Kate Quinn (ed.)


This book brings together the story (or stories) of Black Power in the Caribbean. The volume pays detailed attention to Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bermuda, the Dutch Caribbean, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Also mentioned, in Kate Quinn’s introduction and Brian Meeks’s conclusion, are Dominica, Grenada, and Tobago. The introduction provides an analysis of the Sir George Williams University flashpoint, measures the impact on the Caribbean of the U.S. Black Power movement, and summarizes the ideological limitations of Black Power. The conclusion is partly a recall of personal involvement in the movement in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Grenada. Meeks argues that Black Power was an African Caribbean response to an international revolutionary *abertura*. In hindsight, he views the Black Power movement as politically immature.

All the essays agree that racially based inequality and lack of opportunity were central factors in the movement. Most argue that Caribbean Black Power originated in a long tradition of struggle in the Caribbean for black liberation—from slave revolts and conspiracies, to Pan-Africanism, Marcus Garvey’s UNIA, and Rastafarianism in Jamaica. Similarly, in Guyana the African Society for Cultural Relations with Independent Africa (ASCRIA), which marked the commitment of radical black leadership to reverse negative views of Africa and of the black race, preceded the Black Power movement in the United States. However, Meeks correctly warns against “the evident danger of conflating the specifics of the movement with the general history of resistance” (p. 261).

The essays by Rupert Lewis, on Jamaican Black Power in the 1960s, and Anthony Bogues, on the structure and role of the newspaper *Abeng*, demonstrate the important role of a radicalized black intelligentsia in promoting Black Power in Jamaica. Black Power appeared to be an insurgency of “Blacks” against “black” governments that entrenched (in the view of Black Power adherents) white economic and cultural power. The responses of Caribbean governments were, of necessity, complex and depended to a large extent on local politics. For example, Jamaican Prime Minister Hugh Shearer expelled Black Power advocate Walter Rodney from Jamaica in 1968. His successor, Michael Manley (1972–80), co-opted black and other radicals under the umbrella of Democratic Socialism, pursued a strong sub-Saharan African policy, identified with the Third World movement, developed strong relationships with the Cuban socialist regime, and called for a New International Economic Order.
Under the theme of “secondary decolonization,” Richard Drayton examines the impact of Black Power on Barbados. Prime Minister Errol Barrow, leader of the Democratic Labour Party (a refuge for “progressive” Barbadians), walked a tightrope. He overruled his cabinet’s decision to bar leaders of Trinidad’s Black Power organization, National Joint Action Committee (NJAC), and African-American activist Stokely Carmichael from entering Barbados. However, he prohibited public speeches by Carmichael and established the Barbados Defence Force.

Barbados’s caution seemed justified, given the refusal of Jamaica and Guyana to offer military assistance to Eric Williams during the February 1970 Black Power crisis in Trinidad. The later violence in Bermuda, where British soldiers were called in to contain Black Power-related incidents (including the murder of the Governor and the Police Commissioner), and the guerrilla movement of the National Union of Freedom Fighters (NUFF) in Trinidad seemed to confirm the need for strengthening the repressive apparatus of each Caribbean state. Eric Williams combined repression (especially against NUFF) with reform. Ultimately, growing petroleum prosperity ensured peace in Trinidad.

Gert Oostindie’s essay on the Dutch Caribbean concludes that it was an economic downturn rather than the complex racial make-up of the Dutch Caribbean that led to upheavals in the late 1960s. On the other hand, the essays by Brinsley Samaroo (on Trinidad and Tobago) and Kate Quinn and Nigel Westmaas (on Guyana) demonstrate why underlying ethnic conflicts between “Indians” and “Africans” in both countries proved particularly challenging for the African-oriented Black Power movement. In these two countries Indians constitute about half the population, are committed to their ancestral culture, and do not identify with either Africa or the “Black Race.” Thus, the collaboration that NJAC enjoyed from the Society for the Propagation of Indian Culture (SPIC) and from Indian sugar workers was ultimately weakened by the symbolic representation of Africa in the Black Power movement. Quinn’s essay analyzes the racial politics of Guyana where Prime Minister Forbes Burnham’s attempt to co-opt the Black Power movement through a partnership with ASCRIA collapsed in 1973 with the latter’s decision to merge with the Working People’s Alliance (WPA). The WPA attempted to unite the ethnically divided working class. Black Power, then, in its effort to include the Indian population, evolved toward class analysis in both Guyana and Trinidad. The climax of the Black Power movement came in 1979–83 in Grenada, as Black Power embraced Marxism-Leninism with tragic consequences.

The essays are a thoughtful effort to link Black Power to the complexities of modern Caribbean politics. The inevitable conclusion is that Black Power had its limits.