

The Black Hand

Terror by Letter in Chicago

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The alien conspiracy theory argues that organized crime in American society evolved in a linear fashion beginning with the Mafia in Sicily, emerging in the form of the Black Hand in America's immigrant colonies, and culminating in the development of the *Cosa Nostra* in America's urban centers. This research challenges the alien conspiracy theory by reviewing the history of Black Hand activity in the city of Chicago and argues that the development of Black Hand extortion was not related to the emergence of the Sicilian Mafia but was rooted in the social structure of American society.

Although often equated with organized crime, the Black Hand (*Mano Nera*) was not a criminal organization. The Black Hand was simply a crude method of extortion by which wealthy Italians and others were extorted for money. Intended victims were simply sent a letter stating that they would come to violence if they did not pay a particular sum of money. The term *Black Hand* came into use because the extortion letters usually contained a drawing of a black hand and other evil symbols such as a dagger and skull and crossbones.

The name Black Hand is reportedly derived from an anarchist group that killed wealthy landowners in Spain (Pitkin & Cordasco, 1977, p. 45). It was later found out, however, that the local provincial chief of gendarmes might have invented the idea of the Black Hand to incriminate the leaders of the anarchist movement (Brenan, 1943/1950, p. 160). The adoption of the Black Hand name by Italian groups is probably associated with the publicity given to the Spanish society. In 1902, a series of articles appeared in newspapers throughout Europe exposing the Spanish Black Hand trials as a miscarriage

of justice. It is believed that the term was first used in the United States by a small group of blackmailers who were attempting to extort money from a New York bank (“‘Black Hand’ is a Hoax,” 1908).

Black Hand letters normally came by mail and were written in an unassuming tone. The letters often asked the pardon of the victim and contained either a direct or subtle threat. Offenders frequently stated that times were difficult and that the victim or his property would come to serious harm if the demands were not met. Victims often received a second and third letter, the purpose of which was to instill fear and assure the victim that the offender was a serious malefactor. Some Black Hand victims were instructed to seek a “friend” who could help them solve their extortion problem (White Hand Society, 1908, p. 15). This friend was someone who had recently appeared and was more solicitous than would be expected. This new associate usually knew someone who could intercede on the part of the intended victim and possibly “adjust” the matter. The friend was always happy to act as an intermediary for the victim. In reality, this new friend was part of the blackmailing scheme. The following is a portion of a Black Hand letter that appeared in the *Chicago Record Herald* newspaper (“Ambush Black Hand,” 1908) on August 18, 1908:

We send you these few lines to let you know our misery. We are four persons and you must excuse us if we seem to bother you. The time is hard. We advise you not to act like a boy. You must keep this to only yourself and your wife. You must obey these demands. You can pay. We ask of you \$1,000.

THE BLACK HAND

Black Hand crimes were often described as the work of the Mafia and the Camorra (“4th Man Victim in Camorra War Within 72 Hours,” 1911; “Grim Methods of the ‘Mafia’,” 1912; “2 More Dead: Mafia Tentacles Spread Over City,” 1911). This association was understandable. Whether intentional or not, Black Hand criminals traded on the reputations of these groups. Black Hand extortionists were often referred to as *Mafiosi*, but in the Italian culture, this generally meant that these men were domineering, swaggering, and fearless rather than part of a criminal organization (Park & Miller, 1921/1969, p. 247). In addition, the press and the police greatly exaggerated the role of the Black Hand by attributing many unsolved crimes in the Italian community to this mysterious group. A review of alleged Black Hand incidents reported in the *Chicago Record Herald* newspaper between 1910 and 1915 revealed that many of the crimes had no evidence of extortion (see, e.g., “Slain in His Bed,” 1911).

