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The banner, shown courtesy of the Schwind Collection to Pēteris Cedrinš, is the personal banner of prince Avalov, commander of the West Volunteer Army (Западная добровольческая армия), a White Russian anti-Bolshevik and pro-German force created by Germany Gen. von der Goltz in August 1919 merging the rest of German Freikorps in the Baltic States and some Russian POWs with the Special Russian Corps raised in November 1918 by Gen. Graf Fëdor Arturovič Keller and by Cossack Gen. Pavel Bermond, later Prince Avalov, both Knights of the Russian Branch of the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem (SOSJJ). The Corps lent allegiance to Kolchak's white government and later to a Latvian puppet government supported by Berlin, and fought against both the Bolshevik and the Latvian democratic government supported by the Entente, being disbanded in December 1919. The Banner front shows the imperial coat of arms. On the reverse, the Black Maltese Cross with Crown of Thorns memorializes General Graf Keller, murdered by the Bolsheviks

<http://www.theknightsofsaintjohn.com/History-After-Malta.htm>;

<http://www.vexilloграфия.ru/russia/beloe.htm>;

<http://lettonica.blogspot.com/2007/11/bear-slayers-day.html> (Pēteris Cedrinš, *Bear Slayer's Day*, 11 November 2007). Cedrinš posted the image of the Flag's recto on wikipedia commons.

# An issue pertaining to media, information, and privacy in the Russo-Ukrainian War

by JAIME A. TEIXEIRA DA SILVA <sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War is generating an astonishing amount of information, much of which is being transmitted through social media, allowing events to be observed and followed almost in real time. The impression is that in the initial weeks and months in the 2022 phase of this war, media and social media was much less filtered than it is now. This paper documents a curious aspect of this war observed at that time, namely the open and public display of photos and identity documents of some Russian and Ukrainian combatants, deceased or captured, on select websites or social media platforms. Focusing primarily on April 2022 cases, this paper also reflects on the possible purpose or value of such public exposure, including privacy-related issues, and its role in a parallel information and psychological warfare.

**KEYWORDS:** DISINFORMATION; EU; INFORMATION WAR; MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA; MISINFORMATION; PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE; PUBLIC RECORDS; RESPECT; RISK OF ID FRAUD

## *Introduction*

**O**ne distinct aspect of the current Russo-Ukrainian War has been its long-lasting impressionability. While it is impossible to accept or understand the abuse of power of some of the politicians, commercial enterprises of the war-industrial machinery and leadership involved in the current hegemonic crisis and the dawn of a new Cold War<sup>2</sup>, or come to terms with several of their bad, ruthless and selfish decisions, it is easier to relate to the struggle of average citizens, who are attempting to survive the consequences of those decisions, seeking hope where hopelessness abounds<sup>3</sup>. Citizens around the world, indirectly associated with this war, also understand that one day, they too may be

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<sup>2</sup> GAIDO (2023).

<sup>3</sup> OLSSON & RINNE (2023).



in a similar situation. Relatability arises because there is a visible and tangible loss of life, incalculable suffering (social, economic, and otherwise), and ultimate mass human displacement.

My impression is that public exposure to raw forces of aggression was more unfiltered in the initial weeks or months of this phase of the ongoing war, in 2022, with real-time accounts of bombing or other events being transmitted to and by citizens or even members of the military, via then Twitter (now X), Tik-Tok, Telegram, or other major social media outlets<sup>4</sup>, but a discourse that was also richly populated by civic and popular opinions<sup>5</sup>. The war messaging eventually became more strictly controlled and filtered, even censored<sup>6</sup>, with images and videos often being pixelated, doctored or otherwise trimmed and molded to suit the narrative, or mask it<sup>7</sup>.

