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## "They Were Planning on It": Recasting the 1967 Buffalo Uprising as a Student-Driven Insurgency

Matthew P. Gawley

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“They Were Planning on It”:  
Recasting the 1967 Buffalo Uprising as a  
Student-Driven Insurgency

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Honors Thesis  
2021-2022

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# **Table of Contents**

<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	1
<i>Abstract</i> .....	2
<i>Introduction</i> .....	2
<i>Literature Review</i> .....	8
<i>Chapter One: Black Urban Uprisings from 1943-1967</i> .....	21
<i>Chapter Two: Black Students &amp; Buffalo Public Schools</i> .....	34
<i>Chapter Three: The Uprising's Targets</i> .....	46
<i>Chapter Four: Nighttime Destruction &amp; Daytime Negotiations</i> .....	57
<i>Epilogue</i> .....	73
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	77

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## **Abstract**

The past two decades have witnessed a critical re-analysis of the many African American urban “ghetto revolts” of the 1960s and 1970s. This paper analyzes one of the one hundred fifty-seven violent incidents of the “Long Hot Summer” of 1967, the Buffalo Uprising (June 26 – July 1, 1967). Building from recent research which indicates this incident had deeply political overtones, this work demonstrates the student-driven nature of the five-day rebellion, and the internal collaboration participants engaged in during their violent and non-violent activities. Drawing upon personally conducted interviews, interviews from 1967, newspaper testimony, and various publications, this new understanding complicates the current scholarly knowledge of this particular violent upheaval, as well as larger implications in understanding the northern thrust of the Black Liberation Movement.

**Keywords:** Buffalo, Rebellions, 1967, Insurgency, Students, Public Schools, Protest

## Introduction

Between 1964 and 1972, the United States experienced the most violent domestic upheaval since the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Across hundreds of segregated urban ghettos, tens of thousands of Black Americans participated in incidents of mass violence, often precipitated by white police brutality. African Americans burned or attacked “local symbols of white American society, authority, and property in [Black] neighborhoods—rather than against white persons.”<sup>2</sup> These incidences would often conclude after local or national state agents arrived. The “Americans have been living in a nation and a national culture created in part by the extreme violence of the 1960s and early 1970s.”<sup>3</sup> “Commonly call[ed] ‘riots,’ or what people left of center sometimes refer to as ‘civil disturbances’”<sup>4</sup> political and scholarly critiques of these events have ranged from acts of communal criminal violence<sup>5</sup> to expressions of black rage.<sup>6</sup> However, the interpretation that these incidents as criminal bursts of hostility has usually received the most traction. Even those “sympathetic to these moments of violence often conclud[ing] that

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Hinton, *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion since the 1960s* (New York City, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Otto Kerner et al., “Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,” Report of the National Advisory Commission on civil disorders § (1968), 64.

<sup>3</sup> Hinton, 3 (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Lyndon Johnson, “The President’s Address to the Nation on Civil Disorders,” The President’s Address to the Nation on Civil Disorders (The American Presidency Project, July 27, 1967), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-address-the-nation-civil-disorders>.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Goldman, *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1983), 252.

these so-called ‘riots’ derived from a pathological impulse, rooted in spontaneous, uncontrollable emotion”<sup>7</sup> amongst participants to recklessly destroy.

Several scholars in recent years, notably Elizabeth Hinton in 2021, developed a new lens through which to examine the “riots.” Specifically, these incidents should be “understood as *rebellions* of a sustained insurgency”<sup>8</sup> against the following factors: Hyper segregation, over-policing, economic disparity, frustration with the non-violent tactics of the Civil Rights Movement, anti-Black racist housing policies and white political domination. This evolved perspective argues that many of these “riots” demonstrated a high level of internal organization and group coherence, contrasting with the previous point of view that they were disjointed purely political “riots.”

Newly released federal studies from the late 1960s support Hinton’s argument. They indicate that participants conducted violence in a coordinated, sophisticated manner in many smaller cities, often overlooked in the traditional examination of the 1964 to 1972 period. Participants’ methods deliberately differed whether it was night or daytime. At night, small, disciplined groups, performed targeted acts of violence, like marking certain buildings for vandalism while deliberately leaving others. In daytime hours, they negotiated with municipal authorities for precise demands, like bargaining for the release of prisoners. New Brunswick, New Jersey, Englewood, New Jersey, and Dayton,

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<sup>7</sup> Madeleine Schwartz. "Streets of Fire: New Books Include Historian's Narrative of Brutality, Anger, and Revolt." Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, May 5, 2021. <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/news-and-ideas/streets-of-fire>.

<sup>8</sup> Peniel E. Joseph, "Recasting 'Riots' as Black Rebellions," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, May 18, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/18/books/review/america-on-fire-elizabeth-hinton.html>.

Ohio, include some of the most compelling examples of the previously described coordinated tactics. The actions of those who participated in incidences in those cities can no longer be studied as an anarchic, emotional outburst but rather as organized insurgencies.

Each of the more than 2,000<sup>9</sup> uprisings between 1964 to 1972 was different, and each must (and in many cases have already been<sup>10, 11, 12</sup>) be reexamined. In the 1960s, Buffalo intensely felt the devastating dual effects of Northern depopulation and deindustrialization. Meanwhile, as the Civil Rights Movement achieved hard-won but fruitful political and economic improvements for Southern Blacks, “the quality of life for African Americans in Northern cities...[steadily] deteriorated.”<sup>13</sup> Beginning in 1965, the Johnson administration declared war on crime, which increased police presence and invasiveness dramatically across urban African American communities. At that time, Buffalo was still an essential Great Migration hub, and the Black population was rising steadily. The white-dominated city government was growing increasingly hostile to this demographic change. The White flight created a complex environment of pervasive state discrimination, economic disparity, and a near-constant police presence. Thus, members of the East Buffalo Black community set forth on an

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<sup>9</sup> Hinton, 10 (2021).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue and Andrew P. Goodman, “Plainfield Burning,” *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 4 (2007): pp. 568-601, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144207299182>.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Warren Hill, *Strike the Hammer. The Black Freedom Struggle in Rochester, New York, 1940-1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 51-70.

<sup>12</sup> Peter B. Levy, *The Great Uprising Race Riots in Urban America during the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Rowena Ianthe Alfonso, “‘They Aren’t Going to Listen to Anything but Violence’: African Americans and the 1967 Buffalo Riot.,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 38, no. 1 (January 2014): pp. 81-117, 1.



insurgency to ameliorate their economic, social, and political conditions. The revolt would last five days, from June 26 to July 1, 1967.

Examining Buffalo's revolt reveals that Black public-school student notably made up the largest proportion of the Uprisings' participants. For years, the city's African American pupils had suffered from an increasingly segregated, violent, and inadequate education that brutalized them and ultimately left them unprepared to enter the job market. Buffalo schools intentionally isolated Black students in the worst buildings, with the least experienced teachers, and spent less per capita on their education than white students. Despite the city being twenty percent Black, the Board of Education deliberately under employed non-white educators to the point where most African American students never had a Black teacher. The instructors they did have often beat them with paddles, a disproportionate corporal punishment for minor infractions (or sometimes for no reason) for the 1960s.

After multiple peaceful student protests went unacknowledged, Black students planned an insurrection in the final weeks of the 1966 to 1967 school year. Violence erupted against white instructors who notoriously tormented Black students, who dreaded the start of summer, where they faced hiring discrimination and idle poverty. This paper will demonstrate it was not a coincidence that the conflagration began within a week of school ending. This project will illustrate the underlying complexities, and deeply intense coherence of the Uprising to come. This paper will show, through participants' multi-faceted actions during

day and nighttime demonstrations, that there was a definitive logic and coordination to the Uprising, in contrast to early literature regarding this time.

## Literature Review

The first academic scholarship about the 1967 Buffalo Uprising originated from SUNY Buffalo Professor Frank P. Besag, in *The Anatomy of a Riot: Buffalo, 1967*. Three weeks after the Uprising, at the request of several black residents, Besag created a study to survey the entire community on their feelings about the incident. He and several research assistants conducted approximately 150 interviews with black and white residents of various ages and occupations. They spoke with businesspeople of both races, police officers, onlookers, participants and aimed to sketch a picture of what occurred between June 26 and July 1, 1967. The study closely examined police logs, local media articles, and economic and census data to surmise the causes of what occurred. Besag's work presents a vivid picture of intense racial hostility and widely diverging interpretations of what led to the Uprising.

Besag noted that many of those surveyed in the city felt deeply confused in the aftermath of the violence, because "a very different picture was presented by out-of-town news media compared to the in-town media."<sup>14</sup> The out-of-town narratives emphasized an insidious infiltration by left-wing and the Nation of Islam, which incited young African Americans to indiscriminately destroy. Besag and his colleagues, unsatisfied with this answer, wanted to arrive at "an objective understanding of what happened and why?"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Frank P. Besag and Philip J. Cook, *The Anatomy of a Riot: Buffalo, 1967* (Buffalo, NY: University Press, 1970), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Besag & Cook, 2.

Besag's study revealed the specific grievances of participants as multifaceted. Besag reported that there were four major causes that coalesced to bring these specific Black teenagers to collective violence. The teenagers that participated in the Uprising had frequent negative interactions with law enforcement that left them feeling powerless and abused. Their neighborhoods had increased police presence, brutality, and harassment. The participants had a general frustration and a consensus that society was working against them, both "vocationally and socially."<sup>16</sup> Further, teenagers felt that the anti-poverty government programs of the era "were of little use"<sup>17</sup> and created false hope of a better future. Finally, underemployment was the most significant complaint, specifically Black's only being able to access "menial [jobs] with little to no prospect of future improvement."<sup>18</sup>

The next substantive analysis of the Uprising comes from Historian Mark Goldman's 1983 *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*. Written sixteen years after 1967, and not directly on the incident, Goldman affirmed Besag's view that white prejudice intensified the issues of African Americans. Goldman passionately argued that "private prejudice [by whites against Buffalo's African Americans] was not dealt with but was rather translated into public policy in such critical areas of urban life as housing and education"

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Following Goldman's argument, blacks were forced into what became a ghetto on the East side of Buffalo.<sup>19</sup>

Political scholar Neil Kraus's work was the next influential academic analysis of the riot itself. His book, published in 2000, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power: Buffalo Politics, 1934-1997*, provided a more robust analysis of the event than Goldman's. For the first time, the Buffalo Race riot was explicitly connected with the famed Kerner Report. This report is worthy of a lengthy aside before returning to analyzing Neil Kraus's contribution to contemporary understanding of the Buffalo Race Riot.

In 1967, President Johnson established a bipartisan commission to investigate the causes of the 1964 to 1967 civil unrest and provide recommendations to prevent future upheaval. After a seven-month investigation, "The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders" (colloquially known as the Kerner Report) the commission found that only "compassionate, massive, and sustained"<sup>20</sup> investment in Black communities, an end to police brutality, and many other reforms could prevent more violence. The report placed the blame for these urban uprisings on white America, arguing that the riots proved to be "outgrowth[s] of racial inequality and oppression rather than as acts of political or criminal agitation."<sup>21</sup> These conclusions diverged from President Johnson's point of view. He believed the unrest had been incited by leftist radicals and "hoodlums." The Kerner Report famously warned that the United States' "is

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Goldman, *High Hopes before the Fall: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo*, New York (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 288.

<sup>20</sup> Kerner et al., 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.

moving toward two societies, one black and one white—separate and unequal.”<sup>22</sup> The report ultimately contends that the rioters themselves did not indiscriminately create violence and attack white people. Instead, the findings show that riots were precipitated by an incident of white police brutality which, urban African Americans teenagers and students responded to by burning or attacking local symbols of white American society, authority, and property in [Black] neighborhoods. The violence was directed at symbols rather than against white persons.<sup>23</sup>

After more than thirty years, Kraus connected the Kerner Report to the ongoing analysis of the Buffalo Uprising.<sup>24</sup> Kraus argues that the Kerner Report's findings are like other Buffalo Uprising research, as they all pointed to several underlying causes of the unrest. In this analysis, Kraus hinted at the idea that Black political awareness, not simply emotional rage, contributed to the violence in Buffalo.

In 2014, Dr. Rowena Alfonso of the University of Toronto published a landmark study, “They Aren't Going to Listen to Anything but Violence”: African Americans and the 1967 Buffalo Riot” in which she confirmed and expanded upon the Kerner Report’s findings. She argues the Buffalo Riot and other ghetto riots like it were outraged responses to unfair economic, political, and social conditions. Alfonso’s study proved a powerful analysis of the political intentions of the participants in their violent activities, illustrating that these actions looked

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>24</sup> Kraus, 128-129.

to strike back against white institutions that made Black life so difficult, rather than display outbursts of uncontrollable emotion.

Alfonso referenced fellow scholars who demonstrated the political intentions of Black rioters during the 1960s and 1970s, such as Robin Kelly, Paul A. Gilje, Heather Ann Thompson. Through a re-analysis of the Besag interviews, she demonstrates that Black Buffalonian rioters had specific targets in mind when they took to the streets between June 26 and July 1, 1967. These targets included police stations, public housing administration offices, and white stores that overcharged blacks, in their neighborhoods. This argument echoed the Kerner Report's assertion that Black rioters in general targeted "local symbols of white American society, authority, and property in [Black] neighborhoods."<sup>25</sup> One specific reinterpretation of a Besag interview with an eighteen-year-old Black Buffalonian participant in the riot follows that:

*Question:* What is your present view on the rioting across the country?  
*Answer:* I think it is the same thing all over the United States. The United States are not going to give us our rights overnight. So, there is either going to be a whole lot more rioting or they are going to have to ship us out of the country. *Question:* Do you think this rioting will accomplish anything? *Answer:* It will get the whitey to move faster, because he don't [sic] want his businesses torn up.<sup>26</sup>

Alfonso explained, "[This] teenager's answers suggest that he viewed the riot as an overtly political act. He believed that the riot was justifiable because the stores that the rioters looted and vandalized were the same stores that practiced racial discrimination against African Americans. Further, he contended that "rights," which referred to "full participation for African Americans in a democratic

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<sup>25</sup> Kerner et al., 64.

