



FEMMES FATA

THE SELF-STYLED 'JIHAD JANE':
COLLEEN LAROSE WAS
ARRESTED ON TERRORIST
CHARGES IN MARCH

As the world reels from yet another suicide bombing by female killers in Moscow, we ask why a number of women are turning to the front line of terrorism

WORDS: ANNA HART

From amateur footage of the bloody aftermath taken on a train passenger's phone to tearful eyewitness accounts of the tragedy that left over 50 dead, there's no shortage of gruesome details about the recent double suicide bombings on the Moscow Metro. But the detail that seemed to stun the world most was that "two female suicide bombers" had committed the atrocity.

Dzhennet Abdurakhmanova, 17, and Mariam Sharipova, 28 (both believed to be young widows of men killed by Russian forces in Chechnya) were the latest assailants to kill civilians in a terrorist act. The pair were quickly identified as being Black Widows, a group of Islamist Chechen female suicide bombers looking to avenge the

of your neck stand up. But we can extract a little comfort if we believe this is a one-off, the desperate actions of two women maddened by grief. Unfortunately, however, it's just one more example of the feminisation of suicide bombing – a growing number of women, most commonly aged between 17-24, are using themselves as human bombs for their cause.

It's difficult to believe. After all, ever since the attack in 2001 on the Twin Towers heightened awareness of terrorism, the Western world has been alert, looking out for suspicious people. And for most, that meant men. But growing evidence suggests that women pose just as much of a threat.

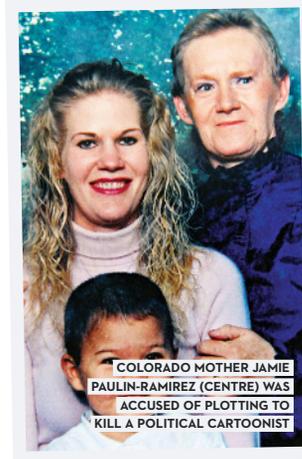
In February, a female suicide bomber killed 54 people and wounded 122 others in Baghdad after hiding explosives under her abaya. And

And while security measures to guard against male suicide bombers have improved over time, target states have been less adept at defending against female attackers.

A DEADLY THREAT

So why is it more shocking when women are behind acts of terrorism?

"As a society, we are very attached to certain myths, none more so than the image of women as inherently maternal," explains psychologist Cliff Arnall, of thefeelconsultancy.com,



COLORADO MOTHER JAMIE PAULIN-RAMIREZ (CENTRE) WAS ACCUSED OF PLOTTING TO KILL A POLITICAL CARTOONIST

population. The success of suicide bombers depends upon an element of surprise, as well as accessibility to targeted areas or populations. A woman fits these two requirements perfectly."

Chillingly, Moscow's Black Widows match this profile exactly. Abdurakhmanova and Sharipova are believed to have taken their orders from Doku Umarov, leader

of the Chechen rebel movement, who may have been inspired by developments in terrorist behaviour in the Middle East.

"Women have become a tactical

LES : THE WOMEN TURNING TO TERRORISM

deaths of their husbands or relatives.

The Chechen separatists became notorious in the Moscow theatre hostage crisis of October 2002 [which killed 170 although exact figures have never been verified] when Russia had hoped to have heard the last of them. But last month, Abdurakhmanova and Sharipova calmly walked into Lubyanka and Park Kultury Metro stations, positioned themselves next to innocent office workers and detonated bombs that killed and maimed.

The sheer horror and impact of this crime makes the hairs on the back

female suicide bombers are becoming an increasing fixture in the ongoing Afghanistan war. The Tamil Tigers, a separatist organisation in Sri Lanka, has used more female suicide bombers since the 1980s than any other militant group and it was one of their female followers who killed the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

US National Security officials recently admitted they've been warned that female suicide bombers representing Al Qaeda may attempt to enter US soil. In fact, in a recent article in the academic journal *Security Studies*, writer Lindsey O'Rourke argued that women have increasingly become key strategic assets in the realm of terrorism. Drawing on data from the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, O'Rourke notes that the number of female suicide attackers has risen from eight in the Eighties to well over 100 since 2000.

Suicide attacks by women also tend to be the most lethal. The average number of victims resulting from individual attacks by women is 8.4, versus 5.3 killed per male attack.

who has researched gender roles.

"Women are 'supposed' to be peaceful and nonviolent; nurturers, innately gentle and good."

