The unforgettable life of prison rebel Martin Sostre

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> 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 dropout 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 hiding 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 tempered 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 fiercely 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.

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