

Z GENERATION: INTO THE HEART OF RUSSIAS FASCIST YOUTH

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[No, this is not about America's Gen Z, named after the Xers and Y Millennials. It is about Russia's, named after the tactical insignia of Russian troops occupying Ukraine, which they support with a Nazi-genocidal fervor]

Red Square, Moscow

Alina is 19. She loves fashion, and watching pirated Hollywood movies with her mechanic boyfriend Sergei.

And, like most young people in Russia, she is addicted to her smartphone.

But since February 24, 2022, when President Vladimir Putin sent an invasion force into Ukraine, Alina's online life has become scarily violent. She is one of the Z Generation.

Where once her pages on VK, the 'Russian Facebook' used by 70 million people, used to feature mostly holiday selfies, now she has a bottomless obsession with conspiracy theories about the war — spread by government-run groups with names like Z For Victory, Ztrength In Truth, REAL Ukraine and Antiterror Z.

She shares and re-posts propaganda about Ukrainian neo-Nazis and child-killers, backed up with warnings of the threat to Russia from shadowy NATO organizations. The people of Ukraine, she believes, can be saved only by wiping out their culture, their government and their language.

Her homepage is plastered with apocalyptic images of a burning White House in 'Fasciston DC'. The Ukrainian flag is renamed 'the Devil's Swastika' and Putin is 'Russia's savior'.

Just two years ago, nothing in Alina's world could be more important than a shopping trip to Moscow, 1,000 miles from her home in the mining town of Nizhny Tagil.

But a passion for designer clothes has given way to lust for war. She posts new slogans daily: 'UkroFascists, you are RABID DOGS'; 'The white of our Russian flag means cleanliness'; 'If I was in charge, you *khokhols* [a derogatory term for Ukrainians] would get what you deserve'; 'God is with our boys, kill the treacherous scum.'

How did Alina, and hundreds of thousands of young Russians like her, become so consumed with online violence and hate? Do they believe what they write or is it all for show? And what next for Russia and the rest of us if a generation of furious, fascist Alinas grows up to take charge of the world's biggest nuclear power?

Following the humiliating setbacks dealt to Russian forces during Putin's invasion, his allies in the media and the Orthodox Church went on a round-the-clock offensive. Images of children supposedly killed by Ukrainian armed forces and rescued by Russian troops flooded social media.

Calls urging genocide were delivered in a language of macho, misogynistic, and homophobic hatred. Russia's enemies are daily called 'f***ots' and 'pussies', or 'blacks' and 'n****rs'.

Ukrainians are subjected to torrents of abuse that echo the language of Nazism: they are 'diseased', 'beasts', 'monsters', 'animals' — and a chilling term to deny them their humanity, *nelyudi*: subhuman 'unpeople'.

After Russia was accused of using chemical weapons, one popular blogger sneered: 'Why poison a handful of cockroaches with sarin when there are a host of simpler and cheaper ways to do it?'

The Russian Orthodox Church does nothing to discourage violence. Its leader, Patriarch Kirill, blesses the army from the pulpit of the Cathedral of the Armed Forces in Moscow, a state-funded megachurch. Religion is totally

at one with the state: commentators assert that ‘the Russian Patriarch believes in Putin instead of believing in God’.

At the war’s onset there were anti-war protests. Isolated demonstrations against the government’s policies — students covered in fake blood outside universities or holding blank protest signs on Moscow’s Red Square — went viral in the West but were mostly ignored in Russia . . . except by the security forces.

Some 15,000 people were arrested in the first three weeks of the war. Journalists who attempted to report on the crackdown were publicly assaulted by heavies and hooligans.

A draconian new law forbade spreading ‘fake news’ about the Russian army, threatening citizens with up to 15 years in jail or fines of up to 1.5 million rubles (over 20 times the monthly average salary of just under 58,000 rubles, equivalent to \$585).

A trickle of celebrities spoke out. Unexpected voices of reason like Ivan Urgant, the host of a long-running and hugely popular late-night chat show on state TV, rapidly found themselves out of a job — and out of the country, fleeing to Israel, Cyprus, and beyond.

Putin announced that Russians were threatened, not just by forces from the outside but by ‘fifth columnists’ who had to be ‘cleansed’. Spies and enemies were everywhere, always working on behalf of a shadowy cabal of forces that included America, Ukraine and ‘globalists’.

