

By Safiya Bukhari  
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By Walidah Imarisha

“Tell no lies and claim no easy victories.” Mao Tse-tung might have had Safiya Bukhari and her collection of writings in mind when he wrote that quotation for his little red book. *The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison and Fighting for Those Left Behind* is not a romanticized, varnished retelling of the 1960s, nor is it a piece of propaganda. *The War Before* offers no easy answers, but instead it tasks everyone interested in creating a new world with difficult and necessary questions.

Bukhari was a member of the New York Black Panther Party and later the Black Liberation Army, an underground armed force. She spent eight years in prison, where she suffered horrific conditions, especially around serious health concerns. Upon her release, she became a tireless organizer around political prisoners, serving as coordinator of the Jericho Movement and one of the founders of the New York Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Coalition

Part memoir, part political reflection and theory, these writings were collected after Bukhari’s tragic death in 2003 at the age of 53. This, as former political prisoner and the book’s editor Laura Whitehorn says, is not the book that Bukhari probably would have written herself. It is, instead, a compilation of the words of a woman more interested in furthering a cause for justice than in accolades and empty praise.

Bukhari would have appreciated the moving and honest introduction by her daughter Wonda Jones, who speaks of the pain of not having her mother present. “She wanted to fight for all people, to make sure that everyone, including me, had a better future. She made a choice, sacrificing being a mother to be an activist.” It speaks to demystifying movement work and especially armed struggle, and leads us from the very beginning of the book to ask who and what are worth sacrificing.

Bukhari would have not only appreciated that honesty, but would have probably demanded – as evidenced by the inclusion of her and former political prisoner Ashanti Alston’s marriage contract in the book, which read in part, “Whenever contradictions arise that threaten to become antagonistic in nature, we will use the principles of constructive conflict resolution to remedy the situation.”

So much of this book is about sacrifice. The sacrifices of the children of the movement. The sacrifice of years, of decades, in prison for a belief. The sacrifice of health, mental and physical. Bukhari’s insightful chapter “We Too Are Veterans: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders and the Black Panther Party” draws connections between soldiers and people involved in the movements under attack by government forces.

It is a book where Bukhari struggles not to sacrifice hope. She visited the over a hundred political prisoners across the country, knew their names, was there with support whenever and however was necessary. She fed spirits, nurtured hope, reassured people they were not forgotten, as years became a decade became many. In the collection, you can hear Bukhari's anguish asking, "Are we serious about struggle, or are we just profiling?" ... If we are serious then we need to stop ego-tripping, stop profiling, stop rabble-rousing, and get down to the serious work of organizing. Talk is cheap, action is supreme."

It is through the chapters that focus on dialogue that the most honest depiction of Bukhari shines through. Two of the chapters are transcripts from the weekly WBAI radio show Bukhari hosted. One, with guest and former BLA political prisoner Mark Holden, focused on former BPP/BLA member Assata Shakur, who is in exile in Cuba. Through their personal reflections and reminiscing about Assata, we get a picture of not only her tremendous spirit and heart, but a picture of both the pain and joy that being involved brought both Bukhari and Holden.

The other is an interview with BPP member and political prisoner Albert Nuh Washington, Bukhari's mentor. The interview took place two months before Nuh died of cancer, and everyone on the interview knew his case was terminal. Nuh uses his time to speak about lessons to be learned through the BPP, and the hope he has for the youth to make change. Bukhari's anguish at his loss, at all the losses, as well as her determination to keep the work alive, are both raw and real.

The one thing Safiya Bukhari never did was stop. She pushed forward until health concerns, exacerbated by her frenetic pace, took her life at far too young of an age. She continued on "the unnamed terrains of struggle," as Angela Davis wrote in her introduction, probing and questioning those places many take for granted. And as political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal writes in his closing, the biggest tragedy of her death is "the tragedy... that more people didn't know her, learn from her, or grown from her fund of hard-won wisdom."

Hopefully everyone will take the opportunity to use this book to do just that.