



## Sacco and Vanzetti case

The Sacco and Vanzetti case is widely regarded as a miscarriage of justice in American legal history. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italian immigrants and anarchists, were executed for **murder** by the state of Massachusetts in 1927 on the basis of doubtful ballistics **evidence**. For countless observers throughout the world, Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted because of their political beliefs and ethnic background.

The Sacco and Vanzetti case began in South Braintree, Massachusetts, on April 15, 1920. Workers at the Slater & Morrill shoe factory were paid in cash. The money to be paid out that day, \$15,773.51, was placed in two steel boxes, each secured by a Yale lock, and picked up by payroll guard Alessandro Berardelli and paymaster Frederick A. Parmenter for escort to the factory. The two guards began walking toward the shoe factory at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Just as they passed two men leaning against a pipe-rail fence, the men attacked the guards. In the struggle that followed, Berardelli was shot four times, with the last shot coming as he had fallen to his knees. Parmenter was shot once in the chest and once in the back as he staggered and fell in the street.

The two attackers fired several other shots, apparently to signal accomplices. A dark-colored touring car, with three men inside, picked up the robbers and the payroll boxes. The car headed west, out of town. Berardelli was dead when the **medical**

**examiner** arrived on the scene at 4 p.m. Parmenter regained consciousness long enough to make a statement that he did not recognize the gunmen. He then died at 5 a.m. the next day.

Eyewitness reports differed on almost every crucial part of the evidence. The description of the gunmen's builds, appearances, and clothes varied widely among the many people on the street that day. There was also disagreement about when the bullets were fired and who fired them. Some witnesses reported that a third robber had fired shots. Even the exact sequence of the crime varied among observers.

The police suspected anarchists, in part because anarchists at the time were engaged in a number of bombings and robberies. Michael Stewart, the police chief of Bridgewater, Massachusetts, had been assisting the Justice Department in rounding up Italian anarchists for deportation. One of the anarchists, Ferruccio Coacci, failed to report for deportation at the east Boston immigration station on the same day as the payroll robbery. Stewart concluded that the robbery and murders must have been committed by Coacci and his comrades, among whom were Sacco, Vanzetti, Riccardo Orciani, and Mario Buda. Stewart also considered them responsible for a botched holdup of a shoe factory in Bridgewater in December 1919.

Nicola Sacco (1891–1927) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1888–1927) both immigrated to the United States from Italy in 1908. Sacco found work as an edge-trimmer in shoe factories, while Vanzetti labored as a fish peddler. Both men were followers of Luigi Galleani, an anarchist

who advocated revolutionary violence, including bombings and assassinations. On May 3, 1920, they learned that an Italian anarchist had died of a purported suicide while in federal custody. The dead man had been involved in a bomb plot with other anarchists, including Sacco and Vanzetti.

On May 5, 1920, Sacco and Vanzetti were either hiding Italian anarchist literature, including a bomb manual, or moving dynamite. Both men were carrying pistols and ammunition when arrested, and during their interrogation—initially about their radical activities, not the payroll robbery and murders—they told lies and gave contradictory statements to the police. The authorities concluded that the behavior of Sacco and Vanzetti meant that the men were guilty of something—presumably the payroll murders.

The trial of Sacco and Vanzetti for the South Braintree murders was held in Dedham, Massachusetts, from May 31 to July 14, 1921. Police believed that Sacco was one of the gunmen and that Vanzetti had been one of the three men seen in the getaway car. During the trial, 169 witnesses testified about 226 items of evidence. Sacco claimed to be in Boston on April 15 to arrange for passports so that he could return to Italy with his family. An Italian consul officer supported Sacco's statement. More than twenty witnesses, all of Italian background, testified that Vanzetti had sold them fish on the day of the crime.