Television showed so-called spies being violently arrested: front doors were shattered with battering rams, car doors torn open, and bodies thrown on to sidewalks and stairwells.

The front doors of alleged traitors were daubed with graffiti — ‘Traitor to the Motherland’, ‘Don’t sell out your country, b*tch’.

Traitors were discovered everywhere. The police and security forces were not exempt, with moderate voices quickly purged.

Teachers who made ‘errors’ in their descriptions of the war were summarily fired.

Even national treasures, such as the singer Alla Pugacheva, could find themselves pilloried as ‘scum’ on social media if they voiced doubts about the ‘special military operation’.

An estimated 200,000 Russians left the country within weeks, decamping to former Soviet states with large Russian-speaking populations such as Georgia, Armenia and Kazakhstan. By late March, any protest movement was effectively dead.

In April, when Western media published details of Russian slaughter in Bucha (a suburb of Ukraine’s capital Kyiv), the Kremlin propaganda machine went into overdrive.

Images of corpses, their hands tied and their eyes blindfolded, and of mutilated bodies in torture chambers at schools, were denounced as fakes created by the CIA and other enemies of Russia.

A deafening clamor built up on Russian social media, especially among teenage users, begging to see ‘diseased Ukrainian vermin’ wiped out. ‘They deserve to die,’ was one common cry. ‘We’ve got to kill these f****rs.’

Alina joined in the frenzy: ‘Bucha. I’ll create another Bucha. I’ll teach them.’ She embraced the atrocities and declared she would like to take part in a genocide against two of the state’s enemies — Ukrainians and homosexuals — in her home town: ‘Ukies, come have a gay pride parade in Tigil, we’ll turn it into a meatgrinder.’

(Meatgrinder is a term used for the kind of bloodbath once endured by Red Army soldiers in World War II, a conflict in which 25 million Soviet citizens died.) The worse Russia’s atrocities, the more the teenagers of Z Generation acclaimed them.

The hashtag *#NamNeStydno* was everywhere: *#WeAreNotAshamed*. To these young people, the war in Ukraine has become a crusade to purify Russia — and Russia to them is a country that exists wherever Moscow once reigned and wherever Russian is spoken.

Everywhere, the Soviet-era slogan is repeated: *Bor’ba za mir* — fight for peace. Liberals, progressives, homosexuals, feminists and non-whites are inherently un-Russian. And the most un-Russian concept of all is *Ukraine*, a country that according to state media ‘has never existed in history and does not exist today’.

Russia is awash with this language of destruction. Nightly talk shows feature politicians, journalists and pundits competing to make the most outrageous statements:

Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelensky is a Nazi; Russia can nuke Europe in 200 seconds; the U.S. is on the brink of collapse; Russian troops will win the war any day now; Ukrainians are murdering Russian women and children.

Apocalyptic rhetoric is inflated to maniacal levels. After Kremlin politicians began to talk openly of using nuclear weapons, the editor of Russia Today, Margarita Simonyan, shrugged: ‘We will go to heaven while they will just kick the bucket.’

Armageddon is touted as an inevitability by many pro-war TV personalities. Nuclear oblivion, often predicted for 2024, is seen as the greatest sacrifice Russia can make, the ultimate ethnic cleansing.

Statements made through official media and TV don’t much interest Russian teenagers, just as British teens pay little attention to party political broadcasts. But Z Generation consumes these ideas through memes and video clips, and via the floods of comments on their smartphone screens.

The Z symbol itself has no real roots in Russian culture. Concocted by Putin’s PR teams to unite the public in the wake of the retreat from Kyiv, it does not have a single meaning: in Russian, *zameans* ‘for’ so Z can be ‘for peace’ or ‘for defense’, ‘for the future’ or simply ‘for Russia’ or ‘for Putin’.

Having fallen to an all-time low in 2013, the president’s approval soared to more than 80 per cent after Russian soldiers annexed Crimea in 2014.

The launch of the *Yunarmiya*, Youth Army, in 2016, a program of military training for adolescent boys and girls, masterminded by Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, also proved a boon to Putin's popularity.

