

Safiya Bukhari's "The War Before"

A Life Worth Saving

By RON JACOBS

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In 1968, Brooklyn College student Bernice Jones volunteered to work in the Black Panther Party's (BPP) breakfast program in Harlem, New York as part of her sorority's social service pledge. This decision was to become the defining moment in her life. Much like Kwame Toure's (Stokely Carmichael) decision to attend Howard University, Jones' volunteering to serve breakfast in Harlem would begin a life of revolutionary organizing. Unable to go along with the BPP's politics at first, Jones' gradual understanding that poverty and police brutality was the order of the day for many US residents convinced her to join the Black Panther Party and become one of its primary New York organizers. Let me emphasize, she was an organizer. She stayed in the trenches and led by example.

Within two years, her decision would put her in the middle of the US government's war on the Panthers. This was a time of lies, rumors and murder--much of it engineered by the Department of Justice and the FBI--designed to destroy the Party once and for all. Bernice Jones eventually took the name Safiya Bukhari and became a Muslim. She spent time in prison and raised a child. She died in 2005. After her mother's death, Bukhari's daughter approached former Weather Underground member Laura Whitehorn with a collection of writings and speeches Safiya had saved and asked if she would edit them into a memoir.

The book, titled *The War Before*, is an unconventional memoir. It is composed of journal entries, articles, notes and speeches. These writings were never necessarily meant to be published as a memoir. Instead, they are the works of a relentless revolutionary organizer, prisoner, and modern African-American woman. There is personal material here reflecting on Bukhari's conversion to Islam and her understanding of its place in her life as a revolutionary. There are also descriptions of the politics and workings of the New York Panthers and the successor organization the Black Liberation Army (BLA). There are speeches about political prisoners in the United States and memories of her life in the BPP. Together, the sum is considerably greater than the parts. Like a well-composed musical tone poem, the reader leaves this book with a sense of understanding and fulfillment like that experienced after a particularly rewarding performance of such a piece.

The history of the 1960s and 1970s remains a point of strong and divisive contention despite the best efforts of commentators, politicians and many historians to bury the period. The flurry of outrage in 2008 over former Weather Underground member Bill Ayers' tangential association with Barack Obama proves this. In general, one is mostly presented with images of long-haired young white people smoking pot or protesting and African-Americans getting hosed by police or wearing leather jackets and carrying guns. These images and the often wistful tales that accompany them ignore the essential reality of the period. That reality being that the social, culture and political establishment throughout the world, especially in the West, was shaken to its foundations. Despite the best efforts to

delete this reality from history, it continues to hover around the edges of our current conversation, occasionally taking a place somewhere close to center stage. In the United States, the Black Panther Party was an essential part of the elements that did the shaking. Safiya Bukhari was an essential part of that Party.

The contextual narrative provided by Laura Whitehorn describes the world as it was perceived by many in the US Left during the period covered by Bukhari's writings. It is a world where injustice exists in the daily lives of prisoners and in the hailstorm of bullets fired into Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark by a death squad made up of Illinois law enforcement with the FBI's assistance. It is also a world where personalities, politics and paranoia combined to make a stew stirred to a sometimes deadly boil by that very same FBI and its henchmen in the White House and elsewhere throughout the US political and law enforcement establishment. Simultaneously, it is a world where hope refuses to die and the struggle for justice and freedom continues despite incredible odds.

In the afterword to [The War Before](#) political prisoner, journalist and former Black Panther Mumia Abu Jamal remembers Bukhari from when he was a teenage member of the BPP and working out of its office in the Bronx. He writes of her relentless commitment and the lessons that such commitment provided to all, young and old. Her untimely death was not the only tragedy in her passing, writes Mumia. "The tragedy was that more people didn't know her, learn from her, or grow from her fund of hard-earned wisdom." *The War Before* helps diminish that aspect of the tragedy.

Ron Jacobs is author of [The Way the Wind Blew: a history of the Weather Underground](#), which is just republished by Verso. Jacobs' essay on Big Bill Broonzy is featured in CounterPunch's collection on music, art and sex, [Serpents in the Garden](#). His first novel, [Short Order Frame Up](#), is published by Mainstay Press. He can be reached at: rjacobs3625@charter.net