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Historical Background

After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, the Civil Rights movement gave way to the Black Power movement, which largely led by the Black Panther Party (BPP), a Marxist-Leninist and Black Nationalist socialist organization. The BPP grew rapidly within a few years and soon the FBI, concerned to "prevent the rise of a black messiah," mobilized an illegal and covert program (COINTELPRO, or Counter Intelligence Program) to destroy the BPP through extensive surveillance, infiltration, sabotage, political assassination, and outright war. The BPP would eventually succumb to both internal and external pressures and splinter into distinct movements.

The BLA

The Black Liberation Army (BLA) was formed in 1970 and began engaging in direct guerrilla warfare against the United States government and capitalist targets. They engaged in dozens of bank robberies ("expropriations") and gun battles with police ("enemy combatants"), following rules of war as delineated in the Geneva Conventions. By the early 80s, the BLA had become severely weakened and most members had been either killed by government agents, imprisoned, or had fled the U.S. into exile.

Sources and Methodological Considerations

There exists little scholarly research concerning the Black Liberation Army. This is primarily due to the politically sensitive nature of the history even today, the vulnerability of former BLA members, many of whom still face extensive repression and identify themselves as political prisoners and prisoners of war (if they identify themselves at all, and the empirical inaccessibility of illegal forms of political resistance in general. For this project, data was drawn from:

- background scholarly research on the final years of the BPP
- archival research of FBI files, movement literature and propaganda, and related paraphernalia.
- speeches, interviews, and conversations with former members of the BLA, the BPP, The George Jackson Brigade (GJB), Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN), and/or other allied groups.

Inquiry: On the Relationship Between Illegality and Political Resistance

Framed by larger theoretical concerns about the material and ideological conditions that allow for illegal forms of political resistance, this research aims to understand how Black Liberation Army members related ideologically to their illegal acts. Did the BLA ignore the illegality of their activities, or did they embrace illegality/criminality in theory and practice? Did they understand these acts otherwise? My aim is to produce a theory of political contestation that incorporates the reality of law-breaking as foundational to both organized and everyday forms of political resistance.

Demographics

The Black Liberation Army drew heavily from the parts of the population that the Black Panther Party referred to—drawing from Marxist economic theory—as the black proletariat ("working class") and lumpenproletariat ("criminal class"). In The Black Liberation Army Political Dictionary, "lumpenproletariat" was defined as "the underclass, unemployed, marginally employed and those who live outside of the law, i.e. criminal element." For African Americans in the 1960s and 70s who were already heavily poor and criminalized, this class included a wide swath of the population—in effect, all formerly incarcerated youth and adults—as well as more visible "criminals" such as gang members and sex workers. Many members of the BLA were also former U.S. military who drew on their arms expertise. Others were journalists, bank tellers, and NASA computer scientists.

Geographic Orientation

The BLA operated in various geographic regions throughout the United States, including the Midwest, Northeast, and West Coast. They engaged in activities throughout the country, from urban centers to rural areas. The BLA was active in major cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., as well as smaller towns and rural areas. Their operations were often centered around the black communities they were drawn from and the political struggles they were fighting against.

Political Orientation

The BLA was deeply influenced by various political and theoretical traditions. They drew from Marxism, Maoism, and Pan-Africanism, as well as the ideas of black nationalist leaders such as Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey. The BLA was also influenced by the teachings of theologian Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement.

Theoretical Directions

Despite the opportunity to produce a theoretical critique of law in itself, BLA members—instead actively invoked law to defend their activities, depicting the U.S. government and its agents as 'the true criminals.' Elsewhere, I argue for understanding this rejection of and unwillingness to identify with criminality as an extension of the larger tendency among subjugated populations to interpret instances of their own illegal contestation against concentrations of power primarily through the tropes of dominant ideology rather than as resistance.

Findings

Theoretically, the BLA drew from Brazilian communist Carlos Marighella's Minimanual of the Urban Guerilla which advocated 'expropriation' as both tactic and strategy. They focused their efforts on expropriating funds from 'exploiters' and 'enemies of the people' such as banks, racetrack businesses, drug dealers, and pimps. The BLA understood their struggle against the U.S. government as a war between sovereign nations and insisted on offering 'enemy combatants' a chance to surrender. Attacks on police were always framed as political retaliation for "terrorist attacks on black people.

"Sometimes the acts of revolutionaries and the acts of bandits appear indistinguishable. The guerrillas must see very clear reasons so the oppressed masses can make very clear distinctions. Bandits indulge in rip-offs for selfish purposes, for the sake of war, or to build up a criminal organization; whereas revolutionaries are deeply involved in the struggle for power. They acquire something that the government neither can nor will give. They create their own organization to meet their own needs. They deal with expropriations of others for the purpose of financing the revolutionary army. [...] There are also tactical reasons for setting revolutionary acts seem like acts of banditry." — BLA Communiqué

"The BLA doesn't want a situation where guards believe they will be shot whether they comply or not, because then there would always be shootouts. Dead guards don't bring us a step closer to land and independence [...]" — BLA Communiqué

"The BLA doesn't want a situation where guards believe they will be shot whether they comply or not, because then there would always be shootouts. Dead guards don't bring us a step closer to land and independence and don't add a cent to the war chest [...]. Either the BLA has a situation where we're just isolated with a local force, or we've issued communiqués explaining why and leaving people the opportunity to propose a theoretical critique of law in itself, I'm not sure that one isn't better. We are not criminals. We are not terrorists. We are not murderers. We are not gods. We are not holy men. We are not war criminals. We are not anti-capitalist revolutionaries. We are not communists. We are not we've issued communiqués explaining why and leaving people the opportunity to propose a theoretical critique of law in itself. I'm not sure that one isn't better. We are not criminals. We are not terrorists. We are not murderers. We are not gods. We are not holy men. We are not war criminals. We are not communists. We are not we've issued communiqués explaining why and leaving people the opportunity to propose a theoretical critique of law in itself. I'm not sure that one isn't better. We are not criminals. We are not terrorists. We are not murderers. We are not gods. We are not holy men. We are not war criminals. We are not communists. We are not we've issued communiqués explaining why and leaving people the opportunity to propose a theoretical critique of law in itself. I'm not sure that one isn't better. We are not criminals. We are not terrorists. We are not murderers. We are not gods. We are not holy men. We are not war criminals. We are not communists. We are not