

1921—Sacco and Vanzetti

In 1921, two Italian-born anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were convicted of murdering a paymaster and guard in Braintree, Massachusetts. Sympathizers claimed that the men were convicted for their political beliefs. In 1926, the defense tried to reopen the case after hearing testimony that the murders were committed by a criminal gang. The judge refused to call for a new trial. In August, 1927, Sacco and Vanzetti died in the electric chair. In 1977 the governor of Massachusetts reviewed the case and declared that any "disgrace should be forever removed from their names." Vanzetti's last statement in court was a moving protestation of his innocence:

Yes. What I say is that I am innocent. . . . Everybody that knows these two arms knows very well that I did not need to go in between the street and kill a man to take the money. I can live with my two arms and live well. . . . Not only have I struggled all my life to eliminate crimes that the official law and the official moral condemns, but also the crime that the official moral and the official law sanctions and sanctifies,—the exploitation and the oppression of the man by the man, and if there is a reason why I am here as a guilty man, if there is a reason why you in a few minutes can doom me, it is this reason and none else. . . .

We were tried during 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, against slackers. . . .

This is what I say: I would not wish to a dog or to a snake, to the most low and misfortunate creature on the earth—I would not wish to any of them what I have had to suffer for things that I am not guilty of. But my conviction is that I have suffered for things that I am guilty of. I am suffering because I am a radical and indeed I am a radical; I have suffered because I was an Italian, and indeed I am an Italian; I have suffered more for my family and for my beloved than for myself; 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. I have finished. Thank you. [Bartolomeo Vanzetti's last statement in court, April 9, 1927]

—Questions—

1. In Vanzetti's opinion, why has he been charged and convicted?
2. What is Vanzetti referring to when he says, "We were tried during a time that has now passed into history"?
3. Based solely on what you have read here, do you think Vanzetti was guilty or innocent? On what do you base your belief?

GLOSSARY exploitation—taking advantage of
hysteria—extreme fear

sanctify—make sacred
sanction—authorize

