

Ukrainians Are Going behind Enemy Lines to Find the Children Russia Stole

About 20,000 kids have been taken. Families face dangerous journeys to bring them home

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A few months before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Nikita was sent to a boarding school in Oleshky, a city in the Kherson region, for orphans and children who require complex care. Around nine years old at the time, he struggled with chronic stomach issues, among other special needs. His grandmother Polina, who had been living in Poland since 2020, supported him; his mother was in a different city in Ukraine, and his father was not even on his birth certificate.

In the fall of 2022, Russian soldiers closed in on Nikita's boarding school and took the children. When Polina learned what happened, she contacted the school and found that a new director, who was pro-Russian, was now in charge. He told her that Nikita had been sent to Crimea for rehabilitation for a few days. But she later learned that, from Crimea, Nikita had been sent to an orphanage in the Krasnodar region in Russia, and then transferred again to an unknown location. When Polina called the director at the boarding school to find out why, he said it had been determined that Nikita has no family. The suggestion that Nikita had been forcibly taken for his own good seemed to be a sharp slap in the face to the grandmother who had long agonized over his well-being.

"I was completely lost," says Polina through a translator. (Her story has also

been featured on CBS's *60 Minutes*.) "I didn't know what to do, but I wanted to find my grandson, and I started to write everywhere, to look for someone who can help."

She came across an organization named Save Ukraine, founded in 2014, which locates and rescues Ukrainian children taken by Russian forces and rehabilitates them once they get home. Save Ukraine took up an investigation on Polina's behalf, eventually finding Nikita at an institution in occupied Skadovsk, a beach town in southern Ukraine now administered by the Russian military. Polina was terrified at the thought of her grandson living behind enemy lines, in the hands of people who could justify stealing children. And she had no idea how she might get Nikita back.

Separating children from their families has for years been one of Russia's key tactics in its assault on Ukraine. In 2014, after Russia's annexation of Crimea, more than ninety Ukrainian children were abducted and later returned. This time, the problem has proven much more intractable, the scale hard to fathom.

Since Russia launched its full-scale attack in February 2022, thousands of vulnerable Ukrainian children, many of whom are orphans or disabled and were living in institutions, are now forcibly held in Russia or under Russian occupation. The numbers vary, but Bring Kids Back UA, an initiative launched by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, estimates that approximately 20,000 children have been taken. (Bring Kids Back UA partners with civil society organizations such as Save Ukraine.) Others put the number considerably higher. The Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale University believes it to be at least 35,000. Of those taken, according to Bring Kids Back UA, only 1,605 have returned as of this September.

When Russia occupies a slice of Ukrainian territory, officials have attempted to erase Ukrainian identity, offering children Russian passports and embedding them in Russian culture, education, and indoctrination. Younger children have been typically placed in foster care, put up for adoption, or

sent to institutional facilities. Older children and teens are often placed in so-called summer camps, where they are taught to be “loyal Russians.” Their forced transfer has been described by the *New York Times* as a “systematic campaign by President Vladimir V. Putin and his political allies to strip the most vulnerable victims of the war of their Ukrainian identity.”

“We know the names of tens of thousands of children... kidnapped by Russia in the occupied territories of Ukraine and later deported,” Zelenskyy said in an address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2023. “Those children in Russia are taught to hate Ukraine, and all ties with their families are broken. And this is clearly a genocide.”

In January 2024, Putin issued a presidential decree that would expedite the process by which orphaned Ukrainian children could receive Russian citizenship. The move appears to be intended to facilitate the adoption process for Russian foster parents. Yale researchers have found 314 children who have been placed in Russia’s adoption and fostering program, and at least 148 of them have appeared on a Kremlin-funded adoption website. The Russian government has begun offering small cash incentives and opened a telephone hotline for prospective adoptive parents. Putin’s children’s rights commissioner, Maria Lvova-Belova, herself adopted a Ukrainian child who was later granted Russian citizenship.

Mykola Kuleba, a former Ukrainian presidential commissioner for children’s rights, has warned of large-scale Russification of Ukrainian children, claiming that 1.5 million of them—representing a fifth of Ukraine’s youth—now live under Russian control, either in occupied territories seized by Russia or in Russia proper, as a consequence of serial Russian annexations dating back to 2014, including Crimea, Luhansk, and parts of Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions. Many of these children have found themselves with new parents, a new passport, and speaking a new language. Effecting their return has become a “race against time,” before they are Russified or lost altogether.

