

Were Sacco & Vanzetti Really Guilty of Murder?

Background Information: In May 1920, Nicola Sacco – a shoemaker -- and Bartolomeo Vanzetti – a fish salesman -- were arrested and charged with robbery and the murder of a factory employee and guard. Both were Italian immigrants, atheists (they did not believe in God), draft dodgers (they had evaded the draft in World War I), and critics of the American government. Their trial received worldwide attention in the 1920s, and eventually both Sacco and Vanzetti received the death penalty and were executed.

Part A. 10 pieces of evidence used against Sacco and Vanzetti are listed below. Examine each piece of evidence. Then imagine that you were Sacco and Vanzetti’s lawyer. In the right column, explain how you would criticize this evidence. Use the model provided as a guide.

Evidence	If You Were Sacco and Vanzetti’s Lawyer, How Would You Respond?
1. The killers were identified as Italians by some witnesses, and Sacco and Vanzetti were Italians.	It could have been OTHER Italians.
2. A similar crime was committed before this one, in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. There were gangs involved in both crimes. Each gang had a car, and in both cases the gang members were identified as Italians.	
3. Sacco and Vanzetti were part of a gang and one of the gang members, named Boda, had a car.	
4. When arrested, Sacco and Vanzetti were very nervous and they were armed with guns.	
5. Sacco and Vanzetti lied to the police about why they went to get Boda’s car and why they were armed when they were arrested.	
6. The gang to which Sacco and Vanzetti belonged believed in anarchism, that is, the radical idea that the government should be abolished.	
7. Vanzetti had already been convicted of a similar crime (armed robbery) in Bridgewater, Massachusetts.	
8. Captain John Proctor of the State Police fired 14 test bullets through Sacco’s gun and compared them to Bullet III – the bullet that killed Berardelli. The captain was asked if Bullet III was fired from Sacco’s gun, he replied “My opinion is that it is consistent with being fired by that pistol.”	

9. A cap of roughly the same size as one found in Sacco's kitchen was found at the scene of the crime.	
10. At the trial, 7 witnesses positive identified Sacco and 4 positively identified Vanzetti of having committed the crime.	

Part B. Big Questions

1. Are you 100% sure that Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent? Why/why not?

2. Are you 100% sure that Sacco and Vanzetti were guilty? Why/why not?

3. If you were the judge in a court of law, would you have found Sacco and Vanzetti guilty or innocent? Why?

4. What additional evidence would be useful to know before making a final decision about this case? (List 2+ examples).

a.

b.

Part C. Evidence Used in Sacco and Vanzetti's Defense

Evidence	Does This Prove They Were Innocent?
1. The police stopped their investigation after Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested.	
2. Several witnesses at the scene of the crime said it happened too fast to make positive identifications.	
3. At the police station some witnesses identified Sacco, but others identified Anthony Palmisano who was in jail at the time of the crime.	
4. The judge in the case, Webster Thayer, wanted radicals put in jail. At the trial, he told the jury that Vanzetti was an "enemy of our existing institutions."	
5. Descriptions of the bandits varied considerably among the witnesses. Some witnesses described the criminals as light-skinned with blonde hair, others described them as dark skinned with dark hair.	
6. Witnesses were called into jail before the trial, shown pictures of Sacco and Vanzetti, and asked if these men were the criminals. No police line-up was used.	
7. Celestino Madeiros, who was under indictment for murder, confessed to the Braintree killings, claimed Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent, and gave the police significant factual details about the crime. He shared a jail cell with Sacco. Shortly after the killings, he deposited a significant sum of money into a bank account shortly after the killings.	
8. In 1988, Charlie Whipple wrote an article in the Boston Globe about an encounter he had with gun expert Sgt. Edward Seibolt, who had worked on the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Allegedly Seibolt told Whipple "we switched the	

weapon in the murder case." Seibolt said he would call Whipple a liar if he printed the story, so Whipple did not print it for 51 years.	
9. Years after the trial, experts from MIT conducted tests on the fatal bullet and Sacco's gun and concluded that the bullet did not go through Sacco's gun.	
10. According to notes taken at the trial, 3 shell casings were found at the scene of the crime. The jury was shown 4 casings. Only one of the shells was proved to have been fired through Sacco's gun.	

BIG QUESTION: Given this new information, do you think Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent or guilty?
Why?