



# **Sacco and Vanzetti: The Men, the Murders, and the Judgment of Mankind**

*Bruce Watson*

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**Sacco and Vanzetti: The Men, the Murders, and the Judgment of Mankind** Bruce Watson  
**The riveting true story of one of the nation's most infamous trials and executions**

When the state of Massachusetts electrocuted Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti on August 23, 1927, it concluded one of the most controversial legal cases in American history. In the eight decades since, debate has raged over what was probably a miscarriage of justice.

In the first full-length narrative of the case in thirty years, Bruce Watson unwinds a gripping tale that opens with anarchist bombs going off in a posh Washington, D.C., neighborhood and concludes with worldwide outrage over the execution of the 'good shoemaker' and the 'poor fish peddler.' *Sacco and Vanzetti* mines deep archives and new sources, unveiling fresh details about these naïve dreamers and militant revolutionaries. This case still haunts the American imagination. Authoritative and engrossing, *Sacco and Vanzetti* will capture fans of true crime books and everyone who enjoys riveting American history.

## Sacco and Vanzetti: The Men, the Murders, and the Judgment of Mankind Details

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# From Reader Review Sacco and Vanzetti: The Men, the Murders, and the Judgment of Mankind for online ebook

## Linda says

I read half of the book and could just not finish it. It was not my type of book.

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## Bookmarks Magazine says

Even after 80 years, claims Bruce Watson, the prejudice and injustice that sentenced Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti to death "haunt American history." Though he presents no new evidence, Watson uses extensive research to offer a judicious and compelling description of the trial and its far-reaching aftermath. Only the *Wall Street Journal*, which nevertheless described Watson's narrative as "vivid" and "smoothly written," complained that he distorted or ignored facts to suit his "liberal conscience"; other critics considered *Sacco and Vanzetti* an honest account that neither romanticizes nor vilifies the duo. Watson clearly sympathizes with his subjects, and one gets the feeling that he believes in their innocence. Still, he doesn't dismiss the questions raised by the evidence.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

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## Patrick Sprunger says

John Dos Passos astutely wrote that Americans are two people: those capable of contextualizing what they read and hear with their republican values and those hopelessly distracted by base prejudice at the expense of good citizenship. Dos Passos's quote is repeated two or three times in *Sacco and Vanzetti* and is the base of the book itself.

I find it interesting that one could also say about Bruce Watson's monograph that *Sacco and Vanzetti* is two books: one that contextualizes the trial with American values and the times and one that gets bogged down in detail.

The 1920s is a fascinating and under-served period in American history. If for no other reason than we became the people we are today in the 1920s, since...

*"Nearly every amusement that would dominate the twentieth century - radio, TV, sporting spectacles, pop psychology, home appliances, youth culture, crazy fads, 'talking pictures,' Madison Avenue, Mickey Mouse - got its start during this frantic decade."*

Much more than the 50s or 60s, the 20s gave us the features we identify ourselves by today. While it may have been Fenno's *Gazette of the United States* (at the earliest) or Hearst's *New York Journal* (more likely) that started the shrieking, manic, panicky news cycle, it wasn't until the 20s that polemic *causes célèbres*

ignited international markets with the antics of a certain sample of an unusually reactionary American public.

The first part of the book doesn't say as much, but I got a real vibe from Watson that he considers Islamophobia and the right's *too cool for brains* posture a continuation of the lessons we failed to learn eighty years ago. In the 1920s, some Americans believed that all Italian and Italian-American Catholics were depraved bomb-throwers in a number that approximately corresponds to the number of Americans who believe all Muslims are suicide bombers. Or all African-Americans are lascivious sub-humans with loose morals... Or that all Japanese-Americans are Tojo's spies... Pick your year; it's sort of the same. The pathological defect in the national character believes a small number of loosely related crimes is justification for wholesale racism and bigotry. Not that terrorism is often justified, but America has to re-learn the lesson that further antagonizing the terrorists by abusing the innocent is the wrong way to quell terror. Watson doesn't say it, but the reason Italians, leftists, and the international proletariat stopped planting bombs when Italian-Americans and Catholics were eventually admitted into the American franchise on a more-or-less equal basis with WASPs and the vicious red-baiting of the early 20th century yielded to the Bill of Rights. It didn't stop because our legal and political system really *stuck it* to the reds.

I digress. Someone else wrote a review complaining that Watson seems to believe in Sacco and Vanzetti's innocence because of a personal, liberal agenda. Not really. The case of Sacco and Vanzetti is routinely taught in American classrooms as an example of government corruption in the age of the Harding and Coolidge heydays. The perception of a "frame-up" and political persecution is the standard academic interpretation. So if Watson is speculating on the context of corruption and prejudice in the 1920s, the reader is not out of line finding parallels in the intervening years. That's all I'm saying. And with that, Watson has a pretty good book, here.

