

The Unexpected Weapon: Civilian and Military Mobile Phone Use in the War

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Danyliw Research Seminar

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University of Ottawa

- Cookies
- Crossover
- DIRECT-DD-HP OfficeJet Pro 8710
- Fios-2FpM2
- GMini2
- GreySloanMemorial
- GreySloanMemorialGuest
- KittyCatLounge
- Kleinbard-Guest
- level3
- LinhXB6-1125-5
- mbarrett30
- MetNet
- NETGEAR19
- nmgchase
- OutOfService
- Piglet
- Pre-Rack Test Team-BBD2-2.4
- ROfficeGuest
- ROfficePrivate
- SBG7580AC-BDE6
- Senso
- ShanHan
- SparingVision
- SpringCreekGuest
- SpringCreekWireless
- Theprocess
- TMOBILE-5E88-ZR
- TraderHoes
- TRIAGE-2929-2.4
- V2
- V4

Mediatization

Deep integration of media and communication with all spheres of life

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Mediatization of war

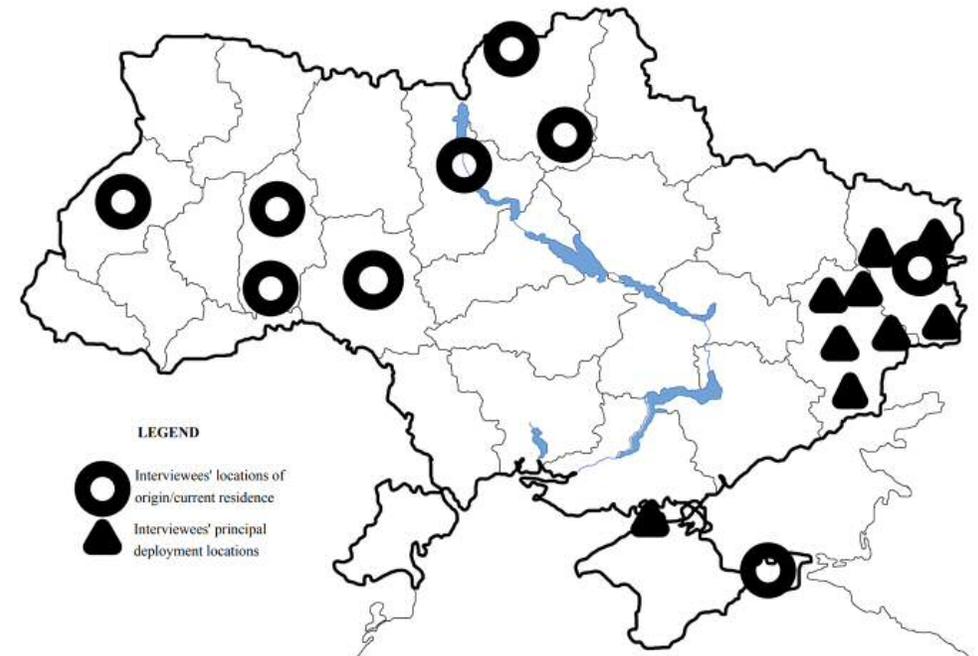
- Mostly studied in US and Israeli armies – and not in combat
- Key takeaway: mobile use at the base reflects the civilian practices
- Widespread use in Syria, Yemen etc - but very different from Russo-Ukrainian War





Methods and sample

- 25 in-depth interviews
- 18 members of the military
- two spouses
- five displaced civilians
- men and women
- privates and officers up to the rank of major
- soldiers in the infantry, armoured vehicles, scouts, pioneers, artillerists, paramedics, signal troops, snipers, and one chaplain



Infrastructure

- Mobile towers and optic cables extremely important
- Russia severed "DPR" and "LPR" from Ukraine grid already in 2014
- New cables lines and own GSM operators using looted equipment





