AN OVERVIEW OF THE SACCO AND VANZETTI TRIAL

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the College of Liberal Arts of St. Meinrad Seminary In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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May, 1972

St. Meinrad Seminary

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Introduction

1776 is debatable as the date marking the beginning of the United States. Since its beginning many trials have taken place in the United States. Few of these trials have had an impact on the whole country and even fewer have had such a great impact that they divided America. And still even fewer have had an impact on the whole world. The trial of Nicolo Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti is one of those elite trials which have had an impact that was worldwide.¹

It was a trial that gave the Communists their first opportunity for a cause that had a certain degree of international appeal ---Sacco and Vanzetti were martyrs of the proletariat, murdered by reactionaries trying to preserve an unjust social order.²

For a period of roughly seven years the Sacco and Vanzetti trial was rioted over, debated, and written about.³ "The trial begins in 1920, a period which is described by most historians as a time of confusion and intolerance."⁴ It is set in the era of the "Red Scare." The Sacco-Vanzetti trial raises many questions. Were they both guilty? Was justione of them guilty? To what extent did social class and political philosophy play a role in the trial? Was justice served? The nature of the trial makes it quite difficult if not impossible to remain objective. In this paper I will present a factual account of what happened. I will try only to give a survey of the trial, as it is far too complex to go into all of the details concerning it. I will look at the country, the men, and above all the trial. In short, I hope to survey the case in a manner which will inform the reader of the subtle issue at hand in this case, "justice versus the law."⁵

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CHAPTER I

One of the major factors in the Sacco and Vanzetti trial was the mood of the country at the time. The mood was set up by a series of conditions and events throughout the world. In 1912, the Socialist Party successfully ran Eugene V. Debs for President and he received 900,000 votes. Victor Berger had been elected as a Socialist congressman from Wisconsin. Many major cities had Socialist mayors. Then came the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in 1917. As a result of this the American Communist Party was formed.⁶

Meanwhile, bitter hostility was rising amoung the general public. Radical opposition to the War and the spread of revolution in Europe aroused a fear for America. It was suspected that the "Reds" might take control of the country. This basically is what is termed the "Red Scare."⁷

The "Red Scare" resulted in a rash of laws, wholesale deportation of alien radicals and even mob action taken against the I.W.W.,⁸ the Communists, the Socialists, and the anarchists. The country was swept by a feeling of Nationalism. "This climate did not make it impossible for a radical to obtain justice in our courts, but it did make this more difficult."⁹

As far as the Sacco and Vanzetti trial goes, there were certain incidents that paved the way to their trial. These incidents were located to the East Coast area. The first of these was the bombing of Attorney General Palmer's home in Washington on June 2, 1919. This bombing triggered off a series of raids at the order of Palmer himself. Palmer had several thousand persons arrested, most of whom were released because of violation of their civil liberties.¹⁰ According to Russell he did this, "Proceeding with minimum of concern for constitutional rights."¹¹ The second was the attempted robbery of the L.Q. White Shoe Company payroll in Bridgewater on December 24, 1919. It was discovered that the bandit's car was a stolen one, and the police were looking for connections between the theft of the car and the attempted robbery. It was later discovered that a "foreigner" had stolen the very license plate found on the bandit's car. "From this piece of information it was determined that the suspect was an anarchist."¹² It was during this week that "Red Raids" were made by Attorney General Palmer in three cities. The people of Bridgewater agreed with the police suspicion that the suspect had to be an anarchist. But there was no real proof as of yet. The stage was set for Sacco and Vanzetti.

Shelley Neal, the South Braintree agent for the American Express Company, stood on the station platform waiting for the arrival of the 9:18 A.M. train. It was Thursday morning, April 15, 1920. He was there to pick up the payrolls for the Slater and Morrill and the Walker and Kneeland shoe factories. After getting the money on the wagon they began to leave toward the Slater and Morrill offices. "Shelley noticed a car parked across the street that was not familiar to him. He could not make out who was in the car."¹³

At 11:15 this car was still there and a man was working underneath it. Lola Andrews, looking for a job, passed the car and asked the man if he knew how she could get to the factory office. Numerous

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other people had noticed the parked car throughout the morning. It was then time for the money to be moved again. The money went to Mr. Parnenter, a representative of the company, and his guard, Mr. Berardelli. They put the money in a cashbox and left the office.

Parnenter kept to the outside of the gravel walk and his guard followed him. Parnenter passed the telephone pole with the Fred-fire-alarm box on it. Two strangers were standing by the fence in front of Rice & Hutchins, dark squat men, their hands in their pockets. One wore a cap, the other a felt hat. He kept on passed them, one step, two steps, three...

