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From Superiority to Supremacy: Exploring the Vulnerability of Military and Police Special Forces to Extreme Right Radicalization

Daniel Koehler

German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies (GIRDS)

ABSTRACT

This article explores potential vulnerability factors for extreme right radicalization of Special Operation Forces (SOF) and Special Weapons and Tactics (S.W.A.T.) personnel in Western countries. Drawing on inquiry commissions reports regarding extreme right behavior or ethical misconduct by six elite units from four countries (Germany, Canada, Australia, the U.S.), this article argues that a lack of diversity in gender and ethnicity, elite warrior subcultures, echo chamber effects and cognitive rigidity can become vulnerability factors for extreme right radicalization. Further, the need for targeted resilience among SOF and S.W.A.T. units designed to counter such processes is highlighted.

Introduction

Following the January 6, 2021, insurgent attack on the U.S Capitol building in Washington DC, attention to the potential threat posed by extreme right radicalization of law enforcement and military personnel has increased substantially. Highly publicized incidents of police officers or soldiers displaying sympathy or support for violent extreme right ideologies and organizations not just in the U.S. but also in other Western countries have spurred research on this issue as well.

Available data on U.S. extremists with a military background shows a notable increase in cases involving active-duty soldiers in the decade since 2010[1] and an all-time high in 2021.[2] Furthermore, as noted by Jensen et al.,[3] the distribution of extremism cases across military branches is highly disproportionate, with the Army and Marine Corps being most prominent. Combined, both branches account for 68 percent of the subjects between 1990 and 2021.[4] Given their overall size, Navy and Air Force are significantly underrepresented, while the Marine Corps with a smaller size than Army, Navy and Air Force is overrepresented and has the highest per capita rate of criminal extremists.[5] Despite this indication that military and by extension law enforcement branches or even units might be unequally affected by different vulnerability factors for radicalization to extremism, research has so far not progressed beyond a general focus on the police and military in this regard, with the exception of isolated case studies.[6]

This article addresses this gap in the scholarly debate with a theoretical exploration of potential vulnerability factors for extreme right radicalization among Special Operations Forces (SOF) and specialized tactical response officers of Special Weapons and Tactics (S.W.A.T.) teams. One might assume these units and their milieus are less vulnerable to extremist radicalization due to their overall more careful membership selection, highest demands on training and discipline, better equipment and higher operational responsibilities, and (supposedly) higher resilience against adverse outside influences.

However, multiple cases of former and active SOF and S.W.A.T. personnel from different Western countries have been documented who became involved in extremist activities, developed extremist attitudes, or – as a proxy indicator for vulnerabilities to excessive and extreme violence or criminal acts – committed war crimes. In March 1993, for example, two soldiers of the elite Canadian Airborne Regiment tortured and killed a 16-year-old Somali teenager in custody during a peacekeeping operation as the peak of a series of events that in the end left dead a total of four Somalis. In the subsequent string of reporting and parliamentary investigations, numerous links between the Airborne Regiment and various extreme right-wing groups surfaced, such as one soldier's involvement in the racist Ku Klux Klan. Further incidents involved airborne soldiers wearing white supremacist tattoos and providing training to the neo-Nazi organization Heritage Front. As a result, the Airborne Regiment was disbanded.[7]

In the U.S., former SOF soldiers were influential in the growing extreme right environment after the Vietnam War. An SOF veteran named Steve Miller became a chaplain of the Carolina Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (CKKKK)[8] and even designed his own SOF styled training camp for extreme right activists between 1982 and 1983.[9] The CKKKK, which turned into the extreme right White Patriot Party, was founded and led in the 1980s by Frazier Glenn Miller who had retired from the Army in 1979 as a Master Sergeant after 20 years of active duty, including two tours in Vietnam and 13 years as a member of the Green Berets. Glenn Miller was sentenced to death and executed in May 2021 for a 2014 triple murder driven by an anti-Semitic motive.[10] Another example would be retired Green Beret Lieutenant Colonel and white power activist James "Bo" Gritz, who was the SOF commander of 1992 Ruby Ridge standoff leader Randy Weaver and was called in by the authorities to help negotiate with the group.[11]

In more recent history, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) resulted a series of prolonged military conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which some SOF soldiers for example belonging to the U.S. Navy SEALS or Australian Special Forces have committed war crimes, such as the execution of unarmed prisoners of war (POW) or the desecration of bodies in both countries.[12] An increased demand for more SOF personnel might have resulted in the lowering of recruitment standards, especially in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks in 2001.[13] A case in point is Matt Buschbacher, who attended a neo-Nazi leadership conference by the National Alliance organization in August 2002 as an active-duty Navy SEAL. Buschbacher, who was later stationed in Baghdad, had a long-standing connection with extreme right groups at least since 1998 and completed the SEAL training in Coronado in October 2001.[14]

With the global spread of violent and extremist conspiracy movements such as QAnon and anti-vaccination ideologies, it has been noted with concern by observers that some former and active SOF members have openly embraced these narratives.[15]

Around the same time, between 2020 and 2021, Germany also experienced a wave of highly publicized cases of extreme right radicalization in its elite military and law enforcement communities. After a whistleblower letter written by an officer of the Germany military's (Bundeswehr) elite Commando Special Forces (Kommando Spezialkräfte – KSK) that raised awareness to unhinged extreme right radicalization within some of the units' platoons was published, the German Ministry of Defense decided to completely disband one combat company in July 2020.[16] Also, several German specialized tactical response or S.W.A.T. units were also impacted by alleged cases of extreme right radicalization. In November 2019, it became public that officers from a "Spezialeinsatzkommando" (SEK, roughly analogous to a S.W.A.T. team in the U.S.) in the state of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania held extreme right views and were connected to militant prepper groups of which some members were allegedly involved in plotting terrorist attacks.[17] One of this SEK's units was disbanded, the overall leadership removed, and an expert investigation committee tasked with assessing the scope of the problem.[18] In June 2021, the SEK unit of Frankfurt was disbanded and its 18 active officers suspended after they were found to have been involved in a racist and extreme right chat group.[19] Extremist radicalization of military and law enforcement personnel can pose significant threats to the public and compromise operational capabilities,[20] for example by extremists who are highly trained experts in marksmanship, use of explosives, heavy weapons, counterintelligence, counterinsurgency, and various forms of irregular warfare could be significant.

