

Killing the Mob

What's in it for me? Explore what happens when criminal minds get organized.

It's the early 1930s and the Great Depression is sweeping the United States. Across the country, people are losing their jobs, their homes, and their hope. It's a time of despair. Soon, a villain emerges in the popular imagination – the banks – those looming faceless institutions that value dollars over human lives. Before long, a new hero has emerged as well – the bank robber. This is the beginning of a new era in crime, where the line between the criminal and the hero begins to blur. From Bonnie and Clyde to Sicilian mob bosses, these blinks tell the fascinating story of how notorious gangsters gained fame and fortune and reveal how Hollywood, the FBI, and the American public fell under the mob's spell. In these blinks, you'll learn

why the Allies asked the Mafia for help in World War II; how the mob controlled Hollywood; and how an ordinary police officer caught the Mafia's top bosses.

Bonnie and Clyde were America's original outlaw sweethearts.

Along with the new breed of villains and gangsters that emerged during the Great Depression was the man tasked with catching them. His name was J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Bureau of Investigation, America's first national law-enforcement agency. Who did Hoover set his sights on first? You've probably heard of them: Bonnie and Clyde. In 1934, the young Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow were on a roll. Their relationship had begun in 1930 when Bonnie was an unemployed waitress and Clyde was an impoverished laborer. Bonnie had left her first husband years earlier, though she still had his name tattooed on her thigh. She enjoyed writing poetry, but when she met Clyde, she turned her attention to stealing cars, holding up gas stations, and robbing banks with her new boyfriend. Bonnie and Clyde weren't the sort of people you'd expect to pose a physical threat. For starters, both of them walked with a limp. Bonnie's legs had been badly burned in a car crash, and Clyde had deliberately chopped off two of his toes during a prison stint, to avoid being assigned hard labor. It was a testament to their love that, when the pain in Bonnie's legs got really bad, Clyde would carry her around. When police found photos that Bonnie and Clyde had taken of themselves, they looked just like any other young couple in love – well, apart from the sawn-off shotgun that Bonnie was brandishing. When the photos were published in the press, Bonnie and Clyde became celebrities overnight: a glamorous symbol of rebellion against the cruel banks who were pushing people into poverty. But there was a brutal side to this love story; Bonnie and Clyde had killed 13 people during their crime spree. Hoover was determined not to let that number climb any higher. Unlike these criminal lovebirds, Hoover had no romance in his life. At the age of 29, he still lived with his elderly mother, and his only friend was said to be his dog. Hoover dedicated himself to eliminating crime. On May 23, 1934, Hoover's agents finally tracked down Bonnie and Clyde and opened fire on the car they were traveling in. Both were killed, with Clyde dying first. Bonnie's screams when she realized Clyde was dead would stay with the agents for the rest of their lives.

John Dillinger was a gangster and master escape artist.

In 1934, Hoover raised the stakes. He announced a brand new breed of American felon: the so-called public enemy number one. This label would only apply to one criminal at a time, to America's most wanted, most dangerous, person. It wouldn't be lifted until that person was in jail, or dead. Hoover declared that the first public enemy number one was a bank robber and gangster named John Dillinger. If you met Dillinger in a bar, you might feel drawn to his friendly, positive energy, and never know you were talking to a ruthless murderer. But make no mistake; Dillinger was so notorious that Hollywood even made a movie based on his crimes. In fact, it was the last movie that Dillinger himself would ever see. In 1934, Dillinger had recently escaped from jail in Indiana. Three days after his jailbreak he stole almost \$50,000 from a bank in South Dakota. Hoover's agents weren't far behind. On the night of April 22, federal agents tracked the bank robber to a popular vacation lodge in snowy Wisconsin. While Dillinger and his associates played cards in a log cabin, Hoover's men hid in the forest surrounding the resort and waited for him to emerge. Back in Washington, Hoover was on tenterhooks, praying for news of Dillinger's arrest or death. But things were about to go very wrong. Next to Dillinger's log cabin was a popular diner, and many of the people who ate there were local hunters. That night, three hunters left the diner together and walked to their car. The waiting federal agents saw that they were carrying guns and immediately assumed they must be Dillinger and his crew. As the hunters tried to drive away, the agents opened fire, killing one person and critically injuring the other two. In the chaos, Dillinger easily escaped into the woods. If this all sounds terribly unprofessional, it's because it was. Remarkably, none of the agents who worked for the Bureau of Investigation were actually police officers. In a bid to stamp out corruption, Hoover had filled the Bureau's ranks with white-collar workers. The agents who were sent to apprehend Dillinger were all accountants and lawyers! And they were no match for Dillinger and his men. But Hoover wouldn't repeat his mistake. Three months later, when he learned that Dillinger was watching a movie at a Chicago cinema, he sent a contingent of sharp-shooting police officers to finish the job. Identifying Dillinger wasn't easy. In an effort to avoid capture, he'd undergone plastic surgery on his face, changing the shape of his nose and chin. But the police weren't fooled. Just ten minutes after the movie's closing credits, America's first public enemy number one had been crossed off the list. John Dillinger was dead.

