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Investigating the Radical Right’s Presence in the Canadian Military

Yannick Veilleux-Lepage

In the early morning on 2 July 2020, Corey Hurren, a 46-year-old military reservist from Manitoba, rammed his pickup truck through the front gate of the grounds at Rideau Hall, which houses the official residence of the governor general of Canada and Rideau Cottage, the temporary residence of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his family. Armed with four weapons—a revolver, two shotguns, and a newly-banned Norinco M14 rifle—¹ Hurren was arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (Canada’s federal police corps) after a ninety minute stand-off. Hurren currently faces twenty-two charges, including ‘knowingly utter[ing] a threat to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’.²

Hurren’s motives remain somewhat unclear. In a handwritten two-page letter found on his person, he expressed a litany of grievances, including fears over the suspension of parliament due to the ongoing pandemic and the possibility that the country, under Trudeau’s leadership, was on its way to a communist dictatorship. Such a list sits alongside what has been described in the Canadian press as a mixture of ‘personal despair and financial distress’.³

Hurren’s exact motivation for this act remains somewhat nebulous. He has a long history of being drawn to conspiracy theories,⁴ including QAnon, a radical right conspiracy theory detailing a supposed plot by an alleged deep state against US President Donald Trump and his supporters.⁵

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- 1 “Trudeau Announces Ban on 1,500 Kinds of Assault Weapons,” *BBC News*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52505765>.
 - 2 Catharine Tunney, “Canadian Armed Forces Member Linked to Rideau Hall Security Incident Faces 22 Charges,” *CBC*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/rideau-hall-arrest-rcmp-1.5636245>.
 - 3 Mercedes Stephenson and Amanda Connolly, “Alleged Rideau Hall Intruder Cited Need for Wake-up Call in Letter,” *Global News*, July 7, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7149667/corey-hurren-rideau-hall-incident-letter/>.
 - 4 Alex Boutilier and Douglas Quan, “Accused in Rideau Hall Gun Incident Has Long History of Being Drawn to Conspiracy Websites,” *Toronto Star*, July 11, 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal/2020/07/11/accused-in-rideau-hall-gun-incident-has-long-history-of-being-drawn-to-conspiracy-websites.html>.
 - 5 Marc-André Argentino and Amarnath Amarasingam, *Q-Pilled: Conspiracy Theories, Trump, and Election Violence in the United States*, ICCT Policy Brief (The Hague,

The incident itself took place in the immediate aftermath of a protest on Parliament Hill, which saw a few hundred of far-right protesters descending on Ottawa to call for the prime minister to be prosecuted for diverse alleged crimes.⁶ These factors have led some analysts, including myself, to wonder whether this represented yet another incident of Canadian military personnel being in ideological alignment with radical right groups.

The threat

The threat posed by the presence of military personnel in radical right groups is a growing concern across NATO member countries, but the full extent of the problem remains unclear. Over the past few months, Ondrej Hajn and I have so far identified 213 individual cases of military personnel from the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, and the United States discharged or prosecuted for their participation in radical right groups since 2010. Only a fraction of cases involving soldiers discharged or prosecuted for harbouring links to the radical right is available through open-source information.

While these numbers may at first glance seem insignificant compared to the overall size of these nations' armed forces, two factors are worth bearing in mind. Firstly, publicly available information about individual military personnel involved in radical right groups is extremely hard to come by. In fact, while our dataset records fourteen cases in Canada, an internal document from the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) Military Police Criminal Intelligence Program found that fifty-three CAF personnel were identified as being part of hate groups between January 2014 and November 2018. This indicates that our dataset only represents the tip of the iceberg.

Daniel Koehler's report on the issue paints a much grimmer picture but stops short of identifying individual cases, as we have sought to do.⁷ In fact, in the majority of cases, the information was not disclosed by the military itself, but instead comes from media outlets, internet sleuths, and law enforcement. Secondly, history has shown us the potentially disastrous

Netherlands: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2020), <https://icct.nl/publication/q-pilled-conspiracy-theories-trump-and-election-violence/>.

6 Bruce Deachman, "COVID-19 Pandemic Unmasks Anger on Parliament Hill, Picnickers Elsewhere," *Ottawa Citizen*, July 2, 2020, 19, <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/covid-19-pandemic-unmasks-anger-on-parliament-hill-picnickers-elsewhere>.

7 Daniel Koehler, *A Threat from Within? Exploring the Link between the Extreme Right and the Military*, ICCT Policy Brief (The Hague, Netherlands: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2019), 34.

consequences of letting such radical right ideologies fester within the ranks of NATO militaries, giving succour to violent, racist ideologies that might lead to vigilante-style attacks.⁸

The threat posed by military personnel in radical right groups became apparent in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, when Timothy McVeigh, a US Army veteran radicalized by anti-government rhetoric and interactions with members of radical right militias, killed 168 people with a truck bomb. However, the events of September 11 and the resultant global war on terror largely side-lined concerns about extremism within military ranks. In 2008, the FBI warned that radical right groups were ‘making a concerted effort to recruit active-duty soldiers and recent combat veterans’. The report further highlighted that ‘military experience is found throughout the white supremacist extremist movement as the result of recruitment campaigns by extremist groups and self-recruitment by veterans sympathetic to white supremacist causes’.⁹

