

cosa nostra a history of the sicilian mafia

****Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia****

cosa nostra a history of the sicilian mafia is a fascinating and complex tale that delves into the origins, evolution, and enduring influence of one of the most notorious criminal organizations in the world. The Sicilian Mafia, or Cosa Nostra—which translates to "Our Thing"—has woven itself into the social and economic fabric of Sicily and beyond, leaving a legacy that has captivated historians, law enforcement, and popular culture alike. Understanding this shadowy organization requires exploring its roots, codes, and impact on both Sicily and the international stage.

Origins of Cosa Nostra: The Birth of the Sicilian Mafia

The story of Cosa Nostra begins in the mid-19th century in Sicily, a region marked by poverty, political instability, and weak state authority. The island's rugged terrain and fragmented communities made centralized control difficult, creating a fertile ground for local groups to assert their power through informal means.

The Socio-Political Climate in 19th Century Sicily

Sicily in the 1800s was largely agrarian, with vast estates controlled by absentee landlords. Peasants had little protection from exploitation, and the law was often ineffective or corrupt. In this vacuum, groups of rural enforcers—initially known as "men of honor"—emerged to protect landowners' interests, enforce contracts, and settle disputes outside the official judicial system.

These groups gradually coalesced into a more organized form, adopting secretive rituals and a strict code of silence, or **omertà**. This code was essential for maintaining loyalty and shielding members from outside interference, laying the foundation for what would become the Sicilian Mafia.

From Banditry to Organized Crime

Initially, Cosa Nostra's activities centered around protection rackets and local arbitration. However, over decades, it evolved into a sophisticated criminal network involved in smuggling, extortion, and eventually infiltration of legitimate businesses. The Mafia's ability to blend into society while exercising power behind the scenes made it difficult for authorities to combat.

The Structure and Code of Cosa Nostra

One of the defining features of Cosa Nostra is its hierarchical and secretive structure. Unlike chaotic criminal gangs, the Mafia operates through a system of families or **cosche**, each controlling specific territories and businesses.

The Mafia Family and Its Hierarchy

At the base of the pyramid are the **soldati** (soldiers), who carry out day-to-day operations. Above them are **capodecina** or **caporegime**, leaders of smaller groups within the family. At the top is the **boss** or **capo**, who oversees all activities and holds ultimate authority.

This hierarchy ensures discipline and efficient command, allowing the Mafia to coordinate complex operations and maintain control over various illicit markets.

Omertà: The Code of Silence

Central to Cosa Nostra's endurance is **omertà**, a cultural code that forbids cooperation with law enforcement. Breaking this silence is considered the ultimate betrayal and often results in severe punishment, including death. This deep-rooted respect for secrecy has made infiltration and prosecution of Mafia members exceptionally challenging.

The Expansion and Influence of the Sicilian Mafia

While originally confined to Sicily, Cosa Nostra's reach has extended globally, particularly through migration waves to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Mafia's Role in American Organized Crime

Italian immigrants brought Mafia traditions to American cities like New York, Chicago, and New Orleans. There, Cosa Nostra adapted to new environments, forming alliances and rivalries with other criminal groups. The notorious American Mafia families trace their lineage back to Sicilian origins, perpetuating the influence of the original Cosa Nostra.

Economic and Political Impact in Sicily

Back home, the Mafia's grip on Sicily's economy has been pervasive. Through extortion, control of public contracts, and infiltration of legitimate businesses, Cosa Nostra has maintained a shadow economy that undermines legal institutions.

Politically, the Mafia has historically manipulated elections and protected corrupt officials, eroding public trust. However, in recent decades, courageous efforts by judges, activists, and law enforcement have begun to challenge this power.

Law Enforcement and the Fight Against Cosa Nostra

For much of its history, Cosa Nostra operated with impunity. But the latter half of the 20th century saw significant efforts to dismantle the Mafia's operations.

The Maxi Trial and Judicial Breakthroughs

One of the most significant moments in combating the Sicilian Mafia was the Maxi Trial (1986-1992) in Palermo. Spearheaded by prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, the trial indicted hundreds of Mafia members and handed down numerous convictions.