In spite of the popular belief that Black Hand activity originated in Sicily and the south of Italy, there is little evidence that the practice existed there. In

fact, Guido Sabetta, the Italian Consul in Chicago, stated, "There was no such thing as the Black Hand organization" ("Scaff at Black Hand: Letters are Derided," 1907). Blackmailers simply used the Black Hand symbol to inspire terror. Sabetta had been previously stationed in Sicily, the alleged origin of Black Hand activity, and had never heard of the organization there. In fact, the United States Immigration Commission (1907, p. 210) reported in 1911 that upper-class Sicilians were refraining from migrating to the United States for fear of the Black Hand, whereas others had actually returned to Italy to find safety from it.

Although the Black Hand was not a secret society, there were many small Black Hand gangs. Black Hand extortion was often viewed as the activity of a single organization because Black Hand criminals in Italian communities throughout the United States used the same methods of extortion. In addition, Black Hand criminals may have exchanged introductions of new members and solicited financial contributions to help members in need (White Hand Society, 1908, p. 4). The result was not a vast organization but a bond established by mutual interest and by virtue of fact that one became the accomplice of the other when needed. The Black Hand existed as a type of crime, and although it was not an organized society, there was a spirit of fraternity among the men who engaged in Black Hand practices.

BLACK HAND ACTIVITY

Although Black Hand activities were reported in Chicago newspapers as early as 1904, most Black Hand activity occurred between 1910 and 1915. There were 10 alleged Black Hand murders in 1910 ("Uses Deadly Slug to Shoot Italian," 1911). In 1911, the dead numbered 40 ("Uncle Sam Starts Black Hand War," 1915). Thirty-three were murdered in 1912. Thirty-one were killed in 1913 and 42 murdered in 1914. In 1915, 5 people were killed during the first 5 months of the year and an additional 12 bombings occurred. The increase in Black Hand activity in 1911 may have been the result of competition between Black Hand groups ("Mafia Chiefs Known?" 1911). Police pressure in New York City had reportedly forced a number of Black Hand extortionists to move to Chicago, where they immediately set up blackmailing operations. The result was not only an increase in crime but also a bloody conflict between the New York and Chicago Black Hand groups.

A review of more than 300 Black Hand cases in Chicago conducted by John Landesco (1929/1968, p. 937) revealed that Black Hand operations were limited almost exclusively to the Sicilian neighborhoods along Taylor Street and Grand Avenue on the Near West Side, along Oak Street on the Near North Side, and near Wentworth Avenue on the Near South Side. The center of Black Hand activity appears to have been Chicago's Near North Side Sicil-

ian community. Sicilians began arriving in great numbers on the Near North Side in 1903 (Zorbaugh, 1929, p. 161). By 1910, 2,300 Sicilians were found to be living on six blocks in the heart of the area. Little Sicily, as the community was known, stretched from Sedgwick Street to the Chicago River and from Chicago Avenue to Division Street.

So many Black Hand deaths occurred at the intersection of Oak and Milton (now Cleveland) in the center of Little Sicily that the corner became known as "Death Point" and "Death Corner" ("4th Man Victim in Camorra War Within 72 Hours," 1911; "Uses Deadly Slug to Shoot Italian," 1911). The more than 20 Black Hand deaths that had occurred in the area of Death Point left the community in a state of terror and caused many families to move toward the outer boundaries of the community where there was a greater sense of security (Park & Miller, 1921/1969, p. 247).

Among the most notable incidents to occur in Little Sicily were the murders attributed to the so-called Black Hand "shotgun man." Each of the victims was killed with a sawed-off shotgun, which was a new weapon in Black Hand extortion ("Two Men Are Slain in Camorra Plots," 1911). Those killed earlier by the Black Hand were executed by revolver, stiletto, or bomb. Three of the men were killed in the vicinity of Death Point on or about March 14, 1911 ("4th Man Victim in Camorra War Within 72 Hours," 1911). There was a fourth man killed within the same time period whose death has often been attributed to the shotgun man, but he was murdered entering his home in the Near West Side Taylor Street community and not in Little Sicily ("4th Man Victim in Camorra War Within 72 Hours," 1911).

