

No. 1/2020 · April 2020

# ZOIS REPORT

**WORLD WAR II FOR  
YOUNG RUSSIANS:  
THE PRODUCTION AND  
RECEPTION OF HISTORY**

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## Executive summary

Under Russian president Vladimir Putin, historical narratives have become a central component of the Kremlin's attempts to shape the identities of Russians at home and abroad. These narratives provide a set of identity markers and aim to compensate for limitations in other spheres of life, such as a lack of economic growth, insufficient infrastructure, and restrictions on personal freedom.

Yet political actors have only a limited capacity to control how historical politics reaches into society. Some of the prevailing historical narratives diverge substantively from the elite's intentions.

A one-sided interpretation of World War II is central for Russian patriotic education and is reiterated in authorised history textbooks. More critical historical narratives are encountered in literature. Recent state-subsidised films tend to repeat Soviet ideas about the war and provide strong emotional links to young people of the time of the conflict.

This report analyses what World War II means for young Russians and how the conflict is represented for them, notably in literature and film. Four themes are particularly important:

- First, victory in World War II provides a generally shared foundation for young Russians to identify with their society and state. Victimhood and violence motivate narratives about the victory in cultural artefacts, while the historical perceptions of young respondents tend to downplay the violence and centre on the heroic victory itself.
- Second, national and social unity is a central theme in how young people perceive the war. Likewise, literature, film, and political discourse emphasise that unity against an external enemy was critical for the Soviet victory.
- Third, views on Stalin and violence against civilians during World War II are diverse, although young people’s opinions of Stalin are on average more positive than negative. Young Russians are generally aware of Stalin’s excessive violence, but their evaluations of that violence differ sharply. The young seem to receive only part of the culturally available information about violence.
- Fourth, present-day victory celebrations are mostly seen as inappropriate and disproportionate. Many young people oppose the official festivities. They agree on the need to transmit the memory of the war to the young generation but prefer a more intimate remembering.

Other historical events remain crucial for how young Russians think about their historical identity. Among them are the humiliation of the breakup of the Soviet Union, the ambivalent rupture of 1917, and — with decreasing popularity — the historical ‘return’ to Russia of Crimea, which Moscow annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

## Victory Day in Russia and its implications abroad

For many countries and people across the globe, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of World War II in 2020 has unparalleled symbolic importance.<sup>1</sup> It is probably the last commemoration to include sizeable numbers of veterans and survivors of the Holocaust, and the anniversary takes place amid increasing divergence between countries' historical viewpoints. In July 2019, Russian president Vladimir Putin declared 2020 the 'year of memory and glory' and invited leaders from across the world to celebrate the end of the war in Moscow on 9 May.<sup>2</sup> From the West, French president Emmanuel Macron was the first to accept — a move that created some irritation among other Western leaders, who have tried to coordinate a common position. Polish representatives have not been invited, whereas Ukraine and Lithuania have stated that they have no interest in attending, even if they are invited.

International hostilities have been building up as the commemoration approaches. Across Eastern Europe, history has become a battle for truth. In the run-up to Victory Day, Putin has repeatedly declared the importance of 'preserving the historical truth about this greatest event of the twentieth century'. He has emphasised the key to Russian historical perspectives: 'We remember at what a high price the victory was achieved and we consider it necessary to remember and not forget the lessons of that terrible war.'<sup>3</sup>

This attitude of perceiving history as a realm for fighting over the truth is unique neither to Putin nor to Russia. Confrontations over history have escalated particularly between Poland and Russia. Since late December 2019, the Russian president has claimed on several occasions that Józef Lipski, the Polish ambassador to Berlin from 1933 to 1939, was an 'anti-Semitic pig'. Putin has made Poland partly responsible for the outbreak of the war, pointing to its annexation of a small part of Czechoslovak territory after the 1938 Munich Agreement.<sup>4</sup> Speaking in early 2020, the current Russian ambassador to Warsaw emphasised that Poland downplays the fact that Soviet soldiers 'saved Poland from complete destruction by the Nazis'.<sup>5</sup> Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki's response was furious. He accused the Russian president of 'repeated lies' and argued that Putin's statements were similar to 'propaganda from the time of Stalinist totalitarianism'. Morawiecki underlined, 'Without Stalin's complicity in the partition of Poland, and

Across Eastern Europe, history has become a battle for truth.

1 The authors gratefully acknowledge research assistance provided by Kseniia Cherniak, Maria Kireenko, and Simon Muschick.

2 'Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 08.07.2019 № 327 "O provedenii v Rossiiskoi Federatsii Goda pamyati i slavy"', Ofitsial'nyj internet-portal pravovoi informatsii, 8 July 2019, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201907080031>. All quotes are translated by the authors.

3 'Putin rasskazal o podgotovke k yubileyu Pobedy v 2020 godu', TASS, 3 July 2019, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/6625880>.

4 'Putin's Big Lie', Atlantic, 5 January 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/putin-blames-poland-world-war-ii/604426/>.

5 '«Fakt spaseniya Pol'shi Krasnoi armiei starayutsya zatushevat'» Posol RF v Pol'she Sergej Andreev o tom, kak Varshava pytaetsya zabyt' ob osvoboditel'yakh Osventsima', Izvestiya, 27 January 2020, <https://iz.ru/968040/elnar-bainazarov/fakt-spaseniya-polshi-krasnoi-armiei-staraiutsia-zatushevat>.



without the natural resources that Stalin supplied to Hitler, the Nazi German crime machine would not have taken control of Europe.’<sup>6</sup>

Incompatible perspectives on the war are a source of tension not only between Poland and Russia. When Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky accused the Soviet Union during a visit to Poland in December 2019 of sharing responsibility for the outbreak of the war, the Kremlin denounced his statements as ‘erroneous’ and ‘offensive’.<sup>7</sup> And the open hostility is not limited to former Warsaw Pact countries. In September 2019, the European Parliament renewed a resolution that equated the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes and proposed 25 May as a day of remembrance for the struggle against totalitarianism.<sup>8</sup> Putin considered this resolution ‘absolutely unacceptable and incorrect’ and added, ‘To put the Soviet Union and fascist Germany on the same level is the height of cynicism’.<sup>9</sup>

Political elites use the memory of the war to strengthen a sense of belonging.