This legal offensive was unprecedented and dealt a serious blow to Cosa Nostra's leadership. Tragically, both Falcone and Borsellino were assassinated in 1992, highlighting the dangerous stakes involved in confronting the Mafia.

Modern Anti-Mafia Strategies

Today, law enforcement agencies continue to employ advanced surveillance, financial investigations, and international cooperation to target Mafia activities. Anti-Mafia commissions and organizations promote civic education to counter the culture of silence.

Efforts also focus on protecting witnesses and encouraging pentiti—former Mafia members who turn state's evidence—to come forward, gradually eroding the code of **omertà**.

Cultural Representation and Public Perception

The mystique of Cosa Nostra has captured the global imagination, influencing films, books, and television series. From "The Godfather" trilogy to "The Sopranos," popular media has shaped how many perceive the Mafia—sometimes glamorizing it, other times exposing its brutal reality.

Impact on Sicilian Society and Identity

For Sicilians, the Mafia is both a source of fear and a painful part of their history. Many locals have suffered from extortion and violence, while others have actively resisted through grassroots movements.

Organizations such as Addiopizzo have mobilized citizens against extortion, promoting economic alternatives free from Mafia influence. This growing resistance reflects a desire to reclaim Sicily's future from the shadow of organized crime.

Understanding the Legacy of Cosa Nostra

The history of Cosa Nostra, the Sicilian Mafia, is not just a tale of crime but a window into the social dynamics of power, culture, and resistance. Its survival over centuries underscores the challenges of combating deeply embedded criminal networks.

By studying its origins, codes, and influence, we gain insight into how organized crime can intertwine with society and governance, and why sustained efforts—both legal and cultural—are essential to breaking its hold.

Exploring Cosa Nostra's past reveals not only the dark chapters of Sicilian history but also the resilience of those who dare to confront it, offering lessons that extend far beyond the Mediterranean island.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is 'Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia' about?

It is a comprehensive book that explores the origins, development, and influence of the Sicilian Mafia, known as Cosa Nostra, detailing its social, political, and economic impact in Sicily and beyond.

Who is the author of 'Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia'?

The book was written by John Dickie, a historian and expert on Italian organized crime.

When was 'Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia' first published?

The book was first published in 2004.

What makes 'Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian

Mafia' a significant work on the subject?

It provides a detailed and well-researched historical account of the Sicilian Mafia, combining academic rigor with accessible storytelling, making it one of the definitive texts on the subject.

Does the book cover the relationship between the Sicilian Mafia and the American Mafia?

Yes, the book explores the connections and interactions between the Sicilian Mafia and its American counterparts, including their migration and influence in the United States.

How does 'Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia' explain the origins of the Mafia?

The book traces the origins of the Mafia back to the social and economic conditions of 19th-century Sicily, highlighting factors such as poverty, weak state presence, and the need for protection and enforcement outside the law.

Is 'Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia' suitable for readers new to the topic?

Yes, the book is written in an engaging and accessible style, making it suitable for both newcomers to the subject and those seeking a deeper understanding of the Mafia's history.

What impact did 'Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia' have on public perception of the Mafia?

The book helped demystify the Sicilian Mafia by providing a clear, factual history that challenges myths and stereotypes, contributing to a more informed and nuanced public understanding.

Additional Resources

Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia

cosa nostra a history of the sicilian mafia unravels one of the most enigmatic and deeply rooted criminal organizations in modern history. Originating in the rugged terrains of Sicily, this clandestine society has transcended its insular beginnings to become a global symbol of organized crime. Understanding Cosa Nostra requires an exploration of its origins, evolution, and complex socio-political influence, as well as its enduring legacy in both Italian society and international law enforcement.

Origins and Early Development of Cosa Nostra

The roots of Cosa Nostra are embedded in the socio-economic conditions of 19th-century Sicily. During this period, Sicily was a predominantly agrarian society marked by feudal land ownership, widespread poverty, and weak state institutions. The absence of effective law enforcement fostered an environment where private protection and enforcement agencies emerged organically. These groups, initially informal and localized, gradually coalesced into what became known as the Mafia, or more formally, Cosa Nostra, which translates roughly to "Our Thing."