As his guard, still following, reached the telephone pole, the strangers slipped their hands from their pockets, and the man in the cap lunged forward, pinning Beradelli by the shoulder with his left hand while his right with a pistol...the man fired into him three times. Parnenter turned...a bullet struck him in the chest...the man fired again...and as he staggered across the street his legs began to go limp...the man in the felt hat snatched up the box, then darted out toward the box Parnenter had dropped.¹⁴

Beradelli had gotten to his feet and started to shoot at the

bandits.

The staccato sounds of the shot echoed from the factory walls. Peter McCullum sprang on top of the bench...'Duck,' yelled McCullum, 'There's shooting going on!'...a few seconds later a cutter at the other end of the room shouted that the automobile was crossing the tracks...Pelser...could see only the rear of the car jolting over the tracks but he still could make out the license plate...49783.¹⁵

Parmenter was taken to the hospital to be operated on and the police pieced together the escape route. Parmenter, upon regaining consciousness said that he did not recognize the men who shot him. He then drifted off again. He died at five in the morning.

About 10 P.M. Officer Michael Connaly received a call from the station. He was told that two foreigners who were unsuccessful in an attempt to steal a car had just gotten on a trolley. A few minutes

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later he boarded the trolley and arrested Sacco and Vanzetti. From them he took a 38-caliber Harrington & Richardson and a 32-caliber colt automatic. After about ten minutes of questioning both men were locked up. "To the policemen going off and on duty they were curiosities and as such subject to a certain amount of horseplay."¹⁶

Meanwhile another suspect was brought in. His name was Ricardo Orciani. He had an airtight alibi and was charged only with exceeding the speed limit and driving without a taillight. Sacco and Vanzetti were charged with carrying a concealed weapon. "This was on page six in the Boston Evening Globe on May 6."¹⁷ These few lines were the first notice in print of what would in the next seven years become the Sacco-Vanzetti case. This has been the framework of the trial. For many months this framework was to be filled with evidence, eyewitnesses, motions, and pleas. From the first shot to the vanishing of the getaway car, approximately sixty seconds had elapsed. There were no less than fifty eyewitnesses and no two saw quite the same thing. It was no time for the start of what was destined to be "America's most controversial court case."¹⁸

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CHAPTER II

It would be a year before Sacco and Vanzetti would be brought to trial. In the second month of that year Vanzetti was to stand trial for the Bridgewater holdup. The trial did not last long and Vanzetti was sentenced to twelve to fifteen years of hard labor. Once the trial was over, Sacco, Vanzetti, their families, and their friends were looking towards the next trial.

A group called the East Boston anarchists held a meeting to decide how they were going to help their friends and co-members. They decided first of all to distribute some literature on the upcoming trial. They drew up a pamphlet which they could distribute rather easily amoung their friends. The pamphlet read:

> "Two of our active friends and comrades... have become involved in one of those tragic, dark legal plots in which innocence has all the semblance of guilt...In a country where subversive ideas are persecuted with inquisitional fury, anarchists are beyond the pale... We are convinced that an attempt is being made to strike at all subversive elements and their ideas...We face what will be a severe and terrible test"19

The committee then spent a week and a half distributing the pamphlets throughout the area. They then followed this up by going around and collecting money for the purpose of defending the two men. "From the nickels, dimes, and quarters of their countrymen, they were able to provide a defense lawyer that was a good one."²⁰ In mid-August, Carlo Tresca, the revolutionary anarchist, moved in and became instrumental in the acquiring of Fred H. Moore and placing him in complete control of the defendents.²¹ Moore was a lawyer

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from the west who was well known for his defense of radicals. Moore's opponent was to be the District Attorney Frederick Katzmann. The judge was to be Judge Webster Thayer. The opening day of the trial saw policemen and state troopers all around the courthouse. All the way into the courtroom police could be seen.²² As soon as the trial began, Moore stood up and made a motion.

"Your honor, I move for severence and request that a separate trial be held for Nicola Sacco on the grounds that his being associated with Bartolomeo Vanzetti would be a case of prejudice, due to the laters conviction of the Bridgewater Holdup."²³

Judge Thayer denied this motion only to have Moore make another one.

"The Defense asks for separate trials on the grounds of necessity for defense evidence. It must be separate and equal."²⁴

This motion was also denied by Judge Thayer. Right away one of the many questions of justice concerning this trial was brought up. That is, did Vanzetti's conviction of the Bridgewater holdup take away from Sacco and of the fairness that he deserved as a defendent. This was but one of the many questions that would later be raised concerning the trial.

