

Al Capone and gangsters

Profile on

Al Capone

In 1925 Al Capone became the boss of the Mafia in Chicago. He was involved in gambling and brothels as well as bootlegging and speakeasies. He also used bribery to control the mayor and the police. He was prepared to use violence and is thought to have ordered the murders of 227 rival gangsters in four years. The violence reached its peak in 1929 with the St Valentine's Day Massacre. Seven members of a rival gang were machine-gunned to death. At the end of the 1920s Capone was earning \$100 million a year. In 1931 federal agents managed to have him convicted for tax evasion.

Organised crime

This was the biggest effect of Prohibition. Rival gangs in cities fought to take over the other's 'territory' – and the rackets within it. Gangland murders increased. The most notorious city was Chicago, where Mayor 'Big Bill' Thompson was known to be a close friend of the most famous gangster, Al Capone. In Chicago alone, between 1927 and 1931, over 200 gang members were murdered, with nobody convicted for these crimes.

SOURCE D

The St Valentine's Day Massacre, February 1929



SOURCE E

From D.B. O'Callaghan, *Roosevelt and the United States*, 1966

The result of introducing prohibition was that many Americans began to lose their respect for law and order. In Chicago, for example, the gangster Al Capone, with his private army of gunslingers, had more power than the real mayor.

The profits made during the Prohibition period were so vast that the gangsters were able to extend their activities into other areas of criminal activity, such as prostitution, labour rackets and illegal gambling. Organised crime also bought its way into legal business activities and into trade unions.

Why did Prohibition fail?

Prohibition did not work. Drinking illegal alcohol was too popular and too profitable. It could not be controlled without huge numbers of enforcement agents. The Prohibition Bureau employed about 4000 agents to stop bootlegging – the illegal making and selling of alcohol – and close speakeasies for the whole of the USA. While agents like Eliot Ness achieved some success, most were ineffective. Indeed, some were guilty of taking bribes from the criminals who ran the trade – nearly 10% of the agents were sacked for taking bribes. In 1933 there were over 200,000 speakeasies in the USA.

	1921	1925	1929
Illegal distilleries seized	9,746	12,023	15,794
Gallons of distilled spirits seized	414,000	1,103,000	1,186,000
Number of arrests	34,175	62,747	66,878

SOURCE F

An American journalist writing in 1928

I was one of the women who favoured Prohibition when I heard it discussed but I am now convinced it has proved a failure. It is true we no longer see the corner saloon: but in many cases has it not merely moved to the back of a store, or up or down one flight of stairs under the name of a speakeasy?

Perhaps the most important reason why Prohibition failed was that the vast majority of American people did not agree with it. They were prepared to break the law in order to consume alcohol. The Depression also made an important difference. With millions out of work, it seemed nonsense that the government was spending large amounts of money on enforcing an unpopular and ineffective law. The money could surely be spent more wisely on helping the poor.

Opponents of Prohibition were able to argue that by legalising alcohol an enormous number of jobs would be created and tax revenues could be raised again on its sale.

Many Americans were concerned at the amount of crime encouraged by Prohibition, especially the growth of organised crime.

In 1932 Franklin Roosevelt, who promised to end Prohibition, was elected president. One of his earliest actions, in December 1932, was to introduce the 21st Amendment to the Constitution, repealing prohibition.



SOURCE 1 Al Capone in 1930 on the Front cover of *Time* magazine, one of the most influential magazines in the USA

Career

- Born 1899 in Brooklyn, New York (parents from southern Italy).
- Joined the Five Points Gang run by 'Terrible Johnny' Torrio.
- In 1919 Capone followed his boss to Chicago, after a short time as a bouncer in a saloon brothel. Torrio and Capone took over other gangs but could not defeat the North Siders.
- In 1925 Torrio was badly injured by 'Bugs' Moran and retired, telling 26-year-old Al: 'It's all yours.' Capone surrounded himself with gangsters he could trust. When he uncovered three of his men plotting against him, he set up a banquet in their honour and at the height of the celebrations used a gift-wrapped club to smash their brains out.
- He brought other gangs under his control and gradually gained political control of Chicago.
- He was behind the St Valentine's Day Massacre in 1929 when rival gangs threatened his operations.
- He escaped jail until 1931 when he was sentenced to eleven years for not paying his income tax. Released in 1939, he never really recovered from his time in the infamous Alcatraz prison.
- Died on 25 January 1947 from natural causes.