Socio-Economic Foundations

The Mafia's early role was intricately linked to the protection of landowners and control over rural resources. Wealthy landowners, unable to rely on the state's ineffective judicial system, turned to local strongmen for protection against bandits and rival factions. This relationship was symbiotic: the Mafia provided security and order in exchange for loyalty and a share of profits. Over time, this protection racket evolved into more structured criminal enterprises, including extortion, smuggling, and racketeering.

Code of Conduct and Organizational Structure

One of the defining features of Cosa Nostra is its rigid code of conduct and hierarchical organization. The infamous oath of silence, or "omertà," demands absolute loyalty and secrecy from members, ensuring operational security and resilience against external threats. The Mafia is organized into "families" or clans, each led by a boss (capo), underboss, and a network of soldiers and associates. This structure has allowed Cosa Nostra to maintain internal discipline and adapt to changing political and economic landscapes.

The Golden Age and Expansion

The early 20th century marked a period of expansion and consolidation for the Sicilian Mafia. Waves of Italian immigration to the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s created new opportunities for Cosa Nostra to establish transatlantic connections. The Mafia's influence spread to American cities with large Italian populations, such as New York, Chicago, and New Orleans, laying the groundwork for what would become the American Mafia.

Prohibition Era and Criminal Enterprises

The U.S. Prohibition era (1920-1933) was a pivotal chapter in the Mafia's history. The ban on alcohol opened lucrative avenues for bootlegging, smuggling, and speakeasy

operations. Sicilian Mafia families capitalized on this demand, amassing immense wealth and power. This period also saw the rise of infamous Mafia figures who became synonymous with organized crime, such as Charles "Lucky" Luciano and Al Capone.

Post-War Sicily and Political Influence

Back in Sicily, the post-World War II era witnessed Cosa Nostra's infiltration into politics and legitimate business. Exploiting the chaos of the post-war reconstruction, Mafia clans extended their control over public contracts, agricultural cooperatives, and local governments. The Mafia's ability to manipulate electoral outcomes and intimidate political opponents entrenched its position within Sicilian society, blurring the lines between criminality and governance.

Law Enforcement and Judicial Response

For much of the 20th century, efforts to combat Cosa Nostra were hampered by corruption, fear, and the Mafia's pervasive influence. However, the tide began to turn in the 1980s and 1990s with landmark judicial initiatives and courageous testimony from insiders.

The Maxi Trial and Its Impact

The Maxi Trial (1986-1992) stands as a watershed moment in the fight against the Sicilian Mafia. Initiated by prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, the trial prosecuted hundreds of Mafia members, exposing the organization's inner workings and hierarchy. Although facing intense threats and assassinations, these magistrates' efforts culminated in significant convictions, signaling a shift in Italy's approach to organized crime.

Anti-Mafia Legislation and Modern Policing

Following the Maxi Trial, Italian authorities implemented stricter anti-Mafia laws, including asset seizures, witness protection programs, and enhanced investigative powers. These measures, coupled with international cooperation, have disrupted many Mafia operations. Nevertheless, Cosa Nostra continues to adapt, often diversifying into new criminal activities such as cybercrime, drug trafficking, and money laundering, demonstrating its resilience.

Features and Characteristics of Cosa Nostra

Understanding the unique characteristics of Cosa Nostra is essential to appreciating its longevity and influence.

- **Omertà:** The cultural code of silence that enforces secrecy and discourages collaboration with law enforcement.
- **Family-Based Structure:** A strict hierarchy organized around familial and local ties that ensure loyalty and operational efficiency.
- **Territorial Control:** Dominance over specific geographic areas, particularly in Sicily, which allows for control over economic activities.
- **Political Corruption:** The Mafia's infiltration into political institutions to protect and expand its interests.
- **Economic Diversification:** Involvement in both illegal activities and legitimate businesses, providing financial camouflage and influence.

