

Children of War | Russia's Forced Deportation of Ukrainian Children

1 | Scale of Deportations

According to the Ministry of Reintegration of Ukraine, as of July 20, 2023, there have been **19,546** verified cases of Ukrainian children being deported or forcibly transferred by Russia, including **4,396** orphans; only 388 children have been returned to Ukraine.

The Yale Humanitarian Research Lab (YHRL) has confirmed the existence of at least **43** facilities in Russian-controlled territories for deported Ukrainian children. Of these, **32 are re-education facilities**. **11** of those are located over 500 miles from Ukraine, including two in Siberia and one in Russia's Far East. In December 2023, the YHRL also confirmed the involvement of Belarus in the Russian policy of forced deportations: at least 2,442 Ukrainian children have been transported to 13 facilities in Belarus of which nine are involved in re-education, military training, or unknown medical activities.

The YHRL cited actual estimates from the Ukrainian government to be in the range of **200,000**, which is the most credible estimate currently available.

2 | Processes of Deportation

Exact procedures of Russia's forcible child deportations vary by situation. There are four main ways Russia deports children:

- 1. Deportation of orphans.** Children from orphanages and boarding schools are systematically moved to Russia under the pretext of evacuation.
- 2. Through filtration camps.** Children are forcibly separated from their parents in interrogation (filtration) camps, (filtration camps), and taken to facilities in Russia. Parents are forced to cooperate with occupiers to get their kids back.
- 3. From hospitals.** Hospitalized children are separated from their parents and forcibly transferred into Russian-controlled territories. Parents are coerced into giving their "consent" for transfers under duress, with conditional access to life-saving medical procedures used as leverage.
- 4. Directly from families.** Parents in occupied areas are often coerced into sending their children to "recreational camps" in Russia where children are forced to take Russian citizenship, "adopted" by Russian families, and re-educated and raised as Russians. Many are never returned.

3 | Classification as Genocide

The forcible transfer of children is a marker of **genocide** (Genocide Convention) and violates the UN Resolution on Children's Rights and the Geneva Convention of 1949.

The ICC issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova for the crime of deportation. The UN Human Rights Council on Ukraine report recognizes Russian actions in Ukraine as a war crime.

UN agencies and ICRC have no access to places of separation or captivity of deported children. Rare visits to such places are staged and highly curated by Russia. The International Federation of the Red Cross **suspended the Belarus Red Cross Society** for refusing to dismiss its secretary general, Dimitry Shevtsov, who publicly admitted his involvement in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus.

4 | Reasons for Deportation

Historically, the Soviet practice of deportations helped weaken resistance in occupied areas. Deportations and illegal adoptions of Ukrainian children are portrayed as rescue missions in Russian **propaganda**. Ukrainian children are presented as uncivilized and are held in re-education facilities subjected to pro-Russian indoctrination and, in many cases, military training. Deported Ukrainians create leverage Putin can exploit in the future to demand **concessions** from the Ukrainian government.

Russian households are **financially incentivized** to adopt Ukrainian children. Processes for adoption and granting citizenship to Ukrainian children have been expedited by presidential decree.

5 | What the US Can Do

- Pass legislation such as **H Res 149 & S Res 158**.
- Isolate and pressure Russia to return Ukrainian children.
- Encourage international organizations like ICRC and UNICEF to take action.
- Contribute to investigations and accountability measures by sharing intelligence, creating a Special Tribunal or working with the ICC.
- Support existing repatriation efforts by organizations like *Save Ukraine* and *Helping to Leave* as well as initiative by the President Office of Ukraine "*Bring Kids Back UA*".

The Human Experience

| These are their stories of families who were direct victims of the Russian war crime of illegal deportations.

Yevhen and three of his children were hiding in a bomb shelter in Mariupol before Russian soldiers gave them an ultimatum: get on a bus, or a Chechen unit will “clear” this shelter. Yevhen and his kids were forcibly transferred to the Donetsk region. He was sent to the filtration camp for 45 days, during which he had no contact with his children. When he was released, Yevhen walked to the nearest town where he was told that his children were gone—they had been taken to Russia. A few days later, he got a call from his oldest son, who said that Yevhen had five days to go and get them before they would be put up for adoption. With Yevhen facing this impossible ultimatum and having no money upon his release from the filtration camp, volunteers helped raise the costs for Yevhen to get to Russia, reunite with his kids, and escape to Estonia where the family now lives.

Olena was a nurse in Kupiansk. Her mother was killed during Russian shelling and her son, Andriy, was heavily wounded and taken to a Russian-controlled hospital. Olena had no contact with Andriy for months, until a woman who was previously deported to Russia provided information that her son Andriy was in a hospital in Russia. There was no way for Olena to return her son without physically going to Russia to retrieve her now-disabled son. Volunteers helped her get him out from Russia and escape to Switzerland, where Andrii is going through rehabilitation.

Denys’s wife and son, Pavlo, decided to evacuate from heavily shelled Kupiansk. Their evacuation route was shelled, and Denys’s wife was killed in front of Pavlo. Pavlo was taken by the Russians to a hospital in the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR). Denys didn’t know if his son was alive or dead. It was only when he happened to be watching a Russian propaganda program on TV that by chance he saw his son, discovering he was alive. Pavlo’s grandmother had to go to LNR and retrieve her grandson. To get out, they had to go to Russia and from there to Europe where Pavlo is now.

These stories are shared with us directly from the survivors themselves, and not through press reporting or indirect sources.