Not having personally lived through WWII, but being a secondary witness, via filtered messaging of state-sponsored mass media, of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, several hot-spots in the Middle East and Syria, I got the impression that there was a stark change in the transmission of war messaging of this ongoing war relative to prior wars and conflicts, primarily the extent of coverage. The notion that individuals or their families may be living in relative safety and peace, then be subjected to extreme acts of war-induced aggression against which they are relatively defenseless, is a surreal concept that is difficult to grasp, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where societies had, over many years, even until today, been fed “soft” neoliberal social wars as the expression of personal conflicts underlying social reform<sup>8</sup>, and where “hot” wars only took place against self-proclaimed autocratic leaders that threatened established commercial global powers and ideological belief systems.

The realization that personal security, aspirations, and to some extent freedoms, can be reversed at the drop of a bomb has now become an almost engrained reality as we head towards the fourth year of this war in 2025, also cognizant that

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4 FERNÁNDEZ-CASTRILLO & RAMOS (2023); HORSKA et al. (2023); PRIMIG et al. (2023); SIDORENKO-BAUTISTA et al. (2023); TAO & PENG (2023).

5 SAVOLAINEN (2023).

6 SHEVTSOV et al. (2024).

7 HOSKINS & SHCHLIN (2023).

8 OGBEBOR (2020).

an era of proxy wars is upon us. For those who follow the war's trajectory on an almost daily basis, as I have, the sensitivities to conflicts of scale, as well as to unprecedented violence and aggression, have in some way been numbed, driven largely by intelligence, national security and nationalist narratives<sup>9</sup>. This leaves the impression that we are now in an age where capitalist-driven conflicts and war<sup>10</sup> – whether they are a personal, social, ideological, commercial, regional or global scale – have firmly set in and have become, to some extent, the “norm”.

Perhaps the world should have paid greater attention to the historical and socio-political conflict that has been growing in this post-Soviet space (i.e., Ukraine) since 1991, appreciating the military antagonism and foreign interventionism leading up to the pivotal 2014 Maidan coup in Kyiv, the subsequent annexation of Crimea by Russia, the ongoing struggle of Eastern pro-Russia populations, primarily in the Donbas<sup>11</sup>, and the election (or strategic instalment) of the pro-Western (US, UK, and EU) Volodymyr Zelenskyy-led Government in 2019<sup>12</sup>. This pro-Western transition of Ukraine away from its historical Russian core or basal traditions<sup>13</sup> was (and continues to be) accompanied by massive injections of funding and militarization by the US and EU<sup>14</sup>, instilling an almost unnatural desire of Ukraine (and Ukrainians) to become part of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). There are various explanations as to what drove this war to what it is currently<sup>15</sup>.

In the words of Putin himself, the US-NATO-EU axis posed a military, linguistic, technological and ideological threat to the Russian Federation<sup>16</sup>. This, compounded by a desire of those strategically placed powers to counter Russian influence in that part of Europe<sup>17</sup>, also bolstered Russia's desire to develop its own sovereign cyberspace<sup>18</sup>. This war thus represents a shift towards the desire

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9 PHYTHIAN & STRACHAN-MORRIS (2024).

10 PITTS (2024).

11 WILSON (2014); KUDELIA (2018); BAYSHA (2023); KATCHANOWSKI (2023); PRESTON (2023).

12 KÄIHKÖ (2021); MATVEEVA (2022).

13 MONIZ BANDEIRA (2019); DUNFORD (2023).

14 KROENIG & STARLING (2023); SZÖKE & KUSICA (2023); TIAN ET AL. (2023); GANVILLE & PAT-TISON (2024).

15 SÆTHER (2023).

16 PUTIN (2021).

17 BUGAYOVA (2020); FOX (2021).

18 PALLIN & HJELM (2021).

of Russia for a multi-polar world, or to at least move away from a unipolar hegemonic one<sup>19</sup>. Evidently, these narratives contrast starkly with that of Volodymyr Zelensky<sup>20</sup>, as transmitted widely via his Twitter/X account<sup>21</sup>. So, it was merely a matter of time before this volatile tinder-box of conflicting socio-political aspirations expanded into a full-blown military “hot” war of broad proportions<sup>22</sup>. Given this rich historical background of conflict and its underlying socio-political and economic power struggles<sup>23</sup>, and while not claiming to be a historian or media specialist in any way, it is not surprising that information has been impregnated with disinformation and misinformation, in the form of fake or manipulated news, as warring parties and their proxies sought – as a form of cyberwarfare – to gain the attention and support of local and international audiences<sup>24</sup>, even as views were sometimes diametrically opposed<sup>25</sup>.