Although Asbury (1942/1986) has linked the four murders occurring about March 14, 1911, charging them to the Black Hand shotgun man, there is little evidence supporting the theory that the same person committed all the murders. In fact, police arrested John Gagliardo as a possible suspect in the shotgun murders but were not able to charge him with any of the crimes ("Jar of Latest Bomb 'to Cost Baby's Life'," 1911). Police concluded that the shotgun shells found in Gagliardo's possession were too common to be important evidence. The following month, federal officials announced that they knew the identity of the shotgun man, but it is unclear that he was ever arrested ("Federal Spies Solve Black Hand Mystery," 1911).

The large number of Black Hand murders occurring in Little Sicily not only terrorized the community but also affected real estate values ("Uncle Sam Starts Black Hand War," 1915). The tenants of the buildings where Black Hand murders occurred often moved away within 24 hours of the incident. It then became almost impossible to rent the property to other Italians for fear of the same fate. In fact, the Chicago Real Estate Board provided an example of a building that had to be demolished because it was impossible to rent.

Moving was a practical alternative to Black Hand violence. It must be remembered that bombs were a common method of enforcing Black Hand demands. Tenants feared living in the same building with Black Hand victims because of the possibility that the building would be firebombed. So extensive was the rash of bombings that occurred in Little Sicily that insurance companies began to cancel coverage in the area ("Policies Cancelled," 1912). The canceling of insurance policies started shortly after the explosion of a two-story brick bakery on Milton Avenue near Death Point in May of 1912. Described as the "greatest explosion that Little Italy has ever witnessed," the force of the bomb hurled men and women from their beds and shook buildings for blocks around.

It has been reported that wealthy continental Italians and those of other nationalities were never molested or threatened by Black Hand extortionists, although the Sicilian who had shown any outward signs of prosperity almost invariably began to receive threatening letters (Park & Miller, 1921/1969, p. 247). The field of victims included poor laborers who through great sacrifice had put aside a few dollars or purchased a small piece of property; the small merchant, who with other members of his family, worked in a little store barely managing to make a living; and the retired businessman, wholesale merchant, or professional man (White Hand Society, 1908, p. 12).

Although Sicilians were probably the major targets, other groups fell victim to Black Hand extortion. For example, Northerner Andrew Cuneo, the richest Italian in Chicago, was shot after ignoring numerous Black Hand letters ("Cuneo Latest Target of Black Hand," 1911). Harold F. McCormick, son-in-law of John D. Rockefeller, also received a number of Black Hand extortion demands threatening death if a large sum of money was not paid ("Rich Men as Victims of the Black Hand," 1908). It was estimated that during this time period, wealthy Chicagoans received an average of 25 such letters from various Black Hand gangs each week.

Just as Black Hand victims were not all Sicilian, neither were the offenders all Italian. For example, Bernard Barasa, a prominent Italian American attorney, investigated 20 alleged Black Hand cases in Chicago and in every instance found that the blackmailers were either non-Italian or that the whole incident was fake ("Black Hand is a Hoax," 1908). Barasa concluded that the Black Hand society was a myth. He stated that the name Black Hand was just a term used by blackmailers that had become a symbolic title applied to such crimes generally.

There are many examples of non-Italian criminal groups adopting the Black Hand name because of its diabolical connotations. For example, Thrasher (1927, p. 142) identified a Jewish gang named Itchkie's Black Hand Society. Itchkie's gang was a group of adolescent pickpockets centered in the Near West Side Maxwell Street neighborhood. George Pavlick, a 15-year-old

Russian boy, was arrested for sending Black Hand letters to Max Maas, a grocer on the Near South Side, demanding \$200 under threat of death ("Federal Grand Jury Completes Its Work," 1910). After his arrest, Pavlick confessed that he got the idea of sending Black Hand letters from cheap novels. There was even a Greek Black Hand episode ("Jury Terrorized by 'Black Hand;' Dragnet Closing," 1911). A Greek fruit merchant on the Near West Side named Kris Koumeks received a letter written in Greek demanding \$500.

