



The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement

Lance Hill

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In 1964 a small group of African American men in Jonesboro, Louisiana, defied the nonviolence policy of the mainstream civil rights movement and formed an armed self-defense organization--the Deacons for Defense and Justice--to protect movement workers from vigilante and police violence. With their largest and most famous chapter at the center of a bloody campaign in the Ku Klux Klan stronghold of Bogalusa, Louisiana, the Deacons became a popular symbol of the growing frustration with Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent strategy and a rallying point for a militant working-class movement in the South.

Lance Hill offers the first detailed history of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, who grew to several hundred members and twenty-one chapters in the Deep South and led some of the most successful local campaigns in the civil rights movement. In his analysis of this important yet long-overlooked organization, Hill challenges what he calls "the myth of nonviolence"--the idea that a united civil rights movement achieved its goals through nonviolent direct action led by middle-class and religious leaders. In contrast, Hill constructs a compelling historical narrative of a working-class armed self-defense movement that defied the entrenched nonviolent leadership and played a crucial role in compelling the federal government to neutralize the Klan and uphold civil rights and liberties.

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