



## BIOGRAPHIES

### **Martin Sostre, 1923-2015** **The Unforgettable Life of Prison Rebel Martin Sostre -** **A Biography by William C. Anderson** **(2020)**

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

