

New details emerge of Canadian military's plans to suppress popular opposition amid COVID-19 pandemic

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An internal Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) investigation, conducted by retired Major-General Daniel Gosselin, has concluded that the military's top brass took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to launch a propaganda campaign modeled on the disinformation operations the CAF mounted while waging counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan. However, this time the intended target was the Canadian public.

In July 2020, the *Ottawa Citizen* revealed that on April 8, 2020, two weeks after the CAF had announced it was deploying 24,000 CAF personnel to assist the government during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) launched an "information operation." This euphemism referred to a propaganda campaign aimed at "shaping" public opinion as fears grew in the military of a "worst-case scenario" related to the pandemic—that is, mass popular anger and civil unrest. (See Canada's military launched operation to "shape" opinion amid pandemic)

The stated objectives of the propaganda campaign were to strengthen confidence in the government and to suppress social opposition. According to the admissions of several CAF officers, the operation was based on methods Canada's military had developed in Afghanistan to coerce villagers into supporting the regime established by the United States and its western imperialist allies, Canada included, after their neocolonial invasion of the country in 2001.

Gosselin's investigative report is dated December 2, 2020, but it was kept secret by the CAF. Only after filing an access to information request did the *Ottawa Citizen* obtain a copy, nine months later. In an article published on September 27, the *Ottawa Citizen's* defence correspondent, David Pugliese, revealed Gosselin's conclusion that the operation was the result of a mindset that permeated all levels of the CJOC, including its highest ranks. The CJOC reports directly to the Chief of the Defence Staff and directs all CAF operations except those under the responsibility of Canadian Special Operations Forces Command and NORAD, the joint Canada-US North American aerospace and maritime Defense Command.

According to Gosselin, the CAF high command saw the pandemic as a "unique opportunity" to test propaganda techniques on the Canadian population. To illustrate this, Gosselin quotes Vice Admiral Brian Santarpia, then chief of staff of the CJOC, as

saying, "This is really a learning opportunity for all of us and a chance to start integrating information operations into our routine."

Gosselin also reports that the propaganda operation was neither requested nor authorized by any branch of the Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government—be it the cabinet, the Prime Minister's Office or the defence minister.

Although the CJOC is purportedly subject to strict civilian oversight, above all in its operations within Canada, its then commander, Lt. Gen. Mike Rouleau, along with other senior officers felt that government authorization was not needed to plan and launch a propaganda operation targeting the Canadian population. Concerns of other military personnel about the legality of such an operation were brushed aside.

Jonathan Vance, then chief of staff of the Canadian military, suspended the operation on April 13, 2020, before terminating it on May 2. A few months later, on August 4, 2020, Vance mandated Gosselin to investigate the matter.

The suspended operation was not an isolated act. The *Ottawa Citizen* has revealed that no less than five propaganda or surveillance operations targeting the Canadian population took place in 2020.

It is relevant here to relate in chronological order the key events—insofar as they are known—surrounding these various operations.

April 8, 2020: The Canadian army launches an "information operation" under the pretext that the pandemic could cause civil unrest which the army will have to deal with, i.e., suppress. This operation will be officially canceled in early May.

Late May-early June 2020: As part of their deployment to long-term care facilities in Ontario, the CAF spies on mass protests taking place in response to the police killing of George Floyd. The CJOC collects information on the people who took part in those protests and taps into social media accounts to identify so-called "key players." Meanwhile, a military intelligence unit monitors social media and collects negative comments about Premier Doug Ford and relays them to the Ontario government. (See Canada's military spied on mass protests against police murder of George Floyd)

September 17, 2020: A letter apparently from the Nova Scotia government warns of a wolf pack in the Annapolis Valley. A few

days later, the Canadian military admits to being behind the fake letter, which imitated the logo of the Nova Scotia Department of Lands and Forests' wildlife division and used the name of a real provincial government employee without permission. According to the CAF, the fake letter was intended to test new skills for conducting propaganda missions at home and abroad. A US military intelligence expert consulted by the *Ottawa Citizen* said the exercise was similar to tactics used on the Afghan population by US soldiers and their allies.

