BOOK REVIEW

Terrorism and sexual violence: The case of the Great Lakes Region by Claudia Forster-Towne

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Over the past few decades the field of African and Postcolonial Studies have spanned some critical and multidisciplinary scholarship focused on violence and war on the continent. Often interdisciplinary in focus, such scholarship has widened our understandings of postcolonial turmoil on the continent, with insightful and nuanced analysis of identity, memory and subjectivities (amongst other socio-political aspects) that are evident in different case studies of violence and war. Most of these studies have taken for granted the relation and equation of sexual violence (as a specific form of violence that is enacted during times of conflict) and terrorism – proceeding to make analytic comments on the use of sexual violence as a form of strategic terrorism. It is this ‘taken-for-grantedness’ that Claudia Forster-Towne addresses in her work Terrorism and Sexual Violence: the case of the Great Lakes Region, aiming to provide evidence for the equation of sexual violence during times
of conflict to acts of terrorism. This is more than a terminological issue – naming acts of sexual violence during conflict as a form of terrorism provides a political and human rights basis from which to engage retributive justice.

The text is divided into six sections, with sections one and two providing conceptual and contextual backgrounds of the study respectively. In Section One, Forster-Towne introduces her epistemological orientation to the phenomenon of gender-based violence which also informs her conceptualization of war as a gendered phenomenon. The importance of feminist security perspectives is further highlighted with regard to how we may critique and analyse the systematic processes of violence against women during times of conflict. In Section Two, a brief contextual background to the on-going conflict in the Great Lakes Region is provided. These regions include Burundi, Rwanda, the DRC, Uganda and Tanzania, although the latter has not been engaged in continued violence but has inadvertently become affected by conflict in the region due to refugees residing in the country. Section Three provides a conceptual debate on terrorism as a concept, distinguishing both the official and academic definitions of the concept. The chapter does a remarkable job of illustrating the complexity of the term as well as its political ramifications more broadly. And yet, despite the varied contestations – both official and academic – we find that there are useful working characteristics that we can employ in the conceptual framing of sexual violence and terrorism, an issue that the next chapter takes up. In Section Four, sexual violence as it occurs both in conflict and post conflict is unpacked even further, elucidating the magnitude and scope of sexual violence. The chapter lays the groundwork for beginning to think about sexual violence as encompassing a deliberate and strategic form of violence in the region. In the next section, the correlation between sexual violence and terrorism is further exemplified. Section Five explores the reasons and consequences that serve the use of sexual violence as form of terror, one of the overriding aims of which is to uproot communities and ethnicity – physically, socially and psychologically. Section Six concluded the exploration by attempting to bring together the arguments and evidence of the preceding chapters.

Forster-Towne does a noteworthy job of highlighting the systematic and deliberate function of sexual terror in the region as political acts that are aimed at achieving specific outcomes, effectively providing an empirical and epistemological basis for further scholarship. The text is readily accessible and very well-written. Furthermore, it tells the stories of survivors of sexual violence as they narrate it, providing a ‘human’ face to the abstract and generic statistical accounts we are familiar with. Importantly, it reminds us of our global responsibility in not just naming sexual violence in the region as acts of terrorism but in how we respond to these crimes against humanity. I believe that this text will be of interest to students, scholars and practitioners with a wide range of interests.
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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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