With these examples in mind, this article aims to address the main research question of which characteristic features of Western military special forces and elite police tactical response units might theoretically pose vulnerabilities to extreme right radicalization or infiltration?

It must be clearly pointed out that this article does not assume that SOF and S.W.A.T. communities are significantly more prone toward radicalization and extremism compared to other military or law enforcement milieus, for which little to no actual empirical evidence exists due to lack of overall data that would allow the comparison between units and milieus. The only exception known to the author is Germany, where the military intelligence responsible for counter-extremism (Militärischer Abschirmdienst – MAD) has confirmed that the KSK is significantly overrepresented in its overall case load,.[21] Otherwise, however, this article is based on the premise that SOF and S.W.A.T. units simply have different vulnerability factors than other units or branches in their respective organizations, which does not allow to predict prevalence rates of extremist radicalization. Clearly and by far, the large majority of soldiers and officers in these units serve with the utmost dedication, commitment, professionalism, and integrity. Warning about adverse influences and risk factors that negatively impact operational capabilities and professionalism in these formations does not equal stigmatization or stereotyping. By increasing the knowledge and awareness about potential risk factors, it becomes possible to target resilience building and prevention measures toward these vulnerabilities with the goal to further strengthen and professionalize military and law enforcement communities against hostile outside influences.

This article approaches the research question by drawing on empirical insights provided through existing reports by inquiry commissions tasked with investigating incidents of extreme right behavior or ethical misconduct including war crimes

committed by members of six such elite units from four countries (Germany, Canada, Australia, the U.S.), as well as the limited available research literature on extremist radicalization in the police and military in general. Based on a search in open source and academic databases, these four countries are so far the only ones that have produced such investigation reports to the knowledge of the author and were therefore included in the empirical base for the following exploration. Of these reports, four at least in part focus on extreme right radicalization in behavior and attitudes of members from SOF and S.W.A.T. units (i.e., the reports from Germany and Canada). The additional two reports from Australia and the U.S. take a broader perspective but also include ethical misconduct, including racist behavior, and war crimes. Since so little empirically based insights into the SOF and S.W.A.T. communities regarding misconduct, radicalization and war crimes exist, these two additional reports are highly important to shed further light on inside dynamics and mechanisms in these milieus.

As a theoretical exploration, this article does not claim generalizability or completeness of the suggested vulnerability factors. Nevertheless, the factors discussed in detail here are based on the findings of investigation commissions that had extensive access to primary data in their task to explain extreme right radicalization and ethical misconduct by SOF and S.W.A.T. personnel. In its exploration of this material, this article makes three important assumptions:

First, within military and law enforcement environments, multiple sub-communities with their unique organizational subcultures and identities exist, tied in part to specific units, branches, tasks, or operational responsibilities.[22] These different sub-communities or milieus within a military or law enforcement environment display different vulnerability factors for extremist radicalization and recruitment, which can be seen as a mixture of the milieu-specific culture, operational characteristics of the typical tasks performed, and organizational characteristics of the specific unit or milieu.

To illustrate this assumption, it stands to reason that within a logistical support unit with little combat experience and a high personnel turnover rate different vulnerability factors are relevant than within a specialized combat unit with high direct conflict experience and membership coherency for example due to the suspected influence of mental health effects on radicalization[23] (e.g. post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] through combat) and strong collective identities.[24]

Second, it is assumed that despite the complex and non-linear relationship between (extremist) attitudes and behavior,[25] even fully extremist or adjacent attitudes held by law enforcement and military personnel which do not lead to any illegal or illegitimate action still pose a significant danger to the operational capabilities of these organizations as they likely will negatively impact the public's trust into their impartiality, professionalism, and credibility, which could erode the fundament of Western democratic rule of law, namely the state's monopoly of force.

Third, the comparability of SOF and S.W.A.T. milieus across the countries discussed here is assumed due to broadly shared political and legal frameworks (i.e. Western democracies based on the rule of law). In addition, except Australia (which is nevertheless member of the Enhanced Opportunities Program) the countries are NATO member states and hence share similar military standards in education, training, tactics, and strategic concepts up to joint exercises and shared capabilities. Likewise, these countries have a deeply integrated law enforcement and intelligence structure, sharing

information, training, and expertise for example within the so called Nine Eyes cooperation framework. Of course, national differences are not negated here and in fact more detailed and even unit specific explorations are warranted in future research.

Terminology

Extreme Right

In this article, the term "extreme right" is based on Miller-Idriss'[26] definition as "attitudes, scenes, groups, and political parties that espouse some combination of xenophobic, antidemocratic, authoritarian, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, antigovernment, fascist, homophobic, ethnonationalist, or racist values, beliefs, actions, and goals", such as for example neo-Nazi, white power, and hate groups.

Since the extreme right is not a consistent and monolithic movement but rather a web of partially overlapping groups, subcultural styles, and ideologically more or less connected variants evolving around the support for violence and human inequality, it is necessary to differentiate here between two types of extreme right radicalization of military and law enforcement personnel in order to better operationalize the key research question of this article: a) the association with or membership in groups or organizations that are located within the extreme right spectrum either by self-definition or external labeling (e.g. through law enforcement and intelligence services) and b) the development of attitudes that are either part of the core of extreme right ideology (e.g. racism, neo-Nazism, glorification of the Shoah, white supremacy) or closely related (e.g. toxic masculinity, anti-Semitism) by police and military personnel. Both might manifest in unison or separately.

