

Lessons in patriotism used to justify Ukraine invasion to Russia's children

Tuesday 26 April 2022, by [ROTH Andrew](#) (Date first published: 23 April 2022).

A modified curriculum in schools will include state-approved textbooks that edit out positive references to its neighbour

When Pavel Tkachev heard about the special lessons on the war in [Ukraine](#) that took place at his son's high school in the Primorky district of St Petersburg earlier this month, he was livid.

"I called them and said this is ridiculous," he told the *Observer*. "We're the parents and it is we who should tell the kids about patriotism and the 'special operation', not the schools."

Similar lectures were delivered to students in schools across the country, decrying "fascists" in Ukraine and suggesting that [Russia](#) was acting in "self-defence". Tkachev said he was particularly angry over comparisons to the second world war, which he called "unforgivable".

School officials "shrugged their shoulders and said these are the instructions", he said. "I was disgusted."

Russia's plans to overhaul education have gone hand-in-hand with its war in Ukraine. Officials are writing curricula to justify the invasion, and have suggested schools will hold flag-raising and sing the national anthem each morning from September. A major Russian textbook publisher is [reportedly using autochecking software](#) to edit out positive references to Ukraine in its schoolbooks.

According to Russia's education ministry, history will become a compulsory subject from the first grade. "We will never allow it [to be written] that we somehow treated other nations - our fraternal nations of Ukraine and Belarus - poorly," said education minister Sergey Kravtsov, who announced the new initiative at the opening of an exhibition called "Everyday Nazism". "We will do everything in our power so that historical memory is preserved."

There is a clear degree of political opportunism in using schoolchildren to deliver propaganda. As Russia declared a disputed victory in Mariupol last week, Andrei Turchak, head of the ruling United Russia party, made a beeline for a local school in the city.

While there, he told the students: "Victory will be ours. The enemy will be defeated, and peaceful life on this earth will finally come ... we will liberate this territory and clean it from the fascist demons."

But there is also a new level of pressure on teachers, sometimes to organise pro-war photo-ops with children, or in other cases to hide their anti-war feeling from their students. "I know a lot of teachers who have hidden their online profiles, they're very careful speaking about politics in school," said Maria, a teacher at a middle school in Voronezh.

Lyubov Zhiltsova, a maths teacher and politician from Pskov, faced a police inquest last week for an

image on social media of her holding a sign that said “No to war”.

“The whole world has turned upside down for me. I prepare events for 9 May [Victory Day] every year, I write a script, I rehearse ... And now how can I talk about it with children?” she [told Radio Svoboda](#). “I couldn’t keep silent, I was burning.”

One of the first Russians to be targeted under a new law banning “fakes” about the Russian military was a schoolteacher who now faces 10 years in prison. “I hoped to break through the [propaganda that is being fed to this country](#). But look where it got me,” Irina Gen, a 55-year-old English and German language teacher said this month. She was reported by her own students.

Educational officials have promised further changes to Russia’s curriculum and new patriotic initiatives clearly inspired by the war. Some, such as the flag and anthem, seem inspired by similar rightwing efforts in the United States.

Others are specific to Russia’s war in Ukraine. Kravtsov told Putin last week that they had already begun developing lessons about the “goals of the special operation - to help our people, denazification, the demilitarisation of Donbas”.

The goal was to fight the “squall of disinformation ... fakes about Russia”.

The lessons have “conditionally been called ‘Conversations about important topics’”.

“And from 1 September, in addition, there will be the raising of the national flag at the beginning of the school week, the performance of the national anthem,” he said.

Leaked manuals for this year’s special lectures have shown that Russian teachers are being told to tell students that Russia has not invaded Ukraine, but is instead practising “self-defence against the threats created to us and from an even greater calamity than what is happening today”.

In a separate lesson on “anti-Russian sanctions”, teachers are told to ask students whether the sanctions are fair, whether they’ll actually strengthen the Russian economy, and whom will they harm (everyone).

“The teacher, together with the students, concludes that economic policy in recent years has been aimed at increasing the protection of domestic producers, ensuring its sustainability in the face of external crises,” the documents read.

The lessons manuals, or *metodichki*, are so far not compulsory, noted Denis Lanshchikov, a history teacher at a private school in Moscow. But many teachers and administrators at state schools appeared to have leaned into them of their own volition, either because they supported the war or because they thought “big brother is watching”.

“It seems to me that it isn’t yet a top-down attempt to make schools totalitarian,” he said. “But then every person ... creates this totalitarianism himself.”

Even grade-school students are facing some level of indoctrination. “In all the schools they held these special events dedicated to the topic that Russia is fighting with fascists,” said Marina Litvinovich, an opposition politician in Moscow. In her son’s fourth-grade class, the children were given a “light version”. “They don’t quite get it. So they went through the [second world war] Leningrad blockade - and during the lesson they also said that ‘look, this is how Russia is continuing to fight against fascism’.”

“The kids are kind of cool toward it,” she said of her son. She compared it to the indoctrination that she went through as a student in the late Soviet period, saying: “When the Soviet Union fell, all this indoctrination flew away ... so I’m not extremely worried about it, it will fly away when they meet reality. It’s bad but not a catastrophe.”

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