

Russia turns Ukraine's occupied areas into an armed camp

Wednesday 6 March 2024, by [PIRANI Simon](#) (Date first published: 21 February 2024).

After ten years of war, and two years of all-out invasion

Russia is turning the parts of Ukraine it has occupied into a giant military buffer zone, from which further assaults may be launched, the Eastern Human Rights Group (EHRG) has warned.

The expansion of military combat, training and transport infrastructure, and the forced mobilisation of local men, was documented in a recent report by the group, which champions labour and civil rights in the occupied areas.

While military institutions multiply, industry across the occupied territories stagnates. Russian passports are forced on young and old, imperial dogma on school pupils. A reign of terror continues against all forms of protest.

Here I try to outline the situation in the occupied areas, as the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine goes into its third year, with links to more sources. (See Note at the end for a reminder of the territories occupied.)

Militarisation

The establishment of four new military units in occupied parts of Luhansk, Donetsk and Zaporizhzhya regions.

Signs of the [military build-up](#) noted in the EHRG report, [published](#) last month, include:

The expansion of paramilitary higher education institutions, including the setting-up last year of a branch of the Nakhimov Naval School in Mariupol, the southern Ukrainian city where thousands of civilians were killed by Russian military action in 2022.

The opening of enormous urban warfare training facilities: the 27-hectare Zoryanyi 8th combined military training ground in Donetsk, with a capacity for training 3-4000 troops at any one time, and a second facility in Luhansk. Three more are planned.

Vera Yastrebova of the EHRG [told the NV.Ua web site](#): "It is not the industrial development of occupied areas that is important for the Kremlin but rather strategic, military development: training soldiers and immediately throwing them into battle against Ukraine."

The opening of four military commissariats that are conducting forced mobilisation of local men.

The incorporation of the occupied territories into Russia's Southern Military District, and the formation of a Federal Security Service (FSB) unit in Donetsk, and two Russian National Guard units. These services are tasked with monitoring the local population; the EHRG says they can also

be used as blocking units to curb desertions and retreats by Russian troops on the front line.

□ The establishment of a new railway company, Novorossiia Railways. Its priorities will be to build two lines: from Rostov-on-Don in southern Russia, through occupied Ukraine, to Crimea; and from Taganrog to Mariupol, Volnovakha and Donetsk. These would improve Russian military logistics and reduce Crimea's dependence on the Kerch strait bridge, which has been damaged by Ukrainian shelling.

Pavlo Lysyansky of the EHRG [said](#): "This is systematic work by the invaders to turn Ukraine's occupied areas into a militarised zone. Military units based there will constantly threaten the rest of Ukraine's territory. There will be no normal life in the occupied areas."

Forcible Russianisation

Pressure is mounting on Ukrainian citizens of the occupied areas to accept Russian citizenship. From 1 January 2024, health care has been [denied](#) to those without Russian passports. The authorities are also making plans to require Russian passports for [internet use](#), and for [those without heating](#) who need gas heaters.

Bosses in local firms have started a renewed effort to compel employees to accept Russian passports, the EHRG [reported](#). "For example, in a mine, the personnel department will write out masses of declarations on employees' behalf, and send them to the ministry of internal affairs. School managements, universities and childrens' homes write them out on behalf of parents."

The campaign to force people to abandon their Ukrainian nationality began in Donetsk and Luhansk [in 2019](#), and in Zaporizhzhya and Kherson after the 2022 invasion. [Threats soon multiplied](#) against those who refused. By May last year Russian prime minister Mikhail Mishustin [said](#) 1.5 million passports had been handed out, and the total has [kept on rising](#) since then.

Russianisation provides cannon fodder. The inclusion of the occupied territories in Russia's annual call-up in October last year meant that men aged between 18 and 27 were "subjected to conscription [...] into an armed force at war with their own country", [a report](#) from the UN Human Rights High Commissioner's office stated - one of Russia's numerous breaches of the Geneva Conventions.

