

# ***Farbrekbers* in America: The Americanization of Jewish Blue-Collar Crime, 1900-1931**

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**Abstract:** The mass immigration of Eastern European Jews between 1880 and 1924—some two and a half million came to the United States—caused a thorough change in the nature of New York Jewry. Following wealthier German uptown Jews, it was now marked by poor Polish or Russian Jews living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The Jewish quarters functioned as the hinges between Eastern Europe and the US for many immigrants. Crime was a shade of it. Jews only constituted a small minority of American society; their Americanized criminal structures, however, became one of the most influential factors of modernization of crime from the fringes to the center of American society. Through the development of the Jewish underworld, the exclusion of and the cooperation with criminals of a different ethnic background, as well as the professionalization and the struggle for respectability, the phenomenon of Jewish blue-collar crime itself experienced an Americanization. Additionally, this process of Americanization was key not only to the rise but also to the downfall of Jewish American blue-collar crime in New York.

In the public perception, the 1920s and '30s in the US are strongly linked to the era of Prohibition (1919-1933). Literature, Hollywood movies,<sup>1</sup> and reminiscences of criminals and noncriminals alike evoke a time of gang fights, speakeasies, bootlegging, and the helplessness of the law enforcement against ever rising gangsters such as Al Capone in Chicago. This perception is usually linked to Italian or Irish mobsters, rarely to Jews or other minorities. In the America of the 1930s, however, Jewish participation in organized crime was a reality and Jewish *Farbrekbers*, Yiddish for criminals, along with their Italian counterparts had a very

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<sup>1</sup> Such as *Some Like it Hot* (dir. Billy Wilder), *The Untouchables* (dir. Brian De Palma), *Road to Perdition* (dir. Sam Mendes), or *Once Upon a Time in America* (dir. Sergio Leone).

strong impact on the development of the modern American underworld. Of all minority groups in the US, the phenomenon of organized Jewish crime<sup>2</sup> appears to be an oddity: Other than Italians or the Irish, Jews were always a small minority and seemingly did not have the resources to generate enough *Farbrekbers* that would eventually develop into some of the leading crime figures of American history. Americanization—or, in other words, the organization, the structure, and the professionalization according to the American underworld—was the crucial aspect of the success of Jewish organized crime in American society. The belief in capitalism, self-reliance, and even in democratic features in the form of corporate-style majority rule took Jewish criminal structures from the fringes to the center of the American underworld. Since the modest beginnings in the form of small Jewish gangs in the early 1900s, akin to their European counterparts and operating in the Jewish neighborhoods, Jewish blue-collar crime developed into a component of the genuinely American multiethnic Syndicate<sup>3</sup> within some thirty years. Americanization, as it will be discussed in this article, was a dual process affecting not only Jewish criminals but also Jewish organized crime itself by evolving the very concept of it. Whereas this process was the foundation of the success of Jewish organized blue-collar crime, it was also key to its eventual downfall.

Americanization, in this article, does neither refer to the concept of the immigrants' submittal to assimilation to a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) America<sup>4</sup> nor to organized efforts of the nativist movement of World War I (Cordasco 23-28). Americanization is to be understood as the immigrants' individual approach to an American lifestyle and its values and as the integration into the American society through acculturation.<sup>5</sup> As such, Americanization—the acculturation of Jewish immigrants to the United States, especially in New York with its large Jewish population—was never a one-way road.

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2 To prevent confusion with the ethnically determined (Italian) mafia, 'Jewish mafia' and the almost comical 'Kosher Nostra' as terms for the phenomenon of organized Jewish crime were avoided in this essay. The latter is a contemporary term and derived from a connection of the *kasbrut*, God's laws, with the Italian 'Cosa Nostra'—where there in fact is none. The preferred term is 'Jewish crime'; for individuals, it is 'gangsters' or the more professionalized 'mobsters.'

3 The old-world mafia with its medieval understanding of territory, power, and honor, as well as its small gangs is hardly comparable to the modern version, the businesslike, cooperative, and nationwide National Crime Syndicate. Therefore, the Italian and Jewish organization after 1931 is best referred to as the 'Syndicate.'

4 Isaac Berkson, for instance, equated Americanization with Milton Gordon's concept of 'Anglo-Conformity' (Herrmann 339).

5 As Hans-Jürgen Grabbe writes, 'acculturation' denotes the integration of the immigrants into the host society. In contrast to 'assimilation,' however, acculturation entails not only the adaption to the new home but a gradual alteration of the host society itself through the presence of the immigrating ethnic group (17).

