



## The Prison Letters of Martin Sostre: Documents of Resistance

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# THE PRISON LETTERS OF MARTIN SOSTRE

## Documents of Resistance

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On July 14, 1967, Martin Sostre, owner of an Afro-Asian bookstore in Buffalo's Black ghetto, was arrested and charged with inciting to riot, arson, and possession and sale of narcotics. Unable to raise \$50,000 in bail (later reduced to \$25,000), Sostre remained locked in the County Jail until his trial. On March 7, 1968, eight months later, the arson and riot charges had been dropped; he was convicted by an all-white jury for selling \$15 worth of heroin and sentenced to prison for 31 to 41 years. One hour later he was in prison, where he remained until Governor Hugh Carey of New York State granted clemency to Sostre on Christmas Eve, 1975.

This case has attracted national attention because of the real possibility of Sostre's innocence in the accused crime.<sup>1</sup> The only witness for the state, Arto Williams, a known drug addict, testified that he bought the heroin from Sostre. But in May of 1973, Williams admitted perjuring his original testimony, claiming a deal was made with police for his own

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release. His second testimony was ruled "unworthy of belief" and dismissed. Judge J. Curtin stated "there was no reason not to believe the police officers" (Guardian, 1974).

Sostre was imprisoned from 1952 to 1964, and from 1967 to December, 1975, a total of 20 of the last 22 years of his life. By the age of 52, Sostre lived almost seven years in solitary confinement.

This essay will focus primarily on the prison letters of Sostre as biographical documents.<sup>2</sup> Sostre's response is a documentation of enlargement through resistance and confrontation with victimage (Benson, 1974: 1-13).

The letters, written from various prisons, often from solitary cells, are a record of active struggle. There is perhaps no image as torturously inactive as that of solitary confinement. "The box," "the hole," embodies society's most telling vision of punishment: caged isolation. Against this scene of forced passivity where all human interaction must be imaginary, Sostre engaged himself in powerful actions of resistance as have only a few others.<sup>3</sup> His letters not only testify to the ideas with which he struggled, but were often the agents of his victories. The victory of clemency, granted on Christmas Eve, 1975, by Governor Hugh Carey, was a legal success and a physical liberation. Sostre's letters also attest to an internal personal victory.

Through the prison letters, Sostre reveals a constant dialogue with himself which resulted in an active rhetoric of resistance. The postures of victimage are familiar to us; the humiliation of cooperation, the passivity of religious withdrawal from action, the destruction of madness, drugs, alcohol, and the security of party-line ideology (Burke, 1957: 164-189; Szasz, 1970: ch. 14).<sup>4</sup> Sostre confronted all sides of the victim in himself. It is this unusual triumph over traditional patterns of victimage which the letters record. Martin Sostre has been labeled a revolutionary, a Black Nationalist, a yogi, a Marxist, and an anarchist. Many ideologies required his attention in 22 years of imprisonment,

nearly seven in solitary confinement. The Sostre that emerges in the letters is a complex man who thus far has succeeded in resisting acquiescence to victimage however encountered.

#### BACKGROUND OF SOSTRE'S ARREST

Two weeks prior to Sostre's arrest, racial disorder erupted in Buffalo, New York. After Sostre's arrest, Buffalo newspapers quoted police officials who portrayed Sostre as a major instigator of the riots. The media-created image of a black man connected to both riots and drugs clearly emerged early in the case with the July 16 headline: "Police Tie Sostre to Dope Sales/Suspect Linked to Disorders" (Courier Express, July 16, 1967: 1B). Among many unsubstantiated accusations was Police Chief Michael Amico's charge that "Sostre conducted a \$15,000 weekly business in illegal narcotics traffic" (Courier Express, July 16, 1967: 3B). Sostre's past was described as "deeply rooted in violence," with loaded images of Muslim Black Power, Black Nationalism, subversion, arson, and looting (Buffalo Evening News, July 15, 1967: A-3; July 18, Sec. 1: 6; August 4, Sec. II: 21; August 5: A-3; August 8, Sec. II: 23; Courier Express, July 15, 1967: 3; July 16: 1-3; July 18: 1). Police Commissioner Felicetta's Senate testimony was quoted: "Martin X [Sostre] planned to use the fires to force white owners to sell out to him cheap" (Buffalo Evening News, August 5, 1967: A-3). Furthermore, Felicetta claimed that "Mr. X" taught 13 to 16 year old boys in a "school" to "make Molotov cocktails" (Buffalo Evening News, August 5, 1967: A-3; August 4, Sec. II: 21). The Commissioner reported unconfirmed stories about Sostre's "plans . . . to loot and burn and assault any white persons. . . Mr. X said he hated all whites and colored police" (Buffalo Evening News, August 5, 1967: A-3; August 4, Sec. II: 21).