The physical war between Russia and Ukraine, as well as their proxy allies, is thus accompanied by an intelligence gathering war<sup>26</sup>, as well as a psychological information war<sup>27</sup>. This impacts not only war participants, but also viewers who are witnessing this war, and who attempt to discern real from fake news, information from misinformation, and facts from disinformation, bias and propaganda<sup>28</sup>, which typify such conflicts<sup>29</sup>. Social media not served only as a polarizing agent and propaganda tool<sup>30</sup>, but in some cases as a depolarizing one<sup>31</sup>. State-run or state-sponsored mainstream media platforms on both sides of the conflict tend to be biased, in a bid to manipulate public perception, all while cyber-hacking

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19 AARTNER (2023); FRIGOLI & MARTELLINI (2023).

20 Readers’ attention are drawn to the fact that there are variations in the spelling of the current Ukrainian President: TEIXEIRA DA SILVA (2023a).

21 NISCH (2023).

22 DAVIES (2024).

23 KUZIO (2018); MITCHNIK (2019); CIFUENTES-FAURA (2022).

24 ASMOLOV (2018); HAIGH et al. (2019); VZIATYSHEVA et al. (2021); ETLICH & GARNER (2023); HOU et al. (2023).

25 WILLETT (2022).

26 RIEHLE (2024).

27 LEBID et al. (2022); SOPILKO et al. (2022).

28 Astuti et al. (2022); Snowden (2022); Johansson-Nogués & Şimanschi (2023).

29 Khaldarova & Pantti (2016).

30 Oleinik & Pannioto (2024).

31 YADAV et al. (2024).



campaigns are taking place<sup>32</sup>, so it is understandably difficult to find news that is neutrally expressed and free of bias, distortion, or propaganda in this war<sup>33</sup>, making fact-checking a challenging task<sup>34</sup>.

Deeply polarized views on social media also seem to be fueling an unprecedented level of aggression and radicalism<sup>35</sup>, and the anger, frustration and hatred expressed on some social media channels is real and palpable.<sup>36</sup> The images of massive destruction in towns, cities, and settlements, mainly in the north and east of Ukraine, but also to a lesser extent in some neighboring regions of Russia, give an impression of amplified versions of what was observed in Grozny, Chechnya, in 1999-2000, or in Aleppo, Syria, from 2012-2016. It is also possible that greater global attention, through news and social media, is being paid to the Russo-Ukrainian war, unlike Grozny or Aleppo, given that Ukraine is an ally of several Western nations, and has become a geopolitical tool to fragment Russia, given its strategic geographic location between Russia and the EU.

### *Photos and documents of combatants in the public arena*

Since February 24, 2022, when the war official began, I initially accessed mainstream Western news media outlets to try and gather background news and information, but rapidly appreciated that viewpoints in such outlets were either biased, hyped or tilted to fit a desired narrative<sup>37</sup>, and thus not completely reliable or balanced news sources. As the war expanded and become more complex, and as military action on Ukrainian territory evolved from a mere “special operation” (it continues to be characterized as such by Russia) into a full-blown war by about early March, 2022<sup>38</sup>, I accessed a wider range of social media sites, both pro-Ukrainian (or pro-Western) and pro-Russian, in order to try and source a greater range of information and appreciate a wider “balance” of perspectives and points

32 SUFI (2023).

33 ALYUKOV (2022); KIZILOVA & NORRIS (2022); PASITSELSKA (2022).

34 MAGALLÓN-ROSA et al. (2023).

35 HORDIICHUK et al. (2023).

36 The author was and is frequently guided by Google translate (Ukrainian-English and Russian-English), so there is also the possibility of imperfect web-based translation, or subtle linguistic expressions that may have led to these impressions.