<sup>26</sup> Alfonso, 86 (2014).

society must be given or riots would continue.”<sup>27</sup> This is one example of many where interviewees exclaimed they specifically targeted white stores they felt had exploited them with exorbitant prices<sup>28</sup> and felt solidarity towards those who rioted in other cities such as Cleveland and Detroit.<sup>29</sup> These interviews highlight that the high hopes for change from the Civil Rights Movement had fallen short for them. Alfonso moves away from the notion that rioters took to the streets out of pure emotion, but instead that they deliberately sought to destroy symbolic areas of white oppression, such as police stations and white businesses.

The final scholarly analysis of the 1967 Buffalo Race riot also came from Dr. Rowena Alfonso in 2015. In her work “Crucial to the Survival of Black People’: Local People, Black Power, and Community Organizations in Buffalo, New York, 1966–1968,” Alfonso focuses on the Black Power movement, which began in 1966 by Stockley Carmichael’s assertion, “[if Black Americans] are to proceed toward true liberation, we must cut ourselves off from white people. We must form our own institutions, credit unions, co-ops, political parties, and write our own histories.”<sup>30</sup> Black Power advocates like Carmichael believed African Americans needed autonomy from whites in order to gain political freedom.<sup>31</sup> Alfonso argues that this rhetoric galvanized a generation of Buffalo youth into action and fueled participation in the 1967 Race Riots. Alfonso strengthens her point by again returning to the Besag *Anatomy* interviews, noting that many riot

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>30</sup> “Black Power: Myth and Reality,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 1966, p. 152.

<sup>31</sup> Rowena Ianthe Alfonso, “Crucial to the Survival of Black People’: Local People, Black Power, and Community Organizations in Buffalo, New York, 1966–1968,” *Journal of Urban History* 43, no. 1 (May 12, 2015): pp. 140-156, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144215583984>, 143.



participants referred to one another as “soul brothers” and “soul sisters,” terms that derive from Black Power lexicon.

However, Alfonso never claims the political acts of Buffalo rioters had a definite, overall coordinated logic to them. While surmising that “some participants implied there was a sense of logic to the riot...[as]...some interviewed suggested that the rioters only targeted white-owned businesses for looting and vandalism,”<sup>32</sup> the scholar never goes any further in exploring if an internal structure or general coherence to the Uprising existed.

A key source of evidence about the disturbances of 1967 has only come to the surface in 2014 and entered mainstream academic scholarship in 2018: The long government suppressed “Harvest of American Racism: The Political Meaning of Violence in the Summer of 1967” report. During its seven-month investigation, from July 1967 to February 1968, the Kerner Commission sponsored internal “research projects” to answer more specific sub-questions the group wanted to investigate. One such study, conducted by twenty-three social scientists, and presented to the commission in November 1967, demonstrated that “those who took to the streets [in the 1967 disturbances] weren’t merely frustrated and filled with despair. They were politically engaged” and had an internal logic to their Uprisings.<sup>33</sup> Upon closer analysis, the social scientists found that multiple uprisings revealed coordinated planning of participants as well as concrete objectives.

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<sup>32</sup> Alfonso, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Shellow, “The Harvest of American Racism: The Political Meaning of Violence in the Summer of 1967,” University of Michigan Press (Michigan Publishing University of Michigan Press, 2018), [https://www.press.umich.edu/9684889/harvest\\_of\\_american\\_racism](https://www.press.umich.edu/9684889/harvest_of_american_racism).

The sub-report sought to go beyond the more limited conclusions of the Kerner Commission, which refused to acknowledge “the discovery of [this internal structure... that persistently appeared in a number of the disturbances]”<sup>34</sup> in the summer of 1967. However, deemed “far too radical”<sup>35</sup> by the Commissioners, the team was fired, its study quickly suppressed, and almost every copy destroyed, “languish[ing] in the LBJ Presidential Library for fifty years,”<sup>36</sup> and only made public in 2014.

The “Harvest” report found that between 1964 and 1967, the actions of participants in individual uprisings became “more pointed”<sup>37</sup> and more internally coordinated. In 1964, uprisings “were mainly negative reactions to instances of perceived police misconduct and to the circumstances of ghetto life in general.”<sup>38</sup> As the years wore on, “Negro demands...increasing[ly] [became] incorporated in the riots themselves... [With for example]...instances of bargaining between rioters and authorities hav[ing] grown in number... [along with]...attacks on [mostly white] public buildings.”<sup>39</sup> In several instances in 1967—such as Plainfield, New Brunswick, and Englewood, New Jersey—Black youth met with police officers or municipal authorities to demand economic concessions or the

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Scott Shellow and Michael C. Dawson, *The Harvest of American Racism: The Political Meaning of Violence in the Summer of 1967* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018), Foreword, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Shellow and Michael C. Dawson, “The Harvest of American Racism: The Political Meaning of Violence in the Summer of 1967,” University of Michigan Press (Michigan Publishing University of Michigan Press, 2018), [https://www.press.umich.edu/9684889/harvest\\_of\\_american\\_racism](https://www.press.umich.edu/9684889/harvest_of_american_racism).

<sup>36</sup> Shellow & Dawson, 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

release of certain arrested people, using the threat of imminent or continued violence as leverage.

The “Harvest” report discovered that many uprisings exhibited a high degree of internal coherence in their actions and purpose. In Englewood and New Brunswick, New Jersey, “well-disciplined and purposeful ‘crowds’ of youths... made plans to create disturbances as a means of impressing their political demands upon local authorities [and then proceeded to execute such plans].”<sup>40</sup> Participants demanded for the city to requisition more funds for recreation in Black neighborhoods and release certain arrested persons. In Plainfield, participants (“with great deliberateness and planning beforehand,”<sup>41</sup>) assembled themselves and marched down a street with several businesses on it. The group then broke the windows of a few “pre-planned targets”<sup>42</sup> and voluntarily dispersed.

Lastly, the “Harvest” report demonstrated that in many cities that witnessed disturbances, public schools became sites of political clashes between Black and white students and teachers. The social scientists reported this connection to the disturbances: “School issues have been among the most prominent ones raised by Negro youths.”<sup>43</sup> They found that violent clashes between Black students and white authorities had increasingly occurred throughout the decade.<sup>44</sup> Further, 1960s Black students felt they received harsher

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

disciplining from teachers, discriminatory treatment from white students, and exclusion from clubs and cheerleading squads.<sup>45</sup>

The “Harvest” report found evidence across the North, in cities large and small, of Black students actively resisting racist treatment in a political and organized fashion, both peacefully and violently. The year prior to the 1967 Detroit Uprising, Black students boycotted Northern High School on the city’s East Side, in response to unfair treatment from their White principal. In Plainfield, New Jersey, Black students boycotted their high school’s cafeteria and then carried out a violent “campaign of intimidation against white students after a white teacher was thought to have treated a [Black] student unfairly.”<sup>46</sup> Similar boycotts and organized resistance occurred in New Brunswick and Buffalo public schools. The report supports the claim that these incidents had begun occurring at an increased frequency in the “few years”<sup>47</sup> leading up to 1967.

The most political Uprisings of 1967 had several precepts. In their sample, the social scientists found that in

a number of...city disturbances, [the rebellions] took the form of political confrontation, in which goals and processes were more explicit, form and structure more evident. Cincinnati, Plainfield, and New Brunswick, New Jersey...all had highly political riots. Each disturbance differed from the other in important ways, but they all shared the common quality that violence was being used in a quite instrumental way to achieve political aims.<sup>48</sup>

Black youth often alternated nights of violent destruction in organized gangs (specifically targeting white officers and pre-selected exploitative white

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<sup>45</sup> Hinton, 145-147 (2021).

<sup>46</sup> Shellow & Dawson, 57.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Shellow & Dawson, 28.

businesses for destruction) with days of discussion with city officials when they would air their grievances and make demands. Or the socio-economic elite of a Black ghetto would make such demands to city officials for greater youth employment, playgrounds, and investigations of police brutality. For example, in Cincinnati "...a number of sectors of the Negro community, acting in concert, showed a high degree of coherence in the overall organization of the various protest activities. Over the course of events, the actions of youths and adults can be seen as meshing into each other in coherent and connected...ways."<sup>49</sup> However, the "Harvest" report never deemed Buffalo, one of the twenty-three cities it examined, an internally structured Uprising.

However, Buffalo in 1967 exhibited all these facets of other coordinated Uprisings, displaying them in a combination of ways typical of internally organized, cross-class structured violent political actions. While previous studies have indicated the political nature of the Buffalo Uprising, such as those of Dr. Rowena Alfonso, no study has ever tried to understand if individual actors in Buffalo worked with one another to achieve a set of concrete objectives, as happened in Plainfield, New Brunswick, and Cincinnati. Further, no study has ever sought to understand what role the oppressive Buffalo Public School System played in driving the Uprising. This question proves critical when one understands that students, aged fourteen to nineteen, were the majority of those who participated in the rebellion.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 30.

Closer analysis of the evidence points to organized gangs of students targeting specific stores and telling black-business owners to mark their businesses with “soul-brother” or “soul-sister” to prevent destruction.<sup>50</sup> Both the youth and adult-elite of East Buffalo attended multiple meetings with city officials throughout the crisis, delivering lists of demands and airing grievances. When white authorities failed to meet their demands, such as the night of June 29, these gangs went to the street and continued violent activity. Interview testimony from 1967 and 2022, articles from *The New York Times*, *The Buffalo Courier*, *The Buffalo Evening News*, and *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* confirm this more internally organized, student-driven interpretation of events. In this historical re-examination, student insurgents take on a far more coherent strategy in their nighttime destruction and daytime discussions and demands with municipal authorities during the day.

Buffalo proved a highly planned, internally coordinated, student-driven rebellion. It had a clear sense to its alternation between violent activity and peaceful discussion, like the internal organization of other “highly-pointed”<sup>51</sup> incidents, such as in Plainfield and New Brunswick. Participants had clear targets for destruction, as well as tangible demands. Spurred on by hundreds of current and past students of the hyper-segregated Buffalo Public School System, participants violently and non-violently sustained a grueling, five-day rebellion, until community elders could leverage their collective violence into twenty-four demands. These demands were presented to Mayor Frank Sedita on June 30, and

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<sup>50</sup> Alfonso, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 28.

they prioritized employment and educational concessions. However, before delving into a Buffalo specific analysis, it is critical to provide a greater context to the history of mass racial violence in the twentieth century.

## Chapter One: Black Urban Uprisings from 1943-1967<sup>52</sup>

According to historians Isabel Wilkerson and Marilynn S. Johnson, the history of modern urban Black rebellions begins with twin disturbances in Detroit and Harlem during the summer of 1943.<sup>53, 54</sup> Amidst wartime demographic changes and colossal economic developments, these two massive incidents initiated a sharp break from previous racial violence. Since the end of the Civil War (1865), most mass incidents of racial violence took the form of white-led pogroms<sup>55</sup> that indiscriminately targeted African Americans and their neighborhoods. These events took place in Wilmington, North Carolina (1898); Atlanta, Georgia (1906); Elaine, Arkansas, (1919); Omaha, Nebraska (1919); Tulsa, Oklahoma (1921); and Rosewood, Florida (1923). They generally involved enforcing the white-supremacist hierarchy, and often were spurred by “rape rumors [of Black men sexually assaulting white women or girls],<sup>56</sup>” a theme also common to Southern lynchings.<sup>57</sup> While African Americans fought back, they generally did not employ a similar level of violence in defending themselves that whites used in attacking them (except for Washington, D.C. in 1919). Black groups feared this would only lead to tougher white reprisals.<sup>58</sup> In the post 1943

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<sup>52</sup> While incidents like this continue to the present day, this chapter stops just before the 1967 Buffalo Race Riot, as this will be addressed in the chapter that follows.

<sup>53</sup> Marilynn S. Johnson, “Gender, Race, and Rumors: Re-Examining the 1943 Race Riots,” *Gender & History* 10, no. 2 (August 1998): pp. 252-277, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00099>, 259. &

<sup>54</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (Vintage Books, 2011), 131.

<sup>55</sup> Johnson, 252.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>57</sup> Amy Louise Wood, “The Spectacle of Lynching: Rituals of White Supremacy in the Jim Crow South,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 77, no. 3-4 (September 2018): pp. 757-788, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12249>, 765.

<sup>58</sup> Wilkerson, 131.



era, a new form of Black urban rebellion “reflected the increasing isolation of the post-war ghetto as well as the changing dynamics of American racism, a racism that had become more subtle, impersonal, and bureaucratic.”<sup>59</sup> White pogroms had given way to ghetto-based Black Uprisings.