Sostre was publicly stigmatized by a negative and sinister image. The image passed from police to the public through

the media. But, for many observers, questions remained. Was Sostre framed because of political activity? Was the subsequent grand jury indictment and final conviction by jury members a response to objective evidence against Sostre or a response to the collective "image of the situation" created and sustained by a fearful community (Boulding, 1959: 120-122)?<sup>5</sup> Was Sostre tried and found guilty because he broke the law or because a major U.S. city needed a victim around which to unite (Schaich, 1975)?<sup>6</sup>

On December 19, 1975, eight years after his arrest, the *Buffalo Evening News* editorially cautioned the Governor to "go slow on Sostre." The paper stated that Sostre had been "ragingly defiant of the entire law enforcement, judicial, and penal system." The paper failed in its attempt to stop clemency.

#### **SOSTRE'S BACKGROUND**

As a Black Puerto Rican growing up in Harlem, Sostre first heard Black Nationalism espoused by orators speaking "in front of the Black bookshop on 125th Street in New York City." Reading books about Marcus Garvey was an additional inspiration. Sostre learned firsthand "the methods of street agitation, uprisings and gang fights." Becoming a Black Muslim while in prison in the 1950s was not so much a religious conversion as a "keeping of faith" with his roots of Black consciousness. "Its Black Nationalist tenets appealed to me; it was similar to the Black Nationalism I had picked up in Harlem as a kid" (Sostre, 1968: 4). Perhaps Sostre joined the Muslims from a sense of Black brotherhood, but it was the official prison position toward Muslims which uncovered Sostre the public man. Sostre broadened his personal rebellion into legal resistance against the state.

While serving time in Attica, Sostre became a student of constitutional, international, and New York State law. He won his first case on grounds of religious freedom as he

argued “Muslim inmates are denied the right to hold and attend Islamic congregational religious worship and service” (Copeland, 1970: 120). In Sostre’s plea that ministers be allowed to “minister to the spiritual needs of the Muslims,” we witness the beginnings of a spiritual theme important to his rhetoric of resistance (Copeland, 1970: 120).<sup>7</sup> In 1964, Sostre was released from his first prison term, having served 12 years of a 6 to 12 year sentence of a narcotics conviction.

#### THE BUFFALO BOOKSTORE

After his release from Attica, Sostre established his own bookstore in Buffalo’s East Side, modeled after the Harlem neighborhood bookstore of his youth. He encouraged Black youth to gather and read, listen, or congregate for spiritual renewal and sustenance. The bookstore served as a symbol for the political and cultural aspirations of the Black community. From there, “revolutionary seeds could be planted in the consciousness of the youth” (Sostre, letter to A, 1972). The bookstore functioned as a political and educational center. “After a rousing speech, I would go to the shelf and pick up . . . Robert Williams’ *Negroes With Guns* or pre-civil war Black Nationalism or a pamphlet by Malcolm X” (Sostre, 1968: 21). It was Malcolm X whom Sostre found most appealing to the audience of Black youths.<sup>8</sup>

As the bookstore was a unifying symbol in Sostre’s search for an active community, books were tools for the politically naive—providing a way to act for the inert, and identity for the oppressed. His purpose was to create “freedom fighters” (Sostre, 1968: 21). Radical books were to serve as guides to the stored knowledge of an oppressed people’s past; this was to be the inspiration for resisting and changing the social order.