Profits of Capone empire

- \$60 million beer and liquor
- \$25 m gambling
- \$10 m protection rackets
- \$10 m dance halls and prostitution

Enforcing Prohibition proved impossible. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) never had more than 2,500 agents, and some of them became paid hands of the gang leaders. The most famous of the IRS agents was Eliot Ness, the man who eventually arrested Capone.

Most Americans were prepared to break the Prohibition law, and so a new criminal age began. Making and selling alcohol brought huge profits. Police and city officials were aware of the spread of speakeasies and bootleggers, but the lawbreakers realised that bribery would buy silence. One New York politician said it would take 250,000 federal agents to enforce Prohibition and that hundreds more would be needed to check the police. What followed in the 1920s was public corruption on a scale never before seen in the USA.

Source A: A cartoon showing Uncle Sam exhausted by the Devil's flow of bootleg liquor



Al Capone

Biography Al Capone, 1899–1947



- 1899 Born in New York
- 1917 Joins the Five Points Gang led by Johnny Torrio
- 1921 Moves to Chicago to work with Torrio
- 1922 Becomes a partner in Torrio's saloons, gambling houses, and brothels
- 1925 Takes over operations when Torrio leaves Chicago
- 1929 Is responsible for the St Valentine's Day Massacre
- 1931 Is indicted for income tax evasion and found guilty as charged
- 1939 Wins release from prison
- 1947 Dies in Palm Island, Florida

Al Capone epitomises the gangsters of the Prohibition era. The son of Italian immigrants, he left school at an early age and became involved in small-time criminal activities. Capone was given the nickname 'Scarface' following a fight that broke out when he was working as a bouncer at a New York club. His links to the crook Johnny Torrio led him to Chicago, where he eventually rose through the ranks to take over Torrio's operations. Capone cemented his position as one

of the leading gangsters in Chicago by bribing local officials. Before long, he had half of the city's employees on his payroll.

Capone controlled the mayor and senior police officers and fixed local elections. In Chicago he controlled speakeasies, bookmakers' joints, gambling houses, brothels, horse and race tracks, nightclubs, distilleries and breweries.

Despite his criminal activities, Capone was seen by many Americans as a glamorous person. He moved in the highest social circles and 'put Chicago on the map'. He was the first person to open soup kitchens after the 1929 Wall Street Crash, and he ordered stores to give clothes and food to the needy at his own expense.

In his quest for overall control of all Chicago gangs, Capone was involved in the infamous St Valentine's Day Massacre. He organised the shooting of several leaders of a rival gang, led by Bugs Moran, in broad daylight. It was this incident which made many Americans finally realise that the gangsters, and Capone in particular, were not the glamorous characters they had imagined.

In 1931 Capone was prosecuted for income tax evasion for the years 1925-29. It was claimed that he owed more than \$200,000 in taxes from gambling profits. He was subsequently found guilty; his role as gang leader was over. The demise of Capone seemed to herald the end of the age of the gangster. With the Depression setting in, the American people had plenty of other issues to contend with.



The bodies of gangsters lying on a Chicago garage floor following the St Valentine's Day Massacre, 1929.

Source B: A poster for the 1932 film *Scarface*



Tasks

2. What can you learn from Source A about Prohibition?
3. Why did many people consider the gangsters of the Prohibition era glamorous?
4. What impression of the USA during Prohibition does Source B present?
5. Create your own poster for a film glamorising the gangster age.
6. Write an obituary for the Prohibition era.

Chicago and the gangsters

The most common image people have of the prohibition era is the gangster. Estimates suggest that organised gangs made about \$2 billion out of the sale of illegal alcohol. The bootlegger George Remus certainly did well from the trade. He had a huge network of paid officials that allowed him to escape charge after charge against him. At one party he gave a car to each of the women guests, while all the men received diamond cuff links worth \$25,000.