Between 1910 and 1940, millions of Black migrants journeyed north in search of economic, social, and political freedom from the entrenched racial caste system of the South. Most made their way to cities such as Chicago, Illinois, Newark, New Jersey, New York City, New York, Detroit, Michigan, and Baltimore, Maryland. However, new migrants found hostility from working class and property-owning Northern whites, many of whom who looked upon them as racially inferior. Whites resented the prospect of sharing urban public spaces with new migrants, who they feared as jobs competition.<sup>60</sup>

As this migration continued throughout the Great Depression, Northern urban whites and government policymakers intensified their opposition to the presence of the new arrivals. On a local level, white property owners formed racial covenants (collective promises to refuse to rent or sell property to African Americans) to prevent Black families from living outside designated areas. This process proved so successful that, for example, on the eve of the Detroit Uprising, “80%”<sup>61</sup> of the metropolis “outside the inner-city was subject to racial convents.”<sup>62</sup> The creation of the Federal Homeowners Loan Corporation in 1933

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<sup>59</sup> Johnson, 270.

<sup>60</sup> Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 7-8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

and the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) in 1934 codified this discrimination “against African Americans, by granting low-interest loans and mortgages”<sup>63</sup> almost exclusively to white city-dwellers.<sup>64</sup> Numerous “passages in FHA underwriting manuals and publications that have been largely overlooked by historians called unequivocally for the containment of African Americans in designated residential neighborhoods as part of a broader effort to establish stable, homogenous communities of white homeowners.”<sup>65</sup> The effects of this institutionalized discrimination would only compound with time.

African Americans further faced pervasive economic discrimination, through depressed wages, higher unemployment rates, and inflated commodity prices alongside violent harassment from majority-white police forces. Even though life had improved upon moving north, many African Americans still lived in poverty, surrounded by whites who enjoyed higher living standards, greater employment, and better housing. After 1941, migration increased further, as the federally desegregated defense industry needed vast labor inputs to operate enormous northern war factories. By 1943, African American frustrations boiled to such a point, particularly in Harlem and Detroit, that one sociologist, writing in 1971, could find:

Blacks in both cities were experiencing the paradoxical combination of rising expectations and gnawing helplessness. Economically, socially, politically, the Black race was improving its position in American society, but the individual Black felt helpless to speed his own movement toward

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<sup>63</sup> “NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.,” *NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.*, 2016, <https://www.naacpldf.org/files/our-work/Detroit%20Housing%20Discrimination.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> John Kimble, “Insuring Inequality: The Role of the Federal Housing Administration in the Urban Ghettoization of African Americans,” *Law & Social Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (June 28, 2008): pp. 399-434, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-4465.2007.00064.x>, 400.

full and equal participation in the good things of American life. Even when he had the money, he found that he could not buy the standard of living that the white man enjoyed. He was hemmed in by prohibitions and discrimination.<sup>66</sup>

The summer of 1943 represented a climax of this tension in violent revolt, as well as a turning point in the history of mass racial violence.

On June 20, 1943, a violent altercation between Black and white teenagers, on an island adjacent to Detroit, led to multi-day inter-ethnic brawls, looting, and destruction. Over the course of three days, 43 died, hundreds were injured and nearly 2,000 arrested. However, during the destruction, for the first time in a post-Civil War incident of mass racial violence, “Blacks fought back as earnestly as the whites...[and]...began attacking and looting perceived symbols of exploitation, the stores and laundries run by whites and other outsiders that blacks felt were cheating them.”<sup>67</sup>

One month later, a similar uprising transpired in New York City. Following a negative interaction between two Black Harlemites and a white police officer, an urban revolt erupted on August 1 and 2. Uniquely, the incident had “almost total absence of black-white clashes”<sup>68</sup> Historian Diana Lestz finds that, rather than white persons, African American participants “aimed [their destructive energies] towards white-owned property. These were not random acts perpetrated by thugs or misguided youths; rather, the rioters represented the perception of oppression shared by a much larger portion of the Harlem

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<sup>66</sup> Alex L. Swan, “The Harlem and Detroit Riots of 1943: A Comparative Analysis,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 16 (1971): pp. 75-93, 82.

<sup>67</sup> Wilkerson, 131.

<sup>68</sup> Swan, 87.

population.”<sup>69</sup> The focus of the riot proved to be focused on symbols of exploitation not on the exploiters themselves.

August 2, 1943, marked the start of a momentous shift in incidents of mass racial violence. These occurrences, for the most part, morphed from the “white-led”<sup>70</sup> pogroms “of the early twentieth century”<sup>71</sup> into “the black-led ghetto revolts of the latter half of the century.”<sup>72</sup> Rather than rumors of rape or sexual assault, police brutality “emerged as the single most important rumor theme in ...[future] riots.”<sup>73</sup> Unlike previous white-led bouts of racial violence, post 1943 Black rebellions, had more deliberate aims and specific targets, such as the nighttime destruction of exploitative white-owned ghetto stores. Before 1943, police officers played a minor role in incidents of racial violence, as white vigilantes assumed the primary role of doling out violence. After 1943, police officers became the primary force against the participants. One telling discovery attests to this, uncovered by the NAACP’s own investigation of the events in Detroit, “of twenty-five Blacks killed, seventeen died at the hands of the police.”<sup>74</sup>

However, no major racial conflagrations, nothing approaching Detroit or Harlem, occurred for the next twenty-one years, in the North or the West, until the 1964 Harlem Race Uprising. Most of the racial violence in this “‘middle period’

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<sup>69</sup> Diana Lestz. “‘Like a Mad Geyser in the Moonlight’: The Harlem Riots of 1935 and 1943 and the Use of Surrealism in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” (2013), 14.

<sup>70</sup> Johnson, 270-271.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Swan, 85.

was instigated by whites,”<sup>75</sup> and took the form of small-scale brawls over public spaces. While these incidents occurred in northern cities since the beginning of the Great Migration, a lack of mass acts of racial violence in the region during these twenty-one years put them in the historical spotlight. Public pools, skating rinks, and amusement parks turned into sites of boiling tension between African Americans challenging de facto segregation and whites determined to maintain their grip over public accommodations. For example, cities such as Cincinnati and Cleveland, Ohio, and York, Pennsylvania, all experienced violent clashes.<sup>76</sup>

Buffalo experienced violence as well. Thirteen years before the Uprising, Black Buffalonians violently responded to recreation discrimination in the Crystal Beach Riot. In May 1956, Black and white teenagers fought on a Lake Erie passenger excursion vessel, the *Canadiana*. This small-scale violence was precipitated by several uniformed off-duty soldiers using racial epithets towards African Americans, expressing hostility to them as they enjoyed a public leisure space. In response, several young Black men hurled one of the soldiers off the *Canadiana*, and brawls quickly followed.

Several factors, both within and outside African American urban spaces, explain why mass racial rebellions arose again in 1964. The Civil Rights gains that nominally desegregated schools, integrated buses, and outlawed all forms of *de jure* Jim Crow by 1965, did not meaningfully impact most northern, urban African Americans. Despite Civil Rights’ activists attempts, in the North,

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<sup>75</sup> “Introduction & Questions,” *Introduction & Questions*, January 5, 2022. (Email between Matthew Gawley and Victoria Wolcott)

<sup>76</sup> Wolcott, 69 & 72 (2014).

“...separate and inferior schools [for Blacks], slum housing, and policy hostility proved invulnerable to direct attack.”<sup>77</sup> In 1967, economist Vivian Henderson explained to the Kerner Commission that

No one can deny that all Negroes have benefited from civil rights laws and desegregation in public life in one way or another. The fact is, however, that the masses of Negroes have not experienced tangible benefits in a significant way. This is so in education and housing. It is critically so in the area of jobs and economic security. Expectations of Negro masses for equal job opportunity programs have fallen far short of fulfillment.<sup>78</sup>

Growing frustration, and the authorities’ unwillingness to address their grievances, led many in northern ghettos to believe only violence could make others understand their plight.

Forces beyond the control of African American communities made life increasingly fraught between 1943 and 1964. Chief among these were continued housing discrimination of the FHA, urban renewal projects, and white flight. By 1964, the FHA had been in effect for some three decades and continued preventing urban Blacks from acquiring credit. The FHA “resist[ed] reforms thrust upon it by the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1940s and 1950s... disavow[ing] any responsibility for discriminatory decisions made in the private market while persisting in supporting segregationist activity.”<sup>79</sup> Additionally, federally-subsidized urban renewal programs, designed for highway building and “slum clearance,” had led to massive displacement of poor people of color

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<sup>77</sup> Kerner et al., “Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,” Report of the National Advisory Commission on civil disorders § (1968), 109.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>79</sup> Kimble, 400.

throughout America's cities, destroying Black businesses and uprooting middle-class neighborhoods.

White flight accelerated as the building of large highways and the cheap FHA loan issuances led to an outpouring of wealth from inner cities. The 1960s witnessed "white populations of central cities...[decline] by 9.6% [overall, and] ...in the Northeast...[by]... 6.2%."<sup>80</sup> Millions of white Americans, fearing the possibility of integrated schools, living close to African Americans, and rising crime, fled to newly built suburbia. This process only increased the spatial and economic segregation of Black city dwellers.

Nevertheless, the migration of African Americans into Northern cities continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s—perhaps more a testament to the barbarity of Jim Crow south than northern benevolence. In smaller, so-called secondary cities (those that did not constitute the largest population center or most economically prosperous metropolis in each state), African American populations rose in tens of thousands. Further, Black birthrates soared between 1940 and 1960. While the "white population rose 34.0 percent,"<sup>81</sup> the African American "population rose 46.6 percent."<sup>82</sup> From 1960 to 1966, the Black population grew at a rate of nearly two to one compared to Caucasians.<sup>83</sup> Thus, by 1964, Northern ghettos were filled with young African Americans, who throughout the 1960s

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<sup>80</sup> Jan Blakeslee, "'White Flight to the Suburbs': A Demographic Approach." *Institute for Research on Poverty Newsletter* 3, no. 2 (1978): pp. 1-13, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Kerner et al., "Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," Report of the National Advisory Commission on civil disorders § (1968), 116.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

had witnessed grinding poverty, failed promises of the Civil Rights Movement, and racist duplicities resulting from an often-apathetic federal government.

Unlike the 1943 rebellions, uprisings erupted in both large and small cities. Smaller cities with less than three hundred thousand residents, such as York, Pennsylvania; New Brunswick, New Jersey; Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Dayton, Ohio all experienced ghetto revolts. While most of the violence and property damage between 1964 and 1967 came from violence in primary urban centers—Newark, Detroit, Watts—incidents in these secondary cities have recently come under historical re-examination. Common across all these rebellions “Black people threw rocks and bottles at police, shot at them with rifles, smashed the windows of businesses and institutions [such as police stations], and plundered local stores.”<sup>84</sup> The root of this violence proved political, not hedonistic opportunism.

Much of American historiography has long misinterpreted many Black uprisings of the 1960s as frustrated, explosions rather than truly organized rebellions. For years, both politicians espousing a law-and-order philosophy and prominent conservative historians such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, John A. McCone, Fred Siegel, and Stephen Thernstrom have argued that “it was the riffraff of the ghetto who fueled the violence...the criminals, the young, the unskilled, and the jobless. They burned and looted seeking momentary thrills as a break from their tedious lives.”<sup>85</sup> According to this interpretation, short-sighted, opportunistic criminality lay at the root of these incidents, not an organized,

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<sup>84</sup> Hinton, 3 (2021).

<sup>85</sup> Hinton, 6 (2021).



political expression of resistance. However, such an analysis proves far too simplistic, as Elizabeth Hinton has commented:

It can be difficult to imagine the [Black] children and teenagers who threw rocks at police or who looted local businesses as political actors, and this bias had influenced the writing of the history of this era...This is, in part, because there were few manifestos or dramatic claims about intentions, from the rebels. But collective action should be understood as political if it is intended to shape the interests of the government. As much as nonviolent direct action, with its august lineage going back to Gandhi and others, violent rebellion offered a means for people of color to express collective solidarity in the face of exploitation, political exclusion, and criminalization. Both traditions continue to ground movements for racial justice. Yet the violent conditions that have shaped Black experience have made violent responses and the politics that fueled them inevitable.<sup>86</sup>

These uprisings sought for Blacks greater inclusion within existing political and economic institutions, access to city services, employment, the end of discriminatory business practices and the driving out of neighborhoods of highly militarized, omnipresent police forces. This is more clearly evident in smaller cities where participants conducted more coordinated actions and displayed a greater element of internal organization. However, most Civil Rights historians, and even “scholars and activists who focus on resistance to systematic racism have been reluctant to take seriously the political nature of Black rebellions.”<sup>87</sup>

One of the most important intensive studies of the political and coordinated nature of urban uprisings was the previously analyzed “Harvest of American Racism: The Political Meaning of Violence in the Summer of 1967.” Ironically, this paramount study was suppressed for fifty years by the commissioners of the famed Kerner Report.

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<sup>86</sup> Hinton, 14 (2021).

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

The “Harvest” report found the most violent upheavals (in Watts, Detroit, and Newark) occurred in two distinct phases. First, sparked by an inciting incident of a particularly brutal encounter between an African American and a white police officer, “widespread and aggressive action by ghetto Negroes...overwhelm[s] the police the first phase and evoke[s] a harsh retaliatory response in the second.”<sup>88</sup> In this “retaliatory response,”<sup>89</sup> law enforcement employed a disproportionate level of violence when “re-establish[ing] police authority, and aveng[ing] police honor.”<sup>90</sup> These officers became increasingly militarized (armed with M4 Carbines, tear gas, and three-foot batons<sup>91</sup>) throughout the 1960s, which predictably caused immense loss of life and destruction. However, while actions within the largest rebellions had politicized actions, the actual uprisings themselves had little to no overall organization. As the “Harvest” report contended, uprisings in Watts, Newark and Detroit had a political element to them, but the sheer “massive[ness]”<sup>92</sup> meant no one could control them. These uprisings proved too large for any wide-spread coordination between participants. Hundreds of incidents in smaller cities, however, reveal clear overtones, such as coordination between participants about hitting specific stores, issuance of demands, or organizing rebels into groups to carry out destruction.

