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Photos of Kids With Weapons in Russian Kindergarten Prompt Internet Storm

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The kindergarten celebration was held to mark Russia's Defender of the Fatherland Day on Feb. 23, after the father of one of the students, a military serviceman, proposed to "show weapons to children" in honor of the holiday, Alexei Golovin, a leader of the St. Petersburg branch of the Resistance movement, was quoted by Rosbalt news agency as saying Wednesday.

An employee of the kindergarten, located in St. Petersburg's Krasnogvardeisky district, also

confirmed that the arms-brandishing celebration had taken place, MediaLeaks reported.

The photos — which stirred indignation mixed with more than a few expressions of approval on social media — showed small boys and girls holding realistic models of AK-47 semi-automatic rifles and grenade launchers. In some of the photos, the children were accompanied by a man clad in military fatigues with a major's epaulettes and a Russian flag emblem stitched on his uniform.

Golovin — whose Soprotivlenie, or Resistance, movement calls for "order in oneself, order in the family, order in the country," according to its VKontakte social network page — said the father who proposed demonstrating weapons at the kindergarten was an "active participant" in the group, Rosbalt reported.

But he insisted that "all those weapons are dummies," according to the report.

"He brought in and showed [the mockups]. Parents started to post photographs, and some blogger made a big deal out of it," Golovin was quoted as saying.

Social network users dubbed the show "Resistance Fighter's Day," a reference to Moscow's term for pro-Russian separatist insurgents in eastern Ukraine.

Some online users also compared the kindergarten event to scenes from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip in the conflict-torn Middle East, featuring young children marching with automatic weapons during parades, and militant performances in Gaza kindergartens calling for the destruction of Israel.

The comparison with Hamas prompted indignation from Golovin's Resistance movement, according to its VKontakte page. The activist also insisted that the kindergarten event had nothing to do with the Ukrainian conflict or any political issues, Rosbalt reported.

The event comes amid an increasingly militant tone to Russia's holiday performances and shows for children.

A New Year's show in southern Russia during the recent holidays featured characters boasting of Russia's nuclear arsenal and lambasting the U.S, while a celebration of the Maslenitsa shrovetide holiday in the western Kaliningrad region this month saw the burning of an effigy of U.S. President Barack Obama. And at summer camps for children last year, attendees were reportedly instructed by veterans of the Chechnya and Afghanistan wars.

Many of the "patriotic" events seem like a revival of some of the practices of the Soviet Union, for whose military might many Russians are nostalgic. But while the Soviet authorities had high-school students practice taking apart and putting back together AK-47s at "fundamentals of military training" classes, they mostly kept weapons out of preschoolers hands.

Supporters of the kindergarten arms show countered that the lesson was supposedly better for children than Western liberal ideas, with some commentators on social networks taking a particular issue with gay rights.

Golovin's Resistance movement asked readers on its VKontakte page to weigh in on whether

"children need to be shown weapons, or whether it is better to present lectures about multiculturalism and tolerance."

A handful of commentators responded that preschoolers in arms demonstrations appeared extreme. "Weapons in a kindergarten, that's just too much," wrote one VKontakte user. But their objections were drowned out by expressions of support for training children in firearm use to instill a "sense of duty, pride and respect," as another user put it.

Generations of Soviet children grew up playing make-believe war games with toy pistols, and many said they would have been delighted to get to hold a real — or realistic — gun.

"If they had given me a toy like that at kindergarten, I would have been so happy that I would have pissed in my pants," Golovin was quoted by Rosbalt as saying.

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