Frontline media ecology

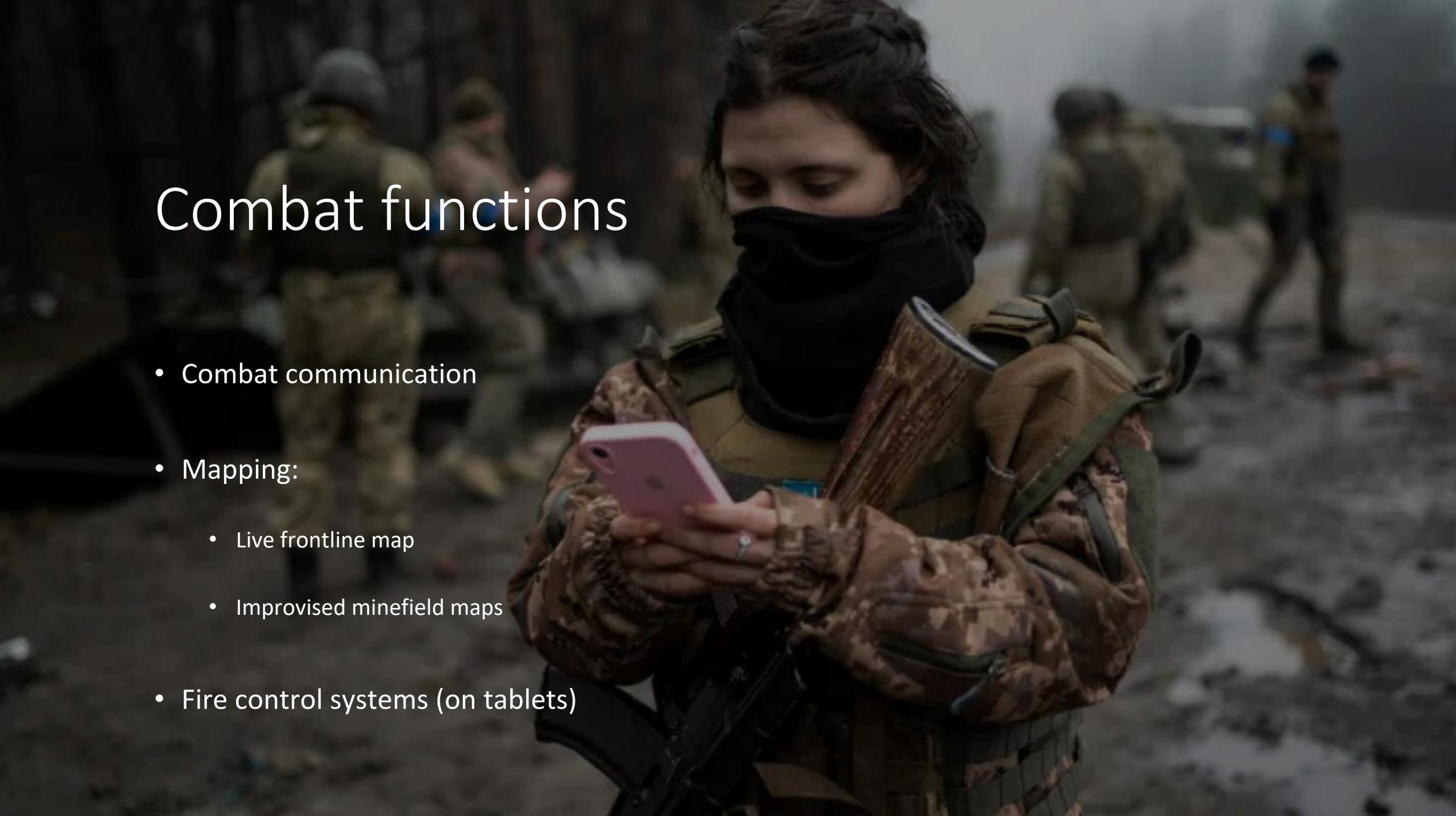
- Field phone ("tapik")
- Radios, walkie talkies
 - Tablets
- Mobile phones (smartphones and button phones)

