

George Jackson: Black Revolutionary

By Walter Rodney, November 1971

To most readers in this continent, starved of authentic information by the imperialist news agencies, the name of George Jackson is either unfamiliar or just a name. The powers that be in the United States put forward the official version that George Jackson was a dangerous criminal kept in maximum security in America's toughest jails and still capable of killing a guard at Soledad Prison. They say that he himself was killed attempting escape this year in August. Official versions given by the United States of everything from the Bay of Pigs in Cuba to the Bay of Tonkin in Vietnam have the common characteristic of standing truth on its head. George Jackson was jailed ostensibly for stealing 70 dollars. He was given a sentence of one year to life because he was black, and he was kept incarcerated for years under the most dehumanizing conditions because he discovered that blackness need not be a badge of servility but rather could be a banner for uncompromising revolutionary struggle. He was murdered because he was doing too much to pass this attitude on to fellow prisoners. George Jackson was political prisoner and a black freedom fighter. He died at the hands of the enemy.

Once it is made known that George Jackson was a black revolutionary in the white man's jails, at least one point is established, since we are familiar with the fact that a significant proportion of African nationalist leaders graduated from colonialist prisons, and right now the jails of South Africa hold captive some of the best of our brothers in that part of the continent. Furthermore, there is some considerable awareness that ever since the days of slavery the U.S.A. is nothing but a vast prison as far as African descendants are concerned. Within this prison, black life is cheap, so it should be no surprise that George Jackson was murdered by the San Quentin prison authorities who are responsible to America's chief prison warden, Richard Nixon. What remains is to go beyond the generalities and to understand the most significant elements attaching to George Jackson's life and death.

When he was killed in August this year, George Jackson was twenty nine years of age and had spent the last [correction: 11 behind bars—seven of these in special isolation. As he himself put it, he was from the lumpen. He was not part of the regular producer force of workers and peasants. Being cut off from the system of production, lumpen elements in the past rarely understood the society which victimized them and were not to be counted upon to take organized revolutionary steps within capitalist society. Indeed, the very term lumpen proletariat was originally intended to convey the inferiority of this sector as compared with the authentic working class.

Yet George Jackson, like Malcolm X before him, educated himself painfully behind prison bars to the point where his clear vision of historical and contemporary reality and his ability to communicate his perspective frightened the U.S. power structure into physically liquidating him. Jackson's survival for so many years in

vicious jails, his self-education, and his publication of Soledad Brother were tremendous personal achievements, and in addition they offer an interesting insight into the revolutionary potential of the black mass in the U.S.A., so many of whom have been reduced to the status of lumpen.

Under capitalism, the worker is exploited through the alienation of part of the product of his labor. For the African peasant, the exploitation is effected through manipulation of the price of the crops which he labored to produce. Yet, work has always been rated higher than unemployment, for the obvious reason that survival depends upon the ability to obtain work. Thus, early in the history of industrialization, workers coined the slogan the right to work. Masses of black people in the U.S.A. are deprived of this basic right. At best they live in a limbo of uncertainty as casual workers, last to be hired and first to be fired. The line between the unemployed or criminals cannot be dismissed as white lumpen in capitalist Europe were usually dismissed.

The latter were considered as misfits and regular toilers served as the vanguard. The thirty-odd million black people in the U.S.A. are not misfits. They are the most oppressed and the most threatened as far as survival is concerned. The greatness of George Jackson is that he served as a dynamic spokesman for the most wretched among the oppressed, and he was in the vanguard of the most dangerous front of struggle.

Jail is hardly an arena in which one would imagine that guerrilla warfare would take place. Yet, it is on this most disadvantaged of terrains that blacks have displayed the guts to wage a war for dignity and freedom. In Soledad Brother, George Jackson movingly reveals the nature of this struggle as it has evolved over the last few years. Some of the more recent episodes in the struggle at San Quentin prison are worth recording. On February 27th this year, black and brown (Mexican) prisoners announced the formation of a Third World Coalition. This came in the wake of such organizations as a Black Panther Branch at San Quentin and the establishment of SATE (Self-Advancement Through Education). This level of mobilization of the nonwhite prisoners was resented and feared by white guards and some racist white prisoners. The latter formed themselves into a self-declared Nazi group, and months of violent incidents followed. Needless to say, with white authority on the side of the Nazis, Afro and Mexican brothers had a very hard time. George Jackson is not the only casualty on the side of the blacks. But their unity was maintained, and a majority of white prisoners either refused to support the Nazis or denounced them. So, even within prison walls the first principle to be observed was unity in struggle. Once the most oppressed had taken the initiative, then they could win allies.

