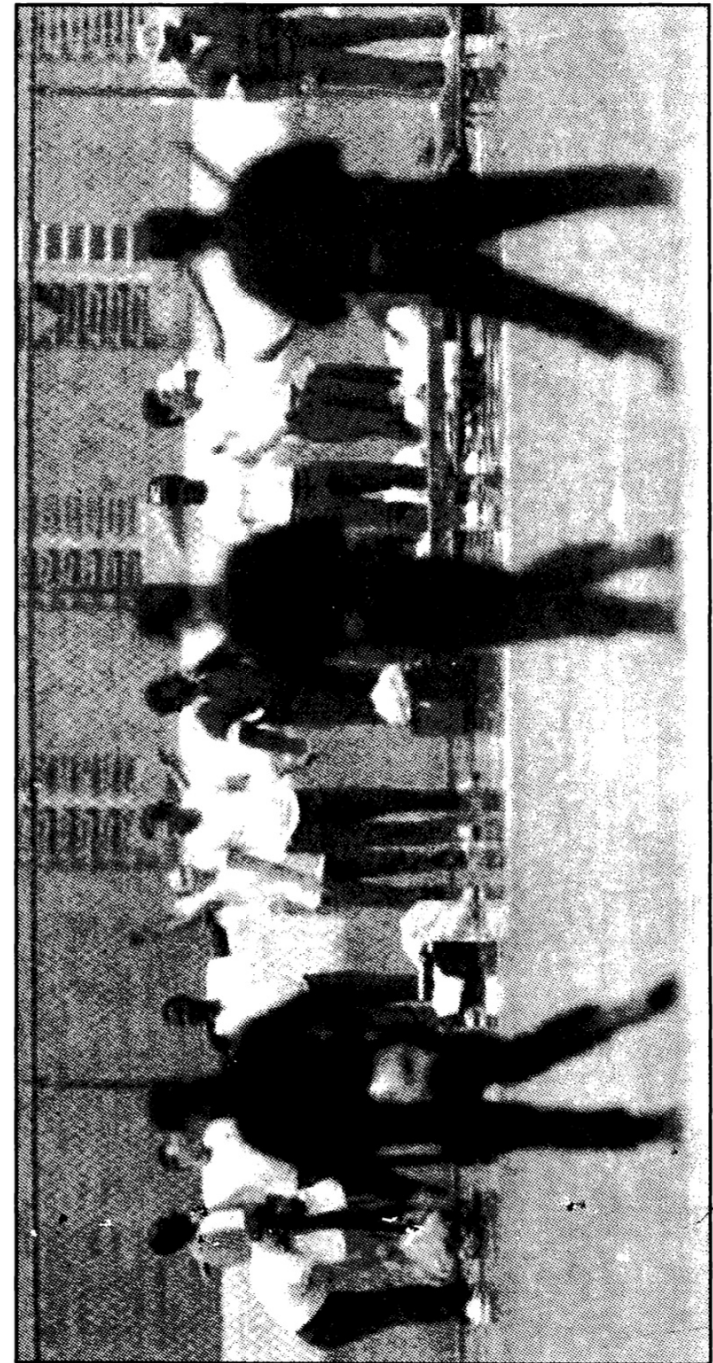




Community members escape from the cops, Cincinnati, 2001

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BACK FROM HELL



LORENZO KOM'BOA ERVIN

Back From Hell (1994)

The federal penitentiary at Terre Haute, Indiana had the reputation of being the most racist and brutal prison in the federal prison system. The city of Terre Haute itself had been known in the 1920s as one of the strongest base areas for the Ku Klux Klan in the Midwest. As I was to discover later, many prison guards were Klan members or sympathizers. There were no black guards at the time I entered it, in the summer of 1970.

The most famous inmate to do time at the prison was the 1950s rock and roll singer, Chuck Berry, during the early 1960s, and reportedly he spoke disparagingly about the state of Indiana for years afterward and said he would never have a concert in the city of Terre Haute. I do not know if this is true.

