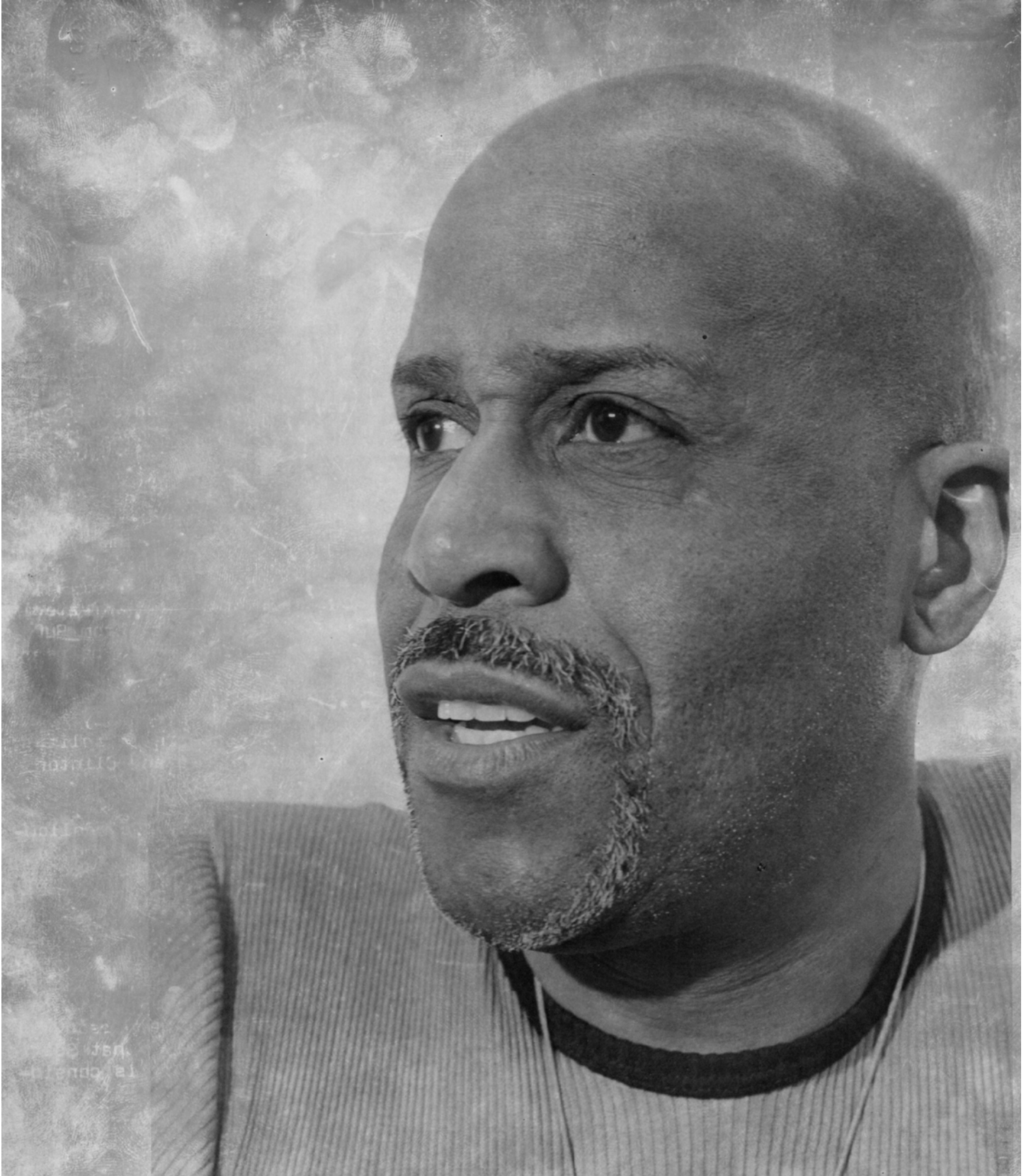


Lesson 1

Who Was Martin Sostre?