Special Operation Forces

It has been pointed out repeatedly that the term "Special Operation Forces" itself is contested.[27] Within NATO, for example, special operations are defined as "military activities conducted by specially designated, organized, trained, and equipped forces, manned with selected personnel, using unconventional tactics, techniques, and modes of employment."[28] Their operational tasks, such as special reconnaissance, seizing, destroying, capturing, or recovering through short-duration strikes,[29] are, according to Olson, mainly employed to gain an "asymmetric advantage" over adversaries.[30] In regard to who is tasked with such operations, Shamir and Ben-Ari name three main characteristics: 1. small team units operating behind enemy lines with special capabilities to find innovative solutions to complex problems; [and] 2. specially selected and highly trained personnel.[31] In short, at least two core characteristics of SOF units are their multi-purpose role and readiness to deploy across various scenarios and contexts, as well as their relative autonomy and responsibility to independently adapt to ad hoc challenges or new threats especially in high-risk operational contexts involving extreme stress and intense combat over a long period of time. Naturally, these exceptional tasks and high demands require personnel that is both physically and mentally resilient and trained to highest standards. Initial recruitment and the following training are typically described as rigorous and highly competitive.[32] It is noteworthy in lieu of this article's

focus that cognitive skills such as adaptability, coping, reflection, and ability are key features beyond mental toughness that are screened for in SOF recruitment and facilitated in follow up training,[33] which could also be seen as potential protective factors against extremist recruitment and radicalization.

Specialist Tactical Response Law Enforcement

Most commonly, specialist tactical response law enforcement units are equaled to the North American model of "Special Weapons and Tactics" (S.W.A.T.) teams, defined by the United States National Tactical Officers Association (NTOA) as a: "designated law enforcement team whose members are recruited, selected, trained, equipped and assigned to resolve critical incidents involving a threat to public safety which would otherwise exceed the capabilities of traditional law enforcement first responders and/or investigative units."[34] However, considerable diversity exists between various forms of tactical response law enforcement units with different specializations and tasks, as well as organizational and operational characteristics. According to the NTAO, so called "tier 1" tactical units must be fully mission capable to respond to a wide array of scenarios, including all of the following: "hostage rescue, barricaded gunman, sniper operations, high-risk warrant service and high-risk apprehension, high-risk security operations, terrorism response, special assignments and other incidents which exceed the capability and/or capacity of an agency's first responders and/or investigative units."[35] Hence, similar to SOF, such specialized tactical response police officers operate in high-risk environments which pose significant threats to themselves, as well as their fellow officers and the general public. In consequence, these officers too are expected to maintain an expert status in the handling of specialized weapons and other equipment (e.g. ballistic shields, breaching equipment) in addition to maintaining highest standards in physical and mental fitness. These demands also create the basis for exceptional responsibilities and expectations placed on these officers, since "[i]t is the ability of a SWAT officer to perform advanced technical skills and tactics at higher intensities, while wearing these heavy loads, that constitutes the reason these officers are typically called on to handle the most dangerous jobs".[36]

Of course, the difference between military and combat on the one hand and law enforcement in non-combat contexts on the other are significant and could complicate combining these two environments for this article's purpose. Naturally, police and military culture are vastly different in nature. However, the brief descriptions of SOF and S.W.A.T.'s main tasks and mission bandwidth show a significant overlap, especially in the fields of counter-terrorism and hostage rescue. Both organizational environments set the highest standards for personnel recruitment and training regarding physical fitness and mental resilience (among other requirements), involve the responsibility to handle lethal force in highly complex and dangerous scenarios, the ability to operate and deploy across all conditions, as well as the mastering of a wide array of advanced weapons and equipment. Also, both milieus have developed distinct cultures of elite warrior cultures (see discussion section). Lastly, at least some SOF such as the Navy SEALS have increasingly been used to conduct policing operations in Iraq or Afghanistan,[37] while the militarization of U.S. law enforcement has often involved the use of military equipment, combat veterans, and tactics by S.W.A.T. units.[38] Still, it

must be pointed out that even within SOF or S.W.A.T organizations and units different cultures and climates may exist, let alone when crossing the boundary between law enforcement and military. Clearly, one of the core arguments of this article is to better understand branch and unit specific dynamics in relation to potential vulnerabilities toward extremist radicalization.

Prior Research on Military and Law Enforcement Extremist Radicalization

Military

Radicalization of military personnel is still a comparatively under-researched subject and typically focused on various specific manifestations that each might contribute to or result from involvement in what today is subsumed under the term "violent extremism". For example, factors and processes involved in war crimes committed by soldiers for example in the Second World War[39] or the Vietnam War[40] such as group pressure, desensitization to violence,[41] or the dehumanization of the enemy have been explored. Furthermore, issues such as racist,[42] nationalist,[43] or authoritarian[44] attitudes among military personnel and the complex relationship with patriotism and military culture were the focus of prior research.

Research on extreme right radicalization of military personnel in the U.S. increased significantly after the 1995 Oklahoma bombing perpetrated (among others) by Iraq war veteran Timothy McVeigh. Subsequent analyses mostly focused on the threat to operational capabilities and security as well as combat effectiveness of military operations if infiltrated by individuals with committed anti-government extremist views.[45] Similarly, major events such as the Oklahoma bombing caused an uptick in public and academic interest in this phenomenon in other countries as well. Razack for example showed how deeply embedded racism and a broader acceptance of extreme right ideology was in the Canadian Airborne regiment after the Somalia incident.[46] Germany has a long history of extreme right terrorist groups, plots, and attacks involving active-duty military personnel.[47] In consequence, one of the few studies exploring political attitudes of German military officers was conducted in 1978 and found a disturbingly higher prevalence of extreme right convictions compared to the general public. From 683 surveyed officers (all three classes of the Bundeswehr Universities) a full 10 percent displayed such viewpoints.[48]

