

## **Female Terrorism and Radicalization of Women in Russia**

Dr. Mariya Y. Omelicheva  
National Defense University, Washington, D.C.  
[m.omelicheva.civ@msc.ndu.edu](mailto:m.omelicheva.civ@msc.ndu.edu)

Paper presented at the annual convention of the Association for the Study of  
Nationalities  
May 2019

Disclaimer: This paper represents work in progress. Please, do not cite without the author's permission. Comments are welcome. The views expressed in the paper are those of the author and do not represent an official position of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or National Defense University.

Female terrorism by Russian revolutionaries was central to the making of modern terrorism in the Russian Empire of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It also played a decisive role at the turn of the millennium during the Moscow theater hostage crisis of October 2002 and a number of high-casualty suicide attacks across Russia in the recent decade. The establishment of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq has contributed to not only a new way of terrorist violence perpetrated by women in Russia, but also the emergence of “female foreign fighters” as well as women who have played a range of supporting roles on the territory of the Caliphate.

Female terrorism has been on the rise around the world, but its upsurge is particularly striking in Russia. Between 1985 and 2006, 225 women suicide bombers acting on behalf of various terrorist groups have been recorded by researchers worldwide.<sup>1</sup> In Russia, alone, 132 suicide bombers took part in 86 separate terrorist attacks between 2000 and 2016. Of those perpetrators, 52 were female suicide bombers.<sup>2</sup> Russia’s natives have also been disproportionately represented among female “foreign fighters” in Syria and Iraq.

This paper examines the paradox of female terrorism in modern Russia. While the earlier studies of female terrorism in Russia have focused on women suicide bombers, this study defines female terrorist activity broadly to include perpetration of terrorist acts, explicit identification with terrorist groups, support for and sympathizing with terrorist causes, women foreign fighters as well as women who left Russia to join their husbands/partners in the war zones in Syria and Iraq. By defining female terrorist activity this way, the paper seeks to highlight a confluence of individual, organizational, and structural factors and motives that explain women’s involvement in terrorism. In particular, this paper contends that women terrorists originate from highly patriarchal societies and communities experiencing rapid changes that offer an opportunity for questioning and challenging the various structures of domination. I argue that women’s individual motives and organizational imperatives for recruiting women should be examined on the backdrop of the structural meanings of women’s roles and positions in the patriarchal societies experiencing transformation, which may have violent or non-violence sources.

---

<sup>1</sup> Karla J. Cunningham (2003) “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 26, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Kavkaz-Uzbel (2018) “Terroristicheskiye akty, sovershennyye terroristami-smertnikami na territorii RF” [Terrorist acts perpetrated by suicide terrorists on the territory of the Russian Federation], *Kavkazskii Uzbel*, 22 August 2018, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/224438/>

The paper shows how Russia's female terrorism of the 1990s and early 2000s largely represented a radical form of patriotism and emancipation. In the recent decade, women have become more susceptible to involuntary participation in terrorism-related activities and prosecution on terrorism charges by the state. Women who left Russia for the war zones have rarely been motivated by the prospects of empowerment through leadership, political voice, or financial security. Rather, the push-and-pull factors for human trafficking (themselves influenced by the patriarchal structures) provide more suitable explanations for the Russian women's joining of the Caliphate. The data for the study comes from the open source analysis of the backgrounds of perpetrators of all terrorist attacks committed in Russia between 2008 and 2016, as recorded by the Global Terrorism Dataset and the Caucasus Knot. It also relies on the interviews with experts and members of the "armed underground" in Russia's North Caucasus.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the trends of female terrorism in Russia followed by a summary of explanations of women involvement in terrorism, in general, and in Russia, in particular. I will examine the evidence from the Russian case.

### **Trends in Women Terrorism in Russia**

Russian female terrorism was central to the making of the modern-day terrorism not only in Russia but also on the world stage. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century assassins, such as Vera Zasulich and Sofia Perovskaia, to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Social Revolutionaries, Russian female terrorists became powerful symbols and legends of terrorism as a profession. Much admired, but also feared, these early female terrorists became subject of public and mass media speculations and debates about their life experiences and motivation that continue shaping our perception of and analyses of political violence by women.<sup>3</sup>

While Russian women continued playing an active role in the Soviet Union's revolutionary, partisan, and war efforts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including through suicide attacks on the enemy forces in World War II,<sup>4</sup> their participation in violent activities against the Soviet regime considerably declined. The Soviet Union became a major sponsor of political violence

---

<sup>3</sup> Anke Hilbrenner (2016), "The Perovskaia Paradox or the Scandal of Female Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Russia", *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 17, <https://journals.openedition.org/pipss/4169>.

