

E. James West. "The Assassination of Malcolm X." In M. Newton-Matza, ed. *Disasters and Tragic Events: An Encyclopedia of Catastrophes in American History*. Bloomsbury, 2013.

Malcolm X's death on the 21st February 1965 at the hands of his former organisation the Nation of Islam was in keeping with the riot and revolt of the 1960s, a period characterised by American novelist Charles Bukowski as the 'decade of assassinations.' However, of the many high-profile assassinations during this era, perhaps no other figure has received a more dramatic posthumous rehabilitation in the public imagination than the incendiary Muslim minister and black nationalist leader. Like the death of Dr Martin Luther King three years later, the shots which ended Malcolm's life in the Audubon Ballroom gave birth to a martyr, and in the exalted halls of black activist heroes, Malcolm and Martin remain the dominant icons of African-American history and culture. However, whilst Dr King's death allowed him to transcend the boundaries of race and become the definitive image of American social transformation, Malcolm's murder established him as the spiritual father of the black power movement, and his enduring appeal has remained closely linked to racial identity and radical black anger (Dyson 1995).

Malcolm Little was born on the 19th May 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska. His father, a Baptist preacher and an outspoken admirer of Jamaican Pan-Africanist leader Marcus Garvey, was killed when Malcolm was six, which led to Welfare agencies separating the Little family and Malcolm being sent to a detention home. He dropped out of school after the eighth grade and moved to Boston before settling in Harlem where he became embroiled in petty crime, pimping and drug abuse under the alias of Detroit Red. In 1946 he was arrested for burglary and sentenced to 10 years at Charlestown State Prison, where he discovered the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Impressed by the Nation's endorsement of racial solidarity and black nationalism through religion, Malcolm converted to Islam and renounced his 'slave name' of Little in favour of an X to represent his true African name. Following his parole in 1952 Malcolm quickly joined the Nation's ranks and became assistant minister of the Nation's Detroit temple less than a year after his release from prison. The following year he was elected minister of Harlem's Temple Number 7.

Malcolm quickly established himself as an enigmatic and popular spokesperson for the Nation, fully embracing the group's separatist agenda. His standing within the organisation

rose at speed, aided by his intervention following the beating of Nation member Johnson Hinton in 1957 which thrust him into the national spotlight. His public rhetoric was marked by scathing attacks on whites and also the leaders of the growing civil rights movement. Malcolm castigated the non-violent direct action tactics favoured by the movement's leaders and instead advocated armed self-defence and black separatism. Although he remained a loyal servant both in word and action to Elijah Muhammad, his popularity began to create tensions within the organisation and Malcolm grew increasingly disillusioned with the Nation's rigid religious teachings. In late 1963 comments made by Malcolm about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy resulted in a public speaking ban imposed by the Nation, and in early 1964 he announced a split from his mentor Elijah Muhammad and the creation of a new organisation Muslim Mosque Inc. This ideological and religious departure was marked by a change of name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, conversion to orthodox Sunni Islam and a rejection of the Nation's racist teachings. Malcolm made the pilgrimage to Mecca in the spring of 1964, which he followed with an extensive tour of Africa. On his return the minister began to develop a more expansive, pan-African vision of black self-determination and founded the Organisation of Afro-American Unity (OAAU)

The tensions which had built between Malcolm and the Nation of Islam prior to the break only increased as he became more outspoken regarding the group's leadership and ideology. Despite Malcolm's own loss of faith in the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, many within the Nation of Islam remained true to the elder statesman and resented Malcolm's position as the media face of the organisation. The inevitable break, when it came, left Malcolm vulnerable. Throughout 1964 veiled threats on the minister's life from the Nation of Islam became more and more explicit, both through public statements made by the organisation's leaders and through articles in the Nation's weekly publication *Muhammad Speaks*, culminating in an article by Louis Farrakhan in December which argued that a man such as Malcolm was worthy of death. According to Malcolm's autobiography, the first direct threat of death was issued through a Temple 7 official who had previously been a close friend, however the man assigned to the job instead warned the minister of the threat on his life (Haley and X 1964). Malcolm had been under FBI surveillance for a number of years, and anonymous threats to his home telephone that were picked up by FBI bugs confirmed suggestions given by FBI informants that the Nation were going to make an attempt on the minister's life (Carson 1991). By this point himself Malcolm knew that he was unlikely to live much longer. The

