

“The whole world is lying about Russia!”

HOW RUSSIAN CHILDREN SEE THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Maya Götz¹

An IZI study of 21 children from Russia has examined how Russian children see the war in Ukraine.

In the early hours of February 24, 2022, the Russian military began an invasion of Ukraine referred to as a “special military operation”. This new phase of escalation in the Russian attacks on Ukraine has brought daily increases in the scale of destruction and the number of victims.

Russia’s actions are not limited to outward aggression; it is also engaged in a targeted internal operation to suppress potential protests. During demonstrations in more than 100 towns and cities in Russia, over 16,000 people have been arrested. To prevent independent reporting, 181 media outlets were blocked at the start of the war. People have been charged with crimes, severely fined for alleged “discrimination” against the army, and accused of being “foreign agents” (Burkhard, 2022, p. 40). In parallel, highly effective channels of propaganda have been used for years to provide supporting narratives for the actions of the Russian government (Portnov, 2022).

Propaganda is the systematic dissemination of political or ideological concepts, with the aim of deliberately influencing people’s thoughts and actions. It is characterized by an overly positive self-presentation and the simultaneous denunciation of the supposed enemy. These messages are naturalized in the propaganda statements and calls to action, so that they

appear to be self-evident, obvious conclusions (Bussemer, 2005, p. 29 f.). Particularly in times of war, politicians and military officials use propaganda to convince their own population, but also other states, of the necessity of war. Typical themes of propaganda – besides the emphasis on the necessity of war and the destruction of the enemy – include the safety of the domestic population and the overthrowing of a brutal regime. Propaganda stresses the threatening nature of the enemy and conceals other aspects, such as one’s own economic and power-related interests, the suffering caused by war, war crimes committed by one’s own soldiers etc. (bpb, 2011).

For years, Russia has been waging informational and psychological warfare (Aro, 2022, p. 42), using certain propaganda narratives to justify the war against Ukraine as a historical necessity. The following section describes some of the recurring narratives that paved the way for the Russian war of aggression which began on February 24, 2022.

RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA NARRATIVES

“One nation” and “brother states”

On June 30, 2021, Vladimir Putin claimed that Ukrainians and Russians were “one nation”. The project of Ukrainian nationality and statehood,

he declared, was an invention by external powers and local elites, pursued in opposition to Russia and the majority of the Ukrainian population (Portnov, 2022, p. 16). In his article, published on the Kremlin website in July 2021, President Putin writes about the “historical unity of the Russians and Ukrainians” and speaks of the need for Russian intervention in Ukraine (Behrends, 2022, p. 26). Putin uses this colonial mythology of “brotherly nations” to assert “historical rights” (Portnov, 2022, p. 16).

Ukraine as a “made-up state”

In his speech of July 2021, which can be read as an official justification for his political actions, Putin expresses a Russian nationalist view of Russian-Ukrainian relations. Ukraine, he claims, is a branch of the triune or All-Russian Nation (made up of Great Russia (Russia), Little Russia (Ukraine) and White Russia (Belarus)), but has been led astray by pernicious Western influences. Putin denies Ukraine’s capacity to form a state and its subjecthood as a culture and nation, because this can only exist under Russian cultural and state hegemony. The Ukrainian state is therefore referred to as “artificial” and “invented” by hostile powers to weaken Russia (Wendland, 2022, p. 31).

Putin denies the contribution made by Ukraine itself and its great efforts at modernization, which have turned an agricultural country into a modern industrial society. The vehemence of

the war of aggression has a symbolic function: its target is modern Ukraine, and its aim is to “turn back history and erase Ukraine from modernity” (Wendland, 2022, p. 34).

The war must not be called a war

In Russia it is officially prohibited to refer to the war against Ukraine as a “war”; instead it is called a “special military operation” (Portnov, 2022, pp. 18/19). The word “war” has been banned from the vocabulary of all public statements about the war, since Russia’s conflict in Ukraine is not with Ukraine itself, but the “West”. Alternative terms in the Russian interpretation are “proxy war” and “escalated civil war” (Wendland, 2022, p. 29).

