

Attica: Rebellion & Massacre

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In September 1971, the political landscape of the American Empire was very different from today's. Detroit, Newark, Watts, and other cities still smoldered with the embers of urban insurgency.

The imperial army in Vietnam was disintegrating from open mutiny in the last days of a failed foreign war. Guardsmen and cops gunned down college students at Kent State and Jackson State, and martial law ruled the streets of Berkeley, California following riots over People's Park. Functioning as political police, the FBI coordinated a nationwide secret and sometimes murderous campaign against dissidents. But rebellion continued, and in the prisons the spirit of the times reverberated and intensified. The uprising at Attica Correctional Facility in Upstate New York in response to the everyday horrors of prison life became a conscious political insurrection that soon to be murdered inmate spokesman Elliot Barkley described as "but the sound before the fury of those who are oppressed."

It was in this context that the Attica revolt and ensuing massacre took place, events which clearly display a racist system that shuts away a vast proportion of its minority underclass in cruel dungeons, and slaughters them when they resist.

What caused Attica? "Attica was the cause of Attica," an inmate wrote later, "just as Tombs caused the Tombs riot, and Auburn caused the Auburn riot." The hellish conditions at Attica combined with events in other prisons to spread a willingness to resist inside the walls. At Auburn, New York, a major prison rebellion in 1970 ended without death when inmates released hostages and returned to their cells upon the state's promise of no reprisals. However, after taking control of the institution, corrections officers proceeded to beat inmates and transfer "ringleaders" to other state prisons. That same year another riot at The Tombs prison in New York City caused more shuffling of inmate agitators; many ended up in Attica. The lies and lessons of Auburn and Tombs increased the militancy of convicts throughout the New York prisons.

A Day For Jackson

On August 21, 1971, three weeks before the Attica rebellion, guards at San Quentin prison in California shot black revolutionary inmate George Jackson to death. He had been wounded in the leg and subsequently executed as he lay on the ground. The Official Version said that Jackson had smuggled a large pistol into the prison in his afro. The inmates of Attica, many of whom wore afro hairstyles themselves, knew that was impossible to do. They gave Jackson a day of mourning on August 22, unnerving the guards as they wore black armbands and silently refused to eat. In Attica's overcrowded cells and corridors, there was a palpable anticipation of revolt. Both cons and guards predicted Attica would blow. All that was necessary was a spark.

On Wednesday, September 8, in one of the prison courtyards, two inmates sent from Auburn were scuffling. Former Auburn inmates were watched closely; a guard called them over and ordered them back to their cells. One of the two refused and knocked the guard's hand away when he tried to grab him. By now a crowd had gathered

and the guard wisely let it go for the time being. That night, after everyone was securely locked up, a special detail of particularly vicious corrections officers used for just these occasions came for the disobedient inmate. On their way in, someone winged an unopened can of soup cleanly through the bars of a cell and hit a guard in the head. Undeterred, the goon squad proceeded to beat and drag away-the inmate wanted in the courtyard incident.

The bomb that was Attica had reached critical mass. The next day, September 9, the screws came as usual to march inmates to breakfast. Prisoners at Attica were marched everywhere they went. Rather than giving verbal instructions, corrections officers started and halted them by beating riot sticks on the wall. Guards handling inmates inside the prison did not have guns but instead carried foot and a half long, two inch thick clubs they called “nigger sticks.” As they opened the cellblock that morning, guards tried to leave the con who threw the soup can locked in his cell while the rest of his company were marched to breakfast. As inmates passed the locking mechanism at the end of the gallery, one of them pulled the lever that opened the detained prisoner’s cell. He joined the others, and the guards did not dare seize him. The tension mounted.

On the march back from breakfast, an agitated guard pushed an inmate. The prisoner pushed back and knocked the guard down. Other corrections officers came running down the corridor to his assistance, but the now defiant inmates jumped and disarmed them. The flashpoint had been reached and riot spread throughout the prison. Guards were beaten, windows broken, and fires set. Inmates in different sections of the prison joined together by smashing through a gate that had appeared solid in the forty years of Attica’s existence. Men ran through the corridors shouting, “To D-Yard! To D-Yard!”

