

An enquiry-based approach to teaching about Russia

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Teachers have greeted the news that Russia is now part of the key stage 3 geography programme of study with some trepidation. At a 'catch-up' day on teaching Russia run by the Prince's Teaching Institute (PTI), most of us had never taught it before and only a few had even studied it. However by the end of the day we were enthused by the possibilities, engaged with the subject matter and eager to exploit the study potential of this vast and diverse country. It is an ideal opportunity to make time for some research and re-engage with that journey of learning discovery that we seek to foster in our students.

Locational knowledge and skills

Brushing up our own Russian locational knowledge is a great way of working on students' locational skills. Russia is uncharted territory for most students, so practising longitude and latitude and using atlases and Google Earth to help locate places is genuinely useful. On our PTI day we developed an activity identifying the influence of latitude and continentality on climate and ecosystems. You can pretty much mop up six biomes if you pop into a few ex-Soviet states to the south!

The scramble for Arctic oil and gas

The geopolitics of the Arctic is already a popular topic for many of us and there is plenty of great material to help with your own research and lesson resources. Political cartoons, YouTube

videos and newspaper headlines are readily available on the internet. Websites such as Durham University's International Boundaries Research Unit (www.durham.ac.uk/ibru/resources/arctic) share quality data and interactive mapping on the Arctic.

Russia's demographic challenge

Russia's demographic challenge is a valid and robust topic for key stage 3 geography. With the fastest shrinking population in the world, Russia's demographic characteristics make for an interesting study. Many of us currently use Japan as an example of a greying population – why not Russia instead? Here are my suggestions for how this could work, using an enquiry framework.

Setting the over-arching enquiry

The enquiry framework requires you to have done all your research before planning the lessons. You need to be, very simply, 'all over it' before you begin. The core big question leads the purpose of the scheme of work. It is the trunk of the scheme and should be clear and known by all students from the start (Figure 1). The enquiry questions we came up with were:

- What is Russia's demographic challenge?
- How will Russia's population have changed by 2050?
- Is Russia's population shrinking?
- Where have all the Russians gone?

Kate advocates Russia's demographic challenge as a valid and robust topic for a key stage 3 enquiry-based unit of work.

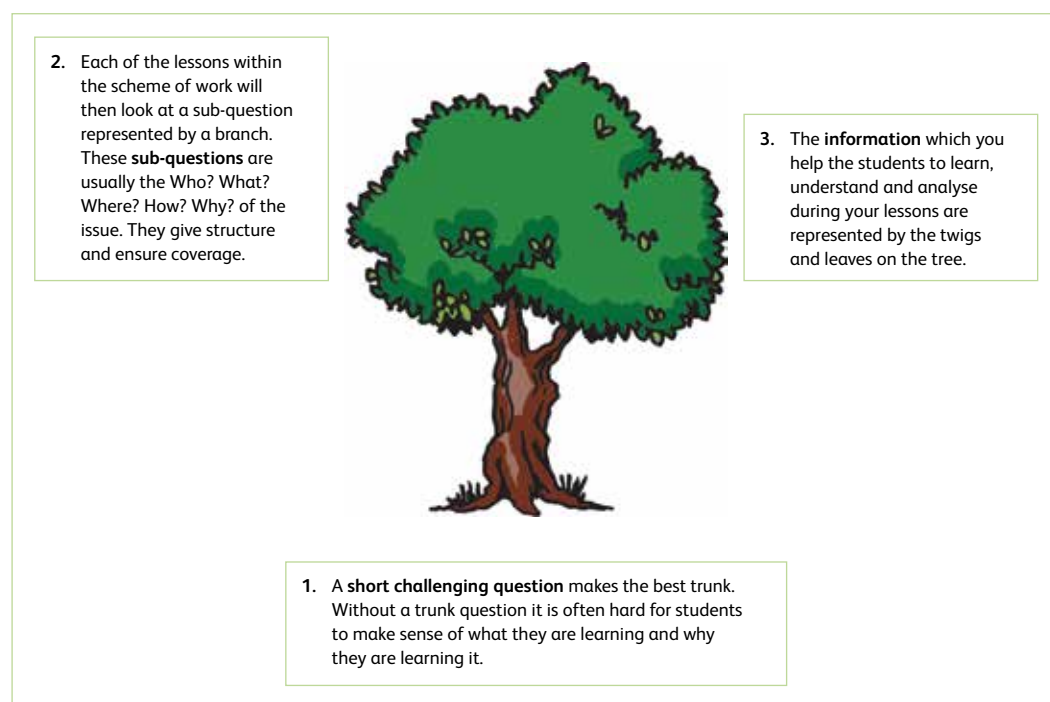


Figure 1: An enquiry framework.