The “Harvest” report added the perspective that the hundreds of other more minor rebellions differed from the famous and fewer largest ones. Many of

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<sup>88</sup> Shellow & Dawson, 23.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Hinton, 11 (2021).

<sup>92</sup> Shellow & Dawson, 23.

these smaller revolts not only had the political actions of “attacking symbols of white American society, authority, and property in Negro neighborhoods,”<sup>93</sup> but a high degree of internal coherence, as well as planning and coordination. For example, in Plainfield in 1967, following school protests, “ghetto youths...throughout the disorders...showed a high degree of organization, leadership, rationality, and collective purpose. They alternated violence with meetings [with city officials] and showed a willingness to bargain and negotiate with authorities when they thought it would do them good.”<sup>94</sup> Demands ranged from greater access to employment to more recreational facilities in Black neighborhoods.

Both teenagers and respected community leaders “used both the threat and reality of collective violence to advocate for structural change.”<sup>95</sup> 1966 Cincinnati witnessed “three straight days [of] selective violence by youths in the evening...followed by a lull during daylight hours.”<sup>96</sup> During the day, the adult Black leadership made demands of the city government in an apparent “political attempt to exploit the disorder to achieve victories on issues that both preceded the violence and evolved into it.”<sup>97</sup> A similar, but far more direct threat of violence emerged in Cairo, Illinois in the summer of 1967. In an effort to leverage violence to achieve economic aims, local Civil Rights organizers and leaders Charles Koen and John Brantley, whom the Black community had selected as

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<sup>93</sup> Kerner et al., 64.

<sup>94</sup> Shellow & Dawson, 28.

<sup>95</sup> Hinton, 51 (2021).

<sup>96</sup> Shellow & Dawson, 29.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

representatives, told Mayor Lee Stenzel and other white city officials they had “72 hours to meet”<sup>98</sup> their demands of better economic and employment treatment of African Americans or “Cairo will look like Rome burning down.”<sup>99</sup> When officials did not redress their grievances meaningfully, the city burned for three days, particularly white-owned businesses.

The Black uprisings of 1964-1967 displayed a wide array of motives and a great deal of chaos and destruction. However, like 1943, contemporary scholarship cannot ignore the internally organized nature of the many acts of destruction. Black urban Uprisings of 1943 forever changed the general nature of mass racial violence and foreshadowed the ghetto revolts of 1964 to 1967: massively chaotic incidents with Black actors committing politicized actions within them, through attacks on police officers and breaking windows of exploitative white-owned ghetto business. In this latter period, some smaller-scale rebellions emerge as internally coordinated organized political ventures. East Buffalo, in the summer of 1967, would come to resemble this latter occurrence.

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<sup>98</sup> Hinton, 51 (2021).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Two: Black Students & Buffalo Public Schools

From newspaper arrest reports<sup>100</sup> to post-Uprising testimony,<sup>101</sup> the historical record affirms that Black public-school students played an outsized role in the June 26 to July 1, 1967, Buffalo Uprising. Decades before 1967, Black students continuously faced a school system (the Buffalo Public School System, also known as the BPSS) that sought to reinforce their status as second-class citizens. White administrators enacted numerous policies to “ensure the...isolation of...Black children in Buffalo’s schools,”<sup>102</sup> confining them to an inferior education with inadequate resources. These policies produced, by 1967, the fourth most segregated school system north of the Mason-Dixon line.<sup>103</sup> The BPSS packed Black students into a handful of dilapidated buildings “with the least experienced teachers.”<sup>104</sup> While the policymakers who forged this educational apartheid remained largely invisible to African American pupils, “the nearly all-white teaching staff”<sup>105</sup> teaching staff did not. These teachers treated their Black students abusively and neglectfully that they became the embodiment of white oppression in their pupils’ eyes.

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<sup>100</sup> “113 Seized in Disorders; Pre-Dawn Court Held,” *Buffalo Evening News*, June 30, 1967, 5.

<sup>101</sup> Besag & Cook, 121-124.

<sup>102</sup> Joseph Gerard Mosey, “Testing, Tracking, and Curriculum: The Isolation of Black Students in the Buffalo Public Schools from 1917 to 1956” (State University of New York at Buffalo, dissertation, 1998), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304470915?fromopenview=true&pq-origsite=gscholar>, Abstract.

<sup>103</sup> John F Siskar, “The B.U.I.L.D. Academy: A Historical Study of Community Action and Education in Buffalo, New York,” *Afro - Americans in New York Life and History* 21, no. 1 (1997): pp. 1-16, <https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/b-u-i-l-d-academy-historical-study-community/docview/200848976/se-2?accountid=10198>, 4.

<sup>104</sup> Mosey, 126.

<sup>105</sup> Neil Kraus, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power: Buffalo Politics, 1934-1997* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 157.

Unsurprisingly, the first student-led protests against the school-system centered on the hostility of white teachers towards Black pupils. The walkouts and boycotts of 1966 would, in 1967, be replaced by violent revolts. In the final weeks of the 1966-1967 school year, African American students physically attacked their instructors with their fists, beating their white teachers and damaging their parked vehicles by letting the air out of their tires. Thus, coordinated, politicized protest, both peaceful and violent coalesced in public school systems as Black pupils sought to strike back against the most obvious symbol of white authority. These incidents, particularly those in the last weeks of the 1966-1967 school year, prefaced the Uprising to come, in which hundreds of students would participate.

Before delving further, it is important to understand the rapid demographic shifts the city underwent between 1940 and 1970. Over those thirty years, Buffalo's Black population rose from eighteen thousand<sup>106</sup> to ninety-four thousand two hundred and thirty-nine.<sup>107</sup> A continuous stream of southern migrants, coupled with a suburban-bound outflux of whites, dramatically altered the city's racial composition. In three short decades, Black Buffalonians went from comprising one in thirty-three city-dwellers (3.1%)<sup>108</sup> to one in five (20.1%),<sup>109</sup> a four hundred-thirty-three percent increase. An even larger percent

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<sup>106</sup> Henry Louis Taylor, "Black in Buffalo: The Incomplete Victory of a People Moving Forward Yet Losing Ground," *The Buffalo News*, February 25, 1996, pp. 1-8, 2.

<sup>107</sup> "Census Tracts BUFFALO, N. Y. STANDARD METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA," Census Tracts BUFFALO, N. Y. STANDARD METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA § (1972), pp. 1-159.

<sup>108</sup> Henry Louis Taylor, 2.

<sup>109</sup> "Census Tracts BUFFALO, N. Y. STANDARD METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA," Census Tracts BUFFALO, N. Y. STANDARD METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA § (1972), pp. 1-159.

increase occurred among student-age African Americans. From 1940 to 1965, “non-white persons” (99.6% of these people were Black<sup>110</sup>) aged fourteen and under increased five hundred- eighty-six percent,<sup>111</sup> from 4,604 to 27,400. This dramatic demographic change could have led to more diversified classrooms, as well as a more equitable distribution of resources across racial lines. However, because of the Board of Education’s actions, the opposite occurred. BPSS conditions declined, particularly from 1954 onwards, due to the intentional segregationist policies made by the Board, whose campaign sought to contain Buffalo’s skyrocketing number of Black students into a handful of schools

According to District Judge John Thomas Curtin and historian Neil Kraus, the Board of Education’s campaign to segregate the BPSS began in 1954. Over several years, the Board manipulated mandatory and optional school attendance zones, redirected predominantly Black junior high schools to feed into East High School, and set up a discriminatory foreign language transfer system. This last system acted as

an optional attendance zone policy whereby students living in geographic areas designated optional had a choice about where to attend school. While on the surface the optional attendance policy was not necessarily a means of segregating the school system, the populations of the numerous optional in the BPSS were disproportionately white. This of course gave the white student population more choices about where to attend school, while also locking the African American community into attending certain schools.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Mary Ellen Warshauer and Robert A Dentler, “PUBLIC SCHOOL SEGREGATION AND RELATED POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS OF BUFFALO, NEW YORK” (New York State Education Department, 1965), pp. 1-51, 28a.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Kraus, 156.

These policies forced Black students into select schools while permitting whites, afraid of rising crime on the East Side ghetto and bigotedly wanting to avoid their children encountering Black students,<sup>113</sup> to opt out of attending them. For instance, in “effectively designating”<sup>114</sup> East as “Buffalo’s ‘Negro High School,’”<sup>115</sup> city officials selected two different high schools, Kensington and South Park to be “entirely white.”<sup>116</sup> This process repeated itself over the next several years and as historian Joseph Gerald Mosley decisively argues,

In moving the whites and Blacks into their respective...[schools]...the Board [of Education] sent a clear message that the whites would attend the better schools...that employed the more experienced teachers, [and] that were housed in updated facilities. On the other hand, the Blacks were sent to the worst schools, that provided them with a compensatory curriculum, that had the least experienced teachers, that were housed in buildings that were old and maintenance deferred.<sup>117</sup>

These policies achieved segregation of BPSS in a matter of decades. For instance, in 1953, the student body of East High School was overwhelmingly white<sup>118</sup> with a small number of Black pupils. Seventeen years later, despite the neighborhood around East being “40 percent white,”<sup>119</sup> some “99 percent”<sup>120</sup> of the student body was African American.

By the time of the Uprising, BPSS had become, for Black students, a hyper-segregated apartheid. That year, 1967, the United States Civil Rights Commission identified the BPSS “as the fourth most segregated school system in

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>115</sup> Mosey, 125.

<sup>116</sup> Kraus, 152.

<sup>117</sup> Mosey, 126.

<sup>118</sup> Steven J. L. Taylor, *Desegregation in Boston, and Buffalo: The Influence of Local Leaders* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 58.

<sup>119</sup> Taylor, 59.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 58.



the North.”<sup>121</sup> Of the system’s ninety-six K-12 schools, “67...enrolled student populations that were either 80-100% majority or 80-100% minority. Twenty of the schools had a student enrollment that was at least ninety percent black while twenty-nine schools had a white student enrolment of at least 90%”<sup>122</sup> These 20 Black-majority schools severely lagged far behind their white counterparts. Even in a city that spent far less per student than the New York State average, majority Black schools received significantly less funding than white ones.<sup>123</sup>

Compared to schools such as South Park and Kensington, segregated African American ones suffered from “grave problems...with the facilities, equipment, and supplies...Science equipment was obsolete and in cramped quarters. Field trips were nonexistent.”<sup>124</sup> No African American-majority schools offered any electives in Black history, nor “were there any materials or methods which respected ghetto-life”<sup>125</sup> even though Buffalo schools celebrated ethnic holidays such as St. Patrick’s Day. In 1967, Gardell Morehead, a sixteen-year-old Black student and vice-president of the local Youth Council of the Buffalo NAACP frustratedly explained to *New York Times* reporters that “They [the schools] make us celebrate St. Patrick’s Day for three days here. I learned a lot of Irish folk songs and nothing about my own Negro past.”<sup>126</sup> In-school job training programs either did not exist or proved largely inadequate, and poor Black

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<sup>121</sup> Siskar, 4.

<sup>122</sup> Gary Orfield et al., “Better Choice for Buffalo's Students: Expanding & Reforming the Criteria Schools System” (Buffalo, NY: Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, 2015), pp. 1-88, 5.

<sup>123</sup> Siskar, 4.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Thomas A Johnson, “Violence Called Only Language: Buffalo Rioters Say Pleas Fall on Deaf Ears,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1967, pp. 14-14, 14.

students felt keenly aware of this: “we’re tired of going to [these] schools”<sup>127</sup> one sixteen-year-old student told an interviewer after the Uprising. “You go to a get a job and you’re not qualified for a job...why? Because of this low-quality education.”<sup>128</sup> Insufficient facilities, underfunding, a lack of electives in Black history and cultural life, terrible job-training programs, and hyper-segregation contributed to a shocking dropout rate of twenty-four percent, some seventeen percent higher than the city-wide average.<sup>129</sup> Thus, the result of any policy of segregation, *de-facto*, or *de-jure*, is a stultifying isolation, enforced daily by majority-white teachers.

Even in her nineties, Mrs. Ruth Kennedy can still recall the racist, violent experience of the BPSS. Long before the Board of Education embarked upon its campaign to segregate Buffalo’s public schools, Black students still acutely suffered at the hands of the teaching staff. After entering Public School #6 in September 1935, Ruth Kennedy recalls, “When I look back, and even when I was going through [the BPSS], it was not very encouraging. Teachers would not inspire you...I had thought at one time I had wanted to be a writer. I got to the place where I would not share my feelings [in the classroom].”<sup>130</sup> Beyond their insensitivity to the aspirations of Black students, white staff employed disproportionate physical violence when disciplining African American pupils. Even in an era of schoolroom corporal punishment, Ruth Kennedy distinctly remembers the psychological and physical brutality she and others endured.

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<sup>127</sup> Besag & Cook, 139.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Kraus, 163.

<sup>130</sup> Gawley, Matthew Philip. Ruth Kennedy & Matthew Gawley. Personal, January 17, 2022.

“Teachers...did horrible things, especially to males, they zeroed in on them.”<sup>131</sup>

Even after eight decades beyond graduating in 1946, Mrs. Kennedy would not, or could not describe what exactly “zeroed in” or “horrible things” entailed, or under what circumstance they occurred. Later interviewees would elaborate upon this, often in frightening detail.