But the author doesn't rest on sound historiography. He goes into detail of the minutes of the trial and rounds of appeals that is, frankly, grueling. While Watson isn't uncommonly long-winded, he doggedly documents each move in a grim dance involving judicial incompetence, judicial indiscretion, and judicial gridlock. Redundant points aren't consolidated together for maximum effect. Instead, they're cited separately, in chronological order. It makes reading a breezy work of non-fiction a little bit like reading actual court transcripts (which I have to do occasionally, and while it may thrill some it definitely isn't for everyone). This approach is thorough, and cannot be fairly called *bad* scholarship. But it slows down the tempo and makes a good book suddenly, decidedly. *much less fun*. That's a shame, because I think Watson has written a book that will be the go-to for undergrads, history enthusiasts, and general interest on the subject for years to come. It's a shame that it doesn't hold the reader as rapt as its subject deserves.

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### **Joe says**

Really interesting book - especially for someone from the Boston area - that would have got 4 stars if not for the unnecessary length. I think this could have been 275-300 pages instead of 350.

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### **Doreen Petersen says**

Fascinating book! Would definitely recommend this one.

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## Kea says

If you have doubts that history repeats itself, this book might change your mind. A horrifying and fascinating moment in American history that I was surprised to discover I knew nothing about, especially considering its international coverage at the time, the story of Sacco and Vanzetti presented a detailed, up-close look at how real people's bias, backgrounds, politics, and preferences affected their behavior surrounding this very famous murder trial. I found myself alternately discouraged about some of the characters' ignorance and pride, and then yet hopeful about others' willingness to place the concept of "truth" above the rest of the noise. Really interesting commentary on democracy, free speech, and the American justice system.

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## Rose says

In August 1927, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts electrocuted Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti for an April 1920 payroll robbery that ended in murder. During the intervening years between their arrests and executions, the two Italian immigrants became a worldwide cause celebre. Public figures like Dr. Felix Frankfurter, who became Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, and socialist poet Edna St. Vincent Millay argued that both men, who were active anarchists, were condemned on the basis of their radical political beliefs instead of the evidence.

This viewpoint is neither idealistic nor naïve when the political climate of the years leading up to Sacco and Vanzetti's trial is examined. Public buildings (i.e. the Los Angeles 'Times' building) and the homes of those hostile to the radical labor movement were bombed with alarming frequency, leading to the Palmer Raids and a clampdown on 'un-American' activity. Americans were in the throes of a Red Scare, and as anarchists accused of murder, the two Italians were crucified for the sins of their more violent colleagues. They had the misfortune of being tried in a state that was, even in the liberal Twenties, a stronghold of Yankee conservatism. The trial judge, Webster Thayer, referred to the defendants outside the courtroom as 'anarchist bastards', and the jury foreman sneered to his fellow jurors, "Damn them, they ought to hang them anyway."

Although he is clearly sympathetic to the plight of the 'good shoemaker and the poor fish peddler', as Sacco and Vanzetti were sometimes called, Bruce Watson refrains from turning his book into one long argument for their innocence. He lets the evidence speak for itself. When he ventures an opinion, it's on the basis of solid fact, not conjecture. For example: ballistics experts asserted that one of the bullets that killed the payroll guard came from a gun found on Nicola Sacco. But four bullets were dug from the guard's body, and witnesses testified that the same man fired all four shots. So why do the other three not match? Is it possible that a bullet shot from Sacco's gun during ballistics testing was surreptitiously included with the prosecution evidence?

The clear discrepancy between the evidence and the guilty verdict set off a series of demonstrations worldwide. American embassies were the targets of picketers and bombings. The Sacco-Vanzetti affair is one of the earliest examples of mass protests being employed to change the fate of a convicted person.

I particularly enjoyed Watson's handling of the personal lives of Sacco and Vanzetti. Without yielding to gush or sentiment, he demonstrates that Nicola Sacco was a devoted husband and father who really believed in fair treatment for workers, while Bartolomeo Vanzetti was a deep thinker whose intelligence impressed all who met him. Even Governor Alvan T. Fuller admitted, "What an attractive man." They were hostile toward their accusers, but with some justification, as they were prosecuted for what they were instead of what they

were formally accused of. Those with an interest in knowing more about their inner worlds should read “The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti” (Penguin Classics).

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### **Florence says**

The facts are murky and unproven. Capital punishment can never be undone and should be abolished.

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### **Alyse Thompson says**

Well reported and well written. It's a little slow in the middle, but the end more than makes up for it.

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### **Lauren says**

The story of two men who were not treated well by the Massachusetts court system, it is a cautionary tale. You know how "they" say, "if you're not guilty, you have nothing to be afraid of"? This story shows us that you do, indeed have something to fear: and it is not just fear itself!

