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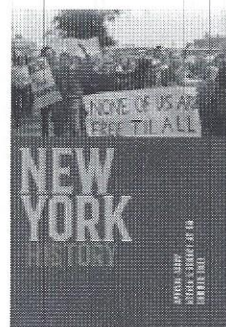
What Actually Took Place and Why So Much Is Still Unknown

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What Actually Took Place and Why So Much Is Still Unknown

Joe Heath

The horrific events at Attica Prison on September 13, 1971, are still largely unknown to the public, but more details continue to emerge as more light is shed and the truth becomes better known. Former Governor Nelson Rockefeller went to great lengths to obfuscate and cover up both the killings by law enforcement officers during the armed assault, and then the “orgy of brutality” that followed throughout the prison and in its dark corners, as the guards and other law enforcement officers enacted their revenge on the prisoners who had rebelled.

This article documents some of the details of this horrendous brutality, which was clearly motivated by white supremacy and systemic racism. Seventy percent of the prisoners were black or brown, while the guards and assault force were 100 percent white. This information comes from the fifty years of legal work that I have done for the Attica Brothers.

My third day of law school at SUNY Buffalo was September 9, 1971—the day the rebellion began thirty miles away. So I was fortunate to have been able to attend federal court hearings that were held shortly after the rebellion and assault, one block from the law school. I began doing legal work in support of the prisoners that first semester; by the spring of 1972, I was able to begin visiting the Attica Brothers, who were isolated in “the box,” or solitary confinement, at Attica. These prison visits and the discussions with several of the Brothers were of huge educational value to me, particularly in helping me begin to understand the systemic problems of racism in our prisons and beyond.

I worked on the criminal defense of the Brothers while in law school, assisted with the early criminal trials, and eventually took on the representation of one of the Brothers, charged in Indictment 5, along with eighteen other Brothers, with thirty-two counts of first-degree kidnapping.

After the criminal prosecutions were halted in 1976 by former Governor Hugh Carey, I next joined with other National Lawyers Guild lawyers Liz Fink, Michael Deutsche, and Dennis Cunningham to prosecute the federal civil rights class action of the Brothers. I

worked on that class action case until the state settled in 2000, when they agreed to pay the Brothers \$12 million. This phase of the work included three trials in Buffalo, one for six months in 1991 and 1992, and then two more in the spring of 1997. Much of our proof at those three trials focused on and exposed the brutality inflicted on September 13, 1971, and the days that followed.

One of my primary duties during all of these phases of the Attica work was the locating and interviewing of hundreds of participants and witnesses. These included hundreds of prisoners, National Guard personnel, doctor and nurses, a former hostage, and many of the observers. Eventually, I helped prepare many of these witnesses for testimony at one or more of the trials. It is my hope that this article, based on so many firsthand accounts, will assist in the public gaining a more historically accurate understanding of the horrors of the aftermath to the Attica Rebellion.

Unfortunately, Rockefeller and other state officials engaged in immediate and extensive efforts to distort the historic record to hide their mistakes and brutality. Once it was clear that the troopers' guns had killed ten of the hostages, a calculated disinformation campaign was quickly launched. It began with Deputy Corrections Commissioner Walter Dunbar's clear lies to the press before the CS (tear) gas had cleared, in which he claimed that the hostages had all died due to slashed throats, with one even castrated. Within forty-eight hours, this was proven false by the medical examiners who performed the autopsies, but the impact of these falsehoods is still present. Rockefeller repeatedly lied about the events at Attica during his Senate confirmation hearing to become vice president in 1974, and that same year a jury survey found that over 60 percent of potential jurors in Erie County still believed the slashed throats false narrative.

This article reviews the armed assault on September 13 and how ill-conceived it was, from the lack of proper training, to the use of weapons and bullets, which were outlawed by the Geneva Convention. It will also cover the extensive beatings and torture. Finally, it will comment on the complete lack of medical care from the prisoners after the shootings and beatings.