Anna Veronika Wendland describes Vladimir Putin’s preferred problem-solving method as a “violent military solution in small-scale actions” (Wendland, 2022, p. 29). War and peace are no longer the defining states, instead ongoing military conflicts are waged below the threshold of open warfare (Major & Mölling, 2022).

The narrative of the proxy war

Given the assumption that Ukraine is not the subject of its own history and is therefore not capable of making its own decisions, its resistance can only be conceived as a proxy war, with Ukraine being a pawn of foreign powers. This colonial construct of Russian propaganda has a dual function: by conjuring up an external threat, it ensures inner cohesion, and at the same time it seeks to explain its own actions to others, to weaken support for Ukraine in Western countries (Wendland, 2022, p. 34).

Ukraine is ruled by “Nazis”

Russia’s first incursions into Ukraine territory in 2014 were already embedded in a propaganda narrative, referring to historical myths such as the

alleged “Nazi character” of modern Ukrainian statehood. According to the narrative, this can be traced back to collaborators in western Ukraine in the 1940s, and it justifies the “uprising” in parts of eastern Ukraine, which led to a “civil war”. Here “nationalists” and “Nazis” are supposedly fighting against pro-Russian “separatists” (Wendland, 2022, p. 30). Wendland also points out that the Russian rhetoric of “Nazis” and “fascists” has nothing to do with our usual use of these terms, but follows the traditional Soviet terminology of Stalinism, in which every political opponent and critic is a “fascist”. “Ukraine is therefore ‘Nazi’ because it represents a counter-project to Putin’s Russian model of governance: a fairly well-functioning, pro-European democracy in which power changes hands in elections.” (Wendland, 2022, p. 31)

In his escalation of the war on February 24, 2022, Putin promised the “demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine, since neo-Nazis had supposedly taken Ukraine hostage and undertaken a genocide of millions of people” (Aro, 2022, p. 43). Russian state media refer to Ukraine as a country ruled by a “fascist junta” (Behrends, 2022, p. 25).

Propaganda and children

Children in Russia are also targeted by propaganda narratives. For example,

an animation produced for use in schools uses the tale of “Vanya and Kolya” (Ill. 1) to explain the “special military action”. The 2 boys, wearing jumpers in the colours of the Russian flag (Vanya) and the Ukrainian flag (Kolya), are long-standing friends. When Kolya moves to another class, he sits next to a boy wearing the colours of the US flag, who whispers something in his ear. Kolya, who now calls himself Mykola (the Ukrainian version of Kolya), starts to hit weaker students with a stick. When Vanya stands in front of the 2 smaller boys (identifiable as Donetsk and Luhansk from the previously shown map), takes the stick away from Mykola and reprimands him, Mykola shouts that Vanya started it. A boy in a jumper with the colours of the German flag believes him straight away. This example clearly shows that Russia’s propagandists have no hesitation in targeting children, who encounter these interpretations at school and elsewhere (see also Nouri in this issue). At the same time, there are some families who oppose Putin’s war of aggression and (presumably) offer their children alternative interpretations of the current developments. In parallel to the propaganda strategy that directly targets children, a letter² was sent to all teaching staff at schools and universities, clearly informing them that they would



Ill. 1: The animated tale of Vanya and Kolya shows that children are deliberately targeted by propaganda narratives

be dismissed immediately if they expressed any public criticism of the special military operation, e.g. in social media, or took part in any form of protest movement.

Children growing up in Russia therefore have no access to critical information about the war, or at least not from any public sources. At the same time, parents, other family members and peers are agents of socialization who can potentially offer critical perspectives. The IZI study presented here therefore focused on the following question: how do Russian children see the war in Ukraine? For this qualitative study, interviews were conducted with 21 children from Russia from April to May 2022.

THE STUDY

Method and sample

The study consisted of a questionnaire with open questions on the war in Ukraine and 2 drawing tasks³, which were carried out by the children prior to the interviews (see also Götz, Pohling & Pütz in this issue). In view of the political situation, the interviews with younger children were conducted by the parents, and the answers entered word for word on a questionnaire. Older children filled in the questionnaire with only open questions themselves.

