

**UKRAINIAN SCHOOL UNDER OCCUPATION:
EXPERIENCE OF HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION**

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Abstract

The article presents the experience of understanding specific features of the organisation of education in Ukrainian schools under occupation during the Second World War in comparison with the Russian occupation of part of Ukrainian territories since 2014. Attention is focused on identifying common and unique characteristics of these occupation regimes in the context of education organisation, as well as specifics of goals and the content of education used by the occupation regimes in the occupied territories. The author analyses the educational policy of the German occupation administration, internal contradictions and contradictory approaches of the fascist leadership to the functioning of the Ukrainian school and emphasises the unanimity of the current Russian occupation authorities in the field of education in the occupied Ukrainian territories. It is emphasised that the invaders are aware of the crucial role of education in shaping children's and youth's mind. The invaders give a prominent place in the process of educating citizens loyal to the new government or supportive of it to pedagogical staff of all education levels. At the same time, significant differences in the educational policies of the German and Russian invaders are emphasised: the Germans primarily fought Soviet ideology, while the Russians openly oppose Ukrainian culture, language, and Ukrainism in general, which leads to genocide and linguicide. The historical context of the occupation is also important, as the events that took place in the first half of the XX century are almost repeated in the XXI century, when liberalism and democracy prevail in Europe.

Key words: *Ukrainian school, war, occupation, genocide, linguicide.*

Introduction

The problem of understanding the specific features of the organization of the educational process in Ukrainian schools under occupation has gained topicality since 2024 – 70 years after the liberation of Ukraine from the Nazi invaders. Taking into account the experience of Ukrainian schooling in 1941–1944, it is well-timed and necessary to explore the common and distinctive features of the German and Russian occupations, to analyse the consequences of education under German occupation in order to develop a strategy for the restoration of the Ukrainian educational system in the de-occupied territories. Apparently, even a superficial glance at these tragic periods in the national history enables understanding consistent differences between them as the socio-political context has changed: a significant historical distance,

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globalization processes in the world, the development of information technology, etc. all leave traces on the way schooling is organized and its nature. In addition, in the author's opinion, the period during which Ukrainian citizens have been under occupation affects educational processes, as three years of German occupation and eleven years of ruscist (russian+ fascist) occupation are significantly different.

Documents and periodicals of the Second World War (<https://libraria.ua/en/issues/328/>; <http://education-ua.org/ua/ekskurs/424-435>; Kral', 1968; <https://nuremberg.media/dokazatelstvo/20210319/134469/Dokument-Zelenaya-papka-Geringa.html>; SS in Action: Documents on SS Crime. 1968), works by scholars of the Institute of History of Ukraine of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (Encyclopedia of Ukrainian History, 2005; <https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/>; https://uk.wikipedia.org/wikicite_note-Ukrmap-2), as well as individual publications by historians (B. Yerzhabkova, V. Lenska) dealing with the fascist school policy in the territory of occupied Ukraine (Yerzhabkova, 2008; Lens'ka, 1990) are the starting point of the present research. Accounts of eyewitnesses who are under russian occupation, assessment of the situation by educators and representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (<https://cedos.org.ua/events/vplyv-vijny-na-osvitu-v-ukrayini-vyklyky-ta-perspektyvy/>; <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-61619012>; <https://saveschools.in.ua/>; <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-62983478/>) make the basis for studying school policy in Ukraine today.

The present research aims to study the problem of organising schooling in the Ukrainian lands occupied by German invaders in the XX century and by the russian army in the first quarter of the XXI century, to identify common and unique features in the educational process, and to attempt to outline possible consequences of educating Ukrainian children and youth under the pressure of the russian invaders. The linguistic aspect of educational activities should certainly be taken into account, since, as a rule, modern Ukrainian children and youth knew the russian language before the occupation, while schoolchildren of the 1930s and 1940s started learning German and other foreign languages only at junior and senior high school.