Attica within the History of U.S. Systemic Racism and Slavery

Given my fifty years of working on the Attica Prison cases, I am often asked to speak—in college classrooms, to reporters, to historical societies, etc.—and I am often asked to attempt to explain the depth and intensity of the racist actions in the orgy of brutality. In my efforts to understand this, I reflect on a prolonged conversation I had with one of the now deceased Brothers over several weeks, in the box (Housing Block Z, or HBZ) at Attica in the spring of 1972. After forty-nine subsequent years of observing and resisting systemic racism and police misconduct/brutality, I now understand his position better.

He explained to me that the orgy of brutality could be traced back directly to slavery. Hundreds of the Brothers have verified that as they were being stripped, insulted, and

beaten—in the gauntlets and in the more intense, individual whippings. The guards also subjected them to constant verbal racist taunting: “It’s our day now, nigger. We’ll teach you and your kind the price of not knowing your place.”

The hundred or so Brothers whom the state claimed had been leaders were subjected to even more intense beatings, torture, and racist harassment than the other 1,100 who were “rehoused,” three to a cell and naked in A Block. Another, longer gauntlet had been set up, especially for those singled out, which ran along the front of A Block, through the administration building, and then all the way over to HBZ. In this longer, outside gauntlet, several Brothers reported being told: “You should be pickin’ cotton, nigger. We’re here to remind you of your place.”

He reflected on the various stages of the “rehousing”: the stripping; the beatings; the isolation of so-called “leaders” with X’s on their backs; the public humiliation and display of “Big Black” on the table, alongside others; and the intense beatings and physical abuse. He then compared these to the treatment of enslaved people, who, if they tried to escape, were often mutilated even though this decreased their value as exploited laborers; and to public lynchings, which were all too prevalent for over 150 years.

White supremacy and control by force and terror were more important than the worth of an individual enslaved person. Attica joined these historic examples of violence to preserve white supremacy.

In contrast to one of the clear messages from the Attica Brothers—“It is right to rebel against inhuman conditions”—the objective of the state, from Rockefeller down to the last guards who committed the atrocities, was clear: to send a message. “If you rebel, we will make you pay and teach others not to think about it.”

Evidence of the intense racism that motivated the horrors of September 13 is found in Heather Ann Thompson’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book:

Even at the time, however, National Guardsman Daniel Callahan could see that the abuses happening to prisoners following the retaking were fueled by outright racism. Callahan overheard one trooper bragging of shooting a black inmate with a .357 and watched him give a “White Power salute.” He also saw “a prison guard sergeant telling this very tall, yellow-skinned black to strip” and when the man refused, the sergeant “told others to hold him down and then kicked [him] in the head like a football—he went limp.” Another Guardsman overheard one trooper saying to another over by a food stand outside Attica’s walls that it was “hot work killing niggers.” Racial hostility was in fact so intense during the legislators’ tour that morning, even Assemblyman Arthur Eve was showered with invective. “Guards [were] yelling at Eve—get your nigger ass out of here.”

Any white inmate who had stood with the black rebels in D Yard also suffered special abuse. Doctors from the National Guard reported hearing troopers and corrections officers punctuate their beating of white inmates—the “nigger lovers”—with bitter refrains of “This is what you get for hanging around with niggers.”

To the state officials, the threat posed by the rebellion was clear, and they were willing to kill and torture to counter this threat.

I was also impressed that this Brother understood the historic importance of the rebellion and its place in the civil rights struggle and history in the United States. Just a few months after the rebellion, he predicted while still heavily isolated in the box and facing almost certain criminal charges, that the importance of the rebellion was that it would be remembered as part of the ongoing struggle against white supremacy and systemic racism.

Nixon and Rockefeller

Just hours after the shooting had stopped and just before noon on September 13, Rockefeller called Nixon, and in this first call he was somewhat boastful: "They [the troopers and the assault force] did a fabulous job. It was a beautiful operation." However, by the next day, their conversation took a very different tone; the details of the carnage caused by the shooters had sunk in, and Rockefeller was much more subdued. Nixon attempted to reassure him, by telling him:

"You just stand firm there and don't give an inch. Because I think the country, you see, the example you set may stiffen the backs of a few other governors that may have a problem. But also in the country, too, I think it might discourage this kind of a riot occurring someplace else."

