

The Soledad Brothers: How a Prison Picks Its Victims

THINK OF CALIFORNIA'S Monterey County and you'll probably imagine quaint shops in Carmel, gnarled pines hanging wind-swept above one of the most dramatic beaches on the West Coast, or exclusive mountain hide-aways for the wealthy. You may remember that Joan Baez has her school for non-violence in Monterey, that the Esalen Institute offers sessions in sensitivity training, or that hitchhiking hippies are taking over beautiful Big Sur.

Images of the easy life come to mind quickly. But there is another side to the county not mentioned in Chamber of Commerce leaflets and not part of the tourists' beaten paths. Inland from the resorts lies the Salinas Valley, flat acres of rich farmland whose white owners once employed vigilance committees and strike-breakers to intimidate and occasionally kill migrant workers. This is the part of the county that John Steinbeck saw. South from Salinas is an even uglier reality—Soledad Prison. Here, the violence and brutality that were once part of the chaos of the Depression have been evoked again with the murders of three of the prison's black inmates.

When Soledad (more properly known as California Training Facility at Soledad) opened in 1946, it was touted as a progressive institution. Perhaps it is, but over the years prisoners have come to know it as the "gladiator school" or the "front line" because of the intensity of the racial hostility which exists between guards and inmates, and among the inmates themselves. Letters detailing the brutality of daily life inside the prison have made their way to inmates' families and attorneys and finally to the attention of legislators in Sacramento. Finally, in early June of this year, California State Senator Mervyn Dymally made an inspection of the maximum security part of the prison, accompanied by two staff members and Bay Area attorney Fay Stender. The group wanted to distribute a questionnaire, to be filled out and returned on the spot by prisoners so that no one would be punished for complaining about conditions.

The plan ran afoul of Ray Proconier, Director of the California Department of Corrections, and of the czars of the prison. "If there's any questionnaire," said Proconier, "I'm going to put it in there. If there's anything wrong going on down here, we want to be the first to know about it." Dymally submitted, and after touring the prison's "O" wing, the senator's group reassembled in the warden's office to talk over what they had learned from brief discussions with inmates. They were especially concerned about black prisoners' complaints about food being contaminated, urine

in their coffee and similar harassments.

"It's my opinion that the food is not being tampered with," said Proconier. "From a management point of view, we don't want it. There's just a bad set of feelings going around this joint." When Dymally suggested that there must be some basis for the fact that so many letters and complaints had mentioned this, Proconier turned to his prison officials. "Now I want you to tell me the truth," he warned. "Has it ever happened that someone has urinated in anyone's coffee?" When the four men shook their heads from side to side in unison, he turned back, satisfied.

After they had asked a few more questions and received Proconier's arbitrary answers, Dymally's group left Soledad without ever getting to the prison's major problem—the rampant racism that has led to a series of murders of black inmates and, more recently, to the outrageous framing and prosecution of three others who have become known as the Soledad Brothers.

A BLACK INMATE IN Soledad's maximum security section wrote recently about the racial hatred there: "On —, A.B. and myself were transferred to Soledad Correctional Facility. We were placed in the Max Row section, 'O' wing. Immediately entering the sallyport area of this section I could hear inmates shouting and making remarks such as, 'Nigger is a scum low-down dog,' etc. I couldn't believe my ears at first because I knew that if I could hear these things the officers beside me could too, and I started wondering what was going on. Then I fixed my eyes on the wing sergeant and I began to see the clear picture of why those inmates didn't care if the officials heard them instigating racial conflict. The sergeant was, and still is, a known prejudiced character towards blacks. I was placed in cell No. —, and since that moment up til now I have had no peace of mind. The white inmates make it a 24-hour job of cursing black inmates just for kicks, and the officials harass us with consistency also."

On "Max Row," prisoners remain in solitary confinement in little cells like iron boxes 23-1/2 hours a day. Heavy screens, not just bars, shut them in, and they are fed through holes in their respective doors.