Criminals, on the other hand, were outside the norms and values of society and were consequentially not forced to adapt socially to the US as immigrants. Their pressure to Americanize was, however, deeply rooted in their economic activities and their own Americanization thus entailed the integration into the existing American criminal structures, and rules of conduct and business. Nevertheless, the concept of acculturation as a process of interaction between minority and majority also holds true for criminals in the US: Jewish gangs adapted to the conditions of crime in order to do their business, but eventually changed organized crime in the US itself through the joint-foundation of the multiethnic Syndicate with the Italians in 1931. The product of the Americanization of Jewish and other ethnicities' crime was by no means a criminal manifestation of an amalgamation according to Israel Zangwill's idea of the United States as a melting pot.<sup>6</sup> The Jewish components retained their collective identity<sup>7</sup> as being Jewish (as will be argued later); therefore, the Syndicate was a culturally pluralistic outcome of Americanization according to the concepts of John Dewey and Horace Kallen.<sup>8</sup>

## **JEWISH BLUE-COLLAR CRIME ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE**

Isaac Max Rubinow, a Jewish émigré from Russia, had put Jewish immigrants in contrast to other groups when he presented New York Jewry to a European audience in 1903:

One cannot accuse the Jew that he has come here to amass wealth or not to spend his earnings here and to return to Europe as soon as he gets a chance, as is the case with the Italians, - or that American culture does not influence him, or that, as in the case of the Poles and Turks, the prisons and the hospitals are filled with them. There are very few Jewish prisoners. The Jews have hospitals of their own. On the contrary, the Jews fill the elementary schools and high schools. The Italians imported the Mafia and the vendettas, the Jews brought hungry mouths and a

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6 For Israel Zangwill's theatrical play *The Melting Pot* and the discussions its assimilationist leitmotif caused, cf. Whitfield 72-73.

7 The concept of Jewish collective identity, as used in this essay, does not differentiate between religious or nonreligious Jews or groups of Jews with different religious backgrounds, such as Orthodox or Reform Judaism. It is applied to the overall identity of being Jewish. Collective identity therefore refers to Jan Assmann's definition. He defines collective identity as the self-perception which is constructed by a group and that members can choose to identify with. Consequentially, collective identity always depends on being internalized by the members of the group who act and think accordingly (132).

8 For cultural pluralism, cf. Herrmann 334-43. This concept is probably known best as the American 'salad-bowl' society.

desire to work. I am not here to defend the Jewish immigrants. I am only posing these contrasts because they are being felt by American society. (108)

Jews in crime, if their existence was acknowledged at all during the first years of the 1900s, were commonly associated with nonviolent offences, especially fraud and arson, but never with violent ones like racketeering or murder-for-hire. The reports of the National Immigration Commission (NIC) in 1911, for instance, connected crime involving personal violence mostly to Italians, but nonviolent crimes such as larceny and fencing to Russians (Hayford 19-20), meaning Jews.<sup>9</sup> Yet New York Police Commissioner Theodore Bingham's report in 1908 held the city's Jews responsible for half the crimes when in fact the rate was closer to twenty-five percent, which corresponded to the percentage of Jews among New York's population (Goren 134-58).<sup>10</sup> Still, these conclusions did not cause larger concerns among Jewish New Yorkers beyond accusation of the authors' suspected anti-Semitism. On May 14, 1911, the *Jewish Daily News* wrote:

It is almost impossible to comprehend the indifference with which the large New York Jewish population hears and reads, day after day, about the thefts and murders that are perpetrated every day by Jewish 'gangs' [...] when we hear of the murders, holdups and burglaries committed in the Jewish section and by Jewish criminals, we must, with heartache justify Mr. Bingham. (qtd. in Pitkin and Cordasco 149)

It was not until the Rosenthal affair that the contemporary public grasped the dimensions of Jewish crime in New York. In 1912, the Jewish bookmaker Herman Rosenthal was killed after having announced to reveal the illegal involvement of high-ranking police officers in New York's illegal gambling scene. District Attorney Whitman, who interrogated the degree of this involvement as well as Rosenthal's murder, soon declared the "police had let Herman Rosenthal be murdered and suffered the murderers to escape" ("Murder"). This led to an investigation against the New York police department's antigambling unit headed by Charles Becker. Most of the gangsters, accomplices, or witnesses involved in the case were Jewish Lower East

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9 Early immigration statistics only noted the country of departure and, later, the country of origin, but not the particular nationality or religious identity. As the majority of Russian immigrants were in fact Jews, it is justified to assume the NIC was referring to Jews of an Eastern European origin.

10 Earlier reports had already revealed the existence of a larger Jewish underworld in New York, such as the one by Reverend Parkhurst, the president of the Society for the Prevention of Crime (1890), and the one by the New York State Senate's Lexow Committee (1894-1895). Both reports exposed the existence of Jewish criminal structures during their task of unmasking political corruption of New York's Democratic Tammany Hall, but were largely ignored (Goren 134; Fried 44-49).

Siders, including the gang boss William ‘Big Jack Zelig’ Alberts as well as the murderers ‘Lefty/Left Louie’ Rosenberg and Harry ‘Gyp/Gip the Blood’ Horowitz (“Names”). The interrogation exposed the interdependence of crime and politics and led to the arrest, trial, and electrocution of Charles Becker, Lefty Louie, and Gyp the Blood (“Becker”).<sup>11</sup>

New York’s *kebillab*<sup>12</sup> saw the necessity to react during the Rosenthal affair in August 1912 (Goren 148-58). It ordered an investigator—Abe Shoenfeld, a former resident of the Lower East Side and fluent speaker of Yiddish—to examine the underworld of the Jewish immigrants’ district. His observation produced some 1,900 biographical vignettes of residents who were involved in crime, from petty criminals up to dominating figures (Fried 6). Therefore, it drew a first thorough image of a criminal Jewish subculture in America’s main metropolis beyond assumptions and generalizations: The existence of Jewish gamblers, prostitutes, and arsonists who defrauded insurances, but also robbers, killers, blackmailers, and gangsters became known to the public (6).