In Russia, political elites use the memory of the war as a central resource to strengthen a sense of belonging. As Putin regularly underlines, ‘Our memory serves our future, inspires us and strengthens our unity. We must protect the truth about the victory.’<sup>10</sup> Highlighting this centrality of World War II, Russia made significant efforts well ahead of this year’s anniversary to determine what the war should mean at home and abroad.

The framing of the war occurs in a myriad of ways, from speeches by political elites to editorials, museum exhibitions, and history teaching in schools. Besides state-funded initiatives, numerous cultural objects such as literary texts and films deal with the conflict. Key targets of many such initiatives are Russia’s young people, who are folded into a larger cultural web of interpretations with the aim of shaping their historical consciousness. At the same time, since May 2014 the Russian penal code has included an article on the rehabilitation of Nazism. This sets out severe punishments for anyone who questions the official depiction of the Soviet Union’s role in the outbreak of the war, the Red Army’s behaviour during the conflict, and the post-war regimes put in place in Eastern Europe.

6 ‘Statement by the Prime minister of Poland Mateusz Morawiecki’, website of the Republic of Poland, 29 December 2019, <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/statement-by-the-prime-minister-of-poland-mateusz-morawiecki>.

7 ‘Ze’ predal deda. Prezident Ukrainy obvinil SSSR, naravne s fashistskoi Germaniei, v razvyazyvanii Vtoroi Mirovoi’, Rossiiskaya gazeta, 28 January 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/01/28/zachem-zelenskij-obvinil-sssr-v-razvazyvanii-vtoroj-mirovoj-vojny.html>.

8 ‘European Parliament resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe’, European Parliament, 18 September 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0097\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0097_EN.html).

9 ‘Za vklad v pobedu. Vladimir Putin nagradil veteranov i obeshchal yubileinye vyplaty’, Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 19 January 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/01/19/vladimir-putin-nagradil-veteranov-i-obeshchal-iubileinye-vyplaty.html>.

10 ‘Putin prizval zashchishchat’ pravdu o Pobede v Velikoi otechestvennoi voine’, Ren.tv, 15 January 2020, <https://ren.tv/news/v-rossii/648272-putin-prizval-zashchishchat-pravdu-o-pobede-v-velikoi-otechestvennoi-voine>.

## Surveys, focus groups, and cultural manifestations

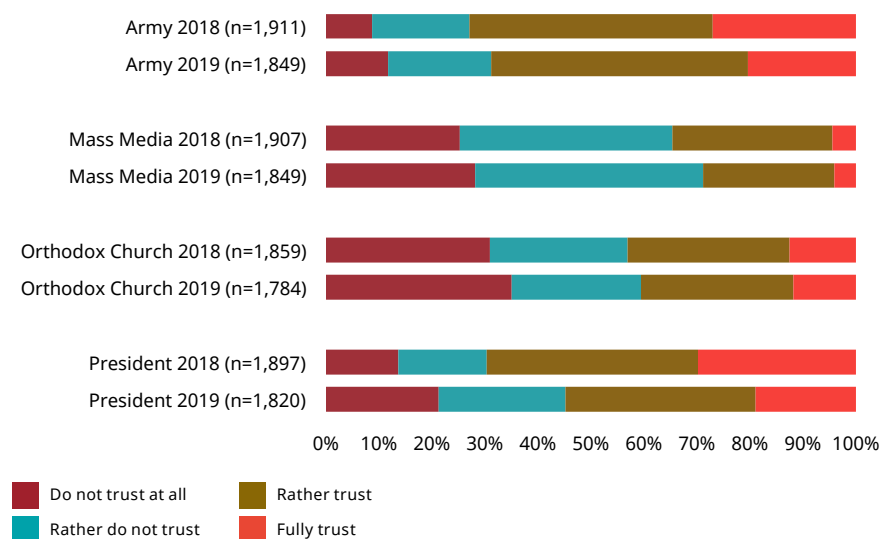
This report explores what World War II means to young Russians and how it is represented for them. We assessed the reach of top-down initiatives in contemporary Russia and the degree to which societal and elite-driven narratives of memory converge in the context of a crucial historical anniversary.

Two sets of sources inform our analysis. The first is a series of online surveys among young people living in Russia’s major urban areas, alongside focus group interviews. The second is a canon of popular historical literature and films aimed also at young people.

In April 2018 and 2019, ZOIS conducted cross-sectional online surveys among young people aged 16–34.<sup>11</sup> The surveys included questions about how the respondents interpreted historical events. The focus groups took place in Yekaterinburg and St Petersburg in June 2019 and included an extensive discussion of historical interpretations of various aspects of World War II. There were twelve groups, each with around eight participants, who were divided according to the following three criteria:

- **city:** Yekaterinburg or St Petersburg;
- **age range:** 18–24 or 25–34; and
- **self-ascribed political orientation:** regime supporter, politically indifferent, or regime critical.

**FIGURE 1**  
Trust in major Russian institutions



Source: ZOIS

11 See Félix Krawatzek and Gwendolyn Sasse, 'Youth in Russia: Outlook on Life and Political Attitudes', Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS), accessed 5 March 2020, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/zois-report/zois-report-12018/>.

The surveys aimed at understanding the broader reference population — urban youth — whereas the focus groups sought to gain a deeper knowledge of specific arguments. To position the focus group participants in the wider population of young Russians, a question about institutional trust asked in the online surveys is instructive. ► FIGURE 1 shows respondents’ trust in major Russian institutions, in particular their declining confidence in the president, between 2018 and 2019, which gives a sense of how prominent the different political orientations are among Russian youth.

