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Stolen Futures: The War on Ukraine's Children



On 11 March 2025, a devastating attack took place in a village in Ukraine's Donetsk region, claiming the lives of two boys aged 13 and 11 and injuring a 14-year-old boy.

Just a few days earlier, on 8 March, a 15-year-old girl was wounded in another attack on a different village. A day earlier, the violence continued unabated: a 7-year-old girl was injured in the shelling of Kramatorsk; a 15-year-old girl was injured in Pokrovske in the Poltava region; and seven children were wounded in an attack on Dobropillya.

These incidents, which occurred in the first half of March, underline a grim reality that has turned such tragedies into routine statistics.

The war's toll on Ukraine's children is staggering. The youngest **recorded** death was a two-day-old boy, Serhii, from the Zaporizhzhia region, killed in the early days of the conflict. **According** to UNICEF, as of late 2024, at least 659 children have been killed and 1,747 injured.

However, these figures are likely underreported, as verifying casualties in Russian-controlled places that were under heavy bombardment, such as Mariupol, remains challenging. Apart from the immediate physical harm, the war has inflicted profound psychological and societal **wounds** on Ukraine's youngest generation.

Illegal deportation

The crisis goes far beyond casualties. Ukraine has urgently called on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to **address** Russia's illegal deportation of 19,546 Ukrainian children and the disappearance of an additional 1,700, all victims of Russian aggression.

Estimates suggest that 1.6 million Ukrainian children remain under occupation or in Russia. To date, only around 600 have been repatriated, with each case being a complex and arduous struggle.

The Russian authorities are not only separating these children from their national identity – they are forcibly imposing Russian culture on them, militarising them, and grooming them for future conflicts.

Children in occupied territories are trained to assemble firearms and operate drones within Russian military youth units

Mykola Kuleba, head of the Save Ukraine NGO, reports that children in occupied territories are trained to assemble firearms and operate drones within Russian military youth units.

Thousands remain ensnared in this system, with some boys, abducted by Russia and **sent** to fight against their homeland upon turning 18, rescued by Kuleba's organisation.

"Forced mobilisation had begun in the city. Draft papers were delivered to every house, and Maksym's friends were being grabbed right off the streets. One of them was forced to sign a contract with the Russian army under the threat of 25 years in prison," **wrote** Kuleba in the story of one of the Ukrainian boys.

A cornerstone of any peace plan

At least 380 Ukrainian children have been **adopted** by Russian families, their identities altered with new names or ages on Russian adoption websites.

These children were taken from state-run orphanages in territories occupied in 2022, primarily in southern and eastern Ukraine, severed from guardians and relatives. In 2022, four orphaned infants in a Kherson regional children's hospital were nearly taken by retreating Russian forces.

Ukraine insists that the return of its children is a cornerstone of any peace plan

The quick reaction of the hospital staff prevented their removal, and after the liberation of Kherson on the right bank of the Dnipro River, these children were granted Ukrainian citizenship, and some even found new homes with Ukrainian families.

Ukraine insists that the return of its children is a cornerstone of any peace plan. However, many of the Ukrainian children have been integrating in the West. The longer the war continues, the less likely it is that they will return.

Education is disrupted

The displacement has uprooted millions, with nearly two-thirds of Ukraine's 7.5 million children **forced** from their homes. Today, 3.5 million are internally displaced, and millions more have fled to neighbouring countries as refugees.

Martial law, which **prevents** most men from leaving, has resulted in a migration, predominantly of women and children, fracturing families and exposing vulnerable youth to risks like human trafficking, especially near borders and evacuation centres.



Education is disrupted as children spend extended periods in shelters instead of classrooms, with many relying on online education

The country's future hangs in the balance, complicated by the demographic crisis and the many challenges facing young people. At least one-third of Ukrainian children lack **access** to proper education, with nearly 4,000 schools

damaged or destroyed.

In Ukrainian-controlled areas, education is disrupted as children spend extended periods in shelters instead of classrooms, with many relying on online education – if it is accessible at all.

In occupied territories, children face coercion into Russian curricula, often under threats of violence or family separation. Parents who hide their children to avoid Russian “re-education” camps highlight the pervasive climate of fear.

Bleak demographic trajectory

The war has also **brought** Ukraine's birth rate to a historic low of 6 births per 1,000 people. Last year, deaths were three times higher than births, indicating a bleak demographic trajectory.

The war has robbed an entire generation of Ukrainian children of their childhood. Some have endured torture, been taken from their parents and forcibly adopted, or even coerced to fight against their own homeland.

Others have been subjected to education and life under the shadow of Russian drones and missiles. Who can blame refugee parents for hesitating to bring their children back to such a dangerous reality?

Ukraine's youth face an existential crisis – threatened by immediate physical harm, severely disrupted education, and the erosion of their national identity

In the midst of these relentless challenges, Ukraine's youth face an existential crisis – threatened by immediate physical harm, severely disrupted education, and the erosion of their national identity.

The resilience of its people, as demonstrated by organisations such as Save the Children and

the staff at Kherson Hospital, gives hope - but it must be complemented by global action to secure a future worth living for these children.

However, without urgent international intervention to end the abductions, reunite families, and rebuild infrastructure, Ukraine risks losing not only its present but also its future.