MAFIA LIFE

LOVE, DEATH AND MONEY AT THE HEART OF ORGANISED CRIME

FEDERICO VARESE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Note to the Reader</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Birth</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Work</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Management</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Money</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Love</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Self-image</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Politics</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Death</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Post-mortem</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Glossary 215

Appendix: Synoptic Table of Mafia Rules 217
Appendix: Synoptic Table of Mafia Structures 220
List of Illustrations 222
Acknowledgements 223
References 226
Index 267
Life is hard.
And then you die.
INTRODUCTION

On a snow-swept November morning in 2016, I find myself staring at a well-kept grave, inside a sprawling Russian necropolis. The monument is not one of the grandest, yet the full-sized figure of Nikolai Zykov is staring at me solemnly. His image is inscribed on expensive dark marble, and the surrounding space includes a tiny table, a simple white Russian Orthodox cross, and a vase for flowers. Some of his dead associates are not far from him. I last met Zykov in the mid-1990s and, until now, I had not been back to the place where he used to be the local Mafia boss, the city of Perm, in Russia’s Ural region. Although I have written a great deal about my time in Russia in the 1990s, I never thought it appropriate to dwell on our encounters. This book will bring Zykov back to life. He belonged to a secret criminal fraternity that has come to play a significant role in Europe’s underworld. Members sport impressive tattoos, abide by a secret code of honour and operate in most European countries. In Mafia Life, we will encounter equally exotic individuals from Sicily, Hong Kong and Japan, and travel further afield, to Macau, Burma and Dubai, and back to Greece, and across the Atlantic, to uncover the shape of today’s badlands. Yet do not for a moment think that a Mafioso is a Mr Big living in a faraway place. He can nest in our midst, in suburban England as much as in Palermo. Let’s take just one example.

Recently, in the town of Salford, Greater Manchester, a man was attacked with a machete, and another had a grenade thrown at his house. A nine-year-old boy was shot as he opened the front door of his house: the killer was looking for his father. Thirty children live with the fear of murder in this town, which has a population of
234,000; there are twenty-five organised crime groups here, and the number of shootings in twelve months was nineteen. ‘Police don’t control the street,’ a gang member told the BBC in 2016.

Imagine that you were one of the fans who attended the Manchester United home game against Wigan Athletic on Boxing Day in 2011. If you were, you might remember that Man United demolished Wigan 5–0. Yet something else was going on off the pitch. Professionally dressed ‘staff’ were directing fans to park near the Old Trafford football stadium. Thousands of people could easily find a spot, for five pounds. A bargain. Large areas of wasteland, car showrooms and empty spaces around office buildings had been turned into parking lots for Man United games throughout the season. The catch was that those attendants worked for local organised crime, using public areas illegally. Occasionally, they engaged in turf wars over who controlled the best spots. On Boxing Day 2011, the police were out in force and arrested thirteen people, aged between fifteen and fifty. The officers were trying to bring to an end a business worth millions every season.

Old Trafford is next to Salford, just over two miles from the centre of Manchester. The Haçienda, the most iconic European nightclub of the 1980s and 1990s, launched acid house and rave music, and produced the records of Joy Division. The doors of the club were managed by one Damien Noonan, a local man from a feared prominent crime family based in Salford. The family was so menacing that, when they got pulled over, the police would let them go, no matter what they had allegedly done. Damien introduced a degree of order at the Haçienda. Gangs were allowed in, but each sat in its own corner, to avoid bloody fights. They got their drinks at cost, so they would not steal them outright and harass the staff along the way. Peter Hook, founding member of Joy Division and co-owner of the Haçienda, recalls that hosting gangsters offered additional benefits: some of the staff took interest-free loans rather than going through banks. And an association with a strong gang carried prestige: ‘Our bouncers were so powerful and so bloody violent that anywhere we went we had the cachet of being associated with them,’ writes Peter Hook in his book about the Haçienda. Allowing gangsters to manage the doors of a
Introduction

club had some downsides: they controlled the flow of drugs into the place and the doormen were drawn into gang wars, forced to exact revenge for what happened the night before, so as not to lose face. A legitimate business that many of us loved and patronised was complicit in wanton violence.