Summary

In 2012, just three years before Martin Sostre passed away at the age of 92, abolitionist educator and organizer Mariame Kaba profiled him on her popular Prison Culture blog. “When I mention the name Martin Sostre, what comes to mind?” she asked. “For many, his name will conjure no images or words.” Although this is slowly changing, Sostre’s life, ideas, and deeds remain largely unknown and understudied today. At the height of his prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was one of the most familiar political prisoners in the world. His lawsuits initiated and

broadened the constitutional rights of incarcerated people. His organizing and writings influenced and mobilized other activists. His principled stand for bodily autonomy in the face of a brutal prison regime which sought to kill both his body and spirit was a legendary source of inspiration for many other prisoners. Sostre is a key progenitor of contemporary Black anarchism and abolitionism. All these contributions were inextricably shaped by Sostre’s life experiences. This first section introduces readers to his life through the writings of scholars and organizers who knew, studied, and learned from him.

Martin Sostre: Prison Revolutionary

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin

Black Rose Anarchist Federation

February 7, 2019

Even in this generation, many young activists know of George Jackson, aka “Comrade George,” Black Panther leader, revolutionary prison writer and organizer who was assassinated in August, 1971, in the California penitentiary, San Quentin.

Yet, in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, Martin Sostre (1923-2015) was every bit as well known as a prison activist, revolutionary, and jailhouse lawyer, who almost single-handedly won democratic rights for prisoners to receive and read revolutionary literature, write books, worship alternative religious faiths, to not be held indefinitely in solitary confinement, and to obtain legal rights to have access to legal rights at disciplinary proceedings. He was the one responsible for prisoners being able to organize during the prison struggle 1967-1974. These lawsuits changed prison conditions nationwide.

He had served a sentence in Attica, New York, during the early 1960’s and went through a political metamorphosis from a Black Muslim (NOI), Black nationalist, and later an Anarchist. In 1966, he got out of prison, came home to Buffalo, NY, and started the Afro-Asian Bookstore in the Black community. Sostre’s bookstore became a center of radical thought and political education in that city. A Black “riot” against police brutality of a Black youth broke out at this time, and Sostre was blamed for this rebellion since many youth visited his bookstore.

The city cops and white political establishment chafed at Sostre’s

organizing and political education, and decided to shut him down. They arrested him on July 14, 1967, along with a bookstore co-worker, and charged them with “sale of narcotics, riot, arson, and assault.” These were totally frame-up charges, but he was sentenced to 41 years in prison. Recognizing this injustice, an international campaign was begun on his behalf by his supporters and fellow activists.

At one point, he became the best known political prisoner in the world, and his case became adopted by Amnesty International, the prisoner of conscience organization, in 1973. This was a first for U.S. political prisoners and put tremendous pressure on the state of New York and the U.S. government. Finally, his worldwide defense organization pressured the New York state governor to grant Sostre an executive clemency, and he was released in 1976.

Historical importance of Martin Sostre

Sostre’s political consciousness and legal activism opened the door for prisoners to have legal and human rights and the ability to organize at a time of civil rights, Black Power, the New Left, and the Vietnam anti-war movements. At one stage, 1970-1976, the prison movement became the central protest movement in America, especially after the August political assassination of George Jackson, and the September, 1971 Attica rebellion. The protest at Attica was put down with a bloody massacre by prison and political officials,

but it opened the eyes of millions all over the world to American state violence and racism. A mass prison support movement arose almost overnight, which demanded human rights for prisoners. There is no doubt that the prior demands of Martin Sostre, in his writings and prisoner’s rights lawsuits, who had been imprisoned at Attica some years previous, played a role ideologically. Sostre’s struggle inside as a political prisoner was clearly bound up with what became the Attica Rebellion.

Contrary to prison officials’ accounts which now claim that the so-called Attica prison “riot” had taken place because of a “gang of criminals” who took guards hostage for no good reason, the truth is New York State officials refused to listen to Sostre or even the federal courts which over the years had ordered an end to brutality, racism, and mistreatment of the men inside. The prisoners took matters into their own hands, demanding human rights and an end to racist abuse with the 1971 rebellion, which shook America and the entire world.