## POSTURES OF VICTIMAGE

## COOPERATION

The letters and courtroom statements emphasize Sostre's conviction that conventions of cooperation, legal, personal, or physical, often were the classic symptoms of victimage. Sostre believed that fear and intimidation were motives for the humiliating stance of victims who participated in their persecution. His repeated acts of resistance must be read from the point of view of one who has long perceived himself as the victim of a cultural system:<sup>9</sup> first as a Harlem youth, then as a prisoner where the vast majority of his cell-mates were also black and poor, and finally as the target of a city's effort to find a scapegoat for civil disorders. From his perspective, to cooperate with the courts, the guards, or the warden was to assist in his own destruction. During the 1968 trial, he clearly stated his position to the County Court Judge: "I don't know how naive you are, but if you believe that I'm going to co-operate in this legal lynching, then you are more naive than I thought" (Sostre, 1968: 34). For Sostre the judge's expectancy of cooperation was a sign of the naivete of unchallenged authority. To resist that assumption of power became Sostre's mission in what he named "war." "The fact that you are getting resistance in the courtroom means you are in trouble. We are not going to let you intimidate us. This is war" (Sostre, 1968: 34).

His arrest in 1967 closed the bookstore but only strengthened Sostre's belief in books and the printed word. Sostre's eloquent letters from prison began in 1967. Letters and law books became the vehicles with which to continue his struggle to resist. Through a maze of legal proceedings and courtroom scenes, Sostre's struggle against perceived victimage emerged in courts of law where he attempted to "take from the commissioner and the warden their unlimited and arbitrary power to oppress" (Sostre, letter to A, 1972).

Sostre knew firsthand of the warden's broad powers to punish. Legitimate excuses for placing a prisoner in solitary included (1) getting an inmate to obey orders "promptly and fully," (2) an inmate now answering "all questions put to them by prison officials fully and truthfully," (3) "as may be necessary for maintenance of order and discipline" (Motley, 1973: 266).

The Commissioner of New York State Prisons had backed the warden's decision in 1960 to place Sostre in solitary confinement. The official reason given was that Sostre "continuously [sic] failed to abide by the rules of the institution, and would not conform within reason or take part in the programs in the area of rehabilitation" (Copeland, 1970: 21). Sostre's continued resistance to prison regulations were violations including possession of religious material, distribution and writing of Muslim literature, conspiring to stage a hunger strike, and possession of a homemade book (Copeland, 1970: 121).

In 1968 Sostre was again put in solitary for practicing law in prison without a license.<sup>10</sup> Sostre's response was formalized as *Sostre v. Rockefeller*, in which Sostre claimed solitary confinement to be "cruel and unusual punishment." In legal briefs, Sostre vilified the officials and claimed a universal standard for human decency.

[It is a] mental sickness of these barbaric racist defendants who still consider eating, personal hygiene, exercise and fresh air . . . a privilege, and punish prisoners by denying them these basic necessities which even animals enjoy. [Copeland, 1970: 169]

Sostre won a temporary court victory and damage fees when Judge Constance Motley released him from solitary and stated that he was there "not because of any serious infraction of the rules of prison discipline," but for legal and political activities and beliefs."<sup>11</sup> She also ruled that the punishment of solitary confinement is "physically harsh, destructive of morale, dehumanizing . . . degrading and dan-



gerous to the maintenance of sanity if continued more than 15 days."<sup>12</sup> In 1972 Sostre was again placed in solitary for one year (his sixth) for refusing to shave his beard or submit to a rectal examination while in solitary.<sup>13</sup>

Sostre's legal briefs reflect his battle with the system of law, but it is his letters written to friends and defense committees which reveal his personal struggle. Sostre chose to resist even the smallest acts of humiliation. Any cooperation with the state's attempts to dictate the terms of one's human rights was rejected as an argument for apostasy.