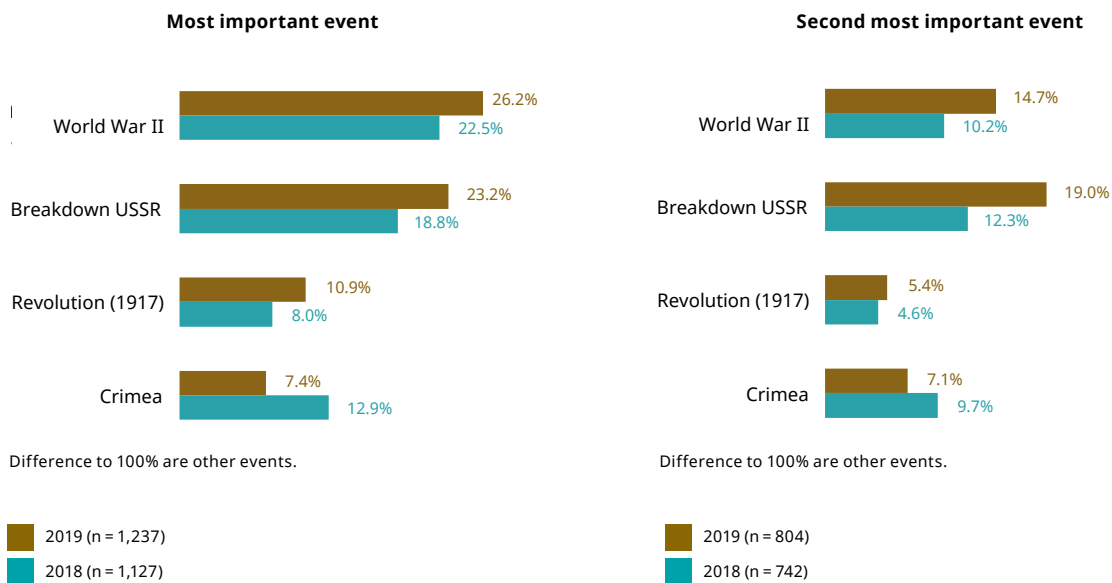
The literature corpus included canonical texts on World War II. We also analysed more recent publications and films that specifically target young people.

## What history young people remember

The historical consciousness of young Russians today is not limited to World War II. Our surveys asked respondents what were the most important and second most important historical events for them. ► FIGURE 2

In both 2018 and 2019, World War II was the most frequently mentioned most important event. The share of respondents who gave this answer increased over the two years to more than one-quarter in 2019. Terms used for the war varied, with most people mentioning either the official Russian label — Great Patriotic War — or, more specifically, the end of the war, known as Victory Day. Only a small share used the more neutral term World War II.<sup>12</sup>

**FIGURE 2**  
**Important historical events for young Russians**



Source: ZOIS

12 This report uses 'World War II' to refer to the entire period of conflict from 1939 to 1945, rather than the term 'Great Patriotic War', which is the standard in Russia and refers to the period from 1941 to 1945.

For many young people, the chaos of the 1990s remains a salient background to their political socialisation.

The breakup of the Soviet Union was also frequently cited as an important historical milestone. Its number of mentions increased from 2018 to 2019, when this event was suggested nearly as often as World War II. Putin regularly underlines that he regrets the Soviet Union's disappearance. For many young people, the chaos of the 1990s remains a highly salient background to their political socialisation. Interpretations of the Soviet breakup are overwhelmingly negative, not only emphasising economic chaos but also suggesting that democracy might not be suitable for Russia.

References to Russia's 1917 revolutions also increased between 2018 and 2019, when 11 per cent of young people saw it as the most important historical event. This increase suggests that the revolution's centenary in 2017 continues to influence historical awareness. It is, however, an ambiguous heritage, and young people's interpretations are double edged: they point not only to the potential for political breakdown and the chaos and civil war that ensued, but also to the gulf the revolution created between Russia and Europe.

Lastly, the number of respondents who view Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea — referred to in various ways — as the most important or second most important historical event has decreased remarkably, dropping to 7 per cent in 2019. This decrease shows the weakened salience of the topic in wider public and political discourse. It also suggests an awareness of the economic costs of owning Crimea, a realisation which has replaced the euphoric nationalism that followed the annexation.

## Young people as targets of historical politics

Interpretations of World War II in today's Russia come not only from the Kremlin but also from broader society and intellectuals. Below we review four sets of contributions to framing the war — patriotic education, history textbooks, literature, and film — and reveal what their respective interpretations emphasise.

### Patriotic education: Military and spiritual training

During Putin's time in power, patriotism has become Russia's state ideology to strengthen regime support.<sup>13</sup> Moscow introduced state programmes of patriotic upbringing back in 2001. But it was during Putin's third term as president, beginning in 2012, that the focus shifted to the military dimension of patriotism. The open conflict with the West as a result of the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region accelerated this development and increased demands to militarise patriotic education.

One component of Russian military and spiritual training is the youth movement Yunarmiya, officially one of the main priorities of patriotic education. Initiated by Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu in 2016, the movement counts eighty-five regional branches, whose members participate in

Beginning in 2012, the focus shifted to the military dimension of patriotism.

<sup>13</sup> 'Putin vyskazalsya za patrioticheskoye vospitaniye molodezhi bez ideologizatsii takoy raboty', TASS, 18 March 2019, <https://tass.ru/politika/6230692>.



FIGURE 3

**Yunarmiya members attend Defender of the Fatherland Day celebrations in Heroes Square, Krasnodar**



Source: imago images / ITAR-TASSstudio

numerous public events (► FIGURE 3), notably the annual Victory Day marches. According to official numbers, Yunarmiya had about 670,000 members as of February 2020 — well below the target of 1 million — aged 8 to 18, with activities reaching into other post-Soviet countries.<sup>14</sup> Our surveys show that young people are increasingly aware of the movement. In 2018, only 10 per cent of respondents recognised Yunarmiya, a number that had nearly doubled by 2019.

Patriotic education also targets a younger constituency. A script exists for Victory Day celebrations in kindergartens, with an emphasis on expanding children's vocabulary and building an emotional bond between them and their ancestors. The goal is to transmit knowledge of the Red Army, and battles are restaged in kindergarten sandpits. Many manuals on patriotic education target children aged 3 to 7, a noteworthy shift from the patriotic education of Soviet times.

In late 2017, a music video featuring member of the State Duma Anna Kuvychko alongside uniformed schoolchildren and university students expressed this sense of uber-loyalty. Shot in Volgograd, *Uncle Vova, we are with you!* caused significant controversy, in Russia and elsewhere, as to whether children should be involved in these kinds of activities.<sup>15</sup> In the video, images

**Young people are increasingly aware of the Yunarmiya movement.**

14 "Yunarmiya' ne budet zanimat'sya prinuditel'nym perevospitaniem', TASS, 15 May 2019, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/6220061>. 'Detstvo – pod ruzh'e. Militarizatsiya russkoi zhizni na marshe. «Yunarmiya» prikhodit v detdoma', Novaya Gazeta, 13 March 2019, <https://novaya-gazeta.ru/articles/2019/03/13/79863-detstvo-pod-ruzhie>.

