

Twentieth-Century Cause Celebre

TWENTIETH-CENTURY CAUSE CÉLÈBRE

*SACCO, VANZETTI,
AND THE PRESS, 1920-1927*

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The trial and imprisonment of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti and the resulting press coverage catapulted the two immigrant anarchists from the margins of obscurity to international celebrity in 1926 and 1927. This study examines this press coverage and the political movement that set the tone for one of the 20th century's most debated and least understood political causes. Neville argues that, while casting about for a case to champion in 1926, the Comintern of the USSR discovered in Sacco-Vanzetti the perfect vehicle to discredit and shame the United States. As an international cause celebre, this event did not occur spontaneously but, rather, was managed behind the scenes in Europe to discredit the reputation of the United States through a carefully orchestrated propaganda campaign. Perhaps the most formidable enemies of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the U.S. government were ultimately their own political leaders, who seemed powerless to rebut an all-or-nothing international propaganda campaign designed to succeed with Sacco and Vanzetti playing the role of willing martyrs. That few supporters of the Sacco-Vanzetti movement realized this effort distorted the historical accuracy of the case for decades after the men were executed. More than 70 years later, historians and scholars must separate the myth from the reality, an extremely difficult task given the passage of time and the still largely accepted view that Sacco and Vanzetti were victims of political persecution.

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目录:

[Twentieth-Century Cause Celebre 下载链接1](#)

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