

Who Spearheads Patriotic Upbringing in Russia?

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Patriotism in Russia is deeply rooted in the Soviet era and communist doctrines. It is the cornerstone of the country's identity, national security, military manifestation, and the "openness" or "closeness" of its society to the world. Not surprisingly, the Russian leadership is regarded in the West as the most interested mover of patriotic trends—take for example the 2012 *The New York Times* headline "[Putin, in Need of Cohesion, Pushes Patriotism](#)" or the 2016 *The National Interest* headline "[Russia's Newest Weapon Is Blind Patriotism](#)." These types of articles and discussions often insist that Moscow has a centralized, carefully planned, one-way state-to-society narrative that aims to make Russians more militarized, nationalist, proud, and, if needed, aggressive.

However, argued here is that there is no highly thoughtful governmental grand design that is the major source of patriotism formation and development in Russia. The sources already exist across Russian society. In fact, the government's ideas on the matter have been rather spontaneous and not very original or thoughtful. In effect, the government's efforts seek to meet the values and expectations that are already prevalent in society and take benefit from Soviet-time pre-existing conditions. One excellent place to observe these dynamics is in the Russian education system. School communities constitute the central actor in the contemporary revival of Russian patriotism, with teachers leaning once again on the repetitive, Soviet-era mechanisms of social embeddedness.

Sources

The [research](#) for this memo is based on various sources of empirical data, including federal, regional, and local patriotic education programs, as well as 60 open interviews conducted in 2015-16 with federal and regional officials, guidance counselors, school directors, and school teachers. The interviews were conducted mostly in the rural areas of

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the regions of Moscow, Leningrad, Pskov, Saratov, Novgorod, Chelyabinsk, Tver, and Voronezh, as well as in the cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Governmental Programs on Patriotic Education

Looking back, one can say that the “recovery point” of patriotism formation in Russia was the beginning of the 2000s. In those years, several legal acts and governmental documents were adopted to boost patriotic sentiments. Examples include the 2003 Concept of the Patriotic Education of Russian Citizens, five-year federal programs on patriotic education for citizens beginning in 2001, and various regional programs and laws on patriotic education. At present, Russia is in its “fourth program” on patriotic education, and the Kremlin has again increased investments into patriotic education.²

A deeper analysis of the governmental programs shows that they lack concrete meanings and tools for patriotism formation. The key missing element in any of the programs is the clear reason *why* such patriotism is needed. The goals and tasks of the programs, as well as the achievement indicators, are expressed in a very general and abstract way. Because they are poorly structured and ill-conceived, the programs on patriotic education can be considered neither as full-fledged public policy programs nor as stemming from an ideological framework. They are not a *system*, and strictly speaking they are not even useful in maintaining jingoistic lines of patriotism. To understand why the real structures of patriotism formation are outside the scope of public programming, we should step back into the Soviet system of educating citizens with “patriotism.”

The Soviet Model of Patriotic Education

In many countries, the school system often has the subtle task of advancing the political socialization of youth. The USSR (and now Russia) are not exceptions in this. The singularity of the Soviet political system underlined its vertical value structure, where the ideological vector of schooling was clearly linked to patriotic education. This structure was implemented in several elements as follows.

First, schools widely used special manuals (*metodichki*) on patriotic education. Unlike governmental programs today, those documents were clearly linked to Communist ideas and provided concrete tools and steps of its embodiment in the school process. The general instruments for patriotic education were emotion-based learning and, essentially, the “patriotism of everything.” Emotions of pride, even of *indispensable love*, and the inevitable respect of the past were part of almost every school subject, including physics, biology, and math.

² For details, see Figure 1 and Table 1 in J. Paul Goode, “[Everyday Patriotism and Putin’s Foreign Policy](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 432, July 2016.

Second, Communist children and youth organizations (Little Octobrists, Pioneers, Komsomols) were deeply integrated into school life. These organizations upheld proper behaviors, collective judgment, and the essence of the Soviet “we.”

Third, schools, as centers of local communities, were regularly and deeply involved in the memorialization of historical events, and certainly and specifically the Great Patriotic War (World War II).

