

22-1 | Condemned Radical Protests Political Hysteria BARTOLOMEO VANZETTI, Last Statement to the Court of Massachusetts (1927)

The trial and execution of two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, illustrates the crippling nativist fear that seized so many Americans in the 1920s. Arrested for allegedly murdering two men during a robbery in Braintree, Massachusetts, they were convicted in 1920. Unsuccessful appeals resulted in a death sentence by electrocution, carried out in 1927. Vanzetti's defiant final statement failed to move the court, but it did provoke a public outcry as well as national and worldwide demonstrations condemning the verdict.

Yes. What I say is that I am innocent, not only of the Braintree crime, but also of the Bridgewater crime.¹ That I am not only innocent of these two crimes, but in all my life I have never stole and I have never killed and I have never spilled blood. That is what I want to say. And it is not all. Not only am I innocent of these two crimes, not only in all my life I have never stole, never killed, never spilled blood, but I have struggled all my life, since I began to reason, to eliminate crime from the earth.

Everybody that knows these two arms knows very well that 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. But besides that, I can live even without work with my arm for other people. I have had plenty of chance to live independently and to live what the world conceives to be a higher life than not to gain our bread with the sweat of our brow. . . .

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 principles, against the foreigner, against slackers, and it seems to me—rather, I am positive of it, that both you and Mr. Katzmann² has done all what it were in your power in order to work out, in order to agitate still more the passion of the juror, the prejudice of the juror, against us. . . .

But the jury were hating us because we were against the war, and the jury don't know that it makes any difference between a man that is against the war because he believes that the war is unjust, because he hate no country, because he is a cosmopolitan, and a man that is against the war because he is in favor of the other country that fights against the country in which he is, and therefore a spy, and he commits any crime in the country in which he is in behalf of the other

The Sacco-Vanzetti Case: Transcript of the Record of the Trial of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in the Courts of Massachusetts and Subsequent Proceedings, 1920–7, vol. 5: Pages 4360–5621, with General Index (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1929), 4896–4905.

¹**Bridgewater crime:** Vanzetti was accused of robbery in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, and, with Sacco, another robbery and the murder of two men in Braintree, Massachusetts.

²**Mr. Katzmann:** Frederick Katzmann was the district attorney prosecuting the case against Vanzetti.

country in order to serve the other country. We are not men of that kind. Katzmann know very well that. Katzmann know that we were against the war because we did not believe in the purpose for which they say that the war was done. We believe it that the war is wrong, and we believe this more now after ten years that we understood it day by day,—the consequences and the result of the after war. We believe more now than ever that the war was wrong, and we are against war more now than ever, and I am glad to be on the doomed scaffold if I can say to mankind, “Look out; you are in a catacomb of the flower of mankind. For what? All that they say to you, all that they have promised to you—it was a lie, it was an illusion, it was a cheat, it was a fraud, it was a crime. They promised you liberty. Where is liberty? They promised you prosperity. Where is prosperity? They have promised you elevation. Where is the elevation?” . . .

Where is the moral good that the War has given to the world? Where is the spiritual progress that we have achieved from the War? Where are the security of life, the security of the things that we possess for our necessity? Where are the respect for human life? Where are the respect and the admiration for the good characteristics and the good of the human nature? Never as now before the war there have been so many crimes, so many corruptions, so many degeneration as there is now. . . .

Well, I have already say that I not only am not guilty of these two crimes, but I never commit a crime in my life,—I have never steal and I have never kill and I have never spilt blood, and I have fought against the crime, and I have fought and I have sacrificed myself even to eliminate the crimes that 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 that 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.

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Vanzetti believe that he and Sacco were tried and convicted of the murders?
2. What does the Sacco and Vanzetti trial reveal about the anti-immigrant and anti-radical politics of the 1920s? How does this trial help you to understand the passage of the 1924 National Origins Act limiting immigration?