

Kiss of Death

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The United States had a serious problem in the 1960s stemming from acts of violence committed by mafia families spanning multiple cities. These cities were battlefields that caught civilians in the crossfire. From my previous paper, we learned that police had a hard time getting charges of significance to actually stick. A head of one of these mafia families, Vito Genovese, was incarcerated on drug charges, but was still seriously feared within the community. But, as it turns out, he was in fear himself and his paranoia was rightly placed. Most of this fear was placed onto Joseph Valachi and his possible testimony.

From the History Channel's television series *The Mafia's Snitch: Joseph Valachi's Deadly Betrayal*, both Genovese and Valachi were serving time in an Atlanta prison for charges of **illegal trafficking of drugs**. (History, 2025, 1:08) From our textbook, *The Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime* by author Peter Reuter we know that "the markets for illegal drugs, mostly cocaine, heroin, and cannabis, probably generate, globally, more revenues than any other illegal market." (2019, p. 359) All of this following the time of prohibition allowed these families to grow so significantly. But all of this time spent in prison together turned out to be detrimental to the Genovese crime family.

The Genovese crime family was based on a **bureaucracy model** and it is how the United States government was able to convict major players (Edward Kleemans, 2019, p.34). Of course, the head of the family or Don, was Vito Genovese but a close member of the family, Joseph Valachi, was the one who ended up snitching on the family. (History, 2025, 1:05) Now as part of the package of mafia services is usually their **protection** for the family members and those who pay a tax to said family. (Kleemans, 2019, p.36) But really the protection only went so far, and if you were no longer a service to the mafia they would finger you for **assasination**. This was

believed to have happened to Joseph Valachi where word had spread that he might be giving information to the authorities. In a form of something similar to a Judas kiss from the Bible, Valachi was on the receiving end of Genovese's kiss on the cheek and handshake coined the "kiss of death" (History, 2025, 2:20)

Now, in a way to hopefully protect himself, Valachi became what Genovese feared in the first place. He broke the **code of omerta**, the greatest sin a mobster could commit (History, 2025, 4:08). Valachi did start talking to the Federal Bureau of Investigations and shared all of the operating information of the mafia in front of the United States Senate. This includes the names of the front runners, the rules and roles of the organization, and how they operated. Ultimately he said it was for revenge due to the bad treatment of the soldiers, men like himself from the families that led to him testifying. (History, 2025, 6:40)

All of these interviews and what lead up to the interviews that are in the History Channel's television series *The Mafia's Snitch: Joseph Valachi's Deadly Betrayal* are very interesting. I learned so much more about the Italian-Mafia family and how they operated by watching the breakdown of the Genovese family committed by the testimony of Joseph Valachi. His testimony in itself is also very telling. He stated himself that he is going before the committee for one major reason. That reason being, is the little men are being treated unfairly and instead of just taking it, he was going to think of himself. Essentially save himself, at least for the time being. His testimony is the first of its kind and still so important in how we understand the Italian-American mafia dynamics that we keep coming back to it. For so many years, the mafia has been wreaking havoc throughout the United States and this testimony helped turn it on its head and topple it. Now are there still mafia groups? Yes, but they are not as strong as they once were. But we do

get to see it portrayed in all kinds of media formats like movies and television series for entertainment.

References

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