<sup>4</sup> Yagil Henkin (2006), "From tactical terrorism to Holy War: the evolution of Chechen terrorism, 1995–2004", *Central Asian Survey*, 25(1), p.198.

against the West and supporter of terrorist movement worldwide. Yet, it effectively clamped down on any expression of domestic dissent that resulted in a marked reduction of terrorist and extremism activity at home.

The breakup of the Soviet Union accompanied by the fall of the Communist ideology unleashed destructive nationalist processes that escalated into violent insurgency and terrorism in parts of the modern-day Russia. Much of the terrorist activity was initially confined to the republic of Chechnya where the Russian military and security forces fought two vicious wars, with the second one turning into a counterterrorism operation. The emergence of terrorism as a weapon of choice marked a significant change from the first to the second Chechen campaign, which also heralded the use of women suicide bombers. During that time, Chechen female terrorist committed at least 17 incidents that resulted in deaths of at least 220 people, mostly civilians.<sup>5</sup> By different account, the women terrorists constituted a majority of the Chechen suicide bombers.<sup>6</sup> And, contrary to the popular portrayals of forced participation in terrorism, in addition to the imagery of helplessness, lewdness or innocence, some of these women took on leadership roles as masterminds or organizers of terrorist attacks.<sup>7</sup>

Women participation in terrorism has increased worldwide in the post-Cold War era. Females committed 257 suicide attacks between 1985 and 2010, representing a quarter of all suicide attacks during this time period.<sup>8</sup> The proportion of women suicide bombers in Russia has been among highest in the world. According to the Caucasus Knot, an online news site covering the Caucasus region and tracing terrorist attacks in Russia, there were 52 female suicide bombers in the total of 132 attackers who took part in 86 terrorist attacks. These acts of terrorism took lives of 1325 people and injured 3282 more. The most prominent of these attacks include a detonation of explosive devices on board of two domestic passenger flights in 2004, double suicide-bombing at two subway stations in Moscow in 2010, and a suicide bombing at the Volgograd railway station and a bus bombing in the same city in 2013, among others. Female

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Sjoberg (2010), "Women Fighters and the Beautiful Soul Narrative," *International Review of Red Cross* 92(977): 53-68.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Mia Bloom (2011) *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism* (University of Pennsylvania Press). Speckhard (2008) offers a similar assessment of 220 female suicide attacks between 1985 and 2006 (Anne Speckhard (2008) "Emergence of Female Suicide Terrorists," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31(11): 995-1023.

terrorists took part in the 2002 Nord-Ost theater siege and the 2004 Beslan school attack. Most of these assailants were young women in their early and mid-20s from Chechnya and Dagestan.

The Russian female terrorists, thus, constitute 39% of the total suicide bombers in Russia.<sup>9</sup> By comparison, women made up about 7% of Palestinian suicide bombers and less than 1% of suicide bombers in Iraq.<sup>10</sup> Based on the author's analysis of the courts' hearing data, between 2013 and 2016, female defendants in terrorist cases constituted almost 13% of all defendants.<sup>11</sup> In addition, by different accounts, Russian women have travelled to the ISIS controlled territories in Syria and Iraq at a higher rate than female citizens of any other Western, Middle Eastern, or Asian country. While the veritable data on women and children on ISIS-controlled territories is hard to come by, the available evidence supports this conclusion. Researchers at West Point have acquired a unique roster of 1,100 women who transited the ISIS guesthouse over a 4-month period in 2014. There were 200 Dagestani women recorded in the roster, constituting 67.89 women per a million of female population in this republic; 50 Chechen women (39.40 women per a million of Chechen female population); 10 women from Kabardino-Balkaria (11.63); and 7 from Ingushetia (16.99), among others. The majority of these women were married.<sup>12</sup> This is consistent with other investigations reporting that over 700 women and children from Chechnya traveled to Iraq and Syria.<sup>13</sup> There have been many more females travelling from other Russian republics. It seems plausible that Russian women formed a significant female contingent traveling to the ISIS-controlled territory.

---

<sup>9</sup> Kavkaz-Uzel 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Laura Sjobert and Caron E. Gentry (2007). *Mothers, Monsters, and Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (Zed Books, London), p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> The data was collected by the author. The charges included crimes banned by Articles 205 (assistance to terrorist activity), 208 (Organization of the illegal armed formation or participation in it), 209 (Banditry), 222 (illegal procurement, transfer, storage, movement, sale, and carrying of arms), and 282 (Organization of an extremist community) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Milton and Brian Dodwell (2018), "Jihadi Brides? Examining a Female Guesthouse Registry from the Islamic State's Caliphate," *Combating Terrorism Center*, Volume 11, Issue 5, <https://ctc.usma.edu/jihadi-brides-examining-female-guesthouse-registry-islamic-states-caliphate/>

<sup>13</sup> Anna Arutunyan (2018), "ISIS Returnees Bring Both Hope and Fear to Chechnya," *International Crisis Group*, 26 May, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/chechnya-russia/isis-returnees-bring-both-hope-and-fear-chechnya>

## Explaining the Trends of Terrorism in Russia

The explanations of women's involvement in terrorism, in general, and women suicide bombing, in particular, tend to coalesce around two broad themes illuminating the gendered nature of the debates about politically motivated violence by women. The first theme runs through those accounts that stress female terrorists' free will versus coercion as the drivers of women's participation in terrorism. The second and related theme is present explanations that debate whether women's motives for involvement in terrorism are similar to or different from those of men. I will first review these two sets of explanations and, next, consider accounts of women's participation in terrorism in Russia.