21 children from Russia were asked, 9 girls and 12 boys, aged 7 to 12. The sample was put together through the network of our Russian research partner. The respondents mainly live in cities and come mainly from university-educated families. In private, their parents are mostly critical of the war of aggression, but there are also parents who defend Putin's actions.

The analysis presented here focuses on the following question: do the Russian children participating in this study accept the propaganda narratives, or do they take a critical stance?

Special military operation or war?

In the questionnaire, we avoided calling the war a war, but instead asked about the "situation" in Ukraine, for example. Pavel and Nika (both 10) call the situation a "military conflict", but all the other children refer to it as a "war" – so the propaganda has mostly failed to achieve its goal here. At the time of the study the conflict had been going on for several months, with massive deployment of military equipment and soldiers and many other states involved, so a small "special military operation" was clearly not an adequate description. In everyday language, phrases such as "We're waiting for the war to end" have become common. The propaganda narrative that this is ("only") another short "sub-threshold war" (Major & Mölling, 2022, p. 12) is so different from people's perception of the situation that it is not adopted and used in everyday language by the majority of children – or their parents.

The narrative of "one nation" and a fratricidal war

Some of the children, e.g. 7-year-old Olga, explicitly call the 2 states "one people": "we're the same nation as Ukraine, and now we're at war". Some children hear the propaganda narratives from their parents. Natalia (9), for example, has heard from her parents that Russia and Ukraine have always been one nation, one culture; it is a disgrace that they are now engaged in a civil war.

Several children speak of a brotherly relationship between the 2 states. Igori (10) cannot understand why they are at war: "I thought we were brothers." Vitalii (8) says: "It's terrible to call our brothers from Ukraine enemies."

Yuri (10) uses the image of brother states and is therefore puzzled by the war of aggression:

"The two brother countries are at war. (...) I can't understand how and why this has happened. I know for certain that we share a lot with the Ukrainians."

For Igori und Yuri it is hard to understand why the "two brother countries" are at war with one another, when they are so closely connected and share so much. Here the propaganda narrative offers them a comprehensible picture of why this war is senseless and wrong. This allows them to express their indignation in words.

At the same time, the propaganda motif covers up the problem. The narrative of "one nation" and of a "war between brothers" presents the 2 states as having a deep connection to and responsibility for each other. As in a family, one member can go his or her own way, but the bonds and the responsibility are always there and are taken for granted. For children, this motif connects to their experience of the world, giving them a way to understand the Russian aggression and describe the situation. But once they have accepted this narrative, they can no longer see how inappropriate it is. Ukraine has been internationally recognized as an independent sovereign state for 30 years, so the image of the family is inherently false. It is also completely inappropriate to compare a war – one that has killed thousands and injured countless others, destroyed the homes and livelihoods of millions of people, and caused many billions in damage to property – with a family quarrel. To realize this, however, Igori and Yuri would have to consciously reject the narrative of the "brother state". But since this image seems so fitting, and is also used so vehemently by their parents (as they perceive it), they cannot see through this propaganda narrative.

If they were to do so, they would realize that "their" Russian government is violating international law, and is trying to obliterate Ukraine, with its independent political actions, everyday life, culture and economy.



Ill. 2: Timofei (10): "I've drawn the destroyed buildings and the children [in the Donbas] who have lost their homes, schools, parents and relatives"

aggressor is not Russia, but all the other Western countries, and especially NATO. Vitalii (8) also identifies NATO as the main catalyst for what has happened, but adds another perspective: "Russia attacked NATO, which chose Ukraine as the platform for its fight against Russia. It looks like the Third World War." Vitalii does actually assume that Russia attacked NATO, but immediately gives the reason: NATO chose Ukraine as the platform for its fight.

On the one hand, the propaganda narrative of the proxy war helps to conceal the question of guilt for the war of aggression. The children often use it in combination with the narrative of a long-existing conflict which they

have heard about. On the other hand, combined with the propaganda narrative of NATO's interference, it serves to justify the length and intensity of the war. Some of these children and their parents have personal contact

Thus the propaganda narratives not only conceal and protect the actions of politicians, but also protect the imaginations of the Russian children participating in this study. Without these narratives, the horrors taking place in Ukraine can become a traumatizing experience. So from the subjective viewpoint of these Russian children it is quite understandable that they conceptualize the invasion of Ukraine as a responsible course of action taken (within a family).

conflict, now with NATO's involvement."