Comparison with Other Organized Crime Groups

While Cosa Nostra shares similarities with other criminal organizations like the Camorra and 'Ndrangheta, it is distinguished by its historical roots and cultural identity tied to Sicily. Compared to the Camorra, which operates with a looser, clan-based network mainly in Naples, Cosa Nostra maintains a more centralized command. The 'Ndrangheta from Calabria, on the other hand, is currently considered more powerful and secretive, especially in international drug trafficking, yet Cosa Nostra's historical significance remains unparalleled.

The Cultural Impact and Global Legacy

Cosa Nostra's influence extends beyond crime and politics into the realms of culture and media. It has been a subject of international fascination, inspiring countless books, films, and television series. This cultural portrayal has sometimes romanticized the Mafia, obscuring the harsh realities of violence and social damage.

Media Representation

Works like Mario Puzo's "The Godfather" and the film adaptations have shaped global perceptions of the Mafia, blending fact with fiction. While these narratives bring awareness, they also risk glamorizing criminal lifestyles. Journalistic and academic efforts continue to provide balanced, investigative accounts to counteract myths and stereotypes.

Challenges for Contemporary Society

Despite successful crackdowns, Cosa Nostra's legacy persists as a challenge for law enforcement and civil society. Its infiltration into legitimate economies complicates detection and prosecution, while social acceptance in some communities hampers efforts to dismantle its networks. Strengthening civic institutions, promoting education, and fostering community resilience remain critical in addressing the Mafia's deep-seated influence.

Tracing the trajectory of Cosa Nostra reveals a complex interplay of historical circumstances, social dynamics, and criminal ingenuity. From its Sicilian origins to its global reach, the Sicilian Mafia embodies both a dark chapter in Italy's history and a continuing challenge for justice and governance worldwide. The story of Cosa Nostra is not only one of crime but also of the persistent struggle between law, order, and the forces that seek to undermine them.

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cosa nostra a history of the sicilian mafia: Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia John Dickie, 2015-03-31 The Italian-American mafia has its roots in a mysterious and powerful criminal network in Sicily. While the mythology of the mafia has been widely celebrated in American culture, the true origins of its rituals, laws, and methods have never actually been revealed. John Dickie uses startling new research to expose the secrets of the Sicilian mafia, providing a fascinating account that is more violent, frightening, and darkly comic than anything conceived in popular movies and novels. How did the Sicilian mafia begin? How did it achieve its powerful grip in Italy and America? How does it operate today? From the mafia's origins in the 1860s to its current tense relationship with the Berlusconi government, Cosa Nostra takes us to the inner sanctum where few have dared to go before. This is an important work of history and a revelation for anyone who ever wondered what it means to be made in the mob.

cosa nostra a history of the sicilian mafia: Cosa Nostra John Dickie, 2004-01 COSA NOSTRA is the compelling story of the Sicilian mafia, the world's most famous, most secretive and most misunderstood criminal fraternity. The mafia has been given many names since it was founded one hundred and forty years ago: the Sect, the Brotherhood, the Honoured Society, and now Cosa Nostra. Yet as times have changed, the mafia's subtle and bloody methods have remained the same. Now, for the first time, COSA NOSTRA reconstructs the complete history of the Sicilian mafia from its origins to the present day, from the lemon groves and sulphur mines of Sicily, to the streets of Manhattan. COSA NOSTRA is a definitive history, rich in atmosphere, and with the narrative pace of the best detective fiction. The mob genre has finally grown up.

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been given many names since it was founded one hundred and forty years ago: the Sect, the Brotherhood, the Honoured Society, and now Cosa Nostra. Yet as times have changed, the mafia's subtle and bloody methods have remained the same. Now, for the first time, COSA NOSTRA reconstructs the complete history of the Sicilian mafia from its origins to the present day, from the lemon groves and sulphur mines of Sicily, to the streets of Manhattan. COSA NOSTRA is a definitive history, rich in atmosphere, and with the narrative pace of the best detective fiction. The mob genre has finally grown up.