37 HOON (2023); LAURIOLA et al. (2024).

38 Here the ongoing war in the Donbas since 2014 is being set aside to simplify the debate.

of view, cognizant that bias was likely present to some extent in almost all media and social media sources, as a strategy to skew readers' perspectives. In that exploration, and to support the observations made in this paper's account, no websites were accessed for which membership was required, i.e., the sites (and thus news stories and evidence) that were consulted were 100% public and thus open.

Interested in the issue of photojournalism and how it has been applied to this war<sup>39</sup>, I observed a uniquely impressive aspect of this war, namely the public display of photos and ID documents (e.g., national ID cards, passports, etc.) of combatants, both Russian and Ukrainian (and on rarer occasions, foreign national combatants<sup>40</sup>). In Table 1, select links of pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian websites (social media accounts) are provided in which photos of either Russian or Ukrainian combatants, deceased or captured (i.e., prisoners of war), were openly displayed. As for any image that appears within such a polarized conflict such as war, there is always the risk of doctored or fake images<sup>41</sup>, even more so with the power of AI-created deepfakes<sup>42</sup>.

### *Reflection on the possible rationale for the public display of combatant photos and ID documents*

In my understanding, the most apparent reason for openly showing photos and identities of combatants would be to serve as a formal public record of death (or capture as prisoners of war) during war, i.e., as digital obituaries. By doing so, public officials (such as members of Departments of Defense, Ministries of Justice, etc.), family members, and other known entities or associates of the deceased (or captured) would learn about their death (or capture). In that sense, there is a "useful" aspect (accurate visual identification) of the timely and public display of such photos and ID documents, provided that there has been no falsification. However, by placing such photos and documents on informal websites or social media seems to minimize or trivialize the seriousness of the record because they are seemingly not official. Moreover, such social media accounts can be ter-

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39 TEIXEIRA DA SILVA (2023B); FERNÁNDEZ-CASTRILLO & RAMOS (2024).

40 As noted by MACKENZIE & KAUNERT (2021), HABTOM (2022), PUGLIESE (2023), AND JOSTICOVA & ALIYEV (2024).

41 OLAN et al. (2024).

42 SAMOILENKO & SUVOROVA (2023); TWOMEY et al. (2023).

minated at any time or for any number of reasons, causing the instant and perhaps irrecoverable loss of that valuable information.

It is unclear to me, at least from the links in Table 1, who owns the rights of such photos and such images, like ID documents, and what ethical or legal rights social media sites have in posting such images. It is not even clear how such websites obtained such documents, and under what circumstances, since social media posts lack any background other than, in many cases, a brief description of the individuals in them, or the location where they were identified. Is the public display of these photos and ID documents, especially without the explicit permission of immediate family members of the deceased or captured, a privacy violation or a lack of respect for those deceased or captured individuals? Another potential problem with publicly displaying ID numbers, signatures and other specific personal items is the risk of fraud, such as ID theft.

Finally, there may be a psychological aspect of displaying the photos and IDs of combatants, namely to send a message to fellow combatants of the declared “enemy” what fate awaits them should they continue on the war path.

### *Discussion*

The battle for trust of the audience in the information war that accompanies the current physical Russo-Ukrainian war involves strategic narratives that can sometimes “bend” the truth to such an extent that the message is no longer true, i.e., fake news<sup>43</sup>, leading to dehumanization and defamation<sup>44</sup>. Shocking imagery, including of death, mutilation, humanitarian strife, struggles of women and families, or children’s pain, are all intricately woven into a media-based fabric to win over the hearts and minds (i.e., to score political points) of national and global audiences. This includes images of combatants, which is the focus of this paper. That ability to transmit information, through images, and coupled with social media, was made more prominent by the availability of mobile phone technology on the battlefield<sup>45</sup>.