He is probably proud to say that "his country" had no choice but to start a war. Here the propaganda has achieved its fundamental goal: the

Proxy war

Most children know that other countries are taking sides. 8-year-old Nadya, for example, knows her parents think "that this war is a global attack on Russia, and poor Ukrainians shouldn't be blamed".

Some of the children mention NATO, e.g. Alyosha (10): "My country had to start the war because there was a long-term



Ill. 3: Kira (10): "I've drawn Russian soldiers who have rescued children in the Donbas"

RESEARCH

with people in Ukraine, so it is very important to them to perceive Ukraine as absolutely free of guilt. This makes it possible to preserve their emotional relationship to the Ukrainians and to see them as victims who need help. This is the underlying perspective from which many of the Russian children approach the current events.

Calls for help; Russia as saviour

When the children describe the cause that led to the attack on Ukraine, several mention the propaganda narrative of a cry for help from Ukrainian citizens. Sergei (9) explains: “Donetsk and Luhansk had a conflict with their government and asked Russia for help and intervention.” Sergei is evoking the Russian propaganda narrative that the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help and intervention as if they were individuals. Oleg (8) offers a similar explanation: “One part of Ukraine asked Russia to protect it from the bad government that has been disrespecting and attacking it for many years.” For Oleg, the trigger for the invasion was a cry for help from Ukraine because of the “bad government”. Here he is mixing the propaganda narrative of the cry for help with vilification of the Ukrainian government. Daria (8) explains what is happening in Ukraine with great confidence:

“Russia decided to protect the people in Luhansk and Donetsk, because they’re no longer welcome in Ukraine. The Ukrainians were quarrelling among themselves. People are dying. The whole world is lying about Russia.”

Daria sees the conflict as a quarrel between the people in Ukraine, who no longer “welcome” some of their citizens (people in Luhansk and Donetsk). “Russia decided” – like a thinking indi-



Ill. 4: Igori (10): “I’ve drawn bombs exploding in a peaceful city. On 24 February I was woken early in the morning by the roar of army planes”

vidual – to invade Ukraine to protect these people. Daria knows that people are dying, but it is the Ukrainians themselves who have fallen out and are now being helped by Russia. The Russian soldiers are there to protect the people in Luhansk and Donetsk. Daria therefore knows that the whole world is lying when it reports on Russia and its protective actions.

A frequently mentioned propaganda narrative is the “children in the Donbas” who have to endure bombing by Ukraine.

Timofei (10) has “heard about the children in the Donbas for years”. His drawing shows destroyed huts, a tank, and a crying child in a babygrow with a teddy bear (Ill. 2). So this is not a new or spontaneous mental image of the events, but something that has been with him for years. Kira (10) (with the help of her parents) has drawn a dramatic picture of Russian soldiers rescuing a blond, pyjama-clad toddler from the ruins of a hut in the Donbas (Ill. 3). Many of these Russian children interviewed refer to the propaganda narrative of a cry for help from the Ukrainians. They have probably grown up with the propaganda-influenced

reports of the war in eastern Ukraine, which has been going on for more than 8 years. They therefore see no contradiction in the fact that the people there have now asked for help. Within the argument that Russia and Ukraine are brother states, agreeing to this request seems a logical response – rather than a violation of international law. Over time and with the aid of powerful images, this propaganda narrative has become deeply embedded in the way these Russian children see the world.

Protection from the “Nazis”

Acceptance of the invasion increases even further if the Ukrainian government is not only presented as “bad” and oppressive, but is associated with what has been fixed in the Russian collective memory since the Second World War as the most brutal of all political movements: National Socialism and the Nazis.