Russian authorities have been defiant, painting a more benevolent picture, claiming that their country's treatment of children has been altruistic. It has called the movement of children "humanitarian missions," "evacuations," and "rescues" from supposedly "liberated" territories. Anticipating Ukrainian counterattacks in occupied zones, Russia has even suggested that it is protecting children from Ukrainian authorities or parents who have abandoned them. And it has pointed to the medical care, housing, and other supports it has provided, even filming children for propaganda purposes. In 2022, the Associated Press quoted one Russian woman who had recently fostered three Ukrainian children: "There are children who need to be given affection, love, care, family, mom and dad. If we can give it, why not?"

The Geneva Conventions dictate that children may be temporarily evacuated from war zones to another country, but only for their protection, with the consent of a guardian, and under such conditions that would enable a return to their family. Russian officials claim they facilitate reunification between separated parents and children. But Russia has also been accused of failing to properly keep track of the children it has detained, frustrating efforts to reunite families. Once in Russian custody, many of the children have been moved, sometimes multiple times, making their eventual relocation and recovery more difficult. And communications with people in occupied territories have been frustrated by intermittent power and severed phone lines.

Kuleba now directs Save Ukraine. When we spoke with him in August 2024, over Zoom, he said that Ukrainian children were being groomed to become future soldiers, turned against their homeland, and programmed to help an imperialist Russia gobble up even more territory.

The family reunification efforts by Save Ukraine resemble a mixture of work done by a logistics company, an intelligence agency, and a not-for-profit corporation. Local Ukrainian officials are often in the know about where children have been moved, particularly from one institution to another. Some

children self-report their whereabouts, texting, emailing, or calling contacts and revealing their location. Others have been spirited out of the country or territory without the knowledge of Russian authorities—though Save Ukraine declined to discuss those cases in detail.

In almost all instances, there are documents that need to be secured, checkpoints to be navigated, and rockets to be dodged. Tracking down children also requires an underground network of contacts putting themselves at great risk to act as eyes and ears, serving as local fixers for the parents who need transit and somewhere to stay along the way. It costs money and other resources that many of these parents and guardians don't have. Save Ukraine raises funds from multiple sources, including government funds and donations from the diaspora; in December 2024, the Canada-Ukraine Foundation, a Toronto-based charity, announced that it was donating \$220,000 to the organization.

On June 13, 2023, several months after Nikita was snatched by Russian forces, Polina left Poland to find him. She went through Belarus and Crimea on her way to occupied Skadovsk. Save Ukraine had given her a specific narrative to recite when questioned by officials: she must not tell anyone that she was planning to bring Nikita home with her; she must simply say that she was a volunteer aid worker from Poland.

When Polina arrived at the institution, she showed the director the paperwork she had carried that indicated she was Nikita's grandmother and legal guardian. "No," he told her, "I'm the director of the institution, so I'm his legal guardian." He told Polina she would have to do a DNA test to prove that she was even related to the boy. He told her that she should get a Russian passport, and she told him that she didn't need it—she was living and working in Poland and her grandson was Ukrainian. He warned her that if she didn't stop pushing back, she would never be permitted to take Nikita. And she would have to leave until they had the results of the DNA test.

Polina told us she saw Nikita before she left: the boy reached his arms out

toward her and they hugged. She gave him the presents she had brought, and he asked if he could leave with her. She promised she would come back so they could both leave forever. Polina then had to go, and after tearing herself away from Nikita, she found herself back outside, in an unfamiliar street, in the middle of a war.

Polina told us this story over Zoom late last summer. It was early evening, Kyiv time. Olha Yerokhina, who worked for Save Ukraine until recently, was also on the call, serving as a translator and press secretary. While we waited for Polina to call in, Yerokhina told us that she had only one wish: to sleep.