"Tell me," Nixon asked, are these primarily blacks that you're dealing with?"

"Oh yes," Rockefeller replied, "the whole thing was led by the blacks."

Later that afternoon, Nixon asked H. R. Haldeman, his chief of staff, whether reports from the prison included "the fact that it's basically a black thing."

"That's going to turn people off awful damn fast," Nixon said, "that the guards were white."

The U.S. Second Circuit

Those District Court hearings that took place a block from the law school in the fall of 1971 were reviewed by the Second Circuit in November. On December 1, the circuit held:

By contrast, in support of plaintiffs' Eighth Amendment claims, detailed evidence was furnished by plaintiffs to the effect that beginning immediately after the State's recapture of Attica on the morning of September 13 and continuing at least until September 16, guards, State Troopers and correctional personnel had engaged in cruel and inhuman abuse of numerous inmates. Injured prisoners, some on stretchers, were struck, prodded or beaten with sticks, belts, bats or other weapons. Others were forced to strip and run naked through gauntlets of guards armed with clubs which they used

to strike the bodies of the inmates as they passed. Some were dragged on the ground, some marked with an “X” on their backs, some spat upon or burned with matches, and others poked in the genitals or arms with sticks. According to the testimony of the inmates, bloody or wounded inmates were apparently not spared in **this orgy of brutality**. [Emphasis added.]

The reader should understand that these words by the Second Circuit reflect a rather sterilized version of the torture, brutality, and horror that were unleashed on September 13, 1971. By the time that the witnesses’ testimony was filtered through the district court judge’s carefully worded denial of the preliminary injunction application, and then again described by the three circuit judges, much of the intensity of the horror had been distilled.

As horrible as the physical beatings were—in the gauntlets and individually—the psychological abuse of the intensely racist barrage by the white guards also must be understood. This, too, was addressed in the circuit decision:

There was testimony that hand in hand with the physical violence upon the inmates went threats of death or further brutality. Correctional officers, addressing inmates as “niggers” or “coons,” threatened to “get rid of” them or shoot or kill them. In at least one instance, the testimony ran, a guard pointed a gun at an inmate’s head, telling him that he was going to die, and started clicking the trigger, following which the inmate was kicked and beaten. On some nights a group of guards visited the cell area and threatened inmates with death, pointing guns or sticks into cells. Several of the witnesses had personally complained to members of the Goldman Panel and to public figures visiting Attica (e.g., Congressman Rangel, Senator Dunne and Assemblyman Eve).

This article shares more details of this “orgy of brutality,” based on our proof in the three civil rights trials, from the testimony of the Brothers; some of the civilian observers; and members of the National Guard, many of whom were outraged by what they observed.

Attica Prison contains four large, three-story cell blocks, which form a square that is divided into four “yards” by four “tunnels” or one-story passageways that connect the blocks to “Times Square,” a central area controlled by several guards. The Brothers had maintained physical control of D Yard during the rebellion. After the initial shooting stopped and the CS gas began to clear, the troopers, guards, and sheriff deputies began to clear D Yard by moving the surviving prisoners through the door midway in D Tunnel, into A Yard.

The Armed Assault

Despite the urgings of every member of the civilian observer team, Governor Rockefeller refused to come to Attica, and on Sunday, September 12, he ordered the “retaking” of the

prison. Unfortunately, the assault plan was riddled with flaws and doomed to produce the bloody result that it did.

The assault was led by the New York State Police, which is not a military force, was not trained for this type of operation, and used weapons that were totally inappropriate and guaranteed to produce maximum bloodshed and carnage. Additionally, there was no “command control” over the shooters—as there was no method to communicate with them once the onslaught was unleashed and no way to give them orders to halt the massacre or stop the shooting.

