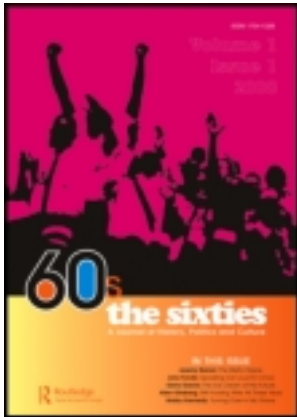


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### The war before: the true life story of becoming a Black Panther, keeping the faith in prison and fighting for those left behind

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**The war before: the true life story of becoming a Black Panther, keeping the faith in prison and fighting for those left behind**, by Safiya Bukhari/edited by Laura Whitehorn, New York, Feminist Press, 2010, 264 pp., \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55861610-3

*The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison and Fighting for Those Left Behind* – edited and introduced by former Weather Underground member Laura Whitehorn, with a foreword by Angela Davis and an afterword by Mumia Abu-Jamal – presents speeches and writings by former Black Panther and political prisoner activist Safiya Bukhari. Bukhari was a Black Panther, imprisoned for eight years from 1975 to 1983 (she escaped in 1976 for two months), who worked upon her release for the rights of political prisoners until her early death at the age of 53 in 2003.

This volume brings together Bukhari's writings – journal entries, speeches, letters, interviews, and articles – in print for the first time. Bukhari's daughter, Wonda Jones, saw their importance and decided to publish them. Former Weather Underground member Laura Whitehorn who became friends with Bukhari while Whitehorn was imprisoned, edited them. As such, the book is as much a tribute or memorial as it is a collection of Bukhari's writings. As Whitehorn puts it in the introduction, "her [Bukhari's] goal was not so much to leave a print record, but rather to organize" (p. xxxviii).

The pieces cover a broad terrain, discussing – among other things – problems internal to the movement, such as its sexism and racism; Bukhari's decision to

convert to Islam; the “post-traumatic stress disorder” affiliated with having been at the forefront of battles between a black rights group and the State, with having witnessed so many being killed or incarcerated, and with having been incarcerated herself; and how to build support for political prisoners. Together, the collection reveals the trajectory of an activist and also the changing political landscape of the United States from the late 1960s to 2003, from the Nixon and Kennedy administrations to the Clinton and Bush years.

The early chapters lay out how Bukhari came to join the Panthers. She was a pre-med student at Brooklyn College and a member of a sorority in 1968 when she volunteered in the Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast for Children Program in Harlem. Soon thereafter, she saw a Panther being harassed by police for handing out Black Panther literature. When she attempted to intervene, she was handcuffed, thrown in the back of the police car, taken to the police station, strip-searched and held in jail overnight. Witnessing the racism, the grinding poverty, and the police harassment that were part of daily life for many African-Americans set into motion Bukhari’s radicalization and motivated her to join the New York Black Panthers.

The late 1960s, which the first pieces present, is often remembered as an era of hippies wearing flowers in their hair. Yet it was also, as Angela Davis puts it in her foreword, an era that was “about a prevailing sense of solidarity and a widespread belief that we were in the process of making a revolution . . . We felt connected to the decolonization and revolutionary processes in Africa, Asia and Latin America.” Laura Whitehorn in her introduction frames the era by referencing the police’s murder of Black Panther Fred Hampton in Chicago on 4 December 1969. His murder was but one instance of the massive state repression and police clampdown that sought to put an end to the Panthers’ self-organizing. The group was, after all, deemed to be the most dangerous by FBI head J. Edgar Hoover. When state repression and internal strife, much of it fomented by the FBI’s COINTELPRO program, as it later emerged, led to a split in the Black Panther Party, rumor-mongering, and even murder, Bukhari joined the Black Liberation Army – a clandestine group consisting mostly of former Black Panther Party members that existed from 1970 to 1981 and that engaged in armed actions struggle – and went underground.

While the book depicts Bukhari’s early years in the Black Panthers, it also includes many writings that present subsequent developments. For example, in one article she discusses the relationship between her revolutionary work and her decision to become Muslim, arguing that the two are not mutually exclusive. Various articles touch in passing on Bukhari’s involvement with the Republic of New Afrika, a black nationalist group that demanded an independent African-American nation and reparations for slavery, segregation, and continued racism. It would have been interesting to hear a bit more about this often overlooked late 1960s movement, which also drew inspiration from self-liberation and self-determination movements in Africa.

The majority of the writings contained in the volume focus on Bukhari’s organizing work, agitating for the rights and release of political prisoners. After her release from prison, she tirelessly gave her energies to this work: she founded the Jericho Movement and worked on the Campaign to Free Mumia, a former Panther on death row. She also provided legal aid to indigenous people. As Whitehorn puts it in the introduction:

Safiya found it frustrating and ironic, as I do, that there is so much interest in the 1960s and the years of revolutionary movement, but so little interest in the plight of the political prisoners who were among the revolutionaries of those years. (p. xl)

The writings reflecting Bukhari's work for the latter include an article discussing how to build support for political prisoners; an interview with Albert Nuh Washington; an exploration of the relationship between the COINTELPRO and Mumia Abu-Jamal; and a letter in support of Jalil Muntaqim. Former Panthers Albert Nuh Washington and Jalil Muntaqim were arrested together with Herman Bell on 21 May 1970 and convicted of the killing of two New York City police officers. The book also includes the transcript of a debate about whether or not to grant amnesty to the USA's political prisoners; the debate included, among others, civil rights lawyer Ron Kuby; Alan Berkman, former member of the Weather Underground and Doctor at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, New York; and Ted Cruz, former law clerk to then Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist.

Overall, the volume provides a good range of writings, spanning the trajectory of Bukhari's life and the range of her political experience. Angela Davis' preface introduces the era and the importance of Bukhari's work. Whitehorn's introduction helpfully fleshes out in greater detail the historical period and the political events that motivated and shaped Bukhari's life and organizing. Each chapter is introduced by a brief paragraph that shares the requisite contextualizing information. Mumia Abu-Jamal's afterword speaks of why she and her writings are so vital: because the struggle for justice for African-Americans and for political prisoners continues. The volume will appeal to organizers, academics, and activists; to those interested in US history, social movements, Africa-American history, feminist history, and prisoner solidarity work.