Black Hand extortion was also practiced by individuals without the association of a gang. For example, Phillip Purpura sent blackmail letters to a man named Rice ("The Individual Black Hand," 1911). On his arrest, Purpura told Chicago Police that he had heard much about the Black Hand and thought he could obtain money by using the terror-inspiring phrase. In addition, not all Black Hand gangs were made up of adults. Eighteen-year-old Tony Baffa was arrested in July of 1909 for the murder of grocer Gieseppe Fillipelli. Fillipelli had failed to submit to the extortion demands of Baffa's Black Hand gang. Interestingly, Baffa's gang called themselves *Loguisto*, which ironically translates to "The Society of Justice" ("Boy Slayer Bares Black Hand Death; Betrays Vendetta," 1909).

THE CAUSE OF BLACK HAND EXTORTION

Although it was popularly believed that the Black Hand was a foreign criminal organization that had migrated to Chicago and other American cities, the historical record shows that Black Hand extortion was the outcome of conditions existing within American society. A study by the White Hand Society (1908), a group organized by the Italian community in Chicago to fight Black Hand extortion, identified these conditions as the isolation of the Italian community; the Italian immigrant's distrust of formal authority; the existence of saloons and saloonkeepers with powerful political connections; and a criminal justice system that was ineffective in repressing crime.

Little Sicily was the most isolated of all of Chicago's Italian communities. A study by the Local Community Research Committee of the University of Chicago (1928) reported that Near North Side Sicilians were isolated from all other groups, except Chicago's "colored" population. Poor transportation and the barrier of the Chicago River and local industry also contributed to the isolation of the community. The area was also physically conducive to lawlessness. Ramshackle buildings, dark and dirty alleys, broken streets, and disorganized living conditions all contributed to crime in the area. The neighborhood was tough, and the only recreation available to the Sicilian immigrant was the street and the poolroom. Housing was so inadequate that the residents often extended their parlors into the street during the warm weather.

Until 1914, the Sicilian colony in Chicago was also a foreign community (Zorbaugh, 1929, p. 165). The food sold was distinctively different. Women rarely left home, and the family arranged marriages. There were no bookstores, and Chicago's daily newspapers had a limited circulation. People lived as much as possible in groups that corresponded to their home village in Sicily and participated in religious societies with other immigrants from their native town. The foreign nature of the community also limited police protection (White Hand Society, 1908, p. 6). The police and public alike generally did not understand the foreign customs, language, and traditions of the Sicilian immigrant.

One custom that benefited Black Hand criminals was the cultural distrust of government and law enforcement exhibited by the Sicilian immigrant. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Sicily had a succession of foreign rulers including the Arabs, Normans, French, and Spanish. The history of Sicily is a record of 1,000 years of political, social, and economic repression. Centuries of foreign domination and bad government had given rise to a culture of contempt for the police and the law (White Hand Society, 1908, p. 5). When a crime occurred, the people refused to cooperate. The code of *omerta*, the quality of remaining silent, prevented them from assisting the police.

Chicago Police were not only confronted with the problem posed by *omerta* but also the belief among many Southern Italian immigrants that it was a point of honor to be able to provide for their own protection and the protection of their families without recourse to civil authority. For example, a murder was committed in Chicago and the police were able to identify the offender. In spite of weeks of searching, the police could not apprehend the malefactor ("The Police and Alien Ways," 1911). Finally, a detective saw the wanted man leave the home of the brother of the murder victim. This home had been the criminal's refuge for weeks. When the police questioned the brother regarding this strange affair, he declared that the killer of his brother had been wounded and that he and his family had nurtured him back to health. He did so to personally kill the offender to avenge the death of his brother.

The personal use of violence to redress grievances was common in Chicago's Sicilian quarter. In 13 months beginning in 1909, 12 men were reportedly slain to satisfy the Sicilian code, which demanded "a life for a life" ("12 Slain in 13 Months," 1910). The use of violence to settle personal disputes was part of the Sicilian culture. The original purpose of the vendetta was retaliation against the foreign officials sent to rule their land (Sassone, 1921, p. 26). Because it was impossible to have their rulers punished for oppression, the Sicilian people would dispose of them by assassination, which became an honorable act. Over time, the use of the vendetta was extended to give families and individuals the right to take private vengeance against their enemies.

