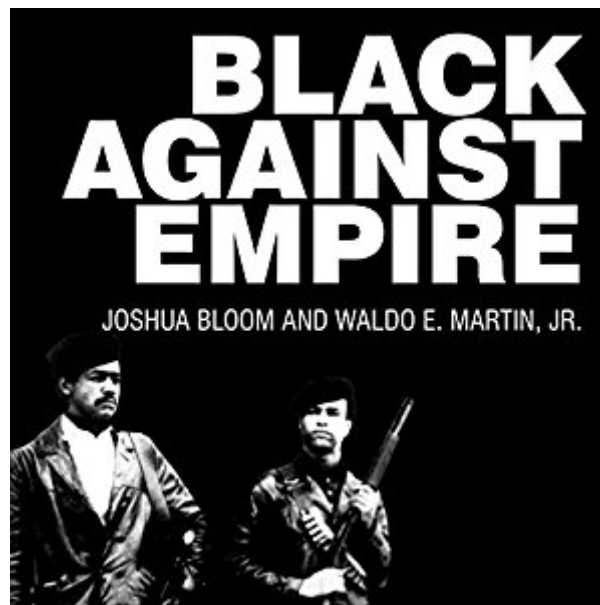




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Black Against Empire: The History And Politics Of The Black Panther Party



Synopsis

In Oakland, California, in 1966, community college students Bobby Seale and Huey Newton armed themselves, began patrolling the police, and promised to prevent police brutality. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement that called for full citizenship rights for blacks within the US, the Black Panther Party rejected the legitimacy of the US government and positioned itself as part of a global struggle against American imperialism. In the face of intense repression, the Party flourished, becoming the center of a revolutionary movement with powerful allies around the world. *Black Against Empire* is the first comprehensive overview and analysis of the history and politics of the Black Panther Party. The authors analyze key political questions, such as why so many young black people across the country risked their lives for the revolution, why the Party grew most rapidly during the height of repression, and why allies abandoned the Party at its peak of influence. Bold, engrossing, and richly detailed, this book cuts through the mythology and obfuscation, revealing the political dynamics that drove the explosive growth of this revolutionary movement and its disastrous unraveling.

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Customer Reviews

Black Against Empire I found fascinating and at times energizing as I read about the intelligence, knowledge and world wide recognition (back in the day) of the Black Panther Party (BPP). The PBS BPP documentary is what prompted me to download and read this book after several profs that I follow on Twitter recommended it as we tweeted while viewing. It's amazing and incredible

that there isn't more acknowledgement in our school history books on this group of individuals who took it amongst themselves to mobilized into a military force all the righteous anger (due to police harassment and killings, no jobs, substandard education you know, the regular) in the Black community and create an organization that stood up for themselves with arms in addition to providing needed services to the community. The BPP gave the marginalized Black community life where young (mostly) flocked to join an organization where something was actually being implemented and where they could stand proud against the insurgent police that had been terrorizing them for decades to be the vanguards of their community. There is so much in this book that I was not aware. To name a few: BPP fought for and got the first Department of Black Studies implemented at San Francisco State; the Chinese government was in frequent communication with the BPP and hosted a delegation with a personal invitation to Huey Newton; Algeria granted the Panthers national diplomatic status and an embassy building of their own; traveled to Cuba to represent at conference on Solidarity; BPP was embraced as the revolutionary vanguard and many groups sought to emulate their model in other countries; white anti war activist identified strongly with the BPP and were strong allies; how BPP formed a alliances with a multiracial coalition of students, faculty, labor and community leaders; the fact that on April 22, 1970, Yale students went on strike in conjunction with the BPP for the first time in the university's history in recognition of oppression, and exploitation; Panthers were the catalyst for the first-ever Special Weapons Assault Team (SWAT); had many high-profile (like Marlon Brando and Jean Seberg) supporters that donated thousands of dollars. While reading I was often struck by the many parallels to today (history repeating itself): police killing African Americans and getting away with it; Black people being treated unfairly by our criminal justice system; rift between the civil rights establishment and young urban blacks such as the Black Lives Matter Movement etc. I strongly believe that knowing one's history supplies an anchor, an armor of sorts, and as an educator I feel it's my responsibility to make students aware to provide that knowledge anchor and hopefully to move on to a more positive history narrative. You know the old saying: if you don't know your history.

This is a major work of history. To delve deeply into the primary sources, the authors with multitudes of research assistants and graduate students, assembled a major archive of published newspapers and collaborated with a second archive, the HK Yuen collection of thousands of fliers and pamphlets and over 30,000 hours of audio recordings of meetings and rallies from the 1960's-1990's. This is an historian's dream to have such complete contemporary records. The

authors also collected many oral histories and retrospective interviews. They also make their interest clear through their concluding chapter: "we consider the history of the Black Panther Party in light of Antonio Gramsci's theory of revolution." Trained historians are well aware of the illusory paradigm of "objective" history. Constant revision, one historian's account dialoguing with past accounts, is the process of writing history. There have been from the beginning of epic story telling "schools" of history. Each generation brings a re-examination of the past. When we readers are fortunate; new or neglected theories of history are freshly employed and new documentary information comes to light. I feel fortunate to have read this compelling and brilliantly researched history which references a neglected methodology. *Black Against Empire* is the exemplary account with which all future historians will have to grapple.