Ukrainian schooling during the German occupation

First of all, it should be noted that in preparing for the occupation of Ukraine, the Nazis did not pay attention to the cultural and educational policy, as they were interested exclusively in the economic aspect of using Ukrainian lands, Ukrainian enterprises and labour, which was represented by the directives and instructions of Göring's "Green Folder" (<https://nuremberg.media/dokazatelstvo/20210319/134469/Dokument-Zelenaya-papka-Geringa.html>).

However, representatives of the fascist leadership had different views on the nature and need for the organisation of educational activities in the occupied territories in general and Ukrainian ones in particular. Thus, Reichskommissar E. Koch emphasised: "Ukrainians do not need to think about schools and universities because they have to work, and they do not need education to work. I consider the opening of educational institutions to be completely inexpedient because education only harms the native farmer and the native worker" (Lens'ka, 1990: 81). Reichsführer Himmler the Reich Leader (Reichsführer) planned to pursue a policy of Germanization and oppression in the occupied territories. He wrote: "For the non-German population in the East there must not be schools except for a four-grade primary school. Primary school must aim to teach students only to count to a maximum of 500 and to sign, as well as to spread the doctrine that submission to Germans, honesty, diligence and obedience are God's commandments. I consider the ability to read to be optional" ([https://uk.wikipedia.org/wikicite note-Ukrmap-2](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wikicite_note-Ukrmap-2)). However, the Minister of Eastern Territories A. Rosenberg's opinion was different as he was loyal to the cultural development of Ukrainians. He believed that in order to exterminate the Bolshevik ideology, it was necessary to open schools, and planned to establish universities in Kyiv and several other cities of Ukraine. He also put forward the idea of opening a number of technical industrial schools. Yet, Nazi leaders did not support his position (Yerzhabkova, 2008: 81). Hitler himself spoke clearly about the local population of Ukraine, cynically emphasising that "...general education is a corroding poison. Therefore, each stratum of the population will have their own level of education. Broad masses of slaves will be granted the boon of being illiterate" (Kral', 1968: 13).

In 1941, Reichskommissariat Ukraine was established in the territory of our country and education was organised, but only for primary school children. All school education was translated into Ukrainian and compulsory German language learning was introduced. Higher education, in the invaders' opinion, was unnecessary for Ukrainians. Therefore, vocational schools, mainly medical, technical and agricultural ones, were preserved. Higher education institutions functioned in Galicia, Transcarpathia, and the southwestern zone of occupation.

Thus, the German authorities in the occupied territories pursued an educational policy of enslavement and Germanization. Despite the fact that the Ukrainian Scientific and Methodological Institute of School Education was established in Nazi-occupied Kyiv, the magazine "Ukrainska Shkola" ("Ukrainian School") was published, and several teacher training institutions were opened, their goal was to raise teachers loyal to the Wehrmacht. The invaders were very afraid of the free-thinking of Ukrainian teachers and their influence on students, so many teachers were executed, e.g. more than 200 teachers in Kyiv alone, and about three thousand in Kharkiv region were executed ([https://uk.wikipedia.org/wikicite note-Ukrmap-2](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wikicite_note-Ukrmap-2)).

On the whole, educational processes in the occupied Ukrainian lands were regulated by orders of E. Koch who, in January 1942, signed a directive to start teaching in four-year folk schools on the first of February (Yerzhabkova, 2008: 163). Moreover, primary education was to cover all children from the age of seven. The invaders also defined and set out clear instructions concerning conditions for opening folk schools, the content and scope of curricula, etc. Yet, it was impossible to control all teachers, because the Germans not only reduced the number of teachers and cut down their salaries, but also reduced the number of school inspectors in order to save money. When selecting teachers to work in primary schools, preference was given to Ukrainian-speaking employees with anti-Soviet sentiments. Teaching the Russian language was prohibited.