The next step of the trial was the selection of a 12 man jury. This was going to be no easy matter as was soon seen. In the whole of the first day, not a single member of the jury had been selected. Each prospective juror was challenged by Moore. Moore was irratating Thayer by the fact that he objected to each on the grounds of some trivial point. After recessing for the day, Judge Thayer was heard saying, "No long-haired radical from California is going to tell me

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how to run my court."25 In his chambers he remarked, "That might be the way they practice law out West but not in the Commonwealth of Massachusettes."²⁶ After hearing this the East Boston anarchists decided that they should get some more help for Moore. They might even get a new lawyer if Moore would get Judge Webster mad at him. That night they phoned William G. Thompson and asked him to come to Dedham in case they would need some help. Thompson got there for the second day of the trial and he watched the proceedings. The trial once again was Moore picking up where he left off. It was only after a lot of objections and a lot of time did the court see the selection of the first juror. Slowly but surely the jury was being selected, a shoemaker, a photographer, a real-estate man Finally the list of 500 prospective jurors had been used up. There was only one thing wrong however, they were still in need of six more jury members. Now they had to look for bystanders on the street to fill the other six vacancies.²⁷ At 1:20 A.M. Moore finally agreed to the last man; the jury had been selected. Judge Thayer then ordered the other 11 to be awakened and he then swore the jury in.²⁸

The trial was then opened up to the public. Then, on June 7, 1921, a hot, muggy Thursday morning the Sacco & Vanzetti trial was begun by Judge Thayer and the State began its case. The State started with the presentation of evidence and establishing of most of the basic facts in the case. As always, Moore was watchful for any statements or evidence that he could object to.²⁹ The defendents merely sat in their cell-like structure, that came up to their

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waists, and listened. With the establishment of the basic facts of the crime and the presentation of most of the evidence, it was now time for the introducing of the eyewitnesses.

The first witness was Shelley Neal. He stated what had happened on the day of the robbery. The trial continued with a handful of witnesses who saw or heard anything that would bring more light into the case. The trial was proceeding in a routine manner.³⁰ As yet no one had identified either Sacco or Vanzetti. Then a lady by the name of Mary Splaine was called to the witness stand. She stated that she ran to the window of the building she worked in after she heard the shots. The prosecutor then asked her, "What did you see? I saw a car speeding down the street with some man in it. Can you describe the man? Yes Sir, he was slightly taller than I am. He weighed possibly from 140 to 145 pounds. He was a muscular active looking man."31 There was a brief period of silence in the courtroom. The prosecutor continued, "Was there anything else? I noticed that he had a particularly large hand. He had it on the back of the front seat. He had a gray shirt ... clean-cut face ... dark eyebrows, but the complexion was white."³² She then pointed to Sacco as the man she was describing.³³ The eyewitnesses kept coming and coming, but none were as sure of whom they saw as was Mary. Even her coworker Frances Devlin, who was looking from the same window as Mary, was sure of whom she saw. The majority were not sure beyond the fact that Sacco looked familiar to the man they saw. 34 Moore was defending his clients well. 35

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Moore would continue to look good for a couple more weeks. Then the position was anything but good. The State had called three more witnesses who could identify Sacco as the man in the car. They were William Tracey, owner of the Tracey Building, the railroad detective William Heron, and Carlos Goodridge, who had heard the shooting while he was playing pool. Having done this the State went on to identify the car as well as they could. This part of the trial was drawn out far too long as the jury and almost everyone else was getting bored due to the great amount of repetition.³⁶ Finally, this line of quest tioning was stopped as no connections could be made between the defendents and the automobile. They were now ready to move on to the evidence that the State felt they could win the case on, the guns, the bullets, and the scratches on the bullets.

There were four bullets removed from Beradelli's body, one from Parnenter, and one in Sacco's coat pocket. Five of these bullets were fired from a 32-caliber pistol or pistols. The lands (ridges) on the fatal bullet had a left-hand twist which meant the gun that fired it had to be a Colt as a Colt was the only American made gun with a left-hand twist.³⁷ For four full days and half of a fifth, experts argued on whether or not the fatal bullet was fired from the gun found on Sacco when they arrested him on the bus. Captain Proctor of the State Police stated that, "It is consistent with being fired by this pistol."³⁸ This answer was not as clear as the District Attorney had wanted it to be but, the defense did not ask for any clarification for fear of his answer sounding worse for the defendents.

