

Confronting Cops and Klan in Stone Mountain

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On April 23, 2016, hundreds of people gathered to oppose a rally called by the Ku Klux Klan at Stone Mountain Park, Georgia. This convergence brought together a wide range of groups committed to shutting down the KKK. The crowd circumvented several blockades consisting of hundreds of local officers, riot police, and state SWAT teams to reach the parking lot where the white supremacists were assembling.

This was just one of many events in the wave of black-led revolt since the eruption in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014 following the murder of Mike Brown. To understand the context of what happened in Stone Mountain, we have to pan back across the struggles of the preceding years. In this report, we recount the demonstrations that led up to this one and offer a blow-by-blow account of the action for everyone who may have to mobilize in response to similar rallies in the years to come.

Background: Against Police and White Supremacy in Atlanta, 2011–2015

August 2011: Troy Davis

In fall 2011, Troy Anthony Davis was executed by the State of Georgia for allegedly killing a police officer in 1989. In the week preceding his execution, thousands of people took the streets of Atlanta and the parking lot outside of Jackson Prison, where the execution was to take place. While Amnesty International and other non-profit organizations held protests during the day, autonomous groups coordinated multiple breakaway marches and an overnight occupation of the plaza of the GA Board of Pardon and Paroles. This was one of the first signs of confrontational protest Atlanta had seen in years.

September-December 2011: Occupy Atlanta

While the Occupy movement was camped out downtown, metro Atlanta police killed many black people and at least one white person. When an officer murdered Joetavius Stafford on his way home from prom, Occupy protesters and others marched through downtown, flooding a train station and chanting anti-police slogans. When Dwight Person was shot to death in his East Point living room, angry Occupy protesters, recently evicted by riot police, marched through downtown again. When Ariston Waiters was shot in the back while handcuffed in Union City, a predominantly white black bloc joined black youth in painting graffiti and smashing the windows of the Justice Center.

March 2012: Trayvon Martin

After George Zimmerman murdered Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, thousands of people rallied at the state capitol. Mostly black university students and churches led chants and prayers for several hours, casting dubious glances at the predominantly white masked demonstrators who later joined others in a breakaway march of perhaps 100. The march vandalized nearly a

dozen police cruisers, stomping in windshields and smashing windows with no arrests. No news station reported the vandalism.

August 2012: Troy Davis Anniversary

On the one-year anniversary of the execution of Troy Davis, around 100 demonstrators marched through downtown chanting anti-police slogans.

July 2013: Zimmerman Verdict

Immediately after the verdict of “not guilty” in the Zimmerman trial, a crowd marched downtown. Masked demonstrators and unmasked young black participants began vandalizing construction equipment and painting graffiti. Other black and white activists physically obstructed this behavior. The next day, thousands marched with the Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee from West End to downtown via a highway. Black professionals, activists, and clergy physically assaulted white people in the masked contingent and collaborated with police to attempt to isolate them. Later, masked protesters made a poorly timed attack on a police cruiser. No one was arrested.

April 2013: Edgewood Courts

On April 8, 2013, Atlanta police pepper-sprayed and beat a crowd of children and their parents playing kickball in the Edgewood Courts Apartments in northeast Atlanta. The following day, over 100 residents joined by others spontaneously marched and attacked police with bricks and bottles for an hour. No one pleaded for nonviolence or argued against masking.

Fall-Winter 2014: Ferguson Solidarity

Following the explosion of anti-police revolt in Ferguson, Missouri, demonstrations spread to hundreds of cities around the US. Dozens of protests took place in the Atlanta area under the Black Lives Matter banner. Activists hoping to impose nonviolence and top-down control repeatedly failed to outmaneuver anarchists and other participants intent on being uncontrollable. From August to November, several marches blocked traffic and one demonstration forced police out of West End. These crowds were racially diverse, comprised largely of students, young workers, artists, skateboarders, and professionals from non-profit organizations.