### **CRIME AND IMMIGRATION: THE FIRST STAGE OF AMERICANIZATION**

Individual Americanization of most Jews in New York, including criminals, usually involved a temporary residence in the mostly Jewish surroundings of the Lower East Side<sup>13</sup> or Brooklyn in order to get accustomed to their new American home while retaining the security of the known.<sup>14</sup> Within this environment, the Jewish gangs developed at the turn of the twentieth century. As ethnically confined criminal entities, they were competing with gangs of other ethnic backgrounds that operated within the Jewish neighborhood. By eventually deciding this competition for themselves and developing into the dominant facet of organized crime on the Lower East Side, the

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11 Jack Zelig, who was a suspect as well as one of the key witnesses, was killed before being able to testify (“Sensational Turn”).

12 The short-lived *kebillab*, New York’s unified Jewish official community, was formed in 1908 and dissolved in 1922. It was the only attempt to form an all-embracing official entity for Jews in the US after the European model (Goren 3-11).

13 The Lower East Side in Manhattan had developed into the main place of settlement for Jews in New York in the late 1800s, early 1900s. Since New York was the main port of entrance to the US and housed the largest settlement of Jews in the US, the Lower East Side is in the center of popular Jewish American remembrance (cf. also Diner).

14 In 1920, sociologist John Daniels pointed out the importance of neighborhoods with shared traditions and a common culture for the ‘group’ of immigrants in the process of Americanization in order to prevent demoralization of the immigrants by overstrain. Through participation in the immediate surroundings of the neighborhood, the immigrant eventually further participates in American society and thus Americanizes (qtd. in Herrmann 303-08).

early Jewish gangs laid the basis for the institutional Americanization of Jewish blue-collar crime in New York.

Historians who investigate the subject see vice and crime of Jewish New Yorkers as the outcome of the city's living conditions. During the immigration wave between 1880 and 1924, some two and a half million Jews had come to the US, mostly from Eastern Europe ("Immigration"). One of their largest places of settlement, the Lower East Side, offered them an all-embracing Jewish life through Yiddish culture and Jewish religious structures, such as the existence of numerous synagogues or the supply with kosher food. Through the sheer number of Jewish immigrants, the Lower East Side had developed into an American shtetl that resembled the Eastern European ones. Thus, Jewish culture flourished and Jewish customs were normative for this part of New York. The other side of the coin was the development of a slum: In its heyday at the turn of the century, the Jewish quarter had reached a density of about seven hundred people per acre, which dwarfs present-day Mumbai's 120 by far (Howe 69; "Largest Cities"). Mass density, poverty, sweatshops, and outward pressure of the non-Jewish society in the form of anti-Semitism led to poor living conditions coupled with dwelling in overcrowded and filthy tenement buildings. These conditions may have caused personal hardships and the eventual emergence of crime as a social phenomenon. Yet Jewish crime did not have its origin in New York; it had existed before in European cities like Odessa or Warsaw and also in Germany (Goren 156).<sup>15</sup>

In the beginning of the twentieth century, prostitution, for instance, was one of the most prominent manifestations of crime on the Lower East Side besides gambling. In 1909, *McClure's Magazine* writer George Kibbe Turner estimated that about two thirds of New York's prostitutes were Jewish.<sup>16</sup> Allen Street on the Lower East Side had become the heart of New York's red-light district (Bristow 146). Apparently, Jewish immigration itself stood at the core of early Jewish vice and crime: Shiploads of single young men, or husbands who planned to earn their families' fares in the USA, provided a constant stream of customers; recently immigrated young women provided the merchandise. They were either tricked into the profession through pimps who vowed marriage and a respectable life or through false criminal employment agencies, or the prostitutes willingly chose it as means to escape the realities of the slum (Bristow 150-59).<sup>17</sup>

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15 For Jewish blue-collar crime in Germany, cf. Glanz.

16 A survey in 1912 found a percentage of approximately forty (Joselit 45-49).

17 Reporter Lincoln Steffens presented the anxiety of a Lower East Side mother who said: "My oldest girl says she will go into that business when she grows up; she says it's a good business, easy, and you can dress and eat and live" (qtd. in Bristow 159).