Martin Sostre and me

I met Martin Sostre at the Federal Detention Center in New York City in August/September, 1969. I had just been brought back to the USA from Berlin, Germany, for hijacking a plane to Cuba earlier that year. He had sued prison officials and been transferred to federal prison to await a hearing. I didn’t know who he was at the time, but someone said he was an “activist

prisoner” and that I should talk to him. A scowling, powerfully built Black man, he looked like a teacher, which in many ways he was, just a revolutionary teacher. So, I went up and introduced myself, and we started talking about prison generally, but he was interested in my case and how the CIA had captured me, and we started talking about that. He was concerned that I could be sentenced to death by an all-white Southern jury.

He knew it was a political case, and so we talked about what I could do about it. Almost every day that I saw him, we would go over my case, and he would give me legal advice. Somewhere along the line, we started talking about revolutionary politics generally, and he bounced a new word on me: “Anarchist Socialism.” I had no idea what he was talking about at the time. I had just come from Cuba, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany, which called themselves “socialist republics,” so I thought I knew all about it. I was wrong. He explained to me about “self-governing socialism,” which he described as free of state bureaucracy, any kind of party or leader dictatorship. Almost every day he regaled me about “direct democracy,” “communitarianism,” “radical autonomy,” “general assemblies,” and other stuff I knew nothing about. So I just listened for hours as he schooled me.

The initial ideas for Black autonomy, within the overall Anarchist movement, came from these sessions. As a Black Puerto Rican, Sostre felt alienated from his community, and since much of the analysis about Black oppression and Socialism was by white radicals, he had originally gravitated into Black nationalism. It was only later during his time in prison that he gravitated into Anarchist Socialism. He told me endlessly that Socialism and Anarchism were for all people, not just Europeans and well-to-do intellectuals. It was universal. At first, I had serious doubts about all this, as it seemed just more white radical student ideology. They were not sympathetic to the Black struggle,

and they were not working class or poor. Sostre’s ideas, however, were that Anarchists of color must build their “wing” of the Anarchist movement. He didn’t call it Black Autonomy, but that is what it was.

I did not even consider myself at the time as an Anarchist, and did not fully understand what he told me. But I had seen first-hand “Soviet Socialism” and was not impressed. It was elitist, authoritarian, and oppressive. I could say the same thing about “Marxist-Leninist Maoism,” which helped to destroy the the 1960’s New Left, and the radical wing of the Black Power Movement, with cult of personality, middle class snobbery, manipulation, and opportunism.

Even before meeting Martin Sostre, I was definitely already looking for something new, and willing to consider Anarchism. But only years later, serving life in prison, is when I really started into Anarchist political education, as Sostre suggested. I started reading Anarchist books and papers, and started corresponding with Anarchist figures and groups all over the world.

These discussions with Martin Sostre were invaluable in broadening my thinking about a radical political alternative. I also found out about many “unknown revolutions” in Africa, Russia, China, Spain and other parts of the world, as well as early Anarchist labor/radical tendencies among Eastern European immigrants, especially in the USA (1860’s-1900’s). Yet, the stickler is that the Anarchist movement generally, had no ties or solidarity to the Black population in the USA, the UK, or the colonized people of color in the Third World. It was essentially a white European movement.

Like Sostre had said, we must manufacture our own Anarchist of Color school of thought and revolutionary practice. Nobody can truly speak for us and fight in our name. Black Autonomy means independence of thought, culture and action. We are not racial

separatists, but we must be sure that we are strong enough to insist on our politics, leadership, and respect within any broader universal movement. We have been sold out, left out, betrayed, and tricked too many times by internal racism inside majority white coalitions and movements. Black voices matter! That is why I wrote a small pamphlet in 1972, “Anarchism and the Black Revolution” while I was in prison in 1979.

Conclusion

Martin Sostre has been lost to history because the White Left and Anarchist radical tendencies have had no regard for him or his legacy. He literally opened the doors for radical prisoners, Anarchist tendencies of color and radical praxis, yet not one institution or movement today is named after him. This is an outrage which must be recognized or corrected now.