Under Siege

Twelve hundred insurgent inmates took control of the institution and seized forty-six prison officials. As they gathered in the yard with their hostages, consumed with the sudden rush of freedom, the men set about reorganizing life within the hated walls. Dubbing themselves D-Yard Nation, inmates set up tents, dug latrine trenches, and settled in for a siege.

State Police from all over New York were rushed to Attica along with guards from other prisons. As troopers pleaded with prison authorities to begin an immediate assault on the rebellious prisoners, liberal reformer Russell Oswald, commissioner of the state correctional system, instead began negotiating with the inmates. Most inmate demands resembled Oswald’s own bureaucratic attempts at reforming the brutal New York penal system, and he soon agreed to nearly all of them.

As the talking went on, several sick and injured hostages were released, but on Saturday, September 11, one of the guards died of his injuries; this led to a halt in the negotiations. Inmates, already asking for guarantees against reprisals, added a demand of amnesty for any crimes committed during the takeover. This position was unacceptable to the state. Nelson Rockefeller, the billionaire governor of New York and later Vice President, refused to come to Attica. From his 300-acre Pocantico Hills estate he issued a statement denying the power to grant amnesty, and added that even if he could grant it, he wouldn’t. The state will always take this position; it must maintain its monopoly on the use of violence, whatever the circumstances.

In D-Yard

As bargaining continued, inmates set up a public address system to broadcast the negotiations and to allow prisoners to address the yard. The surrounding police became further infuriated as they heard themselves constantly referred to by inmates as “pigs” and “motherfuckers.” State Troopers in particular were unaccustomed to being defied, especially by a group of convicted felons most of whom were black or Latino. They had always been able to brutalize such people with virtual impunity. Some troopers shouted back threats and racial insults, while others took pellets from shotgun shells and zipped them into the yard with slingshots.

Corrections officers were so out of control that Rockefeller ordered them not to participate in the assault, an order they would disobey. Police anger was building towards explosion.

The mood in the yard was also unlike before. The inmates slept outside in makeshift tents or under the stars. There was a feeling of comradeship amidst the shared danger. In his book, *The Brothers of Attica*, Richard X. Clark, far from a sentimental man, described the change. “Brothers were embracing all the time. One guy broke into tears and said, ‘This is the first time you are allowed to get close to someone.’ You see what they do to you in prison is make you hide your feelings, and now people were saying for the first time what they felt.” As the weekend passed and the state’s refusal to consider amnesty became clear, inmates prepared for the inevitable assault. They fashioned crude weapons in the metal shop, took pop bottles and gasoline from machine engines to make molotov cocktails, and dug foxholes.

They listened to fervent oratory, responding with cheers and upthrust fists. In their passion, as they mugged for the television cameras, they expressed their willingness to die in a hopeless stand against their tormentors. In media interviews, they stressed their unity, and encouraged their brothers and sisters outside the walls to “get it together, like we got it together in here.”

Attica was a brief moment of rebellious solidarity across the barriers of race. This was in prison, where keepers routinely use race (and anything else) to pit inmates against each other, to make them easier to control. And yet in spite of every attempt to thwart resistance, these insurrections continued to occur. With each passing day, Attica was becoming more of an embarrassment to the state. Just as in the recent Gulf War, the experts in violence didn’t want a negotiated ending. They wanted to crush the insurgents in blood, to make a point—the state rules with force.

Monday morning, September 13. In the light rain, inmates and hostages huddled in the mud. At 7:40 a.m., with bargaining stalled on amnesty, Oswald sent an ultimatum to D-Yard: surrender the hostages and return to their cells within the hour. The rebels of Attica knew the lies of the state from bitter experience. Beatings and indictments had followed all the New York prison riots of the previous year. They would fight this one out to the end, and die if necessary. Many soon would.