Overall, most of the Jewish New Yorkers who were involved in crime were immigrants of the first or second generation. For the nonsexual facets of crime, the constant supply of children proved to be a significant source of recruits. At the turn of the century, more than forty percent of Jewish immigrants were under eighteen (Doroshkin 66). Some of them formed juvenile gangs that were also working as subcontractors for adults and thus grew into the professionalizing crime organizations. Juvenile crime was advanced by the fact that the European parents could hardly offer their American-born children moral guidance or social education in a world so thoroughly different from Eastern Europe. Edward J. Bristow writes that “the lure of the local street gang was almost irresistible for boys in all the immigrant groups” (153). Not always did the membership imply a future career in crime, but it did so for some of the more successful juvenile gangsters. The Jewish boyhood gang of Meyer Lansky, future cofounder of the Syndicate in 1931, for instance, was composed of future leading Jewish mobsters such as Benjamin ‘Bugsy’ Siegel, ‘Dutch Schultz’ Flegenheimer, and Abner ‘Longy’ Zwillman (Eisenberg, Dan, and Landau 57). Other future prominent figures like Louis ‘Lepke’ Buchalter directly joined powerful Jewish adult gangs such as Benjamin ‘Dopey Benny’ Fein’s (Sifakis 160).

The first big Jewish gang leader of the Lower East Side was Edward ‘Monk Eastman’ Osterman, a brutish fighter at the turn of the twentieth century. Then, one of the main aims of the Lower East Side gangs was settling the question of power in the quarter. Gangs of different ethnic backgrounds fought for influence in the Lower East Side, predominantly the Jewish with Irish and Italian gangs (Pitkin and Cordasco 34). It was Eastman’s successor Max ‘Kid Twist’ Zweibach who made sure “no ‘wop’ [Italian] and no ‘mick’ [Irish] would rule over the Lower East Side” (Fried 30). He thus closed the Jewish quarter for criminals of other ethnicities, especially Irish pimps. His own successors, Jack Zelig and Dopey Benny, developed Jewish crime towards a professionalization by the means of discipline and new sources of income, such as labor racketeering or extortion. New York’s Jewish blue-collar crime during the first fifteen years of the twentieth century was, however, still confined to the almost monoethnic Jewish Lower East Side and had not yet entered the larger American stage. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of Jewish crime had taken the first step of Americanization through establishing itself as a self-confident facet in the prism of American crime. Moreover, Jewish gangsters had acquired the necessary skills for a criminal career through either an ‘apprenticeship’ in one of the older gangs or—most important for organized Jewish crime itself—through the implementation of discipline and economic creativity. For the American underworld, they thus had “[learned] the survival techniques of the marketplace” which Cordasco states to be the essential aspect for the early stage of Americanization (54-55). Prior to Monk Eastman, Kid



Twist, Jack Zelig, or Dopey Benny, Jews on the Lower East Side predominantly had been objects of American blue-collar crime, be it as prostitutes for Irish pimps or victims of professional gamblers or thieves; now, they had established themselves as subjects.

## **THE FULL AMERICANIZATION OF JEWISH CRIME**

The full Americanization of Jewish crime in the US after the early gangs was an outcome of Prohibition. Through its opportunities and new requirements for criminals, Prohibition demanded a further professionalization of crime towards modern sources of income and the dismissal of restricting concepts, such as the ethnicity of potential partners or foes. A new generation of Jewish and Italian American criminals consequently created and joined an umbrella organization, which was subject to fixed regulations that eventually ruled out independent activities of former ethnically bound criminal structures.

With the introduction of Prohibition in 1919, Congress instantly created a provision of work, a mass-market, and a high demand for America's underworld. Through the prohibition of alcohol, an entire branch of the economy was turned over to criminals. Never before had moneymaking been easier for them: A demand for the product did not have to be created artificially (as with harder drugs), nor was the supply morally questionable to such an extent as prostitution was. Additionally, alcohol as a socially accepted drug reached more people than gambling. A large market could be satisfied by purchasing a product abroad where it was legal—for instance in Canada or Europe—and importing it to the US,<sup>18</sup> creating very large revenue. Bootlegging in Detroit, for instance, brought in revenue that was only surpassed by the city's automobile industry (Nolan).

The early exemption of wine for sacramental and ritual use from the Prohibition regulations was especially beneficial for Catholics and Jews. Unlike the public use of wine during the Catholic Mass, the ritual use in Judaism is an integral part of the domestic shabbat and holiday rituals. Jonathan Sarna writes that the demand for wine to be used in private “opened the door to widespread abuse [by] impoverished rabbis, unscrupulous imposters, and mobsters [...] Prohibition created, in the words of one cynical inspector, ‘a remarkable increase in the thirst for religion’” (218). Jewish criminals produced and distributed this semilegal wine to Jewish communities that

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18 The Jewish Purple Gang, which dominated Detroit's underworld almost entirely, used the Detroit River as a highway for Canadian liquor during Prohibition (Kavieff, “Detroit's”).



were hastily formed and had not existed before 1919. Although criminals continued to receive income from other forms of crime, Prohibition was a crucial factor for the further Americanization of Jewish crime, as it eventually demanded to escape the confinements of the Jewish quarters and to operate on the larger non-Jewish American market.

