

At 3:00 P.M. on April 15, 1920, a paymaster and his guard were carrying a factory payroll of \$15,776 through the main street of South Braintree, Massachusetts, a small industrial town south of Boston. Two men standing by a fence suddenly pulled out guns and fired on them. The gunmen snatched up the cash boxes dropped by the mortally wounded pair and jumped into a waiting automobile. The bandit gang, numbering four or five in all, sped away, eluding their pursuers. At first this brutal murder and robbery, not uncommon in post-World War I America, aroused only local interest.

Three weeks later, on the evening of May 5, 1920, two Italians, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, fell into a police trap that had been set for a suspect in the Braintree crime. Although originally not under suspicion, both men were carrying guns at the time of their arrest and when questioned by the authorities they lied. As a result they were held and eventually indicted for the South Braintree crimes. Vanzetti was also charged with an earlier holdup attempt that had taken place on December 24, 1919, in the nearby town of Bridgewater. These events were to mark the beginning of twentieth-century America's most notorious political trial.



Bartolomeo Vanzetti (second from right) and Nicola Sacco (far right) as seen in SACCO AND VANZETTI, a film by Peter Miller. A First Run Features release.

The arrest of Sacco and Vanzetti had coincided with the period of the most intense political repression in American history, the "Red Scare" 1919-20. The police trap they had fallen into had been set for a comrade of theirs, suspected primarily because he was a foreign-born radical. While neither Sacco nor Vanzetti had any previous criminal record, they were long recognized by the authorities and their communities as anarchist militants who had been extensively involved in labor strikes, political agitation, and antiwar propaganda and who had had several serious confrontations with the law.

On the night of their arrest, authorities found in Sacco's pocket a draft of a handbill for an anarchist meeting that featured Vanzetti as the main speaker. In this treacherous atmosphere, when initial questioning by the police focused on their radical activities and not on the specifics of the Braintree crime, the two men lied in response. These falsehoods created a "consciousness of guilt" in the minds of the authorities, but the implications of that phrase soon became a central issue in the Sacco-Vanzetti case: Did the lies of the two men signify criminal involvement in the Braintree murder and robbery, as the authorities claimed, or did they signify an understandable attempt to conceal their radicalism and protect their friends during a time of national hysteria concerning foreign-born radicals, as their supporters were to claim?

Their new lawyer, Fred H. Moore, completely changed the nature of their legal strategy. He decided it was no longer possible to defend Sacco and Vanzetti solely against the criminal charges of murder and robbery. Instead he would have them frankly acknowledge their anarchism in court, try to establish that their arrest and prosecution stemmed from their radical activities, and dispute the prosecution's insistence that only hard, nonpolitical evidence had implicated the two men in common crimes. Moore would try to expose the prosecution's hidden motive: its desire to aid the federal and military authorities in suppressing the Italian anarchist movement to which Sacco and Vanzetti belonged.

Moore's defense of the two men soon became so openly and energetically political that its scope quickly transcended its local roots. He organized public meetings, solicited the support of labor unions, contacted international organizations, initiated new investigations, and distributed tens of thousands of defense pamphlets throughout the United States and the world. Much to the chagrin of some anarchist comrades, Moore would even enlist the aid of the Italian government in the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti, who were still, nominally at least, Italian citizens. Moore's aggressive strategy transformed a little known case into an international cause celebre.

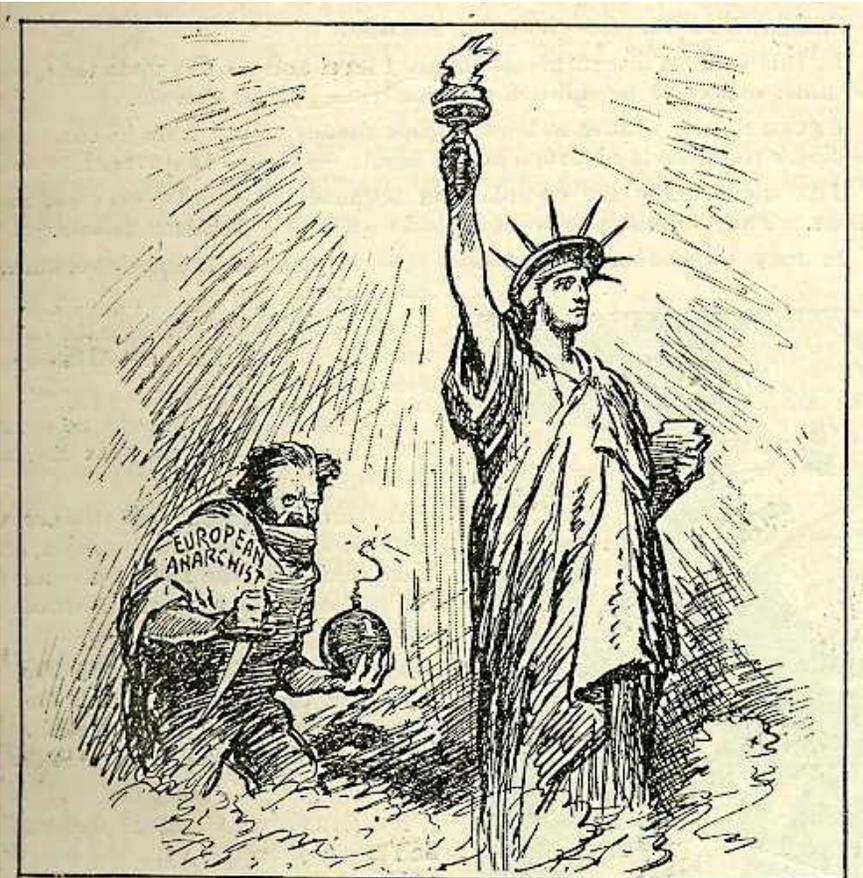
After a hard-fought trial of six weeks, during which the themes of patriotism and radicalism were often sharply contrasted by the prosecution and the defense, the jury found Sacco and Vanzetti guilty of robbery and murder on July 14, 1921. This verdict marked, however, only the beginning of a lengthy legal struggle to save the two men. It extended until 1927, during which time the defense made many separate motions, appeals, and petitions to both state and federal courts in an attempt to gain a new trial.