The Mafia and the Allies came together to fight Fascism.

In 1942, World War II was in full swing, and the Allies were poised to invade Sicily. But the Mediterranean island wouldn't be easy to capture; 200,000 Fascist troops lurked in the island's mountains. Who could help the Allies successfully invade the island? Incredibly, the answer was the Mafia. Decades earlier, the Mafia had fought, and lost, its own war against Fascism. In the 1920s, when Fascist Italian dictator Benito Mussolini came to power, he'd vowed to drive the Mafia out of Sicily. With good reason, too; the Mafia had had a brutal stranglehold over the Sicilian people and economy for as long as anyone could remember. When Mussolini's forces started to make life difficult for the mob, a lot of Sicilian mafiosi fled to the United States, and New York in

particular. Incredibly, these hardened criminals were able to claim refugee status, on the grounds that they were fleeing Fascism. Once they arrived, they continued with the same bootlegging, extortion, and violence that had been their way of life in Sicily. Within a few years, the Sicilian-American Mafia had a grip over large parts of New York's economy. But what does all this have to do with the war effort? Well, after the attack on the American Navy at Pearl Harbor in 1941, the FBI was scared that Nazi sympathizers would commit acts of sabotage along New York's harbor. With this in mind, Hoover sent his federal agents to interview the longshoremen who worked on the docks, to assess the level of risk. But there was a problem. No one would talk to the FBI. Why? Because the Mafia controlled the harbor. There was a code of omertà, the Italian word for silence, on the docks. This meant that no one would speak to law enforcement, for fear of reprisals from the Mafia. The FBI was left with just one option: to work with the Mafia. Reluctantly, Hoover's agents visited the biggest New York mobster of all, a Sicilian American called Lucky Luciano, who was currently languishing in prison. The FBI and Luciano struck a deal. In return for his freedom, Luciano would use his Mafia network of longshoremen to ensure that no attacks took place on the harbor. Luciano would also gather strategic information from the remaining Mafia in Sicily, to help the Allies invade Sicily and defeat their common enemy: the Fascists.

The Mafia's drug racket destroyed Lucky Luciano's career.

During the era of prohibition, the mob illegally imported alcohol into the United States and sold it on the black market for hugely inflated prices. But when prohibition ended in 1933, this lucrative income stream dried up. By 1946, it was looking for new ways to make money, and it turned its attention to a harder substance: heroin. But the Mafia had rules and procedures that had to be followed before a new direction could be agreed upon. So in 1946, it did what any sensible business would do; it called a board meeting, to decide whether to enter the illegal drugs trade. This meeting was a conference attended by 20 of the most powerful Mafia bosses in America. These criminals all belonged to different "families" but together they were part of an alliance known as Cosa Nostra, the Italian for our thing. The gangsters didn't meet on American soil; that would have been far too risky. Instead, they met in Havana, Cuba, where the corrupt government was only too happy to turn a blind eye to the meeting, in return for a hefty bribe. Heading the Havana conference was none other than the FBI's old friend, Lucky Luciano. After his release from prison, Luciano had been banned from returning to the United States. So instead, he ran his criminal enterprise from Havana, which was as close as he could get to his criminal empire. Most of the conference attendees were in favor of entering the drug trade. But Luciano wasn't so sure. As the mob's most senior leader, he knew that if the Mafia began running drugs, he'd get the blame. That would make it harder to convince the American government to let him return. And more than anything, Luciano wanted to be back in America. But he was also a realist; he knew he had to go with the wishes of the majority. So against his own best interest, he agreed to let drug-running begin. It was a decision he'd soon regret. Within months, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics realized that there was a huge uptick in the amount of drugs entering the US from Cuba - and it pointed the finger squarely at Luciano. It wasn't long before they asked Cuba to deport Luciano to Italy, where he couldn't cause any more trouble for American law enforcement. Luciano's days as a powerful American mob boss were over for good.

In the 1950s, intrigue swirled around the Mafia and J. Edgar Hoover.

By the 1950s, thanks to its activities in the drug trade, the mob's wealth had climbed higher than ever before. What was US law enforcement doing about this crime wave? Well, according to J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, there was nothing to do, because he didn't believe that the Mafia even existed. In his view, there was no shadowy alliance of Italian American gangsters. Instead, there were only independent criminals running their own illegal rackets. But even if Hoover didn't believe in organized crime, the American public was about to. In 1950, a Tennessee legislator named Estes Kefauver led a US Senate Committee aimed at investigating the Mafia's activities. Kefauver managed to subpoena hundreds of mobsters, as well as their victims, to give evidence to the committee. For the first time, the shady dealings of the Mafia were thrust into the clear light of day. The proceedings of the committee were also televised; ordinary viewers were captivated by the stylish gangsters, with their opulent displays of wealth, and their victims' stories of murderous behavior. The committee was meant to wind up after a year, but thousands of Americans watching at home sent letters to the Senate, begging it to continue the hearings. Thanks to popular pressure, the committee carried on taking testimony from Mafia associates until 1952, keeping viewers glued to their screens. But even after the hearing, Hoover still refused to admit that the Mafia existed. Why was Hoover so stubborn? Privately, some of his own federal agents believed that Hoover knew all about the Mafia. The problem, they said, was that Hoover was actually being blackmailed by it. But how could the Mafia blackmail Hoover? It was rumored that Hoover was in a relationship with his second-in-command at the FBI, a man named Clyde Tolson. Not only did the two men eat dinner together every night and spend their vacations together, but some people also reported seeing them holding hands. It was said that the Mafia had photographs that proved the two men were in a sexual relationship. In this homophobic era, the release of these photos would have spelled the end for both men's careers. Whether these rumors were true or not, something was about to happen that would mean Hoover could no longer turn a blind eye to the Mafia.