I cannot submit to injustices, even minor ones. Once one starts submitting to minor injustices and rationalizes them away, their accumulation creates a major oppression. That's how entire people fell into slavery. [Sostre, letter to B, 1974]

One legal argument with the state was to eliminate the use of strip and rectal searches as a violation of privacy. Sostre believed every person's body was sacred, and its violation a "profanation."<sup>14</sup> "I refuse to submit to rectal examination," said Sostre, "on the grounds that it's unlawful, dehumanizing and degrading" (Sostre, letter to A, 1972; Worthy, 1970).<sup>15</sup>

Retaliation for his defiance came in 1974 when he claimed he was assaulted by seven guards after refusing a rectal search for the sixth consecutive time. "[I] was subdued . . . lifted off the floor and spread eagle while my face was toward the floor." In a choking armlock, one "sadist continued to squeeze totally preventing me from breathing." As the rectal search was performed, Sostre claimed he was "suffocated" into "unconsciousness" (Sostre, letter to B, 1974). As a result of this incident, Sostre was charged and convicted of second degree assault. Sostre's reluctance to compromise and refusal to cooperate were expressed in his unwillingness to exchange a plea of guilty, at the trial judge's request, for a suspended sentence. "I can't plead guilty, Your Honor, I never hit those guards" (Nadle, 1975: 10).<sup>16</sup>

Sostre recognized no allegiance to an unjust social order. He perceived its real function as conquest and domination. Prison order was maintained by fear. Sostre's letters declared his total commitment "to smash the oppressive prison system," but as he intensified his resistance to intimidation, Sostre believed the state would intensify its oppression. "When opposing an organized oppressive structure . . . [they're] not going to sit idle and allow you to objectify [them] in destruction" (Sostre, letter to A, 1972). Despite Sostre's determination for "dangerous revolutionary activities," he reminded his friends of the following:

[It is not my purpose] . . . to be a martyr or a hero. Nor am I a fool. For I really know what these racist pigs will put on you when they get the ups on you and have you defenseless. If they made Ray Broderick, who is white, hang himself through beatings and torture, and beat Bill Boyle, who is also white, till his screams could be heard in all four galleries of the torture chamber, I know what they will do for black me. [Copeland, 1970: 184-185]

His determination to resist in spite of physical fear shaped his attitude toward death. The "way I would hate to die is like a hog." He quoted from Claude McKay's poem, "Let us nobly die, so our blood may not be shed in vain/Then even the monsters we defy shall be constrained to honor us though dead!" (Sostre, 1968: 55). He claimed, "I lost my fear of death years ago" (Sostre, letter to A, November 23, 1972). His actions demonstrate that he was prepared to risk his life. "We can't have it nice and cozy and safe in this struggle" (Sostre, letter to A, April 17, 1972). To demonstrate, he recalled an experience in solitary. "[I] . . . informed several prisoners of my intentions to challenge in Federal Court the atrocities being inflicted upon us and to sue for damages, several counselled me to 'cool it' " (Sostre, letter to A, March 17, 1972). Sostre vilified their approach as "negative" and "cowardly," reminding his readers that had he not gone to court, prison reform would not have resulted from the

Motley decision. His resistance was an act of war, and he identified his personal war as one with the forces of the third world. "I am like the brave and resolute people in Vietnam who are struggling against the common oppressor. . . . I consider myself a Black Viet Cong" (Sostre, 1968: 3). He viewed his mission to resist the enemy as occurring in planned stages, each expanding in intensity and evolving from a prior stage. His Muslim victory "was [only] a stage and mission concluded successfully" (Sostre, letter to A, July 5, 1972).

In a letter dated July 21, 1972, he described his determination to resist the warden's effort to break him while in solitary.

[The warden] . . . ordered the hacks to close the windows facing my cell. . . . It got so hot in that dungeon that the steel walls and concrete floor were hot. It was like being in a steam bath and even the water from the faucet was hot. I stayed bathed in sweat all day and night, but Follette never succeeded in breaking me. [Sostre, letter to B]

Sostre's ability to resist physical punishment was a requirement to his stance of noncooperation. He claimed that spiritual strength empowered him to continue resistance.

#### RELIGIOUS WITHDRAWAL

For Sostre, "the struggle [against the state] is a spiritual one" (Sostre, letter to A, June 15, 1972). He attributed his efforts to "endure" and "defeat" the "physical torture inflicted by the state" to his "spiritual powers" (Sostre, letter to A, June 9, 1972). He perceived "the inability of the oppressive state to prevail over the spirituality of one man" as a political victory for him and for all liberating forces (Sostre, letter to A, July 15, 1972).

