Malcolm X
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Updated: Nov. 21, 2017
Born: May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska, United States
Died: February 21, 1965 in New York, New York, United States
Other Names: Little, Malcolm; El-Shabazz, El-Hajj Malik
Nationality: American
Occupation: Civil rights activist
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Full Text:

"A race of people is like an individual man; until it uses its own talent, takes pride in its own history, expresses its own culture, affirms its own selfhood, it can never fulfill itself."

Malcolm X was African-American Muslim leader and black nationalist activist whose militant advocacy of black pride, separatism, and armed self-defense foreshadowed the Black Power movement of the late 1960s. He was born on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska, and was assassinated on February 21, 1965, in New York City.

Early Life

As even he himself stated in his autobiography, Malcolm X was a man of many different identities, a man who lived five or six lifetimes in one. Born Malcolm Little to Louise Norton Little and Earl Little, a Baptist minister, he had an especially turbulent and unhappy childhood. His father was an outspoken supporter of black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey, and as a result the family incurred the wrath of various white vigilante groups. Driven from their home in Omaha, Nebraska, they moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and from there to Lansing, Michigan, where they were harassed by a terrorist organization known as the Black Legion. Members of the Legion burned the Littles' house to the ground in 1929, and in 1931 Earl Little was found on some streetcar tracks with his skull crushed and his body nearly severed in half. The police called it an accident, but the family suspected that Legion members had actually beaten him to death and then thrown his body on the tracks to make it look as if he had been struck by a passing streetcar.

Left emotionally unstable by the years of turmoil and tragedy she had endured, Louise Little was committed to a state mental hospital in 1937. Little and his seven siblings were then divided among various foster homes and state institutions. Despite his unsettled family life, Little was an excellent student and class leader with dreams of becoming a lawyer. His dream was shattered when a white teacher he confided in cruelly advised him to be "realistic" about being black and plan on becoming a carpenter instead.

Little dropped out of school not long after that and headed to Boston, where he worked at a series of menial jobs and drifted into petty crime, and then to Harlem around 1942. As a street hood nicknamed "Detroit Red," he ran a gambling operation, sold and used marijuana and cocaine, and hustled business for brothels. Returning to Boston, he organized a burglary ring, an activity that eventually led to his arrest and imprisonment in 1946.

Once in prison, Little--dubbed "Satan" by his fellow convicts because he was so full of hate and anger-set about transforming his life through a process of self-education. But the real turning point came when one of his younger brothers introduced him to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Lost-Found Nation of Islam, better known as the Black Muslims. The core of Muhammad's philosophy held that whites were nothing but a "devil race" created to torment the black race and that in order to
flourish, blacks had to separate themselves culturally, economically, politically, and physically from Western, white civilization.

By the time Little was paroled in 1952, he had taken the Muslim surname "X" in place of the "slave name" Little and had whole-heartedly embraced the beliefs of the Black Muslims. Accepted into the movement after impressing Elijah Muhammad with his quick intelligence and forceful personality, Malcolm X was soon ordained a minister and given a position at a Detroit mosque. He followed that with a period of private study under Muhammad himself and was then sent to Philadelphia to establish a new congregation. From there he went on to serve as leader of the Harlem mosque, although he was frequently called upon to start new congregations across the country.

In 1955, Malcolm X met Betty Sanders, a Nation of Islam member who went by Betty X. After years of courtship, the pair married in 1959. They had six daughters together

**Brought the Nation of Islam into the Public Eye**

Throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s, the charismatic Malcolm X took the Nation of Islam from an insignificant splinter group of about 400 people to an organization that boasted some 10,000 official members and an untold number of sympathizers. A talented and articulate speaker whose fiery, intense style bordered on demagoguery, he was by far the Nation of Islam's most effective and prominent preacher and was in almost constant demand on college campuses, at meetings of various associations, and on radio and television programs.

The message he shared with his audiences was the exact opposite of what people were accustomed to hearing from more "main-stream" civil rights activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King, who called for the integration of American society through nonviolent means. Malcolm X advocated black separatism, and he advised blacks to take up arms in self-defense against white hostility. As a result of his fiercely militant stance, he was hated and feared not only by most whites but also by many blacks, who worried that his tirades against "white devils" would provoke a catastrophic race war. The media enhanced this perception by consistently portraying him as a dangerous rabble-rouser and outlaw.