Some twenty years have passed and most readers will think that the wild days of the Haçienda are over. After all, the club closed its doors in June 1997. Salford Quays is now home to parts of the BBC and ITV, and it has been duly gentrified. And yet, as I was writing this book, the most influential Salford gangster had his life cut short in a carefully planned hit, on 26 July 2015. Paul Massey was shot dead as he climbed out of a silver BMW outside his home in Salford. Shortly after his death, I put this book on hold and travelled to the town, where I met Don Brown, a police officer who started to work these streets in 1983.

I arrested Massey three times. The first time when he was seventeen. He was a small fellow, not much to look at, but he had the guts to get the job done. He even stabbed a man in front of a BBC crew that was making a film about him. And he served the time for this crime.

Violence is a key ingredient of this trade. Massey and Mafiosi alike must be able to convince a sceptical audience that they have what it takes to pull the trigger. Once they have established such a reputation, people will be more likely to comply with their wishes; it follows that the Mafiosi will need to use less violence in their everyday businesses.

These people do not simply buy and sell illegal goods. They organise markets. They control public spaces. Rather than peddling drugs on street corners, they want control over who has permission to sell. Soon, they expand their rackets from a single domain to several elements of the local economy – from drugs to prostitution; from small shops to taxi drivers and hairdressers; from car parks and care homes to construction – until whole sectors are under their rule. They put themselves forward as institutions of governance, ultimately in competition with the legitimate state. Massey’s
business interests went beyond pushing drugs. He set up a company officially named ‘Personal Management Security’, ‘PMS’ for short. Everybody knew that PMS stood for ‘Paul Massey Security’. In a matter of a few years, the company obtained lucrative contracts in Salford, Manchester and beyond. Clients included Metrolink, Manchester’s light-rail network, and the construction company building the new police station in Manchester (both contracts were rescinded after a public outcry). ‘These security firms are in effect protection rackets,’ says Don Brown. Even Massey, a small-time hoodlum by all accounts, had a big foot in the legitimate world.

Individuals like Massey, and the people we will come to know in this book, live in a community. Massey grew up among people who did not trust the police and the legitimate institutions. Indeed, the Salford Riots of 1992 were a week-long attack on the police and the fire services. Those who grass to the authorities have their name sprayed on the walls in the main shopping area. Four years ago, in a local pub, a man was shot in front of thirty people. After the murder, the killer pointed his gun at the witnesses and warned them not to talk. As in other similar incidents, CCTV footage went
missing. No one was prepared to give evidence. Rather than omertà, the Sicilian code of silence, the police call it ‘a wall of silence’. But it is the same thing. The former Chief Crown Prosecutor for Greater Manchester concluded in a 2016 BBC interview, ‘The impression will be that people are above the law … some individuals will feel that they can get away with murder.’ He admitted that ‘there is a trust deficit in the police.’

Over time, gangster justice takes over official law and order. Nobody has been arrested for Massey’s murder, but a local thirty-three-year-old man was killed by gunmen on a motorbike, a signature crime in the Salford underworld. It is rumoured that the victim was involved in Massey’s murder. The informal system of policing Salford even decides the amount of monetary damages that a joyrider has to pay when he hits a passer-by. Members of ‘the Salford Firm’ – also known as ‘the Firm’ (two names by which Massey’s gang was known) – are alternative authority figures, dispensing their own summary justice to transgressors. The next step is that the gangster himself becomes a community leader. In 2015, the Guardian reported rumours that Massey had been asked by police to intervene as mediator following violent incidents in the town, including a grenade and machete attack.* He also acted as a mediator in gangs’ conflicts around the UK. In 2010, to cement his role as a community leader, he even ran for mayor of Salford, coming seventh. If the electoral system had been different – say, proportional representation – he would have gained a seat in the local assembly, alongside some of his allies.

These people prey on their communities yet come to be regarded as local authorities, figures to be respected, out of fear, if nothing else. Since they operate in contexts where a set of official institutions exist, gang members and Mafiosi try to influence the process of democracy, by supporting their candidates or even by standing themselves. Some members of the community benefit from the presence of organised crime, but they are a minority. Unfortunately, legitimate authorities often inspire even less confidence than do local gangsters. Indeed, mafias are rudimentary state-like formations

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*When alive, Massey denied these rumours.
and, if allowed to exist and flourish, they come to replace legitimate institutions.

