

Sacco and Vanzetti, 1921

Introduction

On May 31, 1921, Nicola Sacco, a 32-year-old shoemaker, and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a 29-year-old fish peddler, went on trial for murder in Boston. More than a year earlier, on April 15, 1920, a paymaster and a payroll guard were shot to death during a payroll heist in Braintree, Massachusetts, near Boston. Three weeks later, Sacco and Vanzetti were charged with the crime.

Many Americans found the evidence against the men flimsy and believed that they were being prosecuted for their immigrant background and their radical political beliefs. This broadside, published by the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, articulates the reasons for the pair's persecution: "The two workers were convicted in the midst of the red hysteria of 1921. They hold views opposed by the controlling influences of America." Sacco and Vanzetti were both Italian immigrants and avowed anarchists who advocated the violent overthrow of capitalism. It was the height of the post-World War I Red Scare, and the atmosphere was seething with anxieties about Bolshevism, aliens, domestic bombings, and labor unrest.

Sacco and Vanzetti trial were convicted of murder on July 14, 1921. In June 1927, responding to public criticism of the trial and verdict, a committee was appointed by the governor of Massachusetts to review the trial's fairness. The committee, which included Abbott Lawrence Lowell, the president of Harvard University, determined that the trial had been fair, and the men were electrocuted on August 23, 1927.

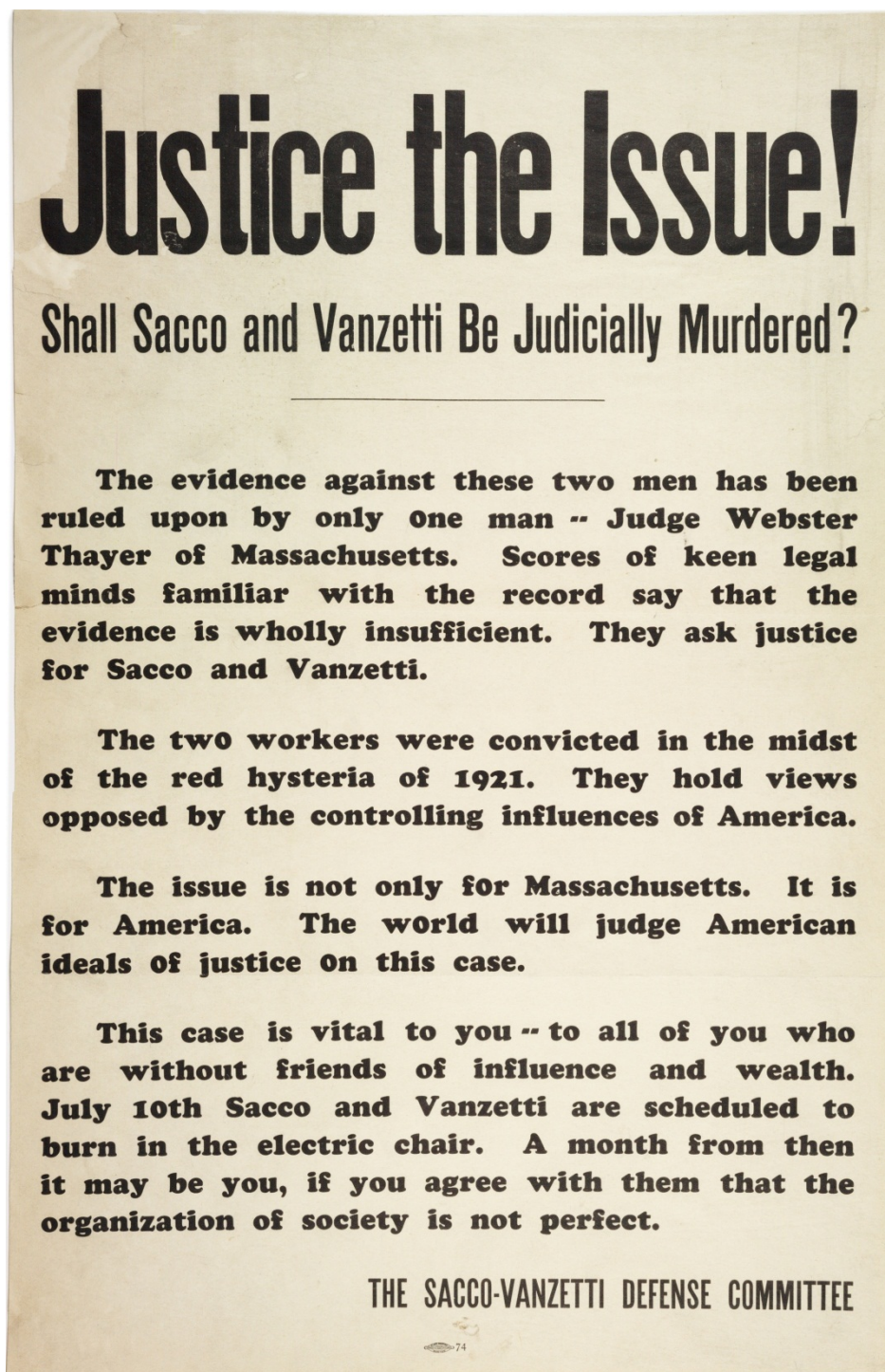
Their execution divided the nation and produced an uproar in Europe. Newspaper columnist and Harvard alumnus Heywood Broun criticized the execution and the trial committee's findings. Broun's opinion about the Sacco and Vanzetti case is the focus of this broadside, printed just after the executions: "What more can these immigrants from Italy expect? It is not every prisoner who has a President of Harvard University throw on the switch for him."

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and view the image. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. How were Sacco and Vanzetti linked to the fear of Bolshevism and anarchism?
2. What role did a fear of foreigners play in the accusations of murder?
3. Why did the broadside criticize the verdict and the committee that reviewed the trial?

Image



Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, "Justice the Issue! Should Sacco and Vanzetti be Judicially Murdered?" broadside, ca. July 1927. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05712.01)

Sacco and Vanzetti, 1921

Image

“What more can these immigrants from Italy expect? It is not every prisoner who has a President of Harvard University throw on the switch for him.”

-- Heywood Broun in N. Y. World

[Broadside against the Sacco-Vanzetti execution], ca. August, 1927. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05712.02)