Prohibition did, in fact, change the face of American crime itself. With a market as big as the one for alcohol in the 1920s, enough money was to be earned for anybody willing to get involved. Prohibition, however, demanded a change in the code of conduct for the illegal business. In this sense, the absence of open distribution conflicts was pivotal, as customers—who lived with their own illusion of the harmlessness and pettiness of bootlegging—would otherwise have been alienated. As a by-product of Prohibition, the moral criticism of organized crime in American society decreased since it now served the average citizen. In addition, new fields covered during and after the end of Prohibition in 1933, like legal gambling in Las Vegas, even increased the request for a facade of respectability in order to maximize profits.

One of the first to realize the new facts of business was Arnold Rothstein. He was the son of a Jewish middle-class manufacturer in New York and became the prototype for the new organized crime. He was sophisticated, mundane, and took blue-collar crime from the streets to the business offices (Eisenberg, Dan, and Landau 103). His protégés, future leading Jewish mobsters like Meyer Lansky, Bugsy Siegel, Lepke Buchalter, or Dutch Schultz, but also Italians like Charles ‘Lucky’ Luciano/Lucania, internalized his example. Rothstein did not only see the necessity of maintaining the appearance of respectability but also of professionalizing crime and overcoming ethnic boundaries (Pietrusza 193-208). Moving beyond the Jewish quarters both locally and mentally—as practiced by Rothstein—took Jewish blue-collar crime to its full Americanization.

Rothstein’s new American philosophy of crime coincided with the old-world style Castellammarese War of the Italian gangs in the late 1920s: Newly arriving mafiosi, predominantly from Castellammare, Sicily, started an open gang war on already established mafia bosses in the United States. The newcomers eventually unified New York’s Italian criminal milieu under one roof and one *capo di tutti capi* ‘boss of all bosses,’ Salvatore Maranzano. This new structure was still confined to Italians, and its bosses looked down upon gangs of different ethnic backgrounds, Jews especially (Eisenberg, Dan, and Landau 121). Due to Rothstein’s philosophy of crime, which made it necessary to end “the wasteful wars between jealous Sicilians and Italians” (Lansky qtd. in Eisenberg, Dan, and Landau 142), young Italian American mobsters around Lucky Luciano removed the organization’s new boss and anyone who put old-

world gang quarrels above moneymaking. The Jewish assassins ‘Red’ Levine and Bugsy Siegel were, on the orders of Meyer Lansky, prominent figures in the events of 1931 involving the Italian cleansing (Sifakis 244-49). On the side of Jewish organized crime, Americanization demanded a similar disposal of rivals and opponents to larger cooperation, especially with gangs of a different ethnic background. They were removed in a ‘war of the Jews’ by Meyer Lansky with the assistance of Italian mobsters (Sifakis 377-78; Eisenberg, Dan, and Landau 89). Individuals and gangs from all over the country<sup>19</sup> who were too powerful to be coerced or fought were invited to join the new organization, as it was the case with Detroit’s Jewish Purple Gang.

To administer the business in all its needs, the new Syndicate took shape in 1931 under the auspices of Lucky Luciano for the Italians and Meyer Lansky for the Jews. Rather than fighting over total control of the underworld, participating gangs came together in a council. Sinecures were handed out from a court of leading mobsters as a manifestation of ‘business only’ in the befriended Jewish and Italian underworld. Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky, for instance, obtained the gambling monopoly outside of New York (Cuba, the Bahamas, and Las Vegas were the most notable), and Lepke Buchalter and his partner Jacob ‘Gurrah’ Shapiro controlled the garment industry of the city. The cartel, or in other words the ‘board of directors,’ served as the great council of organized crime, the Jews having important voices with Meyer Lansky being the most influential (Fried 114-19).

Another aspect of the new corporate character of organized crime was the creation of an armed unit designated to enforce the Syndicate’s ‘laws.’ Instead of letting the tensions between rivaling mobsters or families be solved individually, New York’s big criminals recruited a gang based in Brownsville, Brooklyn that had developed out of Jewish and Italian gangs. Later, the media aptly termed it “Murder, Incorporated”<sup>20</sup> (Turkus and Feder). Turkus, Assistant District Attorney investigating Murder, Inc. in the 1940s, summarized their role:

These killers were not for hire. Their services were limited exclusively to the Syndicate, for use when business required. It was not at so much per throat-cutting or ice-picking or bag job, but rather murder on a year-round flat fee from those gangs in the organization which used the service. It was murder by contract; murder by retainer. (7)

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19 They were predominantly Italians, Jews, and only few criminals of other ethnicities (Sifakis 226-27).

20 In the beginning of the historical evaluation of this modern form of crime, ‘Syndicate’ and ‘Murder, Inc.’ were used synonymously, as Turkus does. However, the Brooklyn gang was not on a par with the Syndicate; they were contractors and followed the organization’s orders. Later works, such as Cohen’s, applied ‘Murder, Inc.’ exclusively to the executive arm of the Syndicate in order to avoid confusion.