Because of newspaper publicity, vendetta killings and almost every other crime in the Italian community was soon attributed to the Black Hand. This undue publicity facilitated the commission of Black Hand crimes by making it appear that all the evil done by Italian criminals was the work of a powerful criminal society that the victim could not resist. This problem did not go unnoticed. A letter written to the editor of the *Chicago Record Herald* ("Letter to the Editor," 1911) protested that the indiscriminate use of the term Black Hand gave both the crime and the criminal a larger importance than would arise if the crimes were treated as separate incidents.

The existence of bawdy saloons and politically connected saloonkeepers within Chicago's Near North Side Little Sicily community also contributed to Black Hand activities ("Saloon Black Hand Retreat," 1908). These saloons, which were centers of gambling and prostitution, provided a retreat for the worst element of the Italian population. Because the keepers of these saloons took an active part in precinct and ward politics—contributing money to party organizations and doing political work for local ward leaders—they were generally immune from the enforcement actions of the police ("The Black Hand and Lawless Saloons," 1908). As a result, it was common for the police department, because of entangling alliances with corrupt politicians, to adopt a let-alone policy toward those saloons and saloonkeepers who supported successful candidates. The profound indifference to the law exhibited by the saloon proprietors created an atmosphere in which Black Hand criminals were able to operate with the expectation of some degree of immunity.

The Chicago police raided six saloons believed to be centers of Black Hand activity in January of 1910 ("Hunt Black Hand Slayer," 1910). All of the saloons were located in the immediate vicinity of Death Point, which was believed to be the home of the Black Hand. The police dragnet resulted in the arrest of 194 of Little Sicily's toughest criminals. These men were believed to be the group from which Black Hand gangs were formed. Of the 194 persons arrested, 187 were fined and 7 discharged by the court ("Black Hand Clew Failed by Fear," 1910). The sensational raid was the result of a need by the police to take action against Black Hand extortion and to avenge the death of Benedetto Cinene. Cinene had cooperated with the police in rescuing a 6-year-old boy who had been kidnapped in a recent Black Hand extortion case.

Chicago authorities had hoped that the Little Sicily raid would lead them to information about the death of Cinene and that the show of force might lead others to provide information to the police. The police, however, were once again confronted by the Sicilian immigrant's natural fear of cooperating with authorities. The common response was, "What's the use? It won't bring the dead to life" ("Hide Facts in Murder," 1910). The residents were more concerned about the living, undoubtedly a matter of self-preservation.

Part of the reason that the Italian community in Chicago was reluctant to cooperate with the authorities in their investigations of Black Hand groups was the failure of the American police to cope with the blackmailing gangs ("4th Man Victim in Camorra War Within 72 Hours," 1911). This fact impressed itself on the minds of the residents of Little Sicily and caused many to fear for their lives. Whether the Black Hand existed in Italy or not, Italian immigrants were struck by the difference between the American and Italian justice systems. Italian criminal justice varied greatly from that of the United States. If a man was convicted of a crime in Italy, he was placed under special surveillance (Woods, 1909, p. 42). The *vigilato*, as it was called, precluded the Italian criminal from carrying arms; from entering saloons, restaurants and hotels; and required him to stay at home from sunset until dawn. Criminals lived in continual dread of the police who could appear at their bedside at any hour of the night to make sure that the suspect was at home. Furthermore, all *vigilatos* were detained during any public occasion for 48 hours to keep them away from temptation. In addition to convicted criminals, vagabonds, persons arrested for less serious crimes, and those acquitted of serious crimes were placed under "admonition," a less severe form of surveillance. Violation of special surveillance resulted in imprisonment.