Initially, these changes seemed to be a revival of the Ukrainian national school, where children would be instilled with a love of everything Ukrainian with an emphasis on the liberation struggle against Soviet occupation and the study of Ukrainian history, literature, and art. "The Kramatorska Gazeta" of 15 October 1942 indicated: "From the third year of school study, children will learn German, the language of the Great Nation that, having created cultural values of the highest level, guarantees us the free development of Ukrainian national culture. ... It is out of the question to allow the use of old textbooks imbued with the spirit of communism and hatred" (<http://education-ua.org/ua/ekskurs/424-435>). The same position was expressed in the newspaper "Holos Poltavshchyny", which presented the concept of the development of Ukrainian national education which was freed from the spirit of Bolshevism and would be national not only in form but also in content (<https://libraria.ua/en/issues/328/>). On the pages of the newspaper, an anonymous author (some scholars believe it was H. Vashchenko, a well-known Ukrainian teacher) presented conceptual foundations of the development of Ukrainian education, free from Bolshevism, which pulled children away from their home land and culture. The author argued: "School must equip our youth with the scientific knowledge necessary to build a new life, equip them with a scientific outlook and technical skills necessary for agriculture, industry and trade. At the same time, it must foster in young people a high national consciousness, firmness of will and character, integrity, diligence and perseverance in work, honesty and discipline, high culture in personal and public life, and complete devotion to public affairs" (<https://libraria.ua/en/issues/328/>). The texts of pre-war Ukrainian-language textbooks were initially corrected by the German administration, but later 2 million textbooks were banned and then exterminated. In early 1942, for the first time under occupation, a primer and readers in the Ukrainian language were published in Ukraine. This gave Ukrainians in the occupied territories reason to hope that their children would still receive proper school education.

A few months later, however, Ukrainians experienced the arrogant attitude of the German authorities who turned from “a liberator from Bolshevik slavery” into an enslaver. Schoolchildren learned to read using the invaders’ newspapers and making notes. Children were subjected to physical punishment, and gender discrimination was introduced, as girls were mostly enrolled in “home economics” schools. In fact, the school was turning into an instrument of fascist education and adaptation to Germans’ dominant position. Schools were placed under the guardianship of the Gestapo, whose officers summoned inspectors on a weekly basis and ordered what and how to teach in schools and what activities to hold. Particular attention, of course, was paid to falsifying history and the nature of current events, and to involving children in pro-fascist youth organisations. The introduction of teaching national history, language and literature in Ukrainian schools did not indicate an attempt to revive Ukrainian identity. In this way, Germans were fighting everything Soviet and Bolshevik. Ukrainian teachers who stayed under occupation took advantage of that and used the opportunity to introduce students to the works of artists banned by the Soviet authorities. However, the teaching conditions were difficult. There was a lack of food, classrooms were not heated, and teachers were not paid. Therefore, they worked extra hours at any job: chopping wood, washing clothes, etc.

Thus, the attempt to turn the Ukrainian school under occupation into a centre of national education was doomed to failure. As early as in 1942, Ukrainians realised the true nature of the German educational policy. Only primary education was compulsory, and children over the age of 12 were left out of school. Primary school turned into a means of teaching obedience and slavery, and an atmosphere of fear prevailed in schools, as the entire educational process was under the full control of the invaders, who interfered with both its organisation and content. Children and their parents tried to evade studying in fascistized schools and the labour service of schoolchildren introduced in accordance with A. Rosenberg’s directives, and organised clandestine and partisan schools. If children were found to be evaders, they were deprived of food stamps and their parents were fined.

Vocational education suffered less damage. The Germans were interested in the development of Ukrainian agriculture, and that is why the invaders supported the relevant educational institutions. For example, in Poltava alone, there were six agricultural colleges that trained educated free labour for the Reich. Even one of the few research institutes left by the Germans, Poltava Feed Institute, was still working. There were also trade schools for boys and arts and industry schools for girls where they were taught weaving, embroidering, knitting, carpet weaving, and tailoring.

