



The Story of the Syndicate

MURDER, INC.

Burton B. Turkus
and Sid Feder

Murder, Inc.

The Story of “the Syndicate”

BY BURTON B. TURKUS
AND SID FEDER

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To Harry Feeney,
a great reporter

Introduction

IN THE spring of 1950, Burton Turkus, a former assistant District Attorney, asked me to write a book with him on the fantastic ring of killers and extortionists that *is* organized crime in the United States. It was an assignment at which any newspaperman would leap. This was the first authentic story, proved by data and record, of how this ring controls and operates, as big business, every racket, extortion and illegitimacy across the nation. By technique and personnel, it was responsible for the unbelievable total of approximately a thousand murders in the decade up to 1940. The killing, though, was not then and is not now done for fun, for passion or for robbery; it is solely for the preservation and improvement of the vast business interests: the rackets. The ring came to be known, a decade ago, as Murder, Inc. Today it is the Syndicate.

Burt Turkus is easily the best-informed man in the United States on this incredible country-wide network of organized crime. The reason is simple: the mobsters themselves told him. In 1940, while he was an assistant District Attorney in Brooklyn, a number of the ranking killers turned stoolpigeon. From them—from the “inside,” in other words—Mr. Turkus learned of the organization and its innermost workings. Their disclosures were so thorough that he was able to prosecute seven of the ring’s members—and put all seven in the electric chair, including Lepke, whose power and rule as czar of labor-industry extortion has never been equaled. To this day, Lepke remains the lone ganglord ever to be sent to the chair by the Law.

Long before the trials were over, the gangsters took to calling Turkus “Mr. Arsenic.”

He does not conform to the general pattern of the prosecutor. He dotes on the theatrics of the courtroom and the criminal trial. But he is neither politician nor publicity hound. He looks like the movie version of a D. A.—suave, dynamic in conversation, sharp. Meeting him, one can readily believe that, as prosecutor, he did put seven men accused of murder in the first degree into the chair.

Before that, in private practice, on the other hand, he defended seventeen men accused of murder in the first degree—and not one of them got the chair. However, he has never defended a criminal in organized crime, unless assigned by the court as pauper's counsel.

He was and is a political independent. The District Attorney during the Murder, Inc., probe was William O'Dwyer, a line Democrat. As a result of the successes against the Syndicate killers, O'Dwyer became Mayor of New York and, more recently, United States Ambassador to Mexico. Turkus ran for county judge (on a Republican ticket)—and was defeated. He hasn't run for anything since, except, perhaps, for the bus to take him to the subway station.

Here, then, is the story of Murder, Inc., in Turkus' words. He himself maintains that his own part in the investigation was entirely as a lawyer, and was made possible by Louis Josephs and Sol Klein, the other assistant District Attorneys who worked with him, and by Detective Frank Gray, his aide, who still is a "top cop" on the force. The end result is all that impresses Turkus, even now.

"All it takes," he says, "is a break from within. No matter what anyone claims about being clever or brilliant, there is only one way organized crime can be cracked. Unless someone on the inside talks, you can investigate forever and get nowhere."

It takes, too, he adds, an end to the corrupt politician, for it is his contention that if the betrothals of gangster and politician were broken, organized crime could not last forty-eight hours.

News columns were overcrowded with the approach of World War II in 1940, and, as a result, only a small part of this "inside" story reached the outside. The facts of how extortion, murder and politics were put together by a group of specialists and formed into a nation-wide "business" are still there for anyone to see—if he can get on the inside.

I suppose the origins and growth of the Syndicate were not unlike that of any huge business amalgamation. The criminal gang first sprang up in this country in the battles between labor and industry just before and after World War I, with such figures as Li'l Augie Organ, Kid Dropper, and Lupo the Wolf Saitta, an

early ruler of Mafia. With the coming of Prohibition, although maintaining their positions as enforcement squads for both management and labor in industry, the mobs waxed fat on alcohol profits. Then came the heyday of Owney Madden, Al Capone, Dutch Schultz, Big Bill Dwyer and their ilk. The organization known as *Unione Siciliano* began to grow up, too, until in 1930 and 1931 it blossomed into its own. Perhaps the most striking developments of gang growth under Prohibition were the comparative ease with which the underworld could put a corrupt finger on law enforcement and the casual attitude with which the public viewed the dumping of bullet-ridden bodies in doorways and gutters. At about the same time, *Café Society* was coming into its own and, perversely, it was considered rather smart to know a gangster personally.

With Prohibition about to be repealed, the two problems that faced the ganglords were first, naturally, to develop new ways of profitable illegitimacy, and, second, to put a stop to indiscriminate killing. The murder of one beer baron by another had come to be accepted as the elimination of unneeded surplus, but it was obvious to the gangsters that the public would hardly stand for such promiscuous slaughter once Prohibition was gone.