Despite the lack of any evidence that military service or training in itself might lead to extremist radicalization, it has been suggested that several aspects inherently tied to the military might facilitate extremist recruitment and radicalization, such as for example group polarization, isolation from opposing political viewpoints, or reciprocal effects from normalization of violence.[49] Further, mental health effects, for example PTSD suffered from combat experience, and struggles to cope with identity shifts especially during the transition from active duty to civilian life have also been suggested and partially shown in empirical work to be relevant influence factors.[50] In particular, the perceived lack of appreciation for personal achievements and sacrifices by a government or society might cause alienation and frustration, which in turn could be harnessed by extremist groups claiming to provide such status and recognition.[51] Finally, toxic hypermasculinity dominant in military 'warrior culture' that idolizes

an archetypical hero in oftentimes racialized concepts (e.g. white, straight, male) can even impact female soldiers and veterans and "create pathways of cultural and organizational familiarity".[52]

Regarding similarities between radicalization processes and military socialization, it has been suggested that the psychological process of becoming a soldier (i.e. "martialization") shares many parallels with becoming an extremist, such as the sense of vicarious injustice, the need for belonging/identity, meaning, excitement, and glory, as well as active recruitment, indoctrination, and group solidarity.[53] Both environments can be described as normative enforcing based on a salient and strong collective identity, which is centered around the use of violence and strong ideals (e.g. honor, justice, heroism, bravery, warrior culture) aimed at protecting or spreading a specific political ideology. Additional indications for potential psychological similarities have been suggested by Harris, Gringart, and Drake, who studied disengagement from what they called "ideological groups" in which "members are encouraged to adopt salient group roles that overlap other self-aspects", such as for example special operations forces and white supremacists (among others).[54]

Police

Research on extremist radicalization of law enforcement personnel is underdeveloped too. The predominant focus in this field lies on adjacent attitudes and behavior, such as racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, or Islamophobia, which are nevertheless important likely antecedents for potential affiliation with and support for violent extreme right groups and their ideologies. Several studies have demonstrated that implicit biases or racialized stereotypes affect police officers' perspective and focus on ethnic minorities as potential criminal suspects.[55] Further, such attitudes are known to negatively impact law enforcement personnel's decisions and actions,[56] especially when interacting with high levels of stress and workload.

In particular, racism is seen as a structural feature of law enforcement and criminal justice systems in the U.S.[57] or a wide-reaching influence on individual actions and attitudes of officers.[58] Experimental studies have shown that racialized stereotypical thinking impacts police officers decisions to use firearms but in significantly less or equal degree compared to the general public, which indicates that even though racism does play a role among law enforcement personnel, it is likely not more pronounced than in the surrounding environment.[59]

A series of German studies on xenophobic and racist attitudes among police officers caused by multiple incidents involving law enforcement personnel in the early 1990s largely came to similar conclusions. Such attitudes, it was found, are not significantly more widespread among the police force than in the overall population and explained through specific risk factors in the form of internal and external occupational strains, such as for example working times, inadequate wages and material resources, lack of respect from society, perceived ineffectiveness, perceived negative media reporting, esprit de corps, external control pressure and traditionally conservative and maintained concepts of the "enemy".[60] These studies point to the cause of such attitudes as a combination of overstraining through working conditions and a collective identity (esprit de corps) built on a perceived mismatch between the police's societal role or

status and the respect or recognition of this status by the society at large and the milieus police officers interact with on a daily basis. The resulting frustration could then be channeled toward those groups holding the least social power to counteract (e.g. immigrants, left-wing students, people without housing or refugees) in the form of "stereotypes as generalization of negative experiences".[61]

One of the very few longitudinal studies focusing on the development and change of xenophobic attitudes as well as impact of specific educational interventions (here: intercultural training) among 160 German officers points out the positive value of specific counter-radicalization education firmly embedded in the training curriculum but also the negative impact of the so called "practice shock", when young officers leave the academy and join the police force on the street, suggesting that officers need to be prepared and closely supervised during this critical transition period.[62]

However, little work has so far been done on the specific scope, nature, reasons, and effects of extreme right radicalization of law enforcement personnel, despite the various initially cited public accounts of such cases. This might be due to the lack of data access, as has been noted by the Minnesota Justice Research Center (MNJRC): "There is effectively no publicly available data on the prevalence of white supremacists in law enforcement. Instead, most of what we know arises through accidental discovery and scandal".[63] However, some existing studies have suggested that extreme right radicalization of law enforcement personnel might significantly impact the criminal justice system, for example through "investigations tainted by racial nepotism; dynamics surrounding the police officers' code of silence; and the surreptitious influence of Klansmen, neo-Nazis, and their sympathizers".[64] Johnson, mapping the scope of publicly documented cases, even called the problem an "epidemic" in the U.S., with incidents in over "100 different police departments, in over forty different states, in which individual police officers have sent overtly racist emails, texts, or made racist comments via social media",[65] starkly reducing the public trust in law enforcement agencies and reforms of the criminal justice.

Little is known about the mechanisms involved in the formation of political attitudes of law enforcement personnel, however. Using an online survey of 781 American police officers from 48 U.S. states for example, Silver found that individual officer endorsement of traditional police culture and support for the use of force as well as support for procedurally just tactics is mostly influenced by organizational factors (agency size and type) among line officers,[66] further indicating the main assumption of this article that branch and unit-specific factors should be considered when exploring potential risk factors for extremist radicalization.

Research mapping the political attitudes of police officers and potential influencing factors are equally rare in Germany. One such study, however, was finished in 2020 by the Interior Ministry of the state of Hessen.[67] The report found that of 3,418 questioned officers, 1.7 percent ($n = 57$) placed themselves on the far or "distinctively" right end of the political spectrum. Most officers (95.8 percent) subscribed to the political center and moderately left or right position.[68] Statistically significant differences were found regarding gender (female officers express less right-wing attitudes) and duty placement in a precinct that is regularly confronted with violence and high levels of crime (officers express more right-wing attitudes), of which the latter factor supports the view of earlier scholarship that particular job related strain

factors (e.g. regular encounter of violent and hostile populations) increased attitudes leading to extreme right radicalization (i.e. racism, xenophobia, pro-violence).[69]

None of the existing scholarship has so far addressed SOF and S.W.A.T. units in relation to potential radicalization factors.