15 Vova is short for Vladimir and refers to Russia's best-known Vladimir, president Putin.

of present-day youth proclaiming its readiness to fight for ‘Uncle Vova’ are interspersed with pictures of military parades, monuments, and churches, highlighting what officialdom expects from the young generation. The video’s foreign policy implications and transcendence over time become apparent in the lyrics:

And what will my generation have left,  
If we let our guard down and lose the country?  
Our truest friends are the Army and the Navy,  
The memories of friendship and grandpa’s red star.

We won’t surrender the ridge to the samurai ever  
We will stand up proudly for the capital of amber [Kaliningrad]  
Sevastopol and Crimea are ours, we’ll preserve them for our descendants  
We will return Alaska to the harbour of the motherland.

### History textbooks: Eradicating critical assessments

Russia promotes a glorified national history in its school curriculum through history textbooks. In 2007, when Russia had turned greater attention to youth in the context of the colour revolutions in a number of former Soviet states, the controversial handbook *The Modern History of Russia 1945–2006* was published. Backed by Putin, this manual for history teachers, written chiefly by Aleksandr Filippov, reiterated Putin’s interpretation of the Soviet Union’s collapse as the greatest geopolitical tragedy, lauded Stalin as an ‘effective manager’, and generally echoed Soviet-era textbook interpretations. To promote patriotism among Russian students, the manual officially determined how twentieth-century history was to be taught. For the potentially delicate period of Stalinism, the emphasis was placed on the industrial leap forward and on understanding Stalin as a continuation of the strong leadership of the Russian Empire.

In 2013, the Council of the Russian Historical Society, a group of historians and politicians, approved a new approach to teaching Russian history. The goal was to develop ‘a civil identity of the younger generation’. *The Concept of a New Educational-Methodical Complex in Russian History* places Russian unity and Russia’s impact on world history centre stage. But it quickly led to national and international criticism of its factual errors and Russia-centric approach.

Another doctrine, *The Historical and Cultural Standard*, further demonstrates the explicit ambition of Russia’s education system to transform young citizens into loyal members of the nation. Since 2015, *The Standard* has defined the rules for history textbooks that are officially approved for use in schools. It has therefore provided a common educational and methodological outlook. In 2016, Olga Vasilyeva, the education minister, endorsed three series of textbooks, which have been criticised for their limited discussion of Stalinist repression and emphasis on Stalin-era industrialisation.<sup>16</sup>

16 ‘Shkol’nikam rasskazhut pro «uplyvshii Krym» i «antirossiiskii front», Znak, 25 August 2016, [https://www.znak.com/2016-08-25/chem\\_novye\\_uchebniki\\_istorii\\_otlichayutsya\\_ot\\_staryh\\_po\\_punktam](https://www.znak.com/2016-08-25/chem_novye_uchebniki_istorii_otlichayutsya_ot_staryh_po_punktam).

Russia promotes a glorified national history in its school curriculum.

## Literature: Competing perspectives

Judged by the number of hours of teaching, literature is one of the most important subjects in Russian schools. In their final two years of secondary school, Russian students have no less than three lessons a week of (Russian) literature.<sup>17</sup> The framework curriculum for literature, published by the Russian Ministry of Education, lists authors and texts that must (category A), should (category B), and may (category C) be read.<sup>18</sup>

All texts about World War II fall in category C and include poems by Aleksandr Tvardovsky, short prose by Viktor Astafyev (e.g. *Sheppard and His Wife*), Boris Vasilyev (e.g. *The Dawns Here Are Quiet*), and Vasily Grossman's epic novel *Life and Fate*.

The texts provide a wide range of literary perspectives on World War II. They describe combat operations in great detail, praise Soviet feats and solidarity in the Red Army, and highlight German cruelties both in combat and against civilians. Some texts also touch on sensitive issues, such as the Red Army's serious supply shortages, its lack of discipline, and — in *Life and Fate* — the ongoing Stalinist repression. What is noteworthy is that none of these texts was written primarily for young people, but rather for a broader Soviet public.

Today, the Russian book market also offers a vast number of books on World War II for young readers. Most of them are either non-fiction or new editions of canonical texts. Series like *75 Years of the Great Victory: Children about the War*, published by AST, a leading Russian publishing house, primarily include texts by well-known authors.

Those texts that were written for young readers focus on what World War II meant for children of the time: growing up without their fathers, with mothers who had to raise their children alone, and in permanent fear of receiving news about their fathers' death. At the same time, the children depicted are convinced that their fathers will defeat the hated German occupiers, because their war — unlike the German war — is a just one. Meanwhile, the children help their mothers, who symbolise the motherland as a whole, as an act of patriotic duty. Because mothers replaced fathers at work, children assumed responsibility for hearth and home, as in the poem *Man* by Valentin Berestov:

My father was called to the front,  
And this is the reason why  
From now on I have got to do  
What a man has to do.

Today, there is a vast number of books on World War II for young readers in Russia.

17 'Federal'nyi bazisnyi uchebnyi plan i primernye uchebnye plany dlya obrazovatel'nykh uchrezhdenii RF', accessed 5 March 2020, <https://base.garant.ru/6149681/53f89421bbdaf741eb2d1ecc4ddb4c33/>.

18 'Primernaya osnovnaya obrazovatel'naya programma srednego obshchego obrazovaniya', Ministerstvo prosveshcheniya Rossiiskoi Federatsii, accessed 5 March 2020, <https://fgos-reestr.ru/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Primernaya-osnovnaya-obrazovatel'naya-programma-srednego-obshhego-obrazovaniya.pdf>.

My mother is at work all the time.  
The flat is empty.  
But a man at home  
Finds always something to do.

The buckets are full of water  
The apartment is swept.  
It's not difficult to wash the dishes —  
There is not a drop of fat on them.  
[...]