These warnings would prove to be prophetic, and the intersection of individuals aligned with radical right groups and the military appear to have plagued almost every NATO member country, where radical right groups have deliberately attempted to recruit individuals with military experience to ‘exploit their skills and knowledge derived from military training and combat’.¹⁰

Hateful conduct

Despite clear indication that the presence of military personnel among radical right groups poses both a serious security threat and can be a detriment to unit readiness and successful deployment, Western militaries have been generally tight-lipped about their efforts to root out such individuals. A notable exception is the German Military Counterintelligence Service (MAD), which recently released its first publicly available report on extremism within the German federal defense forces, the Bundeswehr.¹¹

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- 8 Sherene Razack, *Dark Threats and White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping, and the New Imperialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
- 9 Josh Gerstein, “Attacks Validate DHS Report, Some Say,” *Politico*, June 10, 2009, <https://www.politico.com/story/2009/06/attacks-validate-dhs-report-some-say-023606>.
- 10 “Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment,” Office of Intelligence and Analysis Assessment (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2009), 7, <https://doi.org/10.1037/e610232012-001>.
- 11 “MAD-Report: Jahresbericht Des Militärischen Abschirmdienstes Für Das Jahr 2019” (Militärischer Abschirmdienst, 2020), <https://www.bundeswehr.de/resource/blob/250916/4b7eaa170b1e399018d0c8f961f4233c/mad-report-2019-data.pdf>. For an English

Another positive step is last month's unveiling of the new Canadian Armed Forces policy on hateful conduct.¹² The policy provides a formal definition of hateful conduct as 'an act or conduct, including the display or communication of words, symbols or images, by a CAF member, that they knew or ought reasonably to have known would constitute, encourage, justify or promote violence or hatred against a person or persons of an identifiable group, based on their national or ethnic origin, race, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics or disability'.

Prior to the unveiling of this policy, defining hateful conduct was a task which had previously proven difficult for military brass.¹³ Members found to have violated the policy can face administrative or disciplinary action that can range from mandatory education, counselling and treatment to having their cases investigated by military police.

Along with the new policy, the Canadian Armed Forces announced that it will be implementing a new system to help monitor and track any suspected incidents of hateful conduct within its ranks.¹⁴ While details about this new system remain scarce, it has been reported that it will resemble the system created to monitor sexual misconduct in the ranks.¹⁵

While this new policy and the monitoring mechanism are clearly a step in the right direction that acknowledges the severity of the problem and the importance of addressing it in order to make the Canadian Armed Forces a more inclusive organization, it nonetheless falls short on several points. First, the new policy could be seen as a way of potentially

overview of this report, see Ondrej Hajn and Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, "An Overview of the German Military Counterintelligence Service Report on Extremism Within the German Federal Defence Force," *CARR Insight Blog*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.radic.alrightanalysis.com/2020/05/28/an-overview-of-the-german-military-counterintelligence-service-report-on-extremism-within-the-german-federal-defence-force/>.

- 12 National Defence, "DAOD 5019-0, Conduct and Performance Deficiencies," November 13, 2013, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/defence-administrative-orders-directives/5000-series/5019/5019-0-conduct-and-performance-deficiencies.html>.
- 13 Karen Pauls, "Canadian Military Works to Define 'Hateful Conduct' to Help It Detect and Discipline Extremists," *CBC*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/patrik-mathews-canadian-armed-forces-extremism-1.5461248>.
- 14 Karen Pauls, "Canadian Military Says New Hateful Conduct Policy Will Help Weed out Extremists in the Ranks," *CBC News*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.5652276>.
- 15 Lee Berthiaume, "Military Issues New Rules to Crack Down on Members of Hate Groups in Uniform," *CBC*, July 19, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/military-hate-orders-1.5655353>; National Defence, "2019 Sexual Misconduct Incident Tracking Report," June 4, 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/sexual-misconduct-tracking-report.html>.

decriminalizing hateful conduct within the CAF's ranks. As argued by Colonel Michel Drapeau, 'Under the new policy, the CAF has distanced itself from the Criminal Code, inviting commanding officers and members of the chain of command to treat any such wilful hateful conduct as an administrative, disciplinary matter'.¹⁶

Secondly, cases of hateful misconduct will continue to be dealt with behind closed doors, which makes it particularly hard for journalists, scholars, and concerned members of the public to examine the full extent of the phenomenon. Without direct access to this data, scholars and the public will have to continue relying on open-source data, which only paints a partial picture. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, while this new policy and the recent report from the German MAD are encouraging, the phenomenon has yet to be examined and tackled in a comparative way across all NATO countries, signalling a lack of efforts to coordinate practices and lessons learned amongst NATO member states concerning an increasingly transnational terror issue.¹⁷

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16 Pauls, "Canadian Military Says New Hateful Conduct Policy Will Help Weed out Extremists in the Ranks."

17 "Far-Right Extremism Is Becoming More Transnational," Expert Briefings (Oxford Analytica, January 1, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1108/OXAN-DB249197>.