

## **SACCO & VANZETTI: A MODERN PERSPECTIVE – TWO IMMIGRANTS TARGETED FOR THEIR BELIEFS**

Eighty years ago, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were put to death by the state of Massachusetts.

They had been wrongly convicted and sentenced to death for the robbery and killing of two men, a paymaster and a guard who were delivering wages to a shoe company. During the seven years of their imprisonment, people around the world organized a campaign to save these two men--both Italian immigrants and anarchists. But despite overwhelming support and the abundance of evidence pointing to their innocence, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed in 1927.

To understand why this travesty of justice occurred, we first have to look

at the hostile political climate towards immigrants and radicals. Following the First World War, in what became known as the Red Scare, the U.S. government responded to a wave of strikes and political unrest with force.

The Palmer Raids of the early 1920s, organized by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, resulted in thousands of radicals, especially immigrants, being rounded up, beaten, and held for days without the right to contact a lawyer or even family.

It's clear from the court proceedings that Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted not because the evidence proved them guilty, but because they were anarchists and immigrants.

Sacco, for example, was badgered by prosecutors as to why he dodged the draft rather than fight in the First World War. Judge Webster Thayer, who presided over the trial, said to the jury at the outset, "Although this man (Sacco) may not have committed the crime attributed to him, he is nonetheless culpable [guilty] because he is the enemy of our existing institutions." Outside the courtroom, a friend of Judge Thayer's reported that he heard him say, "Did you see what I did with those anarchist bastards the other day?"

The jury was made up of white, native-born people, and the jury foreman was a former police chief who saluted the American flag every time he entered the courtroom. This was the jury that, in the midst of an incredible anti-immigrant backlash, was supposed to impartially decide the fate of two Italian immigrants who were avowed anarchists. As an appendix to a collection of Sacco and Vanzetti's letters states, "Outside the courtroom, the Red Scare hysteria was rampant; it was allowed to dominate within. The prosecutor systematically played on the feelings of the jury by exploiting the unpatriotic and despised beliefs of Sacco and Vanzetti, and the judge allowed him thus to divert and pervert the jury's mind."

The anti-Red sensationalism overshadowed the evidence put forward that Sacco and Vanzetti were not the culprits. A total of 99 witnesses took the stand to say that they were innocent. Just before the robbery took place, Sacco was at the Italian consulate office, trying to obtain a passport--something that a consulate official testified to. More than a dozen people took the stand to verify that Vanzetti had delivered fish to their homes--miles away from the crime scene--on the day of the killing. Prosecutors failed to find the stolen money--or come up with a credible motive for why two anarchists would steal workers' wages.

During the years that they were behind bars, an impressive campaign was launched to win them a new trial. On the eve of their August execution, miners in Colorado went on strike; there were clashes with police in London, Paris, and Geneva, Switzerland; and protesters took to the streets in Berlin, Warsaw, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rome, Moscow, Barcelona, Milan, Havana, Tokyo and Lisbon--not to mention across the U.S. But Judge Thayer denied eight different requests for retrial put before him.



**Demonstration for Sacco and Vanzetti,  
Boston 1925**

In a letter written to a friend from death row, Sacco wrote: "What I wish more than all in this hour of agony is that our case and our fate may be understood...and serve as a tremendous lesson to the forces of freedom--so that our suffering and death will not have been in vain."

Vanzetti's statement also is a testament to the impact the two men had: "If it had not been for these things, I might have lived out my life talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have died, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life could we hope to do such work for tolerance, for justice, for man's understanding of man as now we do by accident. Our words--our lives--our pains--nothing! The taking of our lives--lives of a good shoemaker and a poor fish-peddler--all! That last moment belongs to us--that agony is our triumph."

## **Questions**

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- 1) **How does the Red Scare relate to the arrest and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti?**
- 2) **Describe two ways in which the justice system was biased against Sacco and Vanzetti. (Hint: judge, jury, court procedures, etc.)**
- 3) **What lessons can be learned from this event?**

**Interpreting political cartoons - A lot can be said by making historical analogies or comparisons.**

- 4) **What is the connection between Salem in 1692 and Boston in 1927?**
- 5) **What is the cartoonist trying to show by making this comparison?**