Another interviewee, Guy Cameron, a student of the late forties and early fifties, would explain that the violence Mrs. Kennedy described was “Corporal punishment. [White teachers] would hit students, even disproportionate for that time, and a lot of them used paddles.” Mr. Cameron recounts, this occurred exclusively in Black majority-schools. It did not happen to him in the majority white Public School #74, he attended. However, he knew it was so pervasive in Black majority schools that “it was a [known] issue,” in the larger African American community.

Brutalization of Black students by white teachers continued throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. In a 1971 report drawn up by Buffalo’s Black United Front, the documents’ authors described the general maltreatment and potential violence white teachers menaced Black students with every day. The

authors issued a clarion call for a black student walk out on October 8th, 1971. This call was not only inspired by the lack of black representation in schools but because of the mental abuse and potential physical threat posed by so called educators: ‘...intimidation of black students by white teachers, some of whom even bring guns to school, and the preferential treatment of white students receive in the schools over the black students.’<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Domonique Griffin “They Were Never Silent, You Just Weren't Listening: Buffalo's Black Activists in the Age of Urban Renewal” (2017), 64.

Despite being the most brutal tension builder between teachers and students, direct violence did not prove the only one.

Miscommunication, according to Mr. Cameron, proved another, albeit lesser, source of tension between Black students and their white teachers. Even the best-intentioned teachers had, in Mr. Cameron's words, "very little knowledge of Black history, Black culture, and Black cultural dynamics."<sup>133</sup> His teachers routinely talked to him and other African American "students in a way that was derogatory, even in a lot of instances it wasn't meant to be that way."<sup>134</sup> The source of this treatment, he contends, "was the perception of a lot of whites that Blacks were illiterate. This goes back to the foundational planks of racism in the country... [the belief that] ...Blacks are childlike, illiterate, always thinking of getting around certain things without doing anything, [and] lazy."<sup>135</sup> However, this prejudice often proved less oblique. In a 1997 interview, Frank Mesiah, a student in the 1940s, recalled how white staff and teachers referred to Black-filled school buses as "nigger freight trains."<sup>136</sup>

The Board of Education even sought to keep the number of minority staff artificially low,<sup>137</sup> filling Black schools with mostly white educators, particularly those with the least teaching experience.<sup>138</sup> The Board deliberately under-employed a pool of qualified Black staff and as a result "even schools with very high percentages of African American students, in the 80 percent to 90 percent

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<sup>133</sup> Gawley, Matthew Philip, and Guy Cameron. 2nd Interview with Guy Cameron. Personal, January 16, 2022.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Mosey, 129.

<sup>137</sup> Kraus, 157.

<sup>138</sup> Mosey, 126.

range or higher, only had a small number of black teachers....Most African American students [of the period between 1940-1970] would not have had any black teachers.”<sup>139</sup> Thus, at best, African American students learned from culturally uninformed, inexperienced, racially insensitive teachers who lived far from the decaying ghettos in which they taught.<sup>140</sup> At worst, Black students had to endure violently racist instructors who felt total apathy toward the well-being of their pupils. Predictably, when protests arose across the school district, they centered on the conflict between white teachers and Black pupils.

The first organized, non-violent, African American student protest of the BPSS occurred in the spring of 1966. In the area of Lackawanna, a neighborhood located in the southern extreme of the Buffalo Niagara-Falls Metropolitan Area, a group of African American students staged a walkout during school hours. The high school protest centered on Black students’ negative perceptions of their nearly-all white teaching staff. One student insurgent angrily told a Besag interviewer after the Buffalo Uprising, “last year we had a boycott of the school... [but the schoolteachers] just forgot it.”<sup>141</sup> Nothing appears to have changed due to this “boycott” and the protest receiving no press coverage.

Another peaceful demonstration occurred sometime during the 1966-1967 school year. This incident, most likely occurring at East High School—by “1966 three-fifths of Buffalo’s Black high school students attended East High”<sup>142</sup>—became the first student-led protest in the city’s East Side ghetto. After the

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Kraus, 162.

<sup>141</sup> Besag & Cook, 104.

<sup>142</sup> Taylor, 58.

Uprising, one student insurgent explained to a Besag interviewer, “I felt that rioting was doing the right thing because we boycotted the school. We walked out of there because we were discriminated against and we went back.”<sup>143</sup> The phrase “we were discriminated against” suggests that the protest occurred against racist actors on school grounds, demonstrating this protest arose because of abusive treatment by white staff. Like Lackawanna, there are few to no records mentioning this incident either, implying neither protest did anything to remedy the situation. The only source mentioning the protest comes from that a local community organization’s (“The Friendship House”) “Progress Report.” This document describes a winter protest in which “Negro High School students boycotted school in their attempt to gain equal attention and concern from the teachers and their principal.”<sup>144</sup> However, the report mentions no resolution to the conflict, implying that the protest did little to change conditions. Thus, these two incidents further demonstrate that Black students viewed their public schools as discriminatory institutions meriting of organized, peaceful, protest. African American students clearly organized their protest to challenge the BPSS power structure.

As the 1966-1967 school year ended, the nature of Black protest radically changed. In these first weeks of June, African American students violently asserted their discontent, targeting the clearest agents of oppression in their schools—teachers. Buffalo School Superintendent Joseph Manch, who had

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<sup>143</sup> Besag Papers: Folder Marked “Interviews 126-138,” Paper Marked “Interview (colored boy),” p. 10. Other, 1967.

<sup>144</sup> Carolyn Fonda, “Progress Report Prepared by Miss Carolyn Fonda, Unit Field Instructor at Friendship House” (Buffalo, NY: Friendship House, 1967).

presided over the BPSS's ninety-six schools since 1957, told journalists on June 29 that during "the last few days of classes...signs of deep unrest were beginning to show...students did things they had never done before—attacked teachers, cars, let air out of tires and stoned teachers with whom they had good relations."<sup>145</sup> Indicative of their aims, these pupils did not destroy school property or assault fellow students. Rather, they struck out against their educators who they had come to view as agents of white oppression.

Like the Uprising to come<sup>146</sup> and others in 1967,<sup>147</sup> Black students chose specific targets in their violent June protests. The specificity of the targets, the teachers, and their property, reveals a politically coherent pattern to these acts of violence. These represented an assault on white oppressors and the vehicles they used to transport themselves out of the ghetto neighborhoods they taught in, and, for many, back to the suburbs from which the white power structures and restrictive housing covenants had excluded their students. The white educators who neither lived near their ghetto-bound students nor truly understood the problems facing them became targets of coordinated violence.

The proximity of public-school graduations (June 22 – June 24)<sup>148</sup> and the Uprising's onset (June 26) does not prove historically surprising. As scholar Elizabeth Hinton has persuasively shown:

...schools [in the late 1960s and early 1970s] were sites of Black insurgency...and of rebellions that began on school grounds before spreading

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<sup>145</sup> "Sedita Seeks Help for Negro Youths From Employers," *Buffalo Evening News*, June 29, 1967, sec. 111, 41.

<sup>146</sup> Alfonso, 3 (2014).

<sup>147</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights In the North* (New York City, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2009), 326.

<sup>148</sup> Besag Papers: Interviews 80-99, p.8, 9. 1967.

into the streets...many cases of rebellion started with young people protesting as students and organizing for racial justice within their schools...[In] many American cities, student-led rebellions spilled over into the larger community and involved widespread violence. That this violence arose from within the public school system suggests that these rebellions were not outbursts of criminality but reactions to unequal educational and socioeconomic conditions.<sup>149</sup>

With graduation and the end of school between June 22nd and 24th, Black students, were no longer faced with harassment and ill-treatment by white teachers, white-run schools, and poor education. They organized and pointed their politicized, semi-coordinated violence at a new target: the exploitative economic structures of the East Side Buffalo Ghetto, the same stores that refused them summer employment, which was a necessity for poor, out-of-school students.

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<sup>149</sup> Hinton, 145 & 148-149 (2021).



## Chapter Three: The Uprising's Targets

Like other Black uprisings of the 1960s, Black Buffalonians “chose their targets carefully and had just two: the police and shopkeepers”<sup>150</sup> businesses.

Analyzing this requires an understanding of the economic and law enforcement institutions which oppressed Black students. Such an analysis demonstrates why insurgent students selected East Side white-owned stores and the officers of the Buffalo Police Department (BPD) for their pre-planned, coordinated violence.

For Buffalo's mostly poor<sup>151</sup> Black students, the end of the school year presented them with a stark reality: either find summer employment and have the chance to pay for the ghetto's overpriced<sup>152</sup> food, clothing, and school materials, or live an impoverished, isolated existence idling in overcrowded public housing units and on over-policed streets. “It's absolutely necessary for some people, especially teenagers, younger people, to have jobs,” one Black student bitterly explained to a SUNY Buffalo researcher discussion group in July of 1967 “This is really the whole thing. Give youths jobs so that if they can't get the help from their parents, they can help themselves. All I want is a job so I can have enough, so I can get everything that I need to be properly equipped [sic]. Then I can go into these books. You know, you don't want to go into a classroom, and you don't want to wear out no book the principal's paying for [sic].”<sup>153</sup> By the end of the

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<sup>150</sup> Sugrue, 326.

<sup>151</sup> Kraus, 144.

<sup>152</sup> Kerner et al., 140-141.

<sup>153</sup> Besag, Frank P. “Besag Riot Study: Group Discussion P.3,” 1967.

1966-1967 school year, it had become apparent that summer jobs, mainly given by white business owners, would not be forthcoming.

Black business owners, who may have been more amenable to the problems of unemployed, dark-skinned students, could offer far fewer jobs due to a two decades-long municipal policy that displaced and destroyed Black businesses. During the 1950s, the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority and Buffalo Common Council (the city's governing body) embarked upon several urban development programs, such as the construction of the Kensington Expressway, that physically and financially ripped apart the predominately African American East Side.<sup>154</sup> One such development "program to raze dilapidated neighborhoods and sell the land to private developers"<sup>155</sup> proved especially disastrous for Black Buffalo's economy. Beginning in 1956, an "all-white redevelopment board appointed by the city's Common Council"<sup>156</sup> demolished "thirty-six blocks in the [predominantly Black] Ellicott district."<sup>157</sup> In the end, the project ruinously displaced "more than two hundred and fifty businesses that had formed the economic backbone of the Black community,"<sup>158</sup> significantly decreasing the financial power of Black Buffalonians. By June 1967, fewer businesses on the East Side were owned and operated by its Black residents because of this project.

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<sup>154</sup> Anna Blatto, "A City Divided: A Brief History of Segregation in Buffalo" (Partnership for the Public Good, April 2018), [https://ppgbuffalo.org/files/documents/data-demographics-history/a\\_city\\_divided\\_a\\_brief\\_history\\_of\\_segregation\\_in\\_the\\_city\\_of\\_buffalo.pdf](https://ppgbuffalo.org/files/documents/data-demographics-history/a_city_divided_a_brief_history_of_segregation_in_the_city_of_buffalo.pdf), 13-14.

<sup>155</sup> V. W. Wolcott, "Recreation and Race in the Postwar City: Buffalo's 1956 Crystal Beach Riot," *Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (June 2006): pp. 63-90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4486060>, 79.

<sup>156</sup> Wolcott, 79 (2006).

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

At the same time, many of Buffalo's firms, large and small, refused to hire young African Americans because of their race. In a 1971 court case, *United States v. Bethlehem Steel Corporation*, one of the city's last manufacturing giants "admitted [to] discrimination against Negroes in most of its employment practice."<sup>159</sup> Specifically regarding summer employment, the court discovered that during "the summer of 1966, 26 Negroes out of 1100 summer employees were hired. In 1967, [only] 12 out of 478,"<sup>160</sup> were hired. Beyond this, no Black summer applicant had ever made Bethlehem Steel's internal "'Golden List,'"<sup>161</sup> which:

...contained the names of a selected group of prospective summer employees who were given preferential treatment including assurance of a job, rapid processing, and favorable job assignment. The employment applications of such persons were designated with the symbol 'AU' [the chemical symbol for Gold]. No Negro has ever been on the 'Golden List.'<sup>162</sup>

Discriminatory hiring practices like this persisted in the heart of the East Side Ghetto as well. After speaking with a white business-owner on July 20, 1967, Uprising researcher Cheryl Lumpkin scribbled beneath the interview transcript: "One of the particular things I noticed in this shop was the fact that this man, although he is in the heart of the Negro community, he employs no Negroes at the present time in his shop. There are other employees besides himself and his wife as he mentioned."<sup>163</sup> Beyond this, there are even accounts of the children of

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<sup>159</sup> *United States v. Bethlehem Steel Corporation*, 446 F.2d 652 (2d Cir. 1971), <https://law.justia.com/> (US District Court for the Western District of New York 1971).

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Besag, Frank P. "Besag Papers, Riot Study, Interview #4 (\*Cheryl Lumpkin's Comments after Leaving Interview)," 1967.

white-business owners telling young Blacks their parents would not hire them. One Black student, a participant in the Uprising, who admitted to breaking the windows of white-owned businesses, told interviewers matter-of-factly: “Well, we broke them because Georgie [an older white man] told us that his son [a white business owner] said that he wasn’t going to hire any colored people, but the day before we came to the conclusion that we wasn’t [sic] going to riot no more, we was [sic] going to break his window that day.”<sup>164</sup> Many of the firms that could have offered summer employment for Black students refused to hire them, or only offered insubstantial numbers of hours to meet their employment needs. Unsurprisingly, during the Uprising, Black participants most prominent demand proved to be summer employment. However, their secondary target proved equally insidious: the BPD.