It is not surprising that an Italian criminal or one who had acquired a reputation as a "bad man" may have found America attractive (Woods, 1909, p. 43). In America, the experienced Italian criminal learned that no law could limit an individual's liberty or force him to remain where he will be harmless (White Hand Society, 1908, p. 8). In America, there was no possibility of detaining "bad men" for extended periods of time. The White Hand Society (1908, p. 9) argued that the administration of American law was an encouragement to Italian criminals who had fled their mother country.

THE WHITE HAND

In 1907, Joseph Mirabella, president of the Unione Siciliana, called for the organization of a "White Hand Society" to oppose the menace of the Black Hand (*La Tribuna Italiana*, 1907a). Although some of its members were later involved in bootlegging, the Unione Siciliana began as a lawful fraternal society dedicated to advancing the interests of the Sicilian immigrant. As a result, a group of prominent Italians met with the Italian Consul in Chicago to seek his endorsement for the formation of the organization (*La Tribuna Italiana*, 1907b). Soon after, the White Hand Society established its headquarters in the Masonic Temple Building in downtown Chicago next to the offices of the Italian Consul and the Italian Chamber of Commerce (*La Tribuna Italiana*, 1908). The White Hand announced that it would secretly

receive information about the activities of the Black Hand and that it would provide protection to all who were threatened with Black Hand extortion.

The White Hand Society also hired private investigators and attorneys to assist the police in arresting and prosecuting Black Hand criminals. In fact, one of their detectives, Frank Enero, was murdered while investigating Black Hand activity in Little Sicily in April of 1911 ("Think Murdered Man Was Enemy of Mafia," 1911). It is interesting to note that Chicago Police believed Enero to be a former Mafia member who had deserted the underworld to work for the White Hand.

Although started in the name of the Italian people of Chicago, the White Hand Society was not strongly supported by the Italian community. In fact, the White Hand Society (1908, p. 24) complained that the wealthy Italian colony in Chicago poorly supported the movement, which was intended to defend it against an alarming form of crime. Part of the apathy of the Italian community was attributed to the fact that the White Hand took money from the Italian fraternal societies, which was mostly the money of poor working people, to defend the lives and wealth of the prominent men of the colony. For example, the 1,300-member *Unione Siciliana* contributed \$300 to the founding of the White Hand Society (White Hand Society, 1908, p. 23). In addition, it was argued that the organization by its existence and the very name White Hand recognized the existence of the Black Hand, casting suspicion and discredit on the Italian name (White Hand Society, 1908, p. 24).

A year after its founding, the White Hand announced that it had driven 10 of Chicago's most dangerous Black Hand criminals out of the city (Nelli, 1969, p. 375). Their success, however, was short lived. Through intimidation and bribery, Black Hand criminals were often able to suborn witnesses and corrupt government officials. Pardons also bore some degree of responsibility for the continuation of Black Hand activity and contributed to the audacity of Black Hand criminals ("The Police and Alien Ways," 1911). Those convicted of Black Hand crimes were often released after a few months at the insistence of "mysterious influences." For example, three of the five Black Hand extortionists sent to prison through the efforts of the White Hand were released on parole after serving only a portion of their sentences (Landesco, 1929/1968, p. 944). Unwilling to sacrifice large sums of money with little promise of success, the Italian business community soon dropped its financial support and the White Hand was disbanded.

After a promising start, the White Hand lapsed into inactivity for more than 2 years. The result was an increase in Black Hand activity ("To Revive 'White Hand' Against Blackmailers," 1910). The White Hand Society again became active in 1910, but the Black Hand immediately marked its president Dr. Joseph Damiani and former president Dr. C. Violini for death (Landesco, 1929/1968, p. 938). Little was heard about the organization after that. By

1912, the White Hand was so discouraged from the lax administration of justice in Chicago that it became ineffectual and soon dissolved.