Children themselves are depicted as ready to fight the fascists. The short story *March* by Arkady Gaidar tells the story of a boy who prepares to join the Red Army. When he is finally prepared, the war is over. Still, the text highlights the Soviet readiness for the fight, even among the country's youngest citizens.

It is difficult to evaluate which of these texts are actually read by young people, but the texts are considered worth reading by Russia's political elite and literary field. What is more, they are all easily available on the book market or for free online.

### Film: In the footsteps of the young heroes

The Russian media are saturated with Soviet and Russian films and television series about World War II. Television series like *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1972) are traditionally broadcast around Victory Day and have suggested a narrative about fascist Germany to generations of Soviet and Russian people.

In the last two years, several war films have been screened that specifically target children over 6. In *Small Soldier* (2018) and *Little Sister* (2019), both subsidised by the Russian Ministry of Culture, children are the main protagonists and viewers adopt their perspective. The protagonists therefore function as potential role models for a young audience. Seryezha, the 6-year-old hero in *Small Soldier* who is picked up by a Red Army soldier after his relatives are killed by German combatants, is directly involved in combat actions at the front line. *Small Soldier* is based on the famous story of Sergei ('Seryezha') Aleshkov, a 6-year-old orphan who became known as the youngest soldier of the Red Army. The film shows how even a boy armed with nothing but a wooden gun could contribute to defeating fascism. A likely interpretation of the film's message can be found on Kino-teatr.ru: 'This little soldier can give a lesson in courage, patriotism, and perseverance to any adult.'<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Yamil, the same-aged protagonist in *Little Sister*, experiences the war and its consequences in the Soviet hinterland. The film is based on the novel *Joy of our House* by Mustai Karim, first published in 1951. *Little Sister* tells the story of Yamil, a Bashkir boy, and Oksana, a Ukrainian girl,

<sup>19</sup> 'Soldatik (2018)', Kino-teatr.ru, accessed 5 March 2020, <https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/ros/131137/annot/>.

The Russian media are saturated with Soviet and Russian films and television series about World War II.

who is saved by Yamil's father, a Red Army soldier, and sent to the region of Bashkiria in the Urals. ► **FIGURE 4** Yamil is delighted about the appearance of a 'little sister' and integrates her into the village community, in particular by teaching her the Bashkir language. The film highlights that World War II was not only a Russian war but also the war of all Soviet peoples, including small national minorities like the Bashkirs.

Both films match official expectations of how to present World War II. The Ministry of Culture of Moscow oblast included them in a series of war films shown for free on the Defender of the Fatherland Day in February 2020.<sup>20</sup>

## The uneasy heritage of a great victory

Seventy-five years after the end of World War II, young people in Russia view the event first and foremost as a heroic victory. War stories, on the other side, irrespective of the medium they are told in, recall the structure of a classical drama. In *Small Soldier*, the viewer gets to know the main character at the beginning of the film, experience his untroubled childhood, and live with his mother and brother (exposition). Immediately afterwards, German combatants kill the boy's relatives; he manages to escape and a Red Army soldier picks him up (rising action). Throughout the film, the hero stays with the army, fights German fascists, and loses more friends during their combat mission (climax). The protagonist finds himself a new family (falling action) and finally receives an award for military merit (denouement).

This story, like any other war story, would not work without exposing civilian and military casualties. The victims motivate the storyline and are the reason for the hero's feats. To put it simply: there are no heroes without victims. The Soviet victory is the logical denouement of every World War II story and is not usually described in detail in literature and film.

When young people were prompted in the focus groups to discuss World War II, the victory on 9 May was their central reference. There was widespread agreement among participants on the importance of Victory Day, which 'allowed them to live further', provided 'freedom', and let them 'feel life again'. The victory is considered the basis for the state in which people continue to live to this day. In the focus groups in both cities and across political orientations, young people reiterated the trope of a victory over fascism which continuously makes them feel 'proud about their grandparents'.

The focus on the victory led one politically indifferent participant to claim that she was 'glad' to live in Russia, because 'we won back then'. This view sidelines the fact that after the war, people did not live in a free country and downplays the continuous limitations to freedoms that existed in the Soviet Union. Cultural products about the war circumvent this aspect of

**FIGURE 4**  
Poster for the film *Little Sister* (2019)



Source: Motor Film Studio

20 'Bolee 30 besplatnykh kinopokazov ko Dnyu zashchitnika Otechestva provedut v Podmoskov'e', Pravitel'stvo Moskovskoi Oblasti, 18 February 2020, <https://mosreg.ru/so-bytiya/novosti/organy/ministerstvo-kultury/bolee-30-besplatnykh-kinopokazov-ko-dnyu-zashitnika-otechestva-provedut-v-podmoskove>.



Soviet times, focusing instead on the years of conflict and heroism. Regime-supporting young people further underlined ‘pride’ for their country as a whole when talking about the war. Only some older participants, aged 25–34, added the human losses and the wounds that the conflict leaves to this day.

Few participants suggested that Russia might have to put the war’s victims at the centre of commemorations. A young man from Yekaterinburg was among those who opposed the otherwise consensual memory of the victory. He underlined that ‘the results of the war are terrible for our country’ and that instead of the celebrations, the day ‘should be honoured with silence’. Once the theme of victims was introduced in the discussions, other politically indifferent young people tended to agree that victims needed to be honoured, but without deviating from the country’s heroic narratives.

Among regime-critical young people, associations with the war tended to be more diverse. One young woman underlined that her first association was ‘destruction’. Although she acknowledged the Soviet Union’s victory, she also highlighted the great cost at which this victory came about. Another young woman compared this ambivalence to thinking about a ‘holiday with tears in your eyes’.

While young people are aware of the great human cost of World War II, this does not motivate their perceptions of the war, unlike in cultural artefacts and political discourse. Instead, what prevails is the end of the conflict and the mythical freedom of the post-war years, when Stalin was the country’s leader and the camps of the Gulag were still open. Importantly, the victory integrates today’s young generation with past and future Russian citizens.

Among regime-critical young people, associations with the war tended to be more diverse.