That way, unauthorized murder was prevented, as were possible outbreaks of gang wars, since the assassin rarely knew the victim and the assignment depended on an unanimous decision of the Syndicate. The reasons for the Syndicate to vote on the assassination of one of its members were most often rooted in the disrupting of its revenues, the misappropriating of its money, or exposing the Syndicate to national attention through excessive violence or the disclosure of secrets.<sup>21</sup> Murder, Inc. was jointly administrated by Jewish and Italian representatives of the Syndicate: Lepke Buchalter, Albert Anastasia, and Giuseppe Antonio 'Joe Adonis' Doto (Turkus and Feder; Cohen). Moreover, Murder, Inc. itself was composed of Jewish assassins such as Phil 'Pittsburgh Phil' Strauss, Abe 'Kid Twist' Reles, Albert 'Tick Tock' Tannenbaum, as well as Italians like Harry 'Happy' Maione.<sup>22</sup>

With its sinecures, trials, death sentences, and settlement of quarrels, the Syndicate created an institution with American democratic features. As Turkus and Feder write, it was a 'democratic government of crime' that maximized its profits by its actions (101). Eventually, the idea behind the new Syndicate was close to the dictatorial Sicilian approach: to unify the underworld. Its form, which included multiethnic components and democratic structures akin to corporations, was, however, a criminal version of American cultural pluralism in a nutshell. Through the realization of Rothstein's concept, the Americanization of Jewish blue-collar crime entered the stage of completion by integrating into the larger criminal society, thus forming a new crime organization that was not Jewish or Italian anymore, but genuinely American. As the first two groups of Americans of different ancestry, Jews and Italians cooperated on a larger scale in the field of crime. They realized Meyer Lansky's and Lucky Luciano's goal of uniting the "yids [Jews] and dagos [Italians]" (qtd. in Sifakis 191), as Bugsy Siegel phrased it, although their goal of a nationwide Syndicate failed eventually.

## **THE JEWISH ELEMENT IN AMERICANIZED JEWISH CRIME**

Even though it might be expected that Jewish criminals had been subject to an Americanization process that took them further away from Judaism as their noncriminal brethren,<sup>23</sup> they retained their collective Jewish identity. Thus, Jewish

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21 Examples of prominent Jewish victims from within the inner circle of the Syndicate for these reasons are Dutch Schultz (1935), Bugsy Siegel (1947), and Longy Zwillman (1959).

22 Murder, Inc. was eventually dissolved by federal legal prosecution by 1941.

23 Indeed, Arnold Rothstein summarized the attitude of many Jews involved in crime when he allegedly replied to his father's request to be proud of his Judaism: "Who cares about this stuff? This is America, not Jerusalem. I'm an American. Let Harry [Arnold's brother] be a Jew" (qtd. in Pietrusza 18).

criminals thoroughly amalgamated their American and Jewish identities. Holding onto the Jewish religion, the Yiddish language, Jewish values (apart from adherence to the law of the land, of course), and the belief in a shared destiny of the Jewish people proves that the identification of the criminals with Judaism had not been reduced by Americanization or their illegal actions. It would be unjustified, for instance, to restrict the phenomenon of Jewish crime to secular Jews. Faith, community, and religion played an important role on the Lower East Side throughout the history of this Jewish quarter. The synagogues<sup>24</sup> were used by criminals and noncriminals alike. Since Bugsy Siegel was killed by the Syndicate, his *Yartzeit* plaque<sup>25</sup> at the Bialystoker Synagogue on the Lower East Side offered mourners to say kaddish—the traditional Jewish mourning prayer—for him (Mark). Tillie Taub, one of the prostitutes of the Lower East Side at the beginning of the twentieth century, said that “[i]t makes no difference whatever I do, on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, I go to shoole [sic]” (qtd. in Joselit 26). Stiff Rivka, a contemporary thief, knew her Jewish heritage and was devout in observing the Jewish rituals (Joselit 26).<sup>26</sup>

Jewish criminals were a visible aspect of the Lower East Side: They ate at restaurants, attended synagogues, and honored Jewish traditions like bar mitzvah or, in the case of prostitutes, the use of the *mikvot*, the ritual baths. In their understanding, they were Jewish Americans, casting aside the otherness of European Jews. Their languages were predominantly Yiddish and English which they combined in their jargon:

Calling the nervy owner of a sleazy saloon ‘Kishkes,’ a powerful underworld boss ‘Rabbi,’ and a tender-hearted prostitute ‘Chanele,’ prewar [WWI] Jewish criminals also gave birth to a host of slang criminal phrases of Yiddish origin. A pimp, for example, was known as a ‘simcha,’ a detective as a ‘shomis,’ and a loafer and ne’er-do-well as a ‘trombonik.’ (Joselit 26)

More than partaking in Jewish life, or individual religiousness (or lack thereof), criminals emphasized their Judaism when it was intertwined with the American principle of personal responsibility. When in the 1920s, and especially after 1933,

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24 As David Blaustein claimed at the National Conference of Jewish Charities in 1903, three hundred synagogues with about seventy thousand seats as well as three hundred heders, religious schools, with nine thousand students existed and were carried by the inhabitants of the Lower East Side (qtd. in Doroshkin 30).

25 The *Yartzeit*, also *Yabrzeit* or *Yabrtzeit*, offers an opportunity to remember the obit of a person through saying kaddish and lightening a candle that burns for at least twenty-four hours. Through its mere existence, the *Yartzeit* plaque at a synagogue is an invitation to commemorate one specific person which is deeply rooted in the Jewish religion (Jacobs 604).