Orders had been given that guards could not take part in the shooting, but these orders were ignored and many guards brought their private hunting rifles into the prison and joined in the shooting. Their participation also had a negative impact on the command structure and contributed to a lack of control of the assault force.

All in all, the lack of a proper plan, the lack of proper training and preparation, and the choice of weapons combined for the disastrous results of thirty-nine deaths and hundreds of serious injuries. These bloody results were predictable to the observers, as documented in Heather Ann Thompson’s book *Blood In The Water*:

And, notwithstanding what many would later claim, it was crystal clear to all at this late [Sunday] night meeting—[John] Dunne, as well as those charged with carrying out the retaking—that this assault would come at a staggeringly high price. Not only would there likely be many prisoner fatalities, but as Assemblyman Clark Wemple put it, “there was absolutely no doubt in anyone’s mind that if we went in there, the guards would be killed.” General O’Hara concurred: “It was the general consensus of opinion by all the officials present that . . . if the prison was retaken by force the hostages would be killed.”

A bloody outcome was virtually guaranteed by the NYSP’s choice of weaponry. The men leading the assault on D Yard would themselves be armed with .270-caliber rifles, which utilizedunjacketed bullets, a kind of ammunition that causes such enormous damage to human flesh that it was banned by the Geneva Convention. Many of the other troopers and corrections officers preparing to go in were also carrying other weapons that would have a particularly brutal effect, such as shotguns filled with deadly buckshot pellets that sprayed out in a wide arc.

The unjacketed bullets in the troopers’ .270 rifles are also called dum dum bullets, as they are designed to explode on contact, thereby causing a much larger wound than a conventional round. The troopers’ shotguns fired double ought buckshot—the largest pellets available—each of which was a third of an inch in diameter and each potentially lethal. Shotgun pellets spread out when fired, gaining greater spacing with more distance. At a range of fifty yards, this spread was six and a half feet. So, if one were aiming at a prisoner next to a hostage, the pellets would inevitably strike the hostage as well.

During the McCay Commission hearings, State Police Major John Monahan, who had

devised the assault plan, was asked whether the assault could have saved the lives of the hostages, if the prisoners had actually intended to kill them. His response was that they could not have been saved, given the physical distances involved.

Stripping, Beatings, and Other Atrocities

Once the shooting had stopped and the CS gas was beginning to clear, the problem of how to handle the approximately 1,200 surviving prisoners in D Yard faced the state officials. As noted above, the ugly intensity of the actions of law enforcement during this “rehousing” phase was so extreme that the Second Circuit found it to be an “orgy of brutality.”

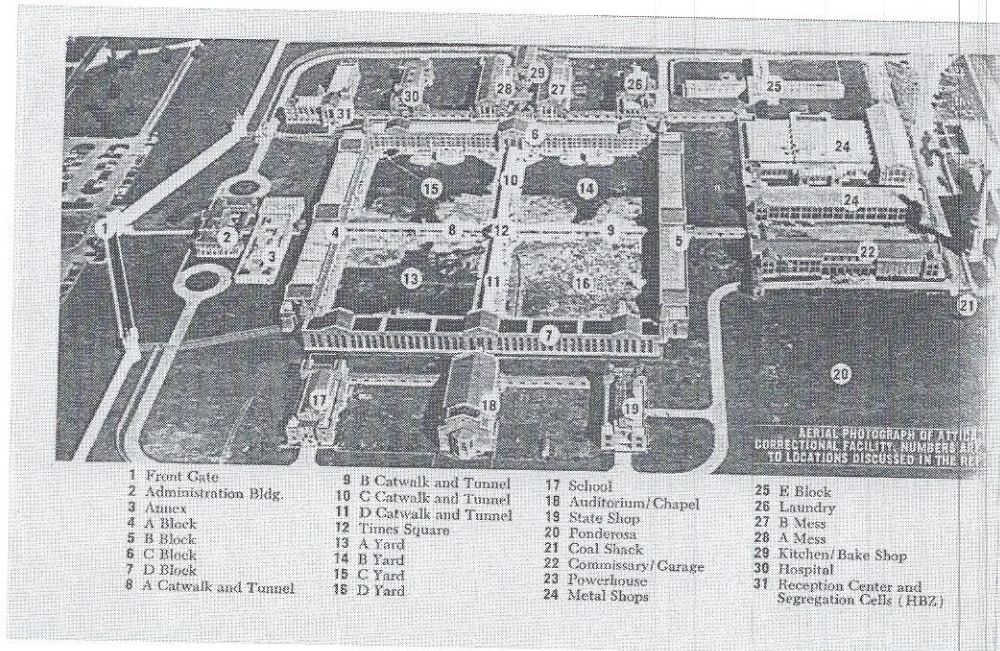
The prevalence and driving force of racism and white supremacy became all too dominant, as evidenced by the all-white assault force set on the prisoners, who were 70 percent black and brown. The inherent racism had built up over the four days of the rebellion and was supercharged by the lies of prison officials who had falsely proclaimed that the ten dead hostages had all died at the hands of the prisoners due to slashed throats, with the extra dose of falsehood claiming castration as well.