To solve these problems, the Syndicate was born. The chief reason for its quick universal acceptance was that the end of Prohibition's crazy era brought an end to the insane egoistic ganglord of the Dutch Schultz breed, who settled everything with a bullet. Lucky Luciano, Costello, Lepke, Zwillman, the Fischettis—they were and are the modern type who believe in arbitration.

The government of the Syndicate is actually set up under a board of directors who dictate all policy. There was not then and there never has been any one mob magnate with more power than any other in national crime. The very fact that one "expert" tries to pin such authority on Costello, another on Lucky Luciano, and so on, seems to us conclusive evidence that individual control does not exist. Along with the board of directors, the moblords provided for a kangaroo court, made up of the bosses themselves, which serves as the judicial branch of the government, with irrevocable power of life and death.

Since the origin of the Syndicate, there has been no killing of a

gang boss that was not "okayed"—from Dutch Schultz in 1935 to Charley Binaggio in 1950.

To insure their organization, one and all concentrated on developing connections, on municipal, state and national levels. The cartel is so finely organized that it can swing elections in many places—and can do it, too, regardless of which political party holds the reins.

The Kefauver Senate Committee did an admirable job of making the public sharply conscious of much of this danger that, although once exposed, had been forgotten through the years. For that, it must receive the thanks of all honest citizens. However, as we will point out, the Committee, as an investigative group, omitted much that, with only very little more prying, would have and should have been uncovered, in order to paint the exact picture of this menace. More important, in several instances, the Committee drew an unfortunate misconception of the organization, most notably in the importance it attaches to the cohesive control of Mafia, which, actually, was purged twenty years ago, and in pointing up a scattered few ganglords above others, in an amalgamation where every territorial mob boss has as much to say as any other.

But, make no mistake about it: Murder, Inc., was and is the national Syndicate. The head men were so well protected that Lepke remains the only one to enter a death chamber since the underworld organized its government. The Syndicate is with us today, not only in Brooklyn, but wherever there is crime, as it took a United States Senate Committee a full year to find out and report in 1951.

Sid Feder

September 1951.

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1.

Don't blame it all on Brooklyn

Murder, Inc.: National Syndicate—one thousand killings, coast-to-coast—Pittsburgh Phil, traveling salesman in homicide—the Mazza Mob goes to Minneapolis—the blueprint is the same today.

EARLY in 1940, while digging into the source of local felony, the District Attorney's office in Brooklyn ran head on into an unbelievable industry. This organization was doing business in assassination and general crime across the entire nation, along the same corporate lines as a chain of grocery stores.

The ensuing investigation exposed a vast network dealing in every known form of rackets and extortion, with murder as a by-product to that "business"—an incident to the maintenance of trade. The disclosures, in fact, uncovered a national Syndicate with coast-to-coast ramifications. It is, moreover, the same national Syndicate decried today by all law, up to and including the United States Senate, but far more closely knit than is generally and popularly believed.

As a member of the District Attorney's staff, I prosecuted the board of directors of the death department of this cartel, and sent seven men to the electric chair. (One other is serving eighty years.) Five of these seven were members of the self-styled Brooklyn combination, the branch office which served as the firing squad for all of the organization. The other two were ranking magnates in the national underworld. One was Lepke, most powerful of all labor and industrial rackets czars; the other, his operations manager, Mendy Weiss, a hulking mobster who coolly ordered murder on a country-wide basis. Their only connection with Brooklyn was as contract employers of the combination. They operated strictly on a trans-America scale.

In all the history of crime, there has never been an example of organized lawlessness equal to the Syndicate. Details are not for the squeamish—this is a warning here and now. In a ten-year period, upward of one thousand murders were committed from New England to California, Minnesota to New Orleans and Miami, by the combination, either directly or through the technique it developed. They were done for the Syndicate. The technique became, and, in fact, remains to this day, the blueprint for organized gang throat-cutting. However, murder, I must emphasize, was not the *big* business. The rackets were. The assassinations were ordered, contracted and performed solely to sustain those rackets.

Fantastic? It can't happen in your town? It did!

The facts were corroborated in testimony that satisfied juries and the highest courts in the land; they were documented in affidavit truths; they were unfolded, in fact, by the killers themselves. In our investigation, for the first and only time, the Syndicate was "broken from within," which is the only way organized crime can be attacked. Abe (Kid Twist) Reles, an arrogant self-glorifying gang leader who murdered more than a dozen men, turned State's evidence, along with a number of his less illustrious cohorts, and the pattern of national organized gangland was exposed. This was an association in which every mob of any importance in the United States had membership. It was a national ring put together on the lines of a cartel.