November 25, 2014: Non-indictment of Darren Wilson

Following the failure to indict Darren Wilson in the murder of Michael Brown, thousands of people took to the streets near Underground Atlanta, a predominantly poor and black shopping area downtown. The night before, organizers from a few different activist organizations had met secretly with police to develop a plan to avoid the mass conflict that had engulfed St. Louis, Oakland, Seattle, and other cities. Despite this, two hours into the protest, a breakaway group

of masked people with a sound system joined by nearly 1,000 people marched into downtown toward the capitol building. They began overturning barricades and trash cans while lighting traffic flares, engaged in a shoving match with Capitol police armed with machine guns, and then marched onto the I-75/85 highway connector, blocking traffic and throwing stones at police. A smaller but determined group of roughly 100 including gang members, black and white proletarians, anarchists, and other autonomous groups threw projectiles at police for nearly an hour before being joined by others at Underground Atlanta. The now much larger crowd was strictly divided about street conflict, with white and black students and activists marching in the back, booing and filming, while multiracial groups towards the front clashed with police and vandalized storefronts on Peachtree Street. Eventually, riot police dispersed the crowd and arrested dozens. Afterwards, some activist groups popularized the theory that “white anarchists” had caused the repression. A group called the Atlanta-Ferguson Solidarity Committee released a statement to the news decrying the arrests and the police who attempted to “citizen’s-arrest” a vandal.

Winter 2015: Eric Garner, Nicholas Thomas, Anthony Hill

Protests erupted again in December 2014, when Officer Daniel Pantaleo was not indicted for strangling Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York. In Atlanta, young black activists pre-emptively ejected “white anarchists” and non-white “agitators” from the demonstration. In the following months, police killed Nicholas Thomas in Smyrna, GA while he was at work and Anthony Hill in nearby Chamblee while he was in dire need of mental health assistance. Racially diverse crowds marched repeatedly, disrupting businesses and attempting to occupy a local police department. At each of these demonstrations, speakers warned against “provocateurs” and “troublemakers,” while professional activists filmed, intimidated, and ejected those they felt fit the profile. Many anarchists and other aspiring revolutionaries did not engage in these protests, fearing that event organizers were collaborating with the police as some had in November.

May Day 2015: Freddie Gray

Following the explosion in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray, autonomous groups organized a march for May Day in West End Park. The crowd of perhaps 150 young people marched around the area, blocking traffic and occasionally tossing projectiles at police who were blocking highway entrance ramps in anticipation of a highway blockade like those of 2014. Demonstrators broke a single window of a bank. There were no arrests. When the crowd returned to the park, students and protesters argued about the ethics of white people wearing masks, finally agreeing that it would be preferable to riot in rich white areas of town.

April 23, 2016: Stone Mountain Park, Georgia

For thousands of years, Stone Mountain served the Creek Nation as a ceremonial and administrative site; it offered a neutral zone for the Creek and Cherokee Nations to coordinate against colonial invaders. In 1821, under the Treaty of Indian Springs, the US Government and the State

of Georgia seized the mountain. In 1845, with the protection of the State of Georgia, whites settled in the new town of Stone Mountain. Early in the 20th century, inspired by the film *Birth of a Nation*, the second incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan began using Stone Mountain as a meeting place. Later, the State of Georgia and the Stone Mountain Memorial Association collaborated to carve a massive image of Confederate war generals into the side of the granite mountain.

After Dylan Roof's attack on a black church in Charleston, SC in 2015, neo-Confederate and white power organizations began holding demonstrations at Stone Mountain Park and other locations around the US. The Klan participated in all of these demonstrations. Apparently as part of a nationwide "white identitarian" regrouping strategy, the Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan announced their intentions to host a white power rally and march at the site on April 23, 2016.

Starting in January 2016, the ad-hoc organization All Out Atlanta called for people to shut down the Klan rally. The group brought together a wide range of people under principles of solidarity, autonomy, and diversity of tactics. When internet attention to the event skyrocketed, authorities limited the Klan rally to a single parking lot. As the date approached, a range of groups including Rise Up Georgia, Students for a Democratic Society, Unitarian churches, the Street Groomers, the Huey P. Newton Gun Club, the Bastards Motorcycle Club, various street organizations, and informal networks of anarchists and anti-fascists around the country prepared to confront the KKK.