The experiences of terrorist groups like Boko Haram and ISIS, which have used deception and force to bring and keep women in their fold subjugating them to a variety of active and supportive roles, have focused public attention on the coercive nature of women's involvement in terrorism. Several studies have stressed the lack of "agency" in women's participation in terrorism due to deception, manipulation, physical control (kidnapping), sexual abuse, and other forms of coercion by terrorist groups. The dependence of women on male relatives and husbands in many Middle Eastern and Arab societies has been a recurrent theme in the discussion of motivations of female terrorists. The Palestinian women participating in the resistance movement as well as women fighters in Iraq and members of Al Qaeda have been portrayed as manipulated and duped to join the terrorist cause.<sup>14</sup> These portrayals of women as victims of terrorist groups' recruitment deprived of any ability to exercise free will have been perpetuated by the governments and other critics of terrorist groups who deploy these narratives to emasculate the groups and to shame male terrorists for taking advantage of "innocent" and "beautiful" souls.

In addition to the narrative of women's victimization, the popular press and several academic accounts have put forth an idea that women are driven to terrorism by a unique set of motives that are inextricably linked to emotion rather than political ideals.<sup>15</sup> Love, jealousy, and

---

<sup>14</sup> Sjoberg, "Women Fighters."

<sup>15</sup> Latkonova, M.A. (2014), "Osoboennosti zhenkogo terrorizma: regional'ny aspekt," [Distinctive features of female terrorism: regional aspects], *Vestnik AGU*, p. 114; Malyshev, V.G. (2012), "Social'no-psihologicheskie aspekty uchastiya zhenshin-smertnik vs terroristichekoi deyatel'nosti," [Socio-psychological aspects of female suicide bombers participating in terrorist activities], Institute Blizhengo Vostoka, Official website, <http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2005/24-11-05.htm>, as cited in Oksana Y. Il'chenko (2016), "Zhenshiny i terror:

revenge are the three commonly cited emotive explanations for women's involvement in terrorism. According to this position, women join terrorist groups and engage in acts of terrorist violence to avenge the deaths of the loved ones: fathers, husbands, brothers, and other family members. Chronologically, women typically take up arms later in the conflict, and this observation has strongly contributed to the "vengeance-based" explanations of women's participation in terrorism. The rape of women by the government forces has been named as a contributing factor to women's vengeance. In many traditional societies, the violations of women's personal integrity trigger a desire - even a responsivity - to regain their personal and family honor through violence. These explanations that stress the role of emotions in women's violence have become rather popular as they reinforce the gendered understanding of women's involvement in terrorism. Emotionality is a feminine trait and violence spurred by feelings is consistent with the gendered perceptions of terrorist violence. In the same vein, when the available evidence does not lend support to the motives of love or revenge, women committing suicide attacks are portrayed as out of the realm of "normal." They are presented as "warped" and "twisted, and "unreal" women.<sup>16</sup>

Other scholars have argued that female participation in terrorism is often willful and driven by a complex set of motives, which may include experiences of marginalization, gender-based discrimination, the lack of opportunity as well as religious or other ideologies.<sup>17</sup> Female participation in terrorism is not limited to roles of supporters and "foot soldiers". Women fighters are known for taking on the leadership roles in terrorist groups as well. Their involvement in terrorism is, therefore, driven by the same reasons that motivate men's participation in terrorist movements<sup>18</sup>, but the gender-based oppression they face in their societies offers an additional impetus for joining the terrorist groups.<sup>19</sup> Cumulatively, this research suggests several additional motives for women's participation in terrorism including self-fulfillment and

---

uchstye zhenshin v terroristichekoi dvizhenii," [Women and Terror: Women's Participation in Terrorist Movement], *Vestnik Instituta Sotsiologii*, 17:130-141. <http://vestnik-isras.ru/article/402>

<sup>16</sup> Sjoberg, "Women Fighters".

<sup>17</sup> Bloom 2011

<sup>18</sup> Kim, I.A. (2006), "Gendernoe neravenstvo v islame: zhenkii terrorizm," [Gender Inequality in Islam: Women's Terrorism], *Analitika Kul'turologi*, 2(6): 71.