They returned a resounding negative to Oswald’s ultimatum. The sensitive liberal then ordered the attack, as sensitive liberals so often do. In response to assault preparations, inmates had taken eight hostages up onto a catwalk. They were blindfolded, and each flanked by a prisoner holding an improvised knife to their throats. At 9:45 a.m., a National Guard helicopter flew over the prison spraying military riot gas into the yard. At the same moment, police snipers opened fire on the catwalk. The cons and guards standing there went down as if swept by the wind.

Killing Ground

Two hostages had their throats cut, but both lived. The only killing done that morning was by police bullets; the prisoners had no guns. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. Wounded inmates who were crawling were shot repeatedly. A tumbling ricochet tore into inmate Elliot Barkley’s back and he quickly bled to death.

One hostage trying desperately to escape the hail of gunfire pulled away his blindfold and ran, appearing in his muddy clothes as just another convict. A sniper disintegrated his skull with a soft tipped rifle bullet. A corrections officer from a high window in an adjoining cell-block stitched four holes across the abdomen of hostage guard Michael Smith with an M-16 he had illegally checked out of the prison armory.

Smith, who miraculously survived, had made statements to the media sympathetic to inmate rights; some later wondered how accidental this shooting was.

Other troopers lowered a ladder down into the yard and charged towards the hostage circle. When an inmate knocked the lead trooper down with a club, the others opened fire with their shotguns. More inmates and hostages died or were maimed. Troopers sweeping through the yard fired blindly into foxholes and dugouts where men were hiding. No molotov cocktails were ignited and very few prisoners attempted to battle the merciless police gunfire with their spears and clubs.

After the slaughter, State Police and guards tried to cover up their murders by telling lurid tales of Rasputin-like inmates rising again and again to charge the flaming muzzles of their weapons. Inmate accounts, and those of some troopers who showed restraint, told a different story. They saw men shot in the back as they ran for their

lives, shot as they crawled, shot as they lay unconscious or dead. Autopsy evidence later bore out these eyewitness versions.

Red Squad Involvement

In one case there may have been a premeditated execution. Incarcerated at Attica was white radical Sam Melville, tagged by the media as the “Mad Bomber” of New York City. Melville had been set up by a NYC red squad operative and was doing heavy time for conspiracy stemming from explosions at an induction center, a federal building, and a police station. Even in prison he had remained a thorn in the state’s side by starting a clandestine newsletter called “The Iced Pig,” and having his unrepentant letters published in New York’s *Village Voice*.

Melville participated in the rebellion, but not prominently. During the assault he and another inmate hid in an entrenchment in D-Yard. The shooting slackened and most prisoners were complying with a surrender message being broadcast from a helicopter. Saying to his companion, “Well, we did the best we could,” Melville stepped out, hands on head as the loudspeaker instructed, and walked towards the wall.

On it were two detectives from the State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI), one of whom had borrowed a shotgun from a trooper. The BCI dicks had followed behind troopers during the retaking, to observe any crimes committed, and were not intended to participate in the assault. When Melville came close enough to the wall the armed detective fired a deer slug through his chest, killing him instantly.

Perhaps this was just another trigger happy homicide on a morning filled with them, but curiously events had brought these investigators to Attica from their usual duties as red squad detectives in Buffalo. Today’s familiarity with the tactics used by the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which included close coordination between FBI field offices and red squads, makes one wonder about the randomness of Melville’s death. Flexibility in taking advantage of circumstance and targets of opportunity were hallmarks of COINTELPRO. These were the only BCI detectives involved in any shooting that day; perhaps they were free-lancing. But unlike many other COINTELPRO-orchestrated slayings, no paper trail connects this murder to the FBI.

Reprisals

Government gunmen fired over 450 shots that morning, hitting 128 people and killing twenty nine inmates and ten hostages. Four suspected snitches were found dead after the retaking, killed in their cells by other inmates. Within a few hours of the carnage, Governor Rockefeller announced that troopers had done “a superb job.” He praised their “skill and courage,” and added that their “restraint had held down casualties among the prisoners as well.”