Inquiry Reports on SOF and S.W.A.T. Incidents

In addition to the relevant research literature, reports by inquiry commissions looking into specific extremist attitudes and behavior or war crimes involving SOF and S.W.A.T. units from Germany, the U.S., Canada, and Australia have been produced in the last decades. The reports and accompanying research relevant to the focus of this study treat six separate units and incident contexts as well as the SOF community at large from four countries: 1. the German KSK;[70] 2. the German SEK unit of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania;[71] 4. the German SEK unit of Frankfurt (Hessen);[72] 4. the Canadian Airborne Regiment and the so called "Somalia affair";[73] 5. the Australian Special Air Service Regiment,[74] and 6. the U.S. SOF community. In the case of the latter two reports, their main focus lies on the investigation of war crimes and general ethical misconduct: The "Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force Afghanistan Inquiry Report" (in short "Brereton Report") published in November 2020 explores war crimes committed by SOF soldiers of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) during the war in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2016[75] and its accompanying research[76] provides highly relevant insights into the psychology and mechanisms at play within that specific SOF environment leading to extreme acts of violence and atrocities that are at least in part directly applicable to this article's main research question. Similarly, in the U.S. a series of allegations of ethical misconduct and war crimes brought up against the SOF community during the WoT have resulted in a 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2018 which called on the Special Operations Command (SOCOM) to conduct an assessment of the SOF culture, leading to the "Comprehensive Review (CR) of professionalism and ethics programs for special operations forces" completed and published in 2020.[77]

Taken together, these inquiry commission reports on extreme right radicalization or serious ethical misconduct by SOF and S.W.A.T. units have collected an array of factors used to explain the incidents and radicalization (for an overview see Table 1). Some of them, such as organizational deficiencies, ignorance of signs of problematic developments, overburdening through excessive deployment, leadership failure, or inadequate personnel selection are not inherently tied to extreme right radicalization but are rather generic risk factors for the deterioration of a unit's operational capacity, skills, and professionalism. Of course, police and military organizations should provide any unit with adequate training, rest and recovery periods, professional and well-equipped leadership, and recruits who are both physically and mentally fit to perform their duties. Screening for (any kind of) extremist attitudes and organizational links or problematic personalities should be a standard measure and indeed has become a key feature of counter-extremism measures in the police and military in many countries.

A second key but nonetheless nonspecific risk factor for ethical misconduct in general is that of individual gatekeepers with high credibility among enlisted personnel or beat cops, mostly noncommissioned officers or patrol and shift commanders below the

Table 1. Overview of inquiry commissions' findings.

	KSK[a] (Germany)	SEK Frankfurt[a] (Germany)	SEK Mecklenburg[a] (Germany)	CAR[a] (Canada)	Australian SOF[b]	U.S. SOF (CR)[b]
Extremist Attitudes and Behavior Brought into Unit by Key Individuals			X		n/a	n/a
Extremist Attitudes NOT Caused by Specific Tasks			X		n/a	n/a
Lack of Knowledge about Extremist Codes, Symbols, Ideology			X		n/a	n/a
Echo Chamber Effect	X	X	X	X	X	
Leadership Failure	X	X	X	X	X	X
Inadequate Personnel Selection	X		X		X	X
Excessive Overburdening Through Deployment/ Lack of Resources	X			X		X
Excessive and Inappropriate Elitist Culture / Identity of Superiority	X	X		X	X	
Uni-Dimensional Black and White Friend-Foe Thinking		X				
Unit-Specific Problematic Collective Norms and Identity or Subculture		X		X	X	X
Excessive Specialization/ Lack of Professional Experience Diversity	X	X				
Lack of Diversity in Gender or Ethnicity		X				
Structural and Organizational Deficits	X			X	X	X

[a]Report either specifically focuses on extreme right radicalization or incidents under investigation were in part connected to extreme right motives.
[b]Report focuses on general ethical misconduct, incl. war crimes.

officers' level. These persons, both in military and police organizations and especially in elite units, are typically chosen for their high level of practical expertise and experience in combat or patrol duty. In many documented cases of ethical misconduct by elite units, it was this personnel level which often effectively counteracted the command-and-control hierarchy, controlled the flow of information to superior levels, and significantly influenced alternative norms and values in the small groups they led.[78]

A third, but nevertheless equally key risk factor in this category, is the simple lack of knowledge and subsequent ignorance of warning signs related to adverse and dangerous developments within the unit. A case in point is an incident involving elements of the elite U.S. Marine Corps Scout Snipers, who posed in front of a flag displaying the Nazi SS bolted runes in Afghanistan in September 2010. Later investigations determined that the Marines had likely mistaken the Nazi symbol to refer to "Scout Snipers" and thereby point to a significant lack of historical knowledge and awareness about basic extreme right codes and symbols.[79] Comparable to basic knowledge of warning signs for example about suicidal tendencies, PTSD, substance abuse, or other potentially harmful and adverse developments, being ignorant of basic extremist codes and symbols allows these ideologies and narratives to intrude and spread within such units and communities without necessarily being based on supportive attitudes and convictions.

However, some of the factors identified in these reports are indeed at least theoretically linked specifically to extreme (right) radicalization and infiltration of SOF and S.W.A.T. units and must be scrutinized in detail in order to design and implement counter-strategies adapted to the unit or milieu level. In the following, the article will hence proceed to explore those factors, namely: lack of diversity in gender and ethnicity, elite warrior subculture, echo chamber effects and cognitive rigidity.

Discussion

Lack of Diversity in Gender and Ethnicity

Western SOF and S.W.A.T. units as well as their communities are typically dominated by or exclusively staffed with white men. The extraordinarily high entry requirements and selective screening procedure might risk causing a perception of physical and mental, i.e. natural or biological, superiority over women and ethnic minorities among some SOF and S.W.A.T. community members.

