

Testimony of Nathaniel A. Raymond

Executive Director of the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab

Yale School of Public Health

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I want to begin by thanking Chairman Graham for calling today's hearing. The issue of the abduction, indoctrination, and militarization of Ukraine's children by Russia is an issue on which this Congress and the American people have ironclad, bipartisan consensus. Kidnapping children from their families and home communities in war is never justified and must be called by their right names under the Geneva Conventions: a war crime and an alleged crime against humanity. It is also a matter in which the assistance of the United States has proven essential to both exposing the scope of scale of this crime and helping ensure these kids are returned.

In the summer of 2022, our team at the Humanitarian Research Lab (HRL) at the Yale School of Public Health was given a specific task by the previous administration as part of the State Department's Conflict Observatory program. Our mission was to investigate reports that Russia was systematically taking kids from territory they occupied following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Initially, we didn't believe we could complete the request. But then we discovered that mayors and other local officials were taking selfies with the forcibly deported children, many of whom had also disclosed their location, giving us latitude and longitude for some of the places the kids were first held. Using the fusion of satellite imagery analysis and open-source intelligence methods, here is what our reporting over the past three and a half years on the subject has found, much of it derived from statements, photos, and documents generated by the Russian Federation itself.

As of early 2023, we assessed that at least [6,000 children](#) had been taken to camps in temporarily occupied territories in Ukraine and in Russia. There, they faced so-called "patriotic re-education" that included being prohibited from speaking Ukrainian and being brainwashed with an alternate version of history in which the nation of Ukraine and its culture did not exist. In September of this year, HRL concluded that there are over [210 facilities](#) in which the children are being indoctrinated, many militarily trained, and held incommunicado. Ukraine's children underwent military training at at least 18.6% of these facilities. Kids as young as 8 years old were dressed in gas masks and military uniforms, taught to assemble machine guns, and – in at least one instance – were taken to a camp where children assembled drones, rapid loaders for assault rifles, and other devices for Russia's

military use. These facilities stretch from the Black Sea to the Eastern Pacific over 3,500 miles, including inside Siberia.

HRL now believes that the actual number of children taken from Ukraine is likely at least 35,000 who are temporarily or permanently in Russia's custody. This number is made up of four distinct groups of children. First, those who were taken to the camps specifically for indoctrination and military training. Second, those who were taken from the battlefield, often by Russia's soldiers and security services, in many cases after their parents have been killed after Russian bombardment. Third, children separated from their families in Russia's filtration camps set up around Mariupol. Many of their parents were taken for interrogation, and the whereabouts of some are still unknown. And fourth and finally, children taken from institutions inside Ukraine and put up for adoption and fostering in Russia.

What happened to the children in this fourth group rises to the level of a crime against humanity. These children have been deceptively placed in Russia's fostering and adoption system, where some of their identifies have been changed— including their name, birth date, and place of birth. [HRL presented evidence to the UN Security Council](#) in December 2024 showing that at least [314 children](#) had been taken from Ukraine and unlawfully placed in Russian families or listed on Russian adoption databases and websites. Ukrainian kids – some taken from their boarding schools in the middle of the night – ended up listed on Russia's adoption websites as orphans from Russia. The breakthrough in understanding the role of Russia's federal and other adoption databases and websites in this case came because of wallpaper. In spring of 2023, an HRL analyst saw a photograph of a child standing in front of a teal and yellow wallpaper background in a photograph posted of a supposed Russian orphan. That analyst had seen that wallpaper before – a Russian propaganda photo of a child had an identical backdrop. The analysts deduced that Russia was hiding these children in plain sight. Checking other photos, HRL found a pattern. That pattern led to understanding the abduction of these and other children, some of whom— based on satellite imagery— we concluded were transported from Ukraine on one of President Putin's own planes and held at facilities until they were illegally placed for adoption. We also found that approximately half of the kids listed in the database had siblings listed at the same time on the websites and databases.

To date, less than 1,900 children have been returned. HRL continues to track and trace all children from Ukraine potentially in Russia's custody. We did this work as an implementing partner of the US State Department. In February of this year, HRL's funding for its Ukraine work was terminated. HRL was temporarily reinstated for six weeks in order to transfer our data to Europol and the Government of Ukraine. In June, HRL was terminated again after the State Department had transferred the data. Since then, HRL has been surviving solely on the generosity of individual donors, including a large number of Ukrainian grandmothers. Now, HRL's work tracking the children from Ukraine stolen by Russia will end in the next four to six weeks as money runs out. We will begin furloughing and terminating an extraordinary team of analysts who have devoted nearly the past four years of their lives to finding these kids and bringing them home.

I'm speaking for our team. Participating in this mission, originally on behalf of the United States Government, has been an honor whether or not our team is able to continue. These children, whose ages at the time of capture ranged in 8 months to 17 years, need the assistance of the United States Government and organizations like HRL now more than ever. In the absence of the support that our government has provided in the past, the likelihood that all of these children will return home decreases significantly. In closing, the Geneva Conventions and basic American decency require that the children from Ukraine— ALL the children from Ukraine— Russia has illegally taken are returned as a precondition for any negotiated settlement to this war.