Sacco and Vanzetti, Guilty or Innocent?

Your Name here

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In American Criminal history, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti are the most symbolic and controversial figures. Some people considered them as martyrs, whereas some considered them as criminals.

After a century, the debate about whether they were criminals or not still continues. The contradictions in the presented evidence and many answered questions remain to date. The Sacco-Vanzetti case took place on the 15th of April 1920, which was a first-degree murder case. The case of Sacco-Vanzetti became a historical turning point for the American history of the justice system. Sacco and Vanzetti were accused of two murders committed during the robbery. The security guard and the paymaster of the Slater-Morril Shoe Company located in Massachusetts were murdered while transporting the payrolls[[1]](#footnote-1). The police investigations of this case led to the arrest of Sacco and Vanzetti. The case did not become popular in the beginning but the later politicization of the case made it a historical case of American history.

The two culprits were American with Italian origin and were party members of a radical anarchist party, the Galleanists. The party was suspected to be involved in many attacks and failed attempts of assassination. An anti-Italian prejudice was prevalent in the country which affected the stance towards this case. The involvement of the Italians in the working-class movement of America was yet another factor for the biased attitude towards Italian Americans. Both Sacco and Vanzetti were active participants of the labor movement.

In 1920, Vanzetti was tried for the failed robbery attempt at Bridgewater. The court found Vanzetti guilty despite strong witnesses. The witnesses of Vanzetti were also Italians who could not speak English properly. The statements of these witnesses were presented in a translated form and hence could not affect the case properly. Another major damage to the case was fear of Vanzetti for revealing his radical activities. Hence, Vanzetti was unable to take a defensive stand for himself.

Vanzetti received a much harsher sentence than usual for his first criminal offense. He was sentenced to jail for ten to fifteen years for a crime in which no one was hurt. This shows that there was a biased approach to this case. A well-known socialist lawyer, F. H. Moore further defended the case. The Sacco-Vanzetti case appeared in a time of political repression in America. This political repression was intense and called as the Red Scare of 1919-1920 in American history. Both Sacco and Vanzetti had no previous record of any criminal conviction. Moore radically changed the nature of the case from a criminal one to a political one. He exposed the intentions of prosecutions for helping the military and federal authorities in the repression of the Italian Anarchists. Moore made the case of political propaganda for organizing meetings with workers. He demanded the support of workers’ unions and other international organizations. Millions of pamphlets were distributed in America and all over the world defending Sacco and Vanzetti.

However, the court found the two men guilty of robbery and sentenced them to death on the 14th of July, 1921. New strategies were formed to save the lives of Sacco-Vanzetti. In 1924, the social lawyer Moore was replaced by another lawyer William Thompson who deprived the case of its political substance. Thompson was more inclined to defending the reputation of the two men and the Massachusetts laws.

The political aspects of the case influenced a large population. From the working class of America to the liberal groups, everyone criticized the injustice of the legal system. Felix Frankfurter who was a law professor at Harvard University stated that the case of Sacco Vanzetti is a test of the American judicial system. The court of Massachusetts on the 9th of April 1927, ordered death sentence for both culprits. Sacco and Vanzetti had become powerfully symbolic for social justice all over the world. There were massive protests against this verdict in and out of America. The capitals of Paris, London, and Mexico observed mass demonstrations against the decisions. On 23rd August 1927, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed. This execution raised historical questions regarding American democracy and the judicial system. The verdicts of the case shook the intellectual layers of America[[2]](#footnote-2).

**Traditionalists and Revisionist Narratives**

The traditionalist narrative was based on the assumption that Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent and executed unjustly. On the other hand, the revisionist narrative claimed that the verdict of the execution was correct basing their arguments on the latest ballistics tests[[3]](#footnote-3). Although neither of the narratives has comprehensively cleared the doubts about the guilt or the innocence of the accused, both hold strong arguments to support their positions. The revisionist point of view claims that the myth of Sacco and Vanzetti's case has come to an end. The traditionalist narrative still counters the arguments of the revisionists, calling it a propaganda of the American right-wing. Traditionalists also maintain that the revisionist propaganda is a mere attempt to destroy the Sacco-Vanzetti legend for pure political agenda[[4]](#footnote-4). The revisionists also maintain that Sacco and Vanzetti were politically affiliated with the militant anarchist militant organization[[5]](#footnote-5). The ideology of anarchism supports violence and chaos. Hence, the ideology of anarchism provided the ideological basis to Sacco and Vanzetti for committing the crimes[[6]](#footnote-6). The statement of the Italian anarchist leader Tresco further provided a base for the revisionists. Tresco, who was a close friend of an American communist Max Eastman, confessed in a private meeting that Sacco was guilty but no Vanzetti[[7]](#footnote-7).

The traditionalists responded to this claim of Tresco by saying that Tresco had ideological differences with Sacco and Vanzetti. Tresco was ideologically inclined to organizational based anarchism, whereas, Sacco and Vanzetti were followers of Galleani who was anti-organization and an advocate of individual anarchism[[8]](#footnote-8). This ideological difference within the Italian American anarchism led to doubts in the statement of the Tresco regarding the Sacco-Vanzetti case[[9]](#footnote-9).

The revisionists also maintain the stance that historically, Italy has been more associated with a criminal history than any other Western country, hence, the Italian Origin of Sacco and Vanzetti is a justification for their criminal activities[[10]](#footnote-10). The Italian Americans which are depicted in Hollywood movies also portray a criminal image of the Italian Americans[[11]](#footnote-11). The movie Godfather is one fine example of this trend in which the criminals are depicted with an Italian background. The theory of Mafia in America further built the revisionist approach towards the Sacco-Vanzetti case. The mafia theory reemerged in America after the end of the Second World War[[12]](#footnote-12).

**Conclusion**

The mystery of the Sacco-Vanzetti case remains unsolved. It was one of the most important cases of American history. This case raised concerns about the foundations of American society. This case also raised a question regarding the fundamental narratives of American history.

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