The struggle within the jails is having wider and wider repercussions every day. Firstly, it is creating true revolutionary cadres out of more and more lumpen. This is particularly true in the jails of California, but the movement is making its impact felt everywhere from Baltimore to Texas. Brothers inside are writing poetry, essays and letters which strip white capitalist America naked. Like the Soledad Brothers, they have come to learn that sociology books call us antisocial and brand us criminals, when actually the criminals are in the social register. The names of those who rule America are all in the social register.

Secondly, it is solidifying the black community in a remarkable way. Petty bourgeois blacks also feel threatened by the manic police, judges and prison officers. Black intellectuals who used to be completely alienated from any form of struggle except their personal hustle now recognize the need to ally with and take their bearings from the street forces of the black unemployed, ghetto dwellers and prison inmates.

Thirdly, the courage of black prisoners has elicited a response from white America. The small band of white revolutionaries has taken a positive stand. The Weathermen decried Jackson's murder by placing a few bombs in given places and the Communist Party supported the demand by the black prisoners and the Black Panther Party that the murder was to be investigated. On a more general note, white liberal America has been disturbed. The white liberals never like to be told that white capitalist society is too rotten to be reformed. Even the established capitalist press has come out with exposés of prison conditions, and the fascist massacres of black prisoners at Attica prison recently brought Senator Muskie out with a cry of enough.

Fourthly (and for our purposes most significantly) the efforts of black prisoners and blacks in America as a whole have had international repercussions. The framed charges brought against Black Panther leaders and against Angela Davis have been denounced in many parts of the world. Committees of defense and solidarity have been formed in places as far as Havana and Leipzig. OPAAL declared August 18th as the day of international solidarity with Afro-Americans; and significantly most of their propaganda for this purpose ended with a call to Free All Political Prisoners.

For more than a decade now, people's liberation movements in Vietnam, Cuba, Southern Africa, etc., have held conversations with militants and progressives in the U.S.A. pointing to the duality and respective responsibilities of struggle within the imperialist camp. The revolution in the exploited colonies and neo-colonies has as its objective the expulsion of the imperialists: the revolution in the metropolis is to transform the capitalist relations of production in the countries of their origin. Since the U.S.A. is the overlord of world imperialism, it has been common to portray any progressive movement there as operating within the belly of the beast. Inside an isolation block in Soledad or San Quentin prisons, this was not merely a figurative expression. George Jackson knew well what it meant to seek for heightened socialist and humanist consciousness inside the belly of the white imperialist beast.

International solidarity grows out of struggle in different localities. This is the truth so profoundly and simply expressed by Che Guevara when he called for the creation of one, two, three - many Vietnams. It has long been recognized that the white working class in the U.S.A is historically incapable of participating (as a class) in anti-imperialist struggle. White racism and Americas leading role in world imperialism transformed organized labor in the U.S. into a reactionary force. Conversely, the black struggle is internationally significant because it unmasks the barbarous social relations of capitalism and places the enemy on the defensive on his own home ground. This is amply illustrated in the political process which involved the three Soledad Brothers—George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette—as well as Angela Davis and a host of other blacks now behind prison bars in the U.S.A.

NOTE: George Jackson also authored *Blood In My Eye* which was published posthumously, or after this article was written.

NOTE: Biography of the articles author

WALTER RODNEY: A BIOGRAPHY

Walter Rodney was born in Georgetown, Guyana on March 23, 1942. His was a working class family-his father was a tailor and his mother a seamstress. After attending primary school, he won an open exhibition scholarship to attend Queens College as one of the early working-class beneficiaries of concessions made in the field of education by the ruling class in Guyana to the new nationalism that gripped the country in the early 1950s.

While at Queens College young Rodney excelled academically, as well as in the fields of athletics and debating. In 1960, he won an open scholarship to further his studies at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. He graduated with a first-class honors degree in history in 1963 and he won an open scholarship to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. In 1966, at the age of 24 he was awarded a Ph.D. with honors in African History.



His doctoral research on slavery on the Upper Guinea Coast was the result of long meticulous work on the records of Portuguese

merchants both in England and in Portugal.

In the process he learned Portuguese and Spanish which along with the French he had learned at Queens College made him somewhat of a linguist.

In 1970, his Ph.D dissertation was published by Oxford University Press under the title, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800*. This work was to set a trend for Rodney in both challenging the assumptions of western historians about African history and setting new standards for looking at the history of oppressed peoples. According to Horace Campbell "This work was path-breaking in the way in which it analyzed the impact of slavery on the communities and the interrelationship between societies of the region and on the ecology of the region."