<sup>19</sup> Katharina Von Knop (2007) "The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30(5): 397-414.

empowerment through collective action, leadership, financial security, and political voice that they otherwise are deprived of in their own societies.<sup>20</sup>

Regardless of women's individual reasons for joining the terrorist cause, whether or not their motives get translated into actions often depends on the groups' motives for recruiting and using women. Terrorist organizations are rational actors making calculated decisions about their tactics, targets, and members. There are many strategic benefits of using female operatives by terrorist groups, but there are also obstacles to females' terrorist involvement. The main hindrance is that terrorism is a gendered and male-dominated activity. The use of female operatives as a tactical choice may require some type of legitimation. Otherwise, women fighters provide many tactical benefits to terrorist groups. Due to the prevailing societal stereotypes associating women with nonviolence, and certain societal taboos and ethos associated with male-female relations, female suicide bombers are more difficult to detect and they can allow the terrorist group to achieve tactical surprise and media shock when they commit violence in places where a male suicide bomber may be discovered.<sup>21</sup> Women are also easier to coerce and they are more "expendable" than their male counterparts. Terrorist groups' imperatives in recruiting women typically rise when their membership is in decline and there is a pressing need for more fighters to continue the operations.<sup>22</sup>

Many of these same explanations have been offered to account for terrorism committed by Russian women. The Russian government dubbed female suicide bombers, most of whom were Chechen locals who joined terrorist groups during the second campaign in the Chechen republic, "the Black Widows," in a reference to their purported widowed status due to the loss of husbands killed over the course of the Chechen war. Researchers, however, contested this representation by showing that less than 23% of the Chechen women fighters were widows and only 3% of them were married at the time of commission of a terrorist act.<sup>23</sup> Still, the narrative of the "Black Widows" "prepared to kill and to die to avenge the deaths" of the loved ones at the

---

<sup>20</sup> Paige Whaley Eager (2008) *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists: Women and Political Violence* (Ashgate Publishing); Margaret Gonzalez-Perez (2008), *Women and Terrorism: Female Activity in Domestic and International Terror Groups* (Routledge); Cindy D. Ness (2006) "In the Name of the Cause: Women's Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28(5): 353-373.

<sup>21</sup> Davis J. 2013. Evolution of the global jihad: female suicide bombers in Iraq. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36:279-91; Knop 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Knop 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Y. Schweitzer (ed.) (2006). *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality* (Tel Aviv: Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University).



hands of the Russian military continues dominating perceptions of female terrorist in the public and among many analysts<sup>24</sup>. These emotion-based explanations have been reinforced by the media accounts that also elude to “abnormality,” “irrationality,” and lack of independent thought by the Russian female terrorist whose “reason” was silenced by the thoughts of revenge and sacred war.<sup>25</sup> Also known as “shakhidki”, these female terrorist have been widely portrayed as the pawns of male terrorists, who were drugged, blackmailed or otherwise coerced into suicide mission.

Notably, empirical research of the Chechen female terrorists found no evidence of this style of coercion, but offered strong support for women’s self-recruitment, autonomy, and will to martyr themselves on behalf of their country.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, many other explanations linking female terrorist violence to socio-economic status or the lack of education also don’t find empirical support. The majority (65%) of Russian female terrorists graduated from the high school and about a quarter of them held university degree. Their socio-economic status did not differ from the median in their republics. Some females were individual entrepreneurs and took advantage of their participation in shuttle trade to conceal their involvement with terrorist groups from their relatives.<sup>27</sup> And, although the media and multiple analysts characterized Russian female terrorists as “cheap,” “expendable”, and “second-grade” fighters within the terrorist hierarchy with men placed at the top<sup>28</sup>, these women have also been leaders and organizers of terrorist violence.

All in all, the existing explanations of female terrorism, in general, and female terrorism in Russia, in particular, does not allow to account for variation in women’s participation in terrorist violence across time and space. Why are some women experiencing strong emotions join terrorist groups? Why are some groups more likely to recruit women fighters than others?

---

<sup>24</sup> Steven Lee Meyers (2003), “Female Suicide Bombers Unnerve Russians,” New York Times, 7 August, A1. As quoted in Knop 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Veronika Shcheblanova and Elena Yarskaya-Smirnova (2009) “Explanations of Female Terrorism. Discourses about Chechen Terrorists in the Russian Mass Media: “East Girls,” “Coarse Women” or Fighters?” in Gender Dynamics and Post-Conflict Reconstruction, edited by Christine Eifler and Ruth Seifert (Frankfurt: Peter Lang), pp. 245-268. [http://89.249.21.74/data/2010/03/16/1231582052/Shcheblanova\\_Yarskaya-Smirnova\\_2009.pdf](http://89.249.21.74/data/2010/03/16/1231582052/Shcheblanova_Yarskaya-Smirnova_2009.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, “Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists,” in Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality, edited by Y. Schweitzer (Tel Aviv: Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, pp. 63-80.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Shcheblanova and Yarskaya-Smirnova (2009).