THE ITALIAN SQUAD

The White Hand Society had advocated the establishment of a squad of Italian American police officers to counter the Black Hand menace. Two Italian American police officers were assigned to Black Hand activity in Chicago as early as 1908. Detectives Gabriel Longobardi and Julius Bernacchi arrested Vincenzo Capra for attempting to extort \$1,000 from grocer Benedetto Cairo in August of that year ("Ambush Black Hand," 1908). Detective Longobardi had been a member of the department since 1906 (Chicago Police Department, n.d.). He was originally assigned to the Maxwell Street district, where his acquaintance with the residents of the city's West Side allowed him to successfully conclude a number of important investigations and win promotion to detective ("Detective Longobardi, Terror of Italian Criminals, Attacked at Home," 1909). Detective Longobardi was eventually reassigned to Assistant Police Chief Herman Schuettler's office, where he worked as an "Italian crimes specialist."

In May of 1909, Longobardi, who was referred to as the "terror of Italian criminals," was attacked by two alleged members of the Black Hand at 116 Bunker Street in Chicago ("Detective Longobardi, Terror of Italian Criminals, Attacked at Home," 1909). Assaulted with a stiletto and a bludgeon, Longobardi was left for dead in the doorway of his home. Longobardi and his partner Julius Bernacchi had been active in investigating a recent outbreak of Black Hand activities directed at wealthy Chicago Italians. The *Chicago Record Herald* ("In Black Hand Peril," 1909) reported that Longobardi had been under sentence of death by the Black Hand because of his arrest of Giuseppe Burtucci for the murder of John Umbrello.

On March 4, 1910, Black Hand criminals near Chicago and Townsend Streets shot two Chicago Police detectives ("Black Hand Battle Fells 2 Sleuths," 1910). This incident was apparently the catalyst that caused the Chicago Police Department to move forward with the establishment of what was described as a "foreign detectives bureau." To recruit Italian detectives, police civil service regulations requiring new recruits to be 5' 8" tall had to be changed as well as the rule requiring the exam to be in English. The plan was eventually approved by the Chicago City Council, which called for the establishment of a bureau of 25 Italian American police officers who would be responsible for obtaining information on the activities of the Black Hand ("Blow at Black Hand," 1910).

The police exam for the Italian Squad was given in secret to protect the identity of the candidates ("Shadows After Black Hand," 1911). Forty-seven

men took the test. Eight were to be chosen from the successful candidates. The candidates were tested on their ability to translate Italian into English and their fluency in three Italian dialects: Sicilian, Neopolitan, and Calabrian. These were the dialects used extensively by Black Hand criminals. Fluency in Italian was not enough because of the criminal jargon used by Black Hand members ("Drastic Measures for the Black Hand," 1908). This jargon included Greek and Arabic words that were only familiar to Southern Italian dialects ("The Black Hand," 1908, p. 291).

Much to the surprise of the Chicago Police, the list of candidates who had successfully passed the civil service examination, and were eligible to be hired for assignment to the new Italian Squad, reportedly contained members of the Black Hand ("Jury Terrorized by 'Black Hand;' Dragnet Closing," 1911). As a result, the city of Chicago appealed to Romano Lodi, the new Italian Consul in Chicago, for assistance in weeding out the supposed spies from the eligibility list. There were also charges of fraud in the examination process. It was alleged that some candidates were primed before taking the exam, resulting in a call for a new exam by the Chicago Civil Service Commission.

Detectives Longobardi, Bernacchi, and other members of the newly formed Italian Squad raided a grocery store in 1911 at 908 Sholto Street, where they found explosives and a list of 150 persons who had been contributing to a Black Hand defense fund ("Find Black Hand 'Clearing House'," 1911). The records of the Chicago Police Department identify the new members of the squad as officers Paul Riccio and Michael Devito (Chicago Police Department, n.d.). The activities of the Italian Squad continued as late as 1915, when Detectives Longobardi, Bernacchi, Devito, and Riccio joined by two additional officers, Phillip Parodi and George DeMar, arrested brothers Paul and Pietro Mennite for the Black Hand extortion of \$300 from an Italian shoemaker named Anthony Petrone ("Held in 'Black Hand' Case; Big Step for U.S.," 1915). What made this incident significant was the fact that the Mennite brothers were brought into federal court as part of a Justice Department initiative to combat Black Hand extortion.

