

G-Men, Gangsters, and Crime

1920–1947

During the 1920s, crime became a serious problem in the United States. One term often heard during this time was *G-Man*. It was a slang term for a Government Man, a man who worked for the United States government. The term came from the G-Division of the police in Dublin, Ireland. These men were hired to find out information about people. G-Man became popular in the United States when gangster George “Machine Gun” Kelly was arrested in 1933. When the United States Division of Investigation (DOI) arrested Kelly, he yelled, “Don’t shoot, G-Men.”

One of the most well-known crime investigators was J. Edgar Hoover. He was the sixth director of the DOI. Hoover fought against organized crime, a permanent organization of criminals. His men went after gangsters who had crossed state lines in stolen cars. As a federal government agent, Hoover could only pursue criminals who had committed crimes that involved more than one state. State and local police handled crimes within states. Hoover tried his best to catch some of the gangsters. Sometimes things did not go well. He led a failed raid at Manitowish Waters in Wisconsin. During the raid, an agent and an innocent person were killed. After this, Hoover was determined to arrest as many gangsters as he could. He really wanted to arrest John Dillinger, a gangster and bank robber. Hoover’s men eventually caught and shot Dillinger when he resisted arrest. In 1935 the DOI became the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Hoover was appointed its director. In 1950 the FBI published a Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list. This practice still continues.

Gangsters engaged in many criminal activities during the 1920s. They were a big part of prohibition when alcohol could not be made or sold. Gangsters also ran gambling rings in America. The most famous gangster of the time was Al Capone. His nickname was “Scarface,” and he lived in Chicago. He became a gangster when he joined Johnny Torrio and Lucky Luciano. Capone began as a bartender in Torrio’s bar. Capone seriously hurt many people when he would throw them out of the bar. Torrio also ordered Capone to kill “Big Jim” Colosimo, the boss of Chicago. Colosimo refused to open a speakeasy where alcohol would be sold. This would have been illegal, but Torrio thought it would be profitable. When Colosimo denied the request, Torrio had him killed. With Colosimo dead, Torrio became the boss of Chicago; and he and Capone ran the illegal alcohol business.

Torrio stepped down as boss in 1925 after he almost was killed. Capone took over for him. He committed many crimes. He had people in the local government

and police department on his payroll. Capone told them what to do. Capone was involved in the St. Valentine's Day Massacre in 1929. Capone wanted another gang member, Bugs Moran, killed. When Capone's men went to kill him, they killed seven people, but missed Moran.

Elliot Ness, a prohibition agent, targeted Capone. Ness looked into the illegal breweries (places where beer was made) Capone was running. Ness' team raided the breweries. Through wiretapping, they found where the breweries were located. The raids made Capone lose more than one million dollars. Capone then tried to pay off Ness' men. They would not take the money, and they were given the nickname "the Untouchables."

Capone eventually was arrested for tax evasion. The Internal Revenue Service had been after him, especially an agent named Eddie O'Hare. He was in charge of investigating the dog and racetracks Capone owned. He saw Capone did not pay his taxes. Capone was sentenced to eleven years in prison and released in 1939. When Capone was released, he was not in good health. He eventually died of dementia and pneumonia on January 25, 1947.

Other gangsters, such as Vito Genovese and Bugsy Siegel, robbed banks and killed gang members across the United States. Gangsters made most of their money providing illegal alcohol during prohibition. They ran speakeasies in many of the cities. Police sometimes raided these speakeasies, but the gangsters would pay the police and other government officials to avoid arrest. Gangs became very popular in the 1920s and 1930s. Some gangsters became rich and powerful, but most of them were killed or sent to jail.

There were other problems in the United States in the 1920s. The "Red Scare" was a fear of communism in the United States. People thought there were more than 150,000 communists and anarchists in the country. An anarchist was against all governments and would sometimes use violence. In one case, Nicola Sacco and Bartolommeo Vanzetti were arrested in May 1920 and charged with robbery. During the crime, two guards were killed. Sacco and Vanzetti were anarchists who were carrying guns when they were arrested. They did not speak English well. Judge Webster Thayer listened at their trial. He did not like communists and anarchists. During the trial witnesses said they saw the two men at other places on the day of the robbery. This did not matter. Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted, even though the evidence against them was not convincing. They spent seven years in jail. They tried to prove their innocence, but they could not. They were executed in the electric chair on August 24, 1927.

Name: _____

Date: _____

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Tree Diagram: Fill out two important facts about G-Men, gangsters, and crime during the 1920s in America.