## United against the external threat

In *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* (1969), a popular Soviet novella by Boris Vasilyev, five female soldiers and their male commander defeat a troop of German saboteurs who outnumber them more than two to one. Thanks to their wit, solidarity, and willingness to sacrifice themselves — all the women die in the battle — the injured Soviet commander finally arrests the surviving German soldiers. In contrast, the Germans are portrayed as selfish and cruel, for example when they shoot their wounded comrades to move forward more quickly or kill one of the female soldiers:

The Germans wounded her blindly, through the leaves. She might have hidden, waited, and maybe left. But she fired while there was ammunition. She shot lying down, no longer trying to run away, because along with the blood, her strength had also left her. And the Germans killed her point-blank, and then looked at her proud and beautiful face for a long time.

Years after the war, the commander comes back to Karelia, where the fighting took place, and honours the female soldiers with a memorial plaque. The popular text and its film adaptations convey a narrative typical for Soviet and post-Soviet war stories: a soldier’s loyalty is forever. Films like *Little Sister* reiterate this and emphasise the multi-ethnic element of this unity.



The young Russians in the focus groups also expressed a longing for fraternal relations among what are now independent former Soviet states, although Russia is clearly the dominant actor in these relationships. Russian youth yearn for social cohesion, which many associate with the Soviet era. Respondents acknowledged the multi-ethnic composition of the Soviet Union but underlined that the ‘unity of the multi-ethnic people’ enabled victory over Nazi Germany. Such responses convey nostalgia for an idealised past, in contrast to the disunity of the present. Only when united, the responses suggest, could the Soviet people demonstrate their power and engage in a collective sacrifice for a great common good: ‘Millions of people died so that we can breathe now.’

Politicians regularly use this trope of national unity, which is mythical and very present among young Russians. To give one example, Valery Gazzaev, the head of the State Duma committee on nationalities, reiterated the idea of historical unity when speaking about the ‘great victory’: ‘Facing a terrible threat, the numerous Soviet nationalities were united, irrespective of national and religious affiliation; they thought and spoke only with one voice [to say,] “We will win, we will eliminate the enemy”, and then went on to attack with the words “For the motherland”.’<sup>21</sup>

Like many others, Gazzaev stressed the importance of intergenerational transmission: ‘It is important that young people feel the inextricable link between generations, that they know about and are proud of the contribution of the multinational people to the greatest victory over fascism in the world history of mankind.’ One regime-supporting participant most clearly expressed this near-sacred national and social cohesion. He underlined how for him, World War II related to the fact that ‘people united and ... rose up’ and sacrificed themselves for a greater common good.

This sense of sacrifice becomes a moral obligation, as yesterday’s sacrifice is seen as foundational for today’s freedom. Young people echo this interpretation when they agree that they benefit to this day from their ancestors’ heroic and selfless actions. Along these lines, young people in the focus group of regime supporters saw the war as an example of courage that people in today’s Russia should observe and follow. With this view, they reiterated the heroic sense of citizenship and patriotism that the Kremlin seeks to cultivate.

**Yesterday’s sacrifice is seen as foundational for today’s freedom.**

Linked to internal unity and the sense of sacrifice is a constitutive external threat. The threat emanating from the external enemy in World War II prompted people to ‘rally together’, as one male participant suggested. It was under the extreme conditions of war that the Soviet people revealed their strength: ‘The victory showed how strong the Soviet Union [was] and how patriotic and how bold its people [were]. The world then learned what this state [was] capable of.’ This external threat has continuously provided the rhetorical foundation for Russian unity. Unspecified external actors are accused of questioning Russia’s heroic contribution to the victory over fascism and innocence at the outbreak of the war, and of equating communism and Nazism.

21 ‘V GD otmetili rol’ edinstva naroda v pobede v Velikoi Otechestvennoi’, Ria Novosti, 17 February 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200217/1564870328.html>.

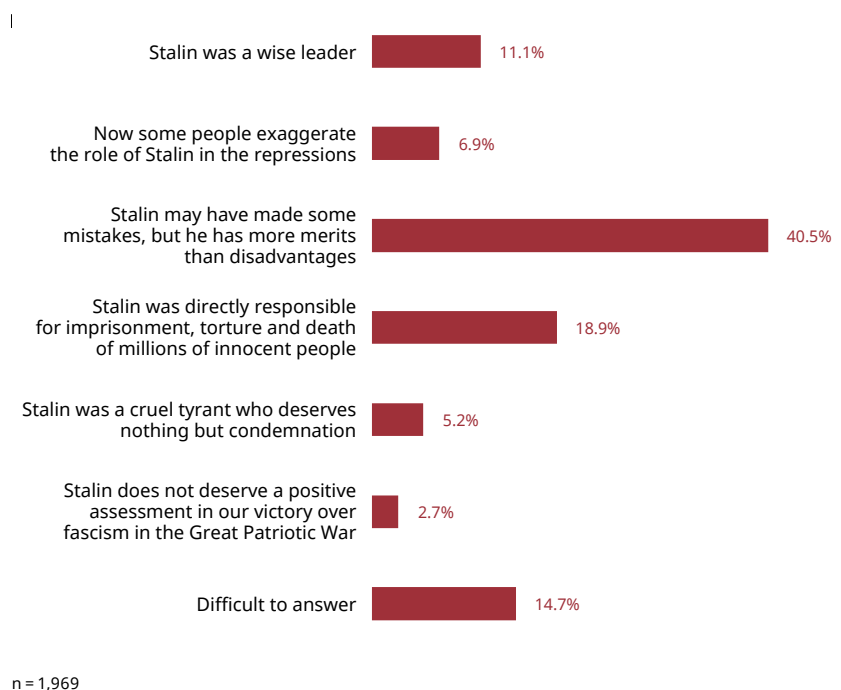
## Remembering violence: Views on Stalin

In our online surveys, hardly any respondents mentioned Stalin or the violence of Stalinism when referring to World War II as important historical event. This view matches Russia's teaching practices, emphasis on military heroism, and political discourse with its focus on economic development after the war. Brutal industrialisation is seen as the key to enabling victory over Nazi Germany, and the terror becomes depersonalised and devoid of perpetrators.

In 2019, survey participants were asked to assess Stalin's role from six possible answers. ► **FIGURE 5** The most popular statement was a broadly positive one: Stalin may have made some mistakes but has more merits than disadvantages. Around one-quarter of respondents agreed with outright critical assessments of Stalin, and 10 per cent opted for a positive assessment.<sup>22</sup> This diversity of responses reflects the fact that the elite does not agree on one storyline about the memory of Stalin in today's Russia.

