

Why were Sacco and Vanzetti executed?

ON 15 APRIL 1920 Fred Parmenter, the paymaster of a shoe factory in South Braintree, and an armed guard were attacked by two men who opened fire on them. The attackers escaped with \$15,000. Before he died Parmenter was able to say that his attackers had been slim foreigners with olive skins. The guard also died soon afterwards.

On 5 May 1920 two Italian-born labourers – Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti – were arrested and charged with the murder of Parmenter and the guard. Both Sacco and Vanzetti were self-confessed ANARCHISTS and hated capitalism and the American system of government. Sacco and Vanzetti were tried before Judge Webster Thayer. Their trial began in May 1921 and lasted 45 days.

The trial took place at the height of the Red Scare. It aroused such strong emotions among the American people that it took a week to find a jury of twelve men (out of the 875 who were called to the court) that were acceptable to both the defence and the prosecution. The jury in the trial retired to consider their verdict on 14 July 1921. They returned a verdict of guilty the same day. Sacco and Vanzetti were sentenced to death.

The trial was unusual in that it was reported in newspapers all over the world. There were demonstrations in cities across the world in support of Sacco and Vanzetti. The American Embassy in Paris was bombed as a protest against the verdict. The protesters claimed that the trial had not been fairly conducted, and that Sacco and Vanzetti were being singled out because of their politics and their race.



SOURCE 1 Sacco and Vanzetti



SOURCE 2 A protest in London against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, 1927

Their case was taken to appeal in higher courts, but none of them would overturn the original verdict. The process dragged on for six years. The last unsuccessful appeal was heard in 1927. Sacco and Vanzetti were put to death in the electric chair on 24 August 1927.

In the 1970s the Governor of Massachusetts granted Sacco and Vanzetti a formal pardon and accepted that a mistrial had taken place.

The trial

Below is a summary of the evidence which the prosecution and defence brought to the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti.

Evidence for the prosecution

- 61 eyewitnesses identified them as the killers. They were sure some Italian-looking men did it.
- Sacco and Vanzetti were both carrying loaded guns at the time of their arrests.
- Forensic experts say that Sacco's pistol matched the pistol that killed the guard.
- The prosecution said Sacco and Vanzetti had acted in a guilty manner when they were arrested and had lied to the police.
- Vanzetti had a previous conviction for armed robbery in December 1919.

Evidence for the defence

- 107 people confirmed Sacco and Vanzetti's alibi that they were somewhere else at the time of the crime. But most of them were recent Italian immigrants who could hardly speak any English.
- The prosecution witnesses did not agree on details, e.g. what the men were wearing at the time of the crime, and many changed their evidence by the time of the trial.
- A number of other men confessed to being the murderers.
- It was not a crime to carry a gun (many Americans did). Sacco and Vanzetti were worried about being attacked because of their political beliefs.
- The ballistic evidence on the guns was very dubious – there were rumours it had been rigged.
- Sacco and Vanzetti said that they had lied to the police because they thought they would be victimised because they were foreigners and had radical political beliefs.