Another prisoner wrote from "O" wing about food service there: "The prison officials here stopped serving the meals and deliberately selected the Caucasian and Mexican inmates to serve the meals and they immediately proceeded to poison our meals by filling food to be issued to us with

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The Road to Phnom Penh: Cambodia Takes up the Gun

ON MARCH 18, AN AMERICAN-backed military coup overthrew the neutralist government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, forcing the Cambodian left into all-out insurgency and providing American counterinsurgents with yet another Vietnam. First South Vietnam; then Laos; now Cambodia—American power has finally toppled the last domino in Indochina into communist revolution.

For over a decade, the United States had tried to unseat Sihanouk and replace him with a right-wing regime. Though a conservative in domestic policies, Sihanouk jealously guarded his country's independence, knowing that entangling alliances could only lead Cambodia straight into the Indochina war, and from there into a full-scale revolution of her own. He also knew that if Cambodia ever became a junior partner in America's Asian alliances, she would open herself to the territorial expansion of her traditional enemies, the Thais and the South Vietnamese.

He was right. General Lon Nol, Cambodia's new ruler, has abandoned neutrality. South Vietnam's General Thieu has agreed to occupy Cambodia, defending Lon Nol from the Cambodian people, at least until a successful Cambodianization of the war permits the withdrawal of South Vietnamese combat troops. The Thais have volunteered military aid and their own combat troops. And the Americans, striking from air and land, are turning Cambodia into the newest battlefield in an unending war.

Sihanouk, meanwhile, is now chief of his country's revolutionary movement. "America attracts communism," the former neutralist once explained, "like sugar attracts ants."

Sihanouk first became King of Cambodia in 1941, appointed by the Vichy French, who from the outset of World War II administered the country on behalf of the Japanese. In early 1945, after Vichy fell to the Allies, the Japanese seized direct control of Indochina, made the right-wing collaborator Son Ngoc Thanh premier, and pushed Sihanouk to declare Cambodia independent of French rule. Following the defeat of Japan in World War II, the French returned, jailing Son Ngoc Thanh and forcing Sihanouk to make Cambodia "an autonomous state within the French

Union." This effectively reestablished French military and economic control, and gave the French the use of Cambodian and Cambodian troops in their campaign to regain control of Vietnam from the Viet Minh.

In reaction to the French takeover, many of Son Ngoc Thanh's followers fled to Thailand, where they organized a Cambodian independence movement. The new group, the Khmer Issarak, covered the political spectrum from right-wing nationalists to communists, and included ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia. By 1953, the anti-French Khmer Issarak, working closely with the Viet Minh, controlled three-fifths of Cambodia.

SIHANOUK, HIS NATIONALIST credentials now in question, began his own "royal crusade for independence." Capitalizing on French fear of the Khmer Serai and the Viet Minh, he skillfully maneuvered the French to back his crusade and, in October 1953, declared the independence of Cambodia.

Sihanouk's success undermined the nationalist position of the Khmer Issarak. Son Ngoc Thanh and a few of his right-wing followers went into exile in Bangkok; the great majority of the Khmer Issarak, including the left, accepted Sihanouk's offer of amnesty and laid down their arms.

Sihanouk then set out to govern Cambodia in classic fashion: balancing right against left, class against class, while maintaining his own position as the indispensable man-in-the-middle. He permitted the communist Pracheachon Party to operate openly. But, stepping down from the throne, he actively campaigned for his own "Buddhist Socialist" Party, the Sangkum, helping it establish exclusive control of the National Assembly. He surrounded himself, both in the Sangkum and in his cabinets, with representatives of the entire span of Cambodian political life, including veterans of the Khmer Issarak. Yet he ran the government as a one-man show, single-handedly making decisions on even the most trivial matters.

Economically, Sihanouk practiced a kind of top-down socialism. But, rather than promoting growth, the profits of

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Photograph by Robert Scheu/Photon West