Home in the pocket: Communication rules

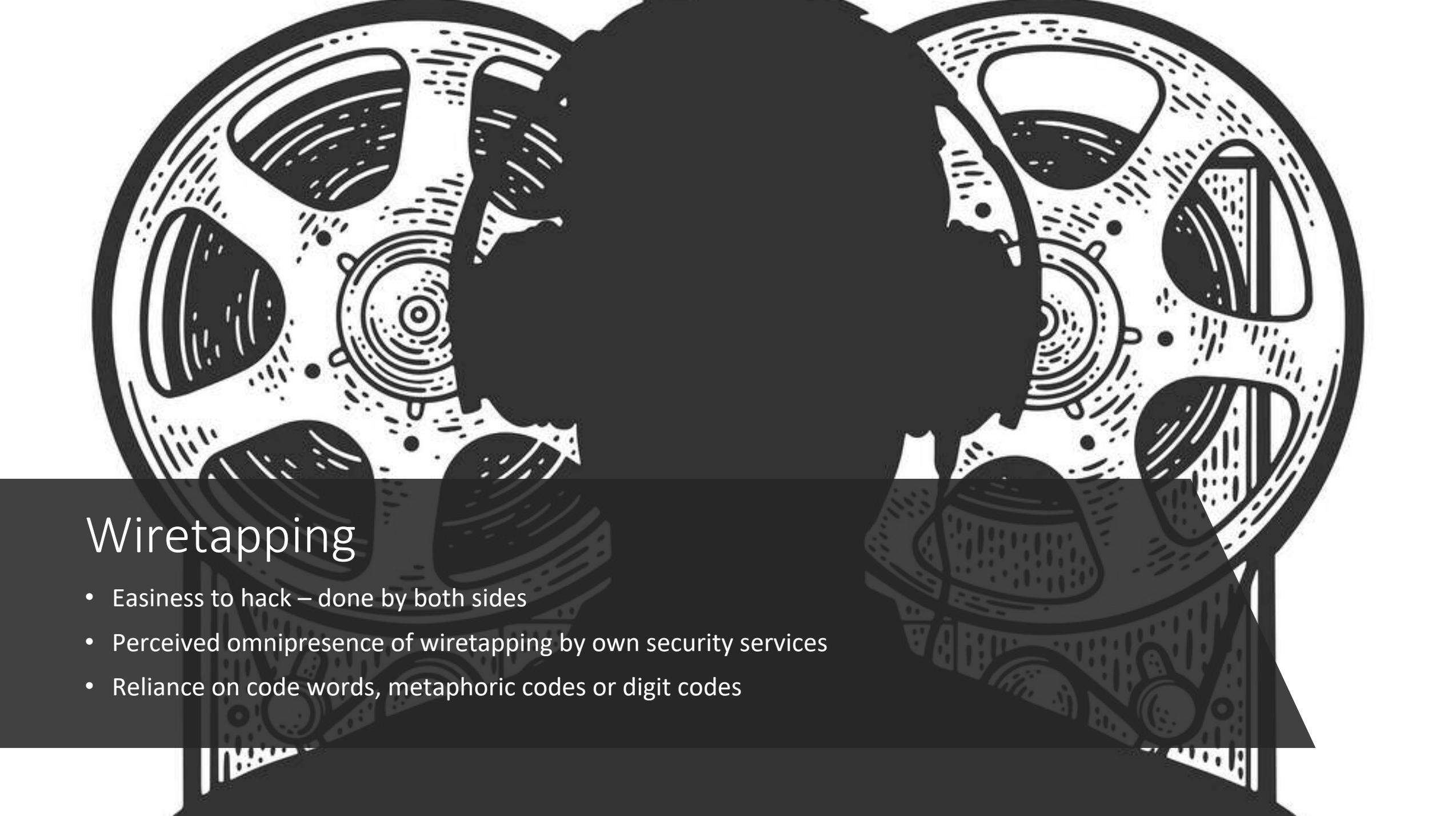
- Blurred lines between family and front
- Strict rules: only calling, never call the soldier first, no texting
- Avoidance of messengers
- Minimalist communication



Combat functions

A soldier in camouflage gear and a black balaclava is looking at a pink smartphone. The soldier is wearing a tactical vest and has a rifle slung over their shoulder. The background shows other soldiers in a combat zone with a grey, overcast sky.

- Combat communication
- Mapping:
 - Live frontline map
 - Improvised minefield maps
- Fire control systems (on tablets)



Wiretapping

- Easiness to hack – done by both sides
- Perceived omnipresence of wiretapping by own security services
- Reliance on code words, metaphoric codes or digit codes

Targeting and spotting

- Targeting mobile signals (especially mass accumulation thereof)
- Assemblage “spotter+mobile” used earlier in the war
- Drones as alternatives