This myth is reinforced everywhere: in art, movies and media. Men have the testosterone-fuelled potential to be naturally aggressive or violent. When a woman kills, society generally looks to find a male counterpart who has 'led her astray'. "The emotional impact of a female killer – never mind a terrorist – is staggering," says Arnall. "It's devastating to see society's caregivers turn to violence and destruction because it undermines the sense of security we have assumed all our lives."

Aside from the shock value, the pervasive belief that women are unlikely suspects makes them "useful" to terrorist organisations in more practical ways. "Suicide bombers are today's weapon of choice," says Debra Zedalis of the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College. "Suicide bombers are readily available, require little training, leave no trace behind and strike fear into the general

innovation because of the widespread assumption that women are inherently nonviolent," explains Dr Mia Bloom, author of *Dying To Kill: The Allure Of Suicide Terrorism*. "Women can bypass restrictive checkpoints and border policy in many countries more easily than men. Their clothing – often loose and long, particularly in Muslim societies – readily hides bombs, and they sometimes use the appearance of being pregnant to discourage searches. And so most women involved in terrorism today appear to fulfill a role as inexpensive cannon fodder."

This answers one question: why terrorist organisations want to recruit women. But it doesn't explain what the women see in terrorism.

Dr Keith Hayward, senior lecturer in Criminology at the University of Kent, and author of the 2008 book *Cultural Criminology* says, "Chechen Black Widows and female Palestinian suicide bombers often have a very similar back story. They've lost a husband, a son or a brother in an attack. Their land has been taken and they are confronted by an overwhelming



COLLEEN LAROSE WILL BE PUT ON TRIAL ON 3 MAY

➤ military superiority – against this background they have little or nothing to lose. With no future, they make a seemingly rational decision: ‘I must do something to change things for my children and for my community. Studies show these women display virtually no levels of psychological disorder: they know what they’re doing.’

Dr Mia Bloom adds that female bombers are motivated by the “Four Rs”: revenge, respect, redemption and relationship.

AMERICAN TERRORISTS

But it’s the rise of the ‘jihadi-wannabes’ – extreme Western converts to Islam who are prepared to kill themselves and others for the cause – that has caused the most panic in the media. A blonde-haired, blue-eyed Western woman is the most unlikely suspect.

“It’s got us suspecting every innocent-looking stranger we pass in the street of being a terrorist,” says psychologist Cliff Arnall. Like their Russian and Middle Eastern counterparts, Western suicide bombers feel they have nothing to lose, but they come from a completely different social and political background – one that, for Westerners, is chillingly recognisable.

Colleen LaRose, who called herself ‘Jihad Jane’, was an Islam convert who pledged her life to an extremist arm whilst her live-in boyfriend remained blissfully unaware that she had any religious convictions whatsoever.

Forty-six-year-old LaRose had been sharing an apartment in Philadelphia with boyfriend Kurt Gorman for six years. She cared for Gorman’s elderly father while he ran his own business in town and tearfully accompanied her boyfriend to his father’s funeral on 22 August 2009. The following day, when he came home from work, she was gone.

The next he heard was in October: his girlfriend LaRose had been arrested in Ireland, on charges of conspiring to murder the Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks. In 2007, Vilks became embroiled in an international controversy when he depicted the Islamic prophet Muhammad with the body of a dog. This resulted in Vilks receiving a number of death threats, including one from an Al Qaeda-affiliated group offering a bounty of £80,000 for his assassination, with a bonus of £35,000 if he was “slaughtered like a lamb.”

It’s alleged that while Gorman was at work, and with his sick father in the next room, LaRose had been online, conspiring with jihadist fighters and Muslim terrorists online. Terror experts have been quick to point to a troubled early life to partly explain why she

might be vulnerable to militant Muslim associations and activities. LaRose dropped out of school at 14, only to marry two years later – having lied about her age – to a 32-year-old Texan man. The marriage, which was reportedly both physically and mentally abusive, didn’t last long. Eight years later – at the age of 24 – she married

Rodolfo Cavazos, a gambler. It ended in divorce 10 years later, when LaRose could no longer handle the instability,

mounting bills and their increased dependence on alcohol. Local police records reveal a public drunkenness and disorderly conduct case in 2002.