This explosive mixture was made even worse by the complete lack of command structure or control over the assault force, which was composed of troopers, prison guards from several different prisons, sheriff deputies from several rural counties, and even state park police from two nearby parks. The lack of a unified command over these disparate forces was purposely made even more dangerous by the conscientious decision of Warden Vincent Mancusi and his staff to turn a blind eye—to deliberately remain in their offices in the Administration Building and not to go out into the blocks to observe or exercise control. The warden’s defense during the liability trial of the class action suit in 1991 and 1992 was that he should not be held liable for this brutality because he had remained in his office, and therefore, he claimed that he was not aware of the actions of his guards and their excesses.

The cell block area of Attica Prison is a large square, with the four main cell blocks—A, B, C, and D—forming the four sides, and each block is three stories tall and two hundred yards long. Inside, this large square is divided by the four “tunnels”—one-story passageways, which connect in the center at “Times Square.” These tunnels allow the prisoners to be marched to the mess, the metal shop, and other areas of the prison outside this large square, which is divided by the tunnels into four yards, accessed via doors in the tunnels at their midpoints. In addition to providing the ground floor connections, the tops of the tunnels were flat with railings and accessed from the second floor of each block. These tunnel tops are referred to as “catwalks.”

The Brothers had maintained control over D Yard over the four days, and this is where the vast majority of the survivors were after the shooting phase of the assault was over. The troopers and others, including many prison and corrections officials, streamed out onto the catwalks; almost all of them were armed with shotguns and rifles.

After each prisoner was searched for weapons, they were herded toward the door halfway



Overhead image of the Attica Correctional Facility used in the McKay Commission Report.
NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

along D Tunnel and then down the steps into A Yard, where they were immediately forced to the ground—by pushing, clubs to the back of their legs, or whatever force was needed.

They then were forced to crawl in the mud, face down, and were told that if they raised their head too far they would be shot. Troopers with shotguns roamed A Yard to ensure complete subservience and control. After this crawling in the mud, each prisoner was stripped and, once naked, forced to join the snake line of naked men that meandered throughout A Yard, until it ended up at the door into A Tunnel.

From the moment that the shooting died down, officers began herding inmates violently up the half dozen steps into D Tunnel, across the tunnel, and then back down into A Yard. As the men were being rushed, pushed, and kicked from D Yard into A Yard, they began falling over one another, bodies on top of bodies. For the men at the bottom of this heap, it was almost impossible to breathe. Barely able to get air, these men were then, as Herbert X. Blyden remembered the ordeal, stripped naked and forced to “lay in the mud, face down . . . and crawl.”

During this entire process they encountered more and more “officers who beat them and tore their clothes off, took away glasses, watches, false teeth, etc., then herded them naked in a long snaking line that wound slowly through [A] yard,” into A Tunnel, where a gauntlet of armed officers awaited them.¹

1. Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy* (New York: Pantheon, 2016), 213.