She would, of course, like to see an end to Ukraine's war with Russia, to the endless worry, but at that moment, her imminent concern was the loud shelling that keeps her awake in her high-rise apartment. Even when Yerokhina could fall asleep, she would be woken in the night—explosions, gunfire, air-raid sirens, the many apps on her phone pinging about impending rockets, directing her to seek shelter. There were often only a few minutes to find cover. So Yerokhina and her teenage daughter joined some of their neighbours in the long, windowless corridor, their collective fatigue felt in the body even as their minds raced in fear that their building might be hit.

Electricity and water services could be intermittent, but Kyiv was still incongruently, misleadingly functional. Kids went to school, buses were running, people gathered in cafes to commiserate over the war. Soldiers on leave met with friends at familiar restaurants, everyone clinging to some degree of normalcy amidst chaos and destruction that were now all too familiar.

When Yerokhina thinks about an end to the war, she can't imagine Ukraine ceding any territory, hacking off a limb like there was nothing in the world that mattered. She feels an urgency to talk about Ukraine's history with her daughter, to instill in her a similar sense of identity and pride. But the war is weighing on Yerokhina's daughter too. Sometimes, she tells her mom that it's

hard to live in Ukraine. Yerokhina agrees but tells her they need to do what they can to protect it.

Ksenia Koldin was seventeen when Russia invaded and occupied parts of the Kharkiv region in northeastern Ukraine. She and her brother Serhii, then ten, had been placed in foster care months earlier after their mother lost parenting rights. They then found themselves separated from each other: Ksenia, who recounted her story to us through Yerokhina, was sent to study in Russia, while Serhii was relocated to one of the so-called summer camps operated by Russian authorities, then moved several more times, finally to be placed with a Russian foster family.

Ksenia was determined to get Serhii back and return with him to Ukraine. But when she finally tracked him down, she says, the Russian foster mother told Ksenia that she was not going to let Serhii just go with her. Ksenia would have to engage the local social workers and fight to prove that she was Serhii's family and that he belonged with her.

When Ksenia finally saw her brother with the Russian social workers assigned to his case, she says, he was like a stranger, a shell. He would barely look at her, his eyes cast down as he played with the zipper on his sweatshirt. Ksenia tried to appeal to him directly, but he barely acknowledged her. She asked to take him for a walk so they could get some ice cream, but she was told that wasn't allowed. She did, however, get to speak with him privately.

When she did, Serhii spoke up. There was a war in Ukraine, he told Ksenia; why would he want to go live in a war zone? Ksenia couldn't believe it. She begged Serhii to go with her. She would protect him, and he wouldn't see signs of war, she promised. They could even move to Kyiv if he didn't feel safe back in their hometown. Ksenia knew she couldn't guarantee most of those things, but she was desperate. Finally, she told him that if he didn't like his life in Ukraine, he could return to live with his Russian family. Okay, he said. He would go back to Ukraine with Ksenia.

Serhii's Russian mother tried bargaining with Ksenia—instead of taking Serhii with her, why didn't she simply stay? She could study or find a job there. What was the point of all of this, anyway? Ukraine would be Russia soon enough. Ksenia made it clear she had come only to take Serhii. And then she and her brother got out of there as quickly as they could.

The international community responded forcefully to Russia's 2022 invasion, supporting Ukraine not only with an unprecedented flow of arms and financial aid but also bringing the full weight of international law to bear against Russia. Sanctions were ramped up, and the International Criminal Court opened an investigation into alleged crimes committed in Ukraine, including the mistreatment of Ukrainian children. On March 17, 2023, the ICC announced that it had sufficient evidence for the war crime of "unlawful deportation...and that of unlawful transfer of...children from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation." Putin and Lvova-Belova, the children's rights commissioner, were both issued arrest warrants.

The Government of Canada co-chairs the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children, launched jointly with Ukraine, that builds on the Bring Kids Back UA initiative. It's also co-chair of a working group, alongside Ukraine and Norway, focused on returning prisoners of war, detained civilians, and children unlawfully taken from Ukraine. At the end of October 2024, Canada convened a meeting of the working group, in Montreal, to discuss aspects of Zelenskyy's proposed ten-point peace plan. In attendance were dozens of stakeholders, from actor Liev Schreiber (a vocal advocate for disappeared Ukrainian children) to government ministers from around the world. Central to those talks were Ukraine's missing children. Mélanie Joly, Canada's then minister of foreign affairs, pledged that Canada would provide support in effecting the return of children, in part through the use of databases and DNA samples to confirm the names of those taken.