26 Attending service at the synagogue, however, did not exclude finding customers for Jewish prostitutes or victims for pickpockets (Bristow 148)—no gathering does.

German Nazis sought the creation of a platform in the United States,<sup>27</sup> Jewish mobsters fought them actively. Their reasons were summarized by Murder, Inc.'s Abe Reles: "They are just the same as the Combination [Syndicate]. We are out to get America by the pocketbook. When we have to, we kill people to do it. Hitler and Mussolini, they're trying to do the same thing, only they are trying to get the whole world. And they will kill people by the millions to get it" (qtd. in Cohen 189). As the Nazis' activities in the United States grew along with Hitler's rise to power in Germany, Jewish gangsters contributed to the prevention of spreading anti-Semitism in American society in their own way. In Newark, NJ, Longy Zwillman raised a defense force that clubbed rallying German American Nazis in such a way that they, the Nazis, demanded police protection (Grover 10-79). Meyer Lansky recalled:

This [the spread of Nazism] worried Jewish leaders, including the most respected one of all, Rabbi Stephen Wise. He sent me a message asking me to do something about this dangerous trend. [...] And for the next two or three years my friends and I saw some good action against the Brown Shirts [Nazi sympathizers] around New York. I got my buddies like Bugsy Siegel—before he went to California—and some other young guys. [...] I was given the address where the Nazis were preparing a meeting, and [reporter] Walter Winchell telephoned me about it and encouraged me to take action. [...] The stage was decorated with a swastika and pictures of Hitler. The speakers started ranting. There were only about fifteen of us, but we went into action. We attacked them in the hall, and threw some of them out the windows. There were fist fights all over the place. [...] We wanted to teach them a lesson. We wanted to show them that Jews would not always sit back and accept insults. (qtd. in Eisenberg, Dan, and Landau 184-85; cf. also Rockaway 220-21)<sup>28</sup>

Meyer Lansky explained his active role in fighting for American Jewry with his Russian background<sup>29</sup> (Eisenberg, Dan, and Landau 46) and his experiences as a young immigrant in America:

"The first time I defended my honor as a Jew," [said] Lansky, "was when the Irish kids asked me to play basketball in a schoolyard game. In those days the Irishers would pull the beards of old Jews and open the flies of Jewish kids to check their origins. During the game one of them made an anti-Semitic remark. I slugged him, even though I was a shrimp. The

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27 The major platform of Nazis in the US was the German American Bund of the 1930s (Grover 174). For more on the subject of National Socialist activities in the United States, cf. Diamond.

28 For a fictional portrait of the rise of Nazism in America, cf. Philip Roth, *The Plot against America*.

29 He recollected a Russian soldier in Grodno, Lansky's hometown in Russia, having said to him to fight back even when risking death. At least then they, the Jews, "might die with honor" (Eisenberg, Dan, and Landau 46).

other Irishers liked that; they told me that from now on they'd call me Mike. I said no thanks, the name is Meyer." (qtd. in *Zion* 71-72)<sup>30</sup>

Resistance by force, as it seems, was one answer of some of the criminals to the virulent anti-Semitism of Nazism in New York. Using brutal force might have been a way for Jewish criminals to prove they were true Americans and unwilling to be victimized, but it was also a way to emphasize their Jewish identity through their own means.

### **NEW YORK JEWISH BLUE-COLLAR CRIME, THE VICTIM OF AMERICANIZATION**

Jewish organized blue-collar crime remained a phenomenon of the first half of the twentieth century, and its downfall after World War II had several contributors. Together with other groups of organized crime, Jewish criminals had to face a new quality of law enforcement. After the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover had denied the mere existence of a Syndicate and far-stretching criminal structures, the investigation of the 1940s and '50s produced evidence for such a reality.<sup>31</sup> New measures were taken and new strategies followed—the acknowledgment of organized crime itself being one of them. More importantly, established criminal structures were facing the same problems as their predecessors:

The gangsters, once mainly Irish, Jewish, and Italian, now prominently included newer immigrant groups, especially Latins and Asians. The gangbusters, once mostly WASPs, now were reinforced by many Irish, Jewish and Italian cops, crusaders, and prosecutors, along with assorted WASP holdovers. The simple pattern that had prevailed for half a century, of WASPs and non-WASPs fencing across the line, no longer existed. (Fox 392)

The downfall of Jewish gangsters was caused not only by major external factors but also by the internal developments of the Jewish American community itself. Jewish neighborhoods, such as the Lower East Side, had dissolved with the upward mobility and the acculturation of its residents, who chose more comfortable and respectable

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30 This interview was made during Lansky's failed application for naturalization in Israel, so the fact that he might have tried to emphasize his fight for the Jewish cause in order to aid this attempt has to be taken into consideration. Lepke Buchalter also took pride in his Yiddish nickname: It came from 'Lepkeleh,' the Yiddish diminutive form of 'Louis' with which his mother addressed him (Kavieff, *Life* 5).