Crucial to Sostre's personal ideology was the spiritual dimension supporting his larger theme of resistance. Spiritual

enlightenment began for Sostre while “reading and studying of Indian scriptures” in Attica in the 1950s (Sostre, letter to A, Aug. 30, 1972). It was during his first of four consecutive years in solitary (1960-1964) that Sostre developed his spiritual powers more fully. In the hole, without community, visitors, or other inmates, Sostre carried his spiritual powers to political uses. In a hostile and sterile environment it was the struggle against great odds that made the achievement of spiritual powers possible. Sostre claimed “the struggle against the state’s attempt to destroy me tempered my powers” (Sostre, letter to A, March 8, 1972).

After more than six years of solitary confinement, Sostre claimed to be a *spiritual adept*. “Being locked up in defense of my principles when I am right is not punishment, it is performance of duty” (Sostre, letter to A, November 23, 1972). Sostre continued his definition one step further. “What is punishment to others is spiritually fulfilling duty and what evokes fear in others evokes gladness in the adept” (Sostre, letter to A, November 23, 1972). Sostre’s spiritual Weltanschauung required a redefinition of ordinary reality too spartan and uncertain for very many captive revolutionaries.

But Sostre also saw religion and *extreme* spiritualism as traps of victimage. To withdraw into the inner peace of the religiously saved or the security of the nonmaterial world was a real possibility for a man who had endured six years of solitary confinement. In his inner dialogues, as written to friends, he saw that both the Muslim religion and Yoga could lead to acquiescence through inaction. His spiritual victory did not develop in a political vacuum; rather, it grew out of confrontation with a life-and-death situation. Sostre struggled to “direct spiritual physical energies toward” further revolutionary resistance (Sostre, letter to B, July 5, 1972).

Sostre’s spiritual growth was a result of his struggle. His spiritual quest did not cast him out of the polis or impede his will for political activity; instead it provided a rationale and

ground swell of further self-immersion in personal resistance as the ultimate political act.

As a spiritualist, Sostre maintained that action imprints one's inner self on to the external world, translating the duality of being and action into one political posture. Too much spiritualism would remove his motive for rebellion. Purposefully he rejected all the yogi disciplines which lead to "superior spirituality and physical and mental control of my presence and the physical forces comprising my environment" (Sostre, letter to A, May 9, 1972). The price of such an undertaking, he wrote, is "renouncing all attachments to the physical things of this world" (Sostre, letter to A, May 9, 1972). For Sostre that process lead to a violation of self and the laws of nature. Not to act against agencies of oppression was an unpardonable sin of omission. "We must turn a good portion of ourselves over to spirituality," said Sostre, "but it is equally crucial that we retain enough to act outward with willed action against powers of domination in the physical world." He recognized the need for spiritual sources in the creation and endurance of his struggle, but, for Sostre, the political act controlled all moves. The body was the "physical vehicle necessary to objectivize" spirituality into political reality (Sostre, letter to A, July 15, 1972).

[To pull back] when the repression and [state] retaliation come[s] down . . . negates natural principles of the universe and betrays both self and revolutionary ideals. What really matters is putting your body and life on the line. [Sostre, letter to A, July 15, 1972]

This marked the difference for Sostre between a "talking yogi" and a "doing yogi" (Sostre, letter to A, July 15, 1972).

Throughout Sostre's letters the theme of spiritual balance was interwoven with the theme of revolution and love. For Sostre, a controlled spiritualism prevented him from becoming his enemies' likeness while continuing rebellious action. Too little as well as too much spiritualism can suppress

revolutionary acts whose ultimate source of inspiration is love. "Were I a sure enough yogi . . . I could not perceive that what is happening is necessary . . . for the . . . benefit of humanity" (Sostre, letter to A, July 15, 1972).