When trying to understand why Uprising participants targeted police, a better question might be to examine why police violently targeted African Americans. As Elizabeth Hinton masterfully demonstrated, Black rebellions of the 1960s and ‘70s occurred partly in response to police brutality, not the other way around. For example, a precipitating incident occurred on the evening of June 26, 1967, when a fight arose between two Black youths playing basketball. A white police officer attempted to break up the fight with unnecessary brutality—by cracking both boys over the head with a baton, and then proceeding to beat and arrest the boys’ frightened mothers after they tried to intervene. This episode raises several questions: Why was a police officer present at such a juvenile

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<sup>164</sup> Besag, Frank P. “Besag Papers, Riot Study, Interview #109,” 1967.

altercation? Why did the officers and others act with such brutality? Why was the level of trust between Buffalo Police Officers and Black residents so low that such an incident like this could occur?

To begin with, the presence of police officers at an argument between teenagers on a public basketball court reflects the unprecedented shift American policing underwent in the 1960s. The long, violent, and complicated relationship between law enforcement and African Americans forever changed during this period. Beginning in 1965, during President Johnson's administration (1963-1969), the federal government looked to forge a link between "the fighting of crime and the fighting of urban inequality,"<sup>165</sup> providing massive funding for local police departments in a way never seen before in American history. With the uprisings of Harlem and Watts fresh in mind, Congress nearly unanimously passed the Law Enforcement Assistance Act (LEAA) in September of 1965. This legislation took American policing in an unprecedented direction, establishing the first "direct funding channels between the federal government and the criminal justice system."<sup>166</sup> In addition to changing the financial relationship between the federal government and local police departments, the Johnson administration philosophically re-conceptualized what an urban police officer ought to be. The President proposed that urban police officers should act as frontline soldiers, "just

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<sup>165</sup> Elizabeth Hinton, "'A War within Our Own Boundaries': Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the Rise of the Carceral State," *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 2015): pp. 100-112, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav328>, 100.

<sup>166</sup> Hinton, 101 (2015).

as the man does in the rice paddies of Vietnam to protect freedom,”<sup>167</sup> reframing them as soldiers conducting counter-insurgency operations. Officers became ever more accustomed to “preventive, rather than solely reactive, policing approaches,”<sup>168</sup> that assumed “the occupation, patrol, and surveillance of high-risk, low-income neighborhoods of color”<sup>169</sup> they deemed necessary to prevent urban unrest and crime.

The LEAA established the Office of Law Enforcement Assistance (OLEA), which allocated millions of dollars in funding towards hiring more police officers to patrol low-income urban centers, militarizing existing police departments, and emphasizing a greater degree of surveillance and direct intervention while on the beat in Black neighborhoods. Between its first and fifth year of directly funding local police departments the “federal allocation for local police forces”<sup>170</sup> underwent a “2,900 percent increase”<sup>171</sup> from ten million dollars in 1965 to three hundred million dollars in 1970.<sup>172</sup>

As a result, between 1965 and 1967, a multitude of freshly hired, disproportionately white<sup>173</sup> police officers, armed with new riot “control-training, military grade weapons such as AR-15 and M4 carbines, steel helmets, three-foot

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<sup>167</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson, “Remarks in Kansas City, Missouri, at the Meeting of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.,” Remarks in Kansas City, Missouri, at the Meeting of the International Association of Chiefs of Police. | The American Presidency Project (The American Presidency Project, September 14, 1967), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/237772>.

<sup>168</sup> Elizabeth Hinton and DeAnza Cook, “The Mass Criminalization of Black Americans: A Historical Overview,” *Annual Review of Criminology* 4, no. 1 (2021): pp. 261-286, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-060520-033306>, 264.

<sup>169</sup> Hinton & Cook, 264.

<sup>170</sup> Hinton, 22 (2021).

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Kerner et al., 169.

batons, masks, armored vehicles, two-way radios [and] tear gas”<sup>174</sup> set forth upon a program of unprecedented surveillance coupled with an expansive counter-insurgency-focused mandate to monitor Black, urban neighborhoods. The result for urban African Americans became the intertwining of everyday life and law enforcement. As scholar Elizabeth Hinton has poignantly observed, Johnson’s crime war

encouraged police to make themselves a continuous presence amid concentrated Black poverty, where criminals and potential criminals were sure to be discovered. By the late 1960s, [African American] residents were growing tired of interacting with officers, of coming into contact with armed agents of the state on a daily basis. Law enforcement saw everyday contact with Black residents as their duty. The message was simple: Black people should get used to the police being part of their pickup basketball games, walks home from work, and family barbeques.<sup>175</sup>

This explains why a police officer was involved in a juvenile dispute between two Black youths on a basketball court in Buffalo on June 26, 1967. BPD officers saw it as their objective to aggressively patrol and become involved in the everyday affairs of Black Buffalonians. It proved an extension of existing policy, not an aberration.

The question of why BPD officers so violently treated the Black residents they ostensibly served can be answered by some combination of the lack of Black officers, ignorant hired officers to the conditions of the ghetto, and general racism. The BPD acted as a white-supremacist institution that sought to prevent African Americans from joining its ranks, preventing those that did from ever rising to positions of influence. In 1978, Judge Thomas J. Curtin ruled that the BPD intentionally maintained “a pattern and practice of discrimination against

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<sup>174</sup> Hinton, 11 (2021).

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 54.

blacks...in hiring requirements.”<sup>176</sup> This systemic discrimination in hiring officers of color long predated the 1978 ruling. For example, in 1948, with the city’s Black population around 36,000, (6.3%<sup>177</sup> of the population), the department employed “only two Black policemen.”<sup>178</sup> By 1967, despite a tripling of the city-wide Black population to eighteen percent,<sup>179</sup> Black officers made up less than four percent<sup>180</sup> of the police department. During the Uprising, the force had one non-white sergeant and one non-white lieutenant, compared to sixty white sergeants and ninety-three white lieutenants.<sup>181</sup> There was not a single captain or higher-ranking officer of color.<sup>182</sup>

The few Buffalo’s Black police officers that had managed to overcome bigoted hiring requirements had little power to reform the department from within. White superiors refused to promote them to positions of real influence. Illustrating this, the sole Black lieutenant in 1967, Floyd Edwards, had been on the force since 1950, and felt he was never taken seriously by his white counterparts. Once retired, he “referred to himself in an interview as ‘Mayor Sedita’s spook at the desk,’ [believing he had only been] promoted because he was Black,”<sup>183</sup> his promotion a form of tokenism to, in the Mayor’s view, appease

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<sup>176</sup> United States v. City of Buffalo, 457 F. Supp. 612 (1978) (United States District Court for the Western District of New York August 1, 1978).

<sup>177</sup> Charles Sawyer and Roy V Peel, “1950 CENSUS TRACT STATISTICS BUFFALO NEW YORK AND ADJACENT AREA,” 1950 CENSUS TRACT STATISTICS BUFFALO NEW YORK AND ADJACENT AREA § (1952), pp. 1-39, 7.

<sup>178</sup> Joseph Gerard Mosey, “Testing, Tracking, and Curriculum: The Isolation of Black Students in the Buffalo Public Schools from 1917 to 1956” (dissertation, 1998),

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/304470915?fromopenview=true&pq-origsite=gscholar>, 114.

<sup>179</sup> Kerner et al., 169.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Mark Goldman, *City on the Lake: The Challenge of Change in Buffalo, New York* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990), 111.



the African-American voting bloc.<sup>184</sup> Because of this, before factoring in the conduct of police, Black Buffalonians saw the BPD as an armed extension of the white supremacist power-structure that oppressed them educationally, economically, socially, and politically.

In addition to practicing hiring discrimination, BPD officers constantly subjected Black Buffalonians to verbal and physical harassment. Even the best-intentioned white officers did not effectively communicate with the African Americans they policed, often reflecting a failure of police academy training. As a “42-year-old Negro police officer...[with]...17 years”<sup>185</sup> of experience, likely Lieutenant Edwards, told an interviewer:

During the rookie’s time in the police academy, a part of his course is lectures in sociology, and this is given by professors from the University of Buffalo—white men. Many of the Negroes feel that this would be better done by a Negro, lecturing to these young police officers who in many cases come from all white neighborhoods, and in many cases have never worked around Negroes before. They don’t know what to expect if they have to go into a ghetto area and I think that a Negro would be better able to prepare them for what to expect and so forth. Just for instance, perhaps you have heard along the line, that a Negro doesn’t like to be called ‘boy.’ Now, this is something that the white man does without thinking, and, in most cases, he doesn’t mean anything derogatory about it, but this is something that stems from the South. They always refer to the Negro as ‘boy’ down there. If a man is eighty years old, he is still ‘boy.’ If he was six foot six inches and weighed two hundred and fifty pounds, he is still a ‘boy’ and the Negro doesn’t like this. Now a white officer comes and says, for instance...right in the heart of the ghetto, and he asks a bunch of fellows, he wants to ask them to get off the corner. He might say, ‘Hey, boy, get out of here,’ or ‘Don’t hang around here, boy;’ well, he immediately—this man, he didn’t intend to do anything. He is doing his job as he sees it, clearing the corner of loungers, but immediately he has made some enemies.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Besag & Cook, 184-185.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

Beyond this lack of cultural understanding, many BPD officers went beyond “boy,” referring to African Americans in more explicitly derogatory terms. One Black youth furiously expressed to researchers that the police routinely referred to him and others as “black bastards”<sup>187</sup> and another recalled that police always referred to him as “nigger”<sup>188</sup> when telling him to get off the street corner. Beyond this, Besag's research found that officers routinely employed “foul language, degrading attitudes, and rudeness (especially to women)”<sup>189</sup> in interactions with African Americans.

As in other cities, many rookie officers wanted to create a reputation for themselves, one that inspired fear and deference in the communities they policed. On the East Side, this often took the form of roughly manhandling African Americans, perhaps if they did not follow police orders quickly enough. A Black youth vividly recounted the police violence he had personally faced and noted that several “rookies...want a reputation but we not gonna [sic] give them that chance.”<sup>190</sup> This violence went beyond mere manhandling and roughing up, however. A year before tear gas, shotguns, and blanket arrests of the Uprising, “a Buffalo police officer was investigated for the shooting death of an unarmed black youth,”<sup>191</sup> which understandably significantly deepened mistrust between the Black community and local law enforcement. In the crime-ridden areas of intentionally segregated, artificially impoverished East Buffalo, police

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<sup>187</sup> Besag, Frank P. “Besag Papers, Besag Riot Study Interview #16,” 1967.

<sup>188</sup> Johnson, 14.

<sup>189</sup> Besag & Cook, 34.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Alfonso, 142 (2015).

misconduct and violence such as this proved common even among older officers, further exacerbating racial tensions.

This tension finally leads to an answer of the third inquiry: why there was so little trust between the BPD and Black Buffalonians? African Americans believed the ninety-six percent white BPD enforced the hyper-segregated economic, political, and spatial order, acting as ubiquitous agents of the white supremacist power structure. Black students intensely felt this oppression, from police harassment on street corners outside their homes, and even during basketball games.<sup>192</sup> Thus, in June 1967, the police, after years of violently brutalizing young African Americans, became targets themselves.

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<sup>192</sup> Besag & Cook, 16-17.

## Chapter Four: Nighttime Destruction & Daytime Negotiations

In exploring the Uprising of June 26 to July 1, 1967, this chapter considers the violent nighttime coordinated activities of public-school student insurgents and secondly of the non-violent daytime actions of these same participants in conjunction with Black Buffalo's leaders. Those living through the turmoil recognized this distinction almost immediately. *The Buffalo Evening News* journalist Bill Artis wrote two days into the Uprising: "Night: Turmoil — Day: Peace...Witness to Looting, Vandalism Finds Quiet Few Hours Later."<sup>193</sup> This day/night duality of the Uprising motivates the structure of the following chapter.

At night, student insurgents employed various tactics to strike back calculatingly and violently against the white power structures in Black Buffalo. Operating in gangs of ten to fifteen persons, student-insurgents burned or vandalized pre-selected white-owned businesses and attacked police officers. As the Uprising continued, law enforcement increased their presence, use of lethal weapons, tear gas and general brutality. Student insurgents in turn responded with greater violence, a clear demonstration of Elizabeth Hinton's contention that "acts of Black rebellion always follow[ed] police violence and not the other way around."<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Bill Artis, "Night: Turmoil — Day: Peace, Witness to Looting, Vandalism Finds Quiet Few Hours Later," *Buffalo Evening News*, June 28, 1967, sec. III, 43.

<sup>194</sup> Ronald S Sullivan, "How Over-Policing Causes Black 'Rebellion' - Not the Other Way Around," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, May 28, 2021), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/how-overpolicing-causes-black-rebellion--not-the-other-way-around/2021/05/26/7dd3ad6e-bd65-11eb-9c90-731aff7d9a0d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/how-overpolicing-causes-black-rebellion--not-the-other-way-around/2021/05/26/7dd3ad6e-bd65-11eb-9c90-731aff7d9a0d_story.html).

During the day, the same student insurgents and Black Buffalo leaders met with city officials, aired their grievances, and issued demands, all to leverage their collective violence into economic and social concessions for Black Buffalonians. When these demands were not met, either by Mayor Sedita or other city officials, student insurgents planned and carried out their nighttime assaults. Day and night activities shared coherence in strategy. From this, one can recognize a novel conception of the 1967 Buffalo Uprising: it was a student-driven, organized insurgency, rather than an “emotional outburst to”<sup>195</sup> injustice or simply “the actions of ordinary people who...were forced to take extreme measures to be heard.”<sup>196</sup> Buffalo, between June 26 and July 1, 1967 represented one part of the greater Black “sustained insurgency”<sup>197</sup> occurring all across the nation between 1964 and 1972. This chapter will evaluate the Buffalo Uprising with this added perspective and illustrate more organized incident than has been previously understood by scholars who have documented this specific Uprising.

