



# A Stolen Childhood

Crimes against children  
committed by Russian troops



Centrum  
Lemkina



Pilecki  
Institute





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## Foreword

The Lemkin Center Report was compiled with full awareness of the fact that the fate of children in Russian-occupied Ukraine has already been the subject of numerous studies and analyses that were presented to the public by international organizations. From among these, we must mention the reports of UNICEF Ukraine: *Situation Analysis of Children in Ukraine 2024* and *Three years of full-scale war in Ukraine: 2025, the monthly Ukraine Humanitarian Situation Reports*, as well as *Life for children during the war. Wave 3, September 2023* and many others. Our intention was not to imitate any of them. The value of our Report lies in the utilization of testimonies obtained directly on the spot, within a short time of the occurrence of the events described.

When we began documenting Russian crimes in 2022, children often accompanied our work: they listened to the statements of adults, and sometimes even supplemented the testimonies of their parents. Occasionally, they took upon themselves the self-appointed role of field guides – such as the nine-year-old girl who, in one of the villages liberated from Russian occupation in the Kharkiv Oblast, directed us to a garden with a pit containing the bones of victims of the Russians. Because of the Russian aggression against Ukraine – ongoing since 2014 – today's ten-year-olds in the eastern part of the country do not know a world free of war. How much it changed their childhood can be seen in every front line Donbas village, for children playing in sandboxes to the sound of explosions, collecting

bullet casings, or learning to recognize different calibers of Russian cartridges have become an integral part of the local landscape. When on 24 February 2022 Russia launched its attack on other parts of the country, the number of children who experienced war further increased.

The objectives of the present Report are diverse. First and foremost, we wanted to draw attention to the war crimes, genocidal practices and crimes against humanity implemented and committed since 2022 by the Russian Army and other military entities of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine as part of the so-called special military operation, to which Ukrainian children fall victim. In this sense, the Report gathers “the voices of war” – shocking in their authenticity, eyewitness credibility and brutal literalness. The ethical overtones of these testimonies should reach journalists, human rights activists, columnists and experts concerned with the plight of civilians in wartime. This alarmist and topical aspect is certainly the most obvious, however it does not exhaust the possible uses of the Report in the circulation of information. Although the document was not created under conditions of methodological sterility, that is, neither the sets of questions were strictly limited to one field of observation nor was there a unification of the language specific to one chosen field of knowledge, we are convinced that, skillfully read, it can provide cognitive benefits also to the scholarly community. This concerns not only legal matters related to the recording

of genocidal practices, such as the kidnapping and abducting of children, depriving them of their cultural and ethnic identity, their ideological and political indoctrination, war crimes and crimes against humanity, but also issues connected with how children experience the trauma of war and its aftermath, and the field of population management under wartime conditions – i.e. the large-scale use of

demographic policies as a tool of domination and conquest. Further, we are convinced that the gathered materials will provide an inspiration to historians of totalitarian practices in the 20th century, pointing to analogies in the methods of conducting total war and managing civilians – including children – living in occupied territories.

*The Lemkin Center Team*

**Photo 1.**  
**A residential block destroyed**  
**during a Russian missile attack,**  
**Kyiv, 15 March 2022**

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

## Report elaboration methodology and ethical considerations

The Report of the Raphael Lemkin Center for Documenting Russian Crimes in Ukraine includes fragments of the testimonies of one hundred people who suffered in the course of various phases of hostilities, both during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and in the years 2014–2022. These testimonies, provided by eyewitnesses, present a wide spectrum of violations of humanitarian and international criminal law – and also common criminal offenses (in many of the cases discussed) – committed by the occupation forces. The document also covers social and psychological issues related to the extreme situations faced by children. From hours-long transcripts of interviews with witnesses we have selected excerpts relating to the experiences of children, as related by them independently or by their parents and guardians.

When using the term “child,” the authors of the Report refer to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989. Within the structure of the document, a general classification of crimes under humanitarian law – as described in the Geneva Conventions – was adopted in order to organize the presented accounts in formal terms.

Because of the methods used to obtain eyewitness accounts of the crimes and offenses committed by the occupation forces, and the collection of testimonies as soon as possible after specific events occurred and at the exact sites where they

occurred, it is not possible to precisely define the methodology of conducting research and their systematization. The goal was to record the current and fresh reflections of witnesses – untainted by later ruminations or the assimilated opinions and accounts of others.

The Report was elaborated on the basis of interviews with witnesses from ten Ukrainian oblasts: Kyiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Sumy, Chernihiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia.

Testimonies were recorded by collaborators of the Lemkin Center at the locations of residence or temporary residence of witnesses, under conditions as friendly and safe as could be assured in order to avoid their secondary traumatization. Witnesses originating from the transitarily occupied regions of Ukraine gave testimony in Ukrainian-controlled territory.

Accounts were gathered for the period April 2022 – February 2024.

The testimonies were collected pursuant to the requirements of Regulation (UE) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation), and of the Ukrainian Act on the protection of personal data, no. 2297-VI,

dated 1 June 2010. Each witness was informed in advance of the purpose for which the information was collected, and of the location(s) where the data would be stored.

Testimonies have been anonymized in accordance with preliminary findings, this in order to protect the privacy and safety of the children mentioned in the Report and of their relatives.

Among the selected accounts are eleven given by children, which are marked with the letter "M" (meaning "minor"; as serial numbers were assigned during the collection of interviews, they do not fall within the range of 1–11). For each quote, the age of the witness during the events in question is shown in a circle on the left (if the witness talks about both periods of war, his or her age is given for both 2014 and 2022). The children's testimonies were collected with the verbal consent of their legal guardians. The testimonies of adults are marked with a "C" (as in "civilian"), while the ages of their children or grandchildren during the events in question are given in a circle on the left (or information that a witness had neither children nor grandchildren at the time,

conveyed by the letter "n"). There is no year provided for the accounts of adults, because all of them concern the full-scale war of 2022. The report presents excerpts of testimonies; sometimes two (or more) paragraphs come from the same interview, but from different fragments, hence they are graphically separated from one another.

The only testimony included in the Report that has not been anonymized is the story of the murdered Stepan Chubenko, for in this case the victim's personal details are publicly known, while his tragic death has in fact grown into a symbol of the Ukrainian children murdered by Russia since 2014. The Report also makes use of stories from the Ukrainian charity "Save Ukraine," which depict the fate of children abducted by Russians under the pretext of organizing a holiday. They have been added to exemplify the methods applied to carry out denationalization, which in the testimonies presented can be qualified as genocide.

The Report is illustrated with photographs taken by staff of the Lemkin Center at the locations where events took place.







## Testimonies

← Photo 2.

Borodianka,

Kyiv Oblast,

April 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

## 1.

## Killings of civilians

The outbreak of war turned the lives of the people of Ukraine upside down, while children were irretrievably deprived of their childhoods. This sense of loss is repeated in all of the accounts – those of the young people themselves, and of their parents or guardians. Already the first days of war – both in 2014 and 2022 – brought with them immense trauma. First, there appeared a sense of danger: no one could feel safe, while the civilian population, contrary to the laws in force, was not provided with any protection – to the contrary, Russian forces implemented a conscious and deliberate process of intimidation and persecution, even killing civilians.<sup>1</sup> Children observed violence against civilians, and many experienced the deaths of their loved ones; some lost their lives themselves.

### 1.1. The beginning of hostilities in the eyes of children

**Witness M47:** For me, the war began in 2014. I was eight years old at the time. After the Maidan, pro-Russian rallies were held in the Donetsk Oblast, and at some point pro-Russian ideas began to be promoted. People in civilian clothes equipped with small arms, and others, wearing dark green camouflage uniforms, showed up.

2014 – 8  
2022 – 16

[In 2022 – ed.] Russian soldiers stopped people in the streets. Some of them were deliberately taken and led to the site of their execution. Others were shot in the street just because they happened to be there.

<sup>1</sup> Killings of civilians are a grave violation of international law and may constitute a war crime or even a crime against humanity, see Article 147 of the Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, adopted at Geneva on 12 August 1949 (hereinafter: Geneva Convention (IV)) and Article 8(2), b, i of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, adopted in Rome on 17 July 1998 (hereinafter: Rome Statute) – War crimes; as well as Article 7(1), a of the same statute – Crimes against humanity.

**Witness M1:** At half past six on the morning of 24 February 2022, my mother woke me up. She said that the war had begun. Mother heard a rocket flying overhead, she heard a whistling noise. One rocket, then another...

**Witness M51:** It was on 3 March [2022 – ed.] in the evening when they blew up a roadside post and immediately entered the city. Our house is right next to this post, so we could hear and see everything. We did not even go down to the basement, we just sat in the hallway. I tried to somehow comfort my younger brother, who was five years old.

The families of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had moved from the temporarily occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts to other regions of Ukraine in 2014 already had experience of living in a war zone and under occupation. Therefore, during the full-scale invasion of 24 February 2022 they knew better than the others how to behave under conditions of armed conflict.

**Witness M47:** I could not believe that something like this was possible in the civilized world of the 21st century, and that the events of 2014 would be repeated on a larger scale. I was in Irpin during the full-scale invasion. It all began with a power outage on the night of 23 February, while at 4 a.m. a friend called me and said that the war had started.

Early in the morning, I first gathered the most necessary items, and then began to help my friends buy food and drugs, and prepare to leave. My mother and I had a plan of action based on our experiences from 2014. We already knew what to buy in the shops, what to do first, and what to take with us.

**Witness M20:** I thought the war would not even reach the city of Izium. I spent the night in the basement. Then I returned to the city center and spent a week in the basement.

## 1.2. Killings of civilians in the war zone and under Russian occupation

The children's wartime daily routine includes omnipresent death – the sight of dead people, the feeling that you can lose your life at any moment.

**Witness M1:** Dead bodies lay in the streets. No one removed them. There were neighbors, there were friends. Many friends.



**Witness M47:** Russian soldiers, threatening the local population with weapons, forced it to dig mass graves to bury their friends, neighbors and relatives.

2014—8

2022—16

**Witness C6:** You had to wear white armbands. It did not matter whether you were a child or an adult, a woman or a man. A lot of white ribbons were needed to mark a car. Personally, I thought that if they were going to kill us, they should kill us all at once. I was not going to hide my children or myself somewhere, we were all together.

**Witness M20:** They would stop us in the middle of the street and take us to a basement [for interrogation – ed.]. For a week, two weeks, a month, no one knew, but not everyone returned. They were tortured, beaten, starved. It is also said that they simply took people to the forest, shot them there, and buried them.

**Witness M1:** They shot at people deliberately. It also happened many times that they simply played with grenades. For example, at the door to my apartment block. Opposite the door was a bus stop. Kadyrovites were sitting there. They stood at the door, playing with grenades. Or they shot at the windows of the bank. They simply fired machine guns at the windows.

**Photo 3.**  
Druzhkivka,  
Donetsk Oblast,  
August 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)



**Witness C44:** I was in the kitchen, marinating tomatoes. My daughter said: "Mother, I am going for a walk. You will have to pickle the tomatoes yourself." My father-in-law was chopping wood, helping my husband. And that was that... The explosion was very strong. I just realized that something gray, a grayish dust, was flying towards me. And shrapnel. Running over glass, I called my daughter. I was not even aware that I was running over shards. I went out into the hallway. The door was lying on the floor, the corridor caved in. I called out to my daughter. She ran to me. My father-in-law ran in from the yard, his hand injured, and said: "My son is over there..." I do not remember what happened next. We jumped out. He was lying against the fence, covered in blood. He had two shrapnel wounds in his back. The fence itself had been torn to splinters, there was nothing left.

**Witness M45:** Dust, sparks, I fell to the ground. Mother was running, shouting.

2022-11

**Witness C44:** My daughter was sitting on a bench next to me. Earlier, her husband had taught her to always fall to the ground in case of danger, and so she fell to the ground. This saved her. The fence was in pieces, chopped up right where she had been sitting on the bench. At the back, there was corrugated iron sheet, all torn and ripped. She had been wounded by shrapnel in the leg. It was an accidental shrapnel injury to the right thigh.



**Photo 4, 5.**  
A girl stands over a pit in which Russian soldiers disposed of the bodies of civilians who had been tortured to death, Mala Husarivka, Kharkiv Oblast, June 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

While collecting testimonies in June 2022 in a village in the Kharkiv Oblast, staff from the Lemkin Center interviewed a nine-year-old girl whose stepfather had been abducted by the Russian military. The child led them to the backyard of an abandoned house and showed a pit that contained the bones of people killed by the occupiers.

**Witness M87:** There is a pit there – an open pit. There were three bodies in it, and you can still see the bones. They were wrapped with tires; there is still a chair lying there and other bits and pieces, they wrapped them [the bodies – ed.] up in wire. There were three dead bodies. They were lying on the ground. Burned. These are bones from the spine. The gasoline was here. They poured gasoline over them, set them on fire and that was it.

2022 9

### 1.3. The experience of loss – deaths of family members

The loss of loved ones became commonplace. And parents and caregivers not only faced their own grief, but also the problem of how to talk about it with their children. One witness, a mother with a number of children from the Sumy Oblast, testified that at the

beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine her husband was tortured and thereafter shot by the Russian military.

**Witness C15:**

5 6 7  
8 10 10

I lost my husband. It happened on the morning of 3 March. We drew some water and carried it to the children. My husband asked for the telephone, said he would be back in five minutes, and departed to eternity. He never returned home. They tortured him to death. His fingers, arms and legs were broken, and they also shot him in the chest and in the back. His skull had been completely crushed with a rifle butt. The boys who found him said that even a tank had driven over him.

A mother of five children from the Donetsk Oblast, which came under attack by Russian troops, recounted the moment her husband died as a result of the shelling of their residential neighborhood.

**Witness C42:**

2 5 8  
10 18

My husband heard an explosion and wanted to run through the barn to our children. In the barn, he was fatally wounded by shrapnel. The children were in a safe room. We have such a room – without windows, surrounded by other rooms. I went down to the basement with the children, and already then I had a feeling that something was wrong, since my husband did not run over to us. When I ran out, he was still alive, but unconscious. An ambulance arrived, however the paramedics gave him no chance [of survival – ed.]. Some police officers drove up later and said: "Please accept our sympathies. Your husband could not be rescued." Just like that, the children were left without a father, and I was left without a husband. It was very difficult.

A witness from the Kyiv Oblast recalled how her 14-year-old grandson was unable to dig a grave for his own father, who had been killed by Russian soldiers. The father was buried in the backyard, because during the occupation of the village the Russians did not allow civilians to go near the cemetery.

**Witness C17:**

14

I went up to my grandson and said: "They killed your father." I asked him as if the child could help. I said: "Your father was killed, come with me." The boy stood up and said: "I am not going to dig a grave for my father, I will not..." We buried the body in the garden.

The husband of one of the witnesses in the Kharkiv Oblast was shot by a Russian sniper while helping a wounded neighbor.

**Witness C54:**

3 22

My husband crawled to the gate, knelt down, opened the lock, and crawled across the yard to the garage. I dragged him into the basement, and we telephoned whoever we could, but no one came. I have two children. I was faced with a heartbreaking decision – get my husband out of there or stay with the children. We were all in the basement, and he died in my arms. That is how we spent our last night with him.

After several days, the territory where the witness lived was recaptured by the Ukrainian armed forces. With the help of Ukrainian soldiers, the witness was able to take away the body of her slain husband for burial.

**Witness C54:** We left the basement on 26 March. I took the children, my younger son in my arms, and we left. I left my husband in the basement. We told the soldiers that there were the bodies of two people left there who must be taken away; they were removed two days later.

During the first weeks of the occupation of parts of the Kyiv Oblast, a couple with two children were staying in the village of Andriyivka. Russian soldiers kidnapped and killed the witness' husband.

**Witness C46:** They went for a walk together, but our son came back home alone and said: "Father said he would be back later." He did not come home in the evening, and he did not come home during the night, so I finally realized that something had befallen him – nothing like this had never happened before. Today I learned that he had been shot dead on the same day.

They took him away on Thursday, and on Friday I was still waiting, but they would not let him go. On Saturday, I went to the Russian soldiers myself. I raised my hands in the air and went to them. They did not allow me to get close, so I spoke to them from a distance of about 100 meters. I shouted: "Please let my husband go!" I was very nervous, which made me speak Ukrainian. They did not know Ukrainian, and so they probably did not understand me. They said: "Go home," but I stood there and kept on shouting: "Let my husband go!" They said: "Go home." Then they started shooting into the air. I realized that I had to go home because I still had two children. We stayed at home. I waited with my children for their father. We stayed here because we hoped he was alive after all.

After the liberation of the village in Kyiv Oblast, the witness and her son continued their search, and eventually found the body of their husband and father; he had been tortured to death.

**Witness C46:** My son and I ran around the streets, asking people where they had been detained, if anyone had seen him. We went from house to house looking for my husband, but we could not find him. Until the very last moment we hoped that he was still alive, that he had been deported to Belarus. So many times we walked down the main street and did not even know that we were passing his body. It was only yesterday that they pointed his body out to us. At the very least, they could have returned the corpse, so that it would not have lain in the dung for over a month.

A witness from the Donetsk Oblast described the mental state of her daughter, whose father had perished in a Russian missile barrage right in front of her eyes.

**Witness C44:** It is difficult. She cried a lot for the first few days. It is slightly better now. (11)  
But at first, of course, she cried. She cried a lot. She gathered up all his shirts. She gathered up his shirts and said: "These are my father's, I am going to wear them."

A witness from the Kharkiv Oblast described how her three-year-old granddaughter reacted to her grandfather's death by shelling by the Russian occupation forces.

**Witness C55:** Grandpa flew off to heaven on a rocket. Now he looks down on me from above. (3)

#### 1.4. The shelling of civilians – families with children

Both adult and underage witnesses tell of the shelling of civilians by Russian Federation troops as they moved and attempted to evacuate from the occupied areas.

**Witness C43:** It was impossible to escape – they immediately destroyed all the cars, and took our telephones. Those who drove along the road remained there forever, as all were burned in their cars. They shot everyone, civilians and others who had nothing to do with the military. (n)

**Witness C56:** We gathered in a convoy, there were more than ten cars in total. As soon as we started to leave, at 7 a.m., the shelling began. Just before departing the village, we stopped on some street and jumped into the basement of the nearest house... It was then that the shelling stopped. We managed to leave the village within an hour, maybe even faster. When people left the next day, after we had gone, they were shot at. It was terrible. (8) (19) (19)

**Witness C30:** The children's lives were in great danger. Cars and people were fired upon on the roads. It was a nightmare. (1) (3)

**Witness M51:** We accidentally drove close to the battlefield. We saw many tanks and blown up cars. My brother, who was sitting behind me, covered his younger brother's eyes, as there were legs and other body parts strewn everywhere. Above all, I was afraid for my brothers and my mother. I realized that from that moment on, I was like a second mother to them. I had to show them that I was strong. (2022-16)

The Russian military deliberately attacked ambulances and vehicles marked with white flags or the word "Children."

**Witness C72:** As we drove, they fired at us, probably from a grenade launcher. They shot at the car, but they missed. There were markings on the car, ours had (10) (25)



the word "Children," and there were white pieces of paper taped to the windows. They shot at us. It was hard to bear, of course we were terrified, we cried.

**Witness M47:** The Russians shot at everything, from cars marked "Children" to ambulances and cars that were simply standing by the roadside. They purposely created "green corridors" [evacuation routes for civilians – ed.] through which civilians were supposed to move, and deliberately set up firing positions there to shoot and kill, so as not to allow people to get out of the city. I think they fired on the civilian infrastructure for the same reason. They intentionally killed people in the streets, burned down houses, drove tanks through buildings and destroyed means of transport. They tried everything possible to prevent people from leaving the city.

**Witness C65:** On 14 March, a neighbor came to us and said that Russian soldiers would be rounding up young men in the village. My wife got scared and said we had to leave. Columns of civilians with children began to leave the village. We stuck "Children" signs to our cars and draped them in white flags, so as to make it clear that we were civilians, and that we had children with us. We started to drive, but we did not get anywhere. As we approached the city, we came under machine gun fire. My son's godfather was severely wounded in the head and there was no way to evacuate him, for my car had been heavily shot up. Before we started off, the girl who had been supposed to go with him – she had even put her things in his car – nevertheless decided to go with us, because she was friends with my son. When we came under fire, she started screaming: "I am wounded," while my pregnant wife then began to shout that she had been shot

**Photo 6.**  
A shelled bus in Bucha,  
Kyiv Oblast, April 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)



in the hand. I decided to turn back, and we returned to the village with the car shot up and on three wheels. The girl who driven with us was twenty-five years old and had covered my son with her body during the shelling. Two bullets hit her in the stomach. She needed surgery, but we could not evacuate her. She died before our eyes.

The Russian military regularly attacked civilians in the streets of the temporarily occupied territories, making even their simple movement extremely dangerous or virtually impossible.

**Witness C43:** When they entered [the village of – ed.] Yahidne, they shot at everything, chaotically, so as to intimidate people.

**Witness M47:** It was very dangerous to move around the city, because the Russians were already in the city at the time, and we knew that they were shooting defenseless people. They shoot at civilians, not looking whether they are children, women or the elderly. We moved around walking along fences and walls, and tried not to venture out into the open, because by that time Russian snipers were already “at work” in some parts of the city. We tried to stay close to our shelter.

**Photo 7.**  
**Bodies of civilians shot dead by the Russian Army, Irpin, Kyiv Oblast, March 2022**

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

2014 – 8  
2022 – 16

**Witness C41:** I was going to the shop to buy some bread, and I saw them shooting towards the feet of children. The boys were frightened, they were 14 years old, and so they started to run away, but then they started shooting to stop them.

**Witness M1:** One day, we were walking with my grandmother and they [the Russians – ed.] started shooting very close to us with “cassettes” [banned cluster munitions – ed.]. We fell to the ground and opened our mouths to avoid pressure injuries [damage to the ears caused by the explosion of these munitions – ed.]. My entire jacket was torn by the shrapnel.

**Witness C71:** We were returning from church together with the children. An army truck passed us by, and in it there were Russian soldiers with rifles. I thought to myself: “I will not follow them, I do not want to run into them.” So the children and I turned into the first side street. Suddenly, however, they turned around and began to follow us. They stopped a little further away. I was walking alone, a woman with three children, and there was no one else in the street. I realized that I could no longer turn back, and there was no way to run away or hide. I told the children: “Children, keep your mouths shut and say absolutely nothing, we will not look at them and walk really fast.” Never before have we walked so quietly and so quickly. Those in the truck started aiming their machine guns at us. We ran into the nearest alley. It was a mixture of shock, fear and incredulity: “Why are you targeting children? What for?” I was dressed in civilian clothes, with a jacket and cap, as were the children – we had no bombs, nothing. The children and I were simply returning from church, and you were aiming at us?

## 1.5. Deaths of children caused by shelling and bombing

According to official data provided by the Prosecutor General of Ukraine on 4 June 2025, during the full-scale war waged by Russia against Ukraine 631 children were killed and more than 1,975 injured.<sup>2</sup>

**Witness C81:** If only one of them were here. One Russian. A native Russian. To see it all. To sit in the basement, to carry the water or bury a child... To see it all with his own eyes.

**Witness M1:** My friend perished. I know this for sure, because I saw everything with my own eyes. When I arrived here [after the evacuation – ed.], I learned that two more of my friends had perished. One lived with his mother.