Corrections officials reported that many hostages died because of slashed throats, and hinted darkly at sexual assault by prisoners on guards during the standoff. Commissioner Oswald himself contributed greatly to this fiction. “Not only were the guards murdered by the prisoners,” he announced Monday, “but atrocities were committed on the hostages. A twenty-two-year-old guard was killed, castrated, and buried in a foxhole.” Tuesday morning, as the press dutifully reported cut throats, the official lies were exposed by the county medical examiner who revealed that all the hostages died from police gunfire, and none had been raped or mutilated.

After police re-established control over Attica the brutality continued. Troopers screamed unintelligible commands at prisoners through their gas masks and struck them with rifle butts. Inmates were made to strip and crawl on their bellies across A-Yard. Bones broke as the kicking and beating continued; watches, false teeth, and eyeglasses were smashed.

When convicts reached A-Tunnel, they were made to run through it barefoot on the broken glass of Thursday’s takeover. Corrections officers and troopers stood along the sides beating the walls and floors with their nightsticks for effect and clubbing inmates as they ran this famous gauntlet shouting, “You want amnesty? Come and get it!”

For the rest of the day prisoners were attacked continuously throughout Attica, and agitators were singled out for special attention in their cells. No one was fed for a day and a half, and a lockdown of the prison continued for weeks.

A lawsuit initiated by family members of the slain and survivors of the massacre continues to this day.

Administrative reprisals such as those that took place after the 1970 riots scattered the brothers of Attica all over New York. Two grand juries indicted many inmates but not a single trooper until four years after the bloodshed, in the wake of a whistle-blowing assistant prosecutor's accusation of a cover-up. In response, then-Governor Carey granted pardons to all inmates accused of crimes during the revolt, in essence amnesty. In exchange, charges were dropped against the indicted trooper and further investigation into the police rampage was halted.

Jailing Frenzy

Attica remains relevant today as sly politicians cry for more cops and prisons as the solution to social problems. The United States already leads the world in incarcerating its own people, imprisoning more of its population than any other country; the Atticas are everywhere.

Construction of the archipelago of gulags continues unabated, a true growth industry in these times of belt tightening elsewhere. While rounding up the poor, the addicted, and the murderous, state officials take on the persona of affable slow-to-anger cowboys who break up fights and dispense justice fairly.

It is understood in the Official Perspective that whatever peace there is results from the state's control of humanity's inherently brutal nature. It is also presupposed in this view that the United States is a prototype and paradigm of civilization's glorious quest for freedom. But of course America instead is a vicious place which eats its young. Every hour women are beaten and raped, children abused and brainwashed. The cities fill with the homeless, the insane, those who can't or won't conform. Poverty and hopelessness spread.

But occasionally insurrections occur. Pushed to the breaking point, oppressed people rise up and collectively resist their oppressors. State officials wring their hands and piously denounce those who challenge their System as crazy extremists who cannot be negotiated with. The media compliantly dehumanizes the rebels, and the state professionals in big-time organized violence take over. The history of nations is replete with such massacres.

As the USA's mass imprisoning program accelerates and model citizens proudly contemplate the racist slaughter in the Persian Gulf, it is fitting that we note the 20th anniversary of Attica's rebellious challenge and resulting turkey shoot.

ATTENTION PRISONERS

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The book is available from Loompanics Unlimited, PO Box 1197, Port Townsend, WA 98368 for \$15 plus \$3 post.

RESOURCES FOR PRISONERS

One of the best publications in our opinion is *Prison News Service*, PO Box 5052, Stn. A Toronto, Ont. Canada V5W 1W4. PNS will be featuring a special supplement on "Women and Prison" and is interested in submissions.

The other recommended paper is *Bayou La Rose*, 302 N. "J" St., No. 3, Tacoma WA 98403. It is devoted to prisoner rights, Native American struggles and revolutionary anarchism. It covers many issues so many papers, including ours, so often miss.

Both papers are free to prisoners, but are worthwhile reading for those in minimum security on the outside.

There are also numerous small prisoner rights and liberation newsletters too numerous to mention here. One notable for its dedication to abolishing control-unit prisons is *Walkin' Steel*, PO Box 578172, Chicago IL 60657.

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