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Moshik Temkin, *The Sacco-Vanzetti Affair: America on Trial*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009. 316 pp. Notes and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-300-17785-5.

Review by Richard D. Sonn, University of Arkansas.

Moshik Temkin's book on Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, the two Italian-American anarchists sentenced to death for carrying out a robbery and murder at a shoe factory in Massachusetts in 1920 and executed in 1927, came out three years ago and has already been widely reviewed. Why then this belated review, and why on a list serving French historians? Temkin reveals in his acknowledgements that much of the book was researched and written in Paris, where Temkin was attached to the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, as well as to Columbia University's Reid Hall campus in Paris (he received his doctorate in history from Columbia, and now teaches at Harvard's Kennedy School for Public Policy). Not only is the provenance of the book French, but the main thrust of the argument concerns the international ramifications of the case or, as Temkin prefers, the affair. This review will focus on the non-American and French aspects of the Sacco-Vanzetti Affair.

Temkin distinguishes both temporally and conceptually the case from the "affair." The case unfolded during the April 1920 robbery and the May 1920 arrest, and culminated in capital convictions for the murder of two payroll guards in July 1921. The case occurred in the context of the postwar Red Scare. Between the arrests and trial, an anarchist exploded a bomb on Wall St. that killed thirty-eight persons, though not the intended victim, J. P. Morgan. This was the bloodiest terrorist act on U.S. soil until the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, and did little to improve Sacco and Vanzetti's chances for a fair trial. He dates the affair over-precisely from the original presiding judge rejecting an appeal in October 1926 through the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti (along with Celestino Madeiros, a twenty-five year old Portuguese immigrant who confessed to participating in the robbery/murder and who tried to exculpate the Italian anarchists) on August 23, 1927 and the worldwide protests of that pivotal year.

The many books focusing on the case are mainly concerned with the guilt or innocence of the two anarchists, and sometimes also include detailed inquiries into the personalities and intellectual development of "Nick" and "Bartolo" during their years behind bars.[1] Temkin refrains from considering ballistics reports and other courtroom minutiae, focusing instead on what he perceives to be the real significance of the affair: what it meant for America's standing in the world at a crucial moment. In the 1920s, the United States assumed a new political and economic prominence in the world, while American isolationists sought to avoid global responsibilities. Temkin argues that the case encapsulated American fears of ethnic immigrants, of radicals, both anarchist and communist, and of the lower classes. Sacco and Vanzetti embodied a triple threat. Europeans perceived it as white American elites reacting against alien forces epitomized by these two humble immigrants, the fish peddler and the cobbler, who were thereby denied a fair trial.

After a useful introduction titled "Sacco, Vanzetti and the Historian," the forty pages of chapter three, "The Transatlantic Affair," placed midway in the book, will be the chapter of most interest to readers of H-France. Temkin argues that the case went largely unheralded in the five intervening years, only to re-emerge in 1926 and 1927, galvanizing protests around the world. While he admits that the case did

generate some international discussion in 1921, that response came mostly from other anarchists and, to a lesser degree, from Italians and communists. When the case blossomed into an affair, it attracted mainstream interest from liberal jurists, journalists and others. Temkin argues that these more moderate figures, represented in France by such groups as the Ligue des droits de l'homme (the Human Rights League), and by such figures as Joseph Caillaux, Marie Curie, and Séverine (who presided at one Parisian mass meeting that attracted thousands in the summer of 1927), made possible the mass movement that transcended the partisan left. Liberal interest was more likely to succeed in overturning the 1921 verdict, Temkin claims, because unlike radicals, liberals did not pillory American racism or xenophobia, but rather focused on procedural problems with Massachusetts law. On the other hand, foreign intervention was counter-productive, leading to a backlash among American politicians loathe to be seen as bending to non-American influence. American judicial and political intransigence turned non-Americans into anti-Americans.