Groups of jailhouse lawyers should name themselves after the man who more than anyone, successfully fought for prisoners’ democratic rights, was an activist who provided an example of a revolutionary political prisoner, and who prefigured the Black-led revolutionary prison movement, including the Attica rebellion and prison labor and activist movements of the 1970’s-1980’s.

I became an Anarchist, a jailhouse lawyer, and a prison activist during the 1970’s because of Martin Sostre. In fact, it was a result of observing Martin’s international defense committee and seeing how he was able to put pressure on the government, that encouraged me to create the “Free Lorenzo” movement, which resulted in my own freedom in 1984 from two life sentences. I owe him a tremendous personal debt. I spoke to him less than a month in a prison cell, but it changed my life. He had a similar impact on many others who never met him, but benefited from him standing up for their rights.

We don’t have him here today in the flesh, but we can at least honor his memory and never let it die! ■

The unforgettable life of prison rebel Martin Sostre

William C. Anderson

Roar Magazine

December 8, 2020

It is time to honor the work of Martin Sostre, an underappreciated jailhouse lawyer who waged a revolutionary struggle against the US prison system.

The burden of a long sentence would be lightened by the satisfaction of knowing that the mission set out for me, that of helping my people free themselves from the oppressor, is being accomplished.

— Martin Sostre

Malcolm X once said, “We’ve only suffered from America’s hypocrisy ... If you go to jail, so what? If you’re black, you were born in jail.” For Black people in the United States today, this statement is still as true as it ever was. The state as prison has been the lived experience for countless Black people throughout generations, but sometimes a myriad of lives can be crystallized into a single account exposing the oppressive realities in intimate detail. The life of the great intellectual, imprisoned litigator and revolutionary organizer Martin Sostre was just that.

Not enough people know Sostre today, though his impact on the prison struggle is as large as Black radicals like George Jackson, Angela Davis and Mumia Abu Jamal. Sostre passed away on August 12, 2015 — five years ago today. His story is one that demands telling, because were it not for him, the world would not be what we know now. Prison rebel to community educator Martin Sostre was born in Harlem in

1923 and came of age during the Great Depression. He was inspired early on by Black speakers, thinkers and activists around the African National Memorial Bookstore on 125th street. But Sostre also received a different type of education, lessons on what he later described as “the methods of the streets,” which would foreshadow much of what was still to come. He initially joined the army, but after multiple run-ins with the law he was “dishonorably” discharged. In 1952 Sostre was arrested for drug possession and sentenced to 12 years in prison.

This was the start of a decades-long journey that would see him pass through terrible facilities like Sing Sing Prison, Clinton Prison and the infamous Attica Prison and eventually reshape the limited legal rights that are supposed to be guaranteed to incarcerated people. In prison, Sostre initially embraced the Nation of Islam, attracted by its Black nationalist elements. When prison authorities tried to stifle his right to

express his beliefs, placing Sostre in solitary confinement after accusing him of trying to arouse dissent, he became a self-taught student of law and took part in a successful lawsuit challenging the authorities' suppression of his beliefs. In one letter from prison he writes, "Although to some the struggle of a Black high school drop-out acting as his own attorney against the massive coercive power of this State may seem like a futile struggle, there is no doubt in my mind of the ultimate defeat of my oppressors." In many ways, the legal struggles he waged were setting a precedent, and Sostre was only just kicking off a series of strategic challenges that would make considerable and historic gains for people in prison.

After his release from prison in 1964, Sostre opened the Afro-Asian Bookstore in Buffalo, New York. Having undergone a political transformation in prison himself, Sostre likened his journey to Malcolm X. However, upon observing the Black power politics among the youth on the outside, Sostre parted ways with the Nation Of Islam. His bookstore would become a place where he cultivated resistance for an entire community. He sold radical books covering topics like Black nationalism and communism. He grew to be recognized as an educator among community members who used his shop as a space for learning and fellowship. This was at odds with the Buffalo Police Department who threatened Sostre for his actions. He was politicizing Black youth at a time when the state was increasingly concerned and surveilling proponents of anti-capitalist, Black empowerment across the United States.