Lack of gender diversity in SOF and S.W.A.T. units is often portrayed as caused by the physical entry requirements. However, considerable differences exist among specific units. For example, by 2022, 100 female soldiers have graduated from the U.S. Army Ranger School.[80] The first female soldier to complete the Navy SEALS Special Warfare Training was reported in July 2021.[81] In Germany, the lack of female members of military elite units is also explained with the lack of applications. By the end of 2021, only four female soldiers applied to the KSK in its 25 years of history. Only one made it through the first screening phase. In other German military SOF units, such as the combat divers, female soldiers have never applied.[82] In addition, however, it seems that significant opposition against the integration of women exists in these milieus. According to a 2016 RAND study for example, 85 percent of survey participants opposed letting women into their specialties, and 71 percent opposed women in their units, with SEALs, Air Force Special Operations Command Special Tactics Team members, and noncommissioned officers most strongly opposed.[83]

Regarding tactical response units within law enforcement, no comprehensive statistics exist for Germany. However, the first female police officer in charge of an SEK unit was appointed in 2014 and hailed as a significant development by the media.[84] In the U.S., it seems that female officers are somewhat more often members of S.W.A.T. units. However, according to the 2014 survey of the 41 largest law enforcement agencies by Dahle, women made up 14.6 percent of the total number of officers, but only 0.47% of S.W.A.T. teams and are thereby significantly underrepresented.[85] Attitudes of male S.W.A.T. members toward female members have rarely been assessed. A 2011 study found that male S.W.A.T. members are "somewhat receptive to a woman becoming a team member; however, they are more likely than women to believe that females lack the needed strength and skills".[86]

Similarly, ethnic diversity also appears to be lacking in these milieus. For example, as of March 2021, 95 percent of all SEAL and combatant-craft crew (SWCC) officers were white, compared to 87 percent among the officers corps of the Army Special Forces. Diversity differs only marginally in the enlisted ranks. About 84 percent of the Navy SEAL and SWCC enlisted personnel are white. The Army's enlisted special forces are also 84 percent white.[87] Structural and perceptual barriers to minority participation in U.S. SOF units have been identified over two decades ago and – among other factors – include perceived racism for example within the U.S. Army Green Berets and Rangers as a reason not to join such units by ethnic minorities.[88]

Taken together, this indicates that SOF and S.W.A.T. milieus might be vulnerable to hypermasculinity or heroic masculinity, and even toxic masculinity or misogyny, which growing evidence suggests being connected to the development of extremist attitudes and cognitive openings toward the extreme right in particular.[89] Likewise,

the development of ethnic (here: white) chauvinism, i.e. the belief in the superiority or dominance of one's own group or people, could also follow from the lack of ethnic diversity in these units.

Elite Warrior Subculture

The collective identities and milieu-specific subcultures of SOF and S.W.A.T. units are dominated by a strong emphasis on camaraderie, intensity, elitism and distinctiveness from the mainstream community[90] among other values and could be summarized under the umbrella concept of an "elite warrior or combat culture", which has been well documented for SOF.[91] The little existing research on S.W.A.T. culture indicates a similar dominance of a militaristic focus on facing danger, gaining pleasure from engaging in tactical training to master combat skills, and an active construction of an "elite" status with explicit references to a warrior culture.[92] The subcultural similarities between SOF and S.W.A.T. milieus are not a coincidence. S.W.A.T. teams often receive advanced combat training and use a command structure modeled on SOF units.[93] Even the development of the first S.W.A.T. units in the late 1960s in Los Angeles was strongly influenced by two combat veterans, one with a background in the elite Force Recon Marines.[94] Military veterans and those with specialized training are also preferred recruits for U.S. law enforcement agencies and have been shown to exhibit more resilience to stress and adverse conditions, making them especially suited for S.W.A.T. units.[95]

SOF and S.W.A.T. cultures are based on the selection process that takes the function of an initiation rite and includes a high notion of individual agency on the part of the recruit.[96] Passing through the selection process can be described as becoming part of the mythology of exceptionalism that binds together members of these milieus with trust and loyalty.[97] When this culture disintegrates into a toxic version, it can form the foundation of a collective identity that emphasizes superiority to all reference groups and the ability or right to disregard rules, regulations, and ethical conventions.[98] SOF and S.W.A.T. culture is not homogeneous however. Competition between units and hierarchical differences even within the same unit family can cause the development of unit specific subcultures. For example, within the Navy SEAL community, the highest ranking so called 'tier 1' unit is the "Naval Special Warfare Development Group (NSWDG)", abbreviated as DEVGRU (DEVelopment GRoUp) and formerly known as "SEAL Team Six". DEVGRU recruits out of the other SEAL Teams, which in turn have developed their own unique cultures attached to nicknames, operational experiences, and mascots.[99] These subcultures can have powerful effects on the soldiers exposed to them, even to the point where they override basic tactical and ethical standards in combat for some members:

> "In the twenty years since each assault team developed names and flags, each had developed a group personality around those identities. (…) Many in Red Tam had appropriated the Native American warrior self-image. (…) 'A third of the guys literally think they're Apache warriors, (…)".[100]

Such unit-specific subcultures in elite units are passed on to new recruits through social rituals and traditions that form a unique learned behavior beyond the combat skills trained in these formations.[101] Through social networks and rotation of individual

members across units and functions, larger toxic cultural frameworks might develop which eventually compete with the official normative framework of rules and regulations for dominance in the milieu. Calling it a "pirate subculture" among the SEALs, Philipps describes a normative framework which disdains weakness, command hierarchies, and military regulations but reveres brutal violence and killing: "In pirate culture, killing was the purpose of the SEALs and its truest expression. That culture gradually influenced the entire Teams. The SEALs were a brotherhood of elite warriors, and lethal force was their craft. They took a certain pride in the art of doing it up close. In the hypercompetitive SEAL hierarchy, experience was everything."[102]