Temkin locates French response to the Affair in terms of a mounting cascade of French books highly critical of American society, beginning with André Siegfried's bestseller, *Les Etats-Unis d'aujourd'hui*, translated in 1927 as *America Comes of Age*.^[2] Siegfried, however, who travelled around the U.S. in 1925, was more affected by the Scopes Trial than by Sacco and Vanzetti. Soon enough, there would be French books with titles such as *The American Menace* and *The American Cancer*.^[3] Yet when Temkin evaluates how Sacco-Vanzetti influenced these foreign intellectuals, he quotes not a Frenchman but the Swede, Carl Laurin, who wrote in 1927 that "the Americanization of the world is...the most horrible of future perspectives" (p. 123). The French said similar things, but Temkin doesn't show that this affair played a critical role in advancing that perspective. He does explain lucidly that Europeans felt that they had a right to speak out on an American judicial matter precisely because the United States was a world power and what happened there affected everyone. As one French official put it, when an American case leads to riots in Paris, it has become a worldwide issue and not a domestic one. Furthermore, tens of thousands of Americans lived in Paris, and the American Legion held a convention there to mark the tenth anniversary of U.S. entry into World War I, just three weeks after the execution, greatly worrying French authorities about possible retribution. This was a newly interdependent world.

The term highlighted in Temkin's title conjures memories of the Dreyfus Affair, and indeed parallels between the two affairs came readily to French minds. One of the first to make the analogy was the Nobel-prize-winning French writer, Anatole France, who compared the Italian-American anarchists to Dreyfus as early as 1921 (he died before the Affair proper arose in the mid-twenties). Temkin nicely points out the similarities between the two affairs in his introduction: the racism, the miscarriage of justice, the role of leftist intellectuals in protesting the cases. On the other hand, Dreyfus remained primarily a French affair, while Sacco-Vanzetti was internationalized. One significant difference he does not point out is that the Dreyfus Affair produced anti-Dreyfusards such as Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras who made principled arguments on the right. No similar movement of conservative intellectuals arose to defend the anarchists' convictions. Though the jurist Felix Frankfurter played a major role in casting doubt on the original trial in a March 1927 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, no single Zola figure emerged as Sacco and Vanzetti's champion. Later researchers advanced the argument that Sacco was guilty of the crime, while Vanzetti was probably innocent, but no one convincingly argued that the trial had been fair or that Judge Thayer was not biased against "those anarchistic bastards," as he privately referred to Sacco and Vanzetti (p. 23). Dreyfus was exonerated and his case transformed French politics (and led to the modern Zionist movement); Sacco and Vanzetti were executed, their guilt remained undetermined, and America was less shaken by the outcome.

The fact that Anatole France protested against the verdict and made the Dreyfus Affair comparison at the time of the trial in 1921 undercuts Temkin's neat bifurcation between the case and the affair. He reveals that a female anarchist tried to assassinate the American ambassador in Paris with a package bomb in 1921, which also suggests early French displeasure with the trial. Further evidence of international outrage in the early 1920s comes from the important article by Temkin's Harvard

colleague, the historian Lisa McGirr, who published a thirty-page article in the *Journal of American History* in 2007 focusing on the international implications of the Sacco-Vanzetti case. McGirr shows that there was plenty of violence in Lisbon, Marseille, Paris and Rio de Janeiro in 1921 after the two immigrants' condemnation. She focuses more on the Italian than on the French response, and goes so far as to call Italians "the preeminent workers of the world," who migrated to more places than any other nationality, including to France.[4]

Both Temkin and McGirr discuss the long term after-effects of the case, but McGirr overtly discusses the social movements of the 1960s in this context, which Temkin mostly avoids. She also gets the name of the IWW right; Temkin calls it, redundantly, "International Workers of the World" (p. 11). Temkin refers to the 1920s as a period in which international anarchism "was past its heyday and now entering its final decline" (p. 14), yet he does not connect this decline to the willingness of anarchists such as Louis Lecoin to forge broad alliances with moderate republicans. As to anarchism's "final decline," one might argue that anarchism revived in the 1960s, certainly in Paris if not elsewhere in the global counterculture, and has shown recent signs of life in the anti-globalization protests and in the Occupy movement (which admittedly occurred after Temkin's book appeared). It is no fault of Temkin's that McGirr scooped him in underscoring the global significance of the case, and his greater attention to the French parameters of the affair makes this book useful to French historians who are interested in the origins of anti-Americanism.