Question stem	Core study	In relation to Russia's demography we need to know and understand:
Who?	Understanding the key players	Total population and by group: age, gender, origin, ethnicity, religion
Where?	Spatial pattern of the issue	How do patterns and trends differ between different regions: interior vs. coast, European vs. Asian, rural vs. urban?
When?	Temporal pattern of the issue	Has the population grown or declined over time? What key events affect this?
What?	Core processes at work	Population growth rate, structure and fertility rate, and patterns of migration
Why?	Analysis of the issue	How reliable is the data? What are the best case and worst case outcomes? Is shrinking a problem? If so, why?
How?	Some predictions or solutions to the problem	Russia's policy of encouraging immigration of ethnic Russians from post soviet states Russia as a migration hub Pronatalist solutions (Russia declares Day of Conception - see www.youtube.com/watch?v=5q9UJFZH6g)

Figure 2: Planning the enquiry.

Initial stimulus material

I am a huge fan of well-chosen and well-placed initial stimulus material. Margaret Roberts (2013) makes a key distinction between initial stimulus material and starter material: the former being more open ended, acting as a 'hook' and helping to frame subsequent lines of enquiry. If you are lucky enough to plan your schemes of work as a team, choosing the initial stimulus material would be a great way to refocus the department on the core learning objective of a scheme of work – I suggest it should be the last thing you decide about the scheme of work.

Planning the enquiry – our branches or sub-questions

The data are the twigs and leaves of our enquiry. Topical, up-to-date information engages students' interest; drawing on data to find evidence and argue their case helps them find answers to the

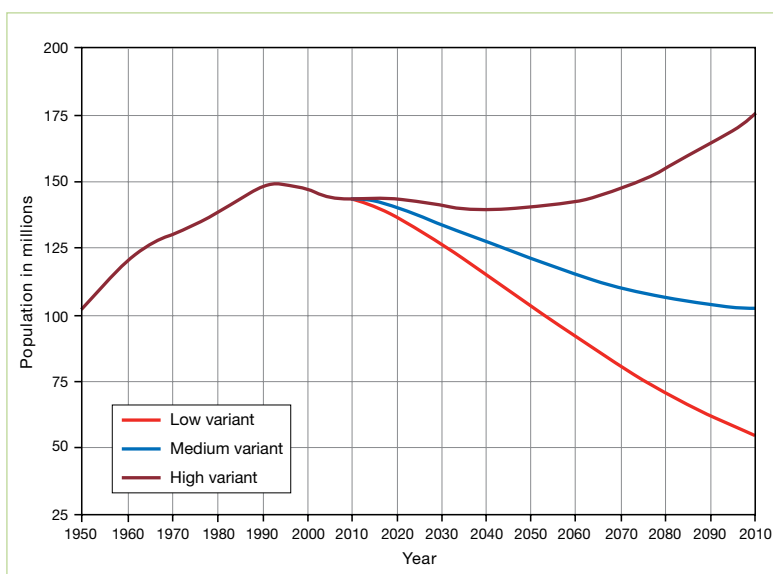


Figure 3: Russia's population change. Source: UN World Population Prospects.

enquiry questions (Figure 2). An enquiry question which asked students to estimate and justify a population projection for Russia would be a robust framework for some interesting learning – for us as well as our students.

Natural population change

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 a combination of low fertility, high mortality rates and emigration caused Russian population to decline by about 4% in 20 years, and death rates exceeded birth rates right through to 2012 (Figure 3). Russia had the fastest shrinking population in the world, and in 2006, Vladimir Putin described population decline as the country's 'most urgent problem' (Keating, 2014). It was not until 2013 that Russia experienced a year of natural population growth (Nechepurenko, 2014).

The Worldmapper map of natural population decrease (Figure 4) graphically illustrates population decline in the Russian Federation: in this already sparsely populated region almost 1 million more people die than are born.

Russia's population profile

Russia's population pyramid is highly uneven and the huge variations continue to ripple through the generations. (For a version showing changes over time, see www.worldlifeexpectancy.com/country-health-profile/russia). There is a gender imbalance – 54% women to 46% men – and male life expectancy is 64 years, which puts Russia among the lowest 50 countries in the world. Factors contributing to low life expectancy are high rates of coronary heart disease, stroke, alcohol poisoning, HIV, accidents and suicide (Mazumdar, 2014). Another feature of post-Soviet era Russia was an exceptionally low fertility rate, which dropped from over 2.1 births per woman in 1989 to less than 1.2 in 2005. In other ex-Soviet countries in central Asia, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, fertility rates remained steady: over 2.5 in 2005. Falling incomes, uncertain futures and, in a society where most parents work, the rising cost of newly privatised childcare were contributory factors (Kumo, 2010).