Sostre also cautioned against spiritualism which can turn into a "hustle." For Sostre, revolutionary resistance constituted the essential foundation for rebuilding a people's culture and spiritual life. Without political activism, culture decays. Resistance makes the difference, said Sostre, between "a talking Marxist" and an "acting Marxist" or between "revolutionary Black Nationalists and the obedient Muslim movement of today" (Sostre, letter to A, April 13, 1972). Sostre became disillusioned with Muslim inaction and withdrawal from the drama of conflict. "When I . . . saw that the Muslim movement . . . was so alienated from the Black masses, I gave it up." In 1974 he wrote that Muslims are now "model prisoners and cooperators. You don't find them in Solitary any more. The box is the real barometer of who is a threat to the state" (Nadle, 1975: 10). For Sostre, the positive strengths of spiritual beliefs led to a direct confrontation with the most subtle voice of the victim: party-line ideology.

#### THE PARTY-LINE

The role of political zealot was possibly the most tempting attitude of victimage available to Sostre while in prison. Sostre's refusal to accept a rigid world view was an internal act of resistance. His constant questioning of ideological assumptions and his refusal to judge by party-line standards marked a man who resisted the victimage of an intellectual prison as well as the prison of the state.

Yoga that did not lead to action became "passive" and "faddish," but action without spiritual guidance became lifeless and "trapped in the rut of outworn political clichés and unproductive acts" (Sostre, letter to A, July 5, 1972).

Such was the politics of “those people whose spirit is captive of the wooden party line [who] therefore seek to overthrow the present dictatorial state, not for the purpose of liberating the human spirit . . . but to replace the present state with one whose official policy is the rigid party line” (Sostre, letter to A, April 17, 1972). Nor, he warned, should revolutionaries become so immersed in “some abstract political line or ideology that we become oblivious to the basis of all political action—human being with lives to fulfill on a personal level” (Sostre, letter to A, December 17, 1971).

With spiritual balance there was, in Sostre’s view, no conflict between revolution and love. Spiritual powers prevent our becoming “mere robots devoid of true love and compassion for our fellow beings, [viewing others] . . . only as mere chess pieces to be used and exploited for the sake of the political game” (Sostre, letter to A, December 17, 1971). Love became the common denominator in the spiritual revolution. Extreme spirituality made one “incapable of experiencing the love and hate of the world” (Sostre, letter to A, June 9, 1972). Sostre believed that love drives the revolutionary. “Love is bias,” he stated (Sostre, letter to A, June 9, 1972). The paroxysms of hate and love transcended both race and sex in Sostre’s view. It distinguished his enemies from loved “brothers and sisters.” “It is the person and her or his acts on behalf of the liberation struggle and me that I love or hate. [Nor am I] . . . in love with anyone’s color or lack of color” (Sostre, letter to A, January 1972). For Sostre, love must not be negated by spiritualism or revolutionary politics.

Sostre moved from Muslim to Black Nationalist and Marxist, rejecting any position of dogma. His letters also revealed a sympathy and infatuation with anarchism. Believing that a Black audience would have difficulty accepting the language of anarchy, in 1972 he wrote of his unwillingness “to introduce foreign terms [such as anarchy] into the ghetto-colony which sisters and brothers cannot relate to”

(Sostre, letter to A, March 4, 1972). His justification was that the language could be defeating to his "agitational propaganda" and "time consuming." His logic and strategy was practical; "Since the word revolutionary is in; and involving anarchist (since an anarchist is a revolutionary), I believe the anarchist concept can be conveyed . . . instead . . . with less effort" (Sostre, letter to A, March 4, 1972). As an anarchist, he admitted to being a novice. By 1972 he had read only "sketches of Kropotkin, Bakunin and others [and] as yet have never read an entire book on anarchism" (Sostre, letter to A, March 14, 1972). His politics again expanded after reading literature about women's oppressed position in the world.

By 1972, Sostre embraced the women's movement as essential to the revolution. For Sostre, Marxism was weakened by his admission that "The mere overthrow of capitalism and its replacement with socialism does not, of itself, liberate women from male chauvinistic oppression." He lamented that "Socialism does not even eradicate racism" (Sostre, letter to A, January 28, 1972).