<sup>2</sup> Juwenalni prokurory: 631 dytyna zahynuła w Ukraini wnaslidok zbrojnoji ahresiji rf, 04.06.2025, <https://gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/yuwenalni-prokurori-631-ditina-zaginula-v-ukrayini-vnaslidok-zbroinoyi-agresiyi-rf> [accessed: 08.06.2025].



A missile hit their apartment and both were killed. And one more friend died. We had this place where weddings were held, and it was set in large grounds. The guys were going somewhere and came under fire. He probably died of shock, as the bomb crater was a little further away. There were cases of people dying of heart attacks caused by the shelling...

A witness recounts an incident when a Russian military convoy in the Kyiv Oblast fired at close range at a car with a family inside. As a result of the shelling, two children were killed.

**Witness C21:** We heard a noise, went outside, and saw them. They were driving down a hill. A column of military vehicles followed by infantry. The boom was horrifying. I looked out cautiously through the gate. I saw the motor car, overturned. There was mud everywhere; the car was literally stuck in the mud.

I started calling my husband and then I saw a little boy walking. He did not shout or wave. He walked back and forth in shock, like a pendulum. We later learned that the boy's name was Misha and that he was 13 years old. I called out to my husband. Yes, there was fear, because we saw the tanks, but my husband ran over there. In the car [stuck in the mud – ed.] were three children, a father, and a mother. Two of the children had perished on the spot. One had a bullet in his head, in the forehead. The second child had a bullet in its back, as we later saw. Mother did not know this at first and tried to resuscitate it. She thought that maybe the child had just lost consciousness or something. The children were three and 15 years old.

#### Photo 8.

A small boy murdered by Russians in the Kharkiv Oblast, April 2023

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

They were going to their relatives. When they drove off, the tanks came down the hill and fired at the car from behind. The father of the family was wounded in the head. A neighbor and my husband ran out, dragged



this father out, and while I took care of him, they came back for the woman, to take her away. My husband saw that we could not do anything for the children. We took all the survivors to our house and waited for the column to leave. Then we went back to pick up the car and the bodies of the kids. Bodies. We removed the bodies of the children in a wheelbarrow, three days later... We simply wrapped them in cloth and blankets. It was impossible to go by car because of the shelling, so my husband and I put some boards on the wheelbarrow, and the bodies on them. Two neighbors, a man and a woman, went with us. We made a wooden cross. We took some shovels and went to the cemetery. And there, under fire, we buried the children.

Eyewitnesses from various regions of Ukraine have told us of children dying as a result of the deliberate shelling of civilian vehicles by Russians as they attempted to leave the occupied territories.

**Witness C43:** Her husband was killed and her eldest daughter, too. Her head was ripped off as she ran away with her infant.

**Witness C39:** So many children were killed. So many innocent people. A friend of mine recounted that her niece's 13-year-old daughter was killed when they were driving through Yahidne and came under fire... After the shelling died down, they could not find the child's head, and so they buried her without her head.

**Photo 9.**  
The grave of a victim of Russian shelling, Yampil, Donetsk Oblast, October 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)



**Photo 10.**  
A girl showing shrapnel  
from Russian shells,  
Mala Husarivka, Kharkiv  
Oblast, June 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

**Witness C56:** There was a case when a column of civilian cars was fired upon in the village of Verkhniy Saltiv; both children and adults were killed. They specifically targeted civilians. A wheelchair was lying there; a 13-year-old child, a girl, had been killed.

8 19 19

A witness from the Zaporizhzhia Oblast told how her grandfather and a 12-year-old child were killed by the Russian shelling of civilian buildings.

**Witness C53:** My grandfather went to cook food for the dog when a shell hit the yard and exploded. Grandfather died on the spot. The right side of his body was cut off. At the same time, his grandson [12 years old – ed.] was in the garden, literally twenty meters from his grandfather. He was injured in the lungs, and his chest was crushed [as a result of the shock wave – ed.]. He lived for a few more minutes. A young boy. Then he died, too.

4 7 12 15

**Witness C5:** This is a terrible crime. So far, many innocent children have been killed. I am a mother of four children. This fills me with fear.

7 8 15 18

## 2.

## The use of torture and inhuman treatment

The use of violence against civilians by the occupation forces of the Russian Federation also takes the form of torture and inhumane treatment. By torture we mean the deliberate infliction of severe, physical or mental, pain or suffering, in a cruel manner. We can interpret inhumane treatment even more broadly, as including the deprivation of access to minimum humane conditions: basic medical care, water, food, etc. Witnesses in many accounts describe such actions, although they are prohibited under international law as crimes against humanity.<sup>3</sup> Not only do they lead to physical damage, but also cause serious mental suffering and trauma. Mothers from various Ukrainian oblasts that were constantly shelled by pro-Russian troops told of the inhumane treatment and the mental suffering experienced by their children.

**Witness C33:** My son sometimes cried... You know, he was that age. If the child were older, like my nephew, who was eight at the time, it would immediately scream: "Mother, I am scared" – and flee to the basement. He would leave the house, go outside, and immediately come running back to the basement. My son, on the contrary, wanted to play in the street, but he ran away from unexpected bursts, trembling with fear, understanding that it was necessary to escape. I tried not to take him out onto the street. He would run up to me, hug me, bury his head in me; at the time, he was still unable to speak.

<sup>3</sup> The definition of torture is contained in Article 1(1) of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1984; the prohibition of torture and inhuman treatment is enshrined in many other instruments of international law: Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, opened for signature in New York on 19 December 1966; Article 3 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, drafted in Rome on 4 November 1950, as amended by Protocols Nos. 3, 5, and 8, as well as supplemented by Protocol No. 2 (known as the European Convention on Human Rights); Article 7(1), f, k of the Rome Statute – Crimes against humanity.

**Witness C48:** He did not sleep. He did not eat.

(13)

**Witness C53:** The children began to understand that something was going on, so they always hid in the basement of the house. When there were air raids, and plaster started falling on our heads, we were afraid we would get hit.

(4)

(7)

(12)

(15)

**Witness C22:** The children were very scared. At the first louder noise, our eldest granddaughter would drop her plate and fork and run to the basement. We spent a lot of time in the basement. It was cramped. We sat huddled together. The maximum number of people in the basement was 17. Children included. We brought the children some toys. We did shadow theater there – my youngest daughter cut out a few figures and acted out some cartoons and fairy tales against the light from her phone.

(2)

(4)

**Witness C78:** A midwife had her son there, and he was very frightened. We learned poems with him. As long as he was with us, he was able to learn quite long poems. We had to distract him and direct his attention elsewhere so that he would not be afraid and not listen, waiting for the next explosion.

(n)

Children who survived the shelling suffer from insomnia and are afraid to go to sleep, lest they miss the air-raid alarm at night and fail to make it to the shelter.

**Witness C66:** We tried not to show that we were afraid. After we received a hit, he became very frightened and did not sleep at all during the night. He did not sleep normally for about a month; he slept during the day, but at night he was alert, and when there was an alarm, he would come up and say there was an alarm, and that we had to go.

(11)

(17)

The witness, who was just 15 years old at the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, recalled her younger brother's reaction to the Russian shelling.

**Witness M1:** He was only four years old. He was small. At first, he was very afraid. He hid under the bed, and actually slept under the bed. My mother and I would go looking for him.

(2022)

(15)

The constant threat of shelling by the Russian Army causes mental disorders in children, resulting in the deterioration of their health. This is one of the reasons why families choose to evacuate from territories attacked by Russia, as in the case of a family from the Donetsk Oblast. The mother of a ten-year-old girl talks about the impact of warfare on her daughter's health.

**Witness C25:** The daughter reacted with tears. She reacted with fear. She would run away. After a while she became a small warrior, and she already knew what to do. She would take her telephone, a charger, bottle of water,

(10)

something to cover herself with, and, carrying all this, bent over, she would run downstairs. She sat there with her teddy bear and toys. We evacuated ourselves for the sake of our daughter, because once we had to call an ambulance – the child felt bad. Through it all, her blood pressure rose. She began to faint and could not stand. She goes pale and falls.

A witness from the Zaporizhzhia Oblast recalled worrying about her four-year-old son during the occupation of their village in 2022. The mother tried to teach the child how to behave in case of contact with the Russian military.

**Witness C64:** We told our eldest son that there was a war, that maybe Russian soldiers would come to us. We told him what to say and what not to say. I was not worried about the older one, but about the younger one. He could hear my husband and I talking. We were very afraid that the little one would say something wrong.

5 9

## 2.1. Living conditions of pregnant women and infants

Testimonies from residents of territories attacked by the Russian Federation indicate that being in an area of combat operations is particularly difficult for pregnant women and infants. A mother with many children from the Zaporizhzhia Oblast recounts her experiences during the first days of the full-scale invasion.

**Witness C53:** We got up in the morning and heard one word: "War!" I could not believe it. We left the house and heard the sound of gunfire from the direction of Berdyansk and Mariupol. Everything could be heard and seen, there was smoke. The children were frightened, panic began, tears. I was pregnant and did not know what would happen next or what I should do.

4 7 12 15

**Witness C68:** We entered the house and had barely gone to bed when all of a sudden there was an explosion. The whole house was filled with dust and smoke, and there was water pouring everywhere. The windows were smashed, the house was full of glass. I grabbed my child and wife, and we ran to the basement. We waited until it calmed down and then went to try and clear the rubble. My wife was pregnant at the time, but she understood that we had a small child and could not panic. Now, when we hear any explosions, we immediately feel fear.

5

A witness from the Donetsk Oblast recalls how Russian shelling during the storming of the city at the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022 affected the behavior of his five-month-old child.



**Witness C70:** Constant gunfire, explosions, the sound of airplanes – all of this instilled fear in the child. Each time there was an explosion, the child became frightened, and started to tremble and cry. It is hard to calm a child when you yourself are scared. Our little daughter did not sleep for several days running, which exhausted not only her, but also us. We tried singing lullabies and cuddled her in our arms, but nothing helped. She was afraid, and each day became more and more difficult.

The witness, who lived in Kyiv, drove his daughter and newborn grandson to a village in the Kyiv Oblast, hoping it would be safer there, however the village had been occupied by Russian troops.

**Witness C29:** I took the children from Kyiv on 26 February [2022 – ed.] and brought them here; I thought it would be calmer. I took my daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter – she was not even a month old. She was born on 8 February, and on 24 February the war had already begun. On 27 February, I wanted to leave, to at least gather some food, water and essentials for the baby. I left, and when I was coming back, I saw tanks were advancing. We barely managed to enter the house. On 27 February, they shelled our neighbors' house. In the evening, Russian soldiers began to go from house to house, telling everyone not to leave their homes. What was left for me to do, since my granddaughter was at home? How could I argue with them when they had rifles?

**Photo 11.**  
The evacuation of  
civilians from Irpin,  
Kyiv Oblast, March 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

Witnesses from regions affected by Russian aggression describe a very critical factor: the lack of access to food for young children.

**Witness C36:** My child was fed powdered baby milk. It was still drinking from a bottle. We cooked semolina for her.

**Witness C92:** There were neither pampers nor baby food. Here there was even a ten-day-old infant, born on 10 or 14 February; other children were nine years old, two were six years old, and one was about three years old.

**Witness C62:** The child was small, there was no gas or electricity, and we had to heat the water to bathe it. My daughter lost her milk supply out of nervousness. Bombing, shelling, constant stress. When a mother is upset, the baby cries. Our windows were boarded up due to the shelling, and it was dark. I was worried that the baby would go blind, that it would not be able to see because it was constantly deprived of light, living in the dark.

**Witness C70:** When the invasion began, my child was only five months old. We had to overcome various difficulties, such as stress, the problem of access to food and diapers, a lack of water, the cold, and a lack of hygiene. There were major problems with the supply of baby food. Nothing was functioning since 25 February. Another difficulty was that we needed special baby food, hypoallergenic, and at the time it was no longer available in the city. There were no other options for feeding children.

Witnesses tell how the occupier deliberately created difficult living conditions in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. This caused many infants to suffer hypothermia and infectious diseases, because of the cold and poor sanitation.

**Witness C70:** The infant was constantly freezing in the basement, and diapers had to be changed frequently, but there were really few of them. We obviously looked for another solution, such as diapers made of gauze bandages, but they had to be changed even more often. It was very cold. In order to change a diaper, the baby had to be undressed. Due to the fact that the baby was crying all the time, it hardly slept. When we finally reached safer territory, the child became very ill due to hypothermia and insufficient hygiene. It had a high fever of 39.6 degrees [Celsius – ed.]. Thank God, it is all over now and the child is healthy, but the stress which it suffered cannot, I believe, be cured.

**Witness C7:** In the evening there, it was 5 degrees Celsius. It was cold. And here we had a three-month-old baby. At our own risk, we lit a tiled stove in the house. The locals – those who had given us [shelter – ed.] – themselves lived in the basement. They told us: "You are doing this at your own risk" [smoke draws attention and can lead to shelling – ed.]. To which I replied: "We will die either from the cold or from a bullet. The child is freezing, what else can we do?"



Attempts to flee areas attacked by the Russians were particularly difficult for those families with infants who did not have their own means of transport, as adults had to carry their children in their arms for miles.

**Witness C36:** We walked from Hlibivka to Demidov [approximately 11 kilometers – ed.]

1 14 20

I carried the baby all the way, sometimes in my arms, sometimes on my shoulders. I got spinal hernia from the exertion.

## 2.2. The situation of children with disabilities

Witnesses who remained in the temporarily occupied territories with children with varying degrees of disability tell of their inhumane treatment by the occupiers and the impact of the Russian invasion on their health. A witness from the Zaporizhzhia Oblast said that there is a shortage of medical supplies and that medication cannot be provided for children with autism.

**Photo 12.**  
The evacuation of  
civilians from Irpin,  
Kyiv Oblast, March 2022  
(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

**Witness C88:** I will never forget how they wrote on my hand that I was one hundred and ninety-sixth in line at the pharmacy. I had received a child's allowance and left all that money at the pharmacy. I bought everything that was available, because I did not know if there would be a supply of medicine the next time I came, or what would happen now, and I had to cope somehow, I had to ensure that the child received treatment.

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In the Sumy Oblast, Russian soldiers broke into the home of a witness whose son had been diagnosed with two serious diseases: adrenal cortical dysfunction and epilepsy. Despite the mother's protests, they began questioning the child, disregarding its terror.

**Witness C41:** The worst part was that they – armed with rifles – approached the child. One of them was missing half of his hand, with the remainder wrapped in bloody bandages. My child was sitting on a stool in the hallway and just became motionless, caught in a stupor. I do not know what it was, he just sat there and did not move. I did not move him, because I did not know how he would react. They had found nothing at our place, so they started questioning him. Seemingly just a few questions, but everything took so long. Whether we had weapons or hosted strangers at our home. They asked him about everything. I asked them to let the child rest: "Look for what you need, but leave the child alone." They replied: "The child will not lie." They focused all their attention on him. They stood over him with their guns, and he simply remained silent. Tears dripped from his eyes. He was horrified.

13

One witness described the reaction of a child to Russian servicemen who came to its house in the absence of its parents.

**Witness C53:** I have a 12-year-old daughter suffering from epilepsy. She had a seizure, started vomiting, and was shaking all over. The other children were very frightened... In addition to epilepsy, due to five head surgeries, she began to feel very bad, she got a fever and her scars began to hurt. She was very scared, she thought we would all be shot.

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Witnesses talk about the situation of children with autism. Children need a stable daily schedule, and any stress leads to a deterioration of their health and behavioral problems. The lack of access to specialized medical and educational services makes it difficult to maintain the proper mental and physical health of these children.

**Witness C88:** I searched all over the city for food for my son, food he was used to, but there were not even any substitutes, everything had been bought out. It was a difficult situation, because for him food is very important. He likes specific cookies, juices, sweets, and if I buy a different brand of yogurt, he will not touch it, there is no way he will drink it.

9 14



**Witness C13:** My grandson is autistic. We do not know what we should do with him. (14) I am already in my seventies. He stayed, but he does not understand anyone. He is 14 years old and does not speak at all. During the shelling, when the windows were blown out, I caught him. And he laughed. He does not understand. What will happen if we die, what will happen to him? I do not know. He will die like a stray dog.

**Witness C88:** My son is autistic, he is quite a difficult child and takes medication on a regular basis. He often has seizures and it is hard for us to deal with him, while without medication it is nearly impossible. He is on neuroleptics because he has hysterical seizures and does not sleep at night. After birth, he slept two hours a night. We moved to Melitopol because of him to find specialists. The city had a very good rehabilitation center for children with disabilities, and we signed him up there. He went to school in September and was just starting to get used to everything when what happened, happened. I was shocked, I did not know where to go with my child. Everything was closed, nothing functioned, even regular schools were closed, there was nothing, there were problems with the Internet. We sat without electricity for three days, without any Internet, it was the end of February. He has always played with his telephone, it is his form of escape. If there is no electricity, how can he charge his telephone? All of ours were discharged, so what could we do? But then he was so brave, I told my husband that if he had an attack of hysteria, we would

Photo 13.  
Psychiatric hospital,  
Svatove,  
Luhansk Oblast,  
April 2016

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)



give him medication. Before that, I bought all sorts of toys, strings and developmental toys, and used them to occupy his time.

Witnesses from the occupied regions of Ukraine point to the lack of access to medical care and necessary specialized medicines, which significantly worsens the health of children with advanced disabilities, and indeed puts them at risk of losing their lives.

**Witness C88:** Many doctors have left. Our child psychiatrist, the only one in the entire area, left with her family on the second or third day of the invasion.

9 14 A group of mothers with such children shared a call, during which she wrote: "Forgive me, we have to leave."

**Witness C41:** Ambulances could not reach us. The good thing is that I always have 13 a supply of medicines, even a small one, but it is there. My child is a difficult case.

That is why, even though I am a lawyer, I know how to do injections and massages. We had to handle everything ourselves, for our child has two disabilities and we simply cannot let him run a fever. He would immediately turn blue and would have to receive an IV. It was impossible to let him get upset or worried. He has been diagnosed with two medical conditions. The first is congenital: adrenal cortical dysfunction. We have been giving him hormone medication since birth. The second disease was acquired as a result of encephalitis suffered at the age of three – uncontrolled epilepsy with all its consequences, dysarthria, right-sided

Photo 14.  
Psychiatric hospital,  
Svatove,  
Luhansk Oblast,  
October 2018

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)



hemiparesis. His movements and speech are somewhat delayed. After experiencing encephalitis, he had a blocked nerve and could not see for a year. He needs constant adult supervision, because even when he eats a meal, his head can droop.

**Witness C88:** You understand, there is no hope there for any medical attention. And how would I stay there with him... If he catches a virus, we can handle it, but if there is a problem with his teeth, he needs general anesthesia. Without anesthesia, nothing can be done.

The father of a 13-year-old child on the autism spectrum from the Kharkiv Oblast recalled how they found themselves in an area shelled by Russian troops.

**Witness C79:** Our child has a diagnosed disability – he is autistic. He did not understand what was going on. The apartment was equipped specifically for his needs, we created a comfort zone for him. He needed cartoons, a TV and a tablet, but suddenly everything was gone. When one of the windows was blown out following an explosion, it got very cold. We had to sit at the front door all the time, close to the supporting wall, to save ourselves. He is so hyperactive that it is difficult to sit with him in the basement. He could not be told to sit there quietly. He wanted to go home all the time. He did not understand what was happening at all, there was terror in his eyes, and he did not sleep well afterwards; it was

Photo 15.  
Psychiatric hospital,  
Svatove,  
Luhansk Oblast,  
April 2016  
(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

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sad to see a child in such a state. We were by his side, but we could not help him.

Our son was studying at a special school near where the rocket hit. Psychologists and teachers worked with the children, gave assignments. We parents took an active part in this educational program. All that is gone now. Do you understand? The program was conducted only at our school. There is no way for it to be continued through distance learning. When martial law was declared and the schools were immediately closed, a teacher called and confirmed: "The educational process has been suspended indefinitely."

Disabled children living in areas of Ukraine temporarily occupied by Russia are exposed to constant stress. Due to the incessant shelling, danger and lack of specialized medical care, many are experiencing deteriorating health.

**Witness C72:** It is difficult. Ten years old – he is still tiny. And the older one is handicapped, with a first-grade disability. It was hard, we were afraid and we cried. First of all, I was afraid for the children. That there would be no heating, that it was constantly cold, that there was an immense deal of stress. They understood what was happening, but they hoped it would end quickly, they believed. Then we left and things improved a little. The war is not over yet, so if there is an air-raid alarm, the children are scared.

**Witness C41:** My son is afraid of everything. Any noise, a knock – immediate stress. We left straight after the occupation began, because he started having very frequent attacks. There is a regression both in terms of his mental state and his mental development. An attack should cease within two to five minutes at the most, so that the consequences for his health are as small as possible. But sometimes he had convulsions that lasted through the night. He cried and could not get out of bed. He was taking medication, but was under such stress that the drugs stopped working. Seemingly, he did not understand the whole situation, although on the level of everyday life he understood everything. It was apparent that he was bottling it all up inside, and this significantly worsened his health.

Transporting handicapped children and on the autism spectrum is difficult and poses additional risks to health and life, both for the children themselves, and their families. It requires special means of transport and medical support, which complicates an evacuation.

**Witness C34:** We took everything that was most valuable. Of course, we had our documents with us. I took my child's medical card, because it is sick. It has problems with its heart, eyesight, and spine.

**Witness C88:** We hired a haulier, and I explained the situation to him – that I have such a child, and that we need to leave within a day. But when we started off,

the manager changed and the rules changed, and we could not leave so easily. The problem is that my son cannot take care of himself. Sitting in a car, in such heat, when there is neither a toilet nor water – it is madness. Luckily, I took some food to feed him. Others heated bottles with baby food using gas burners, it was simply horrible. We sat until five in the afternoon, and then I went to the driver and said that this could not go on any longer. I had given my son two pills in the morning and he was in what I call a half-sleep. He was like a vegetable. I could not keep stuffing him with medication all the time, he had to go and relieve himself, but for this he required his potty. We returned to Melitopol to wait until morning. We were saved by the fact that he has no problem with traveling by car. When we returned to the queue, we had to wait again. He was already starting to bite us, because it only takes 15 minutes for him to get hysterical. I gave him two more pills to keep him from having an attack, for what else could I do? We did not leave until twelve.

**Witness C79:** Of course, it was a very difficult journey. With such a child, it is like dealing with a person with limited mobility. Do you understand? Any trip abroad is out of the question.

**Witness C88:** When we passed through Vasylivka, we were lucky that they did not check us much. I received a certificate of disability and said at the checkpoints: "Excuse me, I have a handicapped child, please let us pass. And one Russian soldier said: "Where are you all going, all of you sick and invalids?" To which I replied: "But you do not need us, the sick and the disabled. That is why we are going where we are needed."

### 3.

## The taking of hostages

Stopping or detaining and threatening to kill, injure or further detain a person in order to coerce a third party, for example, a state or an international intergovernmental organization, to act in a certain manner or refrain from any specific action is a crime under international law as a crime against humanity.<sup>4</sup> The testimonies reveal a wide range of prohibited actions engaged in by the occupation forces, which held civilians – including children – hostage. The threat affects minors in two ways: they can become hostages themselves, or they can suffer by being left without parental care after their relatives are unlawfully detained.

