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Italians and Anti Prohibition

By: Kaitlyn Corson

The United States’ Congress passed the Volstead Act or Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, in 1919. It prohibited the consumption, sale, or transportation of alcohol making it illegal to partake in any of these activities in the United States. The main contributor to the Volstead Act was the ASL, or Anti Saloon League, who lobbied for dry legislation on the floor of Congress. Creating strong ties with religious groups and clergymen and women, the ASL argued that taverns and saloons had destructive and devastating effects on the community and family unit. Also contributing to the Prohibition effort, women particularly members of the WCTU, or Women’s Christian Temperance Union, similarly rallied behind the temperance movement. Believing alcohol to be the reason for the violence and irresponsibility of husbands and other men, the WCTU worked to close saloons and was successful until anti-prohibition activities began. The anti-prohibition movement manifested itself in illegal activity such as bootlegging and the operation and attendance of speakeasies; those most involved belong to the immigrant class, either first, second, or third generations. Alcohol was ingrained in the cultures of numerous European groups and these European-Americans saw Prohibition as an attack on their cultures. To combat the dry sweep of the nation and the infringement on their cultures, many immigrants operated or took part in illegal activity that would prove to be fruitful for the leaders of

1 Jeff Hill, *Defining Moments Prohibition* (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 2004), 150.
4 Hill, *Defining Moments Prohibition*, 123.
5 Hill, *Defining Moments Prohibition*, 122.
speakeasies and producers of bootlegged alcohol in underground distilleries. Although Irish, Jews, Germans, and other immigrant groups held roles in the illegal anti-prohibition scene, none were more successful or lucrative than the Italian Americans who generated a monopoly combining the demands of alcohol deprived Americans and organized crime.

Prior to the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment, Italian American gang leaders conducted prostitution rings and illegal gambling facilities in cities across the country. With the beginning of Prohibition, these mafia leaders saw a massive opportunity to capitalize on the alcohol addictions of many Americans as well as the desire of others for the high life of partying beginning at the turn of the 1920s. During the Prohibition era, nowhere was the success of the Italian American mafia’s illegally lucrative business more evident than in the city of Chicago. The success kick started when Johnny Torio, nephew of Chicago mob boss Jim Colosimo, struck a deal with all prominent gang leaders from different Chicago districts. The deal agreed upon granted each gang a sphere of influence in Chicago allowing for the maximization of profit and the decrease in gang violence; however, competition between gangs still thrived. District based distilleries and speakeasies arose with profits circulating directly to the mob bosses who allocated some for themselves and then distributed it to their immigrant class bootleggers. The one man with ties to the immigrant class synonymous with organized crime during Prohibition was the one to truly capitalize on the bootlegging industry to its fullest extent, Chicago mob boss Al Capone.

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7 Hill, *Defining Moments Prohibition*, 69.
8 Hill, *Defining Moments Prohibition*, 70.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
Born Alphonse Capone in Brooklyn New York in 1899, Capone was raised by his mother Teresina and father Gabriele, two immigrants from Naples, Italy\textsuperscript{11}. Growing up in a poor Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn, Capone was never far from older cousin Johnny Torrio\textsuperscript{12}. Accrediting his cousin for his start in the mob scene, Capone would run errands for Johnny who was actively involved in the mafia in New York\textsuperscript{13}. Capone’s official beginning in the mafia is noted at the age of fourteen when Capone dropped out of school and joined New York City’s Five Points Gang\textsuperscript{14}. Fleeing a looming murder charge in New York City, Capone moved his family now composed of an Irish American wife and newborn son to Chicago in 1920 after accepting a position in Torrio’s growing mafia syndicate there\textsuperscript{15}. After acting as second in command to Torrio for a few years, Torrio handed his empire over to Capone in 1925\textsuperscript{16}. As author Daniel Okrent states when reflecting on Capone, “He was only twenty-five when he took over Chicago from his mentor Torrio, was fundamentally gone from the city before he turned thirty, and when he emerged from his eventual prison sentence a syphilitic wreck, he was only forty”\textsuperscript{17}. Capone’s position of power and accumulated wealth was completely rare for a boy from a poor Italian immigrant family; however, with his reputation for brutality and his tenacity, Capone was not only able to control the mafia scene of Chicago but the political landscape of the city as well for a time\textsuperscript{18}. Politics and bootlegging became synonymous in the eyes of the Chicago mafia. According to Okrent, “Bootleggers required dry laws to keep legitimate businessmen out of the booze industry, and they needed a wet administration to keep the cops