Which contexts, if any, provide a permissive environment for terrorist groups' recruitment of women fighters?

*Explaining Female Terrorist Violence*

This paper argues that it is only by integrating individual and organizational motives with the broader structural meanings of women's roles and positions in the society that we can understand the rise in women's involvement in terrorism and the paradox of the high ratio of women suicide bombers and foreign fighters from Russia. I contend that the largest numbers of women terrorists originate from highly patriarchal societies characterized by the predominance of men in the roles of political power, moral authority, and social privilege, when these societies are in flux due to socio-economic and political transition that offers an opportunity for questioning and challenging this domination. The male domination can take on various forms that get reproduced by legal, political, and economic means in addition to public discourse, stereotypes, traditions, and media.

Patriarchy predates modern-day developments associated with the spread of globalization and expansion of capitalist markets. The post-Cold War political and economic reforms experienced by many developing and transitional states did not, however, eliminate or reduce gender disparity and gender discrimination. On the contrary, in many societies, these global developments institutionalized and deepened the separation between public and production places, on one side, and private and reproduction spaces, on the other. Sweeping economic reforms experienced by developing and transitional states widened the gender gaps. Where the state opened up the space for women's entry into the workforce, it also retained the institution of "housework" entangled with womanhood. This further solidified disparities in terms of an uneven distribution of household resources and responsibilities and women's access to and ability to enjoy the opportunities provided by economic globalization. Market demands also necessitated changes in public policies, including the curtailment of public expenditures on social welfare, health systems, food and agricultural subsidies and education which had particularly detrimental impact on the status and wellbeing of women. And, while modern technologies and greater access to education have improved the destiny of many girls and women around the world, they have also remained a tool of oppression perpetuating certain discourses and reproducing sexism. Women's educational advancements did not remove patriarchal stereotypes and occupational inequalities.

All in all, globalization offered opportunities for women's economic and political emancipation and socio-cultural models exemplifying women's empowerment. It, therefore, opened up a possibility for challenging the preexisting patriarchal norms (including through examples available in the global media and information space. These opportunities, however, have also been met with fear of and resistance to change, and held back by the structural oppression of the public institutions and the state itself, which took advantage of the global process to solidify the gender gaps. Globalization, therefore, amplified patriarchy and the oppression of women and strengthened the pre-existing gender norms.

How is female subordination linked to female participation in terrorism? By becoming agents of violence, women can simultaneously comport with the patriarchic expectations and defy them. Not only carrying out attacks allows some women to fulfill their traditional duties of honoring their loved ones and their communities by giving up their lives, it also gives them a chance at "gender equality" by becoming as violent as their male counterparts. This becomes a distorted form of female liberation or emancipation.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, by challenging the patriarchal social systems, reforms sow the seeds of resistance to change and a desire to protect the traditional values as communities know them. When such a resistance is fueled by a set of radical beliefs filling the ideological void or helping to resolve confusion over the inconsistency of experiences, expectations and discourses, it can quickly take on a violent form. It has been shown, for example, that converts, including female converts embracing a radical ideology, are more likely to engage in violence as a logical step of their commitment to the group.<sup>30</sup>

Notably, the terrorist groups take advantage of the experiences of confusion over the rapidly changing circumstances and ideas that challenge the ways of life as individuals know it as well as despair and disillusionment experienced by women as a result of familial, communal, and state-sanctioned subjugation, if not downright violence and abuse. Terrorist organizations exploit women's subordinate status to both coerce them into violence and cajole them into joining by playing up on their weaknesses or desires of status improvement.

This explanation stresses the role of patriarchal norms, not merely gender-based discrimination. While the two are inextricably linked, patriarchy is both prior to, broader than,

---

<sup>29</sup> Knop 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

and an essential source of gender-based discrimination.<sup>31</sup> It is a foundational system of values, beliefs, and institutions that inform multiple systems of inequality unlimited to sex and gender, but including race and age. All of these forms of inequality are dialectically connected and often act to reinforce each other in erecting a complex hierarchy of the patterns of domination and authority based on age, ethnicity, gender, and other markers of identity.<sup>32</sup>

The patriarchy-based explanations of women's involvement terrorism do not deny agency to women but highlight its relational aspects. It means that social, political, and economic contexts permeated by patriarchal ideas and institutions not merely influence women's choices, but they have a deeper constitutive impact on how women view themselves and their roles in the society, and ways they perceive and interact with their environment and choices. While autonomy denotes self-awareness, individuality, and the ability to make decision, relational autonomy stresses how this self-awareness is inevitably bound by the pre-existing structure of gendered understandings and norms.