The mass abduction and illegal detention of civilians is one form of Russian terror. In the temporarily occupied territories, Russia has created a network of torture chambers, prisons, remand centers, penal colonies, and also covert detention sites. Since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, representatives of the armed forces of the Russian Federation, agents of the Russian special services, representatives of illegal armed groups and so-called law enforcement agencies have abducted tens of thousands of Ukrainian citizens. Russian servicemen illegally detain civilians, often in the presence of their children.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hostage-taking is unequivocally prohibited by international law, both humanitarian and criminal: Article 34 of Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons; Article 75(2), c of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), done at Geneva on 8 June 1977 (hereinafter: Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions). Article 8(2), a, viii of the Rome Statute clearly states that the “taking of hostages” constitutes a war crime in international armed conflicts, while Article 7(1), e of the same statute defines “imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law” as a crime against humanity.

<sup>5</sup> *Human Rights Violations in the Occupied Parts of Ukraine's Donbas since 2014*, SCEEUS Reports on Human Rights and Security No. 1, <https://www.ui.se/butiken/uis-publikationer/ui-report/2021/human-rights-violations-in-the-occupied-parts-of-ukraines-donbas-since-2014/> [accessed: 08.06.2025]; „You Don't Exist”. *Arbitrary Detentions, Enforced Disappearances, and Torture in Eastern Ukraine*, [https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/21/you-dont-exist/arbitrary-detentions-enforced-disappearances-and-torture-eastern?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com#:~:text=English](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/21/you-dont-exist/arbitrary-detentions-enforced-disappearances-and-torture-eastern?utm_source=chatgpt.com#:~:text=English) [accessed: 08.06.2025].



### 3.1. False imprisonment of minors

Cases have been reported of Russian servicemen abducting children themselves, bringing about their false imprisonment and torturing them.

**Witness M20:** They came and took my friend to some village, she claims she was not raped there. But she stayed there for three days, cooking for them and doing other things.

(2014) 9  
(2022) 17

**Witness M60:** My brother and I were at our mother's house, and at 8 a.m. we heard knocking on the window and the door. My mother opened, I heard the Russians entering and a question: "Old woman, where are your sons?" They rushed into the house and started aiming their rifles. They told us to get up, hand over our telephones and passports, and leave. We gave them our telephones and passports, and went outside – seven-eight people were already standing in the courtyard. They led us to the middle of the yard, handcuffed us, and put us in a "tiger" [a Russian military off-road vehicle – ed.]. While we were in the "tiger," they blindfolded us. We drove for an hour. All this time they stunned us with a stun gun. Then we

**Photo 16.**  
Sloviansk,  
Donetsk Oblast,  
July 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)



were transferred to another vehicle, and I, kicking, was pushed into the trunk. When they brought me in, my hands were numb, and one of them shouted: "Cut off his hands, why does he need them?"

I was held captive for three days. During the first day, they did not move me, but later they started taking me for interrogation, for "electrophoresis" [in Russian military slang, this means torture by electrocution – ed.]. They would wake me up with a baseball bat. Then they started threatening that they would slit my throat: "We are going to kill you."

They beat me all over my body. The apparatus for "electrophoresis" was connected first to my little finger, and then to my knees. The first time I suffered so much that the fillings dropped out of my teeth. I was carried to the cell several times. When you lose consciousness several times in a row, you do not have the strength to walk by yourself. And after half an hour they would question you again. My heart began to ache and I realized that I would either run away, or they would kill me there.

One witness from the partially occupied Zaporizhzhia Oblast, who experienced false imprisonment, recalls that in the locations where

**Photo 17.**  
A cell in a Russian torture chamber, Balakliya, Kharkiv Oblast, December 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)



Ukrainian citizens were illegally detained, prisoners were deliberately kept together with children.

**Witness C73:** Businessmen, former councilors and wealthier farmers were illegally imprisoned along with their children. Daughters and sons were tortured in the presence of their parents, so as to force them to hand over their businesses to the Russians.

On 3 March 2022, during the occupation of the village of Yahidne in the Chernihiv Oblast, the Russians set up their headquarters in the local school and imprisoned all the residents in the basement to use them as human shields. On 31 March, the Armed Forces of Ukraine regained control of the village of Yahidne and freed its residents. The story was told by a school employee who, along with his neighbors, spent twenty-seven days in the school's basement.

**Witness C43:** They started herding us into the basement, all of us, the villagers. They sat upstairs, that is where they had their headquarters. They probably wanted to use the people as cover.

They told us to appoint one person that would pass on any questions we may have for them. My son came forward. He was there with his wife and two children. It was terrifying. If you want to shoot me dead, then do it – but not in front of children. Do not let the children see it. But they shot

Photo 18, 19.  
The basement of the school in which during the occupation Russian servicemen for twenty-seven days imprisoned the residents of the village of Yahidne, Chernihiv Oblast, June 2023

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)



right in front of the children, they shot around you, close to your head, towards your feet, and the children saw it all...

**The lack of clean water, food, basic personal hygiene products and medicines in the confined, crowded room had fatal consequences.**

**Witness C43:** There was a one-and-a-half-month-old baby with us, but there was not enough air... We asked: "At least open the door, let the baby breathe, it is dying." "Let it die, this is war, what do you want!"

In the basement we had half a square meter per person. There were nearly 400 people, and the basement was 198 square meters.

Of the 386 people, 69 were children. The youngest child was one and a half months old. The oldest was 92. The elderly were simply dying there. There was not enough food or air. They went crazy, and then they died.

The children understood everything. But when people started dying, we had to explain it to them somehow.



The children slept on beds, with corpses lying right next to them. We asked for permission to take the bodies outside, but in practice did not get permission to do so. If at least three bodies piled up, it was possible to get permission to have them transported to the cemetery for burial. We transported them in wheelbarrows. They gave us an hour, but that is not enough time to even dig the pit. When we reached the cemetery, they saw that we were civilians, but they fired at the cemetery anyway, and, instead of burying the corpses, the wounded people themselves fell into the pits.

We put eight children on one bed and two under the bed, with the bodies of the dead between them. The bodies could lie like this all day, and the children would play beside them. It was terrifying.

The older children understood. They saw what was happening. The war, the shooting. We kept talking to the younger children to distract them as much as possible.

In addition, almost all of us, adults and children, contracted chickenpox and got a fever. There were practically no drugs. The children got infected one from the other, the adults too.

## Photos 20, 21.

The basement of the school in which during the occupation Russian servicemen imprisoned the residents of the village of Yahidne, Chernihiv Oblast, June 2023

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)



We had a woman with an infant. She was a pharmacist at the hospital, and when she came here, she had some drugs with her. In the beginning, she would divide one pill between five children so as to bring down their fever, but later the drugs ran out, and there was nothing left to treat them with.

When the children went outside, they fainted, they could not look at the sun, at the light.

It has been a year since we were imprisoned in that basement, but the death rate is still very high. People die every month.

Knowing of the critical food shortage, representatives of the occupation forces recorded videos and took photographs of the children held in the basement. They later used the materials in Russian propaganda in an attempt to spread the vision that the Russian Army was "saving starving Ukrainian children".

**Witness C43:** We did not have enough food. Two-hundred-gram plastic cups – that was the portion for one day. Whenever possible, we would go out into the yard, and they [the Russian soldiers – ed.] would give the children one sweet, take pictures and say: "We will feed your children, they are starving."

They would throw us one dry ration for ten children. The children did not see bread for a month. Once the Russians dumped a wheelbarrow of bread in a dumpster; it was stale and had been gnawed at. When the children grabbed the bread, choking on it, shaking the sand off the slices, they [the Russian soldiers – ed.] took photographs and said: "Look how hungry they are! If you live with us [as in the Soviet Union – ed.], we will feed you. You will live."

Infants were sometimes given preboiled water, whenever we could get it, and sometimes raw water, which resulted in them having a sore tummy and high fever.

To at least feed the baby. And when a child asks for food, and you have nothing to give... They gave a partially filled plastic cup for two people. If you had a child, you could leave a little for the child – after all, you will go without eating just to make sure it does not go hungry.

When Russian soldiers got drunk, they entertained themselves by letting young children touch their weapons.

**Witness C43:** He walked in, drunk, and pulled out a grenade, and gave it – the grenade – to a child to play with. He walked up and said to the child: "Here, reload the rifle. Here, play with the grenade, but do not pull out the pin, or otherwise everything here will explode." All the mothers were shocked and hysterical.

### 3.2. The impact of the abduction or false imprisonment of family members on children

A 16-year-old girl from the Sumy Oblast, whose home was searched and she herself was intimidated by the Russian servicemen who had abducted her parents, is an example of a minor left unattended.

**Witness M38:** The Russian soldier went to the bathroom and pulled something from under his arm, then came out and waved a gun in front of my nose. He said: "Well, well, apparently they have nothing!" – "This is not ours." He smiled and said: "Well all right then." They were always shooting somewhere near our house. They would come up to our house, right to the door, and shoot: "Why did you kill our soldiers?" – "Who killed them? We killed them?" I continued to talk with them: "We did not kill them. We have nothing to do with it. We were at home, we did not hurt anyone."

A mother of two from the Kyiv Oblast told how, after her husband was abducted, Russian servicemen intended to take up residence



in her home and therefore intimidated her underage son, among others forcing him to drive a car.

**Witness C46:** They inquired: "Why did you not leave here?" – "My son is still a child, he cannot drive us away. He is only 15 years old. I cannot put my child in danger. And you will not let my husband go." "I will teach him right now. Get behind the wheel" – and they drove off. I pleaded: "Do not take my son away from me. Please!" Then they returned my son to me, because our car runs on LPG, and they did not need a car like that, because they could not find the fuel. They returned him. They brought back both my son and the car.

Minors often witnessed arrests, which affected their psyche.

**Witness M98:** Some people were taken and thrown into "the pit" [a hole dug in the ground, in which Russian soldiers placed prisoners – ed.], while others were surprised in their homes, which the Russians would proceed to turn upside down. Some were taken away, and then released. One was taken away, he was gone for two weeks, but then returned. A collaborator denounced him, and they took him away again.

**Witness C80:** I have a neighbor. He rode his bicycle to the market to buy tomatoes. He did not return. He was imprisoned in a basement for two weeks. Of

**Photo 22.**  
Caption: "A war right next to you," Berdyansk, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, June 2017  
(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

course, he refused to tell us why. After two weeks, his wife found him and took him home. He had been beaten very badly. They have a family, a teenage son. He could not recover. But, thank God, my neighbor is alive and well now.

A witness from the Kyiv Oblast recalled the abduction of her husband and their eldest, adult son.

**Witness C36:** I fell to my knees, screaming that I would not let them be taken away. 1 14 20 When I screamed, I saw that they were putting plastic zip ties [used instead of handcuffs – ed.] on my son's hands. They said they would bring my husband and son back to me in two hours. I never saw them again. When a father is kidnapped in front of a young child, it is a crime.

A witness from the Sumy Oblast describes the moment her son, the father of a four-year-old child, was unlawfully detained.

**Witness C76:** The Russians came to check documents and telephones, and took a telephone and left, saying: "If there is nothing in the telephone, we will return it." After an hour and a half or two hours, they returned in an armored personnel carrier, aimed a machine gun at our house, and led everyone out – my wife, child, parents, brother-in-law, and two other children. My son came out with his hands raised, got into the BTR [armored personnel carrier – ed.] and was driven away. 4

**Witness C56:** My child [eight-year-old son – ed.] is a little man. He reassured me. He did not leave my side: "Just do not cry, mother, do not cry." Whenever he saw my tears, he would immediately run to wipe them away. I tried not to cry in front of him or show how hard it was for me. 8 19 19

A mother of three who left an occupied village in the Kherson Oblast told the story of how, right in front of her young children, she found out about her husband's abduction.

**Witness C50:** They called me from the village and said: "Your husband has been shot dead." I was shocked, but I did not cry, because my children were sitting next to me. I called my neighbors, and they said: "We do not know where he could be, the gate is open, the house is open, the windows in the house are smashed." I was very nervous. My son was teething. So here I have a baby that is crying, while next to me my husband's sister is crying because her son is older and she can afford to be depressed, but I cannot because I have a small child. I said that he would be fine. I knew that nothing would happen to him, as I would have sensed it. I know that when something bad happens, I feel it because it is my family. In the evening, my child's godmother called me and said: "He is alive, they wanted to shoot him in the house, but they just beat him up there." They questioned him: "Where is your family, where is your wife, where are your children?" Finally, he responded as follows: "They are far away, you

will not catch them." They started beating him. They made him kneel, and shot at his feet.

One witness, a 16-year-old girl from the Sumy Oblast, recounts how Russian servicemen abducted her parents right in front of her and her younger, seven-year-old sister. The girls' father is still in captivity in the Russian Federation.

**Witness M38:** They surrounded the house, and banged on the door. They burst inside. They started harassing my mother and father. They stole the telephone of a neighbor whom they killed, and showed father a photograph of three people. Father said: "I do not know them." Then he said he only knew the one who had been killed. He did not say anything about the second person, because he is friends with him. "I cannot tell them. How can I tell them? He has children, a family. How can I tell them?" The Russians dragged my father to a tank and took him away. We still do not know why he was taken away.

My younger sister and I were at home. She was crying and shaking all over. My mother entered, followed by a Russian. He saw me with my sister, and said to my mother: "You are coming with us." They took her, put her in a BTR [armored personnel carrier – ed.] and drove away. Then they came a third time. I stood and cried. I said: "Will you let mother and father free? Why did you take them away? They did not say anything to anyone, they were just sitting at home." They replied: "Yes, they will be questioned and released." They did release my mother, she came home at three. When they were releasing her, they said: "Go and raise your children normally, not according to the Nazi propaganda they are selling you." She came in, crying, and said that they had beaten up father; his eyes were covered with tape and they would not let him out. Father was deported to somewhere in Russia. Mother does not talk about many things. She tells us nothing. I do not know what happened there.

I called the National Bureau [of Investigation – ed.], the Red Cross, and then some other institution. I uploaded his name and surname, date of birth, date of arrest and a photograph to various websites. Some girl sent me his photograph. She said: "See, this is your father." I looked, he was so... beaten up, so emaciated. Thank God, we learned that he was alive.

**Witness M20:** My girlfriend's father was in the TDF [Territorial Defense Forces – ed.], and for this her mother was taken to a basement; she was tortured, beaten, starved and kept in the cold for several weeks.

Several witnesses, whose husbands and sons were abducted by the Russian occupation forces, told how their children reacted to the absence of their fathers.

**Witness C76:** She said: "The Russians took father prisoner." By and large, she was afraid of soldiers. She was four years old at the time. They came and took him from their home, and he has not returned to date.

**Witness C6:** It was emotionally difficult. I had to pull myself together, because the children kept asking: "Where is father? Where is father?" – and I had to answer calmly. Especially the youngest son – he knows nothing, so when he asks: "Where is father?" I reply: "At work."

**Witness C95:** We keep telling her that father is on a business trip and that he will be back soon. She waits for him, and he sends her gifts. When she passes by his workplace, she says: "It is father's job. I really want father to come back soon."

**Witness C76:** They said that father was taken to work, that father delivers bread, and that there are good uncles there. He keeps asking where father is. Once, she came to me and said: "Grandmother, father is not at work, father is in captivity." The boy next door had told her. Now she keeps asking me: "Do they beat father in captivity? Do they give him food?"

**Witness C37:** My younger daughter understands everything perfectly. We are waiting for father. The children are worried. When they look at his photographs, they cry.

**Witness C75:** The younger one just cried. She told me about her dream, that she had dreamed of God. She asked him: "Tell me, will my father come home?" God answered her: "Yes, your dad will come back when Lena falls"; the older granddaughter's name is Lena. And she said: "I am ready to fall at any time, as long as father comes back."

**Witness C40:** She cries. As soon as she sees her father's photograph, she starts crying. She now goes to the third grade, and they wrote an essay titled "My fondest dream." She wrote: "My fondest dream is peace in Ukraine. And my fondest dream is for my father to come home soon. That we would have a family."

**Witness C74:** For the first month, I said that father was on standby duty, that it was his shift now. But Romek is not stupid – after all, he understood that his father could not have left, especially since we had already left, and father was still gone. I then decided to tell it like it is, so as not to lie. I said that father had been taken prisoner by the Russians, and that I was doing everything I could, that they were looking for him. Now he has more memories. "And father and I always did that... Father promised me this." He recalls what they did and what they planned to do. He once asked: "When is father coming back?" I replied: "I do not know, my son, they are looking for him." Now he sometimes says: "Father will never return."

## 4.

## Sexual violence

Sexual violence is one of the crudest tools used in war. It serves to show superiority and strength, to intimidate civilians, and to break up the social fabric. It causes deep and long-lasting psychological trauma not only in the victims who are wronged directly, but also in their loved ones: partners, children, parents, who often become observers of the events. It has been stigmatized in international law as a war crime.<sup>6</sup> However, witnesses describe such actions, including instances of representatives of occupation forces engaging in prohibited sexual acts against children. The very threat of sexual violence is traumatizing to civilians.

**Witness C32:** There were rumors that they abused girls, young women. That they bullied and executed them.

④

**Witness M47:** My colleague was in occupied Bucha. He was 17 years old at the time. He told me that when he encountered Russian soldiers, they behaved very aggressively, threatening everyone with guns. He recalled that some of the women who were found – both living and dead – had bruises, torn clothing and signs of sexual violence.

2014 8  
2022 16

<sup>6</sup> Sexual crimes committed during armed conflicts are unequivocally prohibited by international law and are recognized as war crimes, or, under certain circumstances, as crimes against humanity or even acts of genocide; see Article 27 of Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons: "Women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault"; Article 76(1) of the Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions: "Women shall be the object of special respect and shall be protected in particular against rape, forced prostitution and any other form of indecent assault," and Article 75(2), b of the same Protocol: "outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment" are prohibited; Article 7(1), g of the Rome Statute – Crimes against humanity: "rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity," and Article 8(2), b, xxii of the same Statute – War crimes: "committing rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, as defined in Article 7(2), f, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence also constituting a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions."



**Witness C61:** I really wanted my daughter to leave the city, because it was always dangerous to leave the house, and she is 16 years old. We heard many stories about girls being harassed by the occupiers. Girls were raped, insulted, beaten. Girls and women were in real danger.

**Witness C15:** Our neighbor had a daughter and a granddaughter, and she hid the granddaughter in a couch so that no one would see her.

**Witness C5:** When we started watching the news, people who survived the occupation were talking about the rapes of young children. My daughter is eight years old. And there was a story about the rape of a child that age, or even younger. I was very scared then. God forbid that my youngest children should suffer.

**Witness C31:** It is a good thing I took the children away from our house. My daughter is 11 years old, but looks older – more or less 16. No one knows what may come into their minds, what they could do to children. If they abused my child in some way, I would not be able to bear it. I was very worried about her, I was afraid that she would catch their eye.

**Photo 23.**  
Caption: "Do not play on the street until the late hours, do not go far from your homes. Kids – try not to worry your parents," a destroyed school building, Pisky, Donetsk Oblast, 2015

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)



**Witness C80:** When we tried to drive out [of the occupied territory – ed.], we waited six hours for their command's permission to leave. We were in a convoy of seven cars. It was very hot. There were mostly "Chechens" at the checkpoint, so I did not let the girls get out of the car. I said: "Sit so that no one can see you." During the occupation, we did not let the children out of the courtyard at all, because I have girls, and I did not know what could have come into the minds of these soldiers. The biggest fear I had during the occupation and when I was leaving was that my girls would be physically harmed. I have never experienced anything like this before. My husband is very impulsive, they would have killed him, then me, and that would have been it – the end of our family. When you are driving in a column of cars that is several kilometers long, it is, shall we say, safe, no one from the post will come and try to lay their hands on my child. But when there are only seven cars and we are all in plain sight, and the "Chechens" are, you know, savages, it is scary.

**Witness C35:** I was hiding my granddaughter because she is such a beautiful girl. I was very afraid for her.

A female volunteer from the Zaporizhzhia Oblast told the story of a teenage girl staying at an aid center for internally displaced persons, who was hard hit by the aftermath of violence inflicted by the Russian military.

**Photo 24.**  
A destroyed library building, Pisky, Donetsk Oblast, 2015  
(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

**Witness C91:** There was one girl who was about 14–15 years old. Sitting down, she kept pulling her skirt over her knees. There were nail marks on her knees. She stretched the skirt so much that I wondered what was going on. She cried constantly. Even if she had not been raped, there had been physical contact. That means that they had touched her. A child!

(n)

A 16-year-old girl from the Sumy Oblast recalls that she felt threatened with sexual violence when Russian servicemen came to her apartment during her parents' incarceration. After returning from captivity, her mother said that during interrogations the occupiers would threaten her with raping her daughter.

**Witness M38:** They took my father, they took my mother, and then they came a third time. It seemed that they also wanted to take me. My sister and I were standing on the doorstep. A Russian soldier said to her: "Oh, what a baby! Come here, I will give you a sweet." And then: "Oh, I do not have any!" It was scary just looking at him. He looked as if he had just escaped from the wilds... Standing like that, looking at me. He tried to trick me somehow. His eyes lanced right through me. It was as if he wanted to kidnap me and... rape me. Mother was also threatened. Those who came to us then went to my mother and threatened my mother that they would rape me. Mother was sitting in the basement with the Russian servicemen. They told her: "We are going to bring your older daughter now... We will rape her, and then cut her into pieces in front of your eyes." And that would have been it. The end of me... Mother implored them not to harm me. She implored: "Do not touch her, she is a minor, she is 16." – "We do not give a damn..."

(2022-16)

Teenage girls were aware of the threat of sexual violence from the Russian soldiers, and tried not to draw attention to themselves.

**Witness M51:** My mother and I would go shopping, and the streets were full of Russian soldiers, it was scary. I purposely wore gray, inconspicuous clothes and did not wash my hair just to look unattractive.

In our city, there were warnings on Telegram [social media – ed.] that the Russian military were looking for girls and kidnapping them, and so I was very afraid to leave the house at all.

**Witness C37:** I told my older daughter: tie up your hair, smear yourself with soot. Do something so that they do not pay attention to you, so that you look neglected.

**Witness C6:** I was hiding my daughter. I ordered her not to wear anything provocative or revealing. She wore a T-shirt and walked around in leggings all summer. I was very concerned...

**Witness M51:** My greatest fear was that I would either be taken to the basement [to be held captive – ed.] or raped. Even while at home, I was mentally preparing for this. I remember taking a bath and thinking: "What is to be, will be."

2022 (16) 

A girl from Enerhodar in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast repeatedly heard threats of sexual violence from Russian servicemen while crossing checkpoints during her evacuation from the occupied city.

**Witness M51:** While passing through the checkpoints, they approached me several times and said: "16 years? Then you are already a grown-up, pretty." I was shaking all over, and they said: "What are you afraid of, we are all friends here." To be honest, I was already prepared to be abducted, led out somewhere, and raped.

They said: "Why are you going to Zaporizhzhia? The situation there is just like in Mariupol." My mother was at her wits' end. We had already read about all the atrocities that were taking place there, about Bucha. And that is why I was preparing to be raped, because we already knew what they were doing.

## 5.

### The deliberate destruction of private property and looting

Private property is absolutely protected by humanitarian law, and so a crime against it is considered as a serious violation of the laws and customs of war.<sup>7</sup> Looting may serve to enrich the invader – whether carried out systemically, on the orders of commanders, or individually, for the private needs of soldiers or occupation officials. In the case of deliberate destruction, the evident intention of the occupier is solely to worsen the living conditions of the civilian population, to intimidate it, to punish and humiliate. Witnesses describe numerous examples of Russian occupation forces destroying or looting private property that was not needed for military purposes. Whole families, and therefore children, too, fall victim to the destruction of property and looting.