"Defy white authority!"

During the "long, hot summer" of 1967, Black uprisings took place around the nation. Rebellions flared in response to the many manifestations of institutional racism like unemployment, housing discrimination and police brutality. The unending police repression of Black America happening in the streets

was a direct challenge to racist state violence. It was around this time that the infamous police threat, "When the looting starts, the shooting starts" was uttered by the Miami police chief as well. When revolt hit Buffalo, Sostre was there doing the work he knew best: teaching, distributing radical literature to the Black community — especially young people — and providing context to the situation at hand. Sostre organized through education and supported the uprising using the methods he had learned from the orators, teachers and street-level militants during his youth in Harlem. His bookstore became safe haven where people could escape tear gas and police brutality. He would give out lessons and liberation literature to the people hanging out in his store, which the authorities perceived as a threat. It remained open and packed well into the night as people rebelled against police forces.

Eventually, authorities resolved to deal with the defiant Sostre by attacking and ransacking his store. He and Geraldine Robinson (his co-defendant) were imprisoned on narcotics and riot charges. He was convicted after the rebellion in Buffalo had died down and sentenced to 31 to 41 years in jail by an all-white jury. Sostre was gagged in court but was unfazed by what he described as a "foolish" attempt to silence him. He later wrote that he was demonstrating "the weakness of this fascist beast" in the courtroom and encouraged Black people to look at what he was doing to the oppressor. Sostre promised to be consistently confrontational, and from prison, he encouraged Black people to "Defy white authority!," setting an example through his actions.

He maintained his innocence, and in the 1974 documentary *Frame-Up!* he distinguishes "between a political prisoner in its classical sense and a politicized prisoner." He categorizes himself as the latter, as someone "who has become politically aware while in prison, even though the original crime that he committed was not a political crime."

Martin also won a case about the censorship of literature in prison. He recalled fighting so hard so there could be more political literature in prison than there ever had been before. While being imprisoned, he was still doing the political education work that he previously did in the community. He claimed several victories in court for the rights of those in prison, from political and religious freedoms to restricting the use of solitary confinement. He himself had been subjected to the torture of solitary confinement, had his mail tampered with and was subjected to intimidation — all because of his work. But Sostre remained true to his cause. Introducing anarchism

Sostre was a fierce critic of leadership, authority and imperialism. He was opposed to empire and identified with the anti-imperialist efforts. In a 1967-letter from prison, Sostre writes, "I will never submit. The employment of the massive coercive power of the state is not enough to make me give up; I am like a Viet Cong — a Black Viet Cong." He goes on to say the Vietnamese fight against imperialism was an example he was trying to live up to. He consistently connects the global struggle against US imperialism to the struggle for Black liberation.

He insists that "only by challenging and opposing their lies and acts in the streets, courtroom and battlefield will we defeat the fascist oppressors." In another letter from the same year he says one of the first things he is going to do when he leaves prison is "establish a defense fund" because no one should have to be imprisoned "because bail couldn't be met." In another letter, dated 1968, he even criticizes "no-knock" police raids and stop-and-frisk as signals of a coming right-wing takeover. Sostre was ahead of his time in many ways. In 1971 the primary "witness" against Sostre recanted his testimony and admitted he had helped frame Sostre so he himself could be released from jail. This happened in addition to a national campaign for Sostre's freedom, who had since become a well-known

imprisoned radical and was eventually ordered to be released from solitary confinement. It was done by order of the US District Court Judge Constance Baker Motley, who was the first Black woman appointed to the federal bench. She also awarded him damages and he was eventually granted clemency after gaining notoriety in a campaign for his freedom.