When I moved to Berkeley in 1969, the Black Panther Party was in its heyday. Only three years earlier, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale had begun building the party around an image and a name they'd appropriated from other Black organizations then active in those turbulent years of the Vietnam War and exploding ghettos. Yet before the decade of the 1970s was out, the Black Panther Party had all but disappeared. *Black Against Empire*, Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin's excellent study of the Panthers and their politics, makes clear why and how they grew into such a force -- and why the party collapsed so few years later. The pivotal event in the history of the Black Panther Party was the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968. Before that day, the Party was just one of hundreds of activist African-American organizations, most of them vanishingly small, in Black ghettos and on university campuses all across the country. The Panthers were set apart from others by their distinctive black outfits, by carrying guns in public to defend themselves against police brutality, by their outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War, and, perhaps most of all, by their willingness to encompass people of other ethnicities. As a result, they had grabbed headlines locally and were growing at a fast pace, attracting African-Americans in their late teens and twenties who were disillusioned by the timidity of their elders in the Civil Rights Movement -- but the party's activities were largely limited to Oakland, Berkeley, and nearby cities. However, when Rev. King was murdered, the Black Panther Party quickly emerged as the leading organization nationwide with the credibility and the activist ideology that could channel the fury and the hope of young African-Americans and attract alliances with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and other largely non-Black radical organizations. The Party quickly began opening offices around the country -- a total of 68 cities by 1970 -- and for three years remained a powerful and ever-present force in the activist politics of the day. Soon, however, the party's rapid decline began in earnest.

Bloom and Martin emphasize two key factors -- the Panthers' establishment enemies and the shrinking U.S. engagement in Vietnam under Richard Nixon -- to which I would add a third: the explosive personality dynamics of the Panthers' leaders themselves. The Black Panther Party's sworn enemies included the FBI, the Oakland police, and, later, police in Chicago and many other cities. J. Edgar Hoover personally led the FBI's campaign against the Panthers, introducing informers and agents provocateur to trigger violence and sow dissent within their ranks. The Bureau's efforts went so far as to hand out explosives, spread destructive rumors to undermine the marriages of Panther leaders, and arrange the assassination of key Panther activists. The Oakland police used violent and often illegal tactics, invading Panther homes and offices without search warrants and arresting individual Panthers on transparently trumped-up charges. The most egregious incident took place in Richard J. Daley's Chicago, when police, acting on information from an informer, illegally burst into an apartment in the middle of the night and murdered Fred Hampton, the local chapter leader, sleeping in his bed. All told, police murdered dozens of Panther activists around the country. Richard Nixon played a pivotal role, too. "Nixon was the one who rolled back the draft, wound down the war, and advanced affirmative action." The cumulative effect of these strategic moves was to erode the foundation of the Panthers' support both in the Black community and among white radicals (whose popularity among young people, it became clear, was largely grounded in fear of the draft). Once regarded not just by themselves but by other self-appointed revolutionary organizations as the vanguard of the revolution, the Panthers increasingly found themselves alone as liberals attacked them and the revolution on the nation's campuses went the way of the draft. The party was officially dissolved in 1982. So far as it goes, this analysis of the principal forces that undermined the Black Panther Party is right on target. However, I would argue that the personality dynamics of the party's leadership played a significant role as well. Judging from my own observations as well as the evidence advanced in *Black Against Empire*, the three leading figures in the party were all brilliant men. It's idle to speculate what roles they might have played in society had they been born white in middle-class families -- but it's clear that their life experiences as African-Americans growing up in America in the 1950s and 60s, not to mention the cruel frauds worked on them by FBI agents and informers during the late 1960s and early 70s, wreaked havoc on their mental health. Of the three, only Bobby Seale survived the Panther years whole and sane. Both Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver were, by all accounts, unhinged in the final years of their lives. So far as I'm concerned, no further proof is needed than the bitter feud that erupted between the two of them, which led to dangerous and sometimes violent splits within the Panther organization. For anyone who lived through those unsettling times on the margins of the day's

events, *Black Against Empire* is illuminating. Though I crossed paths with a number of the individuals named in the book, and we had a great many mutual friends, I was quite unaware of the Panthers' early history and of the party's years of decline. If you have any interest in East Bay history, Berkeley politics, or African-American history and politics, you'll find *Black Against Empire* essential reading. Joshua Bloom, the principal author, is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at UCLA. His collaborator, Waldo Martin, is a Professor of History at UC Berkeley specializing in African-American history.

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