

**“May my words illuminate the dungeon and my pen sharpen the spear.”  
by Phillip Vance Smith II**

**A BleakHouse Book Review: “Tip of the Spear: Black Radicalism, Prison Repression, and the Long Attica Revolt.” Orisanmi Burton (University of California Press, 2023)**

Orisanmi Burton reshapes the typical narrative of what he calls "the Long Attica Revolt" by chronicling the uprising through accounts of the captive prisoners, not their oppressive overseers. In accomplishing this feat, Burton redefines the contemporary view of carceral systems as sanctuaries of rehabilitation by boldly declaring: "[P]risons are war."<sup>1</sup> Not only does Burton depict prisons as "domains of militant contestation" where captives reject "white supremacist systems of power and invent zones of autonomy," he describes prisons as "state strategies" of a racial caste designed to emasculate Black males.<sup>2</sup>

For Burton, the Attica revolt is no isolated incident. Attica serves as both a microcosm and culmination of the American racial conflict during the 1960s and 1970s when realization of Black power overcame Black fear of oppression inside and outside prison walls. To illustrate this point, Burton begins "Tip of the Spear" with an exposé of three New York jail uprisings that preceded Attica a year earlier. In August 1970, captives (what Burton renames prisoners) overtook the Manhattan House of Detention, better known as the Tombs.<sup>3</sup> Not long after, captives also took over the Branch Queens jail and the Queens House of Detention at Kew Gardens.<sup>4</sup> These revolts did not indicate an animalistic nature prevalent in Black incarcerated men; rather, they were a show of force by people who were tired of being oppressed.

Burton reports about these events as extensions of the Black social consciousness bubbling to a boil on American streets. By the early 1970s, groups such as the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army had abandoned peaceful sit ins and marches in favor of racial revolution, not political resolution. These groups shunned nonviolence because peace had not gifted them equality through the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Revolution, by any means necessary, seemed the next logical tactic to demolish the white supremacist system continuing to oppress them.

Enter the prison.

Burton notes how the American government declared war on Black militant groups that promoted revolution. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover instituted COINTELPRO to "neutralize...Black radical organizations."<sup>5</sup> Imprisoning Black bodies became America's solution to the Black consciousness movement. Yet Burton writes, "One of the unforeseen consequences"

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<sup>1</sup> Burton, Orisanmi, 2023, "Tip of the Spear: Black Radicalism, Prison Repression, and the Long Attica Revolt," University of California Press: Oakland, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Burton, "Tip of the Spear," p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Burton, "Tip of the Spear," p. 24

<sup>4</sup> Burton, "Tip of the Spear," p. 29, 33

<sup>5</sup> Burton, "Tip of the Spear," p. 13

of this strategy converted prisons into "key sites" of "the imprisoned Black radical tradition," birthing "carceral rebellion."<sup>6</sup>

In US prisons, Black militants expanded their knowledge of oppressive systems by studying the strategic works of Mao Tse-Tung, Che Guevara, and Franz Fanon.<sup>7</sup> They exposed oppression by publishing newsletters. Burton situates these men, not as "passive recipients" of oppression, but as "agents who analyzed what was being done to them and consciously fought back."<sup>8</sup>

George Jackson was the most polarizing of these figures. Jackson was murdered by prison guards at San Quentin in California just days before the Attica revolt in August 1971. Burton describes how Jackson "theorized 'a prison movement'" was linked to the global struggle against white supremacy.<sup>9</sup> Captives in New York prisons mourned Jackson's death by wearing black armbands and fasting.<sup>10</sup>

Men at Attica did not fear the same fate. In fact, they embraced it by setting off the revolt on September 9, 1971 after a skirmish between captives and staff broke out.<sup>11</sup>

Over the course of four days, Attica captives formed an ad hoc government, ran the prison without direction, and lived peacefully. But on September 13, 1971, authorities stormed Attica's D yard, killing indiscriminately.<sup>12</sup> Burton describes the violence authorities employed to stop the revolt as a continuation of the white supremacy and Black emasculation that started the conflict in the first place.

As a Black, incarcerated male, I ask myself if anything has changed since the Attica revolt. I have been incarcerated for 22 years. Over half of my life has been spent in a state of oppression. This experience worsens every passing day. But I have learned much from Burton's "Tip of the Spear." First, I learned how the power structure will do whatever it takes to maintain control. From where I sit, it doesn't matter if the oppressors are Black or white, the oppression feels the same. Secondly, I learned that I have the power to change minds through my actions. I will never resort to violence to prove a point, but I can follow the lead of the men Burton writes about by chronicling my experiences. Without me, the outside world cannot see what happens inside, and so it cannot change. My words — like the captives' actions — illuminate the dungeon, and my pen sharpens the spear.

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<sup>6</sup> Burton, "Tip of the Spear," p. 13

<sup>7</sup> Burton, "Tip of the Spear," p. 62-63

<sup>8</sup> Burton, "Tip of the Spear," p. 65

<sup>9</sup> Burton, "Tip of the Spear," p. 77

<sup>10</sup> Burton, "Tip of the Spear," p. 77

<sup>11</sup> Burton, "Tip of the Spear," p. 84

<sup>12</sup> Burton, "Tip of the Spear," p. 119