

Court Statements Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1927)

In April 1920, two employees of a Massachusetts shoe company were killed during the execution of a payroll robbery. Three weeks later two Italian aliens, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were arrested. In 1920 the United States was still caught up in the hysteria of the Red Scare, and the two men, neither of whom had any previous criminal record, were held primarily because they were admitted anarchists. After a six-week trial, in July 1921 the jury found both men guilty of robbery and murder, in spite of unreliable eyewitnesses and the lack of evidence. The defense continued to fight using motions, appeals, and petitions until 1927, when both men were sentenced to death. They were both executed on August 23, 1927.

To many people, the Sacco and Vanzetti case came to symbolize social injustice. The more vocal of the two, Bartolomeo Vanzetti, frequently corresponded with supporters throughout the world. He issued the statement below at the sentencing phase of his trial in 1927.

Even today, historians continue to debate the guilt or innocence of the two men. At issue is not only the validity of the evidence, but the fairness of the trial. Even modern ballistics tests have been unable to clearly prove guilt or innocence. In 1977, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis pardoned both men.

Statement of Bartolomeo Vanzetti

Now I should say that I am not only innocent of all these things, not only have I never committed a real crime in my life—though some sins but not crimes—not only have I struggled all my life to eliminate crimes, the crime that the officials 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 a hysteria of resentment and hate against the people of our principle, against the foreigner, against slackers...

Well, I have already said that I not only am not guilty...but I never commit a crime in my life—I have never stole and I have never killed and I have never spilt blood, and I fought against crime and I have fought and have sacrificed myself even to eliminate the crimes the law and the church legitimate and sanctify.

This is what I say: I would not wish to a dog or to a snake, to the most low and misfortunate creature of 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 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.

Statement by Nicola Sacco

. . . I am not an orator. It is not very familiar with me the English language, and as I know, as my friend has told me, my comrade Vanzetti will speak more long, so I thought to give him the chance.

I never know, never heard, even read in history anything so cruel as this Court. After seven years prosecuting they still consider us guilty. And these gentle people here are arrayed with us in this court today.

I know the sentence will be between two class, the oppressed class and the rich class, and there will be always collision between one and the other. We fraternize the people with the books, with the literature. You persecute the people, tyrannize over them and kill them. We try the education of people always. You try to put a path between us and some other nationality that hates each other. That is why I am here today on this bench, for having been the oppressed class. Well, you are the oppressor.

You know it, Judge Thayer,--you know all my life, you know why I have been here, and after seven years that you have been persecuting me and my poor wife, and you still today sentence us to death. I would like to tell all my life, but what is the use? . . . Among that peoples and the comrades and the working class there is a big legion of intellectual people which have been with us for seven years, but to not commit the iniquitous sentence, but still the Court goes ahead. And I think I thank you all, you peoples, my comrades who have been with me for seven years, with the Sacco-Vanzetti case, and I will give my friend a chance. . . .

Document Analysis

In the first paragraph, how does Vanzetti's statement reflect his anarchist beliefs?

In the second paragraph, what is the "time that has now passed into history" to which Vanzetti refers?

According to Vanzetti, what is he "guilty of"?