Children don't escape, either. From September, 14-18 year olds will [have to do a course](#) on "security and defending the motherland", including military training. And bandits are turned into heroes: to the "youth army" (Yunarmia), a 29,000-strong movement that imparts military training and imperial ideology to teenagers, [a unit was added](#) in December named after Kirill Stremousov, an official in Kherson who collaborated enthusiastically with the occupation before his death in November 2022.

And of course, the forced [deportation](#) of Ukrainian children to Russia [continues](#). Sergei Mironov, leader of one of the tame "opposition" parties in the Russian parliament, has [illegally adopted](#) one of them.

Passports are also a means of controlling dissent. The occupation authorities have prepared paperwork for depriving people of citizenship and making them stateless, on the FSB's recommendation. This will be used against the "rising mood of protest under occupation, caused by social and economic problems", the EHRG [warned](#).

Ukraine's official position is to support those in or from the occupied territories who want to retain Ukrainian citizenship. But a mass of red tape threatens to strangle anyone whose case is less straightforward. A [report](#) in Commons, the socialist journal, told how people who left occupied Donbass as children, and are now adults, have been forced into a stateless vicious circle, largely

thanks to Ukraine's State Migration Service.

Industrial ruin

Water shortages and hazardous pollution in reservoirs and rivers is a growing problem in the occupied territories. The main source of pollution, the EHRG [warns](#), is illegal mining – mostly small-scale open-cast operations, 900 (including abandoned sites) at a recent count. The group [charges](#) the illegal mine owners with responsibility for 64 deaths during 2023, mainly of workers employed with little or no safety procedures.

The illegal mines have grown on the ruins of the Donbass coalfield, not long ago one of the largest in Europe. When the war began in 2014, there were more than 100 mines in the Russian-supported “republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk. At least 49 of these have been closed by flooding, according to a [recent research assessment](#).

In 2022, the “republics” sent miners to the front in large numbers: 58% of the underground workforce in Luhansk, [according to](#) the occupation authorities there. This winter, the Donetsk authorities [pleaded](#) with Russia to send workers to keep the mines open – while homes in pit villages that were supplied with heat from mines [went cold](#) when work stopped.

Given the lack of safety standards, environmentalists are especially concerned about pollution from two long-closed mines: the Oleksandr-Zakhid mine, which has stored hazardous wastes since 1989, and the Yunyi Komunar mine, in which the Soviet authorities used a nuclear explosion to facilitate release of methane in 1979, and which has been closed since 2002.

The steel industry, once Ukraine's prime export business, has also been trashed. Of the big steelworks in Russian-controlled territory, the Azovstal plant at Mariupol, once Europe's biggest, has been destroyed by Russian bombing. The Alchevsk plant, that regularly produced 4 million tonnes per year, now does [about half](#) that amount.

The steel industry in government-controlled territory, whose exports have been stymied by Russian bombing in the Black Sea, is also [struggling](#). After the 2008-09 financial crisis, Ukraine's annual steel output fell from about 40 million tonnes to about 30 million. The outbreak of war in 2014 cut it to about 20 million; last year it was about 6 million.

Terror and repression

As Russian forces entered southern Ukraine in 2022, civilians were terrorised with heavy aerial bombing. The scale of devastation, which Russia did its best to conceal, is becoming clearer: in Mariupol, estimates of the civilian death toll range from [8000](#) to [25,000 or more](#).

[A report published this month by Human Rights Watch and others](#) details damage to several hundred high-rise blocks of flats, hospitals, schools and electricity and water infrastructure. It shows how the occupation forces resisted evacuation attempts and aid deliveries.

An [investigation](#) by the Financial Times shows that Russian media film of the city's reconstruction is falsified window-dressing. Many of the 100,000 people who remain in Mariupol – less than a quarter of the pre-invasion population – are in ruined flats without heat, water and other necessities.

Bombing paved the way for brutal structures of repression. Elected local officials and journalists were targeted for arrest as the Russian army arrived: some, including [Ihor Kolykhaev](#), the mayor of Kherson, are still being held. Most of those released had been subject to [torture](#) or ill-treatment, the UN Human Rights Commissioner's office [reports](#).