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suspensions of mafia involvement still surround some of the country's most powerful media moguls and politicians. The latest investigations show that its reach is astonishing: it controls much of Europe's wholesale cocaine trade, and representatives from as far away as Germany, Canada and Australia come to Calabria to seek authorisation for their affairs. Just when it thought it had finally contained the mafia threat, Italy is now discovering that it harbours the most global criminal network of them all.

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cosa nostra a history of the sicilian mafia: Cosa Nostra Charles River Editors, 2019-07-19
*Includes pictures *Includes a bibliography for further reading [T]he term mafia found a class of violent criminals ready and waiting for a name to define them, and, given their special character and importance in Sicilian society, they had the right to a different name from that defining vulgar criminals in other countries. -Leopoldo Franchetti, 1876 It is hard to find an island on the map more central than Sicily. Located at the crossroads between Europe and Africa, and between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean, Sicily has rarely been governed as an independent, unified state, yet the island has always occupied a front-row seat to some of the most important events in history, and nowhere is this more obvious than during antiquity. Over the course of the 19th century, the people of Sicily found themselves at the center of a struggle for freedom, one that ended up being long and often very bloody. It was during these crucial years of struggle that the Sicilian mafia, La cosa nostra (Our thing), started to take shape. The original word mafia was a part of Palermitan slang, and although the origins of the word are not completely certain, some linguistic historians believe it originally meant flashy. One historian of the mafia, Salvatore Lupo, helpfully suggests that it was used in its earliest iterations to vaguely refer to a pathological relationship among politics, society and criminality. In response to the rise of the mafia, the Italian state propagated a doctrine of Sicilian backwardness, which they used to introduce martial law and suspend civil liberties, under the pretext that they were not ready for the freedoms enjoyed by other Italian regions. Northerners and foreigners mistakenly (and snobbishly) believed that the mafia was just a relic of the primitive, peasant culture that had dominated the island for centuries, and that it was destined to die out once the island had been properly absorbed into the dominant, mainland culture. Others hypothesized that the corruption in Sicilian culture was just a holdover from the Bourbon government and would soon be extinguished once a formal transition was completed. Of course, they proved to be dead wrong. The Sicilian mafia was not a criminal underworld or a form of political rebellion, but more of a kingdom within a kingdom. In other words, according to historians of the mafia, it was a network of hidden power, an alternative hierarchy that sometimes worked in concert with and sometimes superseded official forms of law and order. By 1890, the Cosa Nostra had already developed into a

sophisticated criminal organization with a great deal of blood on its hands. In fact, its tentacles reached into the highest levels of politics and beyond the borders of Sicily and Italy, traveling across the Atlantic to the United States. Today, their power has been dwarfed by the Neapolitan mafia, La Camorra, yet the Cosa Nostra has continued to wreak havoc in Sicily. In 1992 they were responsible for one of the most high-profile assassinations in Italy since the fall of fascism. Ironically, the murderous actions of a small segment of society have caused the Sicilian people in general to be perceived as mafiosi, even though the vast majority of them have been victims rather than perpetrators. *Cosa Nostra: The Notorious History and Legacy of the Sicilian Mafia* examines how the world's most famous mob formed, its inner workings, and the events that made it feared around the world. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the Sicilian mafia like never before.

cosa nostra a history of the sicilian mafia: Blood Brotherhoods John Dickie, 2014-04-22
MAFIA. CAMORRA. 'NDRANGHETA. The Sicilian mafia, known as Cosa Nostra, is far from being Italy's only dangerous criminal fraternity. The country hosts two other major mafias: the camorra from Naples; and, from the poor and isolated region of Calabria, the mysterious 'ndrangheta, which has now risen to become the most powerful mob group active today. Since they emerged, the mafias have all corrupted Italy's institutions, drastically curtailed the life-chances of its citizens, evaded justice, and set up their own self-interested meddling as an alternative to the courts. Yet each of these brotherhoods has its own methods, its own dark rituals, its own style of ferocity. Each is uniquely adapted to corrupt and exploit its own specific environment, as it collaborates with, learns from, and goes to war with the other mafias. Today, the shadow of organized crime hangs over a country racked by debt, political paralysis, and widespread corruption. The 'ndrangheta controls much of Europe's wholesale cocaine trade and, by some estimates, 3 percent of Italy's total GDP. *Blood Brotherhoods* traces the origins of this national malaise back to Italy's roots as a united country in the nineteenth century, and shows how political violence incubated underworld sects among the lemon groves of Palermo, the fetid slums of Naples, and the harsh mountain villages of Calabria. *Blood Brotherhoods* is a book of breathtaking ambition, tracing for the first time the interlocking story of all three mafias from their origins to the present day. John Dickie is recognized in Italy as one of the foremost historians of organized crime. In these pages, he blends archival detective work, passionate narrative, and shrewd analysis to bring a unique criminal ecosystem -- and the three terrifying criminal brotherhoods that have evolved within it -- to life on the page.

