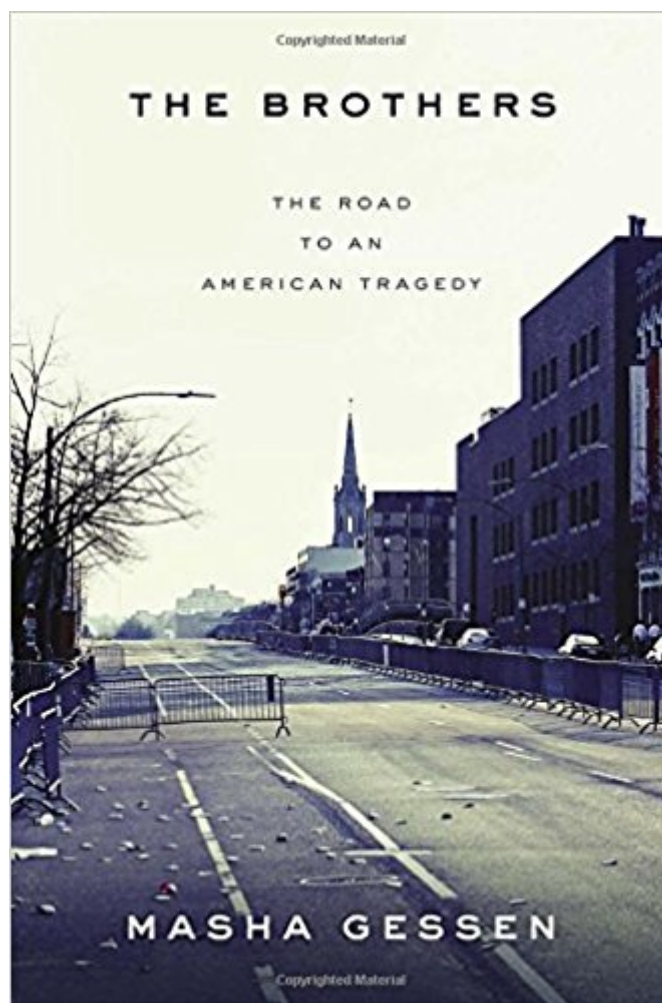


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The Brothers: The Road To An American Tragedy



Synopsis

An important story for our era: How the American Dream went wrong for two immigrants, and the nightmare that resulted. On April 15, 2013, two homemade bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston marathon, killing three people and wounding more than 264 others. In the ensuing manhunt, Tamerlan Tsarnaev died, and his younger brother, Dzhokhar, was captured and ultimately charged on thirty federal counts. Yet long after the bombings and the terror they sowed, after all the testimony and debate, what we still haven't learned is why. Why did the American Dream go so wrong for two immigrants? How did such a nightmare come to pass? Acclaimed Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen is uniquely endowed with the background, access, and talents to tell the full story. An immigrant herself, who came to the Boston area with her family as a teenager, she returned to the former Soviet Union in her early twenties and covered firsthand the transformations that were wracking her homeland and its neighboring regions. It is there that the history of the Tsarnaev brothers truly begins, as descendants of ethnic Chechens deported to Central Asia in the Stalin era. Gessen follows the family in their futile attempts to make a life for themselves in one war-torn locale after another and then, as new Americans, in the looking-glass, utterly disorienting world of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Most crucially, she reconstructs the struggle between assimilation and alienation that ensued for each of the brothers, incubating a deadly sense of mission. And she traces how such a split in identity can fuel the metamorphosis into a new breed of homegrown terrorist, with feet on American soil but sense of self elsewhere.