An ordinary police officer uncovered America's top mob bosses.

In 1957, Hoover wasn't interested in pursuing the Mafia, but someone else was. Edgar Dewitt Crosswell was a police sergeant in the sleepy little town of Apalachin, in upstate New York. For Crosswell, law enforcement wasn't just a job; it was his whole life. He slept in the local police barracks every night and strove to know each and every criminal in the local area. And there was one criminal in particular that he had his eye on. His name was Joseph Barbara, and he was a high-ranking Mafia boss who owned a luxurious mansion in Apalachin. After observing Barbara for years on end, Crosswell finally had a breakthrough. He learned that Barbara had ordered vast amounts of premium meat from a Chicago butcher for November 14. Barbara had also booked numerous rooms at nearby luxury hotels for that date. Crosswell deduced that Barbara was throwing a party. But not just any party. Crosswell believed this was a hoopla for America's most powerful gangsters. He was right. Not since Luciano's Havana conference in 1946 had the Mafia's crime families gathered in such great numbers. But

that weekend, they did. In Barbara's lavish villa, they discussed how they could expand the Mafia's activities even further, get involved in industries such as textiles and sugar, and also in the justice system. They even talked about how they could take their criminal enterprise international. As the bosses discussed their plans for world domination, Croswell and the local police force formed a roadblock all around the luxurious property. Then, they waited. The first person to leave Barbara's estate was a delivery boy who turned back to raise the alarm about the police presence. What did these fearsome mob bosses do when they heard about Croswell's trap? They panicked. Terrified of receiving lengthy jail sentences, many of the bosses ran off into the surrounding woods, ripping their thousand-dollar suits on branches and muddying their designer shoes. All told, Croswell caught 60 mafiosi that night and detained them in the local jail. The news of the arrests hit the media the next day, causing Hoover to nearly choke on his breakfast as he read about it in his morning paper. Never again would he be able to deny the existence of the Mafia. And it was all thanks to a humble police sergeant with a passion for justice.

In the 1960s, the Mafia and Hollywood worked hand in glove.

When you think of Hollywood in the 1960s, you might think of stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Kirk Douglas. But the true power in LA's movie industry was off-screen. And all too often, that power lay with the Mafia. But how and why was the Mafia involved in Hollywood? The answer lies in an American phenomenon that, sadly, is even older than La-La Land: racial discrimination. In the early twentieth century, many of Hollywood's film producers had Eastern-European Jewish backgrounds. They had the ambition and the talent to make movies, but they didn't have the money. That was in part because the banks were too prejudiced to lend to people from these ethnic backgrounds. With few other options, the producers turned to the Mafia for funds. The mob happily agreed, seeing a golden opportunity to skim money off the profits from the movies they'd finance. The Mafia also controlled the labor unions that operated within the movie industry, including the unions for screenwriters, construction workers, and electricians. If a film studio was doing something that the Mafia didn't like, then it would simply tell the labor unions to instruct their workers to stop work on their movie. So to get your film or TV show made, you had to stay on the right side of the mob. Desi Arnaz, the star of the hit TV show *I Love Lucy*, found this out the hard way. In 1957, Arnaz was the producer of a new cop show called *The Untouchables*. Unfortunately for him, the Mafia wasn't a fan. It complained that Italian Americans were being portrayed as the bad guys, as spaghetti-eating buffoons who were always on the wrong side of the law. So the mob made a suggestion to Arnaz; it would be a good idea, it thought, if an Italian American actor, handpicked by the Mafia, was cast in the show – in a heroic role, of course. To make their point clear, the Mafia also intimidated the show's sponsors and even discussed murdering Arnaz. But there was no need; Arnaz quickly decided that the Mafia's casting suggestion was a great idea. So the next time you enjoy a movie from the golden age of Hollywood, remember that it may have been the Mafia who decided what made the final cut.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: In the twentieth century, organized crime

became as American as apple pie. From the upper echelons of the FBI to the movers and shakers of Hollywood to the ordinary general public, Americans in every walk of life were swept up by the thrill, and the threat, of the gangster underworld. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Killing the Mob as the subject line and share your thoughts!