

LT. JOSEPH PETROSINO vs

THE BLACK HAND

Stephan Talty on His
New Book about
**America's Heroic Italian American
Police Detective and the
Deadly Criminal Organization
He Fought**

The early years of the 20th century witnessed a concerted crime wave that first terrorized the public in New York City, and then spread its intimidation and panic nationwide. Death threats, child kidnappings, bombings, execution-style murders of innocent victims—the deadly violence and destruction were the despicable acts of a secret society of criminal Italian immigrants whose calling card was the symbol of a black hand print. As the Black Hand organization's lurid crimes fueled disturbing news-

paper headlines and stoked ethnic animosities, one fearless New York cop, the nation's first Italian American police detective, made his life-and-death mission bringing Black Hand members to justice.

It's the kind of gripping crime tale Stephan Talty can't resist. The best-selling author of five non-fiction books, including "Empire of Blue Water" (the story of the great pirate captain Henry Morgan), "Escape from the Land of Snows" (an account of the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet in 1959); and "Agent Garbo" (the story of the greatest double agent of World War II), Talty has also written, among others, crime novels "Black Irish" and "Hangman," and co-authored "A Captain's Duty," an account of the tension-filled confrontation at sea with Somali pirates that was made into the 2013 Tom Hanks movie "Captain Phillips."

Talty took time out from a busy book tour to answer questions about his latest book, "The Black Hand: The Epic War Between a Brilliant Detective and The Deadliest Secret Society in American History."

—Don Oldenburg



New York City Police Department





Above: Detective Lt. Joseph Petrosino (left), Inspector Carey and Inspector McCafferty escorting hitman Tomasso "The Ox" Petto (second from left) in 1903

While most Americans probably don't know the name Joe Petrosino, his story is fascinating and so telling of the early 1900s, and of immigration issues then and now, that it's hard to understand why. Perhaps your book and the upcoming Leonardo DiCaprio film version will change that?

Talty: Petrosino was absolutely a hero of the early 20th century and it's curious how little he's known today. We imagine that the first people to go up against Italian crime and the early Mafia were the FBI and big city police departments. But, in fact, it was Italians, led by Petrosino. I think the rise of the Mafia also erased the memory of the Black Hand, and that led to the detective being forgotten. I do hope the book and a potential film will re-introduce Petrosino to Americans. He's such a fascinating figure, both personally and culturally. His story reveals so much of what it takes to become an American, and how painful that process was for the first wave of Italian Americans. It's really one of the great immigrant narratives in our history.

You've written both nonfiction and fiction stories of courage, overcoming great odds, amazing tales about homicide detectives, spies, secret missions and secret agents, even man-versus-nature tales. How does the story of Petrosino and *The Black Hand* fit into your wheelhouse?

Talty: It's something I recognize only in looking back at my previous books. I'm not sure why, but I'm drawn to stories where an exceptional individual faces off against a system or an institution. Captain Henry Morgan vs. the Spanish Empire. The young Dalai Lama vs. the Chinese state. They're stories of defiance and struggle, and for some reason they appeal to me. Petrosino was an isolated figure in many ways. Many Italians thought he'd sold out to "the whites" and the Irish and the WASPs by taking on the Black Hand. And, of course, the criminal leaders wanted him dead. But he persevered—he was sure of himself in a way that I find intriguing. It must have been a lonely existence, with possible assassins passing you on the street every day, at least until he got married. The fact that he carried on so relentlessly ... I find it admirable and rare.

When and why did you first start looking into this story? What about it appealed to you personally and as a writer?

Talty: I read a lot of nonfiction and I'd come across his name years ago. It's funny, I told my agent about Petrosino and he thought about it and got back to me. His verdict was: "It's an amazing story, but here's my problem with it. He lost." That prevented me from writing the book for years—the idea that the detective had, in the end, been defeated by the Black Hand. But when I looked further into the archives, I found that he'd actually laid out the blueprint for destroying it, and in that way he'd succeeded. ➤



Leonard Zhukovskiy

Joseph Petrosino memorial plaque in Lower Manhattan



Joseph Petrosino's coffin placed in hearse during his funeral on April 12, 1909, after his assassination a month earlier in Palermo, Italy

The Black Hand was sort of the precursor to the Mafia in America, right? To what degree did the conditions experienced by Italian immigrants in the United States at that time give rise to the Black Hand as a quasi-protective organization, which sometimes is the romantic view of the Mafia? And to what degree was the Black Hand simply a murderous, criminal, terrorist organization that, ironically, often targeted Italian immigrants?

