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| **Sacco and Vanzetti Case** |

On April 15, 1920, F.A. Parmenter, a shoe factory paymaster, and guard Alessandro Berardelli were murdered in South Braintree, Massachusetts. The two men who fired the shots escaped in a waiting car with more than $15,000. Initially this appeared to be a local story only, not unlike similar incidents elsewhere in America during the often lawless postwar years.Three weeks later, arrests were made and charges brought against two Italian immigrants — Nicola Sacco, a shoemaker, and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler. A prominent left-wing attorney, Fred H. Moore, was brought in to defend Sacco and Vanzetti in the South Braintree murders. The accused had no criminal records, but were known as outspoken [anarchists](http://israel.u-s-history.com/836/anarchists.html), labor organizers and antiwar activists — activities viewed with great suspicion during the [Red Scare](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1343.html) era. Moore made the decision to have his clients freely admit their unpopular beliefs, in the hope that the trial would be perceived to hinge on their political convictions and not on the evidence. In so doing, the Sacco and Vanzetti case became a matter of national public attention.A trial was held in the summer of 1921 in a Massachusetts Superior Court. The accused readily admitted their radical beliefs, but denied any involvement in the crime and conducted themselves with dignity during the proceedings. Despite the presentation of corroborated testimony that Sacco was in Boston trying to arrange for a passport at the time of the murder, the jury rendered guilty verdicts for both. Sentencing, however, was put off until a later time and years of appeals and motions followed.Presiding Judge Webster Thayer was clearly not impartial and had been heard to utter prejudicial remarks. A protest movement, organized in part by attorney Moore, galvanized support among liberals and [socialists](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1669.html) who criticized the blatantly political nature of the verdict. Labor organizations and the American Civil Liberties Union joined the protests and sought a new trial.In late 1925, a convicted bank robber, Celestino Madeiros, admitted to having participated in the murders, which provided the Sacco and Vanzetti backers with new hope. Other issues were raised, alleging improper actions by the police, perjury by witnesses and evidence of Boston gang ties to the crime. Appeals to the Massachusetts Supreme Court, however, were routinely turned down on the basis that only the presiding trial judge could reopen a case on the basis of new evidence. Judge Thayer was not inclined to do so.In April 1927, the long-delayed sentencing occurred and both men were given death sentences. During the hearing, Vanzetti was given the opportunity to make a last statement. He was unapologetic: Eugene Debs say that not even a dog -- something like that -- not even a dog that kill the chickens would have been found guilty by American jury with the evidence that Commonwealth have produced against us. I say that not even a leprous dog would have his appeal refused two times by the Supreme Court of Massachusetts -- not even a leprous dog. Public clamor forced Massachusetts Governor Alvan T. Fuller to appoint an investigative committee to consider the appropriateness of executive clemency. President A. Lawrence Lowell of [Harvard](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h2498.html) chaired the committee, which in the end supported the governor’s decision not to spare the lives of Sacco and Vanzetti.The looming executions prompted huge demonstrations throughout the United States, and in Europe and Latin America. [Heywood Broun](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAbrounH.htm) wrote in the *New York World*: The men in Charlestown Prison are shining spirits, and Vanzetti has spoken with an eloquence not known elsewhere within our time. They are too bright, we shield our eyes and kill them. We are the dead, and in us there is not feeling nor imagination nor the terrible torment of lust for justice. And in the city where we sleep, smug gardeners walk to keep the grass above our little houses sleek and cut whatever blade thrusts up a head above its fellows. Despite these protests, Sacco and Vanzetti, proclaiming their innocence to the end, were electrocuted in Charlestown State Prison on August 23, 1927.The Sacco and Vanzetti case is still hotly debated in some circles today as a classic example of the tyranny of the establishment over the poor and politically non-conforming. It is generally agreed that a second trial should have been granted and that the refusal to do so was clearly unfair. For many years there was much support for the belief that both men were wrongly convicted, but more recent scholarship has pointed to the probable guilt of Sacco and the likely innocence of Vanzetti. In 1977, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis issued a proclamation asserting that Sacco and Vanzetti had been treated unjustly. |