There is a strong possibility that war images that invoke deep emotions might

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43 KHALDAROVA & PANTTI (2016); SKARPA et al. (2023).

44 KARALIS (2024).

45 HORBYK (2022).

be censored by Russian, Ukrainian or other Governments, but is censorship a violation of First Amendment rights (in the US) to freedom of expression<sup>46</sup> and freedom of the press<sup>47</sup>? Conversely, the publication of violent images, photos and ID documents might serve precisely to shock the public into becoming more pro-active. Even so, there are limits to the reach and ability of social media to transmit real in-person accounts<sup>48</sup>. Where ID documents are placed alongside images of deceased combatants, it is unclear if the purpose is to shock, inform, or satisfy morbid curiosities<sup>49</sup>. The Dover Ban from 1991-2009 restricted the publication of photos of US military coffins related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a ban that was lifted by then-President Barack Obama<sup>50</sup>. Despite this, images of military coffins were published in the Russo-Ukrainian war (examples in Table 1). The suppressed publication of shocking images, like corpses or torture, might be considered as a suppression of publicly important information and thus of free speech<sup>51</sup>, leading to a lot of photographic evidence being of a post factum nature<sup>52</sup>. Should the media and politicians determine what is “sensitive” information in the name of public security and protection?

In the author’s experience and perception, brutal images (for example photos or videos of mutilated bodies, dying individuals, etc.), that were widely and openly distributed and publicly available during the initial weeks and months in 2022 of the Russo-Ukrainian war became more scant, hidden behind registered accounts (e.g., sensitive material on Twitter, login accounts at Telegraph), or even heavily redacted (fuzzy images, pixelated faces, etc.). At one point, the Ukrainian Government forbade (banned or censored) the immediate publication of any images that could disclose the location of a bombing or that revealed any militarily sensitive information that could compromise public security or the safety of the Ukrainian military<sup>53</sup>, although ample exceptions were found on social media sites. Controversially, in early-mid March of 2022, users of Facebook and Insta-

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46 CALVERT (2005).

47 FRIEDMAN (2006).

48 MASCHMEYER et al. (2024).

49 HAMILL (2011).

50 KELLEY (2016).

51 HASIAN JR. (2011).

52 MILERIUS et al. (2022).

53 GOLOVCHENKO (2022).

gram were allowed (in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine) to post messages of violence against Russia and Russians – specifically the military and leadership – within the context of the war<sup>54,55</sup>. A few days later, Facebook and Instagram users were banned from calling for the death of Russian or Belarusian leaders<sup>56</sup>. Details of 2023-2024 were not assessed. In essence, where national security was deemed to be at risk, this came at the expense of freedom of speech<sup>57</sup>. Censorship was also associated with brand protection in the case of businesses that did not wish to be perceived as taking one side or another<sup>58</sup>.

A point needs to be made regarding the loss of social media accounts and information. As an example, three pro-Ukrainian social media accounts<sup>59</sup> that the author had been following suddenly became obsolete for unclear reasons, and thus all posts and information associated with them were irreversibly lost, with websites such as the Internet Archive not having an archive of such social media posts. Therefore, the public, in their pursuit for news and information, is subjected to these ebbs-and-flows in the wider information war.

### *Conclusion and open-ended questions*

In this opinion piece, the existence of photos and ID documents related to deceased or captured combatants in the Russo-Ukrainian war, especially during 2022, is briefly debated. In academic publishing, based on existing ethical guidelines, the publication of such documents – even more so in an open access format – would likely be considered a violation of privacy, especially if explicit permission of the subjects was not received or indicated. Yet, in the ambit of war, they serve several strategic purposes, both positive and negative. For this reason, guidance is needed for academics on how to handle information versus misinfor-

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54 REUTERS (2022).

55 It is unclear to the author if this policy is still valid and if it has expired.

56 *The Guardian* (2022).