In toxic versions of SOF and S.W.A.T. cultures, superiority can mutate into supremacy. Highest informal status is given to those members of the tribal community who have the most combat or deployment experience, have shown the least hesitation to engage in often unnecessarily brutal violence, and who have proven to prioritize loyalty to their tribe over official command and control structures even to the point of covering up war crimes and interfere with official investigations. Deployment and combat or enemy engagement is seen as the true and only purpose of these units according to these toxic cultures, which can result in a claim to monopoly about the moral and ethical frameworks underlying decision making. Such distorted toxic cultures based on supremacy and overexaggerated elitism paired with the glorification of combat, enemy engagement, and violence has been named by five of the six investigation reports assessed earlier (see Table 1) and appears to play a significant role in the vulnerability to extreme right radicalization or ethical misconduct in general. Indeed, this specific version of a warrior identity framed around (biological and cultural supremacy) is almost indistinguishable from the concepts of martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and warrior identity spread among modern extreme right milieus.[103] Mediated through specific idolized tokens (e.g. Viking or Spartan warriors, crusaders) that have become widespread subcultural reference points both among SOF[104] and S.W.A.T.[105] teams that were investigated for extreme right radicalization or general ethical misconduct and extreme right milieus,[106] such a toxic warrior identity and culture arguably risks to become a narrative bridge between those units and the extreme right. As has been noted by Samuel Huntington already in 1957 in regard to the relationship between fascism and military culture,[107] the extreme right's glorification of an inherently violent "struggle" as the supreme value of existence and highest activity of humanity might be particularly attractive to those elite soldiers and police officers who disproportionately to their environments glorify and aim to perfect warrior skills and mindsets solely focused on prevailing in combat.

Echo Chamber Effects and Cognitive Rigidity

Another set of potential vulnerability factors to extreme right radicalization identified by several of the inquiry and investigation reports are the informational echo chambers and a hardened us vs. them (or black-and-white) thinking patterns known as cognitive rigidity.

The term "echo chamber" typically describes homogeneous and polarized clusters driven by the members' own demands for attitude-consistent information with the potential to magnify messages delivered within the cluster and insulation against rebuttal.[108] Echo chamber effects have been looked at across extremist milieus, including their role in

extreme right radicalization and the spread of conspiracy theories in particular.[109] This concept, however, assumes that individuals select media and content that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and lead to polarization and radicalization based on their interest and political partisanship. In the case of SOF and S.W.A.T. units' vulnerability to this risk factor, it appears the mechanism might be reversed or at least somewhat altered. It was found by five of the six reports (all from Germany, Canada, Australia) that the soldiers and officers involved in extreme right incidents or other ethical misconduct had formed close-knit and partially almost hermetically sealed information sharing clusters online (via messenger groups) and offline (see Table 1). This fact per se is not surprising, since the operational requirements in these milieus demand and produce exceptionally high degrees of mutual trust and cohesion to perform their tasks under highest pressure and danger.[110] Group cohesion is the result of entitativity (i.e. the extent to which a group or collective is considered to be a real or pure entity rather than a set of independent individuals.), proximity, similarity, as well as organization and shared fate.[111] Experimental research has provided strong evidence that individual convergence on so called "binding" moral values (i.e. loyalty, authority, purity) mediated through identity fusion significantly impacts radicalism and extreme actions, including using hate speech and violence against out-groups.[112]

High group cohesion also creates socio-psychological processes that enforce group values and solidarity, reduces dissent but also empathy toward outgroups (with heightened hostility toward outsiders) and produces a dominant or fused social identity in which the success of each group member's identity depends on the group's success in reaching its goals.[113] These characteristics of ideological or normative enforcing groups have been noted to create similarities in the disengagement or exit process from elite military units and extreme right groups,[114] lending additional support to the potential vulnerability for radicalization through group coherence and echo chamber effects in the first place.

Within SOF and S.W.A.T. milieus, however, the high group coherence can be a decisive factor in their resilience in combat or deployment situations and is therefore a much-valued outcome of their training and organizational structure. A high group cohesion arguably also interacts with a group culture of elitism and exceptionalism, since both accentuate the distinctive superiority of the group over others even within the same organization. Recent sociological research has suggested that ideology becomes most potent as a catalyst for violence when it is embedded in micro-social solidarities.[115] This connection is also exacerbated by the unique skillset in elite police and military units, allowing them to claim knowledge and interpretative monopoly not only for technical but also ethical questions.[116] It was specifically stated in the SEK Mecklenburg-West Pomerania report, that extreme right ideology was brought into the unit by one key individual (with high status and respect) and then magnified and spread within the tightly closed echo chamber of the unit.[117] Elite units might be more vulnerable to negative effects by such individual gatekeepers. Those soldiers and officers with more combat experience or "legendary exploits" might be able to derive a high degree of charismatic authority in the Weberian sense, which often is based on a claim of mystical revelation or selection.[118]

This effect might also be facilitated through the notion of mythical exceptionalism and elitism in a context of neo-pacifism and post-heroism across Western societies, which have increased significantly since the late 1960s.[119] Being part of an elite warrior

caste is a highly niche and sometimes even culturally isolated position in Western countries, despite the notable increase of popular culture glorification of SOF and S.W.A.T. members over the last decades.[120] This could foster a tendency to become more inward-looking and self-referential.

