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Cyberpunk Warfare Expediencies? Understanding the Renovation of old Military Technologies in 21st century conflict and the Russo-Ukraine War.

This paper explores the dynamics between old and new military technologies which are in general, either poorly understood, commonly ignored and theoretically under-examined. Instead in much of the general literature about contemporary warfare there is a typical privileging of either high technology weapons systems (AI; hypersonic missiles; drones). Alternatively, academic attention has been sometimes directed towards low-tech, primitive, often improvised weapons or tactics, typically deployed by non-state actors: IEDs, car bombs, suicide attacks.

Yet an intermediate category of technology exists which involves “renovation” of old and new technologies. These are combined to produce effectively hybrid low/high tech platforms. This is not merely the utilisation of old weapons alongside new ones (anachronistic usage). Nor is it impromptu, often low-tech, battlefield adaptations or ‘Field Mods’ (Kollars, 2014). What is involved here is rather a more substantive modification of old weapons by augmenting them with newer technologies—an approach sometimes described as ‘cyberpunk warfare’ (Matisek, et al, 2024).

The research question posed here is firstly to ask how commonplace is the phenomenon of renovated military technologies, and whether such innovations are judged by combatants as important or merely curious expediencies? This paper also interrogates what exactly are diverse actors motivations in modifying old weapons and military technologies? Theoretically, this paper stresses technological longevities over novelty, and the importance of (bottom up/field level) technological adaptation, modification, and learning.

While it is argued that renovated weapons are nothing new and observable in many other conflicts, the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war is used to explore discrete case studies. These include the modernisation of old 1950s recoilless rifles by both sides; use of so-called “Franken-SAMs” by Ukrainian adaptation of 1980s air-to-air missiles into ground based air defence systems; and Russia’s modernisation of dumb free fall aerial bombs, into precision glide bombs.

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