The author plays an even hand and shows how the politicization of the trial prevented the men from a just outcome, which would have been a second trial under an impartial judge. One side claims that the trial was fair, the other says not.

Remarkable to me was the feeling of fear that pervades the conservative side. Anarchists were attacking and blowing up targets around the US. Communists were taking over Russia. And the flu pandemic was taking its toll. People were afraid and these two men were the scapegoats. Unfortunately, by allowing the men to be electrocuted without every opportunity of a fair trial, the United States proved itself as evil as any other bad guy ideologue.

Somewhat like engaging in preemptive war...

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### **Greg Heaton says**

Courts have changed, but it doesn't seem like America has too much.

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### **Bap says**

On April 15, 1920 in the town of Braintree, mass. Just outside of Boston a payroll clerk with a strong box and a guard, were approaching several shoe factories to deliver the weekly payroll. A large car with four or

five occupants came along side the pair, who were both murdered and the cash stolen. Months later two Italian immigrants, both of them Anarchists, came up to a garage holding a large car that might have been used in the hold-up and were arrested, tried and convicted. Seven years later they were executed having aroused the conscience of the world.

This book is an even handed account of the crime, the trial and the cause .there is little doubt that they were not afforded a fair trial. Judge Thayer was determined to convict e "two anarchist bastards". The trial was riddled with irregularities. The jury foreman pronounced his hatred of Wops. The Yankee jury shared the antipathy towards Italians and any Italian speaking witness was completely discounted as being clannish and biased, willing to say anything to absolve one of their own. When the judge was unable to enpanel jurors wiling to serve, the Marshall was ordered to round up a jury from the street. The two defendants had no history of prior crimes, the stolen money was never found or linked to the two defendants, one a shoemaker and the other a fish peddler. Acriminal gang from Providence RI, was later implicated in the heist and had a history of violent crime. Two of the Rhode Island crew later confessed to the crime only to later recant. The head of the crew bore a striking resemblance to Sacco.

Despite the abundant doubt of the guilt of the two men who steadfastly professed their innocence, they both were heavily armed at the time of their death and were followers of an anarchistic leader responsible for a spate of bombings that killed dozens. One of the bullets from the murdered men was linked to Sacco's weapon though there is some thought that this bullet may have been planted.

Sacco and Vanzetti became cause Celebes in this county and around the world ranging from Felix Frankfuter a Harvard law school professor and later supreme court justice to John Dos Passos, Katherine Ann Porter, Michael Musmanno who later became chief justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. All championed the cause as did the anarchists and the communists. Stalin called it the greatest miscarriage of justice of the century.

And the letters of the two were later collected and printed revealed that these two uneducated men were gifted writers especially Vanzetti, which caused conservatives to claim incorrectly that they were ghost written.

Ninety years later, right Wing revisionists claim they were both guilty, others continue proclaim their innocence, and still others have a split decision claiming Sacco was guilty but not Vanzetti . This is a very fine book that captures the time, the crime, the trial and the cause.

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## **Fishface says**

An excellent, wide-ranging study not only of the arrest, trial and execution of the two anarchists, but of the temper of the times. The author makes a good case for his position that the two men are extremely unlikely to have committed the crime they were executed for. He even says the bullets in the victims don't match their gun -- but we happen to know from the police that this is untrue. Overall, though, he helped me understand why people doubt their guilt no matter how many years go by.

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## **Alex Shrugged says**

The crowds said, when Sacco and Vanzetti were found guilty of murder, "We will not forget!" Yet it seems we have forgotten. You don't convict people of murder simply because "you know they did it". You have to prove it with REAL evidence. Not made up evidence.

I was reminded of this during the Zimmerman Trial which prompted this review. Zimmerman was found not guilty of murder. Regardless of what people may think of his guilt or innocence, if you are going to convict someone for murder you must PROVE IT!

Above all, black people MUST understand this because so many black men were hung by the neck until dead on the word of a white woman who didn't want to admit she was sleeping around.

And Jews MUST understand this since so many Jewish communities were wiped out during Easter after the Christians brought false charges against us so that now, during the Passover Seder, we shout out to G-d... "Pour out Your wrath..." (I am Jewish, BTW.)

You must PROVE IT! You can't assume. That is what we must remember from "Sacco and Vanzetti".

The book was well done and I was glad I read it. Although the reader will not be provided proof of their guilt or innocence, the book really helped me understand what happened and why we will never know.

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### **Tom Mueller says**

At the very least, Sacco and Vanzetti should have been granted a new trial. Spences Sacco (grandson) stood next to Michael Dukakis in 1977 as Dukakis said "high standards of justice . . . failed Sacco and Vanzetti". See Upton Sinclair's "Boston" and many others.

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