October 2020: The CAF plans a new "Strategic Defence Communications" group to advance the "national interest" by influencing public attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, both in Canada and in foreign countries where the CAF is deployed. This new organization will use "aggressive information warfare" techniques to influence Canadians, including the use of military analysts and military retirees to "criticize on social media those who ask questions about military spending." This new group will be mandated with gathering and analyzing information about Canadians, non-governmental organizations and news outlets on social media.

October 13, 2020: The *Ottawa Citizen* reveals that the CAF awarded two contracts to British firm Emic Consulting to train military and civilian defense personnel in techniques to change the behaviors of a target group using the "behavioral dynamics" method developed by Cambridge Analytica's parent company, SCL Group. The tactics taught to CAF personnel by Emic Consulting were the "direct descendants" of the methods the SCL Group used to conduct propaganda in Afghanistan as a subcontractor to the US and British militaries.

November 2020: The *Ottawa Citizen* obtains copies of planning documents for the Strategic Defence Communications group and publishes an article revealing that the CAF has begun, in some respects, to implement the new structure.

November 13, 2020: Put on the defensive, the Defence Department announces the end of the plan to establish the Strategic Defence Communications group. Advisers to Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan say that no such plan has been or will be authorized, suggesting that the CAF had begun the implementation of the plan without authorization.

December 2, 2020: The Gosselin Report is submitted but not made public.

May 11, 2021: The *Ottawa Citizen* reveals spying on the late May-early June 2020 mass protests over the murder of George Floyd.

June 24, 2021: *Ottawa Citizen* writer Pugliese reveals that after investigations into incidents not covered by the Gosselin Report, Acting Chief of the Defence Staff Wayne Eyre and Deputy Minister of Defence Jody Thomas admitted that the army command had broken the rules and acted without authorization by employing propaganda techniques against the Canadian public and by gathering information from social media.

In response to the findings of these investigations, the CAF stated that new "clear guidelines" have been issued to ensure that Canadians are not targeted by propaganda operations in the future.

However, in his September 27 article, Pugliese, a journalist well connected in the Canadian military establishment, reported on an

ongoing dispute within Defence Headquarters in Ottawa over information operations. According to Pugliese, senior public affairs, military intelligence and operational planning officers would like to expand the military's activities in this area in order to better control information.

In reality, official assurances the CAF will no longer monitor Canadians or try to "shape" public opinion are worthless. With the deepening crisis of Canadian capitalism, and growing working class resistance, including to the federal and provincial governments' disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ruling elite is increasingly turning to the use of antidemocratic methods to suppress opposition and preserve the profit system.

In this context, the acknowledged links between the CAF's propaganda operations on Canadian soil and those it conducted in Afghanistan cannot be ignored. Canadian imperialism is bringing home to Canada the tactics it employed in seeking to subjugate an Afghan population hostile to foreign occupation.

The Afghan war, the longest in US history, ended with the puppet regime Washington had propped up with hundreds of thousands of troops, massive bloodletting, and trillions of dollars collapsing within weeks of the Pentagon withdrawing its forces. This was primarily the result of the deep-seated anger in the Afghan population at the crimes imperialism committed in that impoverished Central Asian country—collective punishments, torture, air strikes against civilians and unstinting support for a corrupt regime of warlords and tribal leaders, etc. The US debacle in Afghanistan has also dealt a heavy blow to its Canadian junior partner. The CAF intervention in Afghanistan was its largest military deployment since the Korean War and was used by the political establishment and corporate media to acclimatize the population to the CAF waging war.

The military's propaganda operations on Canadian soil are a serious warning to all workers. As in Europe with the rise of the far right under the protection of the capitalist state, and in the US with the January 6 coup attempt by Donald Trump backed by fascist thugs, Canada's ruling class is turning to authoritarian methods of rule to suppress growing social opposition. Workers must respond by building an independent working-class political movement based on a socialist and internationalist program to oppose militarism, attacks on democratic rights and the ruling class' ruinous profits-before-lives response to the pandemic.



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