Since 2022, Canada has pledged almost \$22 billion in support for Ukraine, including aid for repairing and replacing damaged infrastructure, military

needs, and humanitarian assistance such as shelter, water, and sanitation. For 2024/25, over \$27 million was specifically earmarked for the recovery and rehabilitation of children, including in the form of funding for AI-driven technology to identify missing Ukrainians. A spokesperson for Global Affairs Canada indicated that, since the coalition was launched in February 2024, over 600 children have been returned to their homes.

But the international effort to aid Ukraine has recently been thrown into doubt, with the Donald Trump administration signalling a move away from sanctioning Russia or even supporting Ukraine. Earlier this year, it suspended funding for the Yale University program that tracked Ukrainian children abducted by Russia. And Trump's repeated suggestions that Ukraine will likely have to cede territory to Russia raises questions about the fate of the children and families currently under Russian occupation.

For the rest of the summer, Polina bided her time, hoping and waiting while living with local contacts and aided by logistical support provided by Save Ukraine. She was permitted to talk to Nikita only twice a week, for fifteen minutes at a time. Nikita would be angry and suspicious. As the days turned into weeks and months, it was hard to imagine how either of them might get out of there. Polina learned that Russian authorities had placed Nikita up for adoption, and she was now under increasing pressure to claim him before he was handed over to a Russian family, their guardianship superseding hers.

And then, at the end of August, Polina was told that the results of the DNA test had come. She would be allowed to take Nikita with her. But when Polina arrived at the institution on August 30 to collect her grandson, she was confronted by a mob of lights, cameras, and journalists, with a trim blonde figure at the centre of a scrum. The woman was Lvova-Belova, Putin's children's rights commissioner, freshly charged with war crimes.

Smiling for the cameras, Lvova-Belova made a show of handing Nikita over to his grandmother, expressing her pride in the Russian authorities who had made this reunion possible. When the cameras dispersed, Lvova-Belova

turned to Polina and told her that she and Nikita should stay in Russia. Polina says she was offered money, a house, clothing and shoes, medical treatment for Nikita—anything they might want if they stayed and adopted a Russian identity. Polina declined, then grabbed Nikita and announced they were going back to Poland.

Worried about checkpoints, Polina turned to Lvova-Belova and asked for one last thing: Could she provide a piece of paper indicating that Polina was permitted to travel with her grandson, that she could take him back to Poland? Lvova-Belova agreed. And Polina carried the paper the whole journey home, keeping it balled in her fist like a shield.

The rescues coordinated by Save Ukraine don't always have happy endings. A grandmother trying to find her granddaughter died while in transit. One mother, trying to rescue her son, was ambushed by authorities, who forced a dirty black hood over her face. When they pulled it off, she was led into the basement of a building, where they forced her to submit to a lie detector test. The chief legal officer for Save Ukraine told a local news outlet that the mother felt what she believed was a gun pressing against her head and that she was interrogated for about two days. Eventually, after she was forced to make statements on camera, she was allowed to collect her son.

For reunited families that do manage to get back to Ukraine, it's often only the beginning. After Polina finally got Nikita home to Poland, she noticed how much he was changing. Before, he was jumpy, combative, and underweight. But Polina quickly got him into therapy, and she watched hopefully as his moods subsided, as he slowly gained weight. She says she's determined to bring back the cultured, educated boy in him. "I want to do everything possible in this life for Nikita," she says. "I want him to be healthy, happy, and have everything he needs. He is the most important person in my life, and I love him so much."

The children returned from Russian custody typically need assistance to readjust to their old lives. When Ksenia and Serhii arrived in Kyiv in May

2023, they went directly to one of Save Ukraine's Hope and Healing centres. Ksenia now works with Save Ukraine, mostly telling her story to the media and at symposiums hosted by foreign governments. Previously trained as a hairdresser, she's also studying to become a journalist and is working on a book about Ukraine's stolen children.

Serhii stayed at the centre for about six months to undergo a regimen that combines psychological treatment with deprogramming. He worked with an individual therapist and participated in group art therapy. Slowly, as Serhii relaxed and made new friends, as he felt safer and more confident, Ksenia started to see signs of the little brother she remembered.