THE END OF THE BLACK HAND

Black Hand crimes began to disappear after 1915. By 1920, Black Hand activities had virtually vanished. There are a number of reasons for the disappearance of the Black Hand in Chicago. One of the most important was the intervention of the federal government. Black Hand activity came under federal jurisdiction because Black Hand extortion letters were usually sent in the U.S. mail. The participation of the federal government prevented

local politicians and corrupt police officials from interfering in Black Hand prosecutions.

At first, Black Hand extortionists were not intimidated by the intervention of the national government. In fact, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who tried the first federal Black Hand case, was sent a letter threatening him with death if he did not discharge Black Hand extortionist Gianni Alongi ("Threat of Death Sent to Landis by 'Black Hand'," 1911). The members of the Alongi jury were also subject to Black Hand threats ("Jury Terrorized by 'Black Hand;' Dragnet Closing," 1911). As a result, the Alongi jury was not able to reach a verdict. The jury stood 11 to 1 for conviction. The one man who held out against a guilty verdict was reportedly in a state of fear that prevented him from properly weighing the evidence.

The actions of the Black Hand in the Alongi case were viewed as jury tampering. As a result, the case was retried one week later after Italian federal agents were imported from New York to gather additional evidence in the case ("Black Hand Threats Fail to Stop Trial," 1911). On April 8, 1911, 21-year-old Black Hand extortionist Gianni Alongi was convicted by a newly impaneled jury in Judge Landis' court ("Alongi Found Guilty in 'Black Hand' Case," 1911). He was sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment in the federal penitentiary at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for his crimes ("Black Hand Convict is Taken to Prison," 1911).

Another factor that contributed to the end of the Black Hand was the upward mobility and assimilation of the Sicilian community. Once they left Little Sicily, Sicilian immigrants were no longer affected by the isolation of the community and the continued surveillance of the Black Hand gangs that operated there constantly seeking potential victims. As quoted in the *Italians in Chicago Oral History Project* (1980), the Black Hand "Had no power over them because they were away from the area."

Prohibition also had an effect on Black Hand activity. Many Black Hand terrorists turned to bootlegging (*Italians in Chicago Oral History Project*, 1980). The outlawing of alcoholic beverages created a lucrative illegal market that was far less risky than bomb throwing and murder. Men were needed to distribute illegal alcohol, and the existing criminal element provided a fertile recruiting ground for the new Prohibition gangs. Prohibition provided an opportunity for local Italian criminals to leave the comfort of their communities and participate in crime on a much larger scale.

CONCLUSION

Although Black Hand activity only existed for a period of 20 years, it had a major impact on Chicago history. The words Black Hand became a generic

name for the Italian immigrant. To be an Italian was to be a suspected member of this criminal group. In fact, Chicago attorney Bernard Barasa stated that he was having difficulty defending Italians in court because of the prejudice caused by Black Hand activities (“‘Black Hand’ is a Hoax,” 1908). So many Black Hand crimes were incorrectly attributed to Chicago’s Italians that Judge Kenesaw Landis publicly stated that crediting all blackmailing crimes to the Italian race was an insult and an injustice (“In Italians Defense,” 1911). It was the experience of his court that many Black Hand criminals belonged to other ethnic groups.

The activities of the Black Hand also ended any doubts in the minds of Chicagoans about the existence of the Mafia. The advent of Prohibition and the domination of the bootlegging racket by the Capone syndicate forever tied the Black Hand to organized crime and the alien conspiracy theory. As this review has shown, however, social conditions in Chicago bore more responsibility for Black Hand extortion than any foreign criminal group. Political corruption allowed Black Hand criminals to operate with some degree of immunity, and both the press and government alike failed to properly define the Black Hand as a product of America’s disadvantaged urban areas.

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