Usually racism is the best tool of the prison officials to control volatile prison populations. The warden and his guards intentionally keep up racial hostilities through rumors and provocation, and give a free hand within the prison to groups like the KKK and the Aryan Brotherhood to maim or kill black prisoners. They use the racist white prisoners to confine both themselves and others, in return for special privileges and the fleeting feeling that they are “helping” the “white race” maintain control. This is how the system imprisons whites and uses them in their own oppression. The officials can usually count on recruiting a steady supply of racist murderers and henchmen from the white prison population. But an important part of the plan is to beat down or silence anti-racist whites, in order to make sure all whites toe the fascist line. In fact, without this conformity the whole plan would not work.

For years many black inmates had been beaten or killed at Terre Haute by both white prison inmates and guards. I knew from the stories I had been told by black prisoners in Atlanta that this was true. In fact, the black prisoners at Terre Haute had lived in total fear of the whites. I said “had” because by the time I got there things had started to change.

A group of young militant black prisoners had formed an organization called the Afro-American Cultural Studies Program (AACSP), which met every week and discussed black history and culture, as well as world current events. The prison officials hated the group but had to grant their charter because of a lawsuit filed against the Warden and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. But the Warden, John Tucker, said that if they started “acting militant,” he would grant a Klan charter for the racist white inmates — as if they secretly already didn’t have one! Warden Tucker had a well-earned reputation for brutality against black inmates. The older blacks told us “young bloods” all kinds of horror stories about Tucker, and about the blacks killed or mutilated over the years by white guards and inmates. Black men were hanged, stabbed, thrown into a threshing machine, beaten with pipes, burned alive in their cells and murdered in every other way imaginable. Tucker even had a group of white inmates who acted as his “hit men” against whites who refused to conform to the racist line. But the “young bloods,” and especially the black inmates from AACSP, would not be intimidated and vowed that they would fight back to the death. Shortly after I arrived in the prison, I threw in my lot with them.

Our task, as an oppressed people, is to work to overthrow white supremacy and capitalist rule. That is the true nature of this government, not a so-called democracy” where we can expect fair treatment. This system is based on and maintained by our oppression. This is why I believe that the task of Black radicals is not to call for new federal legislation, an FBI investigation, or a citizen review board. We must educate our people about the truth of this system, and begin to build a mass resistance movement against racism and internal colonialism. This resistance should be by any means necessary, and we must have an armed self-defense policy. I have always rejected pacifism. We must seek to build dual power base, and begin to win over the masses of the people, build a militia to protect it, and push the police and white government out of the community entirely. We must begin to govern ourselves, and create a new zone of Black power. The activists have got to stop looking in from the outside and doing all our organizing on the comfortable college campuses or suburbs, and begin to organize in the impoverished neighborhoods where the action is taking place. As activists, we have got to stop waiting on crises like the Cincinnati rebellion, and begin to set up organizing projects to make sure they don’t happen, and when they do we can effectively retaliate. Yes, we have a right to rebel in Cincinnati, Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, and anywhere else we are oppressed.

We are a class of poor and oppressed peoples who are fighting capitalism and racism all over the world. We are not alone, and when we fight we will find that the people of the world support our struggle.

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Recommended Reading and Listening

Anarchism and the Black Revolution, by Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin

Driven by the Movement: Reports from the Black Power Era,
by JoNina Abron-Ervin

A Continuous Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Martin Sostre,
by Garrett Felber

Black Autonomy podcast - <https://blackautonomy.libsyn.com/>



Black People Have a Right to Rebel (2001)

A massive anti-cop rebellion has broken out in Cincinnati over the police shootings of 15 Black men, ranging in ages of 12-44 years old, all unarmed. The latest case of Timothy Thomas, a 19-year old brother, allegedly wanted for misdemeanor traffic offenses, was gunned down last week by a crazed white cop. The Black community has risen up in a massive protest against this racist occupying army, poverty, and other forms of mistreatment. Now, we are being told by various White politicians and their paid Uncle Toms that even more massive police violence should be trained on us "to keep the peace", and "stop the violence". Not the cop violence and murder, which has gone on for years, but the current rebellion by our people against police forces.