Walter took up his first teaching appointment in Tanzania before returning to his alma mater, the University of the West Indies, in 1968. This was a period of great political activity in the Caribbean as the countries begun their post colonial journey. But it was the Black Power Movement that caught Walter's imagination.

Some new voices had begun to question the direction of the post-independence governments, in particular their attitude to the plight of the downpressed. The issue of empowerment for the black and brown poor of the region was being debated among the progressive intellectuals. Rodney, who from very early on had rejected the authoritarian role of the middle class political elite in the Caribbean, was central to this debate. He, however, did not confine his activities to the university campus. He took his message of Black Liberation to the gullies of Jamaica. In particular he shared his knowledge of African history with one of the most rejected section of the Jamaican society-the Rastafarians.

Walter had shown an interest in political activism ever since he was a student in Jamaica and England. Horace Campbell reports that while at UWI Walter "was active in student politics and campaigned extensively in 1961 in the Jamaica Referendum on the West Indian Federation." While studying in London, Walter participated in discussion circles, spoke at the famous Hyde Park and, participated in a symposium on Guyana in 1965. It was during this period that Walter came into contact with the legendary CLR James and was one of his most devoted students.

By the summer of 1968 Rodney's "groundings with the working poor of Jamaica had begun to attract the attention of the government. So, when he attended a Black Writers' Conference in Montreal, Canada, in October 1968, the Hugh Shearer-led Jamaican Labor Party Government banned him from re-entering the country. This action sparked widespread riots and revolts in Kingston in which several people were killed and injured by the police and security forces, and millions of dollars worth of property destroyed.. Rodney's encounters with the Rastafarians were published in a pamphlet entitled "Grounding with My Brothers," that became a bible for the Caribbean Black Power Movement.

Having been expelled from Jamaica, Walter returned to Tanzania after a short stay in Cuba. There he lectured from 1968 to 1974 and continued his groundings in Tanzania and other parts of Africa. This was the period of the African liberation struggles and Walter, who fervently believed that the intellectual should make his or her skills available for the struggles and emancipation of the people, became deeply involved. It was from partly from these activities that his second major work, and his best known --*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* - emerged. It was published by Bogle-L'Ouverture, in London, in conjunction with Tanzanian Publishing House in 1972.

This Tanzanian period was perhaps the most important in the formation of Rodney's ideas. According to Horace Campbell "Here he was at the forefront of establishing an intellectual tradition which still today makes Dar es Salaam one of the centers of discussion of African politics and history. Out of he dialogue, discussions and study groups he deepened the Marxist tradition with respect to African politics, class struggle, the race question, African history and the role of the exploited in social change. It was within the context of these discussions that the book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was written."

Campbell also reports that " In he same period, he wrote the critical articles on Tanzanian Ujamaa, imperialism, on underdevelopment, and the problems of state and class formation in Africa. Many of his articles which were written in Tanzania appeared in *Maji Maji*, the discussion journal of the TANU Youth League at the University. He worked in the Tanzanian archives on the question of forced labor, the policing of the countryside and the colonial economy. This work-- " World War II and the Tanzanian Economy"-- was later published as a monograph by Cornell University in 1976".

Rodney also developed a reputation as a Pan-Africanist theoretician and spokes person. Campbell says that "In Tanzania he developed close political relationships with those who were struggling to change the external control of Africa He was very close to some of the leaders of liberation movements in Africa and also to political leaders of popular organizations of independent territories. Together with other Pan-Africanists he participated in discussing leading up to the Sixth Pan-African Congress, held in Tanzania, 1974. Before the Congress he wrote a piece: "Towards the Sixth Pan-African Congress: Aspects of the International Class Struggle in Africa, the Caribbean and America."

In 1974, Walter returned to Guyana to take up an appointment as Professor of History at the University of Guyana, but the government rescinded the appointment. But Rodney remained in Guyana, joined the newly formed political group, the Working People's Alliance. Between 1974 and his assassination in 1980, he emerged as the leading figure in the resistance movement against the increasingly authoritarian PNC government. He gives public and private talks all over the country that served to engender a new political consciousness in the country. During this period he developed his ideas on the self emancipation of the working people, People's Power, and multiracial democracy.

On July 11, 1979, Walter, together with seven others, was arrested following the burning down of two government offices. He, along with Drs Rupert Roopnarine and Omawale, was later charged with arson. From that period up to the time of his murder, he was constantly persecuted and harassed and at least on one occasion, an attempt was made to kill him. Finally, on the evening of June 13, 1980, he was assassinated by a bomb in the middle of Georgetown.

Walter was married to Dr Patricia Rodney and the union bore three children- Shaka, Kanini and Asha.