It is difficult to understand that Sostre, Muslim, Black Nationalist, and Marxist, began to "dig the hell out of Shulamith [Firestone] and the Feminist movement" (Sostre, letter to A, July 17, 1972). But it was easy for Sostre, the spiritual revolutionary, to state: "In the context of the world's liberation struggle against all forms of oppression, I view the struggle for the liberation of women as the most widespread and humanistic" (Sostre, letter to A, January 28, 1972). Within this struggle Sostre believed that "yogi and spiritualism will play a large role in accelerating the process of equality" (Sostre, letter to A, January 28, 1972).

Sostre enlarged his spiritual revolution to include the sexual dimension. He equated sexual equality with cosmic consciousness or true humanity, i.e., the union of separate male and female psyches into a unified oneness. His role, he assured his audience, would not be "passive." "I am no



longer an . . . upholder, aider and abator of the repressive concepts, laws and customs employed to rob women of their human rights" (Sostre, letter to B, May 25, 1974).

In this strange blending of Marxism, Black Nationalism, yoga, Feminism, spiritualism, and anarchism, Sostre emerges as the victor, resisting dogma, racism, and the "correct" analysis. The politics are uniquely those of Martin Sostre, prisoner and resister. His special relationship to his environment was active resistance to conditions of victimage. Refusing to participate in his own victimization, Sostre rejected intellectual catalepsy as well. Instead, Sostre created his own political identity—which was a dialogue rather than a retreat. Sostre's rejection of dogma indicates that he did more than survive the prison of his isolation. In resisting various party-lines, Sostre freed the victim of his inner cell by inventing himself. Sostre refused to accept the victimage of his society.

### CONCLUSION

Sostre's letters reveal his personal struggle against perceived political and legal victimage. As we follow the dialectic between Sostre the man and conditions imposed by prison life, we witness Sostre struggling with and transcending his situation. In six long years of isolation from even the prison world, and 20 years in prison, Sostre underwent a transformation from personal rebellion to active resistance against a wide variety of oppression. The postures of the victim are many. Sostre resisted cooperation, religious withdrawal, and party-line ideology. He fused spirituality and politics into a unique political activism. His letters gave expression to a humanistic vision of human rights and dignity and provide a daring manifesto of resistance.

## NOTES

1. In addition to numerous defense committees in New York State, a Committee to Free Martin Sostre, made up of prominent citizens, has joined in an effort to publicize Sostre's case and petition the Governor for his release. On December 7, 1975, Russian Nobel Peace Laureate Andrei Sakharov added his name to the clemency appeal. In December 1973 Amnesty Internat'l put Sostre on its "prisoner of conscience" list, stating: "We became convinced that Martin Sostre has been the victim of an international miscarriage of justice because of his political beliefs . . . not for his crimes."

2. The study of prison letters as biographical documents is in the tradition of what C. Wright Mills called the "sociological imagination." Mills (1959) writes: "it is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points in the intersections of biography and history within society." All Sostre's letters are written from prison. All private letters used by the authors were taken from 1971-1972 and from 1974-1975. Most letters from 1972 were written from Auburn; letters from 1974-1975 were written from Clinton Correctional Facility. The receiver of the letter is designated as A or B. The dates and receiver of each letter are cited in the text. The authors wish to thank Elwin Powell and Sharon Fisher of the Buffalo defense committee for making the letters available.

3. Another such prisoner was George Jackson, who speaks of his efforts to defeat years of isolation in solitary confinement through study. "I would be sitting in a special locked isolation cell, . . . and there would be no one to talk to—just the sound of screaming voices. And because there is no human contact, you depend on books. No contact with people. No body around. I'm strictly by myself. The only friend I had was a book. Sometimes I'd find myself talking outloud to the author. I'd sort of wake myself up and I'd hear myself talking to this other person" (Jackson, 1972: xiii-xiv).

4. On the theme of victimage as a major human motive requiring sacrifice of scapegoat and purification of social body, Kenneth Burke has made the most exhaustive contribution. For a case study of Nazi victimage of the Jew see his "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" (1957: 164-189). For a historical treatment of woman as victim see Thomas Szasz (1970), especially chapter 14, "Expulsion of Evil."

5. Boulding (1959) notes how national war images (here we are discussing racial images of Blackman) "extend through time; backward into a supposedly recorded or perhaps mythological past and forward into an imagined future."