In some key ways, the mafias discussed in this book – the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, the Italian-American Mafia, the Russian Mafia, the Japanese Yakuza and the Hong Kong Triads – also differ from the likes of Massey. While gangs tend to be independent organisations, mafias have made efforts to develop norms of behaviour that are shared across Families and they have a lot in common that sets them apart from other types of organised crime. All emerged during turbulent times, when states were not trusted and were unable to properly govern the economy (legal and illegal); they have memorable initiation ceremonies, and tend to have similar hierarchical structures and internal rules, including rules about sex and family life; and they are all active in the same key legal and illegal markets, such as construction, public contracts, drugs and prostitution. A Mafia is in effect a collection of ‘gangs’ controlling a territory and subscribing to the same rules of behaviour. They might still fight each other, but they belong to the same structure. Above all, they have lasted a long time, much longer than gangs.

Who are the Mafiosi? There is a tendency to describe them as supermen, as demonic sociopaths running a Spectre-type organisation lifted from a Bond movie. This is not the impression I came away with from my limited encounters. I am often asked if I was scared when I met them, and why they would want to talk to me. I think people on the wrong side of the law share with us a most human desire to communicate, to talk about themselves, to justify their actions. Indeed, I could easily see how a different turn of events, a different starting point or personal choice would have led them to live a very different life.

Such people have access to violence but they do not go around killing everybody they meet. My best protection was taking them seriously and not having ulterior motives other than a deep desire to understand, to know how they saw the world, what they thought their life was all about, and whether it was worth it. I put myself in their care for an hour or so, and they rose to the challenge. I acted as a holy fool, an academic version of Pollyanna, and became a tiny observer of a whole world.
Certainly, one has to follow some ground rules when doing such interviews. I never asked about specific details, such as ‘who killed whom’, as an investigative journalist or police officer would do. For an interview to yield results, one should not show revulsion or moral superiority. In order to reduce the perception of threat, questions should refer to ‘people in the same business’ rather than to the interviewee in particular. In my case, it proved to be a successful strategy. After a few general remarks, usually the interviewee would refer to a specific case, either his or her own or the case of ‘somebody known’ to them. I rarely used a tape recorder. In my experience, it makes subjects uncomfortable, resulting in evasive answers. My preferred method is taking notes: it reminds the interviewee of the purpose of the encounter (namely, that of writing a public piece of research) and at the same time reduces the threat of the misuse of the information on the part of the interviewer.

*Mafia Life* is not based entirely on the interviews I conducted. Far from it. A significant source is judicial evidence, biographical data and conversations recorded by the police in the course of their investigations. I never forget that this material has been collected for purposes that are very different from my own. Yet it would be foolish to disregard such a wealth of information entirely. Buried in court files, one can find priceless insights into the life of the people I write about. Police intercepts, whose subjects are unaware they are being listened to, allow us to become a fly on the wall, gaining access to both the higher echelons and the street level of a crime group, and to discover a great deal about daily life and work. No ethnographer could ever hope to gain such access. I also draw upon investigative reports and published confessions. Mindful of the limitation of every type of data, I have tried to piece together a story that is plausible and consistent with most sources. The reader is the ultimate judge of whether I have succeeded.

With this book, I want to bring to the fore the human side of criminal conspiracies. It describes Mafiosi as people, no smarter than the rest of us, who make mistakes and occasionally get swindled, ending up dead or behind bars. Using the structure of an ordinary life, I narrate the complex challenges faced by Mafiosi as they run their organisations. Just like the rest of us, Mafiosi are
born and grow up, perhaps get married, find a job or manage a business, save and invest money, engage in politics, get sick and eventually die. Eight elements form the core chapters of this book: Birth, Work, Management, Money, Love, Self-image, Politics and Death. Each chapter starts with a story, narrated in depth. I then turn to what we can learn from the stories.

In ‘Birth’, the key character is Nikolai Zykov, the Russian Mafia boss. Very much like Massey in Salford, Zykov was running protection rackets and trying to set himself up as a community leader. He belonged to a secret fraternity that had emerged in the Soviet prison system with an ideology opposed to all things Soviet. The fraternity also had a ritual of admission – a process of rebirth for the future member – very similar to that of other mafias (and absent in the Salford gangs). With the end of the Soviet Union, this fraternity became a major player in the criminal underworld of several countries and aspired, like other mafias, to control markets and territories.