The rise of the gangsters tells us a lot about American society at this time. The gangsters generally came from immigrant backgrounds. In the early 1920s the main gangs were Jewish, Polish, Irish and Italian. Gangsters generally came from poorer backgrounds within these communities. They were often poorly educated, but they were also clever and ruthless. Dan O'Banion (Irish gang leader murdered by Capone), Pete and Vince Guizenberg (hired killers who worked for Bugsy Moran and died in the St Valentine's Day Massacre), and Lucky Luciano (Italian killer who spent ten years in prison) were some of the most powerful gangsters. The gangs fought viciously with each other to control the liquor trade and also the prostitution, gambling and protection rackets that were centred on the speakeasies. They made use of new technology, especially automobiles and the Thompson sub-machine gun, which was devastatingly powerful but could be carried around and hidden under an overcoat. In Chicago alone, there were 130 gangland murders in 1926 and 1927 and not one arrest. By the late 1920s fear and bribery made law enforcement ineffective.

The gangsters operated all over the USA, but they were most closely associated with Chicago. Perhaps the best example of the power of the gangsters is Chicago gangster boss Al Capone. He arrived in Chicago in 1919, on the run from a murder investigation in New York. He ran a drinking club for his boss Johnny Torio. In 1925 Torio retired after an assassination attempt by one of his rivals, Bugsy Moran. Capone took over and proved to be a formidable gangland boss. He built up a huge network of corrupt officials among Chicago's police, local government workers, judges, lawyers and prohibition agents. He even controlled Chicago's mayor, William Hale Thompson. Surprisingly, he was a high-profile and even popular figure in the city. He was a regular at baseball and American football games and was cheered by the crowd when he took his seat. He was well known for giving generous tips (over \$100) to waiters and shop girls and spent \$30,000 on a soup kitchen for the unemployed.

Capone was supported by a ruthless gang, hand-picked for their loyalty to him. He killed two of his own men whom he suspected of plotting against him by beating their brains out with a baseball bat. By 1929 he had destroyed the power of the other Chicago gangs, committing at least 300 murders in the process. The peak of his violent reign came with the St Valentine's Day Massacre in 1929. Capone's men murdered seven of his rival Bugsy Moran's gang, using a false police car and two gangsters in police uniform to put Moran's men off their guard.

Why was prohibition ended?

The St Valentine's Day Massacre was a turning point. The papers screamed that the gangsters had graduated from murder to massacre. It seemed that prohibition, often called 'The Noble Experiment', had failed. It had made the USA lawless, the police corrupt and the gangsters rich and powerful. When the Wall Street Crash was followed by the Depression in the early 1930s, there were sound economic arguments for getting rid of it. Legalising alcohol would create jobs, raise tax revenue and free up resources tied up in the impossible task of enforcing prohibition. The Democrat President Franklin D Roosevelt was elected in 1932 and prohibition was repealed in December 1933.

ACTIVITY

Why did prohibition fail?

In the end prohibition failed. Here are four groups who could be blamed for the failure of prohibition.



a) the American people who carried on going to illegal speakeasies



b) the law enforcers who were corrupt and ignored the law breakers



c) the bootleggers who continued supplying and selling alcohol



d) the gangsters who controlled the trade through violence

What effects did Prohibition have?

- People soon found ways of getting round the law:
 - Speakeasies: illegal bars, which sold alcohol behind closed doors.
 - Moonshine or hooch: illegally made alcohol, which could be lethal.
 - Bootlegging: smuggling alcohol into the USA from Canada or the West Indies. An enormous amount of alcohol was smuggled into the USA from Canada. Some of it by people who simply rowed across to fetch it.
- Prohibition made ordinary people into criminals. Police were reluctant to enforce the law, and were open to bribes. In Chicago the mayor was known to be an associate of the gangsters.
- The gangsters stepped in to supply the demand. They made a fortune – Al Capone is supposed to have made \$100,000 a year.
- Gangsters fought to control the business and it encouraged an atmosphere of lawlessness and disrespect for the law. There were 200 gang murders in Chicago between 1927 and 1931.
- Prohibition led to a big increase in organised crime, just at the time when many Italian immigrants were arriving, having been driven out of Sicily by Mussolini.
- It led to a huge growth in prostitution, drugs, protection rackets and gambling.

Why was Prohibition repealed in 1933?

- It was clearly not working. Some states repealed their own legislation, which meant that the local police would take no action.
- The Depression meant that there was less money to spare to catch smugglers, and other more important priorities.
- Roosevelt, who became president in 1933, personally disapproved of prohibition.