6. Sostre's arrest took place not only during the duress of racial disorder, which makes him a prime suspect for victimage, but also during the Vietnam war. For a study of racial violence and victimage during the twentieth century and its relationship to wartime, see Schaich (1975).

7. Also see Sostre (1968: 45-47) for additional harassment. While being held in Erie County Jail awaiting trial in February 1968, Sostre filed a legal brief—Sostre v. John Tutuska, Sheriff of Erie County—for illegal obstruction of

mail and harassment of visitors. Sostre was refused the right to receive or read newspapers.

8. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* may have had a lasting influence on Sostre. Benson's (1974: 13) reading of the autobiography persuades us that "Confinement and enlargement . . . stand as the symbols for Malcolm's discovery of himself through the act of addressing his fellow men." Knowledge of Malcolm's struggles may have encouraged Sostre to enlarge his resistance. As Benson (1974: 10) concludes, "Seen in this light, Malcolm's sense of brotherhood with all men is not the weakening of militancy or a softening of commitment, but an extension of potency." Sostre may have similarly interpreted the autobiography and applied its message to his own aspirations.

9. George Jackson (1972: 7) eloquently describes the feelings of victimage: "Born to a premature death, a menial, subsistence-wage worker, odd-job man, the cleaner, the caught, the man under hatches, without bail—that's me, the colonial victim. Any one who can pass the civil service examination today can kill me tomorrow. Anyone who passed the civil service examination yesterday can kill me today with complete immunity. I've lived with repression every moment of my life, a repression so formidable that any movement on my part can only bring relief, the respite of a small victory or the release of death. In every sense of the term, in every sense that's real I'm a slave to and of, property."

10. This confinement came about because Sostre mailed a legal paper to a codefendant, Geraldine Robinson, from prison. The mother of six children, she worked in the bookstore with Sostre, and was sent to prison for three years. Earlier, on December 10, 1967, Sostre was committed by the state to Meyer Memorial Hospital in Buffalo for psychiatric observation as a paranoid personality. On his return to prison, Sostre (1968), in a letter dated December 25, 1967, tells of his experience: "had to refuse drugs . . . which they tried to give me to dope me up and have me walking around in a drugged stupor like the other patients there. . . . My lectures on Black Power, Vietnam . . . etc. were not appreciated. . . . They were glad to get rid of me."

11. 312 F. Supp. 863-69 (S.D.N.Y. 1970). *aff'd*, modified, and *rev'd* in part sub. nom., *Sostre v. McGinnis*, 422 F. 2d. 178 (2d. Cir. 1971) (En banc, cert. denied, 404, U.S. 1049) (1972). As indicated in the second part of the footnote, Motley's decision was in part overturned by a higher court. Courts traditionally have been very timid about interfering in the system of limitless discretion. Sostre was, however, awarded \$13,000 (later reduced to \$9,000) in damages, but never collected because the defendant, Warden Follette of Greenhaven, died.

12. 312 F. Supp. at 868-9. William Worthy (1970) quotes a University of Wisconsin psychiatrist who testified at the trial: "even a week or less in solitary confinement had 'gravely psychologically damaged' several dozen persons he had examined."

13. In order not to submit to prison rules requiring rectal searches of prisoners leaving and entering solitary, Sostre refused to leave for his one hour of exercise; instead he spent the full 24-hour day, completing one full year in solitary without leaving.

14. The word profanation is borrowed by the authors from Emile Durkheim to describe Sostre's response to perceived violation of his body as a sacred object. For a more updated version of the Durkheimian theme, see Goffman's (1961: 14-35) use of "mortification of self" to describe a similar process of dehumanization in mental hospitals.

15. Worthy (1970) quotes Sostre's courtroom testimony: "I never went into the yard because I wouldn't subject myself to their searches. This is merely harassment because we [in solitary] have nothing."

16. For not cooperating with the trial judge, Sostre was convicted in February 1975 by an all-white jury and sentenced 0 to 4 years (indeterminate sentence) on each count of assault charge. In June 1975 Sostre was transferred to N.Y.C. Federal Prison in care of federal authorities. The court had determined that his life was endangered by state officials.

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