In 2006 childrearing allowances and other benefits were introduced, notably the Mothers' Fund, under which parents of two or more children born between 2007 and 2016 can claim a total of 250,000 rubles in subsidies to be used for housing, education, or pension contributions. (Average monthly income in Russia in September 2007 was 12,000 rubles.) There were reports in the media of couples being given days off work (and potentially winning 'money, cars, refrigerators, and other prizes') in exchange for making babies (Keating, op. cit.). The policy appears to be working: by 2013 the fertility rate had risen to 1.7.

Population distribution

Russia is by far the largest country by land area yet is ranked 9th for total population, giving it one of the lowest population densities in the world at just 8 people per km² – on a par with Chad. 75% of the population live in urban areas, and population is densest in the European regions near Moscow and St Petersburg.

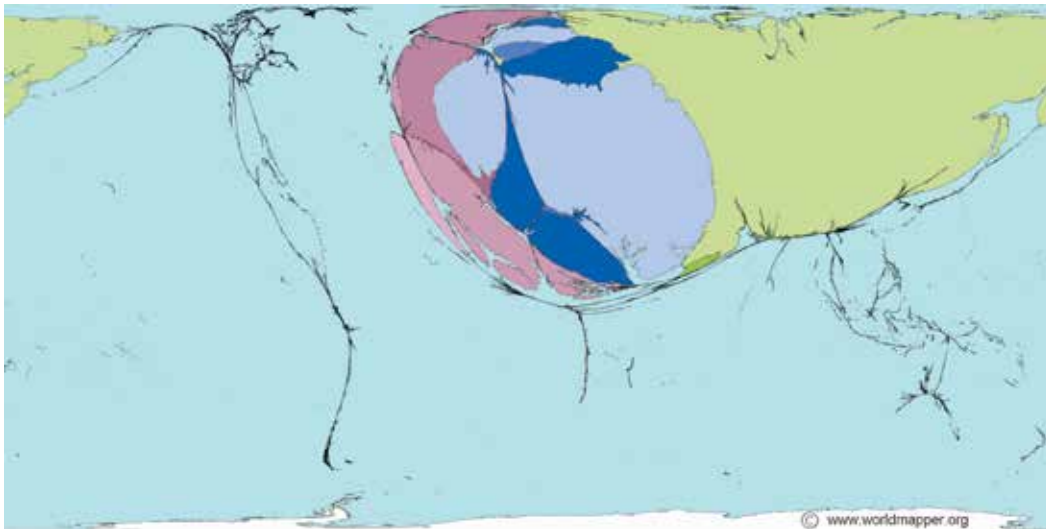


Figure 4: In this Worldmapper map, territory size shows natural population decreases, that is places where there are currently more deaths than births. In the Russian Federation almost 1 million more people die than are born there – this country currently has the largest natural population decline, which is reflected in its large area on the map.
Source: www.worldmapper.org/display_extra.php?selected=370
 © Social and Spatial Inequalities (SASI) Group (University of Sheffield) and Mark Newman (University of Michigan).

Migration

Following the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' in 1991, citizens of the Russian Federation became relatively free to travel abroad, and the country experienced significant out-migration: in 1991, for example, over 676,000 people left Russia. Initially, Russia encouraged immigration by ethnic Russians living in the former Soviet republics, and over three million settled in Russia between 1991 and 1998. It was hoped that this supply would continue to maintain Russian population levels: however, the supply dried up and by 2000 it was cancelled out by the large numbers of Russians leaving – the USA, Israel and Germany being the most popular destinations (Moscow Times, 2013).

However, Russia is also a popular destination for immigrants. There are currently 12 million immigrants in Russia, making this the second biggest immigrant population in the world (after the USA). Immigrants are attracted by the steady demand for labour in urban Russia, one consequence of Russia's ageing population and high mortality rates being a limited pool of home labour. Immigrants from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, are attracted by the higher wages in Moscow, St Petersburg and Irkutsk. Immigration is controversial in Russia, and protests about immigration, in Moscow for example, often hit our headlines: this may provide a topical starting point with your students. | **TG**

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