

Just over eighty years ago in Boston, Massachusetts, at a little after midnight on August 22nd, 1927, twenty-one hundred volts slammed through the body of Nicola Sacco, an Italian immigrant, a shoemaker – and an anarchist.

Ten minutes later his comrade, Bartolomeo Vanzetti, another Italian immigrant — a poor fish-peddler — took his place in the same electric chair to be murdered by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Both men, accused of a murder in 1920 had been held in custody for seven years after a notoriously prejudiced trial in 1921 in which the foreman of the jury – before hearing a word of testimony in the case – declared of the defendants

‘Damn them, they ought to hang anyway’

That was just one of many travesties of justice in this case

The trial judge, outside the courtroom, called the defendants ‘anarchistic bastards’ and announced that he would ‘get them good and proper.’

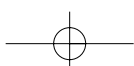
Witnesses – fifteen of them – testified to having seen one or other of the defendants in places so distant from the scene of the crime that it would have been impossible for them to have committed the crimes of which they were accused.

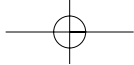
The prosecution did not call even one of these witnesses to disprove this clinching alibi evidence.

Other witnesses who discredited the prosecution case were not only never called to testify – the District Attorney failed to notify the defence lawyers of the existence of these witnesses – as he was in law and conscience required so to do.

Yet, the men were convicted. Their conviction was inevitable – because they were anarchists.

Shortly before his judicial murder, Vanzetti made the following statement to a journalist:





*'If it had not been for these things, 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. This is our career – and our triumph.*

*Never in our full life can we hope to do such work for tolerance, for justice, for man's understanding of man – as we now do by accident.*

*Our words – our lives – our pains – nothing! The taking of our lives – lives of a good shoemaker and a poor fish-peddler – all!*

*That last moment belongs to us – that agony is our triumph!*

Vanzetti was right... Never had a case so shocked the conscience of the world – and never did such an infamous and shameful injustice continue to capture the world's conscience for so many decades after — even until today.

No one at the time could have imagined that the odyssey and ultimate fate of the obscure protagonists of this story could ignite such indignation and stir the heart of humanity for so long after their execution, for a crime which most of the world believed them to be innocent. Who could have thought that these two men would become such titanic figures on the stage of world emotion and that their trial would continue to politicize and radicalise people across the globe for many years to come.

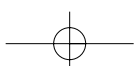
I first heard about the Sacco and Vanzetti case while growing up in Glasgow and the mining communities of Lanarkshire in the mid-1950s, and the anger it aroused in me certainly played a part in fuelling my radicalization and my subsequent adoption of anarchism as a political and moral creed.

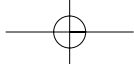
As Anatole France wrote in his plea for clemency to Governor Fuller of Massachusetts — on pragmatic grounds if nothing else:

'I say to you, beware of making martyrs. This is the unforgivable crime that nothing can wipe out and that weighs on generation after generation'

It certainly did, and it wasn't long before the names of these two martyrs swelled to become a battle cry for the disinherited of the earth

The memory of their fate had particular resonance for me in 1963 when history appeared to be repeating itself with the execution of another two anarchists, Joaquin Delgado and Francisco Granado — garroted in Franco's Spain for crimes they did not commit – the bombing of the headquarters of General Franco's secret police and that of the fascist labour union.





In fact it was the farce of their trial — a drumhead court-martial — and summary execution — with its echoes of the Sacco and Vanzetti case — that moved me to volunteer my services to the anarchist action group responsible for coordinating the anti-Francoist resistance movement in Spain and the assassination attempts on Franco.

But Peter Miller's disturbing documentary isn't just about a controversial old murder trial — albeit one of the most compelling and repulsive court cases in American history — nor is it about a racially and politically prejudiced judicial system and the blatant denial of justice to two immigrant anarchists.

Sacco and Vanzetti is an important, timely and highly pertinent film which draws clear parallels with the current xenophobic, totalitarian and anti-democratic legislation and practices in the US, Britain and elsewhere which — in the name of security and anti-terrorism — is curbing civil liberties, eroding freedom and democracy, denying human rights, besmirching justice, promoting anti-immigrant paranoia and a fear and loathing of dissenters, dark-skinned foreigners and Muslims — and denying due process to anyone the state chooses to perceive as a threat to its authority.

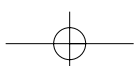
Peter Miller's depiction of the tragic story of Niccola Sacco and Bart Vanzetti is — to me — both a testimony to human resilience and a clarion call for a much more aggressive defence of our freedoms and democratic accountability against the machinations of party politicians and the ever-expanding power of the national security state.

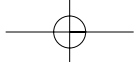
The film also begs the uncomfortable question — what, if anything, has changed politically between 1927 and today?

Apart from the growth in the power of the executive and the collapse of industry and the trade union movement, perhaps the most noticeable differences between then and now is the apparent political indifference and lack of committed people prepared to go out in defence of their ancient hard-won liberties and challenge unjust wars, unjust laws and unjust practices.

In 1927 angry people from every walk of life and from all continents went on strike and took to the streets in their tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands even, to riot and protest against the monstrous injustice carried out that August day in Boston.

They did the same in Spain in July 1936 when the people successfully took to the streets to plead the cause of freedom and take on the Spanish army and the forces of European reaction - and again in Cable Street in London in October that same year... as they did in East Germany in 1953, Hungary 1956, Havana in 1959...and so on...





Where are those angry people today and what if anything are they doing to vent their anger about the present unjust wars, the blatant infringement of habeus corpus, the stifling of free speech, the medievalising of the public realm with the so-called 'anti-terrorism' laws which allow police officers to detain people without trial, charge or even explanation — and provide them with a licence to kill — or to halt the onward march towards an undeclared permanent state of emergency and the constant, grinding, erosion of our liberties?

Perhaps Peter Miller's film Sacco and Vanzetti will go some way towards re-igniting — in at least in some of the people who see it — a commitment to the struggle to take back those freedoms and democratic values we have given up to government. — and stop us sleepwalking into becoming a totalitarian banana republic.

If Sacco and Vanzetti's agony was their triumph, it should be ours as well!

I would like to leave the last words on the subject to Mary Donovan, a tireless member of Sacco and Vanzetti's defence team, who delivered the funeral oration, a damning indictment of the rulers of Boston

'...You, Sacco and Vanzetti, are the victims of the crassest plutocracy the world has known since ancient Rome. Your long years of torture and your last hours of supreme agony are the living banner under which we and our descendants for generations will come to march to accomplish that better world based on the brotherhood for which you died... In *your* martyrdom we will *fight on* and *conquer*.

Remember Justice Crucified, August 22nd, 1922 – Remember!