Sostre's immeasurable contributions also had a big impact on the life and thought of Black anarchist Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin. It was Sostre who introduced the former Black Panther Party member to anarchism after they met in federal detention. Lorenzo had been sentenced to life in prison after hijacking a plane to Cuba while fleeing weapons charges in the US. Ervin had become disillusioned after his time living in Cuba, Czechoslovakia and East Germany. He remembered his life under "Soviet socialism" as "elitist, authoritarian, and oppressive." He argued, moreover, that Marxist-Leninist Maoism had "helped to destroy the 1960's New Left, and the radical wing of the Black Power Movement, with cult of personality, middle class snobbery, manipulation, and opportunism." Lorenzo reflected on Sostre's anarchist lessons:

He bounced a new word on me: 'Anarchist Socialism.' I had no idea what he was talking about at the time ... He explained to me about 'self-governing socialism,' which he described as free of state bureaucracy, any kind of party or leader dictatorship. Almost every day he regaled me about 'direct democracy,' 'communitarianism,' 'radical autonomy,' 'general assemblies,' and other stuff I knew nothing about. So I just listened for hours as he schooled me.

Lorenzo based much of his efforts around Black Autonomy, his own jailhouse litigation and his "Free Lorenzo" campaign that resulted in his freedom on Sostre's instructions. Through Lorenzo, Sostre indirectly

inspired a new generation of Black anarchists (myself included). Had it not been for Martin Sostre, much of the important work of political prisoners, politicized prisoners and prison movements that we know of today would not have been possible. Through his efforts, new rights were granted to people in prison that were not conceivable to many before.

Sostre showed us the way

Martin's life shows us that we should be working to abolish the prison whether that prison is a building or the state itself. Prisons are an instrument of violence that the state uses to oppress us, but the larger apparatus we know as governance is no more redeemable than the police, courts, or any parts of the processes that lead us to a cell. Though Martin Sostre was able to use the legal system against his captors, that does not make it any less deadly. They would have done him much more harm if they could, but it did not work out that way. What does it mean to live the life Martin Sostre did and have your work remain largely unnoticed? It exposes the naked truth of a society that disappears both people and the problems we face. Happy endings are hard to come by in nightmarish conditions where indispensable history vanishes in the margins. The closest thing someone who lives their life like Martin Sostre will get to safety is a hopefully quiet, modest life.

However, decades of torture and suffering should not be the preface to any of our stories. We celebrate the hard won battles of Sostre while still in the trenches of an unwon war. He did not waver in his dedication at times when many would have chosen to do otherwise. He lived a life where he worked to take parts of the prison system down, even while in a cage himself.

We will all die some way or the other, but we should hope to take a piece of the state with us as we go until it is completely undone. Martin Sostre showed us the way. ■

A Continuous Struggle: Remembering Martin Sostre

Garrett Felber

Certain Days calendar

2023

Martin Ramirez Sostre was a

revolutionary anarchist political prisoner and one of the most successful jailhouse lawyers of the twentieth century in the United States. He outlined a radical vision of individual freedom and collective liberation from captivity while winning rights for religious freedom, political expression, and due process regarding censorship and solitary confinement for imprisoned people. He regarded the prison as a concentrated form of state repression, and he considered the so-called “free world” outside as merely “minimum security.” Dismantling both the prison and the state, he believed, was necessary to bring about an egalitarian society free of all forms of domination and coercion. Despite his role as a key progenitor of contemporary Black anarchism and abolitionism, he remains unknown to many today.

Born in East Harlem on March 20, 1923, to Puerto Rican parents, Sostre was exposed to a range of Black radical thought and internationalist solidarity. He saw Paul Robeson speak on street corners and frequented Lewis Michaux’s National Memorial Bookstore on 125th Street. After he was drafted and dishonorably discharged during World War II, he was arrested on drug charges

in 1952 and sentenced to 6–12 years. He was further politicized in prison, teaching himself law, history, and yoga, and eventually joining the Nation of Islam. In the 1960s, he became a leader in an organized prison litigation movement by incarcerated Muslims to secure constitutional protections to religious practice inside.

After serving the entire 12 years of his sentence, the final 5 of them in solitary confinement as punishment for his activism, Sostre moved to Buffalo upon his release. There, he worked days at Bethlehem Steel, eventually opening the city’s first revolutionary bookstore in 1965: the Afro-Asian Bookshop. The bookstore attracted student radicals as well as neighborhood youth and during the rebellions of 1967, it became a refuge and base. Several weeks later, police and the FBI raided Sostre’s shop and framed him with a \$15 bag of heroin using an informant. He was sentenced to 31–41 years by an all-white jury.