Before delving into the daytime and nighttime complexities of the Uprising, one must understand there is a lack of documented evidence on this topic in general. Black rebels across the country left “few manifestos or dramatic claims about [their] intentions.”<sup>198</sup> There exist few if any written statements on any rebellion’s inner workings. Thus, to understand if inner-organizing principles existed within the Buffalo Uprising and what they might have been, the evidence

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<sup>195</sup> Frank P Besag et al., “Preliminary Report on the Disturbances in Buffalo” (Buffalo, NY: Store Front Education Information Centers, 1967), pp. 1-4, 2.

<sup>196</sup> Alfonso, 8 (2014).

<sup>197</sup> Hinton, 7 (2021).

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 14.

must be gathered from what participants said at the time, from what they selected to vandalize or burn, and how they chose to conduct themselves in talks with influential organizations such as the NAACP and Buffalo City Council.

In publishing the first and perhaps most thorough analysis of the Buffalo Uprising, Besag and his research assistants interviewed some one hundred and fifty Buffalonians, demonstrating the outsized influence of students in the Uprising. In the 1970 volume, *The Anatomy of a Riot: Buffalo, 1967*, Besag examined “approximately one-third of the interviews conducted,”<sup>199</sup> selecting them “on the basis of their relevance to the subject.”<sup>200</sup> Besag excluded the other hundred, deeming them “interesting but not entirely germane to the study of the disturbances.”<sup>201</sup> Only six of the 42 interviewees Besag included in *Anatomy* admitted to violently participating in the Uprising. Of these six, three told interviewers they were students (#35<sup>202</sup>, #36<sup>203</sup>), two indicated they were not (#8<sup>204</sup>, #10<sup>205</sup>) and one nineteen-year-old was not asked (#18<sup>206</sup>).

A clearer picture of student involvement emerges when one examines the other 100 unpublished interviews in the Besag collection at the SUNY Buffalo Archives. Nine additional interviewees, excluded from *Anatomy*, admitted to participating in the Uprising (#21, #101, #103, #104, #105, #107, #108, #109, #110). Of these, three said or implied they were high school students (#104, #108,

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<sup>199</sup> Besag & Cook, 84.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 109.

#109), four were not asked (#21, #103, #105, #110), and two indicate they were not (#101, #107). It is difficult to ascertain whether the unasked interviewees were current students at the time they were interviewed. However, a rough estimate might be gained if one applies the twenty-two to twenty-four percent<sup>207</sup> dropout rate of Buffalo's East Side High school (known as Buffalo's "Black High School"<sup>208</sup> where sixty percent<sup>209</sup> of Buffalo's Black students attended, with a ninety-nine percent<sup>210</sup> African American student body) to the whole sample. If we assume that seventy-six to seventy-eight percent of those between high school ages of fourteen and nineteen (Buffalo's Black students sometimes graduated at nineteen<sup>211</sup>) who did not specify whether they were high school students, a clear picture emerges: of fifteen Uprising participants, nine to ten were active students, and four to five were either dropouts or graduates. By a two-to-one ratio, Uprising participants were active students, showing they played a prepotent role in the conflagration to come.

Furthermore, a recently-graduated nineteen-year-old Black male student admitted to "bust[ing] a lot of windows...of...white-owned businesses."<sup>212</sup> He told interviewers that those involved "were male, and female, but mainly males without jobs, [sic] had a poor educational background because of the power structure in the ghetto."<sup>213</sup> A nineteen-year-old white male similarly told Besag

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<sup>207</sup> Kraus, 163.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>209</sup> Taylor, 59.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Thomas A. Johnson, "Violence Called Only Language: Buffalo Rioters Say Pleas Fall on Deaf Ears," *New York Times*, June 29, 1967, pp. 14-14, 14.

<sup>212</sup> Besag & Cook, 111.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 110.

interviewers, “Q: Did you notice anything peculiar on the night of the riot in this neighborhood? A: Well, a lot of the young [Black] boys were missing from the neighborhood, and nobody knew where they was [sic].”<sup>214</sup> His testimony only further confirms to the large contingent of student-aged, Black youths participating in the Uprising.

Nighttime:

Throughout the five nights of the Uprising, student insurgents pre-selected businesses for destruction or vandalism, and deliberately chose to leave others alone. Their planning occurred sometime before gangs of ten to fifteen set to the streets. As one fifteen-year-old Black student explained to Besag interviewers, Uprising participants “were planning on it [violent activity]”<sup>215</sup> for some time beforehand. Another student insurgent explained that the elements of organization in the June 26 to July 1 Uprising would only increase in a possible future incident. “Q: Is there a possibility that these people who did participate [in the Uprising] could get organized and have another riot on a larger scale? A: Well, this was just a test one because, uh [sic], the real happenings haven’t begun yet.”<sup>216</sup> Further, while the actual planning of targeting specific stores cannot be definitively placed, nighttime destruction alludes to evidence of clear pre-selection.

Certain stores were designated for vandalism or destruction while others were not, evidenced by how participants spoke afterward about their actions during the Uprising. In post Uprising interviews, student insurgents described

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<sup>214</sup> Besag, Frank P. “Besag Papers, Riot Study, Interview #37,” 1967.

<sup>215</sup> Besag, Frank P. “Besag Papers, Riot Study, Interview #109,” 1967.

<sup>216</sup> Besag & Cook, 112.



attacking stores they knew frequently exploited African Americans or practiced hiring discrimination. The same student who admitted to participating in the 1966 Lackawanna school protest told interviewers after the Uprising: “[We broke] Whitey’s windows. Once in a while we might have made a mistake and broke colored windows [sic].”<sup>217</sup> The student’s use of the word “mistake” highlights student insurgents’ intentions to damage businesses which they believed had taken advantage of Black Buffalonians. Further to this point, another insurgent explained that he and his group destroyed stores based on whether those businesses “wouldn’t hire Negroes in their stores.”<sup>218</sup> However, he also admitted feeling regret that “by mistake”<sup>219</sup> or “by accident”<sup>220</sup> some in his gang smashed the wrong store windows.

Similarly, evidence of planned and targeted violence emerges when examining businesses student insurgents explicitly chose not to destroy. Uprising participants refused to touch stores with “soul brother” or “soul-sister” spray-painted on the windows. This Black Power phrase implied a sense of solidarity with the insurgents.<sup>221</sup> They did not touch most Black businesses, like the Afro-Asian Bookstore on 1412 Jefferson Avenue, known to distribute anti-war and Black Power literature.<sup>222</sup>

There is evidence that student insurgents spared white-owned stores that did not practice rigid hiring discrimination, revealing a high level of internal

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<sup>217</sup> Besag, Frank P. “Besag Papers, Riot Study, Interview #109,” 1967.

<sup>218</sup> Besag, Frank P. “Besag Papers, Riot Study, Interview #101, 2.,” 1967.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Alfonso, 3 (2014).

<sup>222</sup> “67: Buffalo Uprising”, *YouTube* (Urban Legacy Filmworks, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QY2PO1X0Ib0&t=1404s>.

organization in their selection process. When asked if only white stores “were hit,” one student insurgent poignantly explained, “No, there was about one or two Negro stores hit—people that think they’re white, and there wasn’t [sic] some white stores hit...Q: In other words, stores owners who were fair—they weren’t bothered? A: Right.”<sup>223</sup> A specific example of this comes from Besag Interviewee #7, a “Caucasian Businessmen in [the] Negro Community.”<sup>224</sup> The businessman owned and operated a child wear shop, a frequent target of student insurgents.<sup>225</sup> However, unlike most of the white businesspeople surveyed, this interviewee “employ[ed] negroes.”<sup>226</sup> Likely because of this, the insurgent “children”<sup>227</sup> left his establishment unscathed. This decision, mirroring incidents in other Uprisings, strongly implies student insurgents pre-selected businesses to destroy. Much like participants in the Uprising in Englewood, New Jersey, Buffalonian students displayed clear patterns of organization and discipline in their politicized violence.

Another strong indicator of the cohesion of student insurgents is revealed in the way they organized themselves for nighttime violence. Local newspapers, police officers, and insurgents almost always described operating in groups or gangs. Insurgents themselves usually referred to their nighttime destruction as having happened in groups or gangs, or referring to themselves as “we.”<sup>228</sup> For example, one nineteen-year-old Black uprising participant explained to

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<sup>223</sup> Besag & Cook, 123.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>225</sup> Johnson, 14.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Besag & Cook, 124.

interviewers he broke windows with a gang of “about 15 boys,”<sup>229</sup> and another, an eighteen-year-old, responding to “Q: Were you alone or in a group,”<sup>230</sup> with, “[I was] with a group”<sup>231</sup> when breaking windows. News media press coverage confirmed this view that insurgents conducted violence in small groups. As the *Buffalo Evening News* reported, “300 to 400 people, roaming in small gangs took part in the disorders”<sup>232</sup> and the *New York Times* described violence occurring in “roving bands.”<sup>233</sup> However, simply because student insurgents conducted violence in groups does not necessarily mean these gangs had been organized.

Nevertheless, police testimony from both Black and white officers suggests that some level of organization existed within student insurgent bands at night. In a Besag interview with a thirty-seven-year-old white policeman, the officer distinguished between gangs’ leaders and followers: “Q: Could you tell me what you saw [during the Uprising]? Specifically, what was happening? A: Well, you mean as far as kids breaking windows and robbing stores and that type of thing? Well, I seen [sic] all of that and then the leaders leading [sic] them onto the street, telling them what to do and things like that.”<sup>234</sup> A distinction between leaders and followers could be observed, even by officers trying to drive the groups off the streets.

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<sup>229</sup> Besag, Frank P. “Besag Papers, Riot Study, Interview #107 (Colored Boy),” 1967.

<sup>230</sup> Besag, Frank P. “Besag Papers, Riot Study, Interview #104 (Colored Boy),” 1967.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> “City, Negro Leaders Working to Prevent Renewed Disorders: Meet in Mayor’s Official East Side Calm Again After Night of Burnings, Vandalism,” *Buffalo Evening News*, June 28, 1967, sec. I, 1.

<sup>233</sup> Johnson, 14.

<sup>234</sup> Besag & Cook, 182.

Another example of this group hierarchy came from Assistant Detective Chief Floyd Edwards. Interviewed by the *Buffalo Courier-Express*, Edwards recalled how on June 27, at 9:30 pm, upon finding a group of Black youths smashing a window in a “Tavern,” he ““jumped out of my [patrol] car and grabbed the ringleader who was involved in the trouble the night before [Monday night] and who promised there would be no more trouble until charges of police brutality [on Monday night] had been resolved...His friends took him away from me.””<sup>235</sup> Edwards reinforces the idea that insurgents organized “ringleaders” and followers among insurgent groups, illustrating a previously unresearched internal organization in the politicized violence of the Buffalo Uprising. This structure of coordinated hierarchy would only become more apparent during daytime hours.

Perhaps more so than at night, the organized nature of the student-driven insurgency revealed itself during the day. These activities primarily consisted of meetings with Black leaders and top city officials. At these, student insurgents elected speakers to address concerns on their behalf and voice their political, economic, and social grievances frankly. Using the threat of more collective violence, student insurgents first coerced the traditional Black leadership, who they viewed as “part of the establishment,”<sup>236</sup> and then turned to the municipal authorities.

Daytime:

The first meeting between student insurgents and a significant administrative body occurred on the afternoon of June 29, with the NAACP

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<sup>235</sup> “Broken Promises Are Held at Root,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, June 28, 1967, 2.

<sup>236</sup> Alfonso, 147 (2015).

leadership. Prominent organization members wanted to determine what could be done to prevent a fourth night of destruction. They invited youths, many of whom had participated in the previous nights' violence,<sup>237</sup> to meet at the Buffalo NAACP chapter headquarters. In the afternoon meeting, about "20 Negro youths"<sup>238</sup> met with "approximately 25 adults,"<sup>239</sup> including NAACP chair Reverend Milton A. Williams. Before meeting, the "youths"<sup>240</sup>—none of whom indicated being above the age of eighteen and thus were most likely students—organized themselves into speakers and elected "a spokesman for the group,"<sup>241</sup> eighteen-year-old "Bruce Cosby."<sup>242</sup> The central concern of Cosby's address was the need for summer employment and public-school reform.

Speaking to the assembled group, Cosby and others outlined their grievances and what would happen if nothing changed. Summer "jobs would solve something. That would be a step forward,"<sup>243</sup> the spokesman expressed. "The time for change is right now. The Negro community is just now waking up. There needs to be a change in education and opportunities."<sup>244</sup> Interrupting occasionally, other members of the assembled student insurgents elaborated on what Cosby's meant when he said, "[things] needs to...change."<sup>245</sup> One teenager explained that "We feel that the old Negro people were cheated out of their

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<sup>237</sup> "'We Want Jobs,' East Side Youths Tell Adults," *Buffalo Evening News*, June 29, 1967, sec. III, 29.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

education, and we don't want to be cheated out of ours.”<sup>246</sup> Another sixteen-year-old student insurgent added, “Our schools are systemically destroying our young people.”<sup>247</sup> Yet another demanded an end to “token jobs,”<sup>248</sup> and inquired “why can't we be teachers, lawyers, and doctors?”<sup>249</sup> If the economic inequality and occupational discrimination was not be remedied, the student insurgents indicated, collective violence would resume. For example, the sixteen-year-old student warned that if the discriminatory public-school status quo continued, “there will always be violence.”<sup>250</sup> Another remarked, “We want jobs or we're gonna tear out [sic],”<sup>251</sup> and an eighteen-year-old, even alluded to resorting to deadly violence: “If we can't talk it out, we'll shoot it out.”<sup>252</sup> This final remark indicates how desperate the student insurgents were for tangible changes. Thus, the clarity of their demands, the organized nature of their presentation of grievances through an elected spokesman, and the ages of the “20...youths”<sup>253</sup> demonstrate the participants' deep deliberateness and student status.