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Then to balance out this testimony, the defense then called their own witness, William Burns. Burns had been a balistics engineer for thirty-one years with the U.S. Cartridge Company. He stated that the bullet could have been fired from a Colt or from a Bayard. When asked if the fatal bullet was fired from Sacco's gun he replied, "In my opinion, no. It doesn't at all."³⁹ J. Henry Fitzgerald, the second defense expert, was then called to the stand to back up the opinion of Burns. Fitzgerald worked for the Colt Patent Firearms Company, he had been there for twenty-eight years. When asked the question, he replied, "I can see no pittings or marks on Bullet III (the fatal bullet) that would correspond with a bullet coming from this gun."⁴⁰ By this time the East Boston anarchists were out of money and there was still a lot of the trial left. Once again they distributed pamphlets and collected money as they did before.

The trial was now to take on new life as the next witness called to the stand was Vanzetti himself. This was the moment that everyone was wondering about whether or not it would come. At first all questions were directed at destroying his alibi. The alibi was previously backed up by half a dozen other people.⁴¹ The questions then switched to his being an anarchist. Moore objected saying that it had nothing to do with the trial at all.⁴² It was overuled by Judge Thayer and the line of questioning was continued. "Are you an anarchist? Do you believe in the overthrow of the government? Do you believe in the use of violence to achieve this end?...No! I don't believe in the use of violence," replied Vanzetti. After a

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day and a half, it was time for the final witness, Nicola Sacco. "Sacco's alibi was not a good one, he contradicted Vanzetti a couple of times, he got flustered quite often, and he did believe in the use of violence to overthrow the government if it was a necessity."⁴⁴ The State then made its final statement, then the defense, and Judge Thayer told the Jury their responsibilities. The Jury was then ordered to chambers to reach a decision. It was not long before they had reached a verdict. They returned and read the verdict; Both had been found Guilty of first degree murder. Sacco stood and screamed his innocence, his wife was also screaming and crying, the courtroom was in an uproar.⁴⁵ Soon things were quieted and people began to leave. Tom McArney, the assistant defense lawyer, went over to congradulate the District Attorney Williams. Williams said, "For God's sake, don't rub it in? He turned and walked away crying."⁴⁶

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CHAPTER III

This marked the end of the first part of the Sacco & Vanzetti trial. There were six more years to follow. There would be many motions, appeals, confessions, and demonstrations. "The Communists used the Sacco & Vanzetti trial to launch a campaign directed against the American Government."⁴⁷ Then in October, demonstrations were taking place in France, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, and Scandinavia. There were all sorts of threats made on many American Embassys.

Meanwhile the defense had moved for a new trial. This motion was denied by Judge Thayer. The year 1922 saw many more supplementary motions made for a new trial. All of these were also denied. Moore dropped the case and William Thompson took up the torch. On April 30, 1923, he filed still a fifth supplementary motion for a new trial. This time a hearing was granted.⁴⁸ At the hearing Judge Thayer dismissed all five supplementary motions and said that the verdict of guilty stood. Even Frank Silva's confession of the crime was of no help since it was later found to be a lie. It seemed that there was no hope left for the two convicted men. They wondered how much time they had before sentencing.

Before too much longer, they again had a good reason to hope for an acquittal. Celestino B. Madeiros, who was in the cell next to Sacco, confessed to committing the crime. The evidence, plus the fact, that he confessed to the crime meant certain death for Madeiros.⁴⁹ Thompson immediately went down to the jail and listened to Madeiros'

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confession. He took notes on almost everything he said. When finished, he knew that this would be enough to get him another hearing. "In light of all the information now available, which is the more probable truth: that Sacco and Vanzetti or the Morrelli gang were the perpetrators of the Braintree murders?"⁵⁰ If the Morrelli gang did it then many things are accounted for. It would account for all the bullets, not just one; it would account for the motive, some of the money was found on Madeiros, and it made more sense than riding on a trolley after the committing of the crime, as Sacco and Vanzetti were proven to have done. Every reasonable probability points away from Sacco and Vanzetti; and pointed to the Morrelli gang.⁵¹ In spite of all this new evidence, Judge Thayer denied the defense their new hearing. This gave rise for the worldwide agitation which was to come.⁵² There were bombings of witnesses houses and many demonstrations by different groups. It was still very much a controversial issue.