In ‘Work’, I focus on Antonino Rotolo, the bespectacled boss of the Pagliarelli Mafia Family in Palermo. On the basis of extensive police phone intercepts, I reconstruct how he ran the protection racket in his neighbourhood and how his deputy masterminded the re-entry of Cosa Nostra into large-scale drugs trafficking, thanks to an alliance with the Italian-American Mafia. I also detail the situation that Antonino and other bosses have faced since 2008, including the economic crisis, relentless police pressure, arrests, and the arrival of an immigrant population from across the Mediterranean that is not willing to take the rule of Cosa Nostra as a given. The reputation of the Sicilian Cosa Nostra is not as menacing as it once was.

In ‘Management’, Merab, the boss of the post-Soviet Mafia clan Kutaisi, takes centre stage. We follow him facing down a challenge from the opposing Tbilisi clan, which has been killing his men across Europe. How should he react? By launching a fully fledged war or by devising a long-term strategy in order to isolate his enemy and only then strike back? Read and find out. In the process, you will learn important management lessons.

Mafias need to do something with the money they accumulate.
Introduction

In ‘Money’, I follow the trail of Russian Mafia assets going from Moscow to New York, London and Rome. I identify three key players in this process: the Mafioso, the trusted service providers who work at moving and investing dirty capital, and the bankers who close their eyes to what is going on. We discover that occasionally Mafiosi are cheated by bankers and service providers.

In ‘Love’, I report an intimate conversation between a Mafioso and his partner. Although she is not allowed to enter the male-only fraternity of Cosa Nostra, he organises a rudimentary admission ritual for her. The power of love leads him to breach key Mafia rules and confide in her. To a great extent, deep affection for one’s partner undermines the organisation’s integrity and mafias try to keep emotions and familial feelings in check.

In ‘Self-image’, the main character is ‘Broken Tooth’ Wan, Macau’s boss of gambling, who produced a movie with himself as the subject. Yet the final product was not exactly what he wanted. Film can be a powerful promotional tool. But while mafias would like control over their representation, films produced with their direct involvement do not appeal to sophisticated audiences. The best form of advertising, I conclude, is indirect, as in The Godfather movies.

In ‘Politics’, I follow two Hong Kong Triads who reveal the secrets of the Mafia attack against students on 3 October 2014. It appears that the close proximity of Hong Kong Triads to China is undermining their autonomy and turning them into an arm of a very powerful geopolitical power. More generally, I discuss how a Mafia can become a state and how states often resemble a Mafia.

In ‘Death’, I describe some of the Mafia’s favourite techniques for killing people, and conclude by discussing policies that would weaken, and ultimately kill, mafias themselves. And in ‘Post-mortem’, I travel back to Perm to visit the grave of Zykov and reflect on the future. At the back of the book I have placed the sources I draw upon, and information on additional reading.

A final word on Massey comes from a person I met in Salford who knew him well: ‘When Massey was killed I felt sad. I walked out of my office and just sat on a bench. Why did I feel sad? Yes, he was a criminal, but he was able to keep a lid on things, to keep
things under control, and now there will be more violence.’ Even the most fearsome Mafiosi start their life as small-time neighbourhood hoodlums, like Massey. While we should not credit these people with superhuman powers, we should also not underestimate them. What fascinates and scares me is the ability of these organisations to produce a kind of social order out of fear and injustice. We can ignore this reality only at our own peril.
A NOTE TO THE READER

The events narrated in this book are factual, and so are the dialogues. For legal reasons and reasons of privacy some names and minor details have been changed. Names written in italics are pseudonyms. When ‘Family’ is written with a capital letter, it refers to the Mafia basic organisational unit, rather than the natural family. Normally I refer to the Sicilian Mafia with the name used by insiders, Cosa Nostra. The transliteration of some Russian names has been simplified. Sections of this book are based on academic work I published previously. In the endnotes, I make reference to the original sources.
In the very final days of the Soviet Union, I started a voyage of discovery. I was in search of an entity as yet mysterious, the ‘Russian Mafia’. Since 1989, I had been travelling regularly to Moscow and St Petersburg, witnessing the sudden collapse of the planned economy. Ordinary people lined the pavements of Gorky Street (promptly renamed Tverskaya) selling contraceptive pills, condoms, bottles of vodka, English-language magazines and children’s toys. The more enterprising among them built flimsy wooden constructions known as *kioski*. Russians could now open any sort of shop and engage in any sort of trade. In the meantime, state assets were being auctioned off. The market economy had reached Russia, bringing with it chaos and violence. Russian capitalism was effectively unregulated. Protection rackets were reported everywhere. At the Moscow central market, traders had to pay 100 roubles a day to secure a space. But there was more to Moscow in the early 1990s than contradictory commercial codes and regulations, and burgeoning racketeering. People questioned the state to such an extent that all laws seemed to lack legitimacy. Nobody knew any longer what was legal and what was criminal.