The recent history of tense encounters between autonomous militants and other activists made cooperation with Leftist groups challenging. Relationships were strained between some All Out Atlanta organizers and participants in formal activist organizations. On one side, there were allegations of "white anarchist" opportunism; on the other, of authoritarian power-grabs and collaboration with police. Going into the mobilization, the stakes were high: would the protesters be able to act effectively together? Or would racialized conflicts about tactics and risk incapacitate them?

Meanwhile, alongside the Klan, a wide range of law enforcement agencies including Stone Mountain police, Atlanta and DeKalb County police, various Sheriffs' Departments, Georgia Highway Patrol, and the State and Federal Bureaus of Investigations readied their riot gear and SWAT equipment. At the same time, the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement issued a call for unity to all white power organizations for a rally two hours away in Rome, Georgia to take place later that afternoon and evening.

At a convergence center in downtown Atlanta, people arriving from all around the country picked up welcome packets and conferred with others about the plan for the weekend. Suspense was mounting. No one expected to be able to reach the parking lot where the Klan was gathering; some feared that the authorities would not even allow the counterdemonstration to enter the park.

Entering the Park

At 9 am on April 23, 2016, a few hundred people gathered in downtown Stone Mountain at the corner of Main and East Mountain Street. A single officer cruised the area in a golf cart while a helicopter buzzed overhead. When the march began, with a large number of people masked or in full black bloc regalia and equipped with flags and banners, there was no police escort in sight.

Stone Mountain Park is surrounded entirely by a chest-high wrought iron fence offering few points of entry. Police officers backed by twenty squad cars blocked the first entrance—a pedestrian gate at the end of East Mountain Street—so the march proceeded to the car entrance a block east. A police officer came into view leading a police dog, intending to screen attendees for weapons. Masked demonstrators who had picked up lightweight police barricades began slamming them on the ground, effectively making it impossible for the dog to perform its duty.

Behind this officer, twenty police cars and many officers barricaded the car entrance. Initially, as it seemed that the only way into the park was through the barricade, several people began trying to weave around the police officers. The march slowed to a standstill at this bottleneck until some participants directed attention past the gate to a broken section of the fence hidden by tree cover. As the march poured through this opening and sprinted across the field towards the road, chants rang out: *“I believe that we will win!”*

At this point, police without tactical gear ran into the crowd, shouting for participants to remove their masks and attempting to arrest those who did not comply. The police operation was disorganized; individual police officers were repeatedly surrounded by the crowd or beaten back. Sources report five arrests at this point—the majority of the arrests that occurred throughout the day—and several more unsuccessful attempted arrests that ended with the targets escaping or being de-arrested by the crowd. One officer was left kneeling on the ground, having been pepper-sprayed and beaten with flagpoles. Lacking even a rudimentary first aid kit, police treated him with water stolen from the backpack of an arrestee. Arrestees report that the local police were confused about where to take them.

The march continued, with some participants temporarily removing their masks, while others retained their anonymity. After this initial contact, the police backed off, shifting to another strategy. In retrospect, it appears that local Stone Mountain police were tasked with searching and controlling protesters as they entered, while the larger body of riot police was positioned deeper in the park with orders to block the protesters rather than engage and arrest them. While some demonstrators had feared that a body of riot police would block entry to the park entirely, the police seem to have considered that option a likely PR disaster, since the park was supposed to remain open to the public.

As this was taking place, participants in the march heard that Rise Up Georgia was attempting to block the main entrance to Stone Mountain Park on the other side of the parking lot hosting the KKK rally. A contingent from Rise Up Georgia joined the march later in the day.

Internal Conflicts

Inside the wrought iron fence, a four-lane boulevard runs the perimeter of the entire park. This was the only route traversing the half-mile stretch between the park entrances and the three access roads to the parking lot where the Klan was to rally. Midway between the entrance and the access roads, at least fifty riot police with clubs and shields formed a line to prevent the march from advancing. The demonstration halted in front of the blockade for several minutes. The police were positioned to prevent an easy exit into the woods on either side. They made no effort to kettle or push back the crowd, but officers did arrest a couple more people in the ensuing moments of hesitation.

This was the first time some protesters called for others to remove their masks or get out of the street, on the grounds that the police would then allow the march to proceed. This premise struck other participants as highly unlikely. The state of Georgia had not mobilized hundreds of police in order to permit us to approach the site of the Klan rally, masks or no. Complying with police orders only emboldens them to take further liberties. By giving the police the impression that they can intimidate the crowd into doing their bidding, it endangers all participants—not to mention the risks that ensue for those whose employment or immigration status will be compromised if they are seen participating in a protest.