cosa nostra a history of the sicilian mafia: The Sicilian Mafia Diego Gambetta, 1996-02
Blood ceremonies, obscure symbols, elaborate codes, brutal executions: the arcane remnants of a defunct culture? The Mafia, this book suggests, is not nearly as bizarre as all that, not nearly as remote as we might think. In fact, as Diego Gambetta's analysis unfolds, the Mafia begins to resemble any other business. In a society where trust is in short supply, this business sells protection, a guarantee of safe conduct for commercial and social transactions. It grudgingly shares the market with other concerns like itself, of which it is merely the most successful. The author develops his elegant economic theory with ample evidence, much of it based on the remarkable work done by Judge Giovanni Falcone and his colleagues in Palermo and Agrigento in the 1980s. Drawing on the confessions of eight Mafiosi and the trials their revelations triggered, Gambetta is able to explain all manner of peculiar Mafia marketing strategies that have been endlessly misinterpreted in the past. He makes illuminating - and unexpected - comparisons between the business of protection and ordinary industries, such as automotive insurance, and advertising. And he teases out the subtle distinctions between protection and extortion, in which the protector himself poses a threat. This new approach reshapes traditional interpretations of the Mafia - its origins, functions, and social consequences. Applying informal economic analysis, Gambetta shows how such a recognized evil can perform a real service, and how such a recognizable service can inflict great harm on a society.

cosa nostra a history of the sicilian mafia: Mafia Caterina Bartoldi, 2015-05-09
Caterina Bartoldi, lived several years in Sicily, she has become a Mafia specialist. In this fascinating book, she takes us from Sicily to the United States and in many other countries, she tells us about this part of

History, which is very often confidential, mysterious and difficult to understand. She describes the secret structures, the symbols, the ways to communicate and functions of Cosa Nostra, as well as the great figures of the Sicilian Mafia. Discover the three Volumes of this geopolitical book that can be read just like a thriller: **MAFIA VOL. 1 The History of Cosa Nostra** With 200 years of Sicilian and World History. **VOL. 2 The Analysis of the Sicilian Organized Crime** With its internal structure, its territories, its activities, its killing symbolic and its culture. **VOL. 3 The Language of the Malavita** With its dictionary of the Mafia jargon, its gestuality, its sayings and its nicknames. With annexed, the resumes of the Organized Crime's greatest figures and the table the five families of in New York.

cosa nostra a history of the sicilian mafia: The Mafia Roberto M. Dainotto, 2015-04-15
What is it about Tony Soprano that makes him so amiable? For that matter, how is it that many of us secretly want Scarface to succeed or see Michael Corleone as, ultimately, a hero? What draws us into the otherwise horrifically violent world of the mafia? In *The Mafia*, Roberto M. Dainotto explores the irresistible appeal of this particular brand of organized crime, its history, and the mythology we have developed around it. Dainotto traces the development of the mafia from its rural beginnings in Western Sicily to its growth into a global crime organization alongside a parallel examination of its evolution in music, print, and on the big screen. He probes the tension between the real mafia—its violent, often brutal reality—and how we imagine it to be: a mythical potpourri of codes of honor, family values, and chivalry. But rather than dismiss our collective imagining of the mafia as a complete fiction, Dainotto instead sets out to understand what needs and desires or material and psychic longing our fantasies about the mafia—the best kind of the bad life—are meant to satisfy. Exploring the rich array of films, books, television programs, music, and even video games portraying and inspired by the mafia, this book offers not only a social, economic, and political history of one of the most iconic underground cultures, but a new way of understanding our enduring fascination with the complex society that lurks behind the sinister Omertà of the family business.

