

Joan Smith, *Home Grown: How Domestic Violence Turns Men Into Terrorists*. London, UK: Riverrun, 2019. 310 pp., ISBN: 978-1-7874-7604-2. £12,05 [Paperback].

Reviewed by Christine Boelema Robertus

Charity, the proverb says, begins at home. So does terrorism, according to a new, thought-provoking study by Joan Smith. To cite one of her many examples from the eight chapters of this book: on Sunday, 12 June 2016, a twenty-nine-year-old man called Omar Mateen walked into a gay nightclub in Orlando. Inside the nightclub, Mateen opened fire and killed forty-nine people and wounded fifty-three others before being killed by the police in a shootout. While investigating his motives, it became clear that Mateen had displayed aggressive behavior to both his ex-wife and his second wife. His ex-wife stated that, in one instance, he had tried to choke her after she had not finished the laundry. In addition, family members stated that his second wife had no say in her life whatsoever. Smith describes Mateen as “a domestic tyrant who tried to compensate for gnawing feelings of inadequacy by beating up women in his own home” (p. 84).

Smith, a London-based human rights activist, novelist and feminist, contends that there is a striking connection between perpetrators of terrorist attacks and a history of domestic abuse, amounting to a catalogue of verbal and physical attacks on female relatives. While there is no definitive list of terrorists who had a pre-history of domestic abuse to fully support this claim, Smith argues that this is “only because no one has ever tried to produce one” (p. 9). The author argues that domestic violence should be considered as one of the highest risk factors of violence in the public space and that past downplaying or denying of violence against women and children that happened behind closed doors has had severe and unforeseen consequences for society.

Among the examples discussed by the author are the Kouachi brothers, who carried out the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* (2015) in Paris; Salman Abedi, who detonated a homemade bomb in the Manchester Arena (2017) during an Ariana Grande concert; and Kahlid Monsoon, who drove across Westminster Bridge (2017) hitting pedestrians and stabbing to death PC Keith Palmer. All men had previously experienced or engaged in domestic violence. According to their sister, the Kouachi brothers became a united front after years of domestic violence, neglect, and humiliation. During their childhood, the brothers were beaten by their father and neglected by their mother, who after their father died could no longer take care of the brothers herself. The author writes “It is likely that the two eldest boys, growing up in a patriarchal family, would have borne the brunt of their father’s violence and felt humiliated by it” (p. 28). Smith uses the Kouachi brothers to substantiate her claim that this type of destructive male rage is infantile in origin and that “psychological damage comes first and *enables* the ideology” (p. 37). Abedi had previously physically hit a female student on her head after telling her that her skirt was too short - however he was left unpunished. Monsoon, according to Smith, had been a violent abuser at home for most of his adult life which had resulted in several convictions. But as Smith says, “as he got older he got smarter and learned to conceal his violence in the private sphere” (p. 73).

In her book, Smith explains that some perpetrators became so dangerous because they grew up in families where extremist ideas and the use of violence had become normal. In one chapter, Smith suggests that ISIS is comparable to a criminal organization. She uses four London gang members dubbed ‘The Beatles’ and joined the Islamic State as an example. In Chapter 7 she discusses ‘angry white men’ who are not motivated by religion but rather blame the women as the root cause of their problems. Examples are Adam Lanza, who is responsible for the Sandy Hook massacre (2012); Elliot Rodger, who killed six women at Isla Vista (2014); and Kevin Neal, who murdered four people in a killing spree (2017)]. According to Smith, “the link between misogyny and public acts of slaughter is astonishing” (p. 255). Two of these men, Lanza and Neal killed female relatives (mother and wife) before killing strangers.

In her final chapter, Smith describes terrorism as the “most spectacular form of violence afflicting Western democracies” (p. 267). Nevertheless, according to the author, it remains heavily disputed whether terrorism [in itself] is a form of male violence. Yet, as Smith points out in the examples used for her book, the female relatives of extremists are often their first victims. She recognizes the fact that ideology plays a role in recruiting terrorists but that it is striking that most terrorists, mass murderers and suspects she uses as examples had a record of

abusing women. However, as she points out in Chapter 7, most of these records of domestic homicide, rape and stalking did not result in criminal convictions. Smith sees this as the failure of police and prosecutors to understand the risks of not prosecuting these men, thereby underestimating the seriousness of male violence.

To sum up, this book offers a new and original lens through which security services can monitor individuals who are at risk of radicalizing. Smith makes a strong case for considering a history of domestic violence as a risk factor and early warning sign. While the author deserves credit for identifying a new root cause of (some acts of) terrorism, the volume is not without shortcomings. There is a certain lack of coherence between the chapters of the book. Whereas some chapters focus on radicalised men and the attraction of ISIS to women and gang members, other chapters discuss mass murderers who are also referred to as angry white men. Nonetheless, her book is a very welcome addition on the etiology and psychology of terrorism.

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