The blueprint has never worn out. A Charley Binaggio is killed in an open political clubhouse in Kansas City; a Detective Lieutenant, Bill Drury, is "rubbed out" in Chicago on a September day in 1950 for becoming too "nosy"; a Bugsy Siegel is eliminated as he sits reading a newspaper in the living room of a California mansion; Philly Mangano, an original Murder, Inc., staff gunman, is dropped into a Brooklyn swamp in 1951 with three bullets in his head. All make it brutally evident that the pattern is still in use.

There was no method of murder their fiendish ingenuity overlooked. They used the gun, the strangling rope, the ice pick—commonplace tools for homicide. There was the unimaginative mob-style ride, the shotgun blast on the lonely street. And there were the bizarre touches, too. Dozens were dropped into quicklime pits. Others were buried alive, cremated, roped up in such a way that

they strangled themselves by their own struggles for life. The killers thought they had come up with an especially appropriate effect the night they tied a slot machine to the body of a pinball operator who was "cheating," and dropped him into a resort lake.

The Syndicate's tentacles reached everywhere and anywhere. It brought organized crime to California to stay; Cleveland's infamous Mayfield Road Gang and Chicago's Capone crew, which continued operations after Scarface Al's finish, staffed that Far Western office with able hands. A Seattle hoodlum, still in the picture today, represented the Northwest.

Frank Costello's New Orleans slot machines were linked up, and the Fischettis of Chicago and Tony Gizzo and his heirs in Kansas City. The Purple Gang of Detroit held a franchise. The racing wire service had many connections with it in ensuing years. The Miami gambling ring (also known as the Northern Mob) belonged, and the St. Paul combination. The New Jersey outfit, Lepke and Charley (Lucky) Luciano in Manhattan . . . Cleveland, Boston, Chicago, Seattle, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Milwaukee, Dallas—whatever the locale, the underworld of every community of any size in the nation was "in."

A string of hideouts from coast to coast and into Canada was cunningly fitted into the outline. In the late thirties and early forties, as the heat of the Dewey rackets investigations in Manhattan and our murder probe in Brooklyn intensified, potential witnesses were sent out of town in all directions. One would go to Salt Lake City, where the relative of a minor mob affiliate had a prominent business. Several more would hurry off upstate, to the Saratoga area where the Spa offered accommodations large enough for groups. We learned of at least one who went to New Orleans and was told there would be a job waiting with Frank Costello on the slot machines. Sun Valley, Idaho, was a refuge for California boys. A former New York hoodlum operated a popular hostelry there. Kansas City was one of the most cordial hideout locales. Mendy holed up between Kansas City and Denver for almost two years, while New Jersey and New York sought him for murders and the federal government hunted him for narcotics enterprises in New York and Texas. The mobsters who turned State's evidence told us that, in Detroit, concealment was ready at all times for

killers who were too "hot" at home. Wherever they went, Syndicate hoodlums on the lam were warmly received.

Little about the organization has been changed up to now. Each mob operated its own racket or rackets independently, collected its own take, was forced to cut no one in. Besides its own operations, each co-operated with every other mob. On some of the larger takes, the various gangs shared the profits, as they continue to do today, in matters like gambling and narcotics. The ties that bound them, and bind them yet, lay in a formal code of ethics, a set of bylaws ruling all, a board of governors for policy-making, a kangaroo court for justice, with complete and final say on life and death. All these were legislated when a group of the very top ganglords agreed to amalgamation in 1934. All are very real and concrete today.

The national ring deals in rackets big and small. No avenue of easy money is neglected. That is its reason for being: quick, easy illegal money. There are gambling and vice on a national scale, the profits running into appalling figures; dope-peddling, national and international. A far-flung loan-shark extortion operated from a Detroit-Brooklyn axis. More damaging to the general welfare, the mobsters tear at the very heart of honest business with their industrial rackets and labor extortions. They have controlled whole industries. They have raised the price of food and household commodities, boosted clothing costs and affected the pocketbook of virtually every average citizen in America.

Hard-working laborers have been forced to pay tribute in kick-backs from their day's wages. That has applied to any number of unions in which the thugs "muscle" power. The parasitic pirates hire out to foment or break strikes for fancy fees. On occasion, they have even hired out to both sides in the same dispute. They are that versatile. They infiltrated many unions and, once in, have any number of ways to make them pay off. Take one popular example:

The mob's fronts inside the union would incite a faction of the membership into pushing through a vote for a wage increase. The fronts generally were union delegates (through phony elections). Thus, they would carry the wage demands to the employer. The employer knew that refusal meant acid on valuable merchandise,