This breakdown of solidarity within the crowd is the result of time-tested policing methods used around the globe. If the police can position themselves as neutral enforcers of stability, rebellious social forces will appear to be the catalyst of repression in a simple equation in which police violence appears to be automatic and inevitable. This is the power that the authorities hope to monopolize: the power to determine the limits of conflict, power that becomes invisible because it is taken for granted—power over what is thinkable, over reality itself. A crowd that includes masked and well-equipped participants can keep police at a distance, creating a safer environment for everyone; if necessary, it can defend itself by throwing back tear gas canisters and rescuing people when the police attempt to arrest them. But this is only possible if the police are understood as one of many forces struggling for ascendancy in society, rather than as a natural feature of the social terrain or as legitimate referees in squabbles between rival constituencies of the state.

As it turned out, the march was eventually able to reach the parking lot where the Klan was rallying, but it was not due to any form of cooperation with the police. On the contrary, at every point in the march, creative disobedience was the only factor that enabled the crowd to advance.

Going Off the Map

After multiple attempts to get around the blockade, the crowd began to retreat. The retreat, however, was a feint: the march walked back and started climbing the road up the mountain, only to immediately turn left onto the tracks of a tourist train line and a path in the woods, both parallel to the boulevard, in order to move past the line of police. A single officer stood by the tracks, fruitlessly attempting to dissuade protesters from taking that route. Vastly outnumbered, he cautioned: “I wouldn’t go there if I were you... it’s an active line... even cars can’t outrun a train...” The trains had obviously been shut down at this point, and the tracks offered a route unavailable to the vehicles transporting police. Nonetheless, most participants opted for the narrow path adjacent to them, slowing the march and stretching it out into a long line.

Passing one access road to the Klan’s rallying site—visibly blocked off by police—the crowd descended to the boulevard at the next access road, where a large group of black protesters had already assembled. In the moments it took for both crowds to make their way forward, the police blocked off the second road. The march continued further east towards Old Hugh Howell Road, the final road leading to the Yellow Daisy Lot, where the Klan rally was about to begin.

A thick line of riot police deployed ahead of the march as it approached the intersection. The crowd halted there for some time as a communication breakdown ensued between some hierarchical organizations within the march and other participants. Calls for people to remove their masks and get out of the street resumed, including an SDS group leading a chant of “Take off your

masks!” This position was never able to attract enough participants to dominate the character of the march, but it did create tension and delay the crowd for several minutes.

Meanwhile, white buses were seen passing behind the crowd and north along an access road to the parking lot. At the time, some participants feared they might be used to carry out mass arrests; in retrospect, they were likely transporting riot police from the first blockade to the final intersection at the mouth of the parking lot, a block beyond the line of riot police.

After much chaotic internal discussion, a large portion of the crowd backed up the road and struck out into the woods, climbing down a slope and making its way through thick underbrush toward the parking lot. For the second time, the march was out of view of the cameras and police, with tree cover around and the way open ahead, in no danger of being penned in or mass arrested. Some people were singing. Leaving the striated space of the roads for the smooth space of the forest proved decisive.

The crowd emerged on the street leading directly to the parking lot, having outmaneuvered entirely the previous blockades of riot police. Everyone moved briskly at this point, the march’s objective not far away. But before the crowd reached the final intersection, a line of riot police scrambled to block the final access road. The period of hesitation before descending into the woods had afforded the police enough time to reinforce the roads leading to the rally site.

Still running, some participants attempted to pass through the woods to the left of the intersection, but the riot police fanned out there, as well. There was an industrial container dumpster there, and some people pulled out the contents, building a barricade—somewhat enigmatically—in the woods ahead of the line of riot police. A single wooden pallet, some bags of trash, and tires were set aflame. Masked demonstrators began throwing stones, pipes, and debris at police on the other side of the fire. Others dragged more barricading materials back into the road, where masked participants were throwing rocks and firecrackers at the distant line of riot police. When the firecrackers exploded, there was cheering from many participants who were not throwing projectiles. While there was a brief internal conflict over tactics at this point, it was quickly resolved — none of this behavior appeared to be particularly controversial within the march. The police, dressed in high-tech suits of armor, had little to fear in terms of injury, but the projectiles kept them at a distance. It appears that this line of police could afford neither to advance nor to retreat, being the final line separating racists and counter-demonstrators; this likely explains why they were unable to respond to attacks from the crowd.

