

Children of War | Russia's Militarization of Ukrainian Children

Russia has been pursuing a systematic policy of militarization and re-education of Ukrainian children since 2014: it resulted in children raised under occupation, joining the Russian army and being killed in action. Since its invasion of Ukraine, Russia doubled down on its policy: as of September 2024, a new **Strategy of State Cultural Policy to 2030** was adopted, focusing on raising patriotic youth. It is being implemented by the militarization of education and preparing children to serve in the Russian army.

1| Budget

Since 2022, the **expenditures on youth policy in the federal budget increased by 84%** from \$513 million to over \$1 billion in 2026. It relates to the Russian intention to raise the proportion of patriotic youth from 40 to 70% by 2030 by involving children in patriotic mass youth associations and movements. The budget for one paramilitary organization - *Movement of the First* - is comparable to the annual income of Russia's poor regions, such as Kalmykia or the Jewish Autonomous Oblast.

2| Scale

Yale Humanitarian Research Lab's (YHRL) latest report identified at least **210 various locations where Russia takes Ukrainian children**: 62% of them are involved in the re-education of children, and almost 19% actively militarize children.

NGO *Save Ukraine* interviewed 200 children rescued from occupation and abduction. **41% of those children experienced militarisation** through school-based training, or membership in organisations.

At least **582,600 children** in occupied Ukraine are forced to study according to the Russian government-run curriculum. But at least **44,000 children** continue to secretly study in Ukrainian schools online, risking their lives in the attempt to preserve their identity.

3| Organizations

YoungArmy (YounArmia) is a paramilitary youth movement created by the Russian Ministry of Defence. Children 8-17 y.o participate in military and combat training, military-historical reenactments, etc. The organization is sanctioned by the US State Department. More than **44,000 children** from occupied Ukraine were enrolled by 2025. The organization aims to funnel at least 10% of its members in the Russia's armed forces.

Movement of the First (Dvizhenie Pervykh), established in 2022, is a state-run "patriotic" movement supervised by Putin himself. 14-17 y.o. children are taught the government-accepted ideology and groomed to join the military. The organization is in charge of the war game *Zarnitsa*, where children simulate battle situations, are engaged in "combat" within a confined space, and learn to

operate drones. It is sanctioned by the EU and Canada. As of 2025, **344,600 Ukrainian children** were enrolled.

Eaglets (Orlyonok) movement engages the youngest children (6.y.o) into activities of a russification and militaristic nature. It is the first step for a child to transition into the "Movement of the First" or "YoungArmy". Between **50,000 - 89,000 children** from occupied Ukraine were enrolled by 2024.

Cadet classes provide specialized pre-professional education for entry into law enforcement and the military in public schools for children starting 6 y.o. All cadets must swear an oath of allegiance to Russia. As of 2024, **at least 479 cadet classes** were established in occupied Ukraine.

Summer camps. Under the guise of "health" or "recreation," children are transferred deep into Russia, exposed to propaganda, and forced to do manual labor. Over **312,000 Ukrainian children** were sent to such camps during the 2025 summer campaign only.

4| Activities

Ukrainian **children are forced to build weapons for the Russian army** through the Children's Center "Shift" (Smena). Children are forced to attend **"Conversations about important things"** - weekly classes intended to impose the ideology of the "Russian world", honor the Russian army, and form a positive attitude towards the invasion of Ukraine. Attendance is mandatory, and participation is graded.

Avangard and Warrior - two well-known military centers where Ukrainian children have been subjected to militarization. The **teenagers are trained in engineering, tactical and fire training, UAV control and countermeasures, and parachute training.** They are also forced to participate in the *Zarnitsa* war game. The centers or their leadership are sanctioned in the UK and the EU.

Parents are often coerced and tricked into sending their children to Russian schools or camps under the threat of being deprived of parental rights. The return of children to their families is often delayed indefinitely, forcing parents to assume Russian citizenship, collaborate with occupying forces, and travel deep into Russia.

5| Conclusion

Russia uses education as a weapon to erase Ukrainian identity and breed a new generation ready to fight in its future wars. Almost **400,000 Ukrainian children** have already been subjected to militarization. Russia is increasing its militarization campaign: in 5 years, it will turn thousands of Ukrainian children into soldiers ready to fight the West. **This is not just a humanitarian catastrophe but a national security threat to the US, NATO and its allies.**