### **Examining Evidence of Female Terrorism in Russia**

Russia is exemplary as a case study of patriarchy and women's terrorism. Russia's diverse conservative traditions have been challenged by profound socio-economic, ideological, and political changes at both communal and national levels. Patriarchy has been reignited publicly and privately in response to these challenges illuminating the decades-old contradictions between the rhetoric of equal opportunities, societal pressures and expectations, and public rhetoric, policies, and actions. Women, in particular, have borne the brunt of these contradictions manifested in the growing violence perpetrated against women privately and by the agents of the state, as well as violence committed by women in response to or as part of these changes.

Attitudes toward women in Russia today are a legacy of centuries of patriarchal rule in its diverse communities, where the head of the household (typically, a man) continues wielding a considerable decision-making authority. Although, the Soviet Union made a concerted, if still

---

<sup>31</sup> Patriarchy has several dimensions, including the domination of men over women, the domination of the older generation over the younger generation, the extent of patrilocality, and the preference for sons. See Mikolaj Szoltysek et al. (2016) "The Patriarchy Index: A New Measure of Gender and Generational Inequalities in the Past," MPIDR Working Paper WP 2016-014 December.

<sup>32</sup> See Szoltysek et al. (2016).

superficial, effort at changing women's subservient status by granting them political and economic equality, it did not resolve the gender-based disparity in households. The latter, in turn, perpetuated patriarchal institutions, norms, and expectations, especially in private life, while simultaneously offering women an opportunity for empowerment through employment, education, and participation in political life.

Behind the propaganda of gender parity, perceptions of women in Russia retained all the elements of tradition that continue defining the Russians' attitudes toward women today, especially outside the capital cities. While the liberalization and marketization of Russia's economy offered numerous employment opportunities for women and empowered many of them to make important decisions about family and work, the deep-rooted patriarchal and sexist attitudes are kept alive in the public discourse and practice.<sup>33</sup> These attitudes have been reinforced by the official narratives of conservative Russian identity and public displays of masculinity. President Putin, backed by Russian Orthodox Church, has made Russia more conservative and fortified gender stereotypes at the national level. Putin, for example, has presented Russia as a unique "civilization" (*Russkii Mir*) rooted in Russian ethnic identity, history, and culture. The term *mir*, which denotes people or community if used together with Russian,<sup>34</sup> refers to a self-governing community of peasant households known for its conservative traditions and regarded as a guardian of orthodox national values in the history of Russia. Putin's inventory of Russian values is not extraordinary. It consists of the same kinds of assertions about the Russian national character that so many books on Russian cultural and intellectual history abound in. Among those are patriotism, the sanctity of the family as a unity of man and woman, the indispensable role of religious faith, a belief in the greatness of Russia, social solidarity, and statism.<sup>35</sup>

Strong masculine state is at the pinnacle of Russia's patriarchy. According to the Russian president, a strong state is not an anomaly for Russians, but "a source and a guarantee of order, as well as the initiator and main moving force of any change."<sup>36</sup> A strong state has a direct and

---

<sup>33</sup> Nadezhda Aghgihina (2018) "Why Are Russian Women Opposed to #MeToo?", *The Nation*, 23 February. <https://www.thenation.com/article/why-are-russian-women-opposed-to-metoo/>

<sup>34</sup> Two other meanings of the Russian word *mir* are "peace" and "world." The old Cyrillic alphabet allowed for differentiating these meaning through variations in the spelling of the words *миръ* (peace) and *миръ* (the Universe or world).

<sup>35</sup> Putin 1999; see also Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Gavin, 2007, p. 52

decisive command over the people who are expected to show loyalty and subservience to the state.

One of the markers of “strength” in Russia has to do with an ability to use force. Russia’s old adage, “if he beats you, he loves you” has normalized domestic violence as part of Russian women’s everyday life. According to the Kremlin’s official accounts, over 14,000 women die yearly from domestic violence. This is 10 times more than the number of deaths in the US, which has twice Russia’s population.<sup>37</sup> At the state level, strength has been associated with the monopoly on the use of force that have translated in the prioritization of military solutions as the most effective responses to complex security problems, including terrorism. The Russian government has justified its human rights abuses in the North Caucasus as well as the excesses of counterterrorism operations by the exigencies of the security situation.

As discussed earlier, most of the female terrorists in Russia originated from the North Caucasus, a place known for its highly conservative tradition. Yet, these conservative traditions and ways of life came under attack, first by the Russian military and security services, and, later by the locally-manned militias, including those who subordinated themselves to the rule of the Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. The first Chechen war that fought over the republic’s independence featured few women fighters. The latter, however, became more prominent in the second Chechen campaign (1999-2009) that pitched the Russian Federation against militants of various Islamist groups.