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Thompson then appealed Thayer's denial to the Massachusettes Supreme Court on January 27, 1927. After a long intensive look at the evidence, the Supreme Court upheld Thayer's denial. They then stated that Sacco and Vanzetti were to be sentenced on April 9, 1927. On the ninth they were driven to the courtroom for the last time. Thayer came in, called the court to order, and before long was asking, "have you anything to say before sentence is passed upon you?"⁵³ Sacco spoke a couple of minutes on his innocence and sat down. Vanzetti then got up with a prepared statement;

Yes, What I say is that I am innocent, not only of the Braintree crime but also of the Bridgewater crime...in all my life I have never stole and I have never killed and I have never spilled blood...I did not need to go in between the street and kill a man to take the money. I can live with my two arms and live well ... You see it is seven years that we are in jail. What we have suffered during those years no human tongue can say, and yet you see me before you, not trembling, you see me looking you Same in your eyes straight, not blushing, not changing color, not ashamed or in fear... I would not wish to dog or to snake ... what I have had to suffer for things that I am not guilty of ... I have suffered because I am Italian...but I am so convinced to be right that if you sould 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.34

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After this Thompson filed for clemency to Governor Fuller. The Governor set up an advisory committee, called the Lowell Committee. On July 27 the committe reported their findings to the Governor. Then on August 3, the Governor stated that he refused clemency, the execution was to take place. There was much tension in the area as the date of the execution drew nearer. There were pickets and editorials, fights and bombings. Then the day arrived, August 23, 1927. At 12:11 P.M. Sacco walked unaided the seventeen steps to the chair. Likewise, Vanzetti walked unaided to the chair.55 The last thing Vanzetti said was, "I now wish to forgive some people for what they do."56 The sentence was then carried out.

The funeral was a large one. There was a tremendous amount of flowers and the marchers numbered in the thousands. They were buried in the midst of hate and love, tears and joy, shouts and silence.

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CONCLUSION

It was now history. In 1959 and 1961 a last couple of lingering looks were taken at the case. During ... the years that followed, the full impact of this long ordeal on the minds of thoughtful men and women was revealed in literature and art.⁵⁷ John Dos Passos introduced the theme into The Big Money; Upton Sinclair in Boston; James Thurber in his play The Male Animal: Maxwell Anderson in Gods of the Lightning and Winterset.⁵⁸ There were also a lot of poems dealing with the trial. There was a great deal of myth beginning to be associated with the two men. "Some of their adherents -- and even the men themselves in their last months -- came to see the two anarchists Italians as Christ figures."⁵⁹ At the time of his sentencing in 1927, Vanzetti told the court, "My first lawyer of the defense has not defended me, he has sold me for thirty golden money like Judas sold Jesus Christ." The other extreme is stated by Robert H. Montgomery in his book, Sacco-Vanzetti, the Murder and the Myth. In the last sentence of the book he says, "The truth is mighty but it will not prevail against a Great Lie, and the Sacco-Vanzetti Myth is the greatest lie of them all."60

It was a trial that naturally caused extreme points of view like this. Was the trial fair? Lucien Thayer, a writer for the Boston Globe, felt it was. Felix Frankfurter felt it was not. Were they both guilty? Was Sacco the only one who was guilty? Francis Russell feels that Sacco was guilty.⁶¹ We will never be certain about it unless, as Francis Russell says, "Barring some sudden revelation by one of them,⁶² I do not see how any more clarity can be added to the

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Sacco-Vanzetti case,"⁶³ This much we know; they became a set of martyrs for many people, and they will live on in the minds of men. Even Vanzetti realized this in his last days, as he said,

If it had not been for this thing, I might have lived out my life talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have died, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure... Our words-our lives-our pain--nothing! The taking of our lives--lives of a good shoemaker and a fish peddler--all. That last moment belongs to us--that agony is our triumph.⁶⁴

I guess that if winning or losing is looked at in that light, they

did win.

FOOTNOTES

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-19-45_{Ibid}. p. 214. 46_{Ibid}, p. 215. 47_{Ibid}. p. 217. ⁴⁸Montgomery, <u>Sacco-Vanzetti</u>, p. 353. 49<u>Ibid</u>. p. 238. ⁵⁰Frankfurter, <u>The Case of</u>, p. 100. 51_{Ibid}. pp. 100-101. ⁵²Russell, <u>Dedham</u>, p. 331. 53_{Ibid}, p. 357. 540.K. Fraenkel, "Bartolomeo Vanzetti's Last Statement in Court,", Documents of American History, ed. Henry Steele Commager, (New York: F.S. Crofts & Co., 1945), pp. 398-399. 55_{Russell}, <u>Dedham</u>, p. 450. 56_{Ibid}. p. 450. 57_{Brumbaugh}, <u>Six Trials</u>, p. 98. 58_{Ibid}. p. 99. ⁵⁹Russell, <u>National Review</u>, p. 454. 60_{Ibid}. p. 454. 61_{Ibid}, p. 466. ⁶²Boda, Orciani, Coacci, Dante Sacco, Ives Sacco, Rosina Sacco. 63_{Russell, National Review, p. 466.} 64 Brumbaugh, <u>Six Trials</u>, p. 105.

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