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Introduction

Sacco, Vanzetti, and the Historian

In 1920, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two young Italian immigrants and revolutionary anarchists living and working in Massachusetts, the former as a heel trimmer and the latter as a fish peddler, were arrested for the robbery and murder of a factory paymaster and security guard in South Braintree, an industrial suburb of Boston. They were convicted in 1921, and later sentenced to death. They were not executed, however, until 1927, by which time their previously obscure criminal case, one of many to occur in the United States in the immediate aftermath of World War I, had become the premier cause célèbre of its day, and even of the twentieth century, an unprecedented legal and political battle that put American justice—indeed, America itself—on trial and involved political leaders, public intellectuals, religious figures, legal experts, business elites, artists, diplomats, government officials, and countless ordinary men and women, American and non-American. But the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti was not the end of the Sacco-Vanzetti affair; in some ways, it was just the beginning.

Today, Sacco and Vanzetti are still fairly well-known names in the United States, Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere. But the wider meanings of their history are not. There have been numerous volumes published on the Sacco-Vanzetti case, and even on Sacco and Vanzetti themselves, focusing in particular on the crime and the trial. But most writers have been interested primarily in two things: first, trying to show whether Sacco and/or Vanzetti were guilty of robbery and murder and second, in a related way, trying to show whether their trial was fair. These authors have thus spent many years and boundless energy trying to answer an essentially unanswerable question—"Did they do it?"—and despite the massive study of evidence, ballistics, and

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other paraphernalia, as well as of the legal and criminal record, we are no closer to a resolution now than we were in the 1920s.[1]

But whether they have thought Sacco and Vanzetti innocent or guilty, the many chroniclers of the case have largely neglected its powerful repercussions in the United States and, especially, abroad. Because they have treated the case primarily as an episode in the history of the state of Massachusetts, they have failed to grapple with its impressive national and global reach—dutifully noting that the men and their cause stirred enormous excitement and controversy but usually failing to explain why or even how. And because they have not generally distinguished between the very different situations in 1921 (when Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted) and 1927 (when they were put to death), historians have so far missed one of the most important elements of the Sacco and Vanzetti story: its dramatic transformation from criminal *case* to public *affair.* The crime and legal process (the case) began to fascinate historians, and even the general public, because of the controversy (the affair) that followed, but ironically, scholars have not explored the origins of their own interest in the case. And so while it is certainly important to study the criminal and legal aspects of the case, as well as Sacco and Vanzetti's biographies (as many have), this book largely avoids those well-beaten paths. Rather, its first task is to trace and explain the evolution from an unremarkable local criminal and legal case to a national and international cause célèbre—an evolution that was never predetermined or obvious.[2]

The shift did not happen right away, but when it did it was dramatic. Starting in 1926, and even more in 1927 (and, indeed, ever since), Sacco and Vanzetti and their cause ceased to be a matter of interest primarily to anarchists and other left-wing radicals. As the two men's execution neared, their case attracted widespread mainstream public attention across the United States and around the world and involved people and groups who had no previous connection to the defendants, to anarchism, or to the legal process itself. It became an urgent law-and-order concern when the turmoil and violence around the case grew to critical levels that drew a serious response from local and state authorities worldwide. It became a major diplomatic concern as the U.S. government and its representatives abroad found themselves dealing with what they had long preferred to see as strictly a local legal issue. And, perhaps most tellingly, at its height the case became a touchstone issue that any group of political or social consequence in

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both the Americas and Europe was obligated to respond to if it wanted to stay publicly relevant. In the United States, influential voices in the political, legal, and intellectual spheres took the lead in protesting or supporting Sacco and Vanzetti's punishment, creating entirely new, passionate divisions. Abroad, particularly in Europe and Latin America, outrage and controversy over the case added fuel to the fire of anxiety over the changing place of the United States in the world in the aftermath of World War I. Perhaps no other event until the Vietnam War evoked as much anti-American sentiment among non-Americans who were otherwise prone to hold a favorable view of the United States.

