

Barriers Broken: How the Attica Prison Uprising Reformed Human Rights

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Individual Website

Process Paper Word Count: 495

Website Word Count: 1,200

Website Media Time: 2:51

I picked the “Attica Prison Riot” after learning about the Eighth Amendment in class, which concerns cruel and unusual punishment. My teacher mentioned how it applies to prisons, and I got curious. Do prisoners actually have rights? I looked up "Prison Rights America" and found the Attica uprising. Over a thousand men took control of a prison in 1971 just to demand things like soap and vegetables. They weren't asking for freedom; they just wanted to be treated as humans. When I learned the state killed 43 people to end it, I knew this was my topic. The prisoners' revolution for freedom, the government's brutal reaction, and the reforms that followed fit this year's theme.

I started researching with Heather Ann Thompson's book *Blood in the Water*. Thompson spent years sifting through archives to tell the story. Her footnotes became my roadmap. She mentioned the McKay Commission Report, so I found that online and read how the commission blamed Governor Rockefeller for refusing to negotiate. Thompson also cited the Attica Liberation Faction Manifesto, which I found on Abolition Notes. Reading the prisoners' actual demands in their words was different than reading about it in a textbook.

The New York State Archives website had a timeline showing what happened each day, plus photos from inside D-Yard during the uprising. I found Frank "Big Black" Smith's interview on the Washington University Digital Gateway, where he described the degrading conditions, like getting one roll of toilet paper per month. The American Friends Service Committee website had more survivor interviews. I also read court documents from *Akil Al-Jundi v. Mancusi* describing the torture after the retaking. Old New York Times articles showed me how people reacted in 1971 versus how we see it now.

I chose a website because it captures all three parts of my theme better. The revolution part needed prisoner testimonies and manifestos. The reaction part needed photos of the assault and newspaper headlines. The reform part needed documents spanning decades. A paper would be too linear. An exhibit can't hold enough detail, and a documentary wouldn't capture all the information. A website lets visitors click through the revolution, see the violent reaction, and track reforms or lack of them over decades. Plus, I could add the 2016 prison strike to show the fight is still going.

My argument is that Attica showed how revolution, reaction, and reform work in American history. The prisoners revolted by organizing and taking over the prison to demand basic human rights—better wages and medical care. The state's reaction was extreme violence that killed 43 people, then covering it up with lies. Reforms came slowly, with legal settlements, some improved conditions, and new conversations about prisoners' rights. But fifty years later, prisoners still earn pennies and live in overcrowded facilities. Attica changed things, but not enough. The men who stood up in 1971 proved that even people society throws away can organize and force change. That's why their story matters today.