The focus groups revealed more about these diverging assessments. Young people agreed that Stalin played a crucial role in the war and that the victory would not have been possible without him. However, assessments varied

**FIGURE 5**  
Young Russians' views of Stalin



<sup>22</sup> Young people are therefore significantly more critical of Stalin than general population surveys suggest. See, for instance, 'Uroven' odobreniya Stalina rossiyani pobil istoricheskij rekord', Levada Center, 16 April 2019, <https://www.levada.ru/2019/04/16/uroven-odobreniya-stalina-rossiyani-pobil-istoricheskij-rekord/>.

hugely according to each participant's political outlook. Regime supporters in both cities emphasised Stalin's overall positive role for the country and regretted that today's society tends to forget his contribution. One young man underlined that 'he [Stalin] raised the country and restored cities that were destroyed'. Other young people in the pro-regime group even agreed that Stalin provides a role model for today. Older participants in St Petersburg believed that he was a strong leader with great foresight: one spoke positively about his 'tough decisions', while another argued that we, as Russians, should look up to him.

There were very different historical narratives about Stalin in the indifferent and regime-critical groups. As one would expect, the latter expressed the most negative attitudes towards Stalin. These participants brought up the Gulag, and one young woman argued:

[Stalin] was a tyrant. There was a genocide of the people, which also concerned my family. My great-great-grandfather fought [in World War II], then he once said that German tanks are better than ours. How dare he? He was sentenced for ten years.

Another young man even claimed that there were similarities between Stalin and the current Russian president. However, despite criticising Stalin's violence, regime-critical young people also agreed on his importance for the Soviet victory.

The focus groups revealed conflicting assessments, which are similarly expressed in literature. Traditionally, literature in Russia has functioned as a corrective to state positions by criticising rulers and providing alternatives to dominant narratives. Literature on World War II has long addressed topics that go against official discourse, and it was nearly impossible to publish such texts officially in Soviet times. Vasily Grossman's magnum opus *Life and Fate*, written in the 1950s, depicts Stalinist repression in World War II and, more importantly, compares Stalin with Hitler, was first published abroad. It was only in 1988, during perestroika, that the book was released in Russia.

Today, cultural artefacts dealing with Stalinist repression are available in Russia. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, whose main character is a former Red Army soldier serving a ten-year sentence in a Soviet labour camp for escaping from German war captivity, is even required reading in Russian schools. There are also more recent publications for young readers, which depict the repression in the Soviet Union in the 1940s. *Wormwood Tree*, written by Olga Kolpakova and published in 2017, focuses on repression against ethnic minorities. It tells the story of 5-year-old Soviet-German Marikhen, whose family is deported with many others to Siberia, because Soviet officials are afraid they might collaborate with Nazi Germany. Referring to her father, Marikhen explains the political situation as follows:

[The Soviet Union] is the largest country in the world. And many, many different peoples live in it. Most of them are Russians. There are many Germans, too. And the main person in the country is the Georgian Stalin. We are Germans. The Germans also attacked us. And all because every nation has good and bad people, evil and good,

Despite criticising Stalin's violence, regime-critical young people also agreed on his importance for the Soviet victory.

greedy and generous. And all people started to call the bad Germans 'fascists'. That's what dad explained.

The crimes committed by Red Army soldiers against the civilian population remain probably the most difficult topic.

*Wormwood Tree* is based on a true story; but unlike the flood of memoirs that deal with the time of the repression, it is told not by a grown-up retrospectively but by a first-person child narrator and for children. As an innocent and highly vulnerable character, Marikhen demonstrates the excesses of Stalinist repression that targeted the entire Soviet population.

The crimes committed by Red Army soldiers against the civilian population remain probably the most difficult topic. Especially rape continues to be a taboo even in literature. Yet, a few texts do mention it, perhaps the best known being Solzhenitsyn's long poem *Prussian Nights*, which was composed in 1950 while the author was still in prison. In 1,500 lines, the poem recalls the pillages, rapes, and murders the Red Army committed in Prussia. At first, the narrator seems to be more of a chronicler than a participant, but in the last verse, he confesses that he also raped a woman. When the German weekly *Die Zeit* first published some verses from the poem in 1969, Solzhenitsyn was highly afraid of the consequences from Soviet authorities and protested against the unauthorised publication. In 1974, when an authorised Russian version of the poem was finally published in Paris, Solzhenitsyn was already in exile. However, this seems to be the only version that has ever been printed in Russian.

When young people were asked whether Russians ought to criticise the Red Army or what to make of violence against the civilian population, some intuitively took a protective stance and relativised such violence: 'If you remember what the Germans did in our country, it was much worse.' Similarly, some dismissed the violence as one-off cases or even propaganda. Others, generally more critical of today's Russian regime, were more willing to acknowledge the violence against the civilian populations of Eastern and Central Europe. But some critics of the regime asserted that they rejected any criticism of the Red Army. In other words, the Red Army's heroism has emerged as a largely consensual historical view that seems to affect a significant part of the population and provide a shared sense of belonging.

## Present-day relevance and how to celebrate the end of the war

Memory requires repetition and media. Especially when witnesses to an event have died, the media transmit interpretations about what to remember and how. Young Russians today face a rigid framework that prescribes how World War II is to be remembered, but they have also developed their own expectations.

World War II first became iconised in cultural artefacts during the war itself. Combatants wrote the first texts, and their descendants updated interpretations of the war over time. Most contemporary updates occur via popular, previously published texts and therefore help perpetuate Soviet perspectives. Young people in the focus groups reiterated how important it was for them to watch Soviet films.

FIGURE 6  
Poster for the film *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* (1972)



Source: SPUTNIK Alamy Stock FotoStudio

FIGURE 7  
Poster for the film *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* (2015)



Source: Zori Film

*The Dawns Here Are Quiet* illustrates this particularly well. The novella, first published in 1969, was turned into a film in 1972 (► FIGURE 6), which became even more popular than the original text. On 30 April 2015, shortly before the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, to guarantee maximum media attention, a Russian remake of the film was released. ► FIGURE 7 It was first broadcast on 9 May 2016 on Channel One Russia, the country's most-watched television channel. This Soviet text still frames the way Russians are to think about World War II.

