

The Attica State Correctional Facility, thirty miles east of Buffalo in upstate New York, was an overcrowded place in 1971. Conditions were deplorable. Most of the prisoners were minorities.

Representing the inmate population, five prisoners sent a letter requesting reforms. They didn't ask for much - more showers and toilet paper would have been helpful. At the time, each inmate was given a single bucket of water each week (to serve as a "shower") plus one bar of soap and one roll of toilet paper each month.

Conditions were hardly conducive to good hygiene.

Requesting more visits, the prisoners also asked for less mail censorship. Russell Oswald, then a new commissioner of correctional services, asked for time to implement reforms. Inmates viewed that as a delay tactic.

Pushing the issue, Attica prisoners took over the facility on the 9th of September, 1971. They held forty guards hostage. One guard, who was injured during the uprising, later died in a hospital.

Negotiations between both sides lasted four days. Thereafter, Governor Nelson Rockefeller authorized correctional officers and state troopers to retake the prison by force.

During the melee, ten hostages and twenty-nine inmates were killed. Three additional inmates had been killed, before the melee, bringing the total number of dead individuals to forty-three.

Despite government allegations, claiming the hostages met their end by throat-cutting prisoners, autopsies proved otherwise.

The coroner found all hostages died from bullet wounds - some with the evidence still in their backs - which meant they were shot by troopers and/or correctional employees.

See, also:

[Attica Prison Riot, Part 2](#)

[Attica Prison Riot, Part 3](#)

Credits:

This clip, from "[A Nation of Law? \(1968-1971\)](#)," is part of the PBS series "[Eyes on the Prize](#)."

Clip online, courtesy PBS.

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