The attacks on civil rights are relentless. Russian courts staffed by Russian judges have been introduced, in contravention of international law. Cases that concerned [the UN](#) included the conviction of a woman for posting on social media a video of popular Ukrainian songs and a retroactive conviction of a man for a protest held on Ukrainian territory in 2016.

In the territories occupied in 2014, repression of political activists is especially severe in [Crimea](#). Dozens have been locked up on trumped-up charges, in a manner reminiscent of the repressive machinery in Russia itself.

In classic colonial style, the Russian authorities are [attempting](#) - against local resistance - to drive the Ukrainian language out of schools. All religions except the Russian Orthodox church face persecution: not only have Jehovah's witnesses, various Protestant and Islamic communities been targeted, but also the Ukrainian Orthodox church, human rights defenders explained at [a press conference](#) last month.

Resistance to the invasion persists. The most recent [report](#) by the [Luhansk Regional Human Rights Centre, Alternative](#), includes dozens of examples of small-scale, individual protests. In Crimea alone, up until December last year there were [590 prosecutions](#) for "discrediting" the occupation forces. In Zaporizhzhya, the FSB [claimed](#) to have arrested three teenage members of a group named "Black Sabotage" for attacking occupation forces.

Comment

The Russian occupation of Ukrainian territories has much in common with other imperialist occupations down the centuries. It is accompanied by strong Russian nationalist rhetoric and by attempts to erase the language, religion and culture of Ukraine - historically, Russia's largest colony.

The occupation is underpinned by terror, starting with the aerial war on defenceless civilians - many of them, in the south and east of the country, those Russian speakers that the invaders claimed to be protecting.

Even now, two years after the invasion, we in the European labour movement who support Ukrainians' right to defend themselves against this onslaught are often rebuked, not only by Putin apologists but by "pacifists", who claim that the primary purpose of Russia's action is to defend itself from aggression by NATO powers.

The character of the occupation, and the militarisation of the occupied territories with a view to further attacks on Ukraine, further discredits this deeply flawed logic. *SP, 21 February 2024.*

Note : the Russian-occupied territories

About 18% of Ukrainian territory is occupied by the Russian armed forces, including:

(i) the autonomous republic of Crimea, annexed by the Russian federation in 2014.

(ii) parts of Donetsk region and most of Luhansk region, controlled from 2014 by Russian-supported separatists who established unrecognised "people's republics". These included most of the Donbass coal- and iron-producing industrial region. In 2014-17 the population is estimated to have fallen by half, mainly due to migration to other parts of Ukraine and to Russia. In February 2022, two days prior to the all-out invasion, these "republics" were recognised by Russia.

(iii) parts of Kherson, Mykolayiv, and Zaporizhzhya regions that were invaded in 2022.

In September 2022 the Russian government claimed to have annexed the whole of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhya, including the former “republics” and areas still under Ukrainian control.

□ **People & Nature** has featured articles about the war in Ukraine, and Russian rule in the occupied territories, since 2014, including:

[Yanukovich’s end is a beginning](#) (March 2014)

[Ukrainians, Russians and Europeans against Putin’s war](#) (March 2014)

[Eastern Ukraine: beyond the fragments](#) (May 2014)

[Ukraine: war as a means of social control](#) (October 2014)

[Ukraine: bosses tighten the screw, but eventually screw’s thread will break](#) (September 2015)

[Slave labour in Lugansk: what war has ‘achieved’](#) (October 2016)

[Ukraine: ‘we need new ways of organising’](#) (August 2017)

[Ukraine: women organise in the war zone](#) (March 2018)

[Lugansk miners defy authorities](#) (June 2020)

[Putin’s little helpers undermine solidarity](#) (December 2021)

[The ‘republics’ Putin is fighting for](#) (March 2022)

[Ukraine: the sources of danger of a wider war](#) (March 2022)

[Western capital, warmonger Putin and the climate policy disaster](#) (May 2023)

[Crimean political prisoner Bohdan Ziza: ‘my anti war action was a cry from the heart’](#) (January 2024)

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P.S.

People and Nature

<https://peopleandnature.wordpress.com/2024/02/21/russia-turns-ukraines-occupied-areas-into-an-ar-med-camp/>