In 2005 she met Gorman, in Texas on a business trip, and moved with him to Philadelphia. With no job, no friends and a boyfriend working long hours in the office, LaRose spent all her time on the internet. “I’m so bored I want to scream,” she wrote on her MySpace page. On May 21 2005, LaRose, depressed by the recent death of her own father, overdosed on prescription painkillers. Failing to kill herself, and telling medics that she “didn’t want to die” she was at a crossroads. After months of counselling for depression and alcoholism, LaRose apparently found spiritual rebirth in the form of Islam. Unfortunately, the extremist



MOSCOW METRO BOMBER DZHENNET ABDURAKHMANOVA AND HER LATE HUSBAND UMALAT MAGOMEDOV



2009, LaRose flew to Europe “with the intent to live and train with jihadists and to kill [Vilks]”, according to prosecutors.

As the world reeled at the news,

another blonde, blue-eyed American face emerged in the attempted assassination of cartoonist Lars Vilks: 31-year-old nursing student Jamie Paulin-Ramirez, from Leadville, a small town in Colorado. Her family find it hard to accept their daughter could be involved in terrorism – Paulin-Ramirez’s brother Mike Holcomb claimed she was just “easily influenced. Any man that came along in my sister’s life, she kind of followed like a lost puppy.” He explained that she met her fourth husband – an Algerian – online and converted to Islam. This led to her involvement with LaRose.

Authorities accuse Paulin-Ramirez of travelling to Europe to participate in a terrorist plot and say she accepted an invitation from LaRose to attend a terrorist training camp. So do these

terrorism gives them a sense of control in what seems like an out-of-control world,” says Dr Hayward.

LaRose, who faces a life sentence if she’s found guilty, denies the terror charges of conspiring and pledging to murder in the name of jihad. The prosecution claims that she exchanged emails with an individual from South Asia who instructed her to kill an unnamed Swedish resident:

“Kill [the individual] in a way that the whole kufr [non-believer] world gets frightened,” one email said. LaRose is alleged to have replied: “I will make this my goal till I achieve it or die trying.” Her trial will start on 3 May.

NOTORIETY

It’s still hard to understand for most how – or why – such women end up turning to terrorism. Dr Hayward says, “Every case is different. In Palestine, it’s not uncommon for suicide bombers to be celebrated with posters pasted up in prominent locations. The appeal of fame – even posthumous fame – is something we have to consider. In the case of Colleen LaRose, the vanity of naming yourself ‘Jihad Jane’ speaks volumes. For a woman who considers herself a ‘nobody’, it’s easy to understand the attraction and excitement that terrorism might offer.”

The incident involving LaRose and Paulin-Ramirez is yet another blow for the vast majority of moderate Muslims the world over, who are constantly battling misconceptions of what Islam means.

Shaista Gohir, executive director of The Muslim Women’s Network UK, explains, “Killing innocent people is against Islam, pure and simple. However, bloodthirsty extremists use Islam by misinterpreting texts to justify violence. Without religion, terrorists would find it difficult to recruit others to their cause as their actions would be seen as criminal.”

Unfortunately experts don’t believe these female suicide bombers are isolated cases. “Women are sure to participate more in terrorism,” warns Dr Bloom. “Because terrorist groups, whatever their ideology, are all pragmatic. The sad fact is that female suicide bombers are effective.”

Experts believe it’s not religion, class or gender that inspires terrorism. What does, they say, is frustration, marginalisation and powerlessness – real or imagined. So the challenge is, as Dr Bloom puts it, “to reassure these women that they can contribute more to society alive than dead.” That their role as a mother, a partner, a friend, is more important than a martyrdom.

“JIHAD JANES’ TEND TO BE ALIENATED, INDIVIDUALS WHO DEVELOP INTENSE GRUDGES AGAINST WIDER SOCIETY”

subgroup of Islam that gave her purpose to live advocated anti-Americanism and violence. In 2007, calling herself Fatima LaRose, she registered a video-sharing profile on dailymotion.com, and posted verbal attacks to the US troops in Iraq. In June 2008 she posted a video plea on YouTube using the name Jihad Jane, explaining that she was “desperate to do something to somehow help” suffering Muslims.

By December, she was exchanging emails with co-conspirators, pledging her willingness to die a martyr for the fundamentalist cause. On August 23,

Western women have anything in common with the suicide bombers in Russia or Palestine?

“This is a world apart from Palestinian female bombers and other women pressed into suicide actions,” says Dr Hayward. “In contrast, ‘Jihad Janes’ tend to be alienated individuals who, over time, develop intense grudges against wider society. The allure of terrorism stems both from the way it offers a purported solution to problems and also a chance for notoriety. Suddenly they are empowered individuals serving what they see as a just cause. In a nutshell,