A witness from the Sumy Oblast, which was partially occupied in the spring of 2022, believes that an artillery attack by Russian Federation troops targeted his home in retaliation for his family's civic-mindedness and the fact that his two oldest sons served in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. At the time, there were six young children in the house.

#### **Witness C15:**

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10 10

The Russians who were here would go around the courtyards and look for soldiers engaged in Anti-Terrorist Operations in Eastern Ukraine and regular servicemen; we were first on their list, because two of our sons are anti-terrorist operatives, while one is also a serviceman. The missile that landed on our house was intended specifically for us. Our roof and windows were shattered, and the greenhouse blew up. At the time, we had planned to spend the night in the house, because it was very cold

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<sup>7</sup> The deliberate destruction of private property and looting (plundering) during armed conflicts are unequivocally prohibited by international humanitarian law (IHL) and treated as a war crime. Article 23, g of the Convention respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land of 18 October 1907 (known as the Hague Convention (IV)): it is forbidden "to destroy or seize the enemy's property, unless such destruction or seizure be imperatively demanded by the necessities of war"; Article 46 of the same Convention: "private property [...] must be respected. Private property cannot be confiscated"; Article 47 of the same Convention: "Pillage is formally forbidden"; Article 33 of Geneva Convention (IV): "Pillage is prohibited. Reprisals against protected persons and their property are prohibited."



in the basement, and one child was sick. They were all lying on the floor in their clothes. The girls and I were in the room. I pulled them, they screamed. I pulled one, I pulled the other, and she screamed: "Do not touch me!" All the while fire was coming in through the windows. God only knows how we survived.

Witnesses recall how Russian troops looted civilians.

**Witness M47:** I encountered looting, plunder, and violations of private property by Russian soldiers. At the time, my girlfriend lived in Bucha, and she and her family managed to leave before the occupation. Russian soldiers entered her home. When she returned, it was completely wrecked. The Russian soldiers had taken all the small valuables they could carry, and what they could not carry – household appliances, TVs, laptops, refrigerators and washing machines – they simply destroyed. The house itself was in a terrible condition, with Russian rations and pieces of equipment strewn everywhere.

**Witness M38:** They wanted to take my fitness bracelet [a type of smartwatch – ed.].

2022 16

**Witness M1:** They took my telephone to "check." We used to hide our telephones under the refrigerator all the time, because otherwise they would just take them away.

**Witness M47:** Russian soldiers broke into the apartment of one of my close friends, who spent the entire occupation in Bucha. They entered the eight-story apartment building. One by one, they broke into each apartment, battering down or sawing through doors, taking valuable items, and destroying everything inside. When the Russians burst into the apartment, they came across his grandmother. They threatened her with a gun and

**Photo 25.**  
A child's room plundered by Russian servicemen, Bohorodychne, Donetsk Oblast, November 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

said that they would kill her. Then, after taking the jewelry and small household appliances, they destroyed his computer and TV, completely trashed the kitchen, and left.

**Witness M20:** I saw the looting. They blew up the ATM right in front of me. They plundered offices, taking furniture and documents.

(2014) 9  
(2022) 17

During a search of a civilian home in the partially occupied Kyiv Oblast, Russian servicemen even stole a teenager's birthday present.

**Witness C17:** He [the Russian soldier – ed.] went to the room where my grandson was. He said: "Give me your telephone." He gave it to him. It was a new, expensive telephone that his father had bought him for his birthday.

14

A witness from the occupied city of Chystiakove in the Donetsk Oblast – a mother of two – recounted how after she and her husband were arrested, their children were left at home without adult supervision. Representatives of the occupation authorities repeatedly visited the children and robbed the apartment.

**Witness C49:** In the first month, when the children were alone at home, unattended, representatives of the Ministry of State Security of the Donetsk People's Republic would come to the house when they wanted. They told the children: "Go to the other room" and they simply robbed us. They would take one thing, then another. They walked around the apartment, inspecting the balcony and the garage. The children saw that they kept taking things out. The younger one said: "They ordered us to go to another room. We were curious as to what they were doing there, but they would not let us go in." [How did the children survive this time?] Neighbors fed them.

9 17

In a village in the Sumy Oblast, during another search of a private home, a Russian serviceman attempted to steal a laptop used by children for school (online teaching was provided in the temporarily occupied territories). The story was told by a 16-year-old girl and her grandmother.

**Witness M38:** One of them entered the house. He brought out our laptop, which we used to study.

(2022) 16

**Witness C40:** "Give back the laptop – I said – the children use it for school. Please leave it, there is nothing on it!"

8 16

A mother of two from the Kherson Oblast recounts the loss of her home as a result of the Russian military blowing up the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Plant on 23 June 2023.



**Witness C80:** After the hydroelectric plant was blown up, we saw people floating in the streets, unable to save themselves. We live by a river, in the lowlands. These monsters destroyed my house. I had everything there. We left, and I took the children. We arrived at my mother's house without even a fresh set of underwear. We all came. Four days on the road. We stank. Mother put us in the shower, one by one. Then, after we had washed, she dressed us in her clothes. From home, we took only a laptop. We were traveling in a motor car, eight people in all. I brought only the children, without any belongings.

In many instances, personal property includes not only material goods used on a daily basis, but also documents, memorabilia. Such a loss is unrecoverable.

**Witness C80:** I no longer have a home. I had left my drawings from kindergarten and my knitting there, and also my children's things. I stored it all in a portfolio which we called a "Childhood Portfolio." Sometimes we would look through it. There were records of their New Year's celebrations, kindergarten graduations. I had everything there. It was, it was... And it is all lying there... The "Orks" "freed" me from my children's childhood. All my children's diplomas, medals. This cannot be recovered. Clothes – those do not matter. It is a shame, of course, because everyone has a favorite blouse or a cool, comfortable jacket. It is a shame about the equipment, but we will buy new items. This is not a problem. But the childhood, the childhood memories, I cannot buy. And I do not know where to get them. It is as if there was no childhood. There were no toys. There is nothing left. Nothing.

**Photo 26.**  
Prudianka,  
Kharkiv Oblast,  
March 2023

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

## 6. Attacks on civilian objects and facilities

Civilian objects and facilities include all sorts of buildings and infrastructure that are not related to military activities, namely, residential buildings, schools, hospitals and other public places. During armed conflicts, they are subject to special protection under international law, as their survival ensures adequate conditions for the functioning of the civilian population. The destruction of such objects and facilities is sometimes intentional, and is intended to sow confusion in a society under attack by an invader. Witnesses give numerous examples of such actions on the part of the Russian occupation forces, despite the explicit prohibition existing in international law.<sup>8</sup> These actions cause chaos: the population, panicking, desperately tries to find shelter, while children react with fear to the sound of gunfire. However, they try to adapt and eventually even learn to distinguish the various types of weapons used by the Russian military.

**Witness C32:** My granddaughter distinguished between how a tank fires, how a howitzer fires, and how a machine gun fires. She knew everything: "Grandmother, it is the 'Grad' [rocket launcher – ed.] that is firing now."

**Witness C55:** My granddaughter... When the explosions started, some were less, and others more loud. When there were smaller detonations, she would say: "The crocodile came," and run to sit down in the hallway. And when the explosions were louder, she would say that a dinosaur had come.

**Witness C74:** It was already dark, and my little one said: "Mother, the bees are buzzing." What bees, after all, it is night: "What about you, son?" And then we would listen, look and see a drone.

<sup>8</sup> The prohibition of attacking civilian objects and facilities during armed conflicts is a cornerstone of international humanitarian law (IHL). It protects civilians and civilian infrastructure from the effects of hostilities, see Article 52(1) of the Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions: "Civilian objects shall not be the object of attack or of reprisals"; Article 8(2), b, ii of the Rome Statute – War crimes: "intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects, that is, objects which are not military objectives."

**Witness C95:** We told our granddaughter that it was fireworks. We had to hide, but she understood everything. She had just turned three on 3 March, and she already knew what the "Grad" is, and what mines are. Nearby they were shooting, and her father was protecting her, he stood over her, over her bed, and shielded her with his body, in the event that we did not manage to run down to the basement. She still remembers it all. After that, she could not stay alone in the room, because she would become very afraid if there was no one standing nearby, she was afraid of everything.

**Witness C96:** When the full-scale invasion began, there were about eighty people with small children in the basement of our firehouse. Some came when there was shelling, while others remained there all the time. Someone brought a little food from home, someone a few mattresses and bedspreads, and so we survived. The children were afraid, they hid. Of course, they took it all badly. There were various children, both very young and teenagers. They understood what was going on.

**Witness M77:** "Zlatochka, where did you hide during the war, when they were shooting?" [asks the grandmother – ed.] "That is where we hid, there is a basement off the stairwell."

**Witness C18:** I cry, and my grandson says: "Grandmother, we will survive. We will survive, they will not kill us." He was sure of this all the time. He did not ask about his mother. He helped chop wood. They started shooting, the whole gate was in holes, there was an explosion in the courtyard, we fell. I made it to the basement, but he is gone! He jumped into some hole. We hid where we could. But he kept repeating: "We will survive, we will survive, they will not kill us." He distinguished between "incoming" and "outgoing." He knew where something was flying and how. We would scream and cry all the time, and he would smile.

**Witness C5:** Children understand that war is something very bad. They are afraid. Where I live with my children, there is no basement. We found a small room that had load-bearing walls. The children know that in case of shelling they need to hide there.

**Witness C44:** We slept in our clothes. We slept prepared. Just a jacket, a bag and you are good to go. I went to work with my daughter. For two days, we would stay at home with her, and for the next two days we would go to work with her. Simply put, at work, the basement is a little better, a little safer.

In the Donetsk Oblast, collaborators of the Lemkin Center met with the residents of one of the front line towns. The woman told of the shelling of the house where her four minor great-grandchildren had previously lived, and showed the children's beds and bedding shredded by shrapnel. On the eve of the Russian shelling, her granddaughter had left the building with her children, which saved their lives.

**Witness C97:** Look, everything is smashed. Yes, everything is broken. What if the children had been sleeping here? There was glass everywhere. Look, even the child's quilt has been torn by shrapnel. Two children slept here. Everything is damaged. Holes everywhere. Everything flew this way, can you imagine? We threw away the child's pillow, that is how it all looked [shows holes – ed.]. What if there was a baby sleeping there? We got them out in time! It was at night. There were many people. There were three dead. And approximately six wounded.

We ran to the school basement. Imagine – running with four children, every day or night, to the basement. So they packed up and went to Poland. They got a house somewhere over there. Now they live there.

During preparations for their evacuation from the occupied territory of the Kherson Oblast, the house in which the family lived was hit by a Russian artillery shell.

**Witness C34:** We saw tanks entering the city. My husband told us not to go out, because it was scary to walk down the street with a child. There were tanks driving around, so we sat at home. The apartment was still in one piece. My husband told us to pack. We brought the child out. Then we went back to the apartment to get our things. And then a second time, to pick up the animals. I have been a volunteer all my life, we have a lot of cats. We took the cats and left. It took about an hour. We still planned to take some things from there, but the apartment block was hit... So we did not go a third time. Somehow, we hesitated, I do not know [why – ed.], I probably should not say this, but I think God saved us. Because that is when the rocket hit. Several rockets and explosions. We intended to go there. The building had already completely collapsed. It collapsed from the tenth story down.

One witness from the Kharkiv Oblast recounted how she, her husband and grandson spent 105 days under fire. The boy, who was only 12 years old, did not at first understand the threat posed to his life by the constant shelling – until he saw the destruction of his home. Unable to take the child to safety and losing hope of survival, the witness suggested that her grandson keep a diary that would serve as a family keepsake.

**Witness C18:** He took off his shoes. He lay down without his shoes. I said to him: "When the shelling starts, will you run barefoot?" He did not understand this. He was sleepy, we tried to wake him up, we pulled him by the arm. He did not seem to understand what was going on. We put on his shoes. We pulled him, we "threw" him into the basement, because there was heavy shelling... The whole basement was shaking.

Of course, he is a strong boy, but he was always getting on my nerves. He was not afraid. I would "throw" him into the basement, down [the witness

means that she dragged the child to hide it from the gunfire – ed.]. Rockets flew every minute. At first, he did not understand. Only today is he beginning to comprehend that it was all really serious. Every minute. We described 105 days with him. From the first day, when the war began at 4:20 a.m., right until the end of the occupation... Because we were afraid. We were sure, frankly, that we were going to die. We wrote so that our loved ones could read how we lived. We filled three notebooks with writing. Every minute, every day, every hour – at what time they shot, how they came and scared us with their rifles, how we celebrated Easter... For 105 days we wrote with my grandson.

The mother of a ten-year-old boy from the village of Andriivka in the Kyiv Oblast described how a bullet hit their home and went into the room where she was present with her son.

**Witness C28:** I was standing in the door, my child was on the couch, while my neighbor was sitting in a chair. And then something flew into the house, hit the chandelier, and fell. I asked: "What was that?" She pointed to the door: "Look there." There was an enormous hole in the door, we started looking and found a machine gun bullet. The bullet could have hit either my child in the head, as it flew in that direction, or me in the stomach. After that I began to shake, I became hysterical. I could not calm down when I imagined that my child could die before my eyes or I could die before my child's eyes.

### 6.1. Humanitarian crises in cities caused by attacks on civilian objects and facilities

During the Russian Army's attacks on Mariupol between 24 February and 20 May 2022, approximately 80% of the city's housing infrastructure was destroyed.<sup>9</sup> Throughout this period, Russian troops shelled buildings inhabited by civilians, who were not taking a direct part in hostilities.

**Witness C33:** The aerial attack struck at 2 a.m. We were sleeping on the first floor. There was no way that we could have all slept in the basement. It was a small basement. We slept there with our son and three other boys, soccer players. I do not know why, I just opened my eyes at 2 a.m. I started

<sup>9</sup> A comprehensive damage assessment shows that by mid-May 2022, 93% of the 477 multi-story residential buildings in the central part of the city had been damaged. All of the 19 hospital facilities across the city had also been damaged, as well as 86 of the 89 educational facilities, see "Our City Was Gone". *Russia's Devastation of Mariupol, Ukraine*, REPORT by Human Right Watch's Crisis and Conflict Division, <https://www.hrw.org/feature/russia-ukraine-war-mariupol/report> [accessed: 08.06.2025].

poking one of them, and said: "Come on, get up," and we all went to the basement. I heard a "bang," and then there was a very bright light. We managed to quickly grab the baby and run barefoot to the basement. Glass began to fall, cabinets fell from the walls. We spent three hours in the basement. My son fell asleep, I managed to put him to sleep, because he was very scared. He cried.

At the start of the full-scale invasion, Russia imposed a blockade on the city of Mariupol and thereby caused a humanitarian crisis. The mother of a two-year-old boy told us of the shortage of medicines and water in the city.

**Witness C33:** The doctor auscultated him. I asked for some syrup. She said that they did not have any. She said: "Give him warm water." They brought a bucket of water, and we heated it up over a fire. First I had to bathe the child, because he still wore diapers at the time. It was very difficult, it was cold inside the house, and cold outside. Then he became very ill. I bathed him, and then bathed myself in the same water.

Witnesses recalled how severe the mental and physical condition of both children and adults was after a long stay in the basements of Russian-occupied Mariupol.

**Witness C73:** I was called to pick up people from Mariupol. There was a girl about 16–17 years old, together with her aunt, grandmother and dog. When I brought them in, they said: "We want to take a shower. We have not bathed in almost two months."

When I talked to the residents of Mariupol, I realized that they were hungry and needed water and food. We started making sandwiches, we took water in half-liter bottles and carried it there [to the queue at the checkpoint at the entrance to occupied Berdyansk, through which evacuees from occupied Mariupol were trying to pass – ed.]. I asked the Russian servicemen at the post to at least allow us to feed the children, but at first they did not agree. Then we came to some sort of arrangement and went there with carrier bags. We would walk up to each car, distribute packages and hand out sandwiches to people. It was hard to look into the hungry eyes of children who had not eaten anything for days. They talked about how little and what the children there ate daily – raw potatoes and a piece of pork fat.

**Witness C24:** It was simply terrifying – to see all of them, the children. They suffered from severe dyspepsia and were so dirty. I cannot describe how they smelled. They stank of the basements and all that.

**Witness C7:** People were transported from the outskirts of Mariupol, which were under heavy shelling, through Vasylivka. Here, they loaded humanitarian aid and took it to their village. It was terrible. People lived in basements

for three weeks. I, as a man, found it difficult to look at them. And the children... There was even a situation when the "Orks" did not allow us to leave Vasylivka, and so we spent the night there – five thousand people lined up in a field. The next day, local entrepreneurs brought us bread to Vasylivka. The children apparently had not seen it so long that they asked their mother: "Mother, can we eat this bread? Is all this bread for us?"

Chernihiv is another Ukrainian city gripped by a humanitarian crisis caused by its blockade by Russian troops. A teenager's mother recalls the lack of food.

**Witness C34:** My child was crying. She may already be 14, but she is still very small. She asked for something to eat. There was nothing. The shops were closed.

Problems with access to food also appeared in other regions of Ukraine attacked by Russia.

**Witness C92:** It was tough. It is impossible to explain to a child that there are no shops, no sweets, no nothing, and for children sweets are the most important.

**Witness C31:** For ten days, we and three children experienced hellish conditions. There was nothing to eat... I had one slice of dry bread in my bag. I saved it for my son, he really wanted bread.

Over time, residents of townships under constant Russian shelling stopped going to shelters when air-raid alarms sounded. The grandfather of a four-year-old girl from the Kyiv Oblast recounts how difficult it was to constantly go down to the basement with a small child and wait in the cold room for the shelling to end.

**Witness C32:** Before you got her dressed and took her down to the basement... It was so cramped there. In our house, we have a room with no windows and one wall missing; only two chairs will fit in, and yet we sat there all the time – the three of us. Us two and our four-year-old granddaughter.

**Witness C66:** For the first month, we went down to the basement as soon as there was an alarm. We went down at night and in the morning. Then we stopped going because the children started falling ill, because it is a basement, and it is cold. Our basement is so old that it could collapse, it is dangerous there too.

**Witness C56:** Our basement is so unreliable that if something were to happen, the basement would not protect us. We slept in the house, we tried to lie closer to the door, with our clothes on.

**Witness C3:** We did not go to a shelter. One has not yet been built – either in our apartment block or in the neighboring blocks. While in the subway, young children began to get sick literally immediately. The subway was used



by people who found it difficult to move around and by mothers with infants who had come in from all the nearby homes within the first few days, because they could not run quickly [to the shelter – ed.] over the hillocks of Kyiv. In the subway, it was damp and drafty, simply pneumonic. One electrical outlet for the entire subway station and more than a hundred people.

**Witness C50:** I slept with my younger son. The explosion occurred right above our house, lighting up the entire village. I covered the child with my body, thinking that this was the end.

Access to gas, water and electricity was cut off in most areas of Ukraine temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation. Living in basements, a lack of medication, and the constant stress of warfare caused children's health to deteriorate.

**Photo 27.**  
A woman holding  
a fragment of a Russian  
shell found in the pillow  
on which her son was  
sleeping.

Borodianka, Kyiv Oblast,  
April 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

**Witness M47:** It was quite dangerous to go to the shops, but you had to have plenty of food and water. Many people did not manage to leave in time and remained in the basements of their homes. So there were immense problems with that [with getting supplies – ed.]. And since it was winter,

many people were sick and medicines were badly needed. We cooked over a campfire. During the partial occupation of the city, many homes no longer had heating, electricity and gas, so the basements were simply a dark, cold place. We had to bring blankets there – anything that could keep us warm.

I have a good friend who experienced the entire occupation. He developed chronic lung and kidney problems due to the lack of medication and the cold. Treatment is very expensive. He was 17 years old at the time.

**Witness C88:** An acquaintance of mine remained there with her 12-year-old son, who fell ill. He had bronchospasm. He was coughing so much that I told her to call an ambulance. Some two idiots – excuse my language – came around and starting mocking her: "What did you call us for? Since he is coughing, just give him some medicine," and off they went. Such was the Russian ambulance service... We barely made it till morning and went to the hospital. They took an X-ray and the doctor was surprised that the child had not suffocated during the night.

**Witness C15:** The youngest girl was very sick. She had a high fever – a severe flu. We had no medicine. The hospitals were not working. Thank God she survived. It was a tough experience. She did not eat or drink for three whole days.

In an account of life under occupation in the Kyiv Oblast between February and April 2022, the mother of a one-year-old child tells of her concerns about her child's health due to the lack of access to medical services.

**Witness C36:** I was very worried that my daughter would get sick, because when she has a fever, she gets convulsions.

## 6.2. Children injured in attacks by occupation forces on civilian objects and facilities

Situations in which children were injured as a result of attacks on civilian objects and facilities were not uncommon.

**Witness M47:** One of my friends lost his leg in Russian shelling in March 2022. He was in the countryside, where his family had moved from the city in the hope of improving their safety. Later, the village was occupied by the Russians, and a Russian tank shelled his house.

The 15-year-old granddaughter of a witness from the Kherson Oblast suffered post-traumatic shock as a result of Russian shelling, and lost her sight in one eye.

**Witness C35:** The topic of my granddaughter is a painful one for me, I cannot talk about it [the witness cries – ed.]. She was hiding in the basement. There was shelling going on, and she wanted to go to the restroom. As soon as she went, there was an explosion. The shock wave threw her backwards. As a result, she suffered optic nerve atrophy and cannot see out of one eye. She now has a certificate of disability. I did not believe that this was possible. The pupil is intact, and so is the retina. But the impact was so strong that the nerves snapped.

An elderly woman from the Chernihiv Oblast recalled the artillery shelling conducted by Russian troops. As a result, she lost her legs, while her ten-year-old granddaughter had to undergo several surgeries.

**Witness C39:** We were sitting in the kitchen at the time. Me, my granddaughter, my daughter and my brother-in-law. We did not feel anything. I fell off the couch, it was as if the earth had parted. Later, when they were carrying me out, there was smoke, everything was smashed. I could not think clearly. When they carried me to my neighbors, I saw that I had no legs. My granddaughter is ten years old; her calves were broken, the muscles ripped and singed. Later, they had to rebuild her bones. She is now able to walk. She still has a burn scar on her hand and is undergoing treatment. And there are still injury marks on her calves. At first, she was not allowed to walk so that the bones would grow together.

## 7.

## Use of prohibited weapons

International law prohibits the use of certain types of weapons that may be considered to cause excessive suffering or have uncontrolled effects.<sup>10</sup> Among others, it is prohibited to use weapons whose main effect is to injure by means of fragments that cannot be detected in the human body by X-rays, as well as landmines, various types of incendiary weapons, or blinding laser devices. In addition to conventional weapons, the list also includes weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, and nuclear). However, with today's technological developments, the temptation to use such means is considerable for those who do not comply with international law. Witnesses repeatedly mentioned Russian shelling of residential areas with the use of prohibited cluster munitions or phosphorus bombs.<sup>11</sup>

**Witness C66:** I was in a room with my younger child, and cluster munitions hit the roof just above his room. I don't know what saved us – it didn't break through the ceiling. He fell to the floor, I threw myself on top of him [the mother covered her child with her body to protect him – ed.], he was scared. I thought that if the shrapnel started flying, then I would be hurt and not him.