In its international heyday, in the late 1920s, the Sacco-Vanzetti affair was frequently compared to, and derived much of its symbolic power from, the Dreyfus affair. That notorious 1890s episode—in which a Jewish officer in the French army, the victim of a conspiracy within the military central staff and of anti-Semitism in fin-de-siècle French society, was found guilty of high treason, publicly stripped of his rank, and sentenced to permanent prison exile on Devil's Island, but eventually freed and vindicated—heavily influenced the public perception of the Sacco-Vanzetti case, obviously and especially (but not exclusively) in France, where it became widely known as "America's Dreyfus affair."[3]

The parallels between the two affairs are indeed striking. In both instances men convicted by the state of serious crimes protested their sentences and professed their innocence, were championed by an increasingly large public (including, crucially, groups and individuals with considerable power and influence), and eventually stood at the center of major, divisive national and international controversies that have echoed for decades. Both cases attained totemic status as examples of grave injustices inflicted by the powerful against the powerless, by state or national authorities against isolated individuals—injustices that were later exposed by brave souls in the open space of public opinion. Both cases, in the eyes of many, were the result of the persistence and pervasiveness of racism and prejudice, and of widespread fears of radicalism, foreigners, and change. Both cases raised an enduring question of principle: Who comes first, the individual or the state? And both affairs occurred after the advent of what the historian Carl Schorske called "politics in a new key."[4] The Dreyfus affair thus casts a

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formidable shadow over the Sacco-Vanzetti affair and therefore over much of this book.

There are, however, crucial distinctions to make at the outset between the two affairs. Aside from the most obvious of these—Dreyfus was sent to lifelong prison exile on a desolate tropical island while Sacco and Vanzetti were sentenced to death; Dreyfus was released and rehabilitated, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed—the origins, nature, and details of the two cases also differed significantly. Dreyfus was a wholly apolitical man accused of a political crime. Sacco and Vanzetti were thoroughly political men accused of a nonpolitical crime. The Dreyfus case involved a conspiracy and a scandal: after their exposure, it became clear that the officer was innocent, and the national debate at the height of the affair transformed primarily into an argument over principle. Should the military be held accountable and accept the public consequences for punishing the wrong man? By the same token, should Dreyfus, as a loyal soldier, have challenged—and ultimately destroyed—the authority of his superiors, upon which was based, so his opponents insisted, the entire fabric of the French nation? In Sacco and Vanzetti's case, the defendants' guilt and innocence of the original crime were, and continue to be, in question. They were never vindicated in the same way that Dreyfus was; had they been pardoned, it would have been not over the clarity of their innocence but over the unfairness of their trial. This last distinction, a particularly important one, would have an enormous effect on the differences between the subsequent long-term legacies of the two affairs.

Captain Alfred Dreyfus was an Alsatian Jew (albeit from a well-off family), thus presumably an "outsider" of sorts in late-nineteenth-century France. But he was also a rising military officer in the Central Staff, and because of his position, the high-profile nature of his alleged crime, and his personal background, he drew considerable public attention from the start. His case had its origins in the heart of the French elite, and it had a national component by definition. Sacco and Vanzetti, working-class Italian immigrants and anarchists, were "outsiders" by any American yardstick, and their trial was held in a particularly provincial corner of one state shortly after the United States as a whole had experienced one of the most socially and politically turbulent periods in its history. Because Sacco and Vanzetti were proletarian, their case had a clear class element that had not entered the

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Dreyfus case: indeed, while the radical left, in the United States and elsewhere, was the first group to support the two men, French radicals of the 1890s had not at first taken much of an interest in Dreyfus—since the man was both an army officer and a bourgeois Jew, they saw his case as an internal dispute within the ruling class.

In contrast to Third Republic France, with its highly centralized political life (based in Paris) and the prestige traditionally accorded to its intellectual elite, the United States in Sacco and Vanzetti's era was far more politically and socially heterogeneous and decentralized, and American independent intellectuals played a more marginal political role than did their more glamorous French counterparts. When the novelist Emile Zola published his open letter to the president of the republic, "J'Accuse," in 1898, charging the French government with anti-Semitism and wrongfully imprisoning Dreyfus, it generated an explosive response—both positive and negative—that no American writer of the 1920s, however famous, could have hoped for.[5] Unlike Dreyfus, Sacco and Vanzetti did not draw much national attention at first. Their alleged crime was banditry, a common occurrence in the United States in that period. Their case began in obscurity; its origins were at the margins, not the center, of American life.

More broadly, the Dreyfus affair was the culmination of more than a century of French struggles. It exploded the way it did because it represented a climactic clash between the two principal political forces fighting for mastery of postrevolutionary France: supporters of republican values on the one hand, their traditionalist opponents on the other—hence the stark and long-lasting divide between Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards in French political and intellectual life. Dreyfus himself was a personally and politically uninspiring figure (another distinction, if one wishes, between his case and Sacco and Vanzetti's), but his case held enormous importance because through it long-standing tensions in France came to a head. The United States in the 1920s was *not,* to put it somewhat simplistically, this kind of society: the decade has been described by historians as politically anticlimactic, conformist, business-oriented, and nonideological, and although these descriptions are misleading, the Sacco-Vanzetti case did not immediately represent an obvious and clearly defined confrontation within American society. In time, though, this case too would acquire profound symbolic, and nationally divisive, power.