I have heard this garbage for years. Going back to the 1965 Watts rebellion, when Black folks rebelled after years of LAPD racist brutality, it was a line put forth by the white ruling class and its Negro spokespersons that we were "torching our own neighborhoods". Never mind that we didn't own a damn thing in the ghetto, that it was the cops themselves shooting and torching Black homes, and that this was a clearly a struggle with deep roots in historical oppression, the government's line was duly picked up by the negrosie, and passed off as "truth", along with "the police right to stop looters" and "we need peace". Not about justice, not about stopping police murders of our people, but that we must stop our resistance against our oppressors. That is their only concern, restoring "law and order."

We are an oppressed people, who have the moral and political right to rebel. We are fighting oppression, and seeking freedom. We are opposing terrorism by military agents of the white government. We have been historically enslaved, and our youth are being imprisoned and killed in massive numbers, so we must fight back or become an extinct species. There are those who say that if we will only be "peaceful" those in power will listen to us. This has never happened, and truthfully none of the civil rights bills of the 1960's outlawing Southern segregation, and other concessions of that period, would have been passed if the white government was not afraid of Black people erupting in the streets. So street rebellion is effective.

Neither I nor anyone else can say with complete accuracy, but I think we can soon expect to see other such rebellions in various American cities because similar contradictions exists, and even more murderous police forces guard the white rich of those places. For example, Detroit is a city which could go up at any time. It leads the USA in the number of fatal police shootings of civilians, most of whom are Black. It has a corrupt government, which allows violence by police, drug-peddling, robbery, and other offenses by officers. There are Detroit officers, like Eugene Brown, who have killed several persons, and yet never been punished. He is protected by the Mayor and the police union. Although worse in Detroit, police brutality goes on all over the country, along with political coverups to protect them. I hear white folks and middle class negroes say that if we arm ourselves and resist, "even more of us will be killed." I don't propose individual resistance, but rather community defense, and I believe then we will talk about funerals on both sides.

At one of their meetings held each Thursday, I asked what I had to do to join. The gentleman who had been acting as the moderator, a short, dark, bald-headed brother from Detroit, whose name was Nondu, told me all that was necessary was to actively take part. I was introduced to all the brothers there — fifty in all — but especially to Karenga, a huge but affable brother from Cincinnati, along with his prison rap partner, a relatively smallish brother named Desumba, and then Hassan and Nondu from Detroit, all of whom were the principal AACSP officers.

They along with the general members, all welcomed me into the group and treated me like family. Karenga, the President of the group, actually became my best friend, and saved my life on more than one occasion.

These brothers all wore shaved heads, and were influenced by the 1960s cultural nationalist figure, Ron Karenga, along with the Cleveland, Ohio black nationalist Ahmed Evans (who, with his second in command, Nondu Latham, was serving life in Ohio state prison for killing several policemen in 1968), but their greatest influence was Malcolm X. I was not greatly enamored of Ron Karenga, who headed a Los Angeles-based group called "US" (United Slaves), which was implicated in the murder of two Black Panther Party members in 1969 and purportedly engaged in other internecine violence against the BPP. The Panthers believed that Karenga was a police agent, or knowingly allowed the crimes to take place because of some political sectarian reason. But my initial doubts did not stop me from taking part in the AACSP. It became my all-consuming passion while at the prison, and I would fight and die to defend it. In fact, I almost did make the supreme sacrifice.

We had to fight both the racist authorities and the white inmates on behalf of the black prison population, many of whom were intimidated into silence. We were bold and audacious, and carried on a virtual guerrilla war to strike back at the killers of black men, whether they were guards or inmates. The whites hated and feared us because we were ruthless in defending ourselves and punishing racists. There was no mercy. Our retaliation was always swift and bloody.

Our kind of revolutionary blacks had never been seen before at Terre Haute, and it changed the status quo when we fought back. Many of the prisoners were white radicals who were in prison for anti-war cases, and they in turn began to educate other whites. The anti-racist organizing by white radicals was important because it ensured that white prisoners would no longer be indoctrinated or intimidated by the Klan as they had been for the previous thirty-five years at that prison. This re-education was something black revolutionaries could not effectively do alone, and prisoners began to check out books from the Black Culture library, to attend joint political study groups, and to try to understand in theoretical terms how racism was a way of enslaving us all — blacks and other non-whites as inferiors, whites as oppressors. They understood now how the Klan had been doing the bidding of the prison officials for years, just like the white workers in society do the bidding of the capitalists. Fascist politics became not only unpopular but unsafe.