Invariably, the ‘Mafia’ was said to be behind any criminal activity reported by the press that was not entirely random. Words such
as ‘Mafia’ and ‘organised crime’ were used loosely. For instance, according to Arkadii Vaksberg, Russian journalist and author of *The Soviet Mafia*, ‘Mafia’ referred to ‘the entire soviet power-system, all its ideological, political, economical and administrative manifestations’, which was siphoning off the crown jewels of the USSR’s military-industrial complex. For others, it referred to a new breed of characters, ‘the Oligarchs’, originally obscure scientists and students who had amassed fortunes in a matter of months. They were buying the media, influencing the weak-minded president, and had private armies at their disposal – and did not shy away from using them to achieve their aims. It was frustrating for me, as a would-be scholar of the underworld, that most observers called any criminal conspiracy a ‘Mafia’. Similarly, countless writers, policy-makers and documents – and this includes the official EU definition of the phenomenon – referred to ‘organised crime’ simply as a group of more than two individuals who organise themselves to break the law, a notion that covers almost any form of law-breaking.

Few at the time remembered that pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union had a complex criminal underworld, at whose pinnacle stood a fraternity of bosses, known as *vory-v-zakone*. The expression can be translated as ‘men-who-follow-the-code’, although it is most often rendered simply as ‘thieves-in-law’. Their origins can be traced back to the nineteenth-century ‘guilds’ of ordinary thieves.* Dissidents who had been confined to the Gulag during the Soviet period met some of these people and described their behaviour.† Maximilien de Santerre, a French-Russian spy born in 1924 and confined to the Gulag for twelve years in 1946, wrote in his memoirs that some criminals in the camp adopted a peculiar dress code and odd mannerisms. They wore ‘home-made aluminium crosses around their necks’ and were ‘often bearded and almost always wore their shirts outside their trousers with one or several waistcoats above’. Tattoos covered their bodies: in particular,

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* In Russian, *arteli*.
† *Gulag* is a Soviet acronym standing for the ‘main administration of the camps’. More generally, it is used to refer to the Soviet system of forced labour camps and prisons.
their chests were adorned with ‘a picture of praying angels on each side of the crucifix; underneath are the words “O Lord, save thy slave!” or “I believe in God”, indicating a deep connection to religion. They spoke a language of their own, its grammatical structure being Russian, but with a different vocabulary.*

Varlam Shalamov, who spent a total of fifteen years in the camps (1937–53) and is known in the West as the author of the Kolyma Tales, wrote eight essays on the criminal world in the late 1950s, where he described the vory-v-zakone. The vory had, in his eyes, a consistent attitude of defiance towards Soviet power, as well as their own twisted morality. These law-breakers were organised in groups with their own laws, customs, language, and a rudimentary internal division of labour spread across different districts and even provinces. Caught up in a bitter internecine struggle between the ‘honest’ vory who refused to serve the Motherland during the Second World War and those who agreed to join a special army unit of Gulag convicts, the fraternity was almost completely wiped out in the fifties. Only a few standard-bearers survived.

But these survivors regrouped and expanded their ranks in the 1960s and 1970s and were perfectly placed to take advantage of the chaos of the unregulated market economy of the 1990s, when the vory resurfaced in the news as a national fraternity set to have a central place in the new Russia and beyond. During these years a Georgian vor became a minister in his country’s government and played a crucial role in fostering the ascendency of Eduard Shevardnadze to the presidency in 1992. Eventually, the vory also made it into popular culture in the West. The 2007 film Eastern Promises, directed by David Cronenberg, tells the story of a cell of vory in London. Nikolai, played by Viggo Mortensen, wins the confidence of the old boss and is eventually put up for membership, managing to conceal that he is working for law enforcement. The 2010 novel Our Kind of Traitor, by John le Carré, is centred on Dima, ‘the world’s number one money launderer’, who, born in the Russian city of Perm, is a full member of the vory’s fraternity, trying to defect to save his family.†

* In Russian, fenya.
† I was John le Carré’s consultant on the Russian mafia.