Martin Sostre, Prison Revolutionary

By Lorenzo Komboa Ervin

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, N.Y., 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

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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-80'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!

True Leap Press P.O. Box 408197 Chicago, IL 60640