Women’s participation in terrorism became possible due to a confluence of several factors related to patriarchal norms challenged by the rapidly changing circumstances on the ground. First, in the 1990s, women in Chechnya bore a heavy brunt of war and oppression. Insurgency relieved the guerilla men of any responsibility of taking care of and providing for their families. Women had to perform many of the responsibilities of the heads of households while still adhering to the patriarchal norms. The Russian military became notorious for rampant human rights abuses, including rape, during the first Chechen campaign. By various estimate, between 30,000 and 100,000 civilians were killed and more than 500,000 displaced by the

---

<sup>37</sup> Camille Brueau (2018) “How Do Patriarchy and Capitalism Jointly Reinforce the Oppression of Women,” <http://www.cadtm.org/How-do-patriarchy-and-capitalism-jointly-reinforce-the-oppression-of-women>

In January 2017, Russia's domestic violence laws were changed. Some forms of violence were decriminalized. If one batter their family members but not enough to hospitalize them, and it is perpetrator’s first recorded offence, his punishment is limited to a fine.

conflict. The number of Chechen military casualties is estimated between 3,000 and 17,390 people.<sup>38</sup> With their lives and livelihoods destroyed by the war, many Chechen families have deepened their involvement with Islam as a critical element of the identity-building of the torn region. It is at this important junction in the evolution of the Chechen conflict when their nationalist aspirations first married and later became superseded by religious ideology that the initial prominent attacks by women terrorists took place.

The available evidence collected from the interviews of the relatives of female terrorists as well as a few fighters who survived the attacks suggest that female terrorists were driven by a double-motive of resistance to the oppression and abuses by the Russian state as well as the exercise of the rights and duties as Muslims, Chechen, and women. In this way, their attacks became an expression of both radical patriotism and emancipation, the demonstration of force against the state and its agents who only understand and respect the language of force.

The involvement of women in terrorism would not have been possible hadn't suicide terrorism become a tactic of choice in the transformed and Islamicized insurgency campaign in the North Caucasus and hadn't it been legitimized by an Islamic ruling. A fatwa issued by Muhammad bin 'Abdallah al-Sief", one of the leaders of jihad in Chechnya, sanctioned women's involvement in terrorism as suicide bombers.<sup>39</sup> The transformation of the Chechen conflict from a secular war of independence rooted in local causes to the sprawling religious campaign connected to global jihad marked the transformation of the insurgents' tactics who embraced mass-casualty suicide bombing of "soft targets" in Russia's heartland. The appearance of a small but determined group of fighters embracing the Wahhabist ideas made the North Caucasus locals displaying any sign of radical Islam targets of persecution on suspicion of being "terrorists." Women who wore black hijabs were placed on the lists of potential suicide bombers, their children were beaten and humiliated in schools, the lives of pious Muslims and their relatives were placed under constant surveillance. The prominent coverage given to the early "Black Widows" led to further ostracism and official abuse of the women who suffered family losses in the Chechen wars. Scores of moderate Muslims were caught in the midst of sweeping counterterrorism operations. This type of blank repression became perceived as the ultimate

---

<sup>38</sup> "First Chechnya War – 1994-1996," GLOBalsecurity.org. available at. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/chechnya1.htm>

<sup>39</sup> Yagil Henkin (2006) From tactical terrorism to Holy War: the evolution of Chechen terrorism, 1995–2004, Central Asian Survey, 25:1-2, 193-203,

attack on the identity and the way of life of the North Caucasus women prompting some of them to take up the arms.

The turn of the century saw several important changes in women's terrorism in Russia. Violent attacks have spread into previously unaffected parts of the Russian Federation. Women from territories other than the North Caucasus became implicated in these terrorist attacks. More importantly, analysts have noted a marked change in the motives of female terrorists from a radical form of patriotism and emancipation to submission and exploitation. The women terrorists have been turned into convenient instruments, often chosen for their vulnerabilities, to carry out a war by terror. Research into the tactics of terrorist groups has pointed out how the performance of attacks by the Russian women suicide bombers have been increasingly supervised by both male and older female counterparts and, in multiple instances, managed by the use of drugs or medications. It has been suggested that some women bombers might have been kept in the dark about their mission, the place, and the timing of suicide bombings.<sup>40</sup>

I attribute this change in female terrorists' motivations to the resurgence of patriarchy in Russia as part of the anti-Western narrative (associated with the liberties and feminist onslaught) and the deepening of contradictions arising from the novel opportunities and information and the age-old gender expectations and stereotypes. Russia's informational space has been inundated with the imagery and discourse sexualizing women and amplifying the connection between beauty, sexuality, and heterosexual love with women's worth. Traditional attitudes have been reignited and augmented with the new popular expectations of women as housewives and sex symbols. Women have been strongly encouraged and expected to seek marriage and motherhood as their first priority. In Russia, where the sex ratio dwindles by the time Russian women reach 25 years old due to the prevalence of accidents, suicides, and drug and alcohol abuse among Russia's men population, to find a "marriage-worthy" male partner has become a big problem. The quest for love, aggressive sexualization shrouded in gender-based taboos, and numerous disappointments experienced on this journey have produced women with self-perception of "outcasts" easily manipulated by terrorist recruiters.