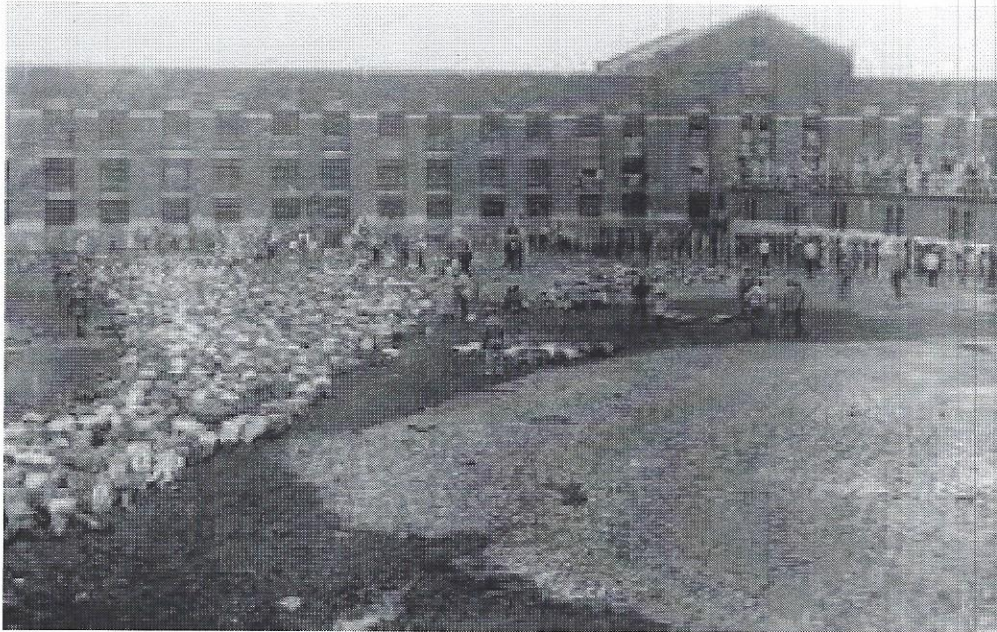


Photo of A Yard showing prisoners face down in the mud, fanning out from the tunnel door and the start of the snake line. ELIZABETH FINK PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION



Photo of A Yard showing the snake line of naked prisoners lining up to enter A tunnel and the gauntlet. ELIZABETH FINK PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION



Photo looking down into A Yard from A tunnel showing “Big Black” on the table with the football under his chin. ELIZABETH FINK PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

In addition to this “routine” stripping, the authorities also began to identify those prisoners whom they labeled as leaders, some of whom were moved into a separate area of A Yard, with X’s marked on their backs. They were forced to sit for hours with their hands behind their heads under constant threats of being shot.

Even more extreme was the special torture inflicted on Frank “Big Black” Smith, who was placed naked on a table just to the side of the A Tunnel door, so that every prisoner who entered A Tunnel, into the gauntlet, would see his torture and humiliation. Big Black was forced to lie on his back on the too short table, and a football was placed under his chin. He was told that if the football fell that he would be shot. He was repeatedly spat on, and cigarette and cigar butts were thrown down onto him. This went on for hours in full view of dozens of state officials who did nothing to stop it.

While all this was taking place openly in A Yard, in full view of dozens of state officials, other law enforcement personnel were setting up gauntlets—first along the fifty yards of A Tunnel from the midway door from A Yard into A Block, and then along the various hallways and stairways of A Block, which held six separate “galleries” of forty-one cells, and the naked prisoners had to run down these hallways, through gauntlets, until they were thrown into cells—three naked men in each cell.

