

Return of the Sun

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Safiya Bukhari. *The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther; Keeping the Faith in Prison, and Fighting for Those Left Behind.* The Feminist Press, 2010.

The incarcerated know firsthand the brutal realities of repression in capitalist society, so it is no coincidence that some of the most important revolutionary writing has come from behind bars. The voices of prisoners have had a tremendous impact on movements in “free” – or, as prisoners often call it, “minimum-security” – society. *The War Before* is a welcome contribution to this tradition. For the first time, it brings together a wide range of writings by former political prisoner Safiya Bukhari in a single coherent volume. Compiled and edited by Laura Whitehorn – herself a former political prisoner and member of the Weather Underground – it offers an up-close glimpse at a revolutionary life lived both inside and outside of prison from 1969 to 2003.

Bukhari stood out as a role model when I first became active in prisoner support a decade ago. She was a tirelessly committed and principled organizer and a revolutionary guided by love. Her death in 2003 at age 53 was felt deeply by the political prisoner support community in North America. This book is a fitting tribute because it takes an unflinching look at the successes and failures of the movement to which she dedicated her life. Bukhari was first politicized in 1968. While still a pre-med student named Bernice Jones, she witnessed an NYPD officer harassing a Black Panther for selling the organization’s newspaper on a Harlem street corner and was arrested for intervening. “That encounter forever ripped

the rose-colored glasses from my eyes,” she writes. She was, in her own words, radicalized “at the business end of a billy club.” Unlike prominent Panther women like Kathleen Cleaver who were widely recognized in the media, Bukhari’s early engagement with the Party was less visible. Initially, she became quietly involved in the day-to-day work of the organization, participating in the free breakfast program for children, sickle-cell anemia health screenings, and selling the Panther newspaper. Her first experience with political prisoner support came during the Panther 21 case, in which a group of Panthers in New York were charged with attempted arson, attempted murder, and conspiracy to blow up police stations, school buildings, a railroad yard, and the Bronx Botanical Gardens. After two years in jail, the defendants were acquitted by a jury after deliberating for less than an hour.

That case, and many of the arrests that followed, turned out to be part of the FBI’s illegal and deadly Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which targeted the Panthers and other progressive groups for frame-ups, infiltration, and even assassinations. Witnessing such brazen attempts by the police and FBI to destroy the Panthers (including the murder of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago), many radicals came increasingly to see the need for armed community defense and moved to form underground groups like the Black Liberation Army (BLA). COINTELPRO disruption was also one of the major causes of the ugly 1971 split in the Black Panther Party, after which Bukhari became communications director of the East Coast organization and edited its newspaper, *Right On!* She issued statements from the clandestine BLA as part of that work.

Bukhari eventually went underground herself after she was subpoenaed to testify against others in front of a grand jury. In 1975, she was captured and imprisoned for nine years for charges related to her activity with the BLA. But prison did not deter her work. After her release in 1983, she became a leader in the emerging political prisoner support movement and co-founded the New York Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Coalition, the Jericho Movement to Free US Political Prisoners, and other organizations. During those years, there were over 80 political prisoners, from the Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Native American, and white anti-imperialist movements being held in US prisons – despite the government’s refusal to recognize them as political prisoners and prisoners of war. As conferences, demonstrations, and publications arose to support them, Bukhari became increasingly involved, by writing to many

prisoners and speaking on their behalf. She spent the remaining years of her life raising their voices with a steadfast commitment to freedom. In the late 1990s, she was one of the driving forces behind the huge demonstrations in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal.

