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What Crimes Did Vanzetti Maintain That He Did Not Commit

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795581662655084

Unanswered Questions of the Sacco and Vanzetti Case: What Crimes Did Vanzetti Maintain That He Did Not Commit?

The story of Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco is one of the most haunting chapters in American legal history. For decades, scholars, activists, and legal experts have debated whether these two Italian-born anarchists received a fair trial or were simply swept up in a wave of xenophobia and political repression. Among the many questions that linger, one stands out as particularly central to understanding Vanzetti's steadfast position: What crimes did Vanzetti maintain that he did not commit? The answer to this question is not merely a matter of historical trivia; it cuts to the heart of a case that continues to symbolize the fragility of justice in times of fear.

Bartolomeo Vanzetti was convicted and ultimately executed for two separate criminal incidents. Throughout his years in prison, in countless letters, and during his final statements, he insisted upon his innocence with remarkable clarity and conviction. To understand his claims fully, one must examine each accusation individually, separating the facts from the hysteria that surrounded his trial. This article explores the specific crimes Vanzetti consistently denied, the evidence presented against him, and the enduring debate over whether he was telling the truth. By the end, you will have a thorough understanding of precisely what Vanzetti said he did not do—and why his declarations of innocence still matter.

The Bridgewater Holdup Attempt: The First Crime Vanzetti Denied

The first legal confrontation that brought Bartolomeo Vanzetti into the criminal justice system involved an alleged robbery attempt in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, on December 24, 1919. According to the prosecution, Vanzetti and another man attempted to hold up a payroll truck belonging to the L.Q. White Shoe Company. The driver managed to escape, and no money was taken. However, Vanzetti was arrested months later and charged with armed robbery and assault with intent to murder.

Vanzetti's Alibi and Testimony

From the moment of his arrest, Vanzetti maintained that he had nothing to do with this incident. He testified that on the day of the attempted holdup, he was working as a fish peddler, selling eels and other seafood to customers in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Several witnesses came forward to support his alibi, stating that they had seen him in Plymouth on that very day—a location roughly thirty miles away from Bridgewater. Yet, despite this testimony, the jury convicted him.

Why did the jury reject his alibi? Much of the evidence against Vanzetti was circumstantial, built upon shaky eyewitness identification. Some witnesses claimed to have seen a man resembling Vanzetti near the scene, but

their descriptions varied widely. Vanzetti himself argued that he was being targeted not because of hard evidence but because of his political beliefs. He was an anarchist, a foreigner, and an outspoken critic of the American economic system—traits that made him a convenient suspect in the eyes of law enforcement.

In his letters from prison, Vanzetti repeatedly stressed that the Bridgewater case was a frame-up. He wrote that the prosecution had manipulated witnesses and suppressed evidence that would have exonerated him. For Vanzetti, this conviction was not just a legal defeat; it was a profound personal injustice that confirmed his belief that the system was rigged against the poor and the foreign-born.

The South Braintree Robbery and Murder: The Capital Crime

The far more serious charge against Vanzetti was the robbery and murder of Frederick Parmenter and Alessandro Berardelli in South Braintree, Massachusetts, on April 15, 1920. Parmenter was a paymaster for the Slater & Morrill Shoe Company, and Berardelli was his security guard. Two men ambushed them on the street, shot them dead, and made off with over $15,000 in cash—a substantial sum for the era. This was the crime that would ultimately send Vanzetti and Sacco to the electric chair.

Vanzetti's Consistent Denial

Vanzetti insisted until his dying breath that he was not in South Braintree on the day of the murders. He claimed he was in Plymouth, again selling fish, just as he had on the day of the Bridgewater incident. He argued that he had no connection to the robbery, did not know the victims, and had never even visited the town of South Braintree prior to his arrest. For Vanzetti, the entire case against him was built on a foundation of lies, prejudice, and prosecutorial misconduct.

One of the most controversial aspects of the trial was the reliability of the eyewitnesses. Several individuals identified Vanzetti as being present at the scene, but their testimony was riddled with inconsistencies. Some witnesses had originally described the gunmen as being shorter or taller than Vanzetti, or as having different hair color and facial features. Over time, and under pressure from the prosecution, some of these witnesses modified their descriptions to fit Vanzetti's appearance. Defense attorneys argued that this was a classic case of suggestive identification, where witnesses were coached to deliver the desired testimony.

Furthermore, the prosecution claimed that Vanzetti had been in possession of a revolver that matched the one used in the crime. Vanzetti countered that he had never owned such a weapon. The gun presented in court was later alleged by some experts to have been planted by law enforcement. The debate over the ballistic evidence remains unresolved to this day, with many legal scholars arguing that the scientific methods used at the time were deeply flawed.

The Role of Anarchism and Political Persecution

To fully grasp what crimes Vanzetti maintained he did not commit, one must also consider the broader context of his persecution. Vanzetti was not just any immigrant; he was a vocal anarchist who openly criticized the United States government, capitalism, and the legal system. He had been involved in labor organizing and had written and distributed anarchist literature. In the climate of the First Red Scare, which gripped America from approximately 1919 to 1920, anarchists were viewed as a direct threat to national security.