Andrei (7) has seen long explanations on television of why Russian troops invaded Ukrainian territory: this was to fight against the “Azov Nazis”. Svetlana (11) has just been learning about the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945



Ill. 5: Daria (8): “The Russians and the Ukrainians have to live in peace. We are one nation. We are waiting and praying, dear God, for peace.” She means peace when the beautiful peasant mistress (Ukraine) is finally part of the nation of Russia again

the colours of the Russian flag, on the right-hand side it has black and orange stripes that vaguely recall the Ukrainian flag (royal blue and golden yellow). On the left-hand side, more or less underneath the Russian flag, Yuri has drawn green grass, a small house and 2 children playing with a ball. For Yuri, this is peace. On the right-hand side, against a grey background, he has drawn anti-tank defences (Czech hedgehogs), a tank and a plane. Explaining the intention behind this picture, Yuri says: “I drew this as an anti-war poster.” In the inner picture of Yuri and his parents – or at least in the picture they have drawn for us – Russia brings peace.

against the Nazis at school, and she is “horrified” that they have reappeared – in Ukraine. The invasion is therefore absolutely necessary and reasonable. She explains:

“Russian troops have been sent to Ukraine to protect its citizens from the Nazis.”

Swastikas also appear in many of the children’s pictures. Timofei (10), for example, has drawn a war situation “(...) the way it’s presented on TV: the Russian troops, weapons and army are against the Ukrainian Nazis, who hurt their own citizens and discriminate against them because they speak Russian, because they have Russian roots.” Timofei’s drawing shows Russian soldiers going to war, marked by a red star and the Russian flag. The opponents are much worse equipped and are fighting under a flag with a swastika. Victoria (9) and her mother have drawn a picture for the school exhibition. At the centre is a mother with her 2 children. Above them a green plane with a swastika on its tail has been hit and is going down, trailing smoke.

The children surveyed here have no reason to doubt the propaganda narrative that Nazis are in power in Ukraine and are oppressing the population. Only Sergei (9) is puzzled: he has made a special effort to watch news programmes to find out what the Ukrainian Nazis look like, and has seen, to his astonishment, that they have modern uniforms.

The Russian army as a welcome saviour and peacemaker

One thing mentioned by various children is that the Ukrainians are very happy about the presence of the Russian soldiers. Kira (10), for example, has “seen interviews with the locals who say that they’re very happy about the Russians, who now control the area.”

Yuri (10) wants to emphasize that he is against the war. He visualizes this in a picture⁴. At the centre is a peace dove, carrying a sash or cloth in its beak, separating the 2 sides of the picture. On the left-hand side the cloth has

Exceptions

Although our research partners have said that the sample of Russian children includes families opposed to Putin’s policies, there are only 2 children who differ from all the others in their pictures and descriptions of Ukraine. One is Igori (10). His drawing shows 3 tall buildings (Ill. 4). Between them lie people, presumably because they have been killed. The 3 big red patches on the buildings, which Igori has drawn with great emphasis, are presumably fire. There are also bombs exploding in the foreground. Igori has drawn an attack and “bombs exploding in a peaceful city”. This makes him the only child in the sample to oppose the propaganda narrative by speaking openly of an attack on a peaceful (Ukrainian) city.

The inner pictures of Ukraine and its inhabitants

In the images drawn by the children and/or the supporting adults, there

is aesthetic evidence of a further propaganda motif: most of the pictures show the Ukrainians living in shabby little huts and farmhouses. These ideas are far removed from the images of bombed apartment blocks which predominate in uncensored media reports. They are linked to Russian propaganda, which presents Ukraine as a mainly agricultural country. Bombed apartment blocks only appear in 4 out of the 22 drawings. Most of the Russian children have probably had very little exposure to these real images of the damage caused by Russia's war of aggression.

The image of the Ukrainians is also striking. The pictures mainly show girls or women. One picture shows 2 men who are acting deviously. The women, in contrast, are presented in a romanticized manner as beautiful blonde peasant women with garlands of flowers in their hair; damsels in distress waiting to be rescued by Russian soldiers (Ill. 5). The image of Ukraine is shaped by (children's) books and Soviet films and comedies, shown in schools and elsewhere, which stress the image of a romanticized, agricultural Ukraine. One everyday context where Russian children encounter Ukraine is restaurant culture, where, as our Russian research partner told us, the rural aspects of Ukraine are lovingly and colourfully emphasized. The waitresses are often women in traditional Ukrainian dress, with their hair plaited into a thick braid on one side, adorned with the typical floral wreath.