The prosecution's chief expert, Captain William Proctor of the state police, did not hold that Sacco's Colt .32-caliber automatic fired the bullet that killed Berardelli (The remaining five bullets taken from the two bodies could not have been fired from the guns found on Sacco and Vanzetti.) Nevertheless, by prearrangement with District Attorney Frederic G. Katzmann, Proctor testified that the bullet in question was consistent with having been fired from the gun, meaning any Colt .32-caliber automatic, not necessarily Sacco's weapon. Katzmann also knew that the .38-caliber revolver found on Vanzetti at the time of his arrest could not have been taken from the slain guard, as the prosecution claimed. The guard's weapon was a .32-caliber revolver with a different serial number—evidence withheld from the defense.

The jury returned a guilty verdict on July 14, 1921. Each of the defendants was found guilty of first-degree murder. The weight of evidence—the weapons, ballistic tests, and eyewitness testimony—and the issue of consciousness of guilt were crucial in convicting Sacco and Vanzetti, but emotional factors were also heavily present. The presiding judge, a

man who had requested to work on the trial because he hated anarchists, influenced the jury against the suspects with his instructions about the guilty behavior of the men. The prosecutor emphasized the Italian background of Sacco and Vanzetti.

A six-year struggle to save Sacco and Vanzetti followed the trial. Countless observers worldwide were convinced that political intolerance and racial bigotry had condemned two men whose only offense was that of being foreigners, atheists, and anarchists. Sacco and Vanzetti defenders eventually included radicals, trade unionists, intellectuals, liberals, and even some conservatives. Others were steadfast in their belief that the American system of justice could do no wrong and that the two subversives were guilty as charged, had been fairly tried, and deserved the maximum penalty.

The fate of Sacco and Vanzetti, however, was not decided in the arena of public opinion. Eight motions for a new trial in accordance with Massachusetts law were submitted to the trial judge. Several pertained to perjured testimony by prosecution witnesses and to collusion between local police and Justice Department agents. Another addressed a jailhouse confession by a convicted bank robber, Celestino Madieros, who claimed he and other members of the Morelli gang of professional criminals had committed the South Braintree holdup and murders. Each motion was denied. After the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that no errors of law or abuses of discretion had been committed, the judge sentenced Sacco and Vanzetti to death on April 9, 1927.

In the face of mounting criticism of the legal proceedings and the impending death sentence, Massachusetts Governor Alvan T. Fuller appointed a committee on June 1, 1927 to review the case and advise him on the issue of clemency. The Lowell committee, named after its chair, Harvard University President A. Lawrence Lowell, ignored exculpatory evidence the defense had discovered since the trial while validating the prosecution's every step. Reporting its findings to Governor Fuller on July 27, the Lowell Committee declared that the trial and appeals process had been fair and advised against clemency. Governor Fuller followed the committee's recommendation. Despite continuing worldwide protests and demonstrations, Sacco and Vanzetti were electrocuted at Charlestown State Prison on August 23, 1927.

By this point, the case had become too controversial to quietly fade away. Scholars and scientists have spent the subsequent decades reexamining the evidence and the trial testimony. In the most current thinking about the case, Vanzetti is regarded as



Italian immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (middle, foreground) were accused of killing a paymaster and stealing about \$16,000 in 1920. Many believed they were convicted and executed in 1927 because of their anarchistic beliefs. AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

innocent of any involvement in the murders. The weight of opinion is that Vanzetti, although innocent, was willing to die to become a martyr for the cause of anarchy.

Less certainty exists about the innocence of Sacco. **Ballistics** tests in 1983 showed that the bullet that allegedly killed Berardelli came from the Colt revolver taken from Sacco at the time of his arrest. A panel of **firearms** experts concluded that Sacco was probably guilty either as a conspirator or a perpetrator of the crime. Another group of experts insists that there exists an overwhelming probability that a substitution of bullets took place and that Sacco was completely innocent. They contend that both Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent victims of a frame-up.

Forensic evidence in the Sacco and Vanzetti case has badly deteriorated in the passage of time. It is unlikely that anyone will ever be able to conclusively

prove the guilt or innocence of the two anarchists at this late date.