31 For the investigations on the national underworld such as the Congress's in 1951 (the Kefauver hearings) and the one by New York prosecutor and future presidential candidate Thomas Dewey, cf., for instance, Kefauver or Stolberg.

homes in Brooklyn, Queens, or suburbia. As historian Jacob Rader Marcus noted, eighty to eighty-five percent of Jewish residents of the quarter had already left the dreads of poverty in the late 1920s when the new Americanized type of organized crime developed and structures such as Murder, Inc. formed (749). New recruits, i.e. Jewish boys of the slum, were thus not available anymore to the gangs. The Jewish gangsters resembled a past that was gone, a past that was to be overcome. On the other hand, Jewish mobsters had developed beyond another generation of the Jewish mob themselves: They were dedicated to promoting their own children towards decent careers, i.e. to fulfill the American and Jewish ideals. The sons and daughters of these criminals became lawyers, doctors, and other respected members of society.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, education enjoyed a very high reputation among law-abiding and criminal American Jews alike.<sup>33</sup> By these means, the sons and daughters of Jews in New York, who had predominantly been a part of the lower class at the beginning of the twentieth century, managed to rise up to middle and upper class. Cases of Jews involved in crime, therefore, shifted from blue- to white-collar and reached new qualities and fields of activities, such as the stock exchange or financial fraud. Remnants of Jewish blue-collar crime can still be found in popular culture, though: Be it Meyer Wolfsheim, the Jewish criminal of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, or, more recently, Reuben Tishkoff and Saul Bloom of the *Ocean's* trilogy, or the animated mobster dogfish Don Ira Feinberg of *Shark Tale*. Another monument of the Jewish criminal past remains up to this day: Las Vegas, which owes its existence partially to the visionary ideas of Bugsy Siegel and his investments of Syndicate money.

## CONCLUSION

The story of Jewish blue-collar crime in America from 1900 to 1931 was one of success. The secret of its accomplishments is to be found in its own Americanization and could not have been achieved by the monoethnic criminal structures of its beginnings. By Americanizing to such an extent that it merged into the truly American umbrella organization of the Syndicate, Jewish blue-collar crime and its Italian counterpart represent an example of an accomplished, culturally pluralistic development of crime.

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<sup>32</sup> As for Meyer Lansky, his son was a West Point graduate (Zion 71).

<sup>33</sup> Jewish immigrants were endowed with an advantage from the beginning: intellectualism and skills. Of the Jewish immigrants of 1900, only about a quarter were illiterate and a tenth were unskilled laborers. In contrast, sixty percent of the Ukrainians and about half of the Polish immigrants were illiterate and, overall, a third of the non-Jews were unskilled (Doroshkin 66-69).



Organized Jewish blue-collar crime in the United States remains mainly an issue of the first half of the twentieth century. Its representatives in New York were primarily first- or second-generation Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who came at the turn of the century and predominantly settled on the Lower East Side. Criminal structures that had formed within this Jewish slum developed from individuals and minor gangs to an American phenomenon, thus being subject to Americanization. Hence, from its beginnings when individuals were involved in prostitution, gambling, or small gangs, fighting for influence and income, Jewish blue-collar crime developed into one of the most important facets of organized crime in the US during the 1930s. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Jewish criminals established themselves as a visible and acknowledged aspect of American crime by driving criminals of other ethnicities away from the Lower East Side and supplementing their activities in modern fields, such as labor racketeering. Still, Jewish crime at this first stage of Americanization was confined to the Jewish quarters of the city.

Prohibition accelerated the process, and Jews, along with Italians, broke the boundaries of ethnic confinement through the cooperation within the newly developed Syndicate, contrived to apply corporation-style approaches to vice and crime. Ground, branches, and income were handed out to members of the Syndicate through institutions akin to democratic and state structures. The grand council thus acted as parliament, government, and justice court of organized crime. It was supplemented by Murder, Inc.—the armed unit jointly administered by Italians and Jews—with the purpose of eliminating possible threats within the organization and circumventing feuds and gang wars by being independent of families or loyalties. Eventually, the modification of the concept of crime, away from old European ideas to the genuinely American theory of mobsters as businessmen, proved to be successful. The new structure of crime was not only the means to fully exhaust the potential of Prohibition, but it also guaranteed continuing revenues after Prohibition ended. Although being criminal representatives of a small minority of American society, the modern form of crime is unthinkable without the theoretical groundwork that was laid by Jews like Arnold Rothstein and carried out jointly by Meyer Lansky and Lucky Luciano. Twenty years before the Kellys and the Cohens bravely went to World War II to fight for democracy together, which was the beginning of the end of anti-Semitism at the core of society, Italians and Jews came together for a far less noble purpose.

Jewish criminals did retain their Jewish identity, though. They honored their religion and traditions to a certain extent and took an active part in the Jewish struggle against anti-Semitism which was on the rise in the United States during the 1930s. It was also the Jewish community that led to the downfall of Jewish blue-collar crime as a

visible and active facet of American crime, since the source for potential successors dried up through the overall upward mobility of noncriminal Jews and the unwillingness of the criminals to accept their own children in the profession.

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