<sup>10</sup> Weapons are considered prohibited if: a) they are covered by a specific treaty prohibiting their use; b) they cause unnecessary suffering or fail to distinguish between civilians and soldiers; c) they cause long-term and irreversible damage to the environment. The purpose of this prohibition is to limit the suffering of civilians and combatants and to protect the environment. The legal basis for the prohibition stems from the general principles of humanitarian law (Article 35(2) of the Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions: "It is prohibited to employ weapons, projectiles and material and methods of warfare of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering") and numerous conventions, e.g. the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, done in Paris on 13 January 1993 (CWC), the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, opened for signature in Moscow, London and Washington on 10 April 1972 (BTWC), the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) – not ratified by Russia, Ukraine or the US and others, including Poland.

<sup>11</sup> Article 8(2), b, xvii–xx of the Rome Statute recognizes the use of weapons prohibited by international treaties as a war crime if the state responsible is a party to the treaty in question.



**Photo 28.**  
The hole left by  
a Russian shrapnel that  
killed a 15-year-old boy,  
Ruska Lozova,  
Kharkiv Oblast,  
April 2023

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

**Witness C5:** Two planes flew over. One dropped a bomb on us. The children saw it. 7 8 15 18 I shouted to them, "Quick, get inside," because I was scared. Another time, they dropped two phosphorus bombs. It was terrifying. You are afraid that you might get hurt, but you have children. Mine are still very young.

During the Russian shelling of civilian buildings in the Chernihiv Oblast with prohibited cluster munitions, the husband of one of the witnesses shielded his one-and-a-half-month-old grandson with his own body and was killed on the spot.

**Witness C63:** They were banned “cluster munitions.” It happened at 12:30 p.m. My husband, son-in-law, daughter, and grandson, who was one and a half months old at the time, were at home. When the shooting started, my daughter finished feeding her son and handed him to my husband, who was sitting in an armchair with a stroller next to him. When he heard a whistling sound, he stood up, and at that moment a shell hit him. My husband died on the spot from his injuries. My son-in-law was seriously injured, my daughter was slightly injured, and my grandson was completely unharmed. My husband shielded my grandson with his own body.

A resident of the Kharkiv Oblast recounts the death of her son, who was killed while trying to evacuate from an occupied town when Russian troops fired cluster munitions at a car.

**Witness C14:** We took our documents and a few essential items. We drove to my parents’ house to give them the keys. We got into the car and carried on down the same street. We were fired at with cluster munitions from behind the trees alongside the road. There were five holes in the car. My husband was wounded in the leg. Our son was sitting behind him – they shot him straight in the heart. He died on the spot. I knew it was the end. Blood was flowing. There was no pulse. He died instantly. Artem was 15 and a half years old. We returned home and pulled him out of the car. That was on 14 March. And on 15 March, “they” [the Russians – ed.] entered the village. They forbade us to leave our homes. We had to bury him. They were quartered in the school, and my father went to beg them to let us bury our child in the cemetery. They called a commander of theirs. They allowed it, but on condition that the grave diggers were marked with white bandages on their arms. We had to transport the child and the coffin in a car, not a truck. No other people were allowed to be present.

## 8. Forced displacement

The forced deportation of civilians from occupied territories serves to disrupt the social fabric, destroy local culture and, due to the threat to material existence and difficult conditions during travel and at the destination, may even lead to the partial extermination of a given community. It is prohibited under international law as a crime against humanity.<sup>12</sup> It is sometimes justified by the occupying forces as a means of ensuring the safety of civilians, but in practice it usually exposes them to additional dangers. It certainly forces them to break with their previous lives, results in the loss of their possessions, status, and homes – even their roots – and thus causes enormous trauma. Neither are children spared this fate.

Witnesses who were in areas temporarily occupied by Russia report cases of the forced deportation of local people from their permanent homes to other places occupied by Russia or to the territory of the aggressor country. In most cases, these displacements were related to the Russian occupying forces' desire to seize buildings and property left behind, and were

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<sup>12</sup> The prohibition of the forcible transfer of civilian populations during armed conflicts is clearly defined in international humanitarian law and international criminal law. Such an act is considered a war crime and, in some cases, a crime against humanity. Forced displacement is: a) the transfer of a population without its consent, often under threat of force or as a result of a threat to its existence (blockades, destruction, lack of access to means of subsistence); b) concerns both deportation outside the territory of a country and internal displacement; c) includes "organized evacuation" aimed at changing the demographic structure (e.g. in the context of occupation), see Article 49(1) of the Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons: "Individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory to the territory of the Occupying Power or to that of any other country, occupied or not, are prohibited, regardless of their motive"; Article 85(4), a of the Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions – War crimes: "Forced transfer of civilian population constitutes a serious violation of humanitarian law"; Article 7(1), d of the same Protocol – Crimes against humanity: "Deportation or forcible transfer of population, committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population, with knowledge of the attack"; Article 8(2), b, viii of the Rome Statute – War crimes: "Deportation or transfer of parts of the population of the occupied territory in violation of international law"; as well as Article 7(1), d of the same Statute – Crimes against humanity.



also intended to support propaganda efforts or intimidate the population.

The aggressor's soldiers spread information about the possibility of civilians leaving for Russia, presenting it as an opportunity. This was the case of a 17-year-old boy who was under Russian occupation in the town of Izium in the Kharkiv Oblast.

**Witness M20:** They offered to have me go and study at any university in Belgorod [in the Russian Federation – ed.]. I refused.

2014 9

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A witness who found herself in the occupied territory of the Kharkiv Oblast with her pregnant daughter recounts an unsuccessful attempt to forcibly deport mothers with children.

**Witness C62:** They were kidnapping children in our village. The Russians were walking around and taking children away, putting them in large trucks with tarpaulins. They announced that everyone should bring out their children and get in. They said it was dangerous here: "Take them away! We

**Photo 29.**  
Sloviansk,  
Donetsk Oblast,  
July 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

mean well." It wasn't supposed to be forced, but they threatened us with weapons: "If you don't bring them, if you don't get in with them, we'll take them away from you." But they didn't manage to take them away. I don't know what happened, but they didn't make it to Belgorod with them. In Buhayivka they said, "We'll continue in a day or two." But something went wrong and they came back.

In 2022 in the Kharkiv Oblast, near the border with Russia, Russian soldiers deported almost all the inhabitants of the village. This is recounted by one of the residents, whose grandson was taken away by the occupiers shortly before the events described.

**Witness C23:** The Russians entered every house. They even dragged disabled people out of the basements. Everyone fled in panic. It was around 2 p.m. (7)

Someone said that they had given us until 3 p.m. At 3 p.m., the bombing would start. We got out of the basement and ran; we didn't have time to get properly dressed. Their trucks arrived. Green ones. Like those used to transport cattle. There were no benches, but there were bars on the windows. It was very cold at the time. We didn't get into the trucks, and then three men with rifles arrived: "Get in, we're leaving." My husband said, "Shoot me here, I'm not going anywhere. My grandson isn't here." Their commander came and started swearing, "Why didn't you go? They'll shoot you." We got into the truck. We were crying. We didn't want to leave.

Russian soldiers abducted and illegally transported locals to Russia, misleading them into believing that they were being evacuated to the border town of Vovchansk.

**Witness C23:** They drove and drove – Vovchansk. I looked – and we kept moving... (7)  
"Where are you taking us?" – "To a safe place. Keep quiet until we get there." First, they took us to the forest. I didn't know where we were, but I knew we had stopped at the edge of the forest.

Near the border zone, those being transported were transferred to a bus to be taken to the territory of the Russian Federation. They beat and shot two men in front of families with small children.

**Witness C23:** Russian soldiers shot two young men in front of us... They transferred us from the truck to the bus. My seven-year-old granddaughter was with us. It was me, my daughter-in-law, and the children. They pulled out two boys and started beating one of them with the butts of their automatic rifles right next to the bus. He was covered in blood. Then they pulled him out onto the road by his arms and legs. And then... [the witness shows how they shot the boy in the head – ed.]. I didn't see how they killed the other one. Everyone started screaming: "What will happen to us? What will happen to us?" The children were crying. The children saw it! When we arrived, our granddaughter couldn't talk or smile.

We looked and saw that we were already at the border, in Shebekino. They took us there, made everyone get out and started checking us – our phones, everything. They said they were taking us to Vovchansk, but they brought us to the border, and from there other buses took us away. They put us in tents in Belgorod. We spent three days there, then they said, "We're going to relocate you." "Where are you taking us? Why did you bring us here? You said we were going to a safe place, to Vovchansk." No one listened to us. They displaced us, they deceived us. They deceived us at every turn. We asked, "What will happen next? Where are you taking us?" "To a safe place." [Were people taken only from your street? Or from the entire village?] I'll put it this way, on this side, where the shops are, it's as if it had been cut out. Everyone, the entire street, 90 people. All at once [were taken away – ed.].

Russian soldiers in various regions of Ukraine forced residents of occupied areas to leave their homes to accommodate soldiers of the occupying forces.

**Witness C2:** They came on 12 March, around 9 a.m. They said, "You have an hour to pack and leave." We asked, "How are we supposed to leave?" We had a car, but there was only five liters of fuel in the tank. Were we supposed to leave like that?

**Witness C62:** I was there with my husband, my parents, and my pregnant daughter. Then, after they had herded us together, there were three more families with us – my niece with her husband and daughter, a neighbor with his mother and nephew, a married couple, and some other people who came. The Russians drove people out of their homes and took up residence there themselves.

According to the witness, during the occupation, Russian soldiers forcibly deported mothers with small children to other temporarily occupied regions of Ukraine and to the territory of the Russian Federation.

**Witness M1:** When the Russian soldiers entered, they began to take people from shelters to Russia or to the occupied part of the Luhansk Oblast. We tried to hide our little brother the whole time because we were afraid they would take him away. Children of that age and even younger were taken away with their mothers, while older children, like me, were left behind. They simply took women with children and shouted to the others: "Pack up, we're taking you away."

## 9.

### Other violations of humanitarian, criminal, and human rights law

In addition to the crimes, war crimes, and crimes against humanity already mentioned, witnesses also report other violations of humanitarian, criminal, and human rights law that they experienced or witnessed first-hand. Their accounts repeatedly mention violations of personal integrity, unlawful searches and inspections. Criminal threats are also part of everyday life under occupation in Ukraine. It is not only adults who are intimidated by Russian military personnel; the aggressor's forces in the temporarily occupied territories also treat children in this way.

**Witness M47:** My friend from Bucha was threatened with a gun. He was 17 years old.   
 (2014) 8  
 (2022) 16

One witness, a 16-year-old girl from the Zaporizhzhia Oblast who evacuated with her mother and two brothers aged 5 and 13, recalls intimidation at Russian checkpoints.

**Witness M51:** Russian soldiers came up and mocked us: "It's over, you're all going to the basement." They threatened to take us and my mother to the basement [to be tortured – ed.].   
 (2022) 16

When we approached Vasylivka, there was a large column standing there and they wouldn't let us through. They said, "We won't let you through, go back or we'll rape the women and kill the men."

One of the methods of persecuting the civilian population in the territories temporarily occupied by Russia is property searches and intimidation of the residents.

**Witness C22:** We had signs on three sides of the house saying that children lived there. Families with children were also hiding in the neighboring building. They also had a sign saying "Children." They [the Russian military – ed.] lined up the whole family – women, grandmothers, children – and threatened them with weapons.   
 (2) (4)

**Witness C80:** They came to the house of my neighbor, a single mother with a five-year-old child, who was feeling very ill. First, they knocked on the gate, but no one opened it. They climbed over the fence, and the dog started barking. They knocked and knocked, but she didn't wake up, so they started shooting into the air. Our neighborhood is so quiet, it's just single-family houses, and suddenly they started shooting with a machine gun. It was stressful. She was alone, with a fever, and she came out with a small child. She was terrified – there were five men with rifles standing outside the house, the dog was barking, and they were shooting.

**Witness C30:** When they came, I said, "Guys, who are you attacking? We have seven children sitting in the basement, who are you attacking?" They looked down and said, "Debt to the motherland." I said, "Nothing justifies this war, no debts. I don't even know what you would have to do to owe such a 'debt to the motherland' that you attack children, someone else's country, someone else's life."

**Witness C53:** We went to get humanitarian aid. My friend, a neighbor from my street, called me and asked, "Where are you? Come home quickly, because the Russians are going door to door looking for weapons and our soldiers." They came, we weren't home, there were six of them, they always carry rifles. They walked past the dog and started looking through the windows. The children were scared, they hid in a corner and sat there, all four of them. They sat and cried. My eldest daughter called me and said in a trembling voice: "Mom, come quickly, they're breaking the windows and they said they'll break down the door. Mom, they're going to kill us." After that, the children were too afraid to go out into the yard for a week.

**Witness C64:** At that time, the children were at home with me. I saw Russian soldiers running into our house. The children just hid in the corner of the bedroom. The younger one was five and the older one was nine. One of the two men who interrogated us came into the bedroom and even tried to talk to my children. They hid there and sat in silence. What's more, it wasn't the first time the children had seen them. It wasn't their first visit. They already knew that "these uncles might hurt us." They came in armored vehicles with machine guns and aimed at the yard.

**Witness C92:** The searches took place in the presence of frightened children. The "uncles" came in military boots, with machine guns, and searched the house while the children watched. Once they came to me because someone had told them that they had seen me in the field with binoculars. During the occupation, 14 people lived in this house, including four children. I said, "I went out to the field to see what was going on, you can see for yourself that there are a lot of children here. I'm not going to keep dragging them back and forth to the basement. If I see what's coming at us, I'll be able to save them."

**Witness C30:** At that time, the oldest was three years old, the youngest was a year and a half. Small children. I grabbed the children by the hands and we went out: "Look, good people, why have you come to us with weapons? We are peaceful. We have children, we have a home, we have our lives, we wish no harm to anyone."

**Witness C31:** We have many small children, why have you come here?

(2) (9) (11)

An elderly couple who, in March 2022, found themselves in the temporarily occupied territory of the Kyiv Oblast with their four-year-old granddaughter, describe how Russian soldiers searched their home with weapons in their hands and threatened to throw them out.

**Witness C32:** They came in with machine guns, there were three of them, one "Chechen" and two Russians. I could see that they were very aggressive: "What do you have here?" My granddaughter and I fell to our knees. We begged: "Don't touch us, we're not guilty of anything. We're not hiding anyone. The three of us don't even go outside." They searched the whole house. They checked everything. The "Chechen" said: "Pack your things and leave, or we'll raze the place to the ground. You'll have nothing left. Nothing at all, everything will burn."

The following situation was described by a 17-year-old resident of the partially occupied Zaporizhzhia Oblast. She was interrogated by Russian soldiers because of an illegal search and photos found on her phone of her boyfriend, who served in the National Guard of Ukraine.

**Witness M8:** I saw through the window that Russian soldiers were pushing their way inside. I went to the other room. I heard them coming in and saying, "Give us your phones, we're going to check them." When they were checking my mom, I tried to hide my phone because I had a lot of photos with a soldier and correspondence on it. I hid my phone under the wardrobe. I sat there until they called me. They started interrogating me. They showed me photos [found on my mom's phone – ed.]. "Who is this?" I said, "My ex-boyfriend." I just didn't want them to track down his parents. I was worried they would pick on them. But they interrogated me anyway. I told them he wasn't from around here and that none of his family lived here. They asked where he was now, where he had last lived. I said he was in Mariupol. And then it started: "Which unit? When did you last see him?" I said we broke up before the war and he went to Mariupol. That's all. They asked about his military rank. I said he was serving in the National Guard. They didn't know what that was and immediately said, "That's Azov! [Azov Assault Brigade, part of the National Guard – ed.]. Everything is clear!"

While the Russian soldiers were interrogating the girl, they abused her father and pretended to prepare for his execution, which they were going to carry out in front of her.



**Witness M8:** At that time, my dad had a heart attack and was lying on the floor. They were asking me questions and at the same time aiming at my dad. "We won't hurt you, just answer [the questions – ed.]." How could I talk when they were aiming at my father... Then they took my dad outside. They started to undress him. I heard them shouting at him and at the dog, which was barking. They said, "Take the dog away or we'll shoot it." We have a black Labrador, a gentle dog, he just wanted to go for a walk. Then I saw them leading my dad to the garbage dump. We have a hole there where we throw out the trash. I saw them pushing him with a rifle. I didn't feel anything, I don't know why.

A witness from occupied Berdyansk, who helped civilians evacuate to territory controlled by the Ukrainian government, recalls how Russian soldiers at a checkpoint tried to arrest a 14-year-old boy, the son of a Ukrainian soldier, for photographs found on his phone.

**Witness C73:** There was an incident where a photo with Ukrainian symbols was found on a boy's phone. They tried to throw the boy and his mother out of the car. I begged them, explaining that he was young, stupid, and didn't understand anything. A 14-year-old boy, a teenager, doesn't understand

**Photo 30.**  
Kozacha Lopa,  
Kharkiv Oblast,  
March 2023

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

many things, hormones and such matters. I told him, "Be quiet, be quiet!" and he replied, "But I love Ukraine!" I said, "Be quiet if you want to stay alive. Do you want to love Ukraine and die here – not just you, but also your mother and sister? How will I look into the eyes of your father, who is fighting? Be quiet, please!" And, thank God, we managed to come to an agreement, they let us go and we made it.

Another example of the persecution of Ukrainian military families is the story of a witness from the Kherson Oblast. A woman was forced to work for the occupying authorities during the illegal "referendum" in 2022,<sup>13</sup> because Russian soldiers threatened her children, who were only one and three years old.

**Witness C30:** Russian Colonel Aleksandr said that he knew that my husband had participated in the ATO [Anti-Terrorist Operation in eastern Ukraine – ed.].

1 3

He said, "You know what we do with people like that." They treated ATO participants brutally, they even shot at randomly discovered ATO uniforms. When we started talking about the referendum, Aleksandr reminded me that he remembered that my family was the family of an ATO soldier. And if I didn't cooperate, my husband would "drown in his own blood." After two or three weeks, he came with a soldier and said: "Unfortunately, we don't have many supporters of the Russian government here, but we need the referendum to go smoothly, without unnecessary complications." He added: "You don't want us to go and meet your children, do you?" and signaled to the soldier, who hit me on the leg with the butt of his rifle. I fell down. The bruise was large. I realized that they had something on me, that my family could be harmed. That's why I agreed to cooperate. As we went from yard to yard, we were accompanied by armed Russian soldiers. I couldn't control myself, I cried. I became hysterical.

A witness from the Kharkiv Oblast says that after being evacuated from the temporarily occupied territory, she learned from her neighbors that Russian soldiers were looking for her underage grandson because of photos of him in a military school uniform.

**Witness C57:** When we left, we didn't hide his uniform or photos. We just packed up, we didn't even take our documents with us. The photos were left behind.

17

Others said they had buried or burned similar things, but we left everything. When the Moskals [a derogatory term for Russians – ed.] came, they took my grandson's album and ran around the village asking who he was: "Where is this boy, where are his parents?"

<sup>13</sup> *Fikcja – rosyjskie pseudoreferenda aneksyjne na Ukrainie*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 28.09.2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-09-28/fikcja-rosyjskie-pseudoreferenda-aneksyjne-na-ukrainie> [accessed: 08.06.2025].

Witnesses recall that Russian soldiers in the occupied territories of Ukraine often went to civilians' homes and aggressively demanded alcohol and tobacco. In a family from the Chernihiv Oblast, they threatened a six-year-old girl with a weapon.

**Witness C4:** We were at home. They drove up to the street and started shouting. They were Buryats. My granddaughter was standing on the doorstep, and he pointed his rifle at her: "I'll shoot. Give me tobacco." "You'd shoot a child for tobacco...? Go, daughter, bring some tobacco. Let them choke on it." He didn't lower his weapon until my daughter brought him the tobacco. My granddaughter is only six years old, but she remembers everything. Every time she hears any movement in the street, she is afraid. She is not the same as she used to be. Now she is afraid of everything. I don't think she'll ever forget it. Aiming a gun at a child is a very serious crime, a great sin. How would he have reacted if someone had aimed a rifle at his child?

A mother of two underage daughters from the Kherson Oblast described the threats made by Russian soldiers during the evacuation to Ukrainian-controlled territory.

**Witness C80:** There was a case when the DPR [unrecognized Donetsk People's Republic – ed.] and the "Chechens" could not agree on control of a bridge that was already in the "gray zone" – 20 kilometers from us. And so the "Chechens" let us through, and the DPR turned us back. They chased us back and forth for six hours. Suddenly, they drove up and started shouting: "Shoot them!".

Then we stopped. They told us, "Hands up!" We were captured. Our convoy was blocked by two cars. They aimed their rifles at us: "Get out of the car!" I got out, stood in front of the car and realized that nothing could help me anymore. My children were sitting behind me. They were pointing their rifles at us. Why was I standing before them? It was no use. I couldn't move. I couldn't change the situation, I couldn't protect my children. For the first time in my life, my knees were really shaking because I couldn't influence the situation in any way, I couldn't defend my children.

They told us, "The children can get in the car." My daughter got in the car and said, "Mom, I'm fainting." She was terrified. My youngest was so scared that even though she was already a big girl – she was nine at the time – she almost soiled herself out of fear. She said, "Mom, we'll never get out of here."

## 10. Attacks on medical facilities

Medical facilities and, more broadly, hospitals, medical personnel, and medical infrastructure, are civilian structures that are subject to special protection. Attacks on them during armed conflicts are prohibited and considered a violation of international law and even a war crime.<sup>14</sup> The armed forces of the warring parties must make every effort to avoid exposing such facilities to the risk of accidental shelling or bombing. However, witnesses believe that Russian airstrikes on Ukrainian medical facilities were deliberate.<sup>15</sup> During the shelling of one of the hospitals in the Sumy Oblast, staff and patients were forced to hide in the basement. The staff tried to work as best they could under the circumstances, as they were

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**14** The prohibition of attacks on medical facilities during armed conflict is a cornerstone of international humanitarian law (IHL). Its purpose is to protect the wounded, the sick, and those providing them with assistance, regardless of which side of the conflict they are on, see Article 19 of the Geneva Conventions for the Protection of War Victims, signed at Geneva on 12 August 1949 (known as the Geneva Convention (I)): "Fixed establishments and mobile medical units may in no circumstances be attacked or bombed, as long as they are marked with the required signs and are not used to commit acts harmful to the enemy"; Article 18 of the Geneva Convention (IV): "Civilian hospitals may in no circumstances be the object of attack, but shall at all times be respected and protected by the Parties to the conflict"; Article 12 of the Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions – Protection of medical units: "Medical units shall be respected and protected at all times and shall not be the object of attack"; Article 51 of the same Protocol – Prohibition of indiscriminate attacks and protection of the civilian population; Article 85(3), b of the same Protocol: "Attacks directed against medical facilities protected by the Geneva Conventions and their Protocols constitute a grave breach and a war crime"; Article 8(2), b, ix of the Rome Statute – War crimes: "Intentionally directing attacks against [...] hospitals and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not military objectives" constitutes a war crime.