Rather than dallying too long, the march backed up and climbed over a guardrail back into the woods. Again, people moved as rapidly as possible through the trees, fording a small brook and ducking under hanging limbs. Jubilant, the crowd emerged in front of the parking lot no one had expected to reach—an expanse of pavement the length of a football field. Behind a chain-link fence in the distance, a surprisingly small number of racists were visible. The crowd was blocked only by a handful of officers in full SWAT gear wearing gas masks and brandishing assault rifles, a couple of tactical vehicles parked behind them.

The arriving crowd paused at this sight. The smooth acreage of the parking lot, empty but for policemen and racists, was intimidating. It was unclear whether the police were going to make arrests, launch tear gas, or make use of other weapons; they were materially equipped, but not numerous enough to make more than a handful of arrests themselves. The crowd paused, building up the momentum to make a decision—missing the moment in which a decision could be made. A couple minutes later, a contingent of police cars raced up and a large number of officers in civilian dress rushed out to reinforce the SWAT team, while a massive contingent of riot police

fanned out around the Klan on the other side of the lot. The window of opportunity during which the march could have run around the police into the parking lot had closed.

For another hour or more, the crowd stood in front of police. More and more protesters trickled in, including a predominantly black contingent that had circled back up to Robert E. Lee instead of cutting through the forest the second time. People chanted and sang, and the first protester armed with an assault rifle appeared alongside several dozen heavily armed members of various street organizations. The members of Bastards MC finally showed up, as well. With great effort, participants managed to force the police line to back up a few feet. One vocal black participant urged white protesters to the front of the line. But at this point, all the pieces were on the playing board and there wasn't any way to get closer to the Klan. The final arrest of the day occurred during this standoff, with police snatching a person out of the crowd after participants had let their guard down. Based on observer reports, the arrestee almost certainly was not throwing things at the police as they alleged.

Afterwards

Eventually, it appeared that the police might be moving the Klan out of the lot. The crowd began to filter back along the side of the parking lot, past the third line of riot police, towards the exit from the park. As the crowd marched slowly out of the park, there were a couple run-ins with sketchy white people who may or may not have been racists. They denied having anything to do with the Klan rally, but some of the signifiers they bore suggested otherwise. As the crowd returned along Robert E. Lee Boulevard, at least one driver shouted racial epithets from his car, creating a situation in which he and his vehicle were attacked and he nearly ran over a park-goer.

As a result of the mobilization, the police had to shut down park attractions for the day on what was to be the opening day of spring attractions. This is surely a major black eye for them; hopefully, it will discourage them from welcoming Klan rallies in the future.

Meanwhile, that afternoon, a couple hours away in Rome, Georgia, about 80 bona fide Nazis participated in the aforementioned rally called by the National Socialist Movement. A non-confrontational group protested, held at bay by yellow caution tape. Racists still have a social base in small towns in the South, as the rally in Rome confirms. In the future, a larger and more regionally coordinated effort might aspire to block them in all of the Atlantas and Romes of the US, simultaneously.

Nevertheless, the demonstration in Stone Mountain consolidated the gains of the preceding years of struggle against white supremacy in the South. It is increasingly difficult for openly white supremacist groups to organize in formerly welcoming spaces like Stone Mountain Park and the grounds of the capitol in Columbia, South Carolina.

The tactical successes of that day can be ascribed to some participants' knowledge of the terrain and to the diversity and collective complicity of the crowd. The police did not appear to be able to track crowd movements through the woods, nor to predict where to mobilize in response; they stuck to the roads, and to a ponderous and reactive strategy. If some groups of demonstrators had been able to make decisions more rapidly and independently, they might have been able to exploit the opportunities presented by this situation. These experiences may be of use to readers reflecting on how to be ready to act in response to future white supremacist rallies.

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