Talty: It was completely the latter. The Black Hand began as extortionists. You'd receive a series of letters that grew more and more threatening, saying if you didn't pay a certain amount of money, your home would be blown up or your children would be kidnapped. And those things happened all the time. The "protective" aspect was introduced when a stranger knocked at your door and said he knew the Black Hand criminals and perhaps could negotiate with the barbarians. This new "friend," of course, was working with the Black Hand. Italians did experience harsh, alienating, sometimes terrifying conditions in America, but the Black Hand was part of the terror and never a true ally of the new immigrant.

Petrosino's life in America was shaped by the same immigrant experience as the Black Hand leaders but he emerged very differently than they did. Why?

Talty: It's mostly about his character, I think, and the fact that he came to America as a teenager. He loved the country; he was patriotic in the way that many immigrants are. So, he'd absorbed the ideals of his new home and saw the Black Hand as a threat to other Italians doing the same. For him, it was about more than crime and punishment. It was about clearing the way so that Italian immigrants could be accepted as true Americans.

At the end of the 19th century, Petrosino, the first Italian police detective in the United States, was at the start of "scientific policing." In his dogged pursuit of the Black Hand members, did he employ new techniques

Talty: Both. He was a smart guy, and he used new methods to try to catch Black Hand leaders. Handwriting analysis—at one point, he ordered every Black Hand



1910 New York Police Department wanted poster for Black Hand members Vito Sorisi, Rosario Castelli and his wife Giovanna Castelli for kidnapping a child

suspect into their local precincts to get a sample of their handwriting to compare them with the threatening letters that innocent people were receiving. He was brilliant with disguises. He created the NYPD bomb squad and traced explosives back to their makers. And he used the press to get the public on his side. At the same time, if he thought a suspect was guilty and was holding out on him, he was fully capable of handing the guy a beat-down, which was accepted in the society at that time.

In those days, some Americans viewed Italian immigrants as more like Black Hand types instead of the Petrosino types, correct? Was Petrosino aware that he was the poster boy for helping to improve the image and lives of Italian immigrants in America?

Talty: Italians in the early 1900's were widely seen as conspirators, natural-born criminals, members of secret societies. The Black Hand was fuel to that fire. After they arrived, the stereotype hardened and was broadcast from one coast to the other.

Petrosino was acutely aware of this. He felt the Italian would always remain an outsider if the Black Hand continued to define what it meant to be Italian. And he gave interviews to the New York Times and other places talking about what being Italian really meant: love of family, a joy in the simple pleasure of life, hard work. He wanted to counteract the dark image.



Lt. Joseph Petrosino

How long and to what lengths did you research Petrosino and the Black Hand to write this book? And, in the process, what fascinated you, surprised you, and amused you the most about Petrosino the man?

Talty: I'd been studying him for years. What really helped me along in my research were two things: Susan Burke, Petrosino's granddaughter,

agreed to give me the family archives, which were filled with intimate details of his life; and Anthony Giacchino, a documentary filmmaker who'd researched the detective's life for years, gave me access to his files, which were extensive. That really broke open the floodgates. My parents were both immigrants, from rural Ireland. They didn't have the easiest lives when they came over, and so Petrosino's story appealed to me. I loved the action of the story, the intensity of it, and I was fascinated by Petrosino's almost spiritual mission: to reclaim the good name of Italians in America. That made it more than a story of cops and bad guys.

Same question but about the Black Hand. While, probably, not much amused you, what fascinated and surprised you about it?

Talty: The interesting thing is that, statistically, Italians in the early 1900s committed less crime per capita than many other ethnic groups. So, why did groups like the Black Hand get so much publicity? Part of it was prejudice, of course, but when you look at their methods, you see they were designed to terrify. They would write these elaborate letters, for instance, that slowly grew more menacing. They put the sweat equity in; they really studied their craft. The Black Hand was theatrical, operatic—they had a psychological brilliance that their Irish counterparts lacked. ▲



Stephan Talty

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