57 SZOSTEK & ORLOVA (2024).

58 GRZANKA & STRZWLECKI (2024).

59 <https://twitter.com/ArmedForcesUkr>; [https://twitter.com/ua\\_industrial](https://twitter.com/ua_industrial); [https://twitter.com/aldin\\_ww](https://twitter.com/aldin_ww)

mation when covering conflict situations like war<sup>60</sup>.

Documents like IDs, as well as photographs, form part of a massive volume of information related to this war. The sheer volume of information being generated during the war begs certain questions: 1) Who owns copyright of images and videos that can often be seen across multiple outlets that do not define the source, and how were those images obtained? 2) Is the privacy of individuals (dead or alive) who are photographed being violated, or are they exempt from privacy because this is a war? 3) Should shocking images of mutilated bodies, blood-covered murder scenes, and other extreme scenes of death and destruction be open, or hidden, to protect from sensitive viewers, such as children? 4) If children's images are openly projected, is this a form of child abuse? 5) What efforts are being made to preserve the wealth of news, information and images that is being generated? 6) How is the veracity of sources being confirmed, and by whom?

This paper does not claim to offer an answer to these complex questions, but will hopefully spur others who are experts in the field of war, conflict and socio-political communication and social media to reflect on them and perhaps offer more concrete answers and solutions, where needed. By providing an evidence-based spring-board via the examples in Table 1, might spur additional debate among specialists, resulting perhaps in some clarification. For example, it has been suggested that the confidentiality of digital content can be protected using advanced cryptographic techniques<sup>61</sup>, but how would that benefit society at large, and who would have the right to encryption and decryption technologies to access such classified information? Ultimately, the use and distribution of sensitive content might be determined based on a legal determination of the level of privacy rights<sup>62</sup>. The issue is more complex when the individual is deceased<sup>63</sup>, and even though anonymity is a protected right<sup>64</sup>, how do these principles apply in times of war?

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60 TEIXEIRA DA SILVA (2024).

61 KHAN & WASEEM (2019).

62 RODRÍGUEZ-REYES (2018).

63 SEDLMAIR (2020).

64 TURLEY (2018).



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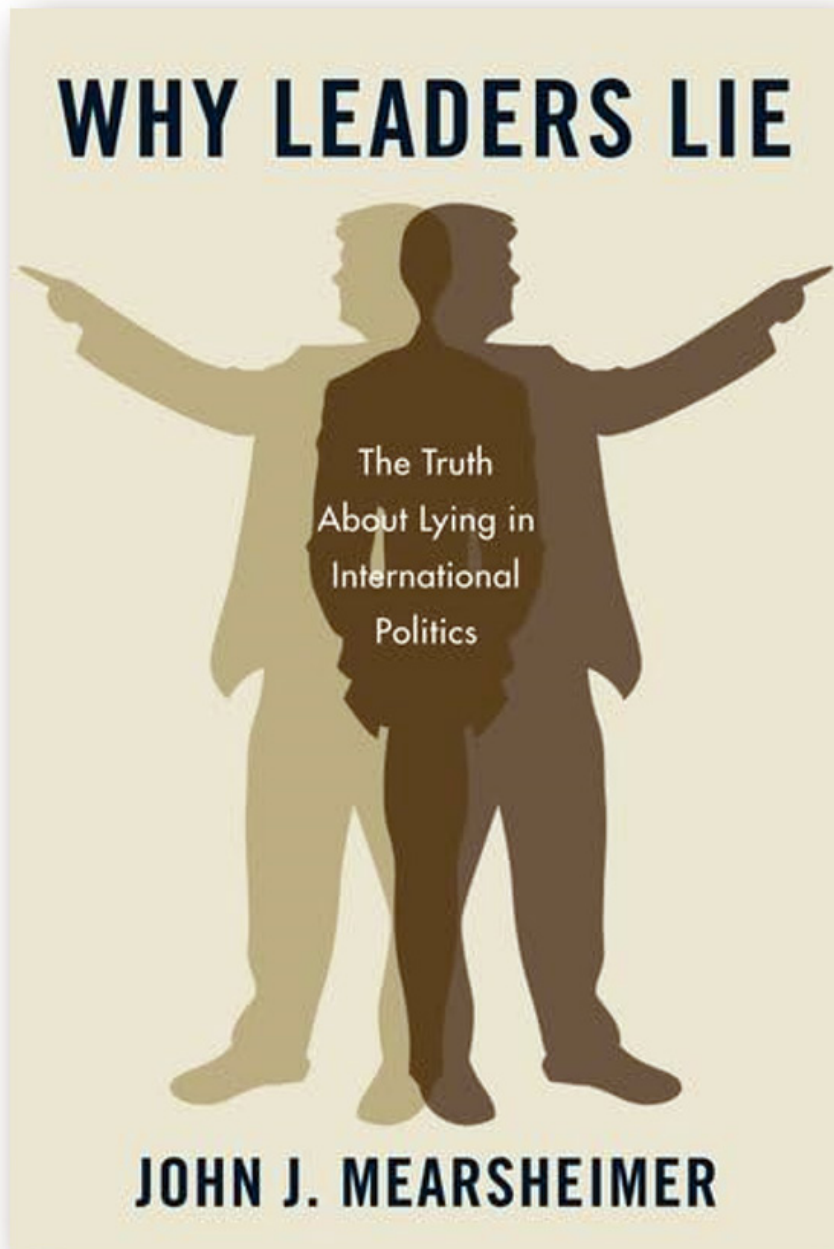
Table 1 *Examples of entries on social media accounts, primarily from April 2022, in which brief obituaries, photos, and ID documents of Russian or Ukrainian combatants have been publicly displayed*<sup>1</sup>