Some educational institutions managed to leave the zone of potential occupation for safe areas. According to archival materials, during the Second World War, more than 45 Ukrainian higher education institutions were

evacuated and continued to operate in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Some educational institutions joined local universities as faculties. Ukrainian schools or classes with Ukrainian as the language of instruction were organised for evacuated Ukrainian schoolchildren in the rear regions of Russia and Central Asia. In addition, technical and trade schools, orphanages and other types of educational institutions were evacuated. In total, about one hundred Ukrainian educational institutions and more than 5,500 Ukrainian teachers were evacuated (Entsyklopediia istorii Ukrainy, 2005).

Thus, in the author's opinion, the school policy of the German invaders, which provided for the intellectual degradation and spiritual impoverishment of Ukrainians, aimed to Germanize and exterminate the national Ukrainian consciousness and foster obedience to the fascist authorities, ultimately failed. After the de-occupation of Ukraine, the number of rebuilt and restored schools grew rapidly: while in the 1943-1944 academic year there were almost 13,000 schools in Ukraine with more than 1.8 million students, in the next academic year there were already 24,000 schools and more than 4 million students. These figures indicate a fairly successful restoration of school education after the German occupation.

Russian occupation policy in the field of Ukrainian education

The above outlined general features of the educational policy of the German invaders enable its comparison with the Russian occupation policy. However, it should be noted that the Russian invasion has been going on for much longer: eleven years have passed since the occupation of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and the fourth year of a full-scale war has begun, when parts of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions were also occupied. Whether the current restoration of Ukrainian schools will be as successful and fast is an open question.

It should be accentuated that in addition to the most painful issue - human losses, as well as destroyed industry and losses in agriculture, the Russian occupation has led to heavy losses in the educational sector. Since 2014, every seventh school in Ukraine has been damaged, 365 educational institutions have been completely destroyed, and 3,798 have suffered damage of various severity. Twenty-nine higher education institutions have been relocated to the non-occupied territories (<https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/>). According to the World Bank estimates, more than \$14 billion is needed to rebuild the educational infrastructure. There is not a single Ukrainian educational institution left in the occupied territories (<https://saveschools.in.ua/>).

It should be noted that even before 2014, for example, there was a problem with learning the Ukrainian language in Crimea, as there were only eight schools with Ukrainian and fifteen schools with Crimean Tatar as the languages of instruction. This situation is conditioned by the Soviet legacy in

the national policy, when Crimeans and Ukrainians were deliberately expelled from the territory of Crimea and russians were resettled in their homes. Today, despite the fact that the invaders themselves have recognised Ukrainian as one of the three official languages in Crimea, only 6% of students study it as an optional subject.

Schools became the first target for the invaders. Immediately after the seizure of part of the Ukrainian territories, the russian military administration tried to resume the work of schools, but in the russian language and according to russian curricula. Claiming to have come to “liberate Ukrainians from the Nazis”, the invaders have unleashed real terror on teachers and parents of schoolchildren who, for various reasons, stayed in the occupied territory. Although in the beginning, the invaders tried to lure teachers with money and a career promising a large salary of 70-80 thousand russian rubles a month (over \$1100) for teachers and 130 thousand russian rubles (over \$2200) for school management, now teachers are intimidated, abducted, their homes are searched and looted. Those who did not or could not leave and openly resisted russification were tortured, arrested and evicted from their hometowns. However, collaboration with the russian occupation administrations have not become a widespread phenomenon, although the enemy propaganda tried to create the appropriate image. For example, a video of a large group of Ukrainian teachers returning from courses in russia in early September 2022 was shared on social media. However, less than a tenth of the teachers are collaborating with the occupation authorities and the russian military. The invaders forcibly retrained Ukrainian teachers according to russian standards, imported russian teachers, and settled them in homes abandoned by Ukrainian citizens.

Nevertheless, Ukrainian teachers became defenders and saviours of Ukrainian symbols and books despite the risk to their own safety.