After presenting their concerns to the NAACP, student insurgents continued to demonstrate the internal organization of the Uprising at a meeting with Mayor Frank A. Sedita. This meeting between the head of the municipal government and the student insurgents, was brokered by several groups (such as the NAACP) out of fear of continued violence. Between 5:30 and 6:30pm

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

(sundown would not come until 8:58pm<sup>254</sup>) at the East Side Michigan Avenue YMCA, about one hundred and fifty youths aired their problems to the Mayor. They bemoaned the state of dilapidated “housing, poor education, police patrols and lack of jobs,”<sup>255</sup> presenting the Mayor with a list of grievances regarding four categories—employment, housing, education, and recreation.<sup>256</sup> At the end of the “tense, dramatic, and noisy”<sup>257</sup> conference, Sedita, trying to demonstrate his determination to fix the situation “announced...he would present a list of the employment grievances to the Chamber of Commerce that same evening.”<sup>258</sup> Then, in an act that indicated the genuine alarm of the city-government, Mayor Frank A. Sedita, who presided over a city of more than one million, and had just won a second term with over ninety two thousand<sup>259</sup> votes two years earlier, pleaded to have “a week to see what could be done,”<sup>260</sup> to attempt to alleviate the situation.<sup>261</sup>

It was at this point that the Uprising would most likely have stopped, had not another incident occurred immediately after the YMCA meeting. This one was out of Mayor Sedita’s control but an implicit betrayal of his promises to “alleviate the situation.”<sup>262</sup> The youths—impressed “with the mayor’s courage and concern which had brought him into the center of the Negro community to

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<sup>254</sup> “Sunrise Sunset Times of Buffalo, NY, USA.” Buffalo, NY, USA Sunrise Sunset Times. ©MAPLOGS, 2022. [https://sunrise.maplogs.com/buffalo\\_ny\\_usa.15409.html?year=1967](https://sunrise.maplogs.com/buffalo_ny_usa.15409.html?year=1967).

<sup>255</sup> Besag & Cook, 23.

<sup>256</sup> Kraus, 128.

<sup>257</sup> Irving Sanes, Betty Cohen, and Claire Ives, eds., “CCHR Indicts,” n.d, 4.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Michael F. Rizzo and Genevieve M. Kenyon, *Through the Mayors' Eyes: Buffalo, New York 1832-2005* (Buffalo, NY: Old House History, 2005), 318.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Besag & Cook, 23.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

discuss the problems openly with them”<sup>263</sup>—peacefully filed onto the four buses that had brought them to the meeting. Then, BPD officers unnecessarily and violently set upon them. “Four police patrol cars passed by”<sup>264</sup> and an unknown officer, with no justification whatsoever, “shot a tear-gas pellet into”<sup>265</sup> one of the full buses, forcing all those inside to scramble from the bus blinded and violently coughing. This incident, an unwarranted attack by armed agents of the very same city government they had just been negotiating with, understandably “left many of the youths”<sup>266</sup> to feel “they had been betrayed.”<sup>267</sup> While Sedita himself had not ordered this, armed agents of his police force had attacked the very same people he had just spoken with just minutes before, leading many to believe the mayor had negotiated in bad faith. The students resultingly reorganized and retaliated, resorting back to collective violence. What followed was the Uprising’s, and Buffalo’s, most violent night. <sup>268</sup> One youth insurgent told newsmen the following day, “there wasn’t going to be no riot last night, and [then] they [the police] tear-gassed the bus.”<sup>269</sup>

Daytime negotiations resumed between student insurgents, Black leaders, and city officials on the morning of June 30 at a downtown YWCA. After this meeting, two pivotal incidents occurred, one during the meeting and one later. Both demonstrated the effect the insurgency had had on the city's

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>269</sup> “Robinson Sent to Buffalo Riot District: Ex-Dodger Star to Counsel Angry Negro Youths,” *Pittsburg Post-Gazette*, July 1, 1967, pp. 1-12, 3.



“establishment,”<sup>270</sup> conservative Black leadership, as well as the internal structure of the insurgents themselves. At the end of the meeting, with “the reek of tear gas still [clinging] to some East Side stores,”<sup>271</sup> an ad hoc group of Buffalo’s African American powerbrokers handed Sedita “a two-page single-spaced typewritten sheet of”<sup>272</sup> twenty-four “demands,”<sup>273</sup> covering all issues from school reform to an end of indiscriminate use of tear gas and K-9 units. First among this list was the most central grievance of the entire student-insurgency: jobs. “a minimum of 3,000 jobs to be provided youngsters from the Negro area.”<sup>274</sup> These official demands put forth the morning after the most violent night in the history of Buffalo showed the depth to which student insurgents had forced the city’s “establishment,”<sup>275</sup> gradualist, conservative Black leadership into concrete action. Presenting these demands to the city’s highest elected official represented a genuine attempt by Buffalo’s Black leaders to leverage the collective violence and main concerns of student insurgents into real change. Further, the demands revealed not only the earnestness of Buffalo’s Black leaders, but the genuine fear student insurgents had put into them. The same African American leadership that had just two days earlier met and publicly stressed with Sedita “violence and

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<sup>270</sup> Alfonso, 147 (2015).

<sup>271</sup> Maurice Carroll, “Buffalo Is Still Tense as Police Restore Patrols in Ghetto Area,” *New York Times*, July 1, 1967, pp. 1-50, 1 & 10.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> Alfonso, 147 (2015).

destructive actions are not going to solve anything”<sup>276</sup> had suddenly changed their approach.

Student insurgents’ daytime demands changed as the status of Black Buffalo shifted from an over-policed ghetto before the Uprising to a harshly occupied, physically cordoned off section of the city (by this point, law enforcement had used so many tear gas canisters that “supplies began to run low [by the 28<sup>th</sup> and] another 136 shells were supplied to the Erie County Sheriff’s department”<sup>277</sup> from other counties). The next day, June 30, in the Masten Community Center, students met with Mayor Sedita and newly appointed Special Assistant for Urban Affairs, former baseball star, Jackie Robinson. They declared that they either achieve their demands or more violence would ensue:

The meeting was marked by a walkout by a slim, impassive Negro youth and his followers. The youth, wearing sunglasses and identifying himself only as Jim, told Mayor Sedita: ‘You’ve got to take the police out. If the police are still in there tonight, you will have to cope with it.’ Mr. Sedita quickly retorted: ‘We’ll do that. We’ll cope with it.’ The young man and several of his followers stood up and left the room. As [Jim] walked into the hallway, the youth said: ‘I held up the riots last night. I told them to wait. Now it’s out of my hands.’<sup>278</sup>

It becomes readily apparent that not only did student insurgents have tangible demands, but they had a sense of internal ranking—leaders and followers—which maintained some control over the level of violence fellow non-student compatriots conducted. This internal structure permitted insurgent’s demands to

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<sup>276</sup> Bud Zubler, “Sedita Meets East Side Clergy, Reviews Plans: Mayor Invites Ministers to City Hall to Answer Negligence Charges, Discuss Past Gains,” *Buffalo Evening News*, June 29, 1967, sec. I, 2.

<sup>277</sup> “Plane to Get More Stocks of Tear Gas,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, June 29, 1967, sec. I, pp. 1-38, 1.

<sup>278</sup> Carroll, 10.

evolve, for example from summer jobs to the removal of the mass law enforcement presence in the East Side, as the Uprising progressed.

From June 26 to July 1, 1967, Buffalo, New York witnessed an organized, student-driven insurgency. Participants differentiated their actions based on time of day and circumstance, revealing a coherent flexibility to their methods and intentions. From the pre-meditated identification of discriminatory businesses to meetings with city officials, student insurgents displayed a deep unwillingness to permit the viciously racist status-quo to continue. The students had finally said enough, refusing to peacefully accept another summer of poverty, without employment or prospects and responded in a multi-faceted—violent and non-violent—truly organized way.

## Epilogue

Within a few weeks of the Uprising, Mayor Sedita acquired some four hundred summer jobs for Black youths through the Chamber of Commerce.<sup>279</sup> The city backed off its massive show of police force, and local business leaders promised to do “more”<sup>280</sup> for the city’s African Americans. But 1967 did not witness the more significant structural changes required to give concrete credence to these concessions, such as an end to destructive urban-development programs, the Board of Education's segregation campaign, or BPD’s hiring discrimination. This meant that in the long run, the city’s concessions meant little. As one twenty-nine-year-old Black steelworker and father explained to *New York Times* reporters three months after the Uprising: “Nothing’s changed.”<sup>281</sup> However, it would be unfair to say the student insurgents who took to the streets between June 26 and July 1 did not achieve something extraordinary: concessions that would have never been otherwise granted from prominent businesses and political figures. As one “young Negro leader”<sup>282</sup> told reporter Sydney N. Schanberg, “[Sedita] went into the ghetto once during the riots, and he’s never been back since. His administration is 10 times better than previous ones, but he still doesn’t understand...If he would stop seeing [Black] people as his enemies, as conspirators, maybe he could take some significant steps...In one sense though,

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<sup>279</sup> Sydney N Schanberg, “Buffalo: 'Nothing's Changed' Since Riot; City Leaders' Motives Are Sincere, But Negroes Insist on More Action,” *The New York Times*, September 18, 1967, pp. 49-74, 49.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

he's right. It is a conspiracy, a conspiracy to make things move in this city.”<sup>283</sup>

This “conspiracy” had achieved tangible economic concessions.

Understanding the Buffalo Uprising instigates repercussions in a larger historiographical context. One of this paper's central arguments posits that the Buffalo Uprising was internally coordinated and deeply organized. This hypothesis gives student insurgents a greater degree of legitimacy than if they were considered to be mere rioters. When an individual laborer strikes, it means little, but when a group does, it is a union. This analysis further discredits the persistent narrative of the 1964 to 1972 rebellions as unconnected with the larger Black Liberation Movement, instigated by illogical and criminal elements. Coordinated student insurgency reveals the agency of impoverished Black students' ability to collaborate and plan and react to changing circumstances and pervading issues. For many Americans, it is uncomfortable to acknowledge the fact that Black students deliberately organized to violently resist white oppression. In doing so, they would legitimize the violence young African Americans endured in every aspect of their lives at the hands of prejudiced oppressors. Most Americans in 2022 believe that organized violence by historically oppressed groups against their oppressors is not criminal, nor illogical. For example, contemporary Americans acknowledge the underlying and unjust oppression that existed before and after John Brown's 1830s raid on

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

Harpers Ferry.<sup>284</sup> Modern Americans extend those views to other applicable examples, like the labor wars between striking workers and armed Pinkertons.

Because America is “a nation and a national culture created in part by the extreme violence of the 1960s and early 1970s,”<sup>285</sup> so many of its citizens cannot comprehend that, in many instances, those who participated in these incidences did so out of a political and organized desire for change. What America witnessed in this era is far closer to the Palestinian Intifada of the 1990s, a collective resistance to an oppressive occupation by violent agents of the state,<sup>286</sup> than the “ghetto-hoodlum” mob violence, in line with often portrayed sentiments by law enforcement, the news media, and right-wing politicians.<sup>287</sup>

Part of the work of this paper has been to show the tremendous historical agency of just one microcosm amongst the Uprisings across northern cities in the 1960s and 1970s, and the more than 2,000<sup>288</sup> incidents that occurred across the country. By conducting a deeper investigation into what truly happened in Buffalo during that time, one can begin to understand just how effective one group of student insurgents, in one city, at one time, became. Furthermore, as historian Chris Myers Asch stated, studying Uprisings in smaller cities clarifies “our understanding of the Northern civil rights movement, as places like Grand Rapids,

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<sup>284</sup> Mara Gay, “John Brown: Domestic Terrorist or National Hero?” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, October 26, 2013), <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2009/12/john-brown-domestic-terrorist-or-national-hero/347401/>.

<sup>285</sup> Hinton, 3 (2021).

<sup>286</sup> Rami G Khouri, “Towards a Global Intifada: From the US to the Middle East, Pauperized Citizenries Are Rising up to Remove the Violent Governments Ruling over Them.,” *Al Jazeera* (Al Jazeera, June 5, 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/6/5/towards-a-global-intifada>.

<sup>287</sup> Alfonso, 8 (2014).

<sup>288</sup> Hinton, 10 (2021).

Michigan, York, Pennsylvania, Buffalo, New York, do not have the same bureaucracies or massive police forces that the larger cities of Detroit and New York City do. What occurred here reveals so much of what occurred in the larger picture and helps us move away from a Martin Luther King-centric, southern-focused narrative.”<sup>289</sup> Consequently, this paper presented evidence that Buffalo’s coordinated insurgencies echoed a similar pattern across the United States, particularly in the de-industrializing urban north. What has emerged is a new historical interpretation regarding the internal and external narrative about one Uprising, in one city at one time. In Buffalo, Black student insurgents were unwilling to accept the stultifying conditions forced upon them and rebelled in an organized fashion. The students deliberately used their agency and influence to leave city leadership with no choice but to meet their demands for improved economic conditions, a chief goal of the Uprising.

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<sup>289</sup> Gawley, Matthew Philip. Interview with Dr. Christopher Myers Asch. Personal, November 30, 2021.

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