In short, under certain circumstances, a toxically deteriorated SOF or S.W.A.T. culture can turn the resilience produced by these units' typical high group coherence into echo chambers for extremist radicalization. In combination with administrative failures (see Table 1 and the earlier discussion on structural deficiencies) individual gatekeepers introducing extreme right narratives and ideology might encounter relatively few institutional or procedural barriers to extending their influence within the already quite insulated elite brotherhood. Even though only explicitly mentioned once in the investigation reports, cognitive rigidity (black-and-white thinking styles) does play a major role in the elite warrior culture and echo chamber effect as well. The near total focus on deployment, combat, and engaging an enemy in combination with the constant pressure to make friend-foe classification decisions in split seconds under high stress could facilitate a mentality dominated through the perception to be able to differentiate the world into "good" and "bad". This thinking style is characteristic for violent extremists as well and has been shown to significantly impact the vulnerability for radicalization.[121] Again, this is also a natural outcome of SOF and S.W.A.T. training and operational requirements, mental inflexibility in the right situations allows to avoid hesitation and produces (necessary) willingness to fully commit and even self-sacrifice for the group. However, if the ability to switch back into a mindset that can handle ethical, moral, or ideological ambiguity and plurality is lost, this can create another significant vulnerability factor toward extremist radicalization.[122] It is important to point out, that cognitive rigidity can also be a coping strategy to reduce stress, cognitive dissonance, or related existential uncertainties,[123] which are likely to be encountered significantly more often by SOF and S.W.A.T. team members then by other soldiers and police officers. Narrow and rigid worldviews as well as black-and-white thinking are often amplified in extremist groups through the facilitation of fundamentalism and dogmatism, which might decrease feelings of uncertainty but also promote out-group bias.[124] Another aspect of cognitively rigid black-and-white thinking is the so called "heroic doubling" which draws on the "warrior elite" narrative nurtured in SOF and S.W.A.T. milieus.[125] "Heroic doubling" in essence is a psychological process that allows individuals to shift between extreme behavior (e.g. killing, brutality, intense combat) for prolonged periods of time and "normality" through the creation of an alternate "sacred warrior" persona. This process is yet another potential vulnerability to radicalization, as it has also been suggested to play a significant role in violent extremism and terrorism through so called "sacred values", "identity fusion", and the "devoted actor".[126]

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has provided an overview of the state of knowledge on extreme right radicalization of (elite) military and police personnel. The risk of radicalization and recruitment into violent extreme right causes should not be seen as a cause for

stigmatization of such elite formations, but rather as one out of many adverse influences on members of these milieus in addition to combat and deployment, skillful opponents, complex scenarios, or the psychological effects of prolonged engagement such as PTSD. In short, creating resilience and equipping SOF and S.W.A.T. personnel to resist and counter the potential vulnerability factors for extremist radicalization must be seen as a consequence of and natural addition to their quest for professional superiority over their opponents.

This article has argued that intimate knowledge about branch and unit-specific cultures is indispensable in the identification of the most accurate picture of vulnerability factors and their most effective counter-measures. In that regard, research is only beginning to acknowledge this aspect and scholarship on SOF and S.W.A.T. related issues other than physical and mental requirements, selection and training processes, as well as deployment performance is scarce at best. Hence, future research should move to empirically explore in much more detail SOF and S.W.A.T. cultures, unit-specific formal and informal climates, mechanisms of group coherence development, or the impact of political and ideological attitudes, ethics, and morality diversity on the individual and collective levels, among other pressing issues. The accumulated findings from existing inquiry commission reports presented in Table 1 provide strong and compelling evidence that a large variety of mechanisms as well as internal and external influencing factors are yet essentially unexplored.

This article has therefore only provided a first step forward in the study of elite units' vulnerabilities for extremist radicalization. The mechanisms and factors theoretically explored in detail here are also merely a first selection of the apparently most obvious ones. For example, it was suggested by Crompvoets that the secrecy attached to many SOF and S.W.A.T. deployments could also be another relevant factor.[127] Constant secrecy of missions might increase the perception of exceptionalism (i.e. being part of a small select group of individuals knowing the truth) and even put members at odds with official political level decision making or public explanations. Another yet to be explored factor might be the role of death and violence as experienced in SOF and S.W.A.T. milieus. While the risk of getting killed is an occupational characteristic in the police and the military, elite units might have a much more agentic perspective as superior warriors with repercussions on ethical, moral, and ideological attitudes. In short, much more of the inner workings of these milieus must be explored to better understand the nature and scope of these vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the relationship between SOF and S.W.A.T. units to the wider society must be scrutinized more. It is worth asking if such elite subcultures are more permeable to extreme right influence than other military and law enforcement milieus. The glorification of supremacy and equality within the extreme right could be a decisive factor connecting to the notion of exceptionalism and "specialness" in elite formations, creating one out of several potential "narrative bridges" into SOF and S.W.A.T. units. However, it is important to acknowledge that exchange via such "narrative bridges" does not work in a one way direction. While it is clear why extreme right groups and actors are keen to influence and recruit elite soldiers and police officers, it is much less obvious why there should be any reciprocal attraction. Future research should attempt to explore the individual motivational side of SOF and S.W.A.T. members in their radicalization processes. Based on the considerations presented here and in the inquiry commission reports (see Table 1), a number of counter-measures to increase resilience

against extreme right radicalization in SOF and S.W.A.T. units appear to be advisable. Among these, measures to increase ethnic and gender diversity exposure should be accompanied with education, training, and the facilitation of a culture that actively counters sentiments of biological supremacy, for example through the integration of historical and modern-day examples of women's contribution to SOF.[128] Furthermore, extensively integrated ethical education into every step of SOF and S.W.A.T. training to an extent that moves this aspect from a mandatory checklist item for career advancement to essential part of the collective identity in these units should be a cornerstone measure.[129] Additional measures should also aim to increase integrative cognitive flexibility outside of deployments, awareness about external adverse or hostile influences on operational readiness and effectiveness through extremist narratives and groups or conspiracy theories, and solid knowledge about the relevant codes, symbols, and warning signs of radicalization, as well as a reporting chain adapted to the unit or branch-specific culture. Finally, a warrior culture based on solid ethical foundations and an identity rooted in values of plurality and solidarity beyond the boundaries of each unit is arguably one of the most important building blocks for resilience against extremist radicalization.

ORCID

Daniel Koehler http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2940-7050

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Notes

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