With an emphasis on 'healthy living' and 'moral and spiritual development', it aims to mold the young into 'soldiers of Russian nationalism' — and to prepare them for army service.

Youth Army members spend ages parading. They parade on national holidays. They parade after school. They parade in gyms. They parade in the community. And when they're not marching, they're taking classes, they're meeting serving troops, or they're helping veterans in the community. But, most of all, they're preparing for battle.

Relentless physical training, capped with annual sports competitions, is meant to keep the members in shape.

At summer camps and after-school events, even the youngest members — those aged six — learn to take apart and reassemble grenade throwers and Kalashnikovs, while older teens practice firing weapons. They also prepare for nuclear and chemical attacks by dressing up in protection suits and gas masks.

From its inception, children rushed to sign up. By 2019, there were 380,000 Youth Army members between the ages of six and 18, most of them from poorer regions in south and western Russia, bordering Ukraine and Belarus.

The scheme also recruits intensively from orphanages, claiming that it is saving vulnerable children from alcoholism and crime.

One typical Youth Army veteran is Nikita, from Saratov, 500 miles south-east of Moscow. He spent four years in uniform, parading on national holidays and attending extra education classes to learn about Russia's 'glorious' history.

But his favorite part, since he has 'always been interested in things like special ops', was learning to use firearms.

Today, Nikita is an internet addict. He spends evenings locked away in his bedroom, waging war on 'lies' from abroad and defending Putin.

He says he loved his time in the Youth Army so much that he plans to postpone going to university to sign up for the Russian army and fight in Ukraine.

Girls make equally enthusiastic online soldiers. In a town outside Volgograd, 14-year-old Maria loves posting videos of herself in Youth Army uniform on social media.

She dances and lip-syncs to popular songs but, every few posts, her adolescent outpourings are punctuated by military images: Maria attending a parade, Maria getting ready to march.

The two worlds melt into one. Sitting in her bedroom, Maria cocks her head, flicking her beret toward the camera. She points to a caption on screen: #volunteer #loveyourself #youtharmy. This is paramilitary youth group as upbeat internet self-help slogan.

But it is also a serious military group. The European Union added the organization to its sanctions package in the summer of 2022, labelling it a ‘paramilitary’ group.

Ukraine’s ombudsman for human rights, Lyudmyla Denisova, released an online statement expressing fears that Russia intends to use Youth Army members on the battlefield in response to its enormous troop losses.

And many of the teenagers declare themselves ready to fight. One teen posts a TikTok-style clip showing off his acrobatic firing routines with an army-issue rifle in a school gym. He has overlaid this with the caption: ‘I’m here to save people!’

A younger child stands to attention in combat trousers and the Youth Army’s red T-shirt to record an awkward recital of a Soviet-era war poem.

An older teen who has attended a series of summer camps boasts in a video of becoming so adept at knife throwing that he now gets to teach the younger recruits.

A group from Sakhalin, in the far east of Russia, uploads a clip of youngsters training in a forest. Young soldiers throw themselves to the ground, take up firing positions and move along a wooded track in response to their commander’s barked instructions.

The theme of children is a constant one in Z Generation propaganda. One soldier at the front posts an archive photo of doleful Soviet children lined up for arrest and perhaps execution by German invaders. He captions it: ‘Don’t worry, we’re fixing it now.’

Last summer, a grainy video of a cherubic blond boy clad in tank commander’s cap and baby military fatigues was uploaded to VK and Telegram groups.

The boy merrily dashes, half running, half bouncing, along a dusty track from his home to the main road towards Kharkiv in Ukraine.

He waves boldly at troop columns making their way to the front. He is eight-year-old Alyosha, a resident of Veselaya Lopan, and he performs this ritual of greeting his heroes every day.

Social media users went into raptures at his exemplary display of patriotism: ‘This is going to warm your heart!’ Alyosha became a viral sensation. He was taken to meet Putin, and one senior Kremlin official proclaimed him to be ‘the future of our Russia’.

Now his image is plastered on everything from T-shirts to school notepads. There is even an Alyosha chocolate bar.

He is the perfect little soldier . . . and the face of Z Generation.

*Dr. Ian Garner is a professional historian with a particular focus on Russian history and culture. He is the author of just-published **Z Generation: Into the Heart of Russia's Fascist Youth**, of which this is an excerpt.*

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