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There were also significant differences in the social, cultural, and political impacts and effects of the two affairs. The Dreyfus affair brought about the fundamental transformation of French politics and society, including the separation of Church and State in 1905–1906, the advancement of individual rights at the expense of the traditionalist centers of power, and the subsequent rise of the socialist movement and political Zionism.[6] Sacco and Vanzetti left no such lasting and obvious traces on U.S. or international institutions; in this sense, their legacy is far less established. But this is not to say that they were ultimately less significant than Dreyfus. Whereas the Dreyfus case was at first important primarily to the French, from the start the Sacco-Vanzetti case was an international, not just an American or a Massachusetts, concern, and it was accompanied by worldwide political violence, which had not been part of the Dreyfus affair. Judging merely by the sheer volume, variety, and even venom of the responses to their case, Sacco and Vanzetti mattered enormously, in the 1920s and beyond, in the United States and around the world, to disparate and deeply engaged constituencies. But whereas Captain Dreyfus has found a clear place in the French historical narrative, the equivalent cannot be said for Sacco and Vanzetti, whose place in American history—and in European or international history, for that matter—remains unclear, despite the lasting ubiquity of their names.[7]

And yet just as the Dreyfus affair continued to loom large in France and elsewhere long after the captain himself drifted out of the spotlight, so the Sacco-Vanzetti affair refused to die with the execution of the two men. On the contrary: it continued to reverberate in the United States and abroad, in powerful but as yet unexplained ways. And so the second aim of this book is to describe and analyze the diverse and contradictory ways in which different people and groups shaped the meanings of the Sacco-Vanzetti case over space and time and thus to help clarify Sacco and Vanzetti's place in twentieth-century history and beyond.[8] More broadly, the book seeks to illuminate the American and international political cultures in which the Sacco-Vanzetti affair took root. While historians of the United States have focused mostly on the case's criminal and legal aspects, historians of Europe, with few exceptions, have largely—and oddly—ignored it altogether or treated it as strictly an American story, despite the fact that in several European nations it was as explosive a public concern as it was in the United States, and a defining generational moment for

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people and groups of virtually all political stripes. This book endeavors to explain how that came to be.

During the seven years in which I researched and wrote this book, the always complicated relationship between the United States and the rest of the world has taken a sudden and alarming turn for the worse. If historians are to make sense of this relationship, they need to look closely at how it developed over time.[9] The Sacco-Vanzetti affair emerged as a major international concern at the height of one of the most sensitive and tumultuous periods in the history of America's interaction with the world, and particularly Europe, a period that, in a number of ways, resembles our own. The affair was generated not only by the widespread notion that Sacco and Vanzetti were punished purely for their politics and ethnicity but also by the potent reaction to the post–World War I rise of American global supremacy and, concomitantly, American isolationism. The result of this protest, both national and foreign, was complex and paradoxical. It turned Sacco and Vanzetti into famous men, put tremendous pressure on American authorities, created a raucous controversy in the United States over the intervention of foreigners in American matters, and led to a backlash that sealed Sacco and Vanzetti's fate: the two men were executed not *despite* the international campaign on their behalf but rather *because* of it.

Beyond telling the story of Sacco and Vanzetti's ordeal, the book aims, then, to recount and explain a larger and longer history. For the late historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., whose own father had been involved in the campaign on behalf of Sacco and Vanzetti, the Sacco-Vanzetti case was unique in that the historian "could fix upon it as a way of penetrating the deepest conflicts in American life."[10] As was true in the Dreyfus affair, in the Sacco-Vanzetti affair events and reactions that appeared to be about one thing—the murder trial of two immigrants in Massachusetts—turned out to reflect much broader concerns. In its use of the Sacco-Vanzetti affair as a prism through which to refract light on wider issues in American and international history, this book is also, ultimately, about the ways that politics came to function in the twentieth century.

The controversy over Sacco and Vanzetti is still ongoing, not only because the truth about the 1920 crime in South Braintree is not known (and never will be) nor because for many their story represents what one author called "The Never-Ending Wrong."[11] The Sacco-

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Vanzetti affair presents us with many eerie and sobering correlations to the present. Global political action, terrorism, justice and injustice, jingoism, xenophobia, radicalism, and the treatment of immigrants and minorities in both the United States and Europe are topics as central in our day as they were in Sacco and Vanzetti's. Ultimately, the executions revealed how fractured the relationship between America and the rest of the world had become—and in many ways it remains so. In these senses, the affair is very much alive, and shows no signs of dying out.