Guards used to the old regime decided to suddenly "retire," and racist inmates begged to be transferred. The Warden and his staff were greatly alarmed, but powerless to take any action lest they precipitate a full-fledged riot, which would

also get guards and staff killed in large numbers. The prison officials realized they were losing control, and began to panic. All prison officials know that if racism is surmounted, revolt is inevitable.

Then in September of 1971 the Attica prison revolt erupted in upstate New York, and riveted the attention of the entire world on the U.S. prison system. Revolutionary prisoners — black, latino, and white — had taken guards hostage at Attica and were running the prison. This terrified prison officials all over the United States. It also pushed forward the prison struggle and made it a red-hot issue.

Even after the repression of Attica, sympathy rebellions broke out all over the country, including at Terre Haute, where for the first time black, white, and hispanic prisoners rose up to fight the prison officials. Buildings were torched or bombed, people tried to escape, strikes and industrial sabotage went on, and desperate hand-to-hand combat between guards and prisoners in the high-security L-unit was taking place, along with other acts of resistance which seemed to break out daily.

Warden Tucker and his staff panicked, and rushed to start building a new wing of high-security cells in L-unit to hold the “malcontents” in his prison. He then tried to provoke a confrontation, a “race riot” among inmates, but this didn’t work because we had chased away most of the racists, and had made alliances with progressive white and latino prisoners. These prisoners, many of whom were schooled in revolutionary politics, wouldn’t fall for the old tricks.

The Warden could not convince the white prisoners, who had now struggled and suffered next to us, to accept the old racist “hate bait.” They knew they were prisoners, and would not accept white skin privileges or resurrect the Klan to help the Warden run the prison. These white prisoners were standing up against their masters, and they were a different people entirely. They no longer saw anything in common with the Warden, not even “whiteness.” The black prison population had overcome its fear and insecurity to become the vanguard and the backbone of a serious threat to the organized racial violence and repression which had ruled unchallenged for years.

Frustrated, Tucker then just told his officers to begin rounding up the AACSP leaders and throw them into the new security unit. But we had prepared for this eventuality, and had decided not to go down without a fight. So the first time they came for our leaders, it precipitated a twelve-hour standoff when we took over one of the prison units where most of them were, booby-trapped the doors with explosives and other traps, and held the unit guards hostage. The prisoners armed themselves with spears, knives, home-made dynamite, and other weapons.

Realizing how serious the situation had become, a truce was negotiated by Tucker for protection of our so-called constitutional rights to have disciplinary hearings for the leadership instead of just summarily throwing them into solitary, and for no reprisals over the protest. But this agreement for amnesty and standard disciplinary hearings with outside legal representation was swiftly broken as soon as the authorities re-took control of the institution. All of the known leaders of the AACSP, and their white and latin allies, were snatched up and rammed into high-security cells.

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.

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!

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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.

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 1960's

The officials were thus satisfied that they had removed the threat, and that the absence of the first level of leadership would cause the group to collapse. But on the contrary, the organization never missed a beat. We had set up AACSP as an organization which had several levels of leadership; there was no primary leader. So as soon as the original founding leaders were removed, the secondary leadership took over. I took over as President, and the other slots were quickly filled by a new wave of leaders. We kept up the struggle, continued our weekly meetings, and began sending out a monthly newsletter to tell our outside supporters and the press what was going on.

We had always had a number of programs to help prisoners: a library of radical and black books, political education classes, literacy classes and job training, and we kept these going. We even demanded that officials allow us to take books and materials to those leaders in the solitary confinement units. The officials had to agree, since they saw they had failed to destroy us in the previous incident.

