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# Il Duce and the Mafia: Mussolini's Hatred for the Mafia and the American Alliance with Organized Crime

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II  
**Il Duce and the Mafia:**  
**Mussolini's Hatred for the Mafia and the American**  
**Alliance with Organized Crime**  
 By Anthony Gigantino



Throughout history, many important facades that changed the spectrum of certain events merely become footnotes. World War II was a time period that epitomizes this historical tendency. Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini's hatred for the Mafia is one of the most little known facts in modern history. His feud with the Sicilian Mafia played a major role in the Allies' victory. The old saying, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," exemplifies the United States' cooperation with the Mafia during the Invasion of Sicily. Two major themes that must be examined in dealing with this triad are the stem of Mussolini's hatred of the Mafia and the United States' alliance with the Mafia.

The conflict between Mussolini and the Mafia has an origin of skepticism. While there is no particular event that caused Mussolini to become disillusioned with the Mafia, his animosity for them was a philosophical hatred that can be summarized in one simple term: power. Mussolini gained power in 1922 and succeeded in making Italy a Fascist state by 1928. His Fascist ideology led him to develop a strong lust for building an empire, which he knew he could do through the aid of Adolph Hitler. Mussolini was jealous of the French and British colonization of North and East Africa and the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>1</sup> He decided that, through the conquest of countries like Greece and Libya, Italy could become a strong ally to Germany, which would make the country the second strongest power in Europe. Mussolini took his ideology of empire-building a step further by stating that, "The Mediterranean must thus be converted from an Anglo-Saxon Lake into a Latin Sea."<sup>2</sup>

Fascism was embraced by Northern Italians, but the anti-government and anti-police sentiments of the citizens of Southern Italy (the Mezzogiorno), particularly Sicily, caused them to distrust their new dictatorial regime. The Sicilians have been conquered by foreign forces for 6,000 years and even had Plato describe the Mediterranean coastline as a place where conquerors flocked to seize it like, "frogs gathering at a pond."<sup>3</sup> Mussolini made it a point to answer the "Southern Question" even though the Sicilians had their own protection from the Mafia. The Sicilians' strong distrust for the state was a notion completely opposite from the ideals of Fascism, which call for the individual to put the state as his or her first priority.<sup>4</sup> Bringing Fascism to Sicily was also going to be

<sup>1</sup> Robertson, Esmonde. *Mussolini as Empire-BUILDER: Europe and Africa, 1932-36*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ciano, Galeazzo. *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers*. London: Odhams Press, 1948, 60.

<sup>3</sup> Frommers. *Europe: Italy: Sicily: In Depth: History*. [1 January 2000; cited 30 October 2004]. Available from <http://www.frommers.com/destinations/sicily/0771020044.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Mussolini, Benito. *The Doctrine of Fascism*. Rome: Ardita, 1935, 60.

hard because of the Socialist influence that existed, especially in the western part of the island.<sup>5</sup>

The Fascists had some success in Sicily, especially through the leadership of Alfredo Cucco in Palermo. Many Sicilian Fascists really believed that Fascism would restore order in Sicily and produce a stronger middle class. However, when Mussolini visited Sicily in 1924, Mafia capos such as Don Ciccio Cuccia, who were members of a “new and younger” mafia whose members did not serve in the military like the “older” mafia did, treated the Prime Minister like a normal guest and insisted that he was under their protection.<sup>6</sup> At this time, Mussolini decided the Mafia was the ultimate threat to Fascism in Italy. The Mafia was all that was preventing the national unity of a Fascist Italy in the eyes of Il Duce.