**15** According to data released by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), a group of human rights and humanitarian aid organizations, since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion until the date of publication of this data, there have been 1,762 attacks on healthcare services in Ukraine: 910 attacks in which hospital and clinic buildings were damaged or destroyed, 261 healthcare workers were killed, 94 attacks affected healthcare for children, 71 attacks affected healthcare for mothers, 145 attacks were on hospital energy infrastructure or the power grid, whose damage limited hospitals' access to utilities, see *1762 Attacks on Health Care Over Three Years as Russia Escalates its War on Ukraine's Doctors and Hospitals*: PHR, Physicians for Human Rights, 18 February 2025, <https://phr.org/news/1762-attacks-on-health-care-over-three-years-as-russia-escalates-its-war-on-ukraines-doctors-and-hospitals-phr> [accessed: 08.06.2025].

caring for patients, including pregnant women and children, whose health and lives were at risk.

**Witness C78:** After the tank entered the hospital grounds and opened fire, we did not leave the basement. We stayed where we were. At 3 a.m., when we were delivering the last baby in the hospital corridor, loud shots rang out. We all quickly went down to the basement, and another woman gave birth there. After 21 March, we didn't go upstairs anymore; we stayed in the basement the whole time. On 23 March, the shelling began; everything was rumbling, there were powerful explosions. Windows were shattering, we heard something very large fall. They were doing it on purpose. They knew it was a medical facility. What's more, one of them had visited us earlier. On 18 March, a tank arrived. Didn't they see that it was a hospital? It was written in large letters. They knew and they were deliberately firing at us.

We understood that we had women and children here, newborns and even unborn children. We had to organize ourselves so that everything was in order, so that everyone would survive, because there were no conditions for providing care. We carried maternity bags with us and delivered babies in the corridors, even though we were used to the sacredness of sterile conditions. We had to take care of ourselves and the patients so that there were no complications.

We reassured the women that everything would be fine, that they shouldn't worry. They were terrified of everything that was happening outside the hospital. Here they were calmer because we supported them, talked to them, sang to them, and also talked to the babies who were still in their mothers' wombs. We supported and helped them. During labor, when they were afraid that there would be complications, anesthesiologists were with us.

All the women gave birth naturally, there were no cases of surgical intervention, there were not even any complications, even though they gave birth on ordinary beds and not on delivery beds. We had a case of a woman giving birth in a basement, by candlelight and with flashlights from phones, because there was no electricity.

**Witness C62:** My daughter was two months pregnant and was in hospital due to complications. When we took her out of there, the war started and she started bleeding again, but luckily she is a doctor and we were able to do something ourselves. There were no medicines or any medical care. We gave her medicine collected from neighbors and gave her injections. At the same time, she instructed me what to do if she fainted. I was preparing to deliver the baby myself.

**Witness C78:** The women didn't cry or scream. When a woman gives birth, she may behave irrationally, she may scream out of fear, but that wasn't the case here. We had one woman who had part of her lung removed. The doctors recommended that she give birth by C-section only, saying that she would not be able to do it herself. But she gave birth naturally at the age of 42; it was our first birth with such a pathology.

**Witness C62:** When they were going to give birth, we collected everything from people because the doctors said they had no medicine. They told us to find haemostatic drugs and others. We cut sheets so that we could wrap the baby later. If the birth was complicated, they took the baby to Belgorod because everything was under Russian control.

**Witness C70:** Living under occupation is very difficult and dangerous. It is much harder when you have a five-month-old baby to look after. The responsibility is much greater because there is no access to medical care under occupation. The feeling of helplessness never leaves you.

One of the witnesses at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine worked as a nurse at the Central Children's Hospital in Mariupol, where she received and examined the wounded, including children, during the bombing of the city.

**Witness C27:** Screams, moans. They brought people in all kinds of condition. Not only the wounded, but also people burned in fires, people pulled from the rubble. For example, they brought in families where the adults had survived but the children had died. It was just a horrible sight. The screaming, the despair, the tears. A grandfather who lost his daughter and granddaughter... I will remember him for a long time. I had a smartphone, but I deliberately did not take any photos. I did not want to keep it in my memory. I did not take a single photo. The city looked terrifying. I had the impression of being in a parallel reality the whole time. It felt like I was dreaming or watching a movie. Remembering it all is a nightmare. I wish I could erase it from my memory.

We didn't have a morgue, so we kept the bodies in the basement beneath the canteen. The canteen was a separate building. We kept them there for as long as we could. When the shelling started, we couldn't keep them there anymore. The hospital grounds were under heavy fire, so we laid the bodies near our building. We couldn't bury them or move them anywhere else.

They brought in a woman with her dying daughter, who had been in agony for several days. She had a damaged skull, we couldn't do anything, we didn't have a neurosurgeon, so the girl was dying. I remember the mother's eyes so full of hope that I would say something when the girl was taken to the operating room... I knew there was nothing we could

do, it was an open head wound; a concrete column had fallen on her and crushed her head.

And then, despite the gunfire, her brothers came running, one was 18 and the other 12. We carried the girl out of the operating room, but there were no beds left in the ward, so we laid her in the hallway. Her mother sat next to her daughter, who was in agony. The girl's movements were uncontrollable. I could see that she was about to tear off all the bandages, everything that had been put on her. I said to her mother, "Lie down here, next to her, hug her and hold her in your arms," and she said, "Will she live?" I replied, "Of course." I called her 18-year-old brother and said, "A difficult moment is coming; your sister is going to die, you have to be with your mother. Understand, you're an adult now, you're the oldest, be with them. You have to be with your mother."

Suddenly, the hospital management arrived. We could only admit patients, no accompanying persons. At that moment, there were so many patients that it was impossible to walk [down the corridor – ed.]. The manager said, "Everyone who is not a patient, please leave immediately. Go home, you can't stay here any longer, this is a hospital." I realized that they were about to take the boys away. I felt sorry for them. I took the boys to the office, bandaged one's arm and the other's head, took two chairs, placed them next to the girl's bed and said, "Sit here, you're injured, you can't go anywhere." And so they sat there with their mother... The girl died. It was terrible. Even for me, even though I've been working for many years. It was horrific.

## 11. Denationalization

In some cases, the actions of the occupying forces and the occupying administration are aimed at denationalizing children. Such policies are intended to weaken or even destroy the conquered society by breaking the cultural continuity between generations. These actions can be unequivocally recognized as a form of genocide. The mechanisms used by the Russian occupiers in Ukraine with regard to children, aiming to deprive them of their national identity by prohibiting the use of their native language, imposing education in the spirit of a different culture, and banning cultural practices, can also be viewed in this light.<sup>16</sup> The testimonies provide many examples of how the obstruction or prohibition of education for Ukrainian children is the first step.

### 11.1. Education during wartime – testimonies of teachers

A witness from the Donetsk Oblast recounts how, on the eve of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, she informed her students how to behave in the event of a Russian attack.

**Witness C11:** We talked at school about evacuation backpacks and about keeping the car fueled so we can leave in case of danger, as well as about the “two walls” rule when there is no shelter nearby. That was the training we conducted.

<sup>16</sup> Denationalization (also known as forced assimilation or destruction of national identity) in international law may constitute a crime against humanity, genocide, or a violation of human rights, depending on the context and the means used to carry it out, see Article II, e of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948: “Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” constitutes the crime of genocide; Article 6, e of the Rome Statute – Genocide: “Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”; Article 8 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989 – Right to identity: “States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations.”



Teachers from the Donetsk and Kherson Oblasts described the impact on children of being in a territory attacked by Russia and of distance learning due to the war.

**Witness C90:** When we found out about the war on 24 February, the school principal called us in and said: "Girls, the war has started." She informed us that the children would be learning remotely. I went to my class and said, "Quarantine until better times." A student came up to me, hugged me, cried, and said, "I don't want war!"

**Witness C101:** I remember that day, 24 February. It started like any other day. As usual, I was getting ready for class, turned on the TV, and heard the words: "The war has begun." Immediately, many thoughts ran through my head, both about the children and about school. We had online classes at the time, so we didn't have to go to school. My son and daughter-in-law also work as teachers, they live in Dnipro, and the shelling started there. My daughter-in-law called me to ask what to do. I was confused. Of course, I wanted to calm the children down first, that is, my class.

**Photo 31.**  
A ruined school  
building, Pisky,  
Donetsk Oblast, 2015

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)



The other teachers and I tried to talk to the children sensitively, to calm them down, but how can you do that when war is right outside the door? We didn't have any more lessons that day, not even online, because shelling had started in the nearby city of Vuhledar. We met some friends and learned from them that several rockets had hit Vuhledar and that there were the first casualties. Those first casualties and the shelling were a shock to us. Our colleague, who worked at a school in Vuhledar, was killed on the first day of the war. Several residents were also killed because a rocket hit a hospital.

**Witness C84:** It was a tragedy. It was scary to think about how it would all unfold. First of all, remote learning is not good. Could we ever have imagined our children in such conditions?

**Witness C11:** All these air raid sirens, panic attacks, explosions and everything else – it will affect the children's psyche. The fact that they are not learning normally, that they are not in contact with each other as we used to be, that everything is happening through a screen.

**Witness C82:** It had a big impact on our children. I can see it in myself, in my students, in my friends' children. For a long time, the children had bad dreams. They saw tanks, they saw people dying, they witnessed evil. It had a strong impact on us, both children and adults. Sooner or later it will come out – in somatic symptoms, in the psyche. Sooner or later.

Photo 32.  
A ruined school building,  
Shyrokyne,  
Donetsk Oblast,  
October 2018  
(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

**Witness C83:** Children are suffering. Children don't want to learn. In my opinion, they were affected by the explosions they heard, the rockets they saw, the



Russians who attacked us. I'm afraid to talk about the war with my students. I tell them that they can no longer go into the bushes [because of landmines – ed.], they can't leave the village because everything is flying overhead, and they can't go anywhere without their parents' knowledge. I worry a lot when parents go to work and I know that a student is left home alone. I sit there, teaching remotely, I see a student on camera – I hear an explosion and see them cowering. I see a child sitting with me in class on camera, cowering because of an explosion. You can see that they are afraid, that they are scared.

**Witness C101:** At first, we didn't realize the scale of the situation. Then, with each passing day, we heard gunshots more and more often, and on 13 March, we decided to evacuate. The gas was turned off and there was no electricity, but my parents and my students stayed there. Many children from my class have moved deeper into Ukraine, but we remain in constant contact and may resume online lessons on 1 September. This year, I will have 11th grade [senior year – ed.]. The children are 16 years old.

**Witness C84:** All these moves to other places. The children had their own friends, their own environment, and they had to leave. Now that they are coming back,

(16) (29)

**Photo 33.**  
A ruined school building,  
Shyrokyne,  
Donetsk Oblast,  
October 2018

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

you can see that home is best. Everywhere is good, but home is home. Their parents say that when the children come home, they blossom.

They are learning remotely. The children started first grade and haven't even seen their classmates in person yet. They take part in competitions remotely, and for entertainment they record and send videos so that their thoughts are not focused only on what is happening around them, so that they can de-stress.

**Witness C101:** Children are very worried about school and their parents. I can see it even in my own child, who is finding it very difficult to cope. They have many different thoughts: "Why did they attack us? What was the point? Why did this happen? Why did this happen to us?" Of course, it's impossible to explain everything. Why Ukraine? Because we started to live better than them? My children also asked me: "Maybe because we live better here? Because we have better living conditions than in Russia? We didn't provoke them."

Teachers from rural schools on the front line in the Donetsk Oblast talk about the destruction of educational buildings caused by Russian shelling.

**Witness C90:** I put my whole heart into the class. I prepared it in accordance with the NUS program [New Ukrainian School, a program based on new educational standards from 2017 – ed.]. It had everything. The classroom was like a second home. Look, there was a large TV, a plasma screen, which was smashed. A shell came through the window. "They liberated us" – I have no words. Not a single [unbroken – ed.] window, not one! There were blinds, but now they are all torn. If you look at this wall, it is also riddled with shrapnel. I wish the same for their own children.

**Witness C101:** We have a beautiful two-story school, a beautiful gym, we just installed new windows, renovated it, laid new linoleum. Everything was ready, we had a computer lab, but then a problem arose – the war. During the war, several people from our team were wounded. Our boilerman was killed. The school is still standing, but some of the windows are broken. In one place, a shell hit the foundation. We thought about resuming classes, but we are now in the line of fire, so it is unlikely that we will be able to resume teaching. There is no heating, gas, and often no electricity.

A witness from the Kharkiv Oblast describes how, on the first night after Ukraine regained control of the village where he lived, the Russians attacked the school.

**Witness C85:** The first night after liberation. They dropped bombs from bombers on the school and the community center.



In the territories temporarily occupied by Russia, children secretly continue their education in Ukrainian online schools. Education is conducted in strict secrecy to avoid persecution by the occupying authorities.<sup>17</sup>

**Witness C67:** Of course, it was hard. We studied remotely, we didn't go to classes. We had to do all our homework ourselves and learn new material. It was very difficult mentally, we were constantly on guard. We paid attention to every stranger approaching our house and, of course, quickly deleted everything [from the computer – ed.], and then logged back in.

There were reports from various Telegram channels [social network – ed.] that those who study or teach at online schools are subject to various repressions. To avoid this, we tried to keep everything secret.

**Photo 34.**  
A ruined school building,  
Kramatorsk,  
Donetsk Oblast,  
September 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

<sup>17</sup> W. Szurmakewycz, Lubinets': Rosiya pereshkodzhaye dityam z okupovanykh terytoriy zdobuvaty osvitu v Ukrayini, "Zhytтя", 13 February 2025, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/lubinets-okupaciyna-vlada-pereshkodzhaye-dityam-z-tot-navchatisya-v-ukrajini-306406/> [accessed: 08.06.2025].

We were very careful when it came to the [educational, distance learning – ed.] platform. We logged in, did our assignments, worked on new material, logged in again, took photos, and sent them. We received feedback from teachers, mainly through online correspondence. The children were isolated. This year, they didn't contact any of their peers so that information wouldn't get out.

**Witness C88:** We have a friend who worked at a Ukrainian institute, and her child attended a Ukrainian online school, not a Russian one. One day at six in the morning, armed Russian soldiers came to her house. They took all the children's laptops and phones. They told her, "If your children don't go to a Russian school next year, you will be left without children."

Witnesses describe the low level of education at institutions in the territories controlled by the Russian occupation authorities, where teachers are employed without the appropriate qualifications and pedagogical training. Students are subjected to unacceptable educational methods, such as corporal punishment for not doing their homework.

**Witness C64:** It's not education at all. The current local principal comes to school and, for example, finds out that a student has not done his homework, and says: "Get down on the floor and do push-ups." He had to do several push-ups because he hadn't done his homework.

**Witness C89:** Our school didn't start on 1 September, but on 16 September, because there were no teachers or principal. Then they found people. In the neighboring village, the school principal is a school janitor. The cleaning lady taught the children and still teaches them; now it's normal, it's all normal in Russian schools. They teach Russian history and social studies. I was shown a video recording of a lesson – children are smoking in the classroom, teachers are saying: "This subject is difficult, we can't cope without vodka." This is what lessons look like in a Russian school, now there is such chaos there, they only care that they get paid. They give grades, but they don't teach the subject for six months, and then you get an A according to the Russian system [the highest grade – ed.].

**Witness C64:** They say they hired teachers who have no pedagogical education.

In the occupied territories, Russia is actively spreading propaganda among students, using educational institutions as a tool to disseminate its ideology.<sup>18</sup> New curricula have been introduced that distort history, promote pro-Russian views, and justify the actions of the occupying authorities.

<sup>18</sup> Jak Rosja niszczy tożsamość ukraińskich dzieci na terytoriach okupowanych, „Ukrainer”, 09.08.2024, <https://www.ukrainer.net/pl/rosja-przekształca-dzieci/> [accessed: 08.06.2025].

**Witness C89:** There are cases where a child says something about Ukraine during a lesson, and after class they force them to recite the Russian anthem. I also know that they plan to sing the Russian anthem before the first lesson starting 1 September. This means that propaganda in schools in the occupied territories is the most important thing. No one there thinks about educating children; the most important thing for them is to fill children's heads with propaganda. Before 1 September, all first-graders received backpacks with school supplies, and in them was a book entitled *Heroes of the SMO* [Special Military Operation – this is what Russia calls the war with Ukraine – ed.]. Why would a first-grader need such a book? It's obvious why they put it there. It's propaganda. They are trying to turn children against Ukraine.

From a pedagogical point of view, children are like dough, especially younger children. They absorb what they hear at home and what they are taught at school, but they don't understand what's really going on. It's different with older children. In our village, many people have collaborated [with the occupiers – ed.] and that's how they raise their children. Children really like this kind of school because they don't have to do anything and get grades for nothing. There was nothing like this in Ukrainian schools.

**In one of the schools in the temporarily occupied eastern part of Ukraine, the new authorities hired security guards who threatened children with weapons for speaking Ukrainian.**

**Witness C86:** The security guards who worked at the high school were hostile towards the children, and every time a Russian security guard heard a word or phrase in Ukrainian, he would grab his gun. The children told me about this. It looked as if he wanted to shoot the children.

**A former school principal from the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia Oblast spoke about the persecution of children for their parents' patriotic attitudes.**

**Witness C89:** They force children to take exams. How can a child pass an exam if they don't know Russian history? There were no such subjects in Ukrainian schools. They deliberately keep children in the same class for another year – a child was supposed to go to sixth grade, but was kept in fifth because they failed the exam. In reality, it is about humiliating the parents.

**In the occupied territories, parents face threats from the occupying authorities, who demand that their children attend schools controlled by Russia. Those who refuse to send their children to these institutions are threatened with deportation and having their children taken away.**

**Witness C9:**

10 17 18

As for school, they said, "If you don't send your child to school within 10 days, they will summon you to the office again and then it will be a different conversation." They started drawing up a report: name, date of birth, that I did not send my child to school because of the war. They opened a case against us. At the office, they took our fingerprints and our child's fingerprints. They photographed us like prisoners. They took our fingerprints: first each finger, then the palm, then they took a photo, DNA. And then they told me the deadline – 10 days. They told us to enroll our child in school so they could issue a certificate. They said, "If you enroll your child in school but they don't go, we'll keep an eye on you."

**Witness C89:**

12

When they caught me in the center of the village, they said, "Send your child to school, or else." They intimidated us. I know that the headmistress, who had been newly appointed by the occupiers, called the parents and persuaded them to send their children to school. And then, in February or early March, a group of people arrived and there was no longer a "gauleiter" or a headmaster. They were wearing balaclavas and had a list of names. They came to people's homes and took them to the office. They conducted interviews, took fingerprints, and performed DNA

**Photo 35.**

A ruined library building,  
Pisky, Donetsk Oblast,  
2015

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

tests; they took a cotton swab, put it in your mouth, and threw it into an envelope. This is their DNA test. I am a biologist and I know that this is not how a DNA test is done; expensive equipment is needed – it was just intimidation. When they take you from your home, do some DNA tests, conduct interviews, you start to get scared. They give you two or three weeks to bring your child to the principal and obtain a certificate confirming that they attend school. If they didn't go, they were summoned to a commission in Berdyansk, where there were indeed many collaborators, where parents were threatened with deportation, threatened with having their children taken away, and pressured to send their children to school.

**Witness C64:** Everyone went to the Russian school, only we remained. They came to our house and set social services on us. At that time, when these services were operating, there were two other families in addition to us who were not going to school. They did not see we were at home. They caught those two other families at home and threatened that if the children did not go to the Russian school tomorrow, they would come, take the children away, and deport the parents. The next day, those two families went to the Russian school. We miraculously managed to avoid this because they did not catch us.

**Witness C89:** Unfortunately, many children stayed there. At the beginning of the war, we had 282 children; about 200 of them remained and are still there. According to statistics, about 60 of those 200 did not attend the occupation school, so they survived for a year, but now they are being repressed so much that from 1 September, all those who remained will have to go.

## 11.2. Birth registration – manipulation of official documents

A witness from the Kharkiv Oblast describes the pressure to register newborn Ukrainian children as Russian citizens and to deport pregnant women to Russia.

**Witness C62:** They started letting us leave the village. The only place where we could buy food was in occupied Kupyansk. When we started going there, we found out that there was a maternity hospital and that our doctors were working there. They said, "When the time comes, bring your daughter." We went there when she was 39 weeks pregnant, and we were afraid that if she went into labor at night, we wouldn't be able to leave because of the curfew. When she gave birth, they forced us to sign a birth certificate stating that the child was a Russian citizen. We didn't take the certificate, we only took a statement that our grandson was born in Kupyansk.

The Russians were armed. We explained to them that our daughter was pregnant, and they started shouting at us: "We're taking her to Russia!" They wanted to take her to Belgorod. When they came later, we hid her. We tried to keep as few people as possible aware that she had given birth because the Russians wanted to take her away while she was still pregnant. They knew from the very beginning that a pregnant woman was living here. We told them that we had taken her away, and they said, "Well, soon a Russian citizen will be born." They came to us and asked, "Has the new Russian citizen been born yet?" We were saved by the fact that it was August and they didn't go around to people's houses so often because they already knew everyone.

## 12.

### Refugee experiences

Leaving home in a hurry, fleeing, dangerous journeys, and finally wandering far from home becomes the experience of many civilians during armed conflicts. For many, however, it is salvation from a life of constant fear under occupation. This fate has befallen many Ukrainians from Russian-occupied territories. As of 17 April 2025, 6.918 million people have left Ukraine as war refugees.<sup>19</sup> Many, however, either decided to remain or their attempts to leave the country failed.

A witness recalls his underage friends and relatives who have remained in the occupied territory since 2014 and are unable to leave.

**Witness M47:** I still have classmates, friends, and some relatives there. I reconnected with a friend I had known since early childhood, and she told me what was happening there. Unfortunately, she couldn't leave.

2014 (8)  
2022 (16)

Even though I have a new home, I sometimes think about the place where I grew up, where I was born. Sometimes I remember my home and my friends with sadness.

**Witness C22:** My granddaughter accidentally took my phone. There were photos of a burned-down, ruined house. Her eyebrows were like this [furrowed – ed.], you could see the emotions on her face, anger. She said, "Bastards!" She remembered it so well.

(2) (4)

A witness with three children who was forced to flee abroad to escape the Russian invasion described how the three-day journey in wartime conditions affected the health of her one-year-old daughter.

<sup>19</sup> *Kil'kist' ukrayins'kykh bizhentsiv u Yevropi prodovzhuye zrostaty: v yakykh krayinakh naybil'she*, texty.org.ua, 22 May 2025, <https://texty.org.ua/fragments/115135/kilkist-ukrayinskyh-bizhenciv-u-yevropi-prodovzhuye-zrostaty-v-yakyh-krayinah-najbilshe/> [accessed: 08.06.2025].

**Witness C3:** The forced departure had a physical impact on my youngest child. We first traveled to one country and then across half of Europe to another country, all in three days. During the first 12 hours of the journey, she had a fever and became severely dehydrated. We treated her for several days.

Residents of the occupied territories describe how the Russians are hindering the evacuation of civilians, multiplying the difficulties that those leaving must overcome in order to reach regions controlled by Ukraine.<sup>20</sup>

**Witness C80:** We were traveling in one car – six adults and my two children. There was a system in place: a checkpoint, a queue, filtration. Sometimes they let you through, sometimes they don't. "They're shooting in Snihurivka, we can't let you through." And you stand there for six hours. A field. A road. There is a sign saying "mines." There is nowhere to go to the toilet. There is nothing but fields around you. And a queue of cars stretching for several kilometers. Everyone stands. Dusk falls. The convoy turns back and we all drive to the nearest village, looking for accommodation, and the locals take us in. These are our people – the best people. And I will say that thanks to the Ukrainians we met along the way, we did not die of hunger. And we did not freeze to death in that field at night.