While Bukhari's political history is instructive in its own right, it's the way she questions her own experience – always aimed at preparing the movement to withstand future attacks – that's most relevant to a contemporary radical audience. As she puts it, “if we can't write/draw a blueprint of what we are doing while we are doing it, or before we do it, then we must at least write our history and point out the truth of what we did – the good, the bad, and the ugly” (15). Accordingly, her work is filled with attempts to critically assess both her own political failings and those of movements more generally. A number of writings are concerned with how weaknesses in the Party allowed the FBI to infiltrate and splinter the Panthers. Others offer a nuanced critique of sexism within the Party that manages, at the same time, to challenge what Bukhari describes as a tendency among white observers to “pounce on examples of sexism in Black groups and culture.” Her essay “Enemies and Friends: Resolving Contradictions” is a must-read for all social justice organizers – what it describes is uncannily familiar even today:

Over the past several years, the movement – or what is left of it – has been bogged down in a quagmire of infighting, backstabbing, manipulation, and one-upmanship. Those of us in the movement don't see it this way. But to the people outside looking in – those we are attempting to organize – this is what appears to be happening... Depending on what political formation we belong to, we consider ourselves the sole standard bearers of revolutionary principles, the ones with the correct path – and everyone else who is not down with us is incorrect, fools, or napes (43).

One of the challenges, she explains, is that the “movement” is so small and incestuous that “it is hard to find someone who has not been party to a relationship – political or sexual – with someone else in the movement. In effect, we're all connected to one another in some convoluted way” (44). The lines quickly blur between political and personal contradictions:

My own inability to confront the problems and struggle to eradicate counterproductive tendencies within our formations stems from a fear of having my motives misconstrued or of being

subject to personal attack. Sometimes it's extremely hard to deal with situations in a principled manner when people call one another "comrade" but treat each other in a manner that belies the use of that term. Social practice is the criterion for truth. If you talk about people behind their backs, have hidden agendas, or manipulate situations so that certain people are not privy to what's going on – and I'm not talking about a "need-to-know" situation – it makes it hard for people to criticize such activity without fearing retaliation. (44)

Here, Bukhari draws on Mao Tse-Tung's "Combat Liberalism," in which he explained how passive-aggressive tendencies could eat away at the unity of an organization from within. It was this dynamic, Bukhari claims, that degraded trust amongst the Panthers, allowing members to believe rumours spread by infiltrators, and eventually leading to an extremely violent split. As usual, Bukhari is quick to point sharp criticism at herself, reflecting on her unwillingness "to engage in constructive criticism" and open up to "criticism and self-criticism":

I was walking away and allowing a situation to continue without struggling to resolve contradictions. I asked myself, "How can you talk about taking on the United States government when you are afraid to struggle with a few people?" That is the biggest contradiction of them all. (45)

It's a dilemma that I've recently faced: how *do* we resolve deep contradictions within groups? Do we ignore damaging beliefs or behaviours for the sake of unity, and simply "focus on the work"? Do we walk away from groups and struggle with only like-minded peers, contributing to sectarianism in the movement? Bukhari pushes us to face up to contradictions rather than ignore them:

It's not good enough to say, "We agree to disagree." That usually means that you've decided to go your separate ways and not interfere with each other. If a contradiction is of such magnitude that you can not work together, even with the knowledge that you're involved in building a revolution – something that requires a coordinated effort between revolutionaries and the masses, something that is highly life threatening – then you cannot just go your separate ways. There is no separate way in a revolutionary struggle. We're all either in this together or we're working at odds with each other (45).

The difficulty of conceiving of a movement in which we are all “in this together” rather than increasingly siloed in isolated groups is itself a testament to the shaky state of current social justice organizing. These are not questions of casual importance, but are life-and-death matters for those truly struggling against the state. “If we had nipped it in the bud, COINTELPRO would not have been able to do its job,” Bukhari states emphatically (46). She offers a practical example of a people’s tribunal that was used to deal with an internal accusation as a possible model. However, the “true contradiction,” she speculates, is the lack of a real base of common beliefs and goals. Are you really working toward the same future as your comrades, or just assuming that you are? This is an essential first discussion without which trust cannot be truly built.

Contemporary radicals will not agree with all of Bukhari’s arguments, including those drawn from the Black Panther Party with its heavy reliance on Mao’s “Red Book.” Indeed, after years of reflection and growth, Bukhari herself would not necessarily agree with her own earlier stated positions. As Whitehorn explains:

Transcribing her essay on Islam and revolution, for example, I came across her comment about resisting the “temptation” of homosexuality in prison and chastised her for failing to update the essay to reflect her own changing attitude about this issue. “I know you don’t think that way anymore,” I argued, wondering how I would make it clear to readers that this negative connotation doesn’t represent what Safiya believed in the years before her death. I knew this from my own comradeship and talks with Safiya, but also because so many of us have evolved in our thinking from some earlier rigid and limited viewpoints (39).