Every prisoner was forced to run these gauntlets, with naked feet, over broken glass, as they tried to avoid the vicious blows from guards on both sides—using night sticks, axe handles, and rifle butts. Those who fell were set on with even more blows and force. Once again, Thompson’s book provides chilling details:

Once inside the tunnel, with their feet bleeding profusely from the glass fragments that covered the prison's ground, the men were forced to run "for some 50 yards . . . [and] both sides were lined with officers with ax handles, 2 x 4s, baseball bats and rifle butts." When these naked and often severely wounded men stumbled or fell, they had to "crawl the length of the tunnel, while being struck and jabbed repeatedly." One prisoner described the gauntlet this way: "Well, they stripped me and they told me to go and get in line. They had a line in the form of a snake and you had to get in line and they were moving [us] in one at a time. So this way . . . the officers [got the] chance to get their sticks ready. On both sides of the hall they had officers, you know, with sticks, corrections officers. . . ." [S]ome of the . . . doctors saw with their own eyes what happened in A Tunnel: "There were people on either side of the door and as men came to the door they'd aim at their legs or vicinity with clubs and, and hit them to knock them down."²

As horrible and injurious as these gauntlets were for the hundreds of prisoners who ended up naked and three to a cell in A Block, the brutality inflicted on those identified as leaders was much worse. About eighty prisoners had been identified in A Yard as leaders, most of whom were marked with X's on their backs, and they were subjected to hours of special verbal abuse and racially motivated threats. After all the other prisoners had been locked into cells in A Block, the officers turned their escalating hostility toward these selected prisoners.

These so-called leaders not only had to endure the A Tunnel gauntlet, but then were forced to run through a much longer and more intense gauntlet that ran from the door of the Administration Building, hundreds of yards, all the way over to the "box," in Housing Block Z. Because some of these Brothers had been active at the negotiating table, or with security, they were individually known to the guards, and they were consequently subjected to the most intense abuse:

Any prisoner who troopers or COs considered to be a leader was chalked across the back with a large white "X" and singled out for abuse. When these eighty men managed to make it through that first gauntlet, they were forced to run another when they were taken from A block over to HBZ. At the entrance to HBZ, where the men would all be placed in solitary, "six to eight Cos . . . called to each one: 'you want your amnesty? Come and get it.'" After they made it through that line up, guards continued to beat them "severely with clubs."³

However, the absolute worst torture and brutality was reserved for Frank "Big Black" Smith, as partially demonstrated by his hours of torture on the table by the A Tunnel door. Again, it is important to remember that Big Black was openly tortured and humiliated for

2. Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 213.

3. Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 214.

hours, in full view of state officials; this and the other atrocities in A Yard served to embolden the guards, who knew that even more intense brutality would be condoned in the hidden, darker corners of the prison.

The extent of the beatings and torture inflicted on Big Black was exposed during his damages trial in Buffalo, in May 1997, which resulted in the jury awarding him \$4 in damages, and is documented in Thompson's book:

Big Black was of course chalked as a leader and after many hours of torture on the table in A Yard, he too was forced to run these gauntlets before being thrown, eventually, into an HBZ cell. Guardsman Dan Callahan was just inside A Tunnel when Big Black got to that first entrance. "The last inmate in the yard was Frank Smith. There was a sense of anticipation—this guy is going to get special treatment. The guards approached Smith and told him to get to his feet. He had been in that position [on the table] for 4–5 hours so he fell and they hit him repeatedly between the legs and in the anal area as he was pleading for mercy." Eventually he managed to crawl through A Tunnel and Callahan could hear then "was the thumping of night sticks against his body."

As five officers took turns hitting him, one of them managed to break his wrist while another, as Big Black recalled, "opened my head up and knocked me just about out." Big Black felt each blow. After this, he explained, "They took me, and played shotgun roulette with me. Then they took me and dumped me on the floor of the [prison] hospital."⁴

A Lack of Planning

Despite planning for hundreds of shooters to storm the prison on September 13, state officials completely failed to plan for any medical care for the inevitably injured prisoners. This failure was due either to a lack of competent planning or deliberate indifference to the suffering of the prisoners:

According to a doctor who had been conducting medical research at Attica since 1960, . . . [Warden] Mancusi had simply not understood that, when they were sent to retake his prison, troopers and COs alike were going to "really open up and start killing people." And not grasping this meant that neither Mancusi nor any other state officials for that matter had made any prior arrangements with paramedics, ambulance companies, or physicians from local hospitals to be on hand in the wake of the bloody assault.⁵ [Emphasis added.]