**Witness C27:** We were brought around 10 p.m. to an abandoned gas station near Vasylivka. As it turned out the next day, there were about four thousand of us there. It was just an abandoned gas station that wasn't in operation. There were a huge number of buses and people. No water, no food, no toilets. All we could take with us was a bottle of water, and by that time we had already finished it. We had also run out of food. They left us in the field at 10 p.m., telling us we would stay there until morning. In the morning, as it turned out, the Russian authorities did not want to let our convoy through, and we stayed there. The leaders of our convoy went to the Russian command post. The convoy consisted mostly of women, children, and elderly people. There were a huge number of children, including infants. There were also pets. Around noon, locals began to bring us bread and water. They gave us water in bottles, and there was maybe 200 grams of water, just enough to wet our lips. We were very thirsty. All the children were crying.

A witness recounts the conditions on the road and the behavior of children during the evacuation from the occupied Kherson Oblast, which lasted several days.

**Witness C80:** We drove for four days through the occupied Kherson and Mykolaiv Oblasts. After we left, I was very worried. I thought about how it would

<sup>20</sup> I. Shepel, Vyhadaly novu "skhemu": zaharbnyky uskladnyuyut' ukrayintsyam vyyizd z okupatsiyi, "OBOZ.UA", 26 December 2024, <https://war.obozrevatel.com/ukr/vigadali-novu-shemu-zagarbniyi-uskladnyuyut-ukraintsyam-viizd-z-okupatsii.htm> [accessed: 08.06.2025].

affect the children, that they would cry at night, scream, wet themselves. But no. First of all, the children were fed. We provided them with sleeping arrangements and distracted them. "Look here – a beetle, and look there – a worm. Let's sing, or maybe dance."

The children were very brave. They understood that they couldn't eat much because they couldn't go to the toilet, because there were mines out there. We didn't know how long we would be on the road, so we couldn't eat too much. No one played with their phones. There was no signal, no internet. We didn't know how long our batteries would last. You couldn't drink, you couldn't complain, but we were all in the same situation. They didn't complain once, not once. In the evening, in the village, when there was shooting, they said, "Mom, we want to eat." I replied, "Kids, we can't right now. Can you hold out until morning?" "We can hold on." There was no hysterics or whining. We stood in a field for six hours – it was hot and stuffy in the car, there was little space, nothing to do – but no one said, "Mom, I want to lie down" or anything else. Nothing like that.

**Witness C28:** We arrived at the station in Kyiv and were welcomed very warmly. (10) A soldier gave a child a pizza; he had bought it for himself, it was still warm, and gave it to the little one [the witness cries – ed.]. I don't have the strength anymore, I don't want to remember everything we went through. I'm shaking all over when I think, dear God, what am I going to do with my child, where are we going to go? We haven't eaten since morning because there was no time, with all the shelling, we had to run with our bags. I had some cookies, the children ate them on the way.

**Witness C64:** When we crossed the border [with the occupied territories – ed.], when (5) (9) we found ourselves on free land, my eldest son immediately started speaking Ukrainian. Immediately. He saw Ukrainian soldiers, and I watched him – he was walking around them, looking at them. The child had a completely different attitude and, accordingly, the soldiers had a completely different attitude towards us. Not like there, where we were treated like animals, not like human beings.

Witnesses who experienced forced evacuation in 2014 and 2022 describe how difficult it was for their teenage children to lose their friends and the environment in which they had grown up.

**Witness C16:** My daughter. She didn't talk to me for three years. She was filled with (15) hatred. She told me, "You ruined my life with your patriotic beliefs. My love is there." When you're 15, that's very important. I know that after her father took her away from there, she went back. Alone. By train. The DRL militants took her computer. Then they laughed and said, "Did you read about her first kiss?"

**Witness C5:** The children asked, "Mom, when are we going home?" I told them we'll (7) (8) (15) (18) go when the war is over: "We can't go there now. It's dangerous."



**Witness C50:** My older daughter said: "Why did you take me away from [place anonymized – ed.], I would have lived there, nothing would have happened to me." And I said, "You don't understand, there's a war, the Russians have invaded. How could you live there? There's no roof, no windows, no doors." Now, after visits to a psychologist, she is calmer.

**Witness C25:** Only now, a month later [a month after her daughter's forced evacuation – ed.], has she started talking to other children. We started going to playgrounds. She started playing there. Before, she would say, "I don't want to, I'm not going!"

**Witness C3:** In the case of my eldest daughter, as is probably the case with all Ukrainian teenagers, moving to another country has affected her mental health. She already had some previous problems with communicating, but her closest friend stayed behind, and she can't find new friends. She has no motivation to study. Although, in general, she is happy we left. There is electricity, peace, and safety.

It was hardest for my five-and-a-half-year-old son. He had a fairly large group of friends in the neighborhood and had just started kindergarten

Photo 36.  
Evacuation of civilians  
from Irpin,  
Kyiv Oblast,  
March 2022  
(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

because of the pandemic. Lots of new friends and changes. And suddenly, he was in different circumstances, in a different country, three changes of residence, 42 hours of tiring travel in a crowded bus without a toilet. For the first two weeks in the host country, every evening he would take a small bag, put a few toys in it and hang it on the door handle with the words: "If we're leaving tomorrow, so I don't forget." And no matter how many times we said we were staying, it didn't help. It was because he forgot to take the bag with his toys from home. He had prepared it in the evening, and in the morning we all forgot about it because we rushed out of the house. The older children went to a psychologist for almost a year.

The Russian Federation is artificially creating a blockade of the occupied territories and making it difficult for civilians to leave for areas controlled by Ukraine, resulting in the separation of families, as in the case of one of the witnesses from Kherson. The mother of two girls describes how the Russian offensive in southern Ukraine separated her from her children, who were spending their vacation with their father and his new family in the Ukrainian Carpathians and then left the country.

**Witness C52:** We were all waiting for the "green corridor." I knew I had to go because my children were in another country. I knew I had to go to my children.

7 16  
The witness talks about her fear of leaving occupied Kherson because of attacks on civilian evacuation convoys and how difficult it was to explain this to her children.

**Witness C52:** I wasn't mentally prepared [to leave – ed.]. I told my children that I couldn't take the risk, that the chances were fifty-fifty. That is, either you have a mother or you don't. It's better to have a mother alive under occupation than not to have her at all.

I decided to tell [the children – ed.] that I was completely fine so they wouldn't guess what was happening to me. First and foremost, to protect their mental health. Fortunately, they were far away from it all, so why should I worry them by telling them that I was suffering?

It was difficult for the younger child. It was impossible to talk to her because she was crying all the time. I could see her condition. A child should not grow up without a mother. She closed herself off and didn't speak at all. She was offended by me. Her birthday is 30 October. She said to me: "I don't care – on my birthday, either I'll be in Kherson, or you should be with me... You have to be with me." She told me, "I don't care where we are, but I have to be with you."

They kept telling me, "Mom, get out of there." I explained to them that I had reasons why I couldn't come to them.

In order to reunite with her children, the witness decided to leave the occupied Kherson Oblast. She had to make a long and dangerous journey through occupied Crimea, the Kerch Bridge, and Georgia.

**Witness C52:** I started to panic that I would never see my children again. Or that my children would never see their mother again. On 26 July, my sister took her family away... They got into the car, there was only one seat left – they took me and my dog. We left.

When the witness finally met her children, she realized how much the separation and forced evacuation had affected her seven-year-old daughter.

**Witness C52:** She went to a Spanish school. She told me, "Mom, I don't understand anything." When I arrived, she said, "I go there in the morning and I don't understand anything. It's as if I don't exist. I don't exist at school, I don't exist in my family." She was under so much stress that if she didn't like something, she would crawl under the bed with a blanket and a pillow so that no one could see her. She wanted to disappear.

It's normal for a child to go away for a week to relax with their father, but then they come back to their stable life, to their school, to their home, to their toys, to their clothes. Here, the child was wearing a ski suit, went skiing and was left without any of that. Without toys, without a mother, without a normal life, without friends from school.

## 13.

### The impact of war on children's mental health

The horror of war affects adults, but children's mental health is even more fragile. Psychological trauma brings with it a life of fear, anxiety, and mistrust, but it can also cause physical symptoms. This is no different for children of war in Ukraine.

**Witness C5:** This will definitely remain in the children's memories. It will never disappear. Children will remember this for the rest of their lives. These are children of war.

A witness who was only eight years old in 2014 talks about his feelings at the beginning of the occupation of the Donetsk Oblast and how the war in Ukraine affected his family.

**Witness M47:** I was little then, and very scared. I didn't understand what was going on. The situation was very tense, incomprehensible, we just left in a panic to wait it out. My father left my mother and me when I was six, but we kept in touch with him. After some time, I found out that my father was fighting on the side of the LPR and DPR [Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts partially occupied since 2014 – ed.]. I was shocked. I never thought something like that could happen. I couldn't understand why he had sided with them, knowing that Russia was shelling our cities. We had a conflict over this and eventually lost contact.

The witness also mentions that in 2022, he experienced the full-scale invasion in Irpin in the Kyiv Oblast.

**Witness M47:** My friends and I were in a bad mental state. We didn't understand what was happening. It was terrible. Constant shelling at night. Some of us saw people die, mutilated bodies, or simply experienced the crimes of the Russian army first-hand. Many still suffer from nightmares. For others, it caused much more serious problems, such as stress-related nervous disorders. It had a strong impact on me personally. Russia was constantly attacking infrastructure and civilian homes, so it was simply

2014 – 8  
2022 – 16

2014 – 8  
2022 – 16



impossible to sleep. The things I saw in Irpin and the events I participated in have not been forgotten. For a long time, I went to a psychologist and took antidepressants because I developed anxiety and mental health issues. Some shadows of these events still haunt me.

The war had a very bad effect on teenagers. Many of them saw terrible things, witnessed or were victims of Russian aggression. It was a very difficult experience for all my friends because many of us found ourselves in terrible situations. Every day we faced death, we saw our neighbors, friends, and relatives die. Many people had to fight for their lives every day in Bucha or Irpin, coming out of hiding only to look for food or help. For them, the memories are a nightmare. Some of them still have nightmares.

Photo 37.  
The widow of a victim  
of Russian rocket fire  
with her daughter,  
Kramatorsk, July 2022  
(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

A mother of six children from the Sumy Oblast recalls how, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022, her children tried to calm each other down as they hid from shelling in the basement.

**Witness C15:** The children understood everything. The boys were 10 years old at the time. I explained to them that the enemy had come to us. The children

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saw and heard it. Russian soldiers were driving two meters away from us. Constantly. Some were leaving, others were arriving. The children were scared all the time, they were afraid of the shots. When a tank drove into the street, there was great fear, everyone immediately sat down together and talked about something pleasant, that we would leave the basement, that we would survive.

Witnesses from various regions of Ukraine talk about the long-term impact of the armed conflict on their children's behavior.

**Witness C32:** When the shooting started, my child's behavior changed. If I begged her to be quiet, she would start screaming. When things calmed down, she behaved like a normal child.

**Witness C33:** In the first months, she reacted emotionally to every ambulance and police car. Her face would immediately change, she would point at the window; if she was on the street, she would hide behind adults. She would calm down after a while.

**Witness C37:** Margarita [younger daughter, seven years old – ed.] is still afraid when she hears an explosion somewhere. The older one experiences it in her own way. And the little one – God forbid there should be an explosion somewhere – she hides, she is afraid, she starts crying. She is afraid to sleep alone. She sleeps with me or with her grandmother.

**Witness C94:** My daughter has nightmares. She needs to see a psychologist. When she draws pictures, she leaves out everything that might disappear. She can't draw her school because it's gone, she can't draw buildings. Everything that disappears is taboo for her. She can draw her mother and grandmother because they are nearby, she can draw the cat or the dog, but not things that disappear. There are no psychologists here at all. The city is under martial law.

**Witness C48:** I left because of my child, because they couldn't sleep at night. Generally speaking, living in a basement is not a solution.

**Witness C95:** The children reacted the same as us – they were afraid. My granddaughter started stuttering after a mortar shell fell between the houses but didn't explode. The child was taken to the basement three or four times a day. It was cold in the basement, it was still February. A basement is a basement, it wasn't heated at all.

**Witness C92:** It was terrible, total horror. Hysteria, children screaming. Everyone was going crazy. Parents were nervous, children sensed it, they felt that something was wrong and started to get hysterical. If the parents had been calm, the children would have been too. Parents couldn't cope mentally. It was really terrible.



**Witness C5:** Once my mother overheard my younger child talking to herself while 7 8 15 18 playing. It was still at home. She was pretending that her "fiancé" was calling her, and she replied: "Don't you understand? We're under fire, bullets are flying, tanks are driving around!"

**Witness C64:** Yes, yes. They talk [about the war – ed.]. They talk about "Orcs," "Zetkas," 5 9 machine guns. Helicopters flying very low are terrifying. Those planes flew constantly overhead. Sometimes even rockets flew overhead, and they saw it all too. The children have a lot to tell. Their childhood is not a happy one. The younger child didn't fully understand what was going on and only understood that "bad men with guns have come."

**Witness C90:** Many children in Ukraine need psychological help. A child's psyche is very n fragile. Sooner or later, as they say, it will all come back to haunt them.

**Photo 38.**  
Boys playing in the ruins  
of a building, Sloviansk,  
Donetsk Oblast,  
July 2022

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

A mother of three children from the Kyiv Oblast says that after the shelling during the occupation, her youngest child began to react with fear to certain words spoken by adults.

**Witness C31:** My child is still scared. I have a two-and-a-half-year-old son. He reacts with fear to the word "quiet." "Quiet" – he hides under the blanket. What can I say? Terror, pain, tears.

After a long stay in a warzone, internally displaced children were often unable to return to normal life, as illustrated by the story of the granddaughter of a witness from the Kharkiv Oblast.

**Witness C22:** The children are very scared. They came to Cherkasy. My daughter enrolled them in kindergarten. The first thing my granddaughter did was ask the teacher to take her to the basement [to the shelter – ed.]. She showed her the basement, and my granddaughter said, "Nice basement." She also showed her where they would sleep: "Nice beds." The child is four years old. After lunch, she said, "They feed us well here, because we used to boil bones." The teacher looked at her in disbelief. My daughter came to pick up the child. The teacher approached her: "Is that true?" "Yes, it's true." "I thought she was joking."

Teenagers from different regions of Ukraine talk about the impact of traumatic wartime experiences on their mental health.

**Witness M1:** It was only when we got here that I had a nervous breakdown and panic attacks. When we were in the city, everything was fine... I don't know, maybe it was adrenaline, but I didn't feel anything much. When we got here, it started. I feel like it was only here that I started to experience everything. Hysteria, panic attacks, insomnia. I went to the hospital and they prescribed me sedatives. They immediately prescribed me medication and a free psychologist. I decided not to go to a psychologist, I just wouldn't feel comfortable talking to a stranger about my problems. I might as well talk to my mom about it. I take sedatives at night so that I can at least fall asleep peacefully.

**Witness M51:** I have several panic attacks every day. You could say it's one long panic attack that lasts all day. I used to compete in gymnastics championships, and now I can't jump normally, I can't climb stairs. When the air raids started, we went down to the basement, there were a lot of stairs up and down, and I had a panic attack and lost my coordination, my legs got tangled up. I couldn't do it then, and even today I find it difficult to go up and down stairs.

**Witness M8:** The last time I had this dream was in February, before the anniversary of the outbreak of the war. I dreamed that I was running away from them...

Parents say that their children who survived rocket attacks witnessed injuries or the death of a loved one and, as a result of their experiences, suffer from health problems and even developmental disorders.



**Witness C53:** I have a five-year-old child who still does not speak properly. We are seeing a speech therapist. All of this has had a very serious impact on his development.

**Witness C65:** The child started speaking worse. We found a speech therapist who is now working with him. She is both a psychologist and a speech therapist, and we go there twice a week. He didn't have such problems before the war, but he started speaking badly under the influence of stress.

**Witness C33:** He is almost four years old and still does not speak. I have been to neurologists. They said that these events could have had a big impact. This is the age when children start to speak, but he was under stress. I think he is trying. He even comes up and seems to want to say something, but all he says is, "Mmm, mmm, mmm." Children his age are already speaking in full sentences. He goes to a regular kindergarten now, and I look at the children around me, and they are talking. It's hard for him in a regular kindergarten because he can't respond to the other children, and they don't seem interested in interacting with him. For this reason, he should be in a special needs kindergarten or group.

**Photo 39.**  
Rubble after a rocket attack on the Sapphire hotel, Kramatorsk, Donetsk Oblast, August 2024

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

A mother of two from the Kyiv Oblast talks about her son's worsening health problems.

**Witness C36:** My son was born with a heart defect, and after all the stress was over, his heart started acting up. It started hurting more often.

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A farmer from the Donetsk Oblast was injured while working in the fields when his tractor hit an anti-tank mine in front of his three-year-old son. The experience caused the boy to develop speech disorders, bedwetting, and anxiety.

**Witness C12:** A TM-62 [type of mine – ed.] exploded. I was with my three-and-a-half-year-old son. He was unharmed, but I was injured. The child was terrified and immediately started crying. I was terrified myself. I was driving a tractor and everything exploded right in front of my eyes! I immediately lost some of my hearing. I felt like I was in a fog, everything was black. I was pushed into the seat. I pulled the child out. Blood was pouring, everything was covered in blood... He understands everything, but because of what happened, he doesn't talk.

Once, he sat down on the potty. Suddenly, cluster munitions started firing. Everything was falling apart. He didn't have time to finish... He ran straight from the potty into the basement. An adult's nerves can't take it, let alone a child's... Now he only sleeps with his mother. He wets himself constantly. We put diapers on him. He can't sleep on his own.

A 17-year-old witness from the Mykolaiv Oblast who survived unlawful detention by Russian military personnel describes how the torture affected his physical and mental state.

**Witness M60:** When I came back, I weighed about 52 kilograms. I was shaking, I stuttered when I spoke. They "slightly" disturbed my mental state. To this day, I take heart medication because my hands shake.

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A psychologist from the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, who worked for several months in a reception and assistance center for internally displaced persons, recalls how the brutal beating of a mother affected a girl's psyche.

**Witness C91:** There was a girl. She kept walking around and asking everyone, "You won't hurt my mom, will you?" The psychologists very gently hugged the girl and asked her what had happened. "They beat her. They beat my mom. You won't beat her, will you?" We didn't see the woman. She was hiding. We didn't know where she was. She only came out in the evenings to get something to eat and drink some water. Her face was badly bruised. At first, she wouldn't even go to the doctors. She just sat there. Russian soldiers hit her in the face with the butt of a rifle.





## Case studies

← Photo 40.

Luhansk Oblast,

June 2015

(Photo: Monika Andruszewska)

## Case study No. 1

### The murder of Stepan Chubenko

Murders of children by armed groups under Kremlin control have been occurring since the beginning of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. In April 2014, self-proclaimed fictitious republics were established in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts and governed by separatists and the Russian Federation. International organizations reported cases of human rights violations in these regions, including the persecution of people with patriotic bearing.<sup>21</sup>

In July 2014, representatives of the separatist "Kerch" battalion kidnapped 16-year-old Stepan Chubenko from a train because he had a yellow and blue ribbon on his backpack and was carrying a scarf of a Ukrainian football club. The boy was tortured for a week and then publicly shot in the village of Horbachevo-Mykhailivka, in the temporarily occupied part of the Donetsk Oblast. The murderers were three pro-Russian separatists – the commander of the "Kerch" battalion, Vadim Pogodin,<sup>22</sup> Yuri Moskaliev, and Maksim Sukhomlinov.

Stepan Chubenko's mother told her son's story.

**Witness C11:** He was returning from Kyiv and was detained by DPR counterintelligence in Donetsk. He was wearing an FC Karpaty Lviv scarf. For them, it was a crime – a boy who plays football has many scarves from different teams at home. They saw the scarf and ribbons with the national colors. That was enough to decide the child's life. It is lawlessness when you can decide someone's life or death with a weapon in your hand.

<sup>21</sup> T. Piechal, *Republiki wojenne w Donbasie rok po wybuchu konfliktu*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 17 June 2015, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2015-06-17/republiki-wojenne-w-donbasie-rok-po-wybuchu-konfliktu> [accessed: 08.06.2025].

<sup>22</sup> *Mother of killed activist, 16-year-old Stepan Chubenko asks PGO to assist in extradition of Pogodin to Ukraine*, Censor.net, 19 July 2017, [https://censor.net/en/news/448387/mother\\_of\\_killed\\_activist\\_16year-old\\_stepan\\_chubenko\\_asks\\_pgo\\_to\\_assist\\_in\\_extradition\\_of\\_pogodin\\_to](https://censor.net/en/news/448387/mother_of_killed_activist_16year-old_stepan_chubenko_asks_pgo_to_assist_in_extradition_of_pogodin_to) [accessed: 08.06.2025].

He took part in the Maidan, but in July his friends went to the front and he came back so we wouldn't worry: "Everything's fine, normal, when I get back I'll tell you," but he didn't make it. The last text message read: "I'll call you later. I love you. Stepanek."

A fighter called us and said that Stepan had been detained in Donetsk. I went there immediately and started looking for him. I wrote letters to all the authorities, appealed to the OSCE. They came, looked me over, nodded their heads sympathetically. And nothing... Later, foreign journalists arrived. I was the first to stick a photo of my son on the building of the regional state administration, with a note saying that I was looking for him and my phone number. Other people started sticking photos too, and there were many of them. Many people disappeared.

The worst thing is that you can't eat because you think your child is probably sitting somewhere hungry. You go to bed and think, "Where is my child now? Maybe somewhere in a basement, hungry, stripped naked." You're alive – you might even smile – but it's hard to call it living.

When Zakharchenko [one of the self-proclaimed leaders of the DPR – ed.] came to power in the DPR, I approached him and said, "My 16-year-old son is missing." He listened and said he would try to find out what the matter was. Literally the next day, he said, "Your son has been shot." I started looking for his body. He went missing on 23 July, but they told me he was dead sometime around 13 or 14 August. He was killed on 29 July.

They thought I would give up. They intimidated us, fired shots over our heads while we were searching for the body; they wanted us to give up, to wait for him at home. They said, "He's with the ukropy [a derogatory term for Ukrainians – ed.]. He ran away from us during the mortar fire." But I didn't give up.

Witnesses saw him being strangled with a towel, his legs were tied with duct tape, and his hands were taped but cut free because they tried to force him to sign something. That's how they do it – to make people go and serve in the DRL army. Stepan probably didn't sign, since it ended like that – five shots.

It [the place of execution – ed.] was not far from the road; regular buses ran there, cars passed by. They didn't hide it – maybe they wanted to make an example of him for the residents of Mykhailivka. Look: this is the enemy [he doesn't support the DRL – ed.]. In the village, we found out where they had buried him.

There were three killers, one from Makeyevka and two from Donetsk. There were many who abused and tortured him. The locals, who were

given weapons, behaved in this way. Human beings do not derive pleasure from this.

They dug a hole near the road, dragged him there on a tarpaulin, threw him in and buried him. The exhumation took place on 3 October [2014 – ed.]. I was only able to remove Stepanek's body on 6 November. The body had been lying there since 29 July, in that tarpaulin, for so many days, and there had been heavy rains. After the exhumation, I saw that his hands were tied with tape, he had a T-shirt over his head, his front teeth were knocked out, and he had been shot five times – his head was shot through.