\textsuperscript{11} Hill, \textit{Defining Moments Prohibition}, 107.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Hill, \textit{Defining Moments Prohibition}, 108.
\textsuperscript{17} Daniel Okrent, \textit{Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition} (New York: Scribner, 2010), 273.
\textsuperscript{18} Hill, \textit{Defining Moments Prohibition}, 108.
and other enforcement officials off their backs. The perfect combination: a dry Congress and state legislatures to pass the laws, and wet mayors and governors to not enforce them. This exact type of relationship forged by Capone with Chicago Mayor Bill Thompson proved to be advantageous for both parties. Aiding violently and monetarily in the campaign and election of Mayor Thompson, Capone compromised a deal with Thompson granting him a salary of $118,000 per year, excluding the $25,000 Capone gave to Thompson’s campaign, in exchange for the political backing and pardoning of Capone’s organization when his men were summoned to court. Capone’s ability to negotiate, as well as other successful Italian American mafia organizers in cities, equally allowed for their financial success during the prohibition years. Al Capone was profoundly wealthy by the late 1920s to early 1930s. By 1926, Capone’s bootlegging industry earned national sales of $3.6 billion for that year alone; this amount was equivalent to the national budget, including the military expenditure. Capone acquired a personal income of $50 million annually, even during brief periods of incarceration. Never fearful of being in the public eye despite his status as a dangerous criminal, Capone lived lavishly with exuberant purchases such as an armor plated car that could deflect bullets valued at today’s equivalent of $350,000. Capone summarized his success by stating, “I give the public what the public wants. I never had to send out high pressure salesmen. Why, I could never meet the demand.” This is what made the Italian mafia, especially Capone’s syndicate, most successful; he realized there would be no shortage of consumers and let the customers come to them. Alcohol was the most popular commodity of the roaring twenties, despite its illegality;

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
however, the Italian Mafiosos in Chicago branded alcohol their commodity and fused the demand and their cheaper made product to create an industry where they could dominate.

Bootlegging had also become a successful business in New York City; however, the city’s mob did not experience the type of profits that Capone and his syndicate enjoyed. The gang culture in New York City was more ethnically diverse even though Italians still held the most prominent roles in the mafia hierarchy there\textsuperscript{26}. Compared to Chicago, New York City endured far less gang violence and gun warfare that was a common occurrence between competing gangs in Chicago\textsuperscript{27}. New York City’s commander of the mafia and overseer of the city’s bootlegging industry was a man nicknamed Charles “Lucky” Luciano. Born Salvatore Luciana in 1896 in Sicily, Luciano immigrated to New York City ten years later with his family\textsuperscript{28}. By the age of ten, Luciano had engaged in petty crime and by the time he reached his early teenage years, Luciano was gang affiliated\textsuperscript{29}. Growing up in poverty, entering the mafia’s bootlegging trade meant new sources of wealth and status for Luciano, as it similarly did for all immigrants\textsuperscript{30}. Foreshadowing his rise to fame in the mafia world of New York City as a gang diplomat, Luciano acted as a bodyguard for Jewish children at his school in exchange for money\textsuperscript{31}. As Luciano gained status, he elevated the image of a mobster to convey the appearance of style and power\textsuperscript{32}. Luciano, more than any other figure in New York City during the prohibition years, made the participation in the bootleg trade something to be emulated,

\textsuperscript{27} Hill, \textit{Defining Moments Prohibition}, 75.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Hill, \textit{Defining Moments Prohibition}, 115.
especially amongst the immigrant classes. Whether as a bootlegger or consumer, Luciano appealed to his target audience - immigrants - as someone they could relate to and admire, thus drawing in more customers to his New York speakeasies. After organizing the murder of two competing mob bosses, including the one who gave Luciano his first esteemed position in the mob, Luciano sought to eradicate the competition between different ethnic gangs all participating in the bootlegging industry. Uniting himself with two major gang leaders of different ethnicities, including Jewish Meyer Lansky and German “Dutch” Schultz, Luciano saw the unification of different ethnic gangs as a way to maximize profits and eliminate the need for gun violence between competing gangs. Reflecting on a meeting with former mob bosses of New York City about the new unification of gangs, Luciano recalled, “In our kind of business there was so much money to be made that nobody had the right to be jealous of nobody else”. By unifying the rival ethnic gangs of New York City’s bootlegging underground, Luciano established himself as the cooperate head of the new unified syndicate. Gangs in Chicago were cooperative to a degree but the competition between gangs endured; economically, this model worked for the Italian mafia in that city. However, in New York City where there was a higher concentration of ethnically different immigrant groups, competition amongst different gangs would prove to diminish profits for the bootleggers in charge. By extinguishing existing competition, gang leaders could focus on production and meeting the demands of prospective customers. Distinguishing himself as a decisive corporate leader, Luciano made his empire inclusive to those who were willing to cooperate. He tactfully created allies and closed

33 Marni Davis, Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition, 147.
34 Ibid.
35 Hill, Defining Moments Prohibition, 76.
36 Hill, Defining Moments Prohibition, 116.
37 Ibid.
38 Hill, Defining Moments Prohibition, 76.
preexisting ethnic gaps between gangs that made Luciano and his bootlegging business ever more successful for him and his partners.