In the drawings, Ukrainian children, e.g. blonde girls in pyjamas, become the symbol of the suffering civilian population. They give visual form to this suffering, or are saved from the ruins by Russian soldiers.

CONCLUSION

The Russian propaganda narratives identified by political scientists become visible in the statements of the

Russian children participating in this study. Virtually all the children evoke at least one of the propaganda narratives to explain and contextualize the situation; most allude to 2 or 3 of them. Three narratives are mentioned most frequently by the children. The first is that of "one nation" and a "war between brothers". It connects to the children's everyday world and can therefore be readily used to explain the events. This narrative is particularly useful because both Russia and Ukraine are treated as valued members of the same "family". Children can thus continue to identify both with their country and with the relatives and people they know in Ukraine. According to this propaganda narrative, the guilty party is the Ukrainian government.

This connects seamlessly with the second most frequently mentioned narrative, that of the proxy war. If Russia is not fighting Ukraine itself, but "the West" or NATO, and Ukraine is only – more or less by chance – the site of this conflict, then this shifts the blame and allows Russians to pity the suffering Ukrainians.

This is further intensified in the third most frequently mentioned narrative, that of the Ukrainian Nazis. Here the representatives of the Ukrainian government, already identified as guilty, are described as adherents of a group associated with extreme brutality in Russia's collective memory.

The propaganda narratives interlink seamlessly and allow the children to continue to feel Russian and to maintain a positive view of Ukraine, in case it becomes part of the Russian Federation. Here disinformation is used as a weapon (Aro, 2022), and a very effective one, as the statements of the Russian children show. What is particularly worrying here is that the children assimilate the propaganda narratives regardless of the political position of their parents. Even in families that are outspokenly critical in private, the propaganda narratives are deeply embedded in the children's minds. ■

NOTES

¹ A big thank-you to Ekaterina Nouri for her courageous cooperation and data gathering (see also Nouri in this issue).

² The letter is available to the author.

³ The artistic quality of the pictures drawn by these Russian children differs from what we have seen in 20 years of international research using drawings by children of this age. Their design and colouring is at the level of university students. Our Russian research partner gave us the decisive clue here: it is customary for children, especially at primary school, to be asked to create a picture as a homework task. Because the mark they receive for this is important for their future school career, someone from their family usually helps them or completes the drawing "overnight". Since the introductory letter presented this study as an important part of an international scientific study, adults helped with these drawings as well – at least with the initial pictures about what things are like in Ukraine.

⁴ The picture has been drawn in pencil, probably based on Yuri's instructions, by an artistically skilled hand, probably that of a parent, and then coloured in with watercolours.

REFERENCES

- Aro, Jessikka (2022). *Desinformation als Waffe. Über einen Krieg, den Russland seit Jahren führt*. APuZ, 72(28/29), 42-46.
- Behrends, Jan Claas (2022). *Die postsowjetischen Kriege*. APuZ, 72(28/29), 21-27.
- Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung/bpb (2011). *Krieg in den Medien, Definition von Propaganda*. Available at: <https://www.bpb.de/themen/medien-journalismus/krieg-in-den-medien/130697/was-ist-propaganda/> [12.9.22]
- Burkhard, Fabian (2022). *Das System Putin. Regimepersonalisierung in Russland und der Krieg gegen die Ukraine*. APuZ, 72(28/29), 35-41.
- Bussemer, Thymian (2005). *Propaganda. Konzepte und Theorien*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Major, Claudia & Mölling, Christian (2022). *Von der Friedens- und Konfliktordnung*. APuZ, 72(28/29), 10-15.
- Portnov, Andrii (2022). *Im Osten nichts Neues*. APuZ, 72(28/29), 16-20.
- Wendland, Anna Veronika (2022). *Zur Gegenwart der Geschichte im russisch-ukrainischen Krieg*. APuZ, 72(28/29), 28-34.

THE AUTHOR

Maya Götz, Dr. phil., is the Head of the IZI and of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL, Munich, Germany.