minister had begun meeting with Alex Haley in 1963 as they developed his autobiography, and he frequently predicted to Haley that he would not survive to see the book's publication. In spite of, or perhaps because of this fear, Malcolm travelled extensively during the last 12 months of his life. Following the foundation of the OAAU in June 1964, he returned to Africa and also travelled to France and Britain, meeting officials, giving interviews and attending debates. He was in the United States for just 12 of the 34 weeks between the foundation of the OAAU and his death. In what proved to be his final trip abroad, Malcolm travelled to Britain in February 1965 to lecture at the London School of Economics. A few hours after his return to New York on Saturday 13th February, his house in Queens was firebombed and burnt to the ground. Despite a successful attempt on his life becoming more and more likely, Malcolm attended a rally the next day to promote his fledgling organisation. In an interview on the 18th February Malcolm acknowledged that he was a marked man and suggested that the Nation was planning to murder him, but remained defiant (Jones 1965). Just three days later at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, Malcolm intended to outline in greater detail the aims and ambitions of the OAAU. He would not be given the chance. As Malcolm began to speak a disturbance broke out at the rear of the ballroom involving two men. His bodyguards began to move towards the back of the hall, leaving the minister exposed. Taking advantage, a man rose from the front row and rushed the stage. Drawing a sawn-down shotgun from beneath his coat he opened fire on Malcolm, shooting him twice through the chest. As the room descended into panic two more men rose and joined the first assailant in firing on the minister. A later autopsy would reveal 21 separate wounds, although the initial shotgun blasts had already proved fatal. In the ensuing chaos that followed one of the assassins escaped through a bathroom window, whilst the other two attempted to flee down the stairs. One of the men, 23-year-old Talmadge Hayer, was shot in the leg by Malcolm's secretary Reuben Francis, and had to be rescued from the mob of Malcolm's followers by two policemen outside the building. Inside a number of Malcolm's aides attempted in vain to resuscitate him, and he was quickly transported to a nearby hospital where he was pronounced dead. He was not yet 40 years old.

Following Malcolm's death some of his followers retaliated against the Nation of Islam, setting black Muslim mosques on fire in New York and in San Francisco. His funeral on the 27th February in Harlem was attended by nearly 2000 people, with Ossie Davis delivering an impassioned eulogy in the minister's honour. Elijah Muhammad and the Nation's leaders denied any involvement in the assassination. Hayer along with fellow members of the Nation

of Islam Thomas Johnson and Norman Butler were convicted of Malcolm's murder the following year and received 20-years to life sentences. However, although Hayer confessed to his part in the killings he denied the involvement of either Johnson or Butler, and in 1978 signed two affidavits naming others as his true co-assassins (Garrow 1993). A number of scholars have presented a strong case for disputing the sentencing of Johnson and Butler and have pointed to some element of FBI collusion in the assassination, if not by direct violence than through a failure to protect Malcolm from attempts by the Nation of Islam on his life. Manning Marable (2011) rejected Johnson and Butler as plausible assassins and identified 5 members of the Newark Mosque as part of the plot to kill Malcolm – Benjamin Thomas, Leon Davis, Talmadge Hayer, Willie Bradley and Wilbur McKinley. Marable named Bradley as the man with the shotgun whose initial volley had killed the minister.

Critics of Malcolm contended that his death was an unfortunate consequence of the violent black separatism he was seen to embody. However, his assassination served only to extend his influence, and the publication of his autobiography in late 1965 secured his lionisation by younger civil rights activists such as Stokely Carmichael who would play an increasingly central role in the radicalisation of the movement as the decade progressed. Perhaps the most outspoken and incendiary black activist of the early 1960s, Malcolm's black nationalist ideology alongside his increasing sensitivity to internationalism and the intersection of civil rights activism with Cold War politics best reflected the ideological roots of the black power concept (Joseph 2006). The extent to which Malcolm underwent an ideological metamorphosis following his break from the Nation of Islam and the suggestion that he may have been moving towards a more moderate nationalist ideology at the time of his death has remained a deeply contested issue. Certainly, the formation of the OAAU and his public rhetoric in the last months of his life suggests that Malcolm was moving towards a more expansive, internationalised perspective of the black freedom struggle. When considered alongside Dr King's increasingly radical civil rights ideology in the second half of the 1960s, we may speculate that if both men had lived longer their ideas and political ambitions may have become increasingly convergent – a position that stands in contrast to popular media representations of the men as polar opposites (Cone 1991).

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