For me, it is still 2014. For 10 years, I have been living with memories of a happy life until 2014 – and this moment. It's hard. I wasn't there with him; my child was tortured, and I couldn't do anything. He was alone with his enemies, alone during the execution. What was he thinking, what was he thinking about... It breaks my heart. I am proud and I cannot imagine how he could have gone through all this – 16 years old, and so strong.

He grew up in a Russian-speaking environment, we spoke Russian at home. But for us, Ukraine is Ukraine. A separate country, and if you live here, you have to know the language, history, culture, respect it all – and that's how we raised Stepan.

My son, who was born in Ukraine, loved it and respected its national symbols, was first brutally tortured and then murdered. Just for being Ukrainian, for not betraying his homeland. I am proud of him because they were afraid and are still afraid of our children. He was only 16 at the time. A week of torture and abuse, attempts to convince him to serve in the DRL army in exchange for his life. He refused and suffered the consequences. I believe this is genocide against the Ukrainian people.

He was awarded a high honor – "National Hero of Ukraine" and an order for bravery. Our school is also named after Stepan Chubenko. Recently, in 2021, the street parallel to the one where he lived was named Stepan Chubenko Street. He showed that it is possible to defend Ukraine without weapons. Ukraine was in his heart.

## Case study No. 2

### Rostyk – unlawful detention of children in the occupied territories and the Russian Federation

The cases of denationalization of Ukrainian children represent systematic actions conducted by the occupiers aimed at destroying the identity of a national group, which may constitute the crime of genocide.<sup>23</sup>

My name is Rostyk. I was born and raised in Oleshky, in the Kherson Oblast. I lived with my grandmother, who raised me. We were always very close; she was like both a mother and father to me. My father lived separately, and I had almost no contact with my mother. Life was simple: school, friends, sometimes arguments about grades, dreams for the future.

And then the war broke out. 24 February 2022. Our city was quickly occupied. At first, I didn't fully realize that it was going to change our lives forever. My grandmother used to say, "Don't go far. Stay calm. Don't get involved." We were afraid.

Life became difficult. The constant checks, patrols, searches. Russian soldiers were everywhere. They came to our house, looking for something, asking questions. The city was tense and unsafe. The worst happened in September 2022.

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<sup>23</sup> On 17 March 2023, Pre-Trial Chamber II of the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova in connection with the situation in Ukraine. Both are accused of war crimes consisting of the illegal deportation and transfer of children from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation, in violation of Articles 8(2), a, vii and 8(2), b, viii of the Rome Statute. ICC Prosecutor Karim Asad Ahmad Khan explained that there are reasonable grounds to believe that Putin and Lvova-Belova are criminally responsible for these acts. In particular, Lvova-Belova, as Commissioner for Children's Rights, bears direct responsibility for organizing the deportation of children from Ukrainian orphanages and children's homes to Russia, see H. Han, *ICC Issues Arrest Warrants for Russia's President and Commissioner for Children's Rights, Lawfare*, 17 March 2023, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/icc-issues-arrest-warrants-russias-president-and-commissioner-childrens-rights> [accessed: 08.06.2025].

One day, I had severe stomach pains – I had stomach problems. We went to a doctor we knew. I was admitted to the hospital. Suddenly, Russian soldiers appeared. They said they had to “take me away to complete some paperwork.” I didn’t understand what was happening. I asked, “Where are you taking me?” They either shouted or simply didn’t answer.

I was taken to Crimea without any explanation. I was alone, without my grandmother, without my personal belongings, without any means of contact. They said they had to “draw up documents.” They took my fingerprints, took photos, and started forcing me to apply for Russian citizenship. I refused. They locked me in a cell. They said, “You’ll stay here until you agree.”

I spent several days in solitary confinement and was then transferred to a boarding school. Everything was according to Russian rules: the Russian national anthem, propaganda, teachers who forced me to study “Russian history.” When I didn’t sing the anthem, they punished me and threatened to “transfer me to a special (punitive) facility.”

No one told me where my grandmother was. I had no contact with her. I was told that no one was looking for me. I began to believe that I was alone, that I had simply been forgotten. But I didn’t give up. I held on.

Then something unexpected happened. I was called to the office and told, “You will be sent back to Ukraine.” I couldn’t believe it. I thought it was a joke, a provocation. But it was true. I was put on the list to be returned.

When I crossed the border and heard the Ukrainian language, I burst into tears. I was finally back. Ukrainian volunteers met me and took me to a safe place. They gave me warm food, clothes, and support. I felt like I was home again.

I am 17 years old. I am Ukrainian. I was abducted by the occupiers. They wanted to make me one of them. But I remained myself. I did not give up and I am home.

## Case study No. 3

### Vlad – made into a Russian

Like other residents of Kherson, he found himself under occupation after 24 February 2022. In the summer of 2022, representatives of the Russian occupation authorities began harassing his mother, Tetiana, demanding that she send her son to military school. If Vlad did not enroll, she would be in serious trouble. With no other option, the boy enrolled in a military school.

On 7 October 2022, Vlad received a phone call instructing him to pack his belongings immediately for departure. He was given 15 minutes to make a decision. The teenager said he needed to consult with his mother, who was not at home at the time. Tetiana was attending the funeral of her mother, Vlad's grandmother, who had been killed the day before by a Russian missile that struck a civilian bus on the Darievsky Bridge. However, the Russians did not care about people's problems, and the next morning, armed Russian soldiers in balaclavas came to Vlad's house. They ordered him to go with them. He initially refused, but he knew he had no choice because the soldiers were armed.

The boy was taken to the port and put on a ship bound for Crimea. He was told that he would be taken to the 'Druzhba' camp in Yevpatoria for 10 days. The 10 days ended with Vlad spending eight months under Russian control in camps in the occupied territories, cut off from his family, home, and everything he knew and trusted. His mother was devastated when she found out.

The boy spent two months in the camp in Yevpatoria. Then the rector of the State Maritime Academy arrived and took Vlad and several other children away. The boy stayed at the Academy for another six months until his mother came to get him.

Vlad's life at the military school was not easy. He was exposed to constant Russian propaganda aimed at 'brainwashing' Ukrainian children. A Russian tricolor flag hung in the school, and every day he

was forced to sing the Russian anthem along with everyone else. If he refused, he had to write an explanation. If he refused to write an explanation, he was subjected to "a different kind of conversation." The photographs he sent to his mother showed how he was changing. In the photos, he posed with weapons and boxed, even though he had never been interested in sports before. However, there were more disturbing signs: injuries, a broken leg, and a broken finger.

Vlad describes the psychological and physical abuse he was subjected to. When he tried to escape, he was punished.

**Vlad:** I felt bad, I didn't like where I was. They interrogated me and asked me why I ran away. I said I wanted to go home, to Ukraine.

For disobeying, the Russians put Vlad in solitary confinement for five days. It was an extremely difficult time for a teenager.

**Vlad:** For five days, you don't talk to anyone. You only see someone bringing you food, and you sit there wondering what to do. You're just isolated, you can't hear anything – it's like you're deaf.

It was then that Vlad began to think about suicide.

The camps where Vlad was held were located in occupied Crimea and the Kherson Oblast. The children were told that Ukraine was ruled by Nazis and that their families were not waiting for them to return. They were encouraged to obtain Russian citizenship and promised money and apartments. The children were forced to sing the Russian anthem.

Tetiana turned to the NGO Save Ukraine for help. Together with other mothers, she planned how to get the children back. She risked a dangerous journey from Ukraine through Poland and Belarus to Moscow, and then through Russia to occupied Ukraine. The journey was thousands of kilometers long and lasted over a week. It was a huge risk for the woman, as she had seven other children waiting for her at home, two of whom were in foster care, and her youngest daughter was only 11 months old.

When she reached her destination, a white van with four soldiers in balaclavas and armed with weapons arrived to carry out a "check." They searched Tetiana from head to toe, checked everything, and took her documents. The woman was placed in a private home, and the next day, between 8 and 9 a.m., she was allowed to see her son. The following day, a gray car pulled up to the house and two young men got out, identifying themselves as officers of the Federal Security Service (FSB). After talking to Tetiana, they allowed her to take her son. She went to the Maritime Academy to prepare the documents that would allow her and her son to return home. However, when

the mother and son were about to leave the academy, FSB officers reappeared and prevented them from leaving. Over the next two days, Tetiana was forced to undergo a lie detector test. It was a terrifying and humiliating experience for her. A hood was pulled over her head, covering her eyes, and she was taken to Skadovsk. She was led to a room on the second floor, where she was interrogated for six hours using a lie detector. She was then locked in a two-by-two-meter basement with a barred window, a bench, and a sleeping bag. The interrogation continued the next day, and during a "conversation" with an FSB officer, the woman realized that there had been a "leak" of information about the rescue mission. Tetiana was not released until she told journalists on camera that she and her son really liked Russia. Only then were their documents returned, the data on their phones deleted, and they were released. Despite this, they were not allowed to cross the border. They stood in line for 12 hours. When Tetiana finally met her son, she could not hold back her tears.

**Tetiana:** I just hugged him and cried. I had no other emotions, only tears flowing from my eyes.

However, Tetiana's suffering did not end there. The Russians held her for another six days and interrogated her for 10 hours every day, putting a bag over her head. These experiences left a deep mark on the woman's psyche.

**Tetiana:** Every time I think about it, I just want to forget it, like a terrible dream that never happened. I had many different thoughts. I was afraid that they would take me away and I would never come back, I was afraid that I would never see any of my children again, not just Vlad.

Eventually, the Russians released them both. Mother and son embarked on a long journey back to Ukraine. They are currently in Kyiv because it is dangerous to return home due to Russian shelling.

This was not the end of Tetiana's problems. She noticed that eight months in Russian camps changed Vlad. The boy still cannot understand what really happened to him.

**Tetiana:** It hurts me a lot that I've come such a long way and he just pushes me away. I feel hurt. I understand him, as a mother I forgive him because I don't know the whole truth about what happened to him there. Maybe he's acting this way because he wants to protect me.

Although Vlad has returned to Ukrainian soil, the trauma caused by the Russians still haunts him and his mother. In occupied Ukraine and deep inside Russia, many like him have not returned home and may never do so.

The organization Save Ukraine, which helped Tatiana arrange Vlad's return, confirms that children who remain in captivity are being ideologically indoctrinated and transformed into young Russians to help in the war against Ukraine.

**Mykola Kuleba (Save Ukraine):**

The worst thing is that these children will grow up hating Ukraine. They will grow up and receive Russian citizenship, go to war against Ukraine with the conviction that Ukraine is the enemy. I am very afraid that we will lose thousands or hundreds of thousands of children who have been brainwashed by Russia.

## Case study No. 4

### Testimony from Kherson

Among the testimonies collected in the Lemkin Center's archives is an interview with a boy from the liberated Kherson Oblast who recounts his experiences of deportation from the occupied territories to Crimea. Out of fear for his safety, the witness did not consent to the interview being made public.

His fate is proof that Russia is pursuing a systematic, genocidal policy of denationalization of children. The witness lived in the occupied territory of Ukraine and was deported to Crimea to a 'regeneration' camp, which in his case lasted four months. The camp was of a re-educational and educational nature (de facto propaganda). The boy's testimony confirms media reports about Russian patriotic and military training of children from occupied areas.<sup>24</sup>

Upon arrival at the camp, the children underwent specific medical examinations during registration. These included the drawing of blood, allegedly for Covid tests.

The children were drilled daily to the rhythm of the Russian anthem. Singing the anthem was compulsory every day when the Russian flag was raised. Refusal resulted in repression, writing explanatory notes, and disciplinary talks with educators.

Like other children, the witness was subjected to psychological violence and persecuted for any signs of pro-Ukrainian beliefs, and even for speaking Ukrainian. He was constantly told that "if you are in a Russian camp, you must [support – ed.] Russia." The boy says that particularly rebellious, "difficult" children are sent to a psychiatric hospital for "treatment." Their phones are taken away

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<sup>24</sup> O. Ivashkiv, *Russia wants to take tens of thousands of Ukrainian children from occupied territories to Russia – ISW*, "Ukrainska Pravda", 29 May 2024, Russia wants to take tens of thousands of Ukrainian children from occupied territories to Russia – ISW; <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/05/29/7458126/> [accessed: 08.06.2025].

and they are prevented from contacting their parents. During their "rest," the minors were moved between camps several times.

Their guardians are teachers loyal to the occupiers from previously occupied territories of Crimea and Donbas. Representatives of Russian state services always become the main "educators." There are many children from foster care in the camps, and entire orphanages are taken away for "rest." It is common for young people aged 17–18 to be pressured into accepting Russian passports. Representatives of the authorities also encourage them to enroll in Russian universities. Children who have accepted the offer to study at these universities report very poor living conditions. They are housed in dormitories that are cold, dirty, and infested with bedbugs and lice.

Many children in the camps are sick, but they are not provided with professional medical care. Those who are seriously ill are sent to isolation wards, while the rest are told to "treat themselves as they wish" and "dress warmer."

During their stay in the camps, the children were visited by film crews and "inspectors" from Moscow. They were given sweets and video recordings and photographs were taken, which were then used for propaganda purposes.

Children who had parents and were able to inform them or their relatives about the ill-treatment and terrible conditions of their stay eventually returned home with the help of volunteers. The fate of orphans is unknown. It is estimated that many such children are still in the camps.



**Closing remarks – summary  
by the Raphael Lemkin  
Center for Documenting  
Russian Crimes in Ukraine**



The report contains testimonies collected from eyewitnesses directly at the scene and shortly after the events described. These "voices of war" confirm that war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide against the civilian population are being committed in the territories occupied by the Russian Federation since 24 February 2022 as a result of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine. Ukrainian children are among those most affected.

### **Children are being killed**

**Witness C39:** A friend of mine recounted that her niece's 13-year-old daughter was killed when they were driving through Yahidne and came under fire... After the shelling died down, they could not find the child's head, and so they buried her without her head.

**Witness C56:** They specifically targeted civilians. A wheelchair was lying there; a 13-year-old child, a girl, had been killed.

### **Children are tortured and murdered**

**Witness M60:** They beat me all over my body. The apparatus for "electrophoresis" was connected first to my little finger, and then to my knees. The first time I suffered so much that the fillings dropped out of my teeth.

They led us to the middle of the yard, handcuffed us, and put us in a "tiger" [a Russian military off-road vehicle – ed.]. While we were in the "tiger," they blindfolded us. We drove for an hour. All this time they stunned us with a stun gun.

An example of the torture and murder of a child is the well-known story of Stepan Chubenko, described in the report as Case Study No. 1.

### Children are treated as hostages

**Witness M20:** They came and took my friend to some village, she claims she was not raped there. But she stayed there for three days, cooking for them and doing other things.

**Witness C43:** They started herding us into the basement, all of us, the villagers. They sat upstairs, that is where they had their headquarters. They probably wanted to use the people as cover. [...] Of the 386 people, 69 were children. The youngest child was one and a half months old.

### Children are exposed to sexual violence

**Witness C61:** I really wanted my daughter to leave the city, because it was always dangerous to leave the house, and she is 16 years old. [...] Girls were raped, insulted, beaten. Girls and women were in real danger.

**Witness C15:** Our neighbor had a daughter and a granddaughter, and she hid the granddaughter in a couch so that no one would see her.

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### Children are exposed to destruction and looting of their property

**Witness M47:** At the time, my girlfriend lived in Bucha [...]. Russian soldiers entered her home. When she returned, it was completely wrecked. The Russian soldiers had taken all the small valuables they could carry, and what they could not carry – household appliances, TVs, laptops, refrigerators and washing machines – they simply destroyed.

**Witness C17:** He [the Russian soldier – ed.] went to the room where my grandson was. He said: "Give me your telephone." He gave it to him. It was a new, expensive telephone that his father had bought him for his birthday.

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### Children suffer from attacks on civilian facilities: schools, kindergartens, hospitals

**Witness C78:** On 23 March, the shelling began; everything was rumbling, there were powerful explosions. Windows were shattering, we heard something very large fall. They were doing it on purpose. They knew it was a medical facility. [...] It was written in large letters. They knew and they were deliberately firing at us.

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**Witness C90:** I put my whole heart into the class. [...] A shell came through the window. “They liberated us” – I have no words. Not a single [unbroken – ed.] window, not one! There were blinds, but now they are all torn. If you look at this wall, it is also riddled with shrapnel.

### **Children are being abducted to Russia and subjected to denationalization**

Examples of such actions are described in Case studies Nos. 2–4.

#### **Mykola Kuleba (Save Ukraine):**

The worst thing is that these children will grow up hating Ukraine. They will grow up and receive Russian citizenship, go to war against Ukraine with the conviction that Ukraine is the enemy. I am very afraid that we will lose thousands or hundreds of thousands of children who have been brainwashed by Russia.

In many cases, these crimes are not a side effect of warfare, but a systematically adopted tool for managing the conquered population, an element of the Russian occupiers' demographic policy.

### **Children are victims of the use of prohibited weapons**

**Witness C14:** We were fired at with cluster munitions from behind the trees alongside the road. There were five holes in the car. My husband was wounded in the leg. Our son was sitting behind him – they shot him straight in the heart. He died on the spot. I knew it was the end. Blood was flowing. There was no pulse. He died instantly. Artem was 15 and a half years old.

### **Children are victims of forced displacement**

**Witness C62:** They were kidnapping children in our village. The Russians were walking around and taking children away, putting them in large trucks with tarps. They announced that everyone should bring out their children and get in. They said it was dangerous here.

**Witness M1:** When the Russian soldiers entered, they began to take people from shelters to Russia or the occupied part of the Luhansk Oblast. We tried to hide our little brother the whole time because we were afraid they would take him away. Children of that age and even younger were taken away with their mothers.

## Children are victims of crimes described in criminal codes

**Witness M47:** My friend from Bucha was threatened with a gun. He was 17 years old.   
 (2014) 8  
 (2022) 16 They forced him to shout pro-Russian slogans and simply threatened him: "We will kill you. We will kill you! You're fucked."

**Witness M51:** Russian soldiers came up and mocked us: "It's over, you're all going to the basement." They threatened to take us and my mother to the basement [to be tortured – ed.].   
 (2022) 16

## Children experience war trauma and its long-term social effects

**Witness M51:** I have several panic attacks every day. You could say it's one long panic attack that lasts all day. I used to compete in gymnastics championships, and now I can't jump normally, I can't climb stairs.   
 (2022) 16

**Witness C95:** The children reacted the same as us – they were afraid. My granddaughter started stuttering after a mortar shell fell between the houses but didn't explode.   
 (3)

**Witness C5:** This will definitely remain in the children's memories. It will never disappear. Children will remember this for the rest of their lives. These are children of war.   
 (7) 8 (15) 18

The subject of children came up repeatedly in conversations with witnesses. Parents and grandparents recounted how their children coped with suddenly finding themselves in the middle of a war zone: "When there were smaller detonations, she [my granddaughter] would say: 'The crocodile came.' [...] And when the explosions were louder, she would say that a dinosaur had come." They also talked about how they are coping with the loss of loved ones killed in Russian attacks: "Grandpa flew off to heaven on a rocket. Now he looks down on me from above."





## About the Raphael Lemkin Center for Documenting Russian Crimes in Ukraine

The Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine since 2014 and the full-scale invasion that began on 24 February 2022 constitute a crime under international law.

On 26 February 2022, the Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor established the Raphael Lemkin Center for Documenting Russian Crimes in Ukraine (Lemkin Center) in response to the Russian Federation's military actions during the invasion of Ukraine.

The Lemkin Center was created out of the need to document crimes committed by the occupying forces of the Russian Federation through the testimonies of people who were direct observers or victims of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine and fled the war to Poland. One of the reasons for collecting these testimonies was the conviction that crimes committed against the civilian population should be analyzed not only by lawyers, in terms of their admissibility in court, but also by scholars – historians, psychologists, sociologists – and journalists.

Since its inception, the Pilecki Institute has been collecting testimonies from Polish citizens who suffered harm at the hands of the German and Soviet totalitarian regimes during the Second World War. In the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Institute exploited its potential to the fullest by employing its academic staff, experience in research and archival work, technological solutions for collecting and sharing the stories of witnesses, as well as its relations

with academic circles and the media. The Lemkin Center collaborated with people experienced in working with individuals struggling with trauma, documentary filmmakers, journalists, translators, and archivists, divided into two groups: one working in Ukraine and the other in Poland.

Between 2022 and 2023, the Lemkin Center collected individual testimonies from civilians in the form of questionnaires filled out by interviewees, audio testimonies, and film recordings. It also documented the accounts of people living outside Ukraine or Poland using remote recording via online platforms.

In total, the Lemkin Center collected approximately 1,600 testimonies in various formats. Based on these, an anonymized archive is being created, containing accounts of crimes committed by Russian troops.

The collection of testimonies in Poland occurred in places of temporary residence for refugees located in the provinces of Mazovia, Pomerania, Łódź, Kuyavia-Pomerania, Greater Poland, Lower Silesia, Lesser Poland, Subcarpathia, Lublin, and Lubusz. The Lemkin Center's partners in Ukraine collected testimonies in occupied and frontline areas in the regions of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Donetsk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Zhytomyr, Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk, and Chernihiv.

Since 2022, questionnaires, filmed accounts, photographs, and videos documenting Russian crimes committed against Ukrainian civilians

have been compiled, anonymized, digitized, transcribed, and translated into Polish and English. They will then be made available in a repository for researchers, journalists, and anyone interested in history.

The Lemkin Center operates independently of the judicial system, and the database it is building is a valuable source of information for documenting and exposing crimes committed in Ukraine. Unlike the testimonies of witnesses and victims, which are forwarded to law enforcement authorities, the Lemkin Center's accounts are not classified and can therefore be used as material for academic analysis or as a source of information for journalists. The collected testimonies have been quoted many times by media around the world.

The Lemkin Center cooperates with scholars, researchers, historians, lawyers, journalists, archivists, public and academic institutions, Ukrainian archives, and non-governmental organizations.

The Lemkin Center is a signatory of the Coalition for Victims, Survivors, and

Witnesses (KOOS) agreement, together with the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, the Sunflowers Foundation, and OPORA in Poland, and cooperates with them to help victims and punish perpetrators of crimes committed by the aggressor in Ukraine.

The Lemkin Center's activities serve to strengthen memory in the face of unaccountability for crimes and attempts to create false historical narratives, including rewriting history. By creating a database of testimonies of crimes committed, the Lemkin Center contributes to commemorating Russia's mass atrocities and the war. Its work also includes organizing events to promote this memory – exhibitions, conferences, presentations, meetings with witnesses – and creating films and reports based on the testimonies collected.

If we consider the collected testimonies to be the voice of Ukraine, then the Lemkin Center's activities serve to ensure that this voice is heard, preserved, made available, understood, and above all, not silenced.



The Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor – Raphael Lemkin Center for Documenting Russian Crimes in Ukraine would like to thank the **Save Ukraine** organization in Kyiv for sharing the testimonies of children abducted by the occupiers.

**Save Ukraine** is a Ukrainian charity that rescues children illegally taken to Russia from temporarily occupied territories and creates the necessary conditions for their rehabilitation and social reintegration. The organization is part of the presidential initiative Bring Kids Back UA.

**Save Ukraine** has already recovered about 700 children, including nearly 150 orphans.

Since 2014, approximately 1.6 million Ukrainian children have been living under Russian occupation.

The exact number of abducted children remains unknown...

**[www.saveukraineua.org](http://www.saveukraineua.org)**

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the destroyed building of an elementary school in Pisky, Donetsk Oblast, 2015

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