Mussolini hired Cesare Mori as his Prefect to eliminate the Mafia in Sicily. Although Mori had over 11,000 Sicilians arrested, many of them had no relationship with the Mafia, and many actual members of the Mafia were able to flee to the United States. However, Mori was able to make Don Vito, the original capo of the Sicilian Mafia, admit that he was in charge of the Mafia. Mussolini declared that the Mafia was destroyed after he imprisoned Vito, and his popularity soared.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately for Il Duce, Mori was eventually dismissed as the Prefect and many of his successors were not able to maintain a stranglehold on the Mafia. The criminals were able to revitalize through operations such as racketeering and commercial deals, which is how the later capo of the Sicilian Mafia, Genco Russo, came to power.<sup>8</sup>

Just as Mussolini believed he was gaining power through an alliance with Nazi Germany, the Mafia was gaining power in the United States, along with their strong connections to Sicily. The United States military, which was planning to invade Italy in order to cripple one of Hitler’s biggest allies in the Axis, found that the Sicilian Mafia could become a beneficial ally in fighting the Fascists. This alliance was first evident when the Office of Naval Intelligence of the U.S. decided to seek the help of New York Mafia boss Joseph Lanza. Many ships, such as the French liner Normandie, were being sabotaged on the East Side docks, which were controlled by Lanza. The U.S. Naval Intelligence called for “Operation Underworld” to begin as Lanza established surveillance along the waterfront.<sup>9</sup> However, expanding the operation to the West Side docks would not be as simple because the boss of that part of New York was Charles “Lucky” Luciano, who was currently incarcerated in the Dannemora prison for compulsory prostitution. Naval Intelligence was aware that Luciano still had strong connections in Sicily to the Mafia, so they made sure he was transferred to a lesser penitentiary in Albany and that he would later be exiled to Italy. Luciano was met by naval officers and gangsters such as Meyer Lansky and Frank Costello to establish contacts in Sicily for the invasion.<sup>10</sup>

The Allies landed in southwest Sicily on July 9, 1943 and marched towards Palermo with the aid of Mafia associates. Once the Allied troops, who were led by General George Patton, reached the village of Villalba, they sought the aid of Don Calogero Vizzini. The “L” scarf that the American tanks hoisted was a sign that stood for Lucky Luciano, which would allow all of the Mafiosi who were aiding the Allies to

<sup>5</sup> Duggan, Christopher. *Fascism and the Mafia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989, 100.

<sup>6</sup> American Mafia. *Rick Porello’s American Mafia.com*. [updated 1 November 2004; cited 1 November 2004]. Available from [http://www.americanmafia.com/Feature\\_Articles\\_267.html](http://www.americanmafia.com/Feature_Articles_267.html).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Pantaleone, Michele. *The Mafia and Politics*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1966, 56.

<sup>9</sup> Drug Text. *The Mafia Restored: Fighters for Democracy in WWI*. [updated 11 June 2004; cited 29 October 2004]. Available from <http://www.drugtext.org/library/books/McCoy/book/08.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Kefauver, Estes. *Crime in America*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1951, 31.

lead them through the rugged mountains of Sicily.<sup>11</sup> As the Allies approached the region of the Tummaraa and Salito valley, many Italian troops failed to report back to duty and were reportedly said to have been persuaded by Mafia associates not to fight against the Allies.<sup>12</sup> Mussolini was arrested on July 25<sup>th</sup> and the new Prime Minister, Marshal Badoglio, switched sides to the Allies and ended Fascism.

Just as the Allied forces easily handled the Invasion of Sicily, the Mafia was easily restored to power in the post-Mussolini Italian Republic. Don Calogero Vizzini was personally appointed the mayor of Villalba by the U.S. army and he was able to appoint his own Mafiosi mayors in towns all over Sicily. Not only did the U.S. grant power to the Mafia out of gratitude for helping the Allies conquer Italy, but it also found another use for the Mafia, disbanding the increasingly leftist approach to politics many Italians developed in post-World War II Italy. The Mafia would disrupt any Communist efforts in Italy through fraudulent elections and sheer force. The U.S. military even worked with future New York mob boss Vito Genovese in the reconstruction of Italy in order to ensure that the Communists did not gain power. Mafia power in Italy and the U.S. became stronger than ever and Italy would be subjected to corrupt ruling at the national level from the Christian Democrats, an anti-fascist political party whose conservative ideologies were viewed by Italians as ridiculous. However, the Italian people had a saying, "Hold your nose and vote Christian Democrat," so that the Communists would not gain power in Italy. Thus, the Mafia influenced the outcome of post-war Italian politics as well as the war itself.

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<sup>11</sup> Pantaleone, Michele. *The Mafia and Politics*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1966, 59.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

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