But the more famous Malcolm X became, the more tension and jealousy he provoked among the leaders of the Nation of Islam, who were also wary of his growing uneasiness with some of the more cultish aspects of the Black Muslim faith. If Elijah Muhammad were looking for an excuse to get rid of such a formidable threat to his own power, he found it in December, 1963, when Malcolm X publicly described the assassination of President John F. Kennedy as a case of "chickens coming home to roost" in a society that tolerated white violence against blacks. Muhammad suspended his protégé and forbid him from speaking on behalf of the Nation of Islam for ninety days. The estrangement became permanent in March, 1964, when Malcolm X announced that he was quitting the Nation of Islam to form two new groups of his own, the Harlem-based Muslim Mosque, Inc., and the multinational Organization of Afro-American Unity.

**A New Philosophy**

That same spring, Malcolm X made a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca and followed it with a prolonged period of study in the Middle East and Africa. Impressed by the sight of people of all races coming together as one in the name of Islam, he returned to the United States in late 1964 a changed man, proclaiming himself a convert to orthodox Islam and adopting a new name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. His new philosophy combined elements of his religious faith with socialism, anti-colonialism, and what eventually came to be known as "black consciousness"—a sense of pride in being black and a desire to foster links with other blacks around the world based on a shared racial and cultural heritage. He softened his stance on a wide variety of issues and tried to downplay his menacing image. He admitted he had once been a racist but insisted that he no longer accepted Elijah
Muhammad's belief that all white people were evil; economics, not color, was what kept blacks from succeeding. He also condemned separatism as counterproductive and expressed a willingness to work within the system to secure political and civil rights for blacks, and to that end he began making overtures to moderate black leaders and progressive whites.

Throughout the rest of 1964 and into early 1965, Malcolm X also became increasingly critical of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, raising questions about financial irregularities and suspicious contacts with white supremacist groups and even denouncing his onetime mentor as a fake, a racist, and an immoral philanderer who had fathered at least eight children with several young Muslim secretaries. The conflict between the two men and their respective supporters escalated as both sides traded insults and accusations. The situation took an ominous turn after Malcolm X received a number of death threats and thwarted what he suspected were Black Muslim attempts on his life, including a firebombing incident at his home during the night of February 14, 1965.

Death

Exactly one week later, on February 21, Malcolm X was preparing to address several hundred of his followers in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom when three black men rushed up the center aisle toward him and opened fire with a shotgun and two pistols, striking him more than a dozen times. He died a short time later while undergoing surgery at a nearby hospital. The shotgun-toting man was quickly tackled and subdued by onlookers, and the other two suspects were apprehended some time later. All three men had ties to the Nation of Islam, but one of them later insisted that he had been paid by someone else to kill Malcolm X. A jury subsequently convicted them of murder, for which they were sentenced to life in prison.

The initial reaction to Malcolm X's death was mixed; the white press took the opportunity to moralize that those who live by the sword die by it, while black leaders acknowledged his moderating views and termed the loss of his brilliance and passion a setback for the civil rights movement. It was not until the end of the year, after the publication of The Autobiography of Malcolm X (an as-told-to work he collaborated on with writer Alex Haley), that his message of black unity, self-respect, and self-reliance truly began to strike a responsive chord. Later he was hailed as the first true black revolutionary and the inspiration for the Black Power movement of the late 1960s.

Legacy

The legacy of Malcolm X remains a powerful force in black America, his affirmation of black pride admired by people at opposite ends of the political spectrum, from conservative Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas to revolutionary playwright and poet Imamu Amiri Baraka. A great deal of the current interest in him can be attributed to filmmaker Spike Lee, who closed his 1989 movie Do the Right Thing with the famous "by any means necessary" quote from Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech. Not long after that, the black nationalist's likenesses and slogans began showing up on T-shirts worn by black and white teenagers in major U.S. cities. Then Lee began sporting a baseball cap featuring a large "X" on the front as a promotional gimmick for Malcolm X, his 1992 film on the life of Malcolm X, which touched off a virtual explosion of interest in clothing and art bearing his image. Even the music world has taken notice; many rap artists, for instance, have incorporated Malcolm X's words and message into their songs.

The commercialization of Malcolm X bothers some people, who find it sad that so many young blacks feel they have to look to the grave for leadership and ironic that a man who rejected mainstream culture has himself become a consumer good and pop icon. Yet his ongoing importance as a symbol of the black struggle is undeniable. "Our generation said, 'just topple the walls of segregation,'" explained Cornell University professor James Turner, the national chairman of the Malcolm X Commemoration Commission. "The walls are down but the barriers to social justice are still there. Young people are asking, 'Who are we, in this time?' Malcolm speaks to that." Howard Dodson of the
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture agreed. "There's something in Malcolm that touches the core of younger people," he said. "He was willing to stand up, to talk straight. Malcolm was a man—a real man." The year 2015 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Malcolm X.

FURTHER READINGS:

**Books**


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