SOURCE 3
Sacco and Vanzetti at their trial



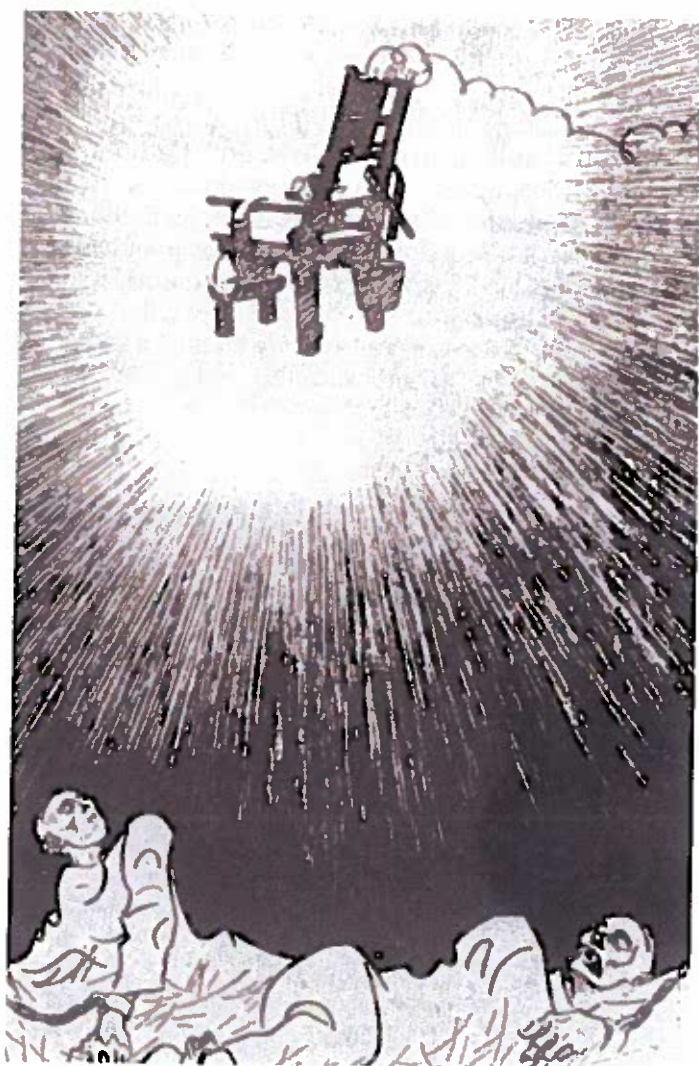
SOURCE 4 After the trial Judge Thayer is reported to have said

“ Did you see what I did to those anarchistic bastards the other day? ”

He is also supposed to have called Sacco and Vanzetti 'dagos' and 'sons of bitches' in private conversation during the trial.

SOURCE 5 A leading American lawyer made the following remarks about Judge Thayer

“ I have known Judge Thayer all my life . . . I say that he is a narrow-minded man; he is an unintelligent man; he is full of prejudice; he is carried away by fear of Reds, which [has] captured about ninety per cent of the American people. ”



SOURCE 6 A German cartoon suggesting that Sacco and Vanzetti were praying for the electric chair to save them from the American legal system

Importance of the trial

- The trial was reported all over the world and showed the intolerance of US society. As Italian immigrants, the two men were victims of racial **discrimination** and were denied rights they were entitled to.
- It exposed the unfairness of the American legal system. The two men were convicted on flimsy evidence, although subsequent evidence suggested that Sacco may have been guilty.
- In the 1970s the Governor of Massachusetts granted Sacco and Vanzetti a formal pardon and agreed that a mis-trial had taken place.

Source D: Proclamation from the governor of Massachusetts, August 1977

Therefore I, Michael S Dukakis, hereby proclaim Tuesday, August 23, 1977, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti Memorial Day and declare, further, that any stigma and disgrace should be forever removed from the names of the two men.

SOURCE 7 As they were led from the court, Vanzetti commented

“ What I say is that I am innocent . . . It is seven years that we are in jail. What we have suffered no human tongue can say, and yet you see me before you, not trembling, you see me looking in your eyes straight . . . not ashamed or in fear . . . We were tried in a time that has now passed into history. I mean by that, a time when there was hysteria of resentment and hate against the people of our principles, against the foreigner . . .

I am suffering because I am a radical and indeed I am a radical; I have suffered because I was Italian and indeed I am an Italian; . . . but I am so convinced to be right that if you could execute me two times, and if I could be reborn two other times, I would live again to do what I have done already.

[As he was being led to the electric chair Vanzetti said]

I want to tell you that I am innocent and that I have never committed any crime but sometimes some sin . . . I wish to forgive some people for what they are now doing to me. ”

SOURCE 8 Robert K. Murray, Red Scare, 1955

“ Their many sympathisers . . . continued to claim that the word ‘anarchist’ rather than any criminal act had sent them to the electric chair, and the whole incident was denounced as a prime example of American disdain for justice and prejudice against the foreigner. ”

Source B: Demonstrators in Boston in 1925 in support of Sacco and Vanzetti