Category	Russian or Ukrainian subjects	URL <sup>2</sup>
Brief obituary and photo	Russian	<a href="https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1519213315418902531">https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1519213315418902531</a>
	Russian	<a href="https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1519265741110976512">https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1519265741110976512</a>
Photo only	Ukrainian ♂	<a href="https://t.me/chub_detection/1201">https://t.me/chub_detection/1201</a>
	Ukrainian ♀	<a href="https://t.me/chub_detection/1256">https://t.me/chub_detection/1256</a>
ID only	Ukrainian	<a href="https://t.me/anna_news/30180">https://t.me/anna_news/30180</a>
	Ukrainian	<a href="https://t.me/epoddubny/10163">https://t.me/epoddubny/10163</a>
	Ukrainian	<a href="https://t.me/RVvoenkor/9826">https://t.me/RVvoenkor/9826</a>
	Russian	<a href="https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1519211751484665856">https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1519211751484665856</a>
ID and non-death context (with or without photo)	Ukrainian	<a href="https://t.me/chub_detection/1210">https://t.me/chub_detection/1210</a>
	Ukrainian	<a href="https://t.me/milinfofive/82312">https://t.me/milinfofive/82312</a>
Photo, ID and death <sup>3</sup>	Ukrainian	<a href="https://t.me/chub_detection/1413">https://t.me/chub_detection/1413</a>
Coffin image	Russian	<a href="https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1520077751088205825">https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1520077751088205825</a>
	Russian	<a href="https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1519623084826935296">https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1519623084826935296</a>

<sup>1</sup> The images themselves have not been displayed, to avoid publishing-related ethical issues related to sensitivity, copyright violations or other potential legal issues that might arise from the publication of images related to the war. Consequently, only links to publicly available images are provided. For each category, except for the fifth category, at least two examples (URLs) are provided. All URLs were openly accessible from 2022 until at least 7 June 2024. This is only a small and representative sample, and dozens more cases have been personally archived by the author as screenshots.

<sup>2</sup> Disclaimer: The language and comments used by the original commentators, and associated with the images indicated, are not those of the author. The author remains neutral with respect to whatever is being stated in those comments.

<sup>3</sup> Sensitive imagery (e.g., blood, dismemberment etc.), so viewer discretion is advised.



John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie. The Truth About Lying in International Politics*, Oxford U. P., 2011.

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