After the shooting ended there were only a handful of medical personnel at Attica—the two racist and incompetent prison doctors and a couple of nurses. Mancusi did not make

4. Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 214–15.

5. Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 205.



Photo of “Big Black” on the hospital floor after the severe beatings. Smith suffered broken wrists and a head wound. ELIZABETH FINK PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION.

any calls for additional medical assistance until after 11:00 a.m.—more than an hour after the assault was officially over; and even then instructions from Rockefeller’s office provide further evidence of systemic racism:

[W]hen he finally let some more doctors in, he was instructed by General John C. Baker, the governor’s chief of staff, to make certain that the prisoners weren’t going to “get priority” when it came to dispensing medical care. This state official deemed trooper injuries—a “fractured finger, bruised knee,” a “fractured toe,” and “gas in eyes and inhalation”—a higher priority than 128 prisoners who had been shot, many multiple times.⁶

Even when Mancusi finally called Dr. Worthington Schenk at Meyer Memorial Hospital in Buffalo, he failed to convey the scope of the tragedy at the prison, or the extent of the need for doctors and medical equipment and supplies. When I interviewed Dr. Schenk at his home on Lake Erie in the summer of 1991, he told me that all the warden said was: “Could you bring a team out here? We have a slight problem.”

Consequently, when Dr. Schenk and his small crew arrived and saw the extent of the carnage, he had to go to the Administration Building and make calls for a half hour. After these hours of delay, the medical emergency and chaos were overwhelming. Dr. Robert S. Jenks, of the hospital in Genesee County, verified that they had no supplies to work with:

6. Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 206.

As Jenks described it, not only were “there inmates lying out there for hours without any kind of care,” but in the area where he was trying to work, “there wasn’t a pint of blood anywhere.” This he felt was completely “inexcusable; they just didn’t ask for it, because I know plenty was available. . . .” Another doctor also reported that “it was chaos when he arrived. Nobody was directing anybody what to do,” he went on, and the prison had none of the medical supplies he needed including vital things such as plasma.⁷

It became clear to the medical doctors and personnel that the carnage was so great that many severely wounded prisoners needed to be transported to nearby hospitals. However, when doctors asked Mancusi for permission to move prisoners, he either flatly denied those requests or delayed them for hours; and consequently, prisoners either bled to death or suffered needlessly for far too many hours.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to share the factual history of the horrific events at Attica Prison on September 13, 1971, and the extensive efforts by then Governor Rockefeller and other state officials to create a false narrative, so that history would not know of all of their mistakes, which caused thirty-nine deaths, hundreds of gunshot wounds, and massive and systematic torture and brutality, driven by racism and white supremacy. The facts contained herein are the results of hundreds of interviews that I conducted and from the testimony of dozens of witnesses whom we presented in the three trials in the federal civil rights class action suit on behalf of the Brothers.

It is important that history accurately record the events of 1971 and the subsequent years, so that we do not repeat the same life-threatening errors. Far too much is still unknown about the events at Attica, or about the investigations and the grand juries. All state-held records pertaining to Attica and its aftermath should be released immediately, and the veil of grand jury secrecy, which now protects many state officials for their felonies and other misdeeds, should be lifted.

The events and conscience-raising over the past year relative to the pervasive problems of systemic racism and white supremacy are evidence that we simply have not done enough over the past fifty years to properly address these cancers. Clearly sending in an all-white attack force against a group of mostly black and brown prisoners is a recipe for disaster and cannot be repeated. The entire prison and criminal justice systems cry out for fundamental reforms and restructuring, as they are now understood as part of “the new Jim Crow.”

The book on Attica has not been closed, and we should all be working to release all the records.

7. Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, 207.