Over the next eight years, Sostre fought his case while winning landmark legal victories over political censorship, solitary confinement, and the rights of prisoners to due process. He also organized chapters of the Black Panther

Party and fought for prisoners’ unions, established radical study groups and lending libraries, and published revolutionary newspapers. During the final years of his incarceration, he identified as a revolutionary anarchist and refused to shave his quarter-inch beard or submit to mandatory rectal “searches.” For these refusals, he was beaten nearly a dozen times. Finally, after being named a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, and with the support of defense committees across the country, his sentence was commuted by the governor in 1975.

“For me this is a continuous struggle whether I am on the outside or the inside,” he announced. “If the battlefield changes, my struggle never changes.” He continued to organize, leading tenant organizing efforts in Harlem and co-founding a group called the Juvenile Education and Awareness Project (JEAP) with Sandy Shevack in New Jersey. Martin Sostre passed away on August 12, 2015, at the age of 92. Attorney William Kunstler remembered Sostre as a “Promethean figure, a hero to other inmates and to ourselves. He should not even have been in jail, but while he was, the state did all it could to destroy what it could not destroy—his indomitable will.” ■

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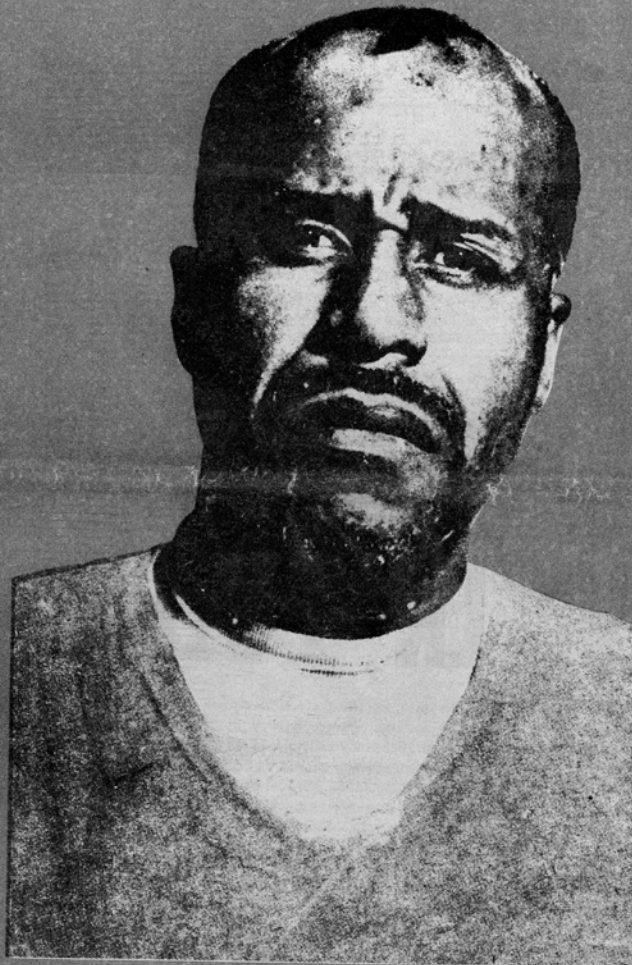
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MARTIN GONZALEZ SOSTRE

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Cover Story pg. 4, 5

INSIDE: Huelga En Puerto Rico

FRIDAY, Jan. 15, 1971

Prisoners Of War

Discussion Questions

- 1** Why do you think Martin Sostre is not more well known?
- 2** Sostre's politics developed throughout his life. What do you think led him to embrace anarchism in his final years?
- 3** What are some of the legal victories Sostre won for incarcerated people? How do those victories affect incarcerated people today?
- 4** Do you think solitary confinement affects people's politics? How do you think solitary affected Sostre's development?
- 5** Are there parts of Martin Sostre's life that surprised you? What themes can you trace throughout it?
- 6** How does Sostre's life compare or differ to other imprisoned revolutionaries you have read about?