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Customer Reviews

This book was frustratingly perfunctory. It reads more like several articles stitched together than a sustained piece of journalism. As a former Soviet myself, I was originally drawn to what I assumed would be Gessen's nuanced insight into immigrant anomie and the larger Soviet trauma. Instead, I found her observations and articulations not only flat and dull, but also frequently off-target. Grab an antacid, because "The Brothers" is studded with maddeningly categorical statements that appear without so much as basic evidence or rhetorical support and often seem entirely to miss the mark (take, for example, the following statement: "Having your ethnic identity mean nothing to you, however, is unusual for American high school students. [...] Everybody is somebody, and it always means something"). For readers interested in a perceptive take on how the convergence of collective trauma and individual failure led to the events in Boston, I'd recommend the Boston Globe piece by Sally Jacobs, David Filipov and Patricia Wen. For those looking to read more about Chechnya, I'd recommend Anna Politkovskaya (A Dirty War, A Small Corner of Hell), who reads like an infinitely more robust and engaging "and engaged" writer and person. What really irritated me beyond Gessen's infuriatingly categorical, almost insolent style, however, was her assertion about Tamerlan being an FBI informant. Of course, that is a wholly and entirely plausible scenario, but to present what is, at this point, a tenuous conspiracy theory as fact is actually pretty irresponsible given Gessen's larger subplot, where the US and Russia are cast as nefarious twin secret police states "with America being the 'better liar' of the two. Needless to say, the conspicuous lack of factual support for rather provocative claims on Gessen's part is not only frustrating and imprudent, but rather ironic.

Masha Gessen has written a dry-eyed and detached account of the Tsarnaev brothers' family history, situating the two boys as best she can in the context of their dysfunctional family, who would have been most comfortable settling down in Dagestan but made the fateful decision to move to the US without thinking it through and without the inner and outer resources to cope in 21st-century America. Gessen is good at charting the ironies of the Tsarnaev family's situation but doesn't do a great job at bringing the reader close to them. It's clear from her Afterword that she wasn't able to get access to many people for interviews--they were too afraid--and she did a decent job with what she had. But we see this family from the outside from beginning to end. Gessen brings up the disturbing suggestion that the Tsarnaev brothers were pawns in a bigger game. She describes the murky intersection of the FBI, Watertown police, Tamerlan's past history of drug dealing and connections with the FBI...without drawing any final conclusions except that it's clear that Tamerlan

was on the FBI's radar and may have at one point been an informant. She thinks that someone else helped the brothers make the bombs, but it is, frustratingly, left up to the reader to connect the dots. I will say that Gessen does an excellent job in painting the grim picture of what Stalin did to the Chechens. She also has a realistic awareness of the pervasive corruption of both Russia and America that's born out of her personal experience, but which won't necessarily please American readers. While she doesn't focus as much on the Tsarnaevs themselves as I would have wanted, she certainly highlights the nasty and draconian way that the Tsarnaevs' friends and associates, including Dzokhar's clueless student pals, were treated by law enforcement. I hope that the book can one day be published in a new edition with more info.

Given that the majority of Americans no doubt view these brothers as jihadist Muslims that come from a family of losers who immigrated here from [someplace else, who really cares where] and took advantage of the American system by getting welfare, this book does a marvelous job of explaining and educating these same Americans about these brothers. Where were they from? What motivated their parents to come to America? What were the brothers like prior to the bombings? What was their home life like? What did their friends and acquaintances think and say about them? Once we read this, then these two guys become more than just two guys that blew up the Boston marathon because of their extremist reasons. In fact, based on the research by the author, just why they did it remains a big question. But the author never promises to explain their reasons, she just exposes their backgrounds and shares some actual facts about these two brothers. The questions she leaves us with at the end of the book are real. She cannot answer them. They are not conspiracy theories. They are questions. Who, What, Why did they do it? Did they have help? Did everything happen that day the way it was planned, or is there more we are not being told? We may never know the answers, but at least we know more about these two individuals who are now and forever will be held accountable for this event.

Probably a hard subject, but you come away from this book not really feeling like you know a lot more about the people involved. Large parts of the book are devoted to the detailing of the physical movements of the brothers and their family members between the US, Dagestan and other places - it makes the point that they were uprooted, but little else. Later on the book does get clearer, and appears to ultimately conclude that the brothers were not acting alone, but were tools in the hands of other forces. Not a hugely satisfying read, I am afraid. I did read it soon after the book about Breivik, the Norwegian criminal called "One of Us" which is an outstanding book and really tells you

much about what drove that man to his crimes.

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