

Gotham Unbound: How New York City Was Liberated From the Grip of Organized Crime

James B. Jacobs, with Coleen Friel and Robert Radick. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

reviewed by Louis J. Kern

While James B. Jacobs does not maintain that the Mafia was the only organized crime group in twentieth-century America, it is his central contention that the Italian-American controlled organized crime families that since the 1930s have dominated illicit businesses—loan-sharking, protection rackets, drugs, prostitution and pornography—also have played a significant and largely unique role in infiltrating and corrupting legitimate businesses and labor unions in larger urban centers like the New York metropolitan area. The Cosa Nostra, he believes, due to its aggressive and often violent racketeering, achieved, in the period between 1920 and 1990 a preeminent criminal economic power that carried with it exceptional social status and significant political influence.

enforcement initiatives were sporadic at best. Undercover operations, while successful in identifying companies owned and operated by organized-crime families, secured no jail sentences for offenders, and saw only minimal fines imposed.

The New York State Organized Crime Task Force (OCTF) investigation of the Long Island trash cartel and the subsequent antitrust suit (1982-88) in which twenty-one members of the Lucchese crime family were indicted in 1987-88 is a case in point. Though convicted, the defendants received light sentences (monetary fines ranging from \$6-\$10,000). Ultimately, Robert Kubekca and his partner, Donald Barstow, independent carters who had assisted the OCTF investigation, were murdered (August 1989). Salvatore Avellino, head of the Lucchese family's waste-hauling cartel on Long Island was eventually convicted of conspiracy to murder the independent haulers (1994).

Jacobs argues convincingly that such examples evince the demonstrable failure of traditional law-enforcement techniques and established legal remedies to effectively address the deeply entrenched, systematic and rationalized operations of organized crime syndicates. Enforcement procedures, he finds, were also undermined by political and administrative inertia or lack of will. Since 1980, however, a closely coordinated effort to eliminate Italian-America organized crime families throughout the nation has resulted in an industry-by-industry liberation from Mafia control in New York City. The national campaign by the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice, in cooperation with state and local law enforcement authorities, provided the basis for this "liberation" of the city.

Up to this point, Jacobs' interpretation is generally straightforward and balanced. But when he details the systematic changes that provided the specific tools that empowered law enforcement and led to the break-up of the Mafia's stranglehold on the six industries under consideration here, his interpretation takes on a tone of political advocacy that undermines its earlier balance. Jacobs makes clear that a series of legislative initiatives and events on the national level set the stage for a more effective anti-mob campaign in the 1980s and 1990s. First, the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act (1968) provided for the legalization of wiretapping and electronic bugs as aids in gathering evidence of criminal activity. Then, in 1970, Congress passed the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), that outlawed enterprises characterized by "a pattern of racketeering activity" (131). Also in 1970, Congress established the Witness Security Program (Witness Protection). Finally, J. Edgar Hoover, who had been mysteriously and notoriously passive in pursuing mobsters since the 1950s, died in 1972.

Despite the fact that Jacobs and both of his collaborators are lawyers, little credit for these developments or for the evolution of their application is given to law enforcement personnel, the legal profession, or a renewed politic

of Names” and a “List of Indictments and Judicial Decisions” -- which will prove useful to those pursuing further research in this area. The book offers a solid, reliable account of the history of criminal activity in six industrial areas that many students will find a serviceable starting point for further study of this subject. Unfortunately, the bibliography is incomplete and lists only popular secondary source material and newspaper articles, requiring the student to exploit the notes in order to generate more specific, primary source material. In terms of style, the writing is too often uninspired and the organization of the material (proceeding from one industry to another), while logical, makes the text seem at times somewhat repetitive in its presentation.

Finally, the emphasis on Giuliani’s role in combatting organized crime, while fair from a narrowly prosecutorial perspective, unfortunately obscures the larger issues and initiatives undertaken by scores of others (lesser known) that effectuated the RICO assault on the mob in New York City. The volume makes a useful contribution to the history of organize