Fourth, schools widely practiced patriotic celebrations on key Communist holidays, and during these celebrations, children’s concerts and performances were often combined with ceremonies near graves and monuments.

Fifth, many school programs included basic military training, military games, and military-type gatherings. These activities were widely supported by the Soviet state and were considered an important part of preparing young people for military service.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, all of these elements and efforts were abandoned. Through the 1990s, for about 15 years, it seemed like the historical model of Soviet patriotism was gone once and for all. However, some of its notions and specific elements began to experience a revival from the early-mid-2000s. But no documents, guidelines, or political speeches have been released that indicate there was a systematic effort to develop Russian patriotism in the Soviet way. The real source of the revival of Soviet elements of patriotic education was from *inside* the school system, led by teachers, school directors, heads of extracurricular activities, and education and guidance counselors.

The Crucial Role of the School Agents

Most Russian school teachers today formed their professional values and attitudes under Soviet ideology. The [average age](#) of Russian teachers is about 52 years and teachers at rural schools are often older. They themselves received a classic Soviet education at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. After they weathered the chaos of the 1990s, they returned to their mission of not just educating students, but also raising a new generation of citizens. The element of pride had been missing in the classroom, and teachers took it upon themselves to bring it back in. It is unsurprising that they relied on their old principles; many just do not know any alternatives.

The design and implementation of their mission were not guided by any governmental conception or program on patriotic education. Most of the teachers, directors, and educational counselors were part of, or turned to, pedagogical communities that were creating new, assorted training manuals on patriotic education. The manuals very rarely include even a brief summary of any contemporary governmental program of patriotic education. Instead, they widely use replicas of Soviet-era understandings of patriotism. Along with the manuals, schools re-introduced many of the above-mentioned activities.

Perhaps the major revitalized element is the practice of memorialization, such as for Victory Day and other Great Patriotic War commemorations and celebrations. Many schools have restored their “Museums of Glory,” which have once again become centers for local society.

Moreover, based on my interviews, teachers consider the students involved with memorialization practices as being “especially involved in the community.” And they often see the governmentally based group activities, such as participation in the Russian School Movement or the Young Army (*Yunarmiya*) as something formal and “not disingenuous.” In social networks and pedagogical newspapers, teachers have been sharing methods for developing patriotic and military-patriotic studies in various courses, including in the sciences such as physics and math – similar to Soviet practices. They also use patriotic conversations, patriotic celebrations, and military trainings as revived tools of installing patriotism among youth.

Due to the lack of a definition of what it means to be a Russian patriot today, teachers have borrowed from the Soviet experience of patriotic education, including its emphasis on military aspects. Although the “patriotism of everything” is mostly associated with local history and knowledge of the native land, it has been expanding as an underlying concept in the creation of new model citizens.

Conclusion

The background of the school-based patriotic education in contemporary Russia is of a predominately social nature. The Soviet model of patriotic education was preserved by teachers and school administrators, who returned to it because it was an indispensable part of their own training and outlook. For them, the revival of patriotic education is logical and even progressive. In interviews, they have often interpreted it in terms of a “return” (*vozhraashchenie*) to traditions, to roots.

Of course, this does not mean that the Russian government does not play any role in that process. It does, and over time, the centralized actions and particular requests on patriotism formation have become more and more intensive. This is reflected in the periodic trend of developing networked, school-based, patriotic movements, although the ideological background of such groupings are only updated variants of erstwhile pioneer organizations. Also, the state often expresses its demand for patriotism formation through law-making, such as urging regional governments to adopt (their own) laws on patriotic education, albeit under the assumption any such laws copy-paste from federal programs and concepts. Finally, a another actor on the patriotic education scene is the Russian Orthodox Church, whose priests, for example, were active participants in the creation of the ambiguous and pathos-oriented historical [exhibition park](#) “Russia, My History.”

Still, any kind of restoration of Soviet-style patriotism formation would never have been

possible in Russia without the inner expectations of Russia's pedagogical community. This is an enormous group that has reasonably taken it upon itself to maintain its members' social status as not only educators of curriculum fundamentals but a new generation that espouses the Fatherland.

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