Presented in these motions were evidence of perjury (lying) by prosecution witnesses, of illegal activities by the police and the federal authorities, a confession to the Braintree crimes by convicted bank robber Celestino Ma-deiros, and powerful evidence that identified the gang involved in the Braintree affair as the notorious Morelli Gang. All were ruled on and rejected by Judge Webster Thayer, who rejected all the evidence. Judge Thayer would even rule on a motion accusing himself of judicial prejudice. His conduct--or misconduct--during the trials and the appeals became another of the controversial issues surrounding the case, but it, too, would prove insuf-ficient to bring about a new trial.

On April 9, 1927, after all recourse in the Massachusetts courts had failed, Sacco and Vanzetti were sentenced to death. By then the dignity and the words of the two men had turned them into powerful symbols of social justice for many throughout the world. Public agitation on their behalf by radicals, workers, immigrants, and Italians had become international in scope, and many demonstrations in the world's great cities--Paris, London, Mexico City, Buenos Aires--protested the unfairness of their trial. This great public pressure, combined with in-fluential behind-the-scenes interventions, finally persuaded the governor of Massachusetts, Alvan T. Fuller, to consider the question of executive clemency for the two men. He appointed an advisory committee, the "Lowell Committee," so-called because its most prominent member was A. Lawrence Lowell, president of Harvard Uni-versity. The committee, in a decision that was notorious for its loose thinking, concluded that the trial and judi-cial process had been just "on the whole" and that clemency was not warranted.

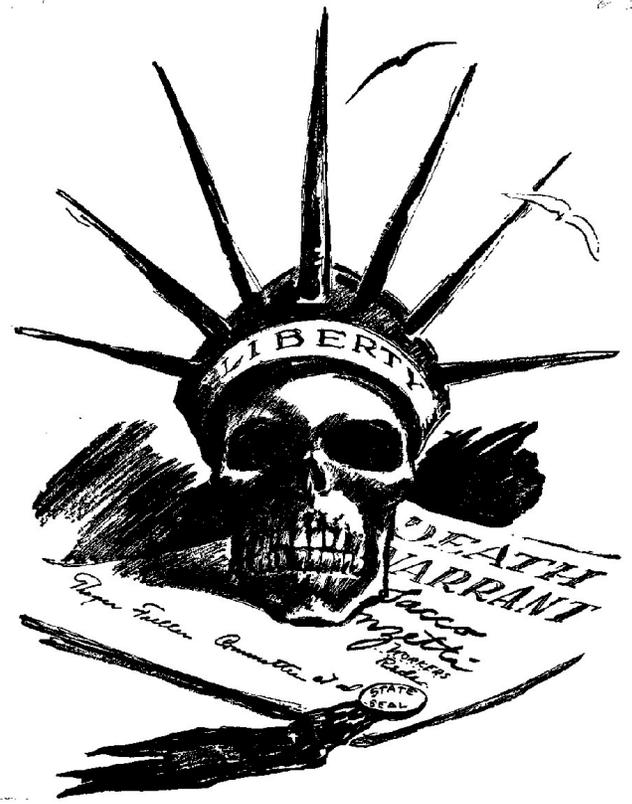
Sacco and Vanzetti were executed on August 23, 1927, a date that became a watershed in twentieth-century American history. Up to the present, most writers have focused their attention on the legal, social, and cultural dimensions of the Sacco-Vanzetti case. The legal dimension, in particular, has been rather exhaustively consid-ered, and its two major issues--the fairness of the trial and the innocence or guilt of the two men--still domi-nates most of the literature about the case.

Earlier opinion almost unanimously felt that the two men were innocent and had been unjustly executed, but later revisionist points of view emerged: some totally, if implausibly, defending the verdict as correct; others more plausibly arguing that, based on new ballistics tests and words by Carlo Tresca and Fred Moore, Sacco was guilty, Vanzetti innocent. No single account nor any ballistics test has been able to put all doubts about inno-cence or guilt completely to rest, despite the two most recent books that have claimed to have done so, while arriving at almost directly opposite conclusions.



"COME UNTO ME, YE OPPREST!"

—Alley in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*.



August 22, 1927