Immediately after the seizure of new Ukrainian territories in 2022, the russian occupation administration ordered the opening of educational institutions. Despite the fact that distance learning had been well developed over the two years of the pandemic, the invaders insisted on the immediate opening of schools in a face-to-face format. Even the destroyed infrastructure was not an obstacle. For example, in Mariupol, the damage made 90%, but the occupation authorities decided to extend the school year in the city until 1 September in order to de-Ukrainise it and prepare it for russian curricula. However, the plan was not fully implemented due to the lack of teachers. In September 2022, only 10 schools were conditionally ready to start classes. Only four of the 20 schools in Melitopol resumed the educational process. However, with their usual deceitfulness, on 1 September, russian media announced that 1422 schools had started classes in the “liberated” territories of Ukraine.

On the eve of 1 September 2022, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine explained that education in the occupied territories would be conducted exclusively online, and students could enrol in any school in Ukraine.

In early September, I. Fedorov, the mayor of Melitopol, said that 14,000 students in the city had started the school year in Ukrainian schools remotely (<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-62983478/>).

The rush to resume school education is explained by the invaders' belief that the school is a "stronghold of Bandera", and that everything related to Ukrainian national culture, language, and history is a "indication of Nazism" for the invaders, and therefore must be exterminated. In addition, a school always unites teachers, children and their parents, and thus it is the centre of community life. By placing military bases in schools, the invaders are trying to destabilize society and undermine it from the inside (<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-61619012>).

The meticulous attention to the organisation of schooling is an attempt to gain a foothold in new territories, a demonstration of the invaders' intentions to "stay here for a long time". The switch to russian as the language of instruction undoubtedly indicates another crime committed by russians against Ukrainians – linguocide. This is what the Commissioner for the Protection of the State Language T. Kremin calls the policy of de-Ukrainisation of educational institutions in the occupied territories, considering linguocide "part of the genocide against Ukrainians" (<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-61619012>).

Along with the russification of education, the invaders launched the process of "cleansing" library collections disguising it as a "fight against the Nazi ideology". They confiscated books that had "extremist content", which are all textbooks on the history of Ukraine and literature, as well as all books in the Ukrainian language. Thus, in Kharkiv region, russia started with extermination of Ukrainian symbols, and shortly after - books. Such works as the history of the Ukrainian army for children "The Path of the Ukrainian Warrior", books about the Holodomor (man-made famine), as well as the finalists of the BBC's Book of the Year-2018 "Ukraine" by A. Chapai and "Grey Bees" by A. Kurkov and others were declared banned and "harmful". In the curriculum of History for grades 5-9, compiled by Donetsk Republican Institute for the Development of Education, a search for the word "Ukraine" yields zero results, while the word "Kyiv" yields one. Kievan Rus is referred to as the "state of Rus" or "russian land"; Kyiv is never mentioned as the capital and cultural centre of the Old Rus state. Donbas is consistently referred to as russian. Special topics are suggested for studying the statehood of the "Donetsk People's Republic", its constitution and human rights protection (<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-61619012>). In other words, russian narratives are consistently imposed on children.

In fact, during the war, education in the temporarily occupied territories turned into "education of war", as schools were controlled by the russian security forces directly involved in the organization of the educational process. Thus, since the 2024-2025 academic year, the occupiers has started teaching a new subject – "Fundamentals of Security and Defence of the Motherland" with

most of the curriculum devoted to military disciplines. Students study characteristics of different types of weapons, military strategy and tactics, specifics of working with drones, etc. The new subject is optional for the 5th-7th graders, and compulsory for students in grades 8-11. The subject includes a practical component consisting in the involvement of the russian military with combat experience gained in the russian-Ukrainian war, the war in Chechnya, Syria and other countries.

In addition, special classes of the russian guard and the armed forces of the russian federation are being opened in schools in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. In September 2024, the first class of this kind was opened in the village of Novopetrivka, Berdiansk district. The opening of the class was patronised by the 336th separate guards marine brigade of the russian federation, which was seeng direct action in Mariupol area in 2022 (<https://texty.org.ua/fragments/113649/osvita-vijnny-rosijski-sylovyky-berut-pid-kontrol-navchannya-shkolyariv-na-okupovanyh-terytoriyah/>).