Finally, after several months of this standoff, officials created another provocation by attacking one of the leaders in solitary, Brother Hassan. He was badly beaten when he objected to a guard spitting and blowing his nose into the prisoners' food. We knew this was a set-up, so we did not violently respond. We demanded that the harassment cease, circulated a petition, and filed a lawsuit in the local court system. Even though we did not attack the guards like they wanted, they began to round us up anyway, claiming that we were "planning" to create a disturbance. The truth was the officials concocted this "conspiracy" to try to destroy the organization and justify these harsh security measures.

We were all thrown into the special security cells in L-unit and were only let out for showers and the law library. For twenty-three hours a day we were locked down in these cells, which were about the size of your bathroom. The guards taunted us by calling us racist and offensive names, and spitting and blowing their noses in our food. They would do this right in front of you hoping you would object so they would have an excuse to call you a "smartass nigger" and beat up on you. They would gang up and beat prisoners bloody, especially those they did not like.

After a discussion among the comrades in the unit, we decided to rebel against these conditions before things got worse and somebody got killed. As it was, Hassan was so badly beaten he required stitches and a back brace.

One day when they opened the doors to take me to the law library, I knocked the handcuffs away, leaped out of the cell, hit one of the guards in the face with my fist and stabbed the other one in the hip with a knife. I tried to force them to open the security door to let all the prisoners out, but the guard who had the keys ran and threw them out the window into a hallway. So I was trapped along with them, and decide, in frustration to kill our keepers who had been tormenting us for weeks.

I jumped on the guard I had punched, and stabbed him several times until the knife broke in his side. He screamed, "Don't kill me! Don't kill me! I've got a wife and three kids." I hit him again and again until he fell to the ground. Then I picked up a mop wringer to crush his skull, but the other guard attacked me from behind. I turned to hit him in the chest, and then we started to wrestle. Meanwhile

the pig on the floor jumped up and sprayed my face with chemical mace. I also had cut my forehead on the mop wringer, and blood flowed into my eyes, blinding me. I fought on in a blind rage!

By this time the other guards in the hallway had been alerted and ran into the unit with riot equipment. They started to beat me, but the other prisoners in the unit broke their cell windows out and started throwing coffee mugs, glass jars, and other things at the riot squad as they dragged me out of the unit, feet first, like I was some lifeless animal. But they were more afraid than I was, to see this stuff flying in the air at them, so they refrained from hitting me any more in front of the inmates.

I was dragged down the hallway by about six guards to the hospital where I was thrown into a “mental observation” cell on the second floor. They were treating me as if I had gone “crazy.” They ripped all of my clothes off of me, and then threw me naked into the cell.

There was no bed, linen, toilet, or even a sink to wash my face — just a door, a window, a hole in the wall to “do your business,” and padding all over the floor and walls to either cushion these “crazy” inmates from injuring themselves when they run their heads into the walls, or to cushion the sound of blows by guards when they beat prisoners.

For the week I remained there, they would neither feed nor clothe me, and except for when they would open the doors to spray me with a high-pressured water hose, and then open the windows to freeze my ass off with a blast of wintry air, I was left alone night and day. I caught pneumonia as a result and almost died. When they saw I was real sick and that my death would cause the other prisoners to revolt, they decided to see that I got some kind of medical attention. They made arrangements to send me to the prison hospital in Springfield, Missouri.

But even though I was being transferred by prison officials, who hoped to end the uprising, this did not happen. Although the prison officials ultimately took back administrative control from the “rioters,” the prison was never the same place. Because of the united prisoner population at Terre Haute, the prison had strikes and violent protests for years afterward. The unity of the prisoners made many things possible: the creation of the Indiana prisoners’ labor union, which fought for better working and living conditions, an end to the racially motivated killing and organizing by groups like the Klan, and of course better overall treatment. Some of the most brutal guards were fired or prosecuted after they had beaten or tortured prisoners, something which had never happened before.

Although I was to go through many years of torture at Springfield, Marion (Illinois), and other prisons, I lived through it all. I remember many things about those fifteen years in prison, but the struggle at Terre Haute, and how even whites who had been following the Klan line for many years rose up with the blacks against the prison officials was one thing I will never forget.

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Martin Sostre: Prison Revolutionary (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.

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