cosa nostra a history of the sicilian mafia: Italy's Most Powerful Mafias Charles River Editors, 2019-10-19 *Includes pictures *Includes a bibliography for further reading
The word mafia, Sicilian in origin, is synonymous with Italy, but Italy is home to several different mafias, with three being particularly notorious. While the Cosa Nostra of western Sicily is the most infamous, other powerful groups include the ferocious 'Ndrangheta of Calabria and the Camorra, the third-largest mafia, which is active in Naples and the Campania region. A mafia is loosely defined as a criminal organization that is interested in social, economic and political power, combining elements of a traditional secret society with those of a business, but further levels of nuance are necessary in order to understand these groups. In a general sense, this is because each mafia creates a myth about the development of the organization, which becomes like an unquestionable truth. In essence, part of what makes its members so completely loyal to it is also what makes outsiders so utterly afraid of it. Over the course of the 19th century, the people of Sicily found themselves at the center of a struggle for freedom, one that ended up being long and often very bloody. It was during these crucial years of struggle that the Sicilian mafia, *La cosa nostra* (Our thing), started to take shape. The original word mafia was a part of Palermitan slang, and although the origins of the word are not completely certain, some linguistic historians believe it originally meant flashy. One historian of the mafia, Salvatore Lupo, helpfully suggests that it was used in its earliest iterations to vaguely refer to a pathological relationship among politics, society and criminality. In the particular case of the Camorra, the difficulty of understanding an underground criminal association is made all the more intense because it is so heterogeneous in terms of its development, its different functions, and the diversity of economic sectors in which it operates. To reflect that diversity, some scholars like to refer to it as *Camorre*, the plural version of Camorra. This decision is more than just a question of semantics, because using the plural form helps emphasize the internal differences and conflicts within the Neapolitan mafia, which, in turn, helps explain the very nature of the organization itself. The Neapolitan mafia is famous for its pervasive nature, which is due to the fact that it is organized in a horizontal, decentralized way. This means there is not one single boss who dictates policy and

can be more strategic in how and when violence is deployed. Unlike other mafias, in the Camorra there has been no long-term reigning family, nor extensive coordination between families to form an alliance and function as a unified mafia for their shared benefit. The 'Ndrangheta (pronounced an-drang-et-ah) is a close neighbor of the Cosa Nostra and currently considered the most powerful (and difficult to spell) criminal organization in Italy. The 'Ndrangheta is centered around Calabria, the most southwestern region of Italy, almost touching the Sicilian city of Messina. Though it began as far back as the late 19th century, it was not until the 1950s that the 'Ndrangheta started to spread its tentacles throughout Italy and then across the entire globe, forming an empire that now ranges from Australia and Turkey to Chile to Canada. The fact that the 'Ndrangheta is overshadowed by the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, as well as by the Neapolitan mafia, the Camorra, allowed it to grow and develop outside of the public eye. For years, people actually considered the Calabrian mafia to be part of the Cosa Nostra as a mere appendage, rather than its own entity. This false belief was perpetuated by the high-profile Sicilian pentito, Tommaso Buscetta, and it was not until the beginning of the 21st century that the 'Ndrangheta came into the public eye due to two dramatic killings, the assassination of a politician and the Duisburg massacre.

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order that has not only left thousands dead, but has created a ripple effect of crime and violence that can be felt on the streets of America's cities today. Taking us into the eye of this criminal storm, Boss of Bosses tells the story of Bernardo Provenzano, who rose from humble origins to become the head of the Sicilian Mafia, overseeing a deadly empire of corruption so large in scope, the full sweep of its dark reach has yet to be fully accounted. On the run for over 43 years before his arrest, Provenzano's life is a testament to Mafia history, and typifies the code of the ultimate gangster.

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