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Sacco & Vanzetti Case

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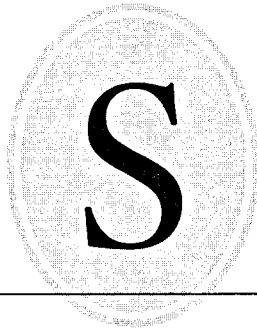
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SACCO-VANZETTI CASE. Nicola Sacco, a skilled shoemaker born in 1891, and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler born in 1888, were arrested on 5 May 1920, for a payroll holdup and murder in South Braintree, Massachusetts. A jury, sitting under Judge Webster Thayer, found the men guilty on 14 July 1921. Sacco and Vanzetti were executed on 23 August 1927 after several appeals and the recommendation of a special advisory commission serving the Massachusetts governor. The execution sparked worldwide protests against repression of Italian Americans, immigrants, labor militancy, and radical political beliefs.



Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. The Italian immigrants and self-declared anarchists, who were executed in 1927—unjustly, many people still believe. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Numerous legal issues arose regarding the case's prosecution that sidelined the question of guilt or innocence, including prejudicial behavior of an unscrupulous district attorney, Frederick G. Katzmann, complemented by an often inept defense; and profane and violent prejudice by the judge against the defendants, expressed outside the courtroom and possibly implicit in his behavior on the bench. Other issues included alleged perjury by a state police captain; refusal to address circumstances pointing to a group of professional criminals; inept and potentially deceptive presentation of ballistics evidence; and failure of the evidence as a whole to remove "reasonable doubt." Throughout the trial, the men were disadvantaged by their avowed anarchism, their status as unassimilated alien workers, and the backdrop of the red scare following World War I. Scholarly legal opinion overwhelmingly holds that apart from the question of guilt or innocence, the case is an extremely serious instance of failure in the administration of justice.

Within the United States, Sacco and Vanzetti received from the start the help of compatriots, fellow anarchists, and scattered labor groups. By 1927 they had support in money, action, and words of concerned lawyers, numerous writers, prominent activists, organized labor, and the Communist Party leadership. Nevertheless, it is clear that the majority of persons in the United States who held an opinion, and they were in the millions, believed the verdict sound and approved of the death penalty.

The case has inspired writers and artists from the 1920s onward, including several novels, plays, television presentations, and over a hundred poems by such prominent writers as John Dos Passos, Countee Cullen, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Upton Sinclair's novel *Boston* (1928) and Maxwell Anderson's prize-winning play *Winterset* (1935) reached particular fame, and Ben Shahn pro-

duced a notable series of gouaches on the two men. The letters Sacco and Vanzetti wrote during their seven years in prison are still regarded by many as the most profoundly human and genuinely literary commentary on the case.

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See also Anarchists; Italian Americans; and vol. 9: Vanzetti's Last Statement.