Thus, the russian military, who occupied part of Zaporizhzhia region, are now teaching Ukrainian children. In general, the occupiers plan to open specialised classes of the russian guard, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Airborne Forces, etc. in schools in the occupied territory of Zaporizhzhia region. In occupied Berdiansk, a class of the russian guard has already been opened to train “young russian national guard soldiers”. The similar class has been opened in the occupied territory of Kherson region.

Schools in the occupied Crimea and partially occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions also give special anti-terrorism classes. In these classes, children are told about terrorist attacks in russia, starting with Beslan and the bombing of a high-rise building on Kashirskoye Highway. And, of course, fake, distorted information is presented about russia’s current war against Ukraine.

Thus, in addition to “New Geography” and “History of the russian world”, which are the basis of russian imperialism propaganda, there is a systematic militarisation of Ukrainian children. The main goal of the latter is to attract new resources to the russian army. For this purpose, Ukrainian children are forced to join militaristic cultural and sports movements. One of these movements, the “Movement of the First”, was created under Putin's personal patronage to “promote traditional russian values”, including in the occupied Ukrainian territories. Children are encouraged to join the organisation by promising to give them extra points for university admission. The organization’s annual budget makes \$19 billion, which is more than, for example, the annual budget of the Republic of Kalmykia. Since 2024, “The Movement of the First” has been under sanctions by the EU and the US for its involvement in the deportation of Ukrainian children, obtrusion of foreign values on them through forced re-education, and involvement in work with weapons and drones (<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/militaryzatsiya-nova-istoriya-russkyy-myr-okupatsiya/33105881.html>).

It should be noted that militarisation of education in the occupied territories of Ukraine aimed at recruiting Ukrainian children into the Russian army is a violation of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War and a war crime. The occupation authorities' attempts to change the identity of Ukrainian children are a violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provides for the right to preserve identity and nationality and prohibits absorption of culture, interference with the use of the mother tongue, etc.

Comparison of the current situation with that after the German occupation, which was quite short, leaves little hope of resumption of education today. After all, the prolonged influence of Russian propaganda on Ukrainian schoolchildren and teachers has a destructive effect on their minds. Apart from that, according to the Ministry of Education and Science, more than 670,000 students and 25,000 teachers have left Ukraine, and their absolute return is doubtful. In addition, a survey of 800 children showed that 45% of children are in a state of moderate and higher stress and anxiety. This means that for them, too, the resumption of the educational process is not realistic; they require socio-emotional and possibly psychological support (<https://cedos.org.ua/events/vplyv-vijny-na-osvitu-v-ukrayini-vyklyky-ta-perspektyvy/>).

Conclusions

Given the above, it can be stated that the German and Russian occupations have much in common. Firstly, the invaders are aware of the role of education in shaping the minds of future generations. Moreover, the invaders attach an important role to teachers and pedagogical staff at all levels of education in the process of raising loyal citizens or at least loyal to the new government. Just like eighty years ago, the willingness of teachers to collaborate with the invaders was not widespread, but it was not solitary either. Secondly, during the occupation, textbooks are rapidly substituted with ideologically "correct" ones. If the German administration was unable to replace textbooks, it exterminated the old ones or "edited" the current ones accordingly.

However, there are also significant differences in the educational policies of the German and Russian invaders: while the Germans primarily fought Soviet ideology, the Russians openly oppose Ukrainian culture, language, and Ukrainism in general, which leads to genocide and linguicide. Apart from that, the influence of Russians on students' minds is stronger than during the German occupation because of the absence of a language barrier, as most students in the occupied territories are fluent in Russian. On the other hand, today's students have the opportunity to study in Ukrainian schools online. The number of years spent in occupation and the historical context are also important factors, as the events that took place in the first half of the XX century are almost repeated in the first quarter of the XXI century, when liberalism and democracy prevail in Europe.

Thus, the problem of resuming Ukrainian education after de-occupation is a complex and multifaceted process that requires careful preparation based on multidisciplinary research and balanced political decisions.

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