In the middle of the Red Scare, a pair of anarchists were executed on charges of robbery and murder in Massachusetts. Was justice served, or were they convicted because of their radical views?

By Adam Liptak

Eighty years ago, two Italian immigrants were put to death in Massachusetts for a robbery and double murder. Though capital punishment was commonplace at the time and usually attracted little attention, The New York Times published five front page articles on the case on the day of the execution, Aug. 23, 1927, under a giant headline.

By then, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti had already become world famous—or infamous, depending on your point of view. To their supporters, they were innocent men, condemned to die because of their radical views; to their opponents, they were dangerous anarchists who wanted to bring down the U.S. government just a decade after the Russian Revolution, when Communists and other radicals were stirring up trouble all over Europe.

In the years since, for many people the names of Sacco and Vanzetti have become a sort of shorthand for a justice system that has become infected by politics and prejudice. Though their guilt or innocence in the crimes for which they were executed has never been conclusively established, few
observers today doubt that their political views and immigrant backgrounds prejudiced the judge and jury against them.

The trial of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1921 came at a moment in American history in some ways similar to our own, when the country feared a lethal threat from abroad. In 1917, the Russian Revolution had led to the abdication of the Czar and the seizure of power by the Communists, who were making inroads in other European countries. Americans began to fear that a Communist revolution was possible, even imminent, in the U.S.

On June 2, 1919, a bomb exploded in front of the Washington home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. A man plotting to kill Palmer and his family had accidentally blown himself up. That same evening, anarchists—radicals who opposed all forms of government—detonated seven more bombs around the nation in a coordinated attack against politicians, judges, and law enforcement officials that left one bystander dead and set the nation further on edge.

In a period that became known as the “Red Scare,” authorities cracked down, with the Attorney General himself in charge: In “Palmer raids,” law enforcement officials harassed, prosecuted, and deported thousands of anarchists, Communists, and others seen as a threat to the government.

Immigrants were a particular target as fear of radicals had become bound up with a fear of foreigners. About 5.7 million people had come to the U.S. in the previous decade, which represented an enormous influx given that the total population was only about 100 million.

NEW IMMIGRANTS

In the 19th century, immigrants had come largely from Northern Europe. Early in the 20th century, millions arrived from Italy, Poland, and Russia and crowded into ghettos. They didn’t look, speak, and act like “Americans.”

Sacco and Vanzetti—“a good shoemaker and a poor fish peddler,” as Vanzetti put it—fit the stereotypes perfectly. They were avowed radicals from Italy who belonged to an anarchist cell in South Boston dedicated to the violent overthrow of the government.

But it is hardly clear that they were guilty of the two murders

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with which they were charged. On April 15, 1920, less than a year after the anarchist bombings, someone killed Frederick Parmenter, the paymaster of a shoe company in Braintree, Mass., and his guard, Alessandro Berardelli, and made off with $15,000. Police said that robbery was the motive.

The evidence against Sacco and Vanzetti was thin and contradictory. There were eyewitnesses who placed the two men at the scene, but their testimony was shaky and they may have been pressured by prosecutors. There was ballistics evidence, but it was open to question. Indeed, two jurors submitted sworn statements that there were bullets in the jury room that had not been admitted into evidence. And there was little question that the defense lawyers were not up to the task.

MEDIA CIRCUS

After a seven-week trial, the case was ready to go to the jury. In his instructions to the jurors, Judge Webster Thayer cautioned them not to hold against the defendants that they were Italians, radicals, and draft dodgers. Those remarks, the defendants’ lawyers later said, were a backhanded way of making sure the jurors did not forget those facts.

After five hours of deliberations, the jury found the two men guilty on July 14, 1921. The case caused a media circus at home and abroad. There were demonstrations in Europe, South America, and Mexico. Prominent intellectuals, including the future Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, took up their cause.

Appeals of the verdict lasted six years; the last was dismissed in April 1927. Sacco and Vanzetti were then formally sentenced to die in the electric chair.

The two men were eloquent at their sentencing. "I know the sentence will be between two classes," Sacco said, in broken English, "the oppressed class and the rich class."

Vanzetti added: "If you could execute me two times, and I could be reborn two other times, I would live again to do what I have done already."

At their executions four months later, The Times reported, "Sacco cried 'Long Live Anarchy,'" while Vanzetti proclaimed his innocence. Their deaths did nothing to quell the debate over the fairness of their trial.

In 1977, on the 50th anniversary of the executions, The Times—which at the time of the trial had praised the judge and denounced the demonstrations—ran an editorial saying that the two men's guilt was open to debate. "What is undeniable," the editorial concluded, "is that their trial was marred by gross prejudice."

That year, Governor Michael S. Dukakis of Massachusetts issued a proclamation that said the trial had been "permeated by prejudice."

The case continues to resonate today. "There is probably not a single Italian newspaper that has not devoted an article to the case every August 23 from 1945 to the present," according to Andrea Camilleri, an Italian writer.

Some critics draw parallels to the contemporary American justice system in the wake of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and ask if people with unpopular views or unconventional backgrounds can receive justice today.

In reviewing a new book on the Sacco and Vanzetti case in The Times in September, William Grimes said that Judge Thayer "despised the defendants for their political views and presided with barely concealed bias."

It is never easy, of course, to render impartial judgment on people who hold unattractive opinions. As Grimes concluded, the Sacco and Vanzetti case and political climate that surrounded it "feel quite contemporary."