It’s unfortunate that we don’t have a record of the evolution that Bukhari underwent. Yet, as Whitehorn points out, we might recognize something of ourselves in Bukhari’s missteps. We might even forgive ourselves for our own at-times simplistic, binary views – “the posturing, the drama, the self-seriousness” – along the winding road to finding “our own place in the whirlwind of change” (37).

Much of the latter half of the book is devoted to Bukhari’s legacy of work with the roughly 100 political prisoners in the United States, some of whom have now served more than 40 years in prison. “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,” Whitehorn writes (40). In the crucial essay, “On the Question of Political Prisoners,” Bukhari grapples with the problem of how to generate popular support for movement prisoners in the absence of the tenant groups, liberation schools, food co-ops, health care clinics, and day care centres that were once the heart of community organizing:

Because our “movement,” for lack of a better word, has deteriorated to the point that the majority of our organizing is done through demonstrations, rallies, conferences, and press conferences, the only way we feel we can talk about the issue of political prisoners is when we drag them out for show-and-tell or when we need to legitimize what we are doing... The term “political prisoner” means nothing to the average brother or sister on the block, because the terms “liberation” and “revolution” mean nothing. The words have no meaning for our people, no real meaning, because we have done no real organizing and educating for liberation (99).

Bukhari makes a compelling point about the need for real community programs to serve as the foundation for not just political prisoner support but also for the majority of social justice work. Indeed, the social justice movement as a whole has arguably taken steps back since 2001, and the political prisoner support community in turn has shrunk dramatically since the “Millions for Mumia” days. In many ways, these challenges are themselves part of the legacy of COINTELPRO. Despite her intimate knowledge of its brutal reality for targeted activists, Bukhari tends to overlook the far-reaching effects of the program on the public. As Joy James writes in *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (St. Martins Press, 1999), even after COINTELPRO came to light, it remained largely unknown (or unchallenged) in polite society. This is a powerful testament to the strength of the program in defaming its victims and one reason why it’s difficult to mobilize a mass movement around political prisoners today: the public has been subjected to decades of misinformation and slander against these groups and against radical organizing in general. The use of the word “terrorist” to instill fear in the hearts of the public is by no means a new tactic.

The state made an example of political prisoners in order to discourage future activists from engaging in militant actions. Their message was clear: any form of resistance would be managed. And, to the shame of our movements, we let them manage it. We let the state kill or imprison the leaders of what could have been a revolution and we our comrades to languish, increasingly forgotten, in prison. We're seeing this tactic return, as the FBI again uses "war on terror" rhetoric to target environmental activists. We will be manageable until a movement emerges that understands that we cannot let the state make examples of activists.

So it seems clear to me, as it was for Bukhari, that any kind of resistance has to be connected to a very strong network of support for political prisoners. Otherwise, moments of instability and upheaval will simply be opportunities for the state to reassert its control. We must renew our commitment to raising prisoners' voices in our work – and not just in "prison-centric" publications and events. Every activist publication should regularly include in-depth prisoner commentary, and every activist event should feature statements from prisoners. Prisoners not only provide vital forms of political memory; they can be important and vibrant participants in our struggles today. These efforts should extend beyond tokenistic inclusion to actually involving prisoners in planning and decision-making processes. This will require initiative and creativity from individuals and groups to find workable solutions. We need to ask ourselves: can we integrate prisoner members into our collectives? Can we begin regular communication with prisoner support organizations? Can we collaborate on long-term projects with prisoners?

The War Before provides opportunities for such reflection as well as inspiration for moving forward. Writing of the grief at the loss of comrades, the years of imprisonment, and the post-traumatic stress suffered by the soldiers in this war, Bukhari remained hopeful.

From the sea of loss.
 It is the return of the sun,
 Of my exiled ones,
 And for her sake and his,
 I swear
 I shall not compromise
 And to the last pulse in my veins
 I shall resist,
 Resist—and resist (155). ★