One of the salutary effects of considering French and other foreign outrage over the Sacco-Vanzetti Affair is to show how it is overly simplistic to divide the two decades of the interwar period into *les années folles* and the politicized thirties. Temkin reports on the many mass meetings that took place all over France, and the riots that followed the anarchists' execution. He might have added that the French liberalized their naturalization laws in 1927 and, after the Americans excluded immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe the French continued to welcome them until the 1930s depression and the influx of Jews from Central Europe reversed French openness. Another case in 1927, not mentioned by Temkin, underscores the American-French divide. Two months after the Italian-American anarchists' executions, the French tried and acquitted an immigrant Jewish anarchist from Ukraine for murdering the former *hetman* (or leader) of Ukraine, Simon Petliura—even though there was no question that Sholom Schwartzbard killed Petliura as he left the restaurant Chartier on the Left Bank in May 1926.[3] Schwartzbard's skillful lawyer portrayed him as an avenger of his people for antisemitic crimes perpetrated under Petliura's aegis during the Russian Civil War in 1919-1920, and the jury agreed that this was a case of justifiable homicide.

The eighty pages of notes attest to Temkin's thorough acquaintance with both primary and secondary sources (though the book lacks a bibliography). The notes are worth reading on their own, as many continue arguments made in the text. While he may exaggerate the separation of the Sacco-Vanzetti case from the Affair, may overstate the salutary impact of mainstream opinion in 1926-1927, and may magnify the extent to which foreign outrage at the verdict hardened American politicians' resolve not to give in to foreign pressure, his focus on the international significance of the case, rather than on issues of guilt or innocence, makes a significant contribution. He is also not afraid to make contemporary connections to this ninety-year-old case. The book was written during the culminating years of the Bush administration, at another time of European outrage at America and of corresponding American disdain for the opinions of "old Europe." Temkin finds the roots of this discordant relationship in the 1920s. It would have been difficult for any historian not to be influenced by such contemporary events, and to see intransigent forerunners of George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld in Governor Alvan Fuller of Massachusetts and Idaho Republican Senator William Borah, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—notwithstanding the fact that the former figures might ignore foreign opinion, but could hardly be accused of isolationism. The risk comes in letting the reader suspect that the historian is reading back from the contemporary context, thereby embellishing the historical parallels between the

1920s and 2000s. If contemporary events led Temkin to find something (relatively) new to say on a topic that has intrigued a great many historians, the benefits outweigh the risk.

NOTES

[1] The most recent entry in the field is Susan Tejada, *In Search of Sacco and Vanzetti: Double Lives, Troubled Times: The Massachusetts Case that Shook the World*, (Lebanon, N.H.: Northeastern University Press, 2012). Tejada tries to decouple the two men, often portrayed handcuffed together, and examine each individually.

[2] André Siegfried, *America Comes of Age* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1927).

[3] Georges Duhamel, *The American Menace: Scenes from the Life of the Future* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931) and Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu, *Le Cancer Americain* (Paris: Rieder, 1931).

[2] Lisa McGirr, "The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti: A Global History," *Journal of American History* 93/4(March 2007): 1096.

[3] See Richard Sonn, *Sex, Violence, and the Avant-Garde: Anarchism in Interwar France*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), chapter six, "Facing East: Russians and Jews." In chapter five, "American Heroes," I discuss the Sacco-Vanzetti riots in Paris, which occurred three months after Charles Lindbergh's triumphal solo transatlantic flight.

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