Other immigrant groups partook in the anti-prohibition movement with minimal prosperity compared to the Italian Americans. Participating as bootleggers and customers, the second leading immigrant group behind the Italians in the anti-prohibition business was the Jews. During the latter half of the eighteenth century, Jews had become largely involved in the liquor industry. This pattern continued until the start of Prohibition making Jewish involvement in the liquor industry synonymous with their Americanization process. The consumption and selling of liquor for Jews, common American practices, allowed them to engage in the American culture as equals. Legally established by the Volstead Act, Jewish families were permitted ten gallons of kosher wine to be used for religious purposes annually. Even though they were granted this privilege, Jews accounted for twelve percent of all violators of the Volstead Act in New York City from 1924 through 1932. Also, a sample study, conducted by sociologist Mark Haller, focused on seventy-three participants in the underground bootlegging economy which found that almost half of the bootleggers were Jewish. However, compared to the Italians, many did not enter higher level positions in the mafia hierarchy. In New York City, allied Jewish and Italian gangs typically operated with Jews as the accountants and Italians as the decision makers and brawn behind the operation. Even though Jews were underrepresented in leadership positions within the mafia, especially after the unification of

39 Marni Davis, Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition, 146.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Marni Davis, Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition, 146.
45 Marni Davis, Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition, 148.
46 Marni Davis, Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition, 149.
ethnic gangs in New York City under Luciano’s leadership, there were key Jewish figures who acted as crucial allies to Luciano, including Russian-Jew Meyer Lansky who aided Luciano in his diplomatic efforts between gangs\(^4^7\). Several factors hindered the Jews from achieving the status and economic success achieved by the Italian bootleggers and mafia. During Prohibition, rabbis seeking profit were found guilty of illegally distributing sacramental liquor and wine in return for a fee\(^4^8\). Also, there appeared to be a whole new crowd of born-again Jews and supposed converts to the faith\(^4^9\). Already facing accusations that they were using their religion as an excuse to cheat the system, the esteemed Jewish reputation in the liquor industry that existed prior to Prohibition would change due to these scandals involving greedy rabbis and false Jews\(^5^0\). However, not all Jews were trying to cheat the system by accepting the alcohol the Volstead Act granted them. Many Jews during the Prohibition years were still struggling with the process of Americanization\(^5^1\). The ten gallons of alcohol they were allowed gave them an opportunity to stay connected with their culture; however the Jews that accepted the wine would face public resentment by other Americans\(^5^2\). Italian Americans filled the gap where the Jewish reputation in the booze industry was failing. For Italians beginning in the gangs of Chicago and New York, there was a chance for moving up the social ladder and placing one’s self in the mob hierarchy, an opportunity not possible for Jews. Because they were not able to establish themselves as prominent figures in the bootlegging industry, the Jews lacked leaders like Al Capone and Charlie “Lucky” Luciano who shaped the life of organized crime into a glamorous and lucrative trade for themselves and members of their syndicates.

\(^4^7\) Ibid.
\(^4^9\) Ibid.
\(^5^0\) Ibid.
\(^5^1\) Ibid.
\(^5^2\) Ibid.
Immigrants turned to bootlegging because it represented an opportunity for upward mobility. For the Italian American mafias, especially in New York City and Chicago, upward mobility was a direct result of ruthless tactics and organized crime. Deals were made, treaties negotiated, men murdered, and politicians swayed all because these Italian American mafiosos like Al Capone and Luciano had the power and the money to do so. Alcohol became their commodity and the chief financer of all their wealth and corrupt power politics. These Italian American men from immigrant backgrounds were extraordinary entrepreneurs during the mid-1920s through the early 1930s; however, even more so they were criminals.

Author Ken Hill perfectly summarizes why the Italian American mobs were the most financially successful immigrant group to partake in the anti-prohibition scene: “They came to dominate the bootlegging industry because they were well organized, had well developed ‘protection’ arrangements with the authorities, and were willing to eliminate anyone who challenged them.”

No other immigrant group displayed these qualities that when brought together, transformed simple illegal activity into a money making empire that dominated the “dry” years in American History.

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54 Hill, *Defining Moments Prohibition*, 76.
Bibliography


