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## INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER STILLE

*This interview has been edited for clarity.*

**Alexander Stille** is a professor of international journalism at the Columbia School of Journalism and the author of *Excellent Cadavers: The Mafia and the Death of the First Italian Republic*, published in 1995. In this interview with **FRONTLINE/World** reporter and producer Carola Mamberto, Stille explains how the Mafia came to dominate in Sicily and replicate its model across other parts of the country. He also assesses how powerful the Mafia is today.

**Carola Mamberto: What is the relationship between the city of Palermo and the Mafia?**

Alexander Stille: Initially, the Mafia was mainly a rural phenomenon. But, particularly after World War II, during the 1940s and 1950s, there was an enormous amount of building in Palermo and an enormous amount of dollars and resources concentrated in the city. And the Mafia tends to go where the money is. So they became concentrated heavily in Palermo and got very involved in real estate speculation and politics in the city. They took control of the flow of government money and the assigning of housing permits. In a period of several years during the 1960s, something like 2,600 housing permits were issued in the city of Palermo. Over 90 percent [of those permits] were issued to retired gentlemen who had no experience in the building trade but who were front men for the organized crime interests in the city. This gives you an idea of how the Mafia became urbanized during the 1960s and took control of lucrative activity in the city, which was building.

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## **How has the Mafia survived for so long in Sicily?**

Well, the power of the Mafia has always been a particular kind from its beginnings in the 19th century. It has distinguished itself from other forms of simple crime by having friends in high places. Often, the first Mafiosi were camp guards for the large landed aristocracy in Sicily. By being mediators between the labor force and the property owners or landowners, they often had friends in high places.

## **Some have called the Mafia Italy's second government. How is the Mafia part of the political system in Italy?**

I wouldn't say that the Mafia is a second government, in that it doesn't perform a lot of the functions that government does. But it does do some things the government does, or should do, and it derives a lot of its power from that. In particular, it offers physical protection and security, which is a sort of basic function of government.

Part of the source of the Mafia's power and the reason for its enduring strength has been that, from the very beginning of Italian unification in the 1860s, the Italian government wasn't able to guarantee basic physical security for people in the more remote parts of the country -- Sicily being one of the primary examples, an island away from the Italian mainland. It's also an area with mountains and inaccessible terrain, and in those kinds of areas, the state could not, in effect, make its word stick. So, in areas where people are allowed to threaten, intimidate, kill and get away with it, they effectively assume one of the basic rules, which is the monopoly of violence. The Mafia essentially breaks the state's monopoly of violence and tries to establish its own monopoly of violence in an area it controls.

## **How have things changed in the past 15 years?**

Because the Mafia guaranteed electoral support to parties in power, not only could it assume some of the functions of government in the form of protection but it also acted sort of parallel with the political class by electing people very close to its organization to key positions. It would be unusual if, in a city council, there wouldn't be a couple of members who were closely tied to the local Mafia boss.

This power began to be challenged in the 1980s and the early 1990s, and it was highly contested. There was a series of big trials in Palermo, which showed that it was possible to successfully put the Mafia on trial. Then, two of the key prosecutors who led many of these cases were assassinated in the summer of 1992. And that raised the stakes considerably.

This tragedy embarrassed the government into acting in a more forceful way and applying resources to the Mafia problem. It also created a change in the public mentality. The successful prosecution of these big crimes required witnesses to come forward. It meant that ordinary citizens in Sicily were asked to testify. Many people had traditionally believed we could never get Sicilians to testify against the Mafia. There's a rule of *omerta*, a kind of rule of silence that Sicilians are going to obey. But when they were presented with a credible response from the state, they actually did testify. The fact that ordinary people were beginning to testify at trials changed the atmosphere and created possibilities for people within Sicilian society to openly oppose the Mafia.

## **What's the state of the Mafia in Sicily today?**

I would say that the picture is mixed. There are periods when part of the problem is that a high degree of public attention is required to dedicate the necessary resources, and public attention comes and goes. People get tired of screaming headlines with pictures of dead bodies. It's a mistake to think the Mafia is only powerful when it kills lots of people. In the last 10 or 15 years, it's actually killed relatively few people and has avoided killing prominent government officials to avoid attracting public and government attention.

From many points of view, it's been a period of backsliding. The government has not made this a major priority, and the Mafia has returned to its former power in most places. It's not true, however, that nothing has changed. Things have not returned to the condition of the 1970s, when it was assumed that there was nothing you could ever do about the Mafia problem, and therefore it was useless to even try. Unfortunately, what we've seen in the last 15 years is that the early- to mid-'90s scandals involving politicians associated with organized crime helped to wipe out the traditional governing parties that had ruled Italy from World War II into the early '90s. However, new parties cropped up in their place, and they were faced with the same opportunities and temptations as the old parties: If you wanted the quick way to secure power and electoral success in places like Sicily, you had to deal with local powers -- in many cases, the Mafia.

**What was the significance of Vincenzo Conticello [the restaurant owner who stood up to the Mafia] pointing to his accuser in court, in that famous picture that was published in the papers the next day?**

I think the importance of someone like Conticello, getting up in court and pointing at his accuser, serves mostly as an empowering device. What we've seen in general in the last 25 years in Sicily is that the most important things done against the Mafia have been done by Sicilians who have realized that life in the place that they love, the place that they've grown up in, is not really viable unless you do something about the Mafia problem.