Young people echoed the relevance of the war that the media and political discourse suggest. There is a consensus that the war contains lessons for today's Russia that ought to be transmitted to the next generation. Pro-regime youth argued that Russians should be considered 'the heirs of the generation of winners', and others agreed on the importance of knowing one's ancestry. But regime critics, too, tended to agree that the war should be commemorated as an example of 'courage'.

For example, young people in the focus groups agreed in principle with the Immortal Regiment marches, in which people carry portraits of their relatives who fought during the war. But at the same time, many criticised the fact that the authorities increasingly use these marches for their own purposes. There was a broadly shared view that today's celebrations are inappropriate: they were described as 'for show', too dramatised, and detached from the population. One young woman argued that the victory celebrations had become a kind of empty shell to show that Russia could win a war again, implicitly referring to the huge number of suggested continuities from 1945 to the present. Young people criticised the fact that those in power simply want to 'prove something', without having a clear historical meaning associated to the events.

Frustration with today's commemorations cut across political views. Young people — and not only those critical of the regime — complained about the 'fuss' the government makes of every 9 May. One young man from

There was a broadly shared view that today's victory celebrations are inappropriate.

Yekaterinburg argued that Victory Day had become a ‘nightmare’, as it had turned into an occasion for ‘hurray patriotism’ and was completely dissociated from the original event.

Among the politically indifferent in St Petersburg, criticism of the present-day celebrations was particularly virulent. One young woman maintained that millions of roubles were spent just ‘to disperse the clouds [during large festivals]’ and that ‘veterans are dying of hunger in monstrous conditions in the villages’. She added, ‘It is just the same as going out and shooting them.’ A male participant took that argument further and said that in his eyes, it is a ‘celebration of hypocrisy’:

*We take a little old man out from the top shelf of the closet once a year. We say, ‘Well done to you’, eat buckwheat, soup, and then on May 10, we hide him back in the closet. All this goes along with drinking alcohol and the phrase ‘We can repeat it’. You can’t repeat it, and it’s not necessary to repeat it, because it was a dishonest, senseless war, and we drowned the Nazi knife with the blood of our people. And I think this is inadequate.*

### Even most regime critics agreed on the need to remember Victory Day.

Even most regime critics agreed on the need to remember Victory Day, but many underlined that it was not worth celebrating it. One young man criticised public displays of heroism and argued that this should be a private day of remembrance for family members. Adding nuance to the question of how to deal with the victory today, another male participant agreed that it was necessary in principle to remember this historical milestone, but with an emphasis on society:

*It is not necessary to clothe this in some kind of heroism of the Soviet Union itself. The heroism of the people should be clothed with this, because the victory was won by the people’s victims, not by the state.*

Critical young people agreed that it was necessary to remember the war and teach the young generation, to prevent such violence from recurring. History needs to be brought to young people, and today’s young Russians are concerned about history being rewritten. Most link this rewriting of history to the deaths of the last veterans, who are recognised as authentic witnesses to the war.

It is noteworthy that even some regime supporters had a nuanced view of what kind of remembering is desirable. One young man underlined that ‘our country does not need to live only in memory’. For him, this might be a way to cover up the fact that nothing else happens in Russia today. He illustrated this argument with the example of his home city of Volgograd, where life only happens in memory, given that nothing else is available.

Tropes of the Russian state discourse were clearest in the regime-supporting groups. Most prominent was an emphasis on the need to defend the memory of the victory against external threats. One young man was very outspoken in this regard and accused the ‘propaganda of Western media’ of trying to influence what people think about history and of reshuffling the facts. Most worrying for him was that even many Russians would come to believe that ‘the Soviet Union itself attacked Germany’. He went on, ‘It sounds crazy and utopian for us now. If we were sitting in a European country or in America, everyone would probably nod their heads.’



## Conclusions

Historical narratives are a central component of today's identity narratives in Russia. These narratives were first promoted overtly around 2005 with the aim of formulating a sense of belonging for Russians in Russia and abroad. At that time, Russia felt threatened domestically by the unfolding colour revolutions in neighbouring countries. The narratives have been intensified during Putin's third term as president.

The use of history to strengthen national identity is not unique to Russia but can be encountered across Europe. In the current political context, history is increasingly used as an instrument by political and social actors in various political systems. But authoritarian countries seem particularly able to control historical narratives. The extent to which Russians internalise the top-down narratives is harder to assess, however. This report has found diversity in young people's historical narratives, some of which contradict the official visions of history.

Views on Stalin and the violence that civilians were exposed to are particularly contested. Although young people are generally aware of Stalinist repression, evaluations of that period of history differ sharply among young Russians today. Information in literature, exhibitions, and films about violence are publicly available but reach young people only to a limited extent. Young people also criticise today's victory celebrations as excessive. There is widespread agreement on the need to transmit memory from one generation to another, but many prefer a more personalised way of remembering.

The Soviet victory in World War II provides a shared historical foundation for young Russians. They broadly reiterate Russia's official narratives of heroism and Soviet strength, while the victims and violence — usually central in literature or films — play only a minor role in young people's perceptions of the war. The mythical unity of the people in wartime is a recurring theme among young Russians, who contrast this with a contemporary society that many perceive as atomised. The unity of the diverse people of the Soviet Union contrasts with today's geopolitical situation and is a feature that recent films in particular reiterate.

For those in power, the Soviet victory in World War II provides one of the most usable historical events to generate support for Russia. But narratives about a glorified past are bound to be contested in society. As this report has shown, the Russian elite can control the key in which young Russians talk about history, but it cannot determine the tune they sing.

## Imprint

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### Published by

© Centre for East European and  
International Studies (ZOiS)  
gGmbH

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### Citation

Félix Krawatzek and Nina  
Frieß: "World War II for young  
Russians: The production and  
reception of history", ZOiS  
Report 1/2020, ([https://www.  
zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/  
Dateien/ZOiS\\_Reports/ZOiS\\_Re-  
port\\_1\\_2020.pdf](https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOiS_Reports/ZOiS_Report_1_2020.pdf))

ISSN 2512-7233

### Layout

Yuko Stier

### Cover image

Premium Stock Photography  
GmbH / Alamy Stock Foto

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