Guilt by Association

The prosecution leaned heavily on Vanzetti's political beliefs, arguing that his anarchism was evidence of his criminal nature. Vanzetti, however, maintained a clear distinction between political activism and criminal behavior. He argued that being an anarchist did not make him a murderer or a thief. In fact, he asserted that his moral code forbade the kind of violence he was accused of. Vanzetti wrote extensively about his philosophy of non-violent resistance and social justice, insisting that he would never take a human life for personal gain.

In fact, instead of the confession, Vanzetti delivered a moving speech in which he went on to say that he was being punished not for what he had done, but for what he believed. This speech remains one of the most powerful expressions of political dissent in American history, and it underscores the central point that Vanzetti saw the charges against him as entirely fabricated.

The Ballistic Evidence and the Sacco Connection

Another critical dimension of the case involves the alleged link between Vanzetti and the murder weapon. The prosecution attempted to prove that the bullet that killed Berardelli came from a Colt automatic pistol that Vanzetti or Sacco had possessed. Vanzetti denied owning any such firearm. He claimed that the only weapon he had ever carried was a small revolver for protection while traveling with his fish cart, and that revolver was not the one used in the South Braintree murders.

Flawed Forensics and Expert Testimony

At trial, the prosecution called expert witnesses who testified that the bullet fragments matched the Colt pistol found on Sacco. Defense experts, however, argued that the evidence was inconclusive and that the ballistics tests of the time were not sophisticated enough to make a definitive match. Modern forensic analysis has since cast further doubt on the original conclusions. Many contemporary experts believe that the ballistics evidence was insufficient to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

Vanzetti consistently maintained that the gun evidence was manipulated. He pointed out that the police had ample time to switch or alter weapons before the trial. In his correspondence, he expressed frustration that the court refused to allow a more rigorous examination of the firearms. For Vanzetti, the gun was just another piece of a fabricated puzzle designed to connect him to a crime he had nothing to do with.

The Psychological and Emotional Toll of Denial

Understanding what crimes Vanzetti maintained he did not commit also requires empathy for the man himself. He spent nearly seven years in prison, much of it awaiting execution. During that time, he wrote hundreds of letters articulating his innocence. These letters reveal a man who was deeply thoughtful, literate, and convinced of the righteousness of his cause. He described the agony of being punished for something he did not do, and he expressed sorrow not only for himself but for Sacco, his co-defendant, and for their families.

Vanzetti's emotional state was marked by a mixture of defiance and despair. He refused to admit guilt even when offered deals that might have saved his life. This unwavering stance has led many historians to believe that he was telling the truth. It is difficult to imagine a guilty man enduring years of solitary confinement, public vilification, and ultimately death, all while maintaining a consistent claim of innocence. The psychological cost of such a performance would have been enormous, and Vanzetti's letters reveal no cracks in his story.

The Concept of Martyrdom

Some have argued that Vanzetti's insistence on innocence was part of a larger political narrative. By presenting himself as a martyr to the cause of the oppressed, he could galvanize support for anarchism and socialism. However, even if this were true, it does not necessarily mean he was guilty. Many activists throughout history have been willing to die for their beliefs, even when they were innocent of the specific crimes charged against them. Vanzetti's case is unique because he maintained his innocence not only of the murders but also of the lesser charges of robbery and attempted robbery.

The Public Campaign and International Awareness

As Vanzetti and Sacco sat on death row, their case became a global cause célèbre. Millions of people around the world protested their impending execution. The question of Vanzetti's innocence became a rallying cry for labor unions, intellectuals, and civil rights activists. Prominent figures such as Albert Einstein, George Bernard

Shaw, and H.G. Wells called for a retrial. The widespread belief was that Vanzetti's claims of innocence were credible and that the legal system had failed him.

This international outcry did not succeed in saving his life, but it did ensure that his story would not be forgotten. The public campaign forced a review of the case, but the governor of Massachusetts at the time, Alvan T. Fuller, after appointing an advisory committee, ultimately decided to uphold the verdict. The committee concluded that the trial had been fair and that the evidence, while circumstantial, was sufficient. Vanzetti responded by reiterating his innocence, stating that he had been condemned by prejudice, not by proof.

The Enduring Legacy of Vanzetti's Protestations of Innocence

So, what crimes did Vanzetti maintain that he did not commit? The answer is clear: he maintained that he did not commit the Bridgewater holdup attempt, and he maintained that he did not commit the South Braintree robbery and murders. Beyond these specific acts, he also denied that he was the kind of person who would use violence for criminal gain. He claimed that his entire life was consistent with peaceful labor and political advocacy, not armed robbery.

Decades after his execution, scholars remain divided. Some believe Vanzetti was guilty but that his trial was still unfair due to judicial bias. Others believe he was entirely innocent. A third group argues that the evidence is too old and too tainted to ever reach a definitive conclusion. What is beyond dispute is that Vanzetti himself never wavered. From his arrest in 1920 to his final moments in the electric chair on August 23, 1927, he maintained that he was innocent of every criminal act he was accused of.

Conclusion

The question of what crimes Vanzetti maintained that he did not commit is more than a historical footnote. It is a window into one of the most controversial legal cases in American history. Bartolomeo Vanzetti insisted that he was not involved in the Bridgewater robbery, nor the South Braintree murders. He argued that his convictions were the products of political persecution, unreliable witnesses, and manipulated evidence. Whether one believes him or not, his steadfast assertions of innocence continue to challenge our understanding of justice, prejudice, and the power of the state. His case serves as a powerful reminder that the legal system is not always a guarantor of

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