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Summary Article: **Sacco and Vanzetti**

From *The Social History of Crime and Punishment in America*

After the Russian Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, fears of communism quickly spread throughout the United States, and in 1919, a series of bombings heightened these suspicions. In April, the U.S. Postal Service intercepted several mail bombs, and in June, eight bombs—in eight cities—exploded within minutes of each other. Fears of conspiracy and communists at the national level further fed social hysterias. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and his assistant J. Edgar Hoover led a series of raids throughout the country (known as the Palmer Raids), and in May 1920, two Italian immigrants in Braintree, Massachusetts, found themselves at the center of this national hysteria. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were quickly accused, tried, and convicted of murder. Normally, a murder conviction would not make national and international headlines, but this case centered on the ethnicity of the accused, national origin, and political leanings. To this day, much controversy surrounds the Sacco-Vanzetti case, questioning if they really were anarchists.

On April 15, 1920, F. A. Parmenter and Alessandro Berardelli—a shoe factory paymaster and his guard—were shot in South Braintree, Massachusetts. Records note that about \$15,000 in cash was taken, which was not an uncommon crime. Immediately, Sacco and Vanzetti were not suspects, but they fell into a police trap at Boda's Garage three weeks later. The duo, both carrying weapons, lied to the police about their whereabouts and weapons. They were arrested on the basis that they were carrying a weapon similar to that of the crime and the vehicle they were claiming was seen in the Braintree area at the time of the shooting.

On September 11, 1920, they were charged, and Vanzetti was also charged with a December 24, 1919, robbery in Bridgewater. In the summer of 1920, Vanzetti stood trial for the Bridgewater robbery, and he was subsequently found guilty, even though he had a sound alibi and witnesses to support him. He received a stiff sentence of 10 to 15 years for an attempted robbery with no injuries. After the harsh verdict, the recently formed American Civil Liberties Union hired Fred H. Moore, a well-known labor attorney on the west coast, to defend Sacco and Vanzetti. Moore used his own socialist beliefs to defend the duo, and throughout the trial he likened the Braintree police to the actions of the Palmer Raids. More so, he argued that the two were being wrongly prosecuted because they did not fit the American ideal, nor did they speak much English.

The trial lasted six weeks, and Moore used grassroots techniques to rally not only national public support but also that of the international community. He even enlisted the help of the Italian government. On July 14, 1921, the jury found the duo guilty, even though the evidence was conflicting, evidence that the crime could have been committed by the Morelli Gang, and a confession from convicted bank robber Celestino Madeiros (given in 1925) came into play.



A group tries to draw support for an upcoming protest in London, England, in 1921 to support protest of the death sentences imposed on Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

Several witnesses testified that Sacco and Vanzetti were in Boston at the time of the murders, but these accounts did not aid the defendants. In addition to base facts, the prosecutor—Frederick G. Katzman—used the defendants; political beliefs as motive for the murder. The two were known to converse with anarchists and socialists.

In addition to the conflicting testimonies, Judge Webster Thayer repeatedly threw out testimony from known political activists, in the retrial he refused to allow the testimony of Celestino Madeiros, and he presided over Vanzetti's trial for the attempted robbery in 1919. Thayer's actions reflect the rise of nativism in the United States, and they also mirror the amount of media attention the case received. Moore captivated his audience and he made frequent use of newspapers and other media outlets to argue that the defendants were being penalized for their political beliefs and not for their actions.

In 1924, while attempting to reverse the court's decision, Moore was replaced as defending council. William Thompson, a well-known Bostonian, took over the case. As the defense progressed, he stated that he did not care for the defendants political beliefs, but he did admire them for their dedication and determination. He attempted to downplay the political front, but it was to no avail. In 1926, the Massachusetts Supreme Court reviewed the case, but it did not see a different outcome (*Commonwealth v. Sacco and Vanzetti*, 255 Mass. 369, 151 N.E. 839 [1926]). Attempts to save the duo lasted until 1927.

The two faced their fate on April 23, 1927, as they died in the electric chair. Afterward, they received an elaborate funeral in Boston, as the trial had brought great attention to the city. At the time, comparisons were made between the Sacco-Vanzetti affair and the Boston Massacre.

See Also: Anarchists; Italian Americans; Political Dissidents.

Further Readings

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