

Prisons as the Domain of Hidden Warfare in the U.S.

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a review of

Tip of the Spear: Black Radicalism, Prison Repression, and the Long Attica Revolt by Orisanmi Burton. University of California Press, 2023

When Heather Ann Thompson's account of the 1971 Attica prison uprising, *Blood in the Water*, was published in 2016, I was one of the readers who was overjoyed to see that historical turning point brought back to life after decades when it seemed to be slipping from popular consciousness.

The humanity of the prisoners came through, along with the murderousness and sadism of the State response to the rebellion. Thompson did well off her project, winning the Pulitzer Prize, testifying before Congress and serving on various panels on mass incarceration in the U.S.

A lot has happened since then, including the deaths of George Floyd and many other African American victims of a policing system that still refuses to see them as fully human, as well as the resulting #BlackLivesMatter movement. Now, Orisanmi Burton, an assistant professor of anthropology at American University, brings us a corrective to *Blood in the Water* and a very necessary new way of looking at Attica: one that coincides much better with the way it was understood at the time, both by the victims and by the State.

Thompson, like other writers over the years, "de-radicalizes the prison movement," Burton argues in his book, *Tip of the Spear*, "relying heavily on state sources" and interpreting them in a way that emphasizes "recognition, rights, humane treatment, government transparency, legal redress, and reform," all of which "stabilize, rather than challenge, the 'foundations of the established order.'"

It was all about reform, in other words, painting a picture that no doubt was meant to help today's mainstream (white liberal) audience to empathize with a prison full of largely Black and Hispanic men who killed three co-inmates and held 42 officers and civilian employees hostage. Casting the rebels as victims makes them easier to see as individuals, but it also denies them their agency, instead serving up salacious, "explosive scenes of Black suffering and death."

Relying far more than Thompson on the words and writings of the inmates and their supporters, Burton restores the revolutionary intention to Attica, reminding us that the central demand of the inmates—the underlying purpose of the uprising—was the abolition of the carceral system, a fact that goes almost unmentioned in Thompson's book.

Moreover, he contextualizes the four days of the rebellion—from September 9 to September 13, 1971—as one episode in what he calls the "Long Attica Revolt": the series of jail and prison uprisings that started with the takeover of the ninth floor of the Tombs—the Manhattan House of Detention—in August 1970, spread to other New York City jails and then to the upstate Auburn Correctional Facility later that year, to Attica, and then to a host of other American prisons in 1972.

Some of the rebellions resulted in gains by the prisoners. City officials negotiated with inmates in the Queens House of Detention, and several inmates got new hearings that reduced their outrageously high bail. But over-

whelmingly, the insurgencies were met with brutal repression, reprisals, and, ultimately, the vast expansion of the prison-industrial complex that we live with today.

Tip of the Spear offers plenty of suffering and death, but Burton is more interested in the vision that the insurgents brought from the Black Liberation movement into the prisons, how they spread a revolutionary ideology within the walls, the way the prison authorities and the State regarded them, and the measures the authorities put in place after the rebellions were quelled to keep anything like them from happening again. It is an appalling story, but sometimes a hopeful and inspiring one.

Prison abolitionist Angela Y. Davis, at the time, compared the Attica uprising to the Paris Commune, the great urban revolt against the French state that took place 100 years earlier. In both cases, the besieged set about remaking their society. In the case of Attica, that included instituting a directly democratic decision-making process, largely protecting the hostages, caring for the prison's sick and wounded, and organizing to defend themselves from attack. Burton argues persuasively that a new gender fluidity developed between some of the rebels as well, countering the cultural association of sexual violence with Black males.

"Just to view what was happening in that yard, you know," one of the inmates, Frank "Big Black" Smith, later said, "it's like freedom. And it was a form of freedom."

The second and equally compelling part of Burton's book looks at the aftermath, beyond the end of the revolt in a hail of tear gas and bullets. Thirty-three prisoners and ten guards were killed on the final day of the uprising, all but four by law enforcement gunfire when the state retook control of the prison.

New York State and other prison authorities instituted a handful of superficial reforms aimed at pacifying the inmates and convincing the public that the abuses the inmates exposed were being addressed: not least, making TVs more available throughout the system as a way of keeping the prisoners pacified. A vast prison expansion program got underway, in part to disperse and isolate the "agitators" and "communists" who had "indoctrinated" the rank-and-file prisoners. The abusive "management control units," in which prisoners are kept in solitary confinement in tiny cells for between 22 to 23 hours a day, originated at this time to house the troublemakers; today, they are ubiquitous.

Most sinister were the chemical and other experiments in behavior modification that New York and other states unleashed on the rebels, sometimes in collaboration with the FBI and the CIA, stigmatizing them as "aberrant" and "psychotic": further proof of the inmates' understanding that the prison system is a form of domestic warfare. Burton marshals the recollections of individuals who were subjected to these "treatments" in some of the most chilling parts of his book. All this was happening in the very same years when US officials and Cold War liberals were denouncing the Soviet Union for its consignment of dissidents to mental hospitals.

As this suggests, *Tip of the Spear* is as much about the State response to the Long Attica Revolt as it is about the revolt itself. What's especially striking from an anarchist perspective is how many organs of the State participated in the war against Black insurgency: the state and federal prison systems; the FBI and the CIA; politicians at all levels; private security consultants and "risk management" firms; academics from a wide variety of disciplines, but all focused on some aspect of rehabilitation and behavior modification; and the Pentagon, through the spread of its counterinsurgency doctrine and increasing supply of military-grade equipment to police and prisons.

Even more striking is how tightly their efforts dovetailed. All seemed to be working out of the same playbook which ran something like this: surveil, suppress, imprison, isolate, and rehabilitate, if not through reformist programs (prison with a Smiley face), then through chemical means or further isolation. Their handiwork stands before us as the vast, distended, devouring prison-industrial complex we have today.

But give them credit for knowing what they were up against. When a member of the House Internal Security Committee, in 1973, said that "revolutionary groups" were recruiting "from behind prison walls and with the aim of tearing down the institutions and form of our entire government," he was not far wrong.

The job is still before us.

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