The prevalence of addictions among Russian men and their propensity toward violence and infidelity in marriage have become one of the chief reasons for Russian women's conversion

---

<sup>40</sup> Yulia Yuzik (2013) "The Deadly and Mysterious new Breed of Female Suicide Bomber," Foreign Policy, 24 October. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/24/russias-new-black-widows/>



to Islam with the purpose of marrying Muslim men. Some women adopt Islam after they marry a Muslim man, while others convert hoping to find a Muslim husband because of the religious prohibitions on drinking alcohol and money spending ethos.<sup>41</sup>

A person who converts to Islam does not, by default, become prone to radicalization. Yet, converts are particularly eager to conform to the precepts of the new faith. Since the novices may lack the broad knowledge of the new religion and experiences with the faith through communal and familial events, they may be more prone to uncritically accept the kinds of interpretation that make them vulnerable to the radical groups' recruitment attempts. Indeed, evidence from Europe and Russia suggests that the converts to Islam are overrepresented among the members of radical Islamic groups. In Russia, hundreds of ethnic Russians have converted to Islam and joined the ranks of Islamic militancy. For example, three of 32 Beslan school terrorists, including the group's leader, were converts. Several leaders of the "Caucasus Emirate" were Russian converts. A house and wife suicide bombers in March 2011 attack on a police checkpoint in Dagestan were also converts to Islam.<sup>42</sup> Russian converts were identified in several Islamist radical cells in Siberia, the Volga region, as well as in other parts of Russia and other post-Soviet states.<sup>43</sup>

Notwithstanding serious reservations about the quality of the available data, Muslim converts are particularly noticeable among foreign fighters and wives of foreign fighters. While the reality is more complex than Muslim men forcing their wives and partners to travel to the ISIS-controlled territory, conversion to Islam or deepening one's involvement with Islamic faith as part of the relationship and/or marriage, have played a role in women's decisions to follow their male counterparts to Syria and Iraq.<sup>44</sup> Russian women have been recruited to join ISIS through the online propaganda of romantic relationships and many were subjected to exploitation

---

<sup>41</sup> David M. Hersznhorn (2015) "Russia Sees a Threat in Its Converts to Islam," The New York Times, 1 July, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/02/world/russia-sees-a-threat-in-its-converts-to-islam.html>; Paul Goble (2009) "Why Do Ethnic Russians Convert to Islam?" The Moscow Times, 3 June, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2009/06/03/why-do-ethnic-russians-convert-to-islam-a35003>

<sup>42</sup> Jahangir E. Arasli, "Violence Converts to Islam: Growing Cluster and Rising Trend," <https://globalecco.org/ctx-v1n1/violent-converts-to-islam>

<sup>43</sup> Bart Schuurman, Peter Grol and Scott Flower (2016) "Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction", International Counterterrorism Center (ICCT) Policy Brief, June, <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Schuurman-Grol-Flower-Converts-June-2016.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> This follows from the interview evidence of the women currently detained in the Iraqi prison or returned to Russia, or their relatives.

once they arrived on the territory of the Caliphate<sup>45</sup>. Even more importantly, the permissive institutional and structural environment in Russia, which includes fraud and corruption on the borders and the dearth of efforts at preventing human trafficking, has turned Russia in one of the top countries of origin and destination for human trade, including trafficking for the purpose of violence and criminality.

Certainly, not all radicalized women in Russia commit terrorist attacks. There is an age-based hierarchy superimposed on the range of extremist activities carried out by the females. Russian women of 40-55 years old typically perform the role of recruiters of new members. Many of these female recruiters hold public positions in the government that allow them to reach out to large number of people. Still, other women are “sympathizers” support terrorism indirectly by stirring up inter-religious and inter-ethnic enmity on the social media platform by promulgating ideas of their husbands and relatives.<sup>46</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This paper sought to explore and explain the rates of female terrorism and radicalization of women in Russia. It attributed women’s participation in terrorism to a confluence of individual and organizational motives and argued that those motives should be examined on the backdrop of ideas and practices concerning women’s roles in the society. In particular, it argued that women terrorists are more likely to emerge in patriarchal societies experiencing socio-economic or political changes.

---

<sup>45</sup> Edward Lemon, Ver Mironova, and William Tobey (2018) “Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia: Where Are They? Why Did They Radicalize? What Next?” Russia Matters, 7 December, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/jihadists-ex-soviet-central-asia-where-are-they-why-did-they-radicalize-what-next>

<sup>46</sup> Il’chenko 2016.