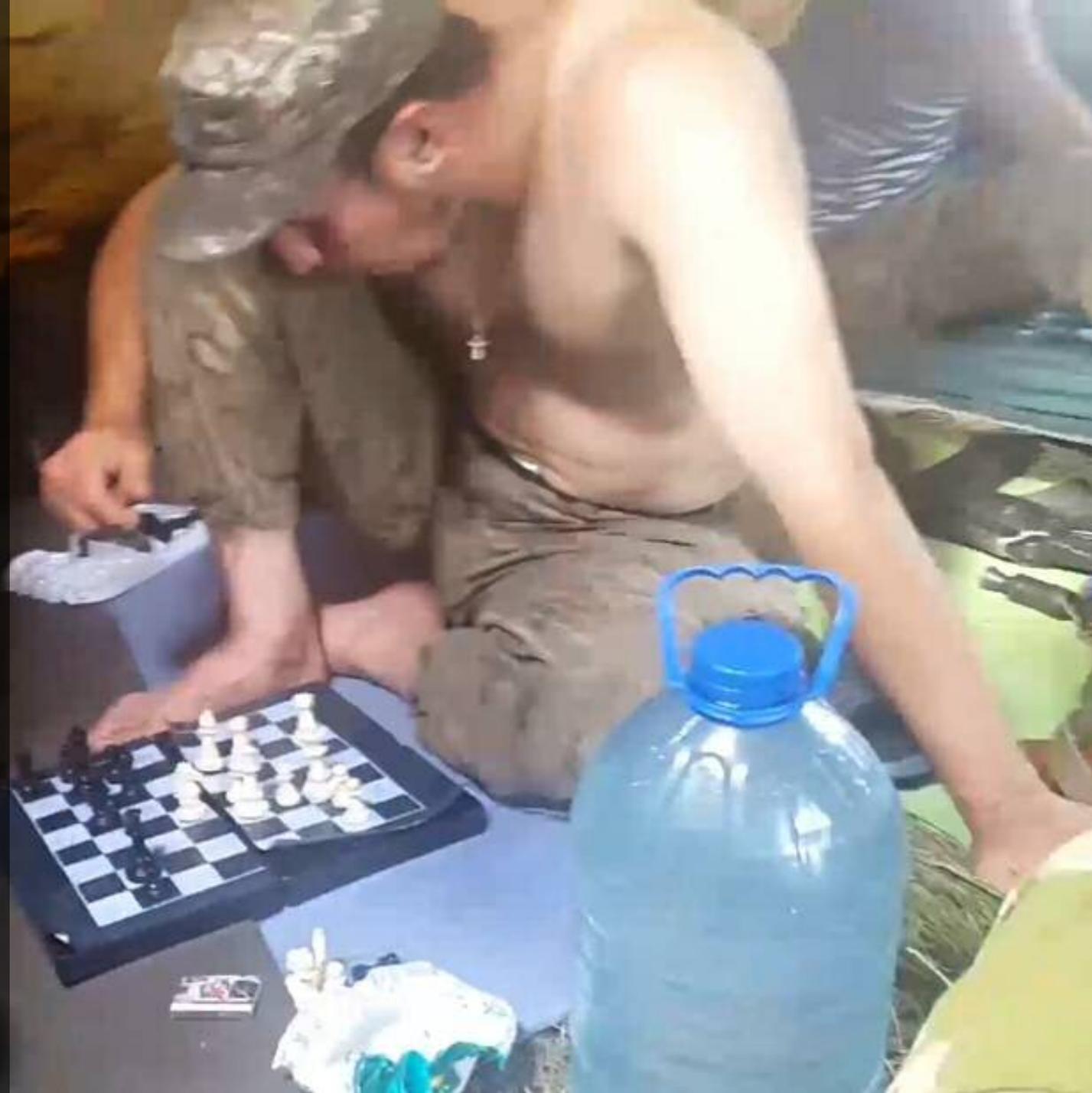
I went with a guy who had to broadcast coordinates. I cleared the field, he set it up, then I check with the map and see we came to a wrong area. He says, 'I know'. And then the area where we were supposed to be is shelled. He says, 'Got it?'. I say, 'Got it.'

And then a new strike hits very close to us! And the guy goes nuts: 'What bastard took the phone? I'll kill ya!' And a young soldier comes forward and says, 'I just called mama'. In 5 min we were gone, and the place was pulverized

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News and fun on boring frontline

- Keeping informed: social media, word of mouth -> risk of poor fact-checking
- Films ("I have watched all seasons of Game of thrones on the frontline!")
- Games (can be weaponised by Russians)
- Radio and music
- Books
- Content sharing practices





Smartphone videos for fun and fact

- Video pranks
- Filming combat (GoPros, later edited for personal “collections”)
- Filming interrogations, documenting attack consequences
- Russians film POW abuse and torture

The Ukrainian response

- Less mobile
- More satellite phones and Starlink wifi
- Russians forced to use looted mobiles
- This leads to targeting them, including top brass



Фінляндія надала важке озброєння Україні

2022 lessons

- Drones, fire control apps tablets, mobiles, high-precision weapons create complex networks
- Similar networks exist from the Russian side: mobiles+towers, drones+canons, Russian radioelectronic equipment
- Modern battle as a battle of communication networks
- Mobiles became indispensable as actors in war
- The plight of civilians: mobile communication as a human right



Conclusion

Russo-Ukrainian war as a case of full-fledged “digital war” (Merrin 2018);

”Post-digital war”? (O’Loughlin 2020)

Mobile phone compensates deficiencies but entails risks => spontaneous rules

Hybridisation, irregularity, and improvisation

Mobile phones have become weaponized and at the same time contributed to the hybridization of the military and the intimate, and of war and peace

Mobiles as a mediated extension of a battlefield

Review the very definition of what constitutes weapon as a tool of combat?

Thanks!

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