I've heard police officials say people need to understand that the Mafia is not a problem, it is *the* problem, and without solving that we can't solve any of the other problems. Virtually a third of Italy, one of the largest industrial countries in the world, will be in a state of permanent underdevelopment as long as this problem persists. No healthy, sane business would invest in Southern Italy under the kind of conditions that prevail there. Why would you open a factory or start a business, even though labor costs are low, knowing that you're soon going to be pressured by this person or that to use a particular supplier? An enormous number of your profits are going to be siphoned off by that, and it's just not worth it.

Foreign investment in Southern Italy is close to zero. As a result, the economy depends almost entirely on Italian state spending. So it's just not a viable, healthy situation. It's crucial for Sicilians and Southern Italians in general to understand they have to take their own thing in their hands and do it.

**Can you explain the *Addiopizzo* movement, and what it has accomplished?**

*Addiopizzo*, which means "Goodbye *Pizzo*," the price you pay for extortion, is a movement of shopkeepers and business owners to essentially guarantee that they will not pay extortion or deal with the Mafia, and therefore guarantee customers that they are buying a product or [inaudible] a store or a locale that

is not doing business with the Mafia. What's nice about it, what's innovating and interesting about it, is that it applies a different strategy, rather than a kind of law enforcement strategy, to dealing with the Mafia. It implies a kind of consumer strategy, something like a boycott, so that you apply market pressure against the Mafia. Because, presumably, if people are favoring Mafia-free products or Mafia-free businesses, it's hurting those that *are* doing business with the Mafia. This is helping to shift the incentives and give people a reason, other than reasons of principle or pride, not to cooperate with the Mafia.

### **Has it made a tangible difference?**

That's hard for me to say. I haven't been back there in the last couple of years. For the moment, from what I can gather, it's still in its beginning stages. Police have said that about 90 percent of Sicilian businesses pay the *pizzo*. I would be surprised if that has changed too much because the powers that be are considerable, but, as I said, giving people another option does open up some space, particularly if it's accompanied by commitment on the part the government.

### **What is the scope of the *pizzo*?**

The problem is not simply the shoemaker and the bread maker and the local shopkeeper paying 150 euros a month to the local Mafia boss. That's important in terms of establishing control of the territory, but the real money is made in government contracts. That's probably the biggest source of income for the Mafia now, and has been for a generation. The way this works was literally codified in the last 20 years. The Mafia had a guy who would be a go-between between the Mafia and important public officials, essentially making sure the Mafia got its cut on all major projects -- building a tunnel, building a bridge, repairing a highway.

The enormous number of corruption scandals that broke out [in Italy] in the early 1990s showed how political parties got a percentage of public contracts, which went into the coffers of political parties and, in many cases, the pockets of individual politicians. That same system existed in Southern Italy, but with the added dimension that the Mafia was getting a percentage on top of what the politicians would get. And therefore the politicians, through a combination of intimidation and greed, had an incentive to include the Mafia in the discussions.

### **Could you explain, to somebody who's not at all familiar with Italy and the Mafia, how different mafias are able to exist in Italy and why they can thrive?**

The state of different mafias in Italy now varies from region to region. Most progress has been made in Sicily, although I think the Mafia is still very strong there. In recent years, while people were paying attention to the Sicilian Mafia, the Neapolitan Camorra was becoming stronger than ever. They have gotten deeply involved in all sorts of business activities -- including controlling the Port of Naples and the enormous amount of counterfeit merchandise smuggled into the country from China. They've gotten involved in sweatshops and making counterfeit clothing sold under designer labels around the world. Being sold as Prada or Gucci, you know? May be made in some factory controlled by the [Camorra] in Southern Italy.

In Calabria, an organization known as the "Endragita," which started as a very poor rural Mafia, became an extremely rich criminal organization between the

'70s and '90s -- as powerful, or more so, and extremely ferocious when its interests are at stake. There was a series of killings in Germany in which several people were assassinated in a feud having to do with the Endragita. Unfortunately, these groups have grown very powerful. People tend to think "Mafia" equals Sicily. And *Cosa Nostra* is powerful in Sicily, but the same kind of model had reproduced in other parts of the country very successfully.

### What does the future of the Mafia look like?

I wouldn't bet against the future of the Mafia. Consider a few facts. A man from Sicily and one of the closest friends of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was reelected to Parliament in the most recent elections, in 2008. This man was actually convicted of collusion with the Mafia. Even though his case remains on appeal, what kind of signal does it send when somebody has been convicted of such a serious crime and they are put up for reelection?

There was a Mafia gangster convicted of murder and heroin smuggling who was hired by Prime Minister Berlusconi in the 1970s. And Berlusconi referred to him as a hero because, while he was in prison and being pressured to testify, he refused to implicate his former employers and talk about his relationship [with the prime minister]. So, again, what kind of signal does that send to a country? The signal it sends to me is that having friends in organized crime is an acceptable thing. Doing business with them is an acceptable thing.

When there's a public emergency, you'll make a big show of sending police in and making some arrests and doing this and that, but as long as the Mafia can count on having friends in power, it will continue to be very powerful. So I'm not wildly optimistic right now.

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