the attempted government deportations that began hounding him in the 1950s, Marcello was often seen in the back rooms of the Newport Motel in Morgan City, a remote area of Louisiana where many transients and oil field workers lived. "Marcello established an illegal gambling empire in Jefferson Parish with the help of political officials. He bought a bar in Gretna, ran a liquor store in Metairie, dabbled in illegal slot machine dealings, and gobbled up real estate in Jefferson and St. Charles parishes."[25] During his heyday, Marcello maintained an ample number of legitimate businesses in order to present a respectable front, but his real capital continued to be derived from the same sources listed earlier: narcotics, extortion, prostitution, and gambling in many forms. The collusion of public officials made Marcello's corrupt organization run like a well-oiled machine which encompassed police, sheriffs, justices of the peace, prosecutors, mayors, governors, judges, aldermen, licensing authorities, and state legislators.[26]

Carlos Marcello only stood about 5'2" and became known as "the Little Man," but his reputation for brutality was well known in New Orleans and the surrounding swamplands. If anyone crossed the Little Man, they could expect retaliation without a doubt. He was known to put the dead bodies of those who crossed him in a box, then cover it in lye or caustic acid, which would liquefy the corpse. Afterward, the box containing the liquid would be taken deep into the swamplands of South Louisiana and poured into the bayou where no one would ever know what happened. Furthermore, there was no evidence of who had killed the person. And since there was no "corpus delecti," there was no conviction—ever.[27]

Carlos Marcello's failure to obtain a birth certificate or become a U.S. citizen before his crime career began soon came back to haunt him. The federal government knew that Marcello was involved in the Mafia, but he had the best attorneys money could buy and the government could not pin anything on him through evidence. He was very low-key, never tried to boast or call attention to himself and was always slick. If ever questioned about his mob connections, his response was often, "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just a poor tomato salesman." He registered his legal businesses, such as his restaurants, night clubs, real estate, etc., in the names of his 8

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[23] Kohn testimony, 1961.

[24] *Saturday Evening Post*, 1964.

[25] "Statement of Aaron Kohn for the House Judiciary Committee Subcommittee No. 5." Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970; *Saturday Evening Post*, 1964.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Davis, *Mafia Kingfish*, Ch. 7; Vaccara, *Conspiracy in Camelot: The Complete History of the Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy*. Ch. 5; *Saturday Evening Post,* 1964.

siblings, or his trusted lieutenants who were born in the U.S. The only thing the government could tie to him was the fact that he was not a U.S. citizen.[28]

By 1959, the government put the pressure on Marcello to an even greater degree, when Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) served as chief counsel to the U.S. Senate Committee investigating organized crime. RFK's brother, John F. Kennedy (JFK), was still a senator from Massachusetts at the time, and he was on the Senate committee.[29] Marcello had hired Jacob Wasserman of Washington, D.C., to defend him in these hearings and in his deportation case. Wasserman was the leading immigration attorney in the country at that time and Marcello spent a million dollars in attorney's fees and court costs. His deportation case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, but the government was unsuccessful in its efforts. The problem with Marcello's deportation was that no country would accept him—not even the officials which he had paid off to get his forged birth certificate in Guatemala.[30] [31] [32]

In January of 1961, JFK became the President of the United States. He appointed his brother, RFK, as U.S. Attorney General. RFK immediately set his focus on targeting organized crime and bringing it down. First on his hit list was Jimmy Hoffa and second was Carlos Marcello, but Sam Giancana and Santo Trafficante were not far behind.[33]

Early in 1961, RFK had Marcello deported to Guatemala, "the country Marcello had falsely listed as his birthplace."[34] "On April 4, 1961, Marcello walked into the District Immigration Office at the Masonic Temple in Jefferson Parish [Louisiana] for his required routine quarterly appearance. Before he had a chance to open his mouth, he was seized and hand-cuffed by Immigration officers, rushed to the airport in an Immigration Service car, and by 1:30 … he was on his way to Guatemala City, officially deported."[35] Marcello was dumped out in Guatemala City. He settled into his hotel suite and made contact with local businessmen who had long been interested in him taking over their Central American slot machines, racetracks, and gambling casinos.

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[28] "New Orleans: Cosa Nostra's Wall Street." *Saturday Evening Post, Vol. 237, Issue 8*. (Philadelphia, PA: Curtis Publishing Co., 1964). Retrieved from Texas Woman's University Blagg-Huey Library; Davis, John, Ch. 8.

[29] "Transcript of Deportation Hearing for Carlos Marcello." *United States Department of Justice—Immigration and Naturalization Service File, N. A2-669-541*. New Orleans, LA: INS, 1972. In this document, Marcello related to the immigration officers the story of his 1961 "kidnap-deportation" and exile to Central America; McClellan Senate Committee Hearing, 1959.

[30] McClellan Senate Committee Hearing, 1959.

[31] *Saturday Evening Post*, 1964.

[32] Katy Stein Badeaux, "The Amazing, but True, Deportation Story of Carlos Marcello." Houston, TX: University of Houston O'Quinn Law Library, 2012.

[33] Vaccaro, *Conspiracy in Camelot: The Complete History of the Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy*, Ch. 11.

[34] "Transcript of Deportation Hearing for Carlos Marcello." *United States Department of Justice—Immigration and Naturalization Service File, N. A2-669-541*. New Orleans, LA: INS, 1972.

[35] Ibid; *Saturday Evening Post*, 1964.

The Guatemalan citizens had learned that a notorious personality had been admitted to their country, and they were outraged. Due to this, Marcello was taken from his hotel room at the behest of the Guatemalan government and deposited on the border of El Salvador on May 3, 1961. The El Salvadorans did not wish to harbor such a criminal, either, so they quickly transported him to a mountaintop in the jungle of Honduras. Marcello later complained that he had to walk 17 miles to the nearest village and claimed that he fainted three times, fell, and fractured several ribs along the way. Somehow, Marcello was able to contact one of his associates, Felice Golino, a shrimp-boat-fleet operator in the Gulf of Mexico. Golino, apparently, was able to smuggle him back into the U.S. through the bayous surrounding New Orleans in June of 1961.[36]

Carlos Marcello continued his nefarious underworld activities throughout the remainder of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and beyond. His notorious legend and power continue to intrigue criminologists and the American public today. As can be garnered from this study, Marcello was the epitome of the Sicilian Mafia and its far-reaching "black hand" in the United States. Furthermore, his effective Mafia strong-arm tactics and the *Omerta* code of silence placed him at the core of organized crime in America throughout the majority of the 20th Century. He never received justice for the many atrocities he masterminded. After his rise to power, the only conviction that was ever obtained against him was his involvement in a racketeering scandal known as Brilab in 1980. He served nine years for that crime. Carlos Marcello was released from prison in 1989 when a federal appeals court threw out the Brilab conviction.[37] Marcello returned to his home in Metairie, Louisiana, surrounded by friends, family, and a newborn great-grandson. The poor Sicilian tomato salesman died quietly in his sleep on March 3, 1993 at the age of 83.[38]

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[36] *Saturday Evening Post*, 1964; Transcript of Deportation Hearing for Carlos Marcello." *United States Department of Justice—Immigration and Naturalization Service File, N. A2-669-541*. New Orleans, LA: INS, 1972.

[37] Davis, *Mafia Kingfish*, Ch. 57 & 58.

[38] McCarthy, "Carlos Marcello: The Times Picayune Covers 175 Years of New Orleans History," 2012.