

Attica: Tragic Drama of Many Acts

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The bloodiest episode in American prison history erupted on Sept. 9, 1971, when more than 1,000 inmates at Attica seized 43 hostages and the D yard of the correction facility and began a four-day siege of knife-edge tensions and negotiations that failed.

During the revolt and siege, one guard and three inmates were killed, ultimatums of surrender and amnesty were rejected. Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller refused to go to the prison at the behest of a committee of civilian observers seeking a nonviolent solution.

On Sept. 13, on orders from State Correction Commissioner Russell G. Oswald and with the Governor's approval, a force of more than 1,000 heavily armed state troopers, sheriff's deputies and prison guards stormed the prison amid a hail of gunfire and tear gas. In the fight, 10 prison employees and 29 inmates died.

In the more than five years since the crushing of the rebellion, there have been numerous investigations, a complexity of legal entanglements, many indictments, few trials and a number of legislated prison reforms.

Grand juries to hear Attica evidence were empaneled in 1971 and 1974 and returned indictments against 62 inmates and one prison guard, with a total of 1,289 crimes ranging from murder to coercion alleged. The amount of evidence was awesome—there were some 2,500 witnesses and participants alone and uncounted exhibits.

For two years, the prosecution was under the direction of a Deputy Attorney General, Robert F. Fischer, who was succeeded by Anthony G. Simonetti as chief Attica prosecutor.

The lone indictment against a correc-

tive officer, charging him with reckless endangerment, was dismissed last fall. Of the 62 inmates indicted, only eight were convicted—John Hill of murder and Joseph Parnaslice of attempted assault in the death of a guard, William E. Quinn, and six other inmates who pleaded guilty to lesser charges. Two defendants are said to have died and one is believed to be a fugitive. All of the rest have either been acquitted or the charges against them have been dismissed.

Several State and U.S. Agencies

In addition to prosecution investigations, there were several state and Federal inquiries into Attica.

One of the earliest was a year-long inquiry by a commission appointed by a panel of judges and headed by Robert B. McKay, dean of the New York University Law School. In 1972 the commission sharply criticized Mr. Rockefeller for not going to the prison during the uprising, but noted that his presence might not have averted violence.

Another investigation was undertaken last year by Bernard S. Meyer, a former State Supreme Court justice who was appointed by Governor Carey and Attorney General Louis J. Lefkowitz. He concluded after an eight-month inquiry that there had been "serious errors in judgment" but "no intentional cover-up" by the prosecution.

At Mr. Meyer's suggestion, a new special prosecutor, Alfred J. Scotti, a former chief assistant district attorney in Manhattan, was named by the Governor and the Attorney General. Last February, Mr. Scotti recommended that all remaining indictments—except one against a fugitive charged with murder—be dismissed.