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Harnessing Criminology's Potential to Theorize the Link Between War and Crime over the Life Course

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Abstract: As unprecedented numbers of children worldwide are exposed to armed conflict, understanding how the hidden wounds of war unfold over the life course has become an urgent concern. The aim of this work is to chart new directions in the criminological study of war by focusing attention on its enduring implications for its most vulnerable victims: children. Building on recent scholarship that has assessed the relevance and utility of core criminological theories in explaining the perpetration of genocide and crimes of mass atrocity (see, e.g., Karstedt, Nyseth Brehm, & Frizzell, 2021), this work argues for drawing more heavily from the life course paradigm (Elder, 1974; 1995) as well as foundational criminological theories to examine the potentially criminogenic implications of exposure to war-related violence and victimization in childhood. Renewing criminological attention to the link between exposure to war and criminality provides an opportunity to refine existing theories and to further understanding of the link between macrosocial contexts and individual lines of development and may promote further understanding of resilience to contexts of extreme violence.

"*No one has been able to explain away the fact that war creates the conditions that beget war.*"
Dwight Eisenhower,
Remarks at Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 10/19/50

Introduction

At present more than 450 million children worldwide—nearly 1 in 6—are living in or fleeing countries afflicted by war and political violence (UNICEF, n.d.). Nearly 50 million have been displaced by conflict, many of whom are forced to live in refugee camps, where the normal trappings of childhood (e.g., going to school, playing with friends) are suspended and uncertain. These numbers reflect a larger trend toward greater civilian casualties in recent years, prompted by shifts in the way contemporary wars are being fought around the globe (see, e.g., Jamieson, 2003, 2014; McGarry & Walklate, 2019). Whereas civilians made up roughly half of casualties during World War II, that proportion has since grown to as much as 90 percent, including increasing numbers of women and children (United Nations, 2022). For those who survive war and other forms of mass violence, including genocide, there is little doubt that the experience will leave an indelible imprint on their lives. However, the question of how such exposure will shape trajectories of development—including pathways of crime and violence—over the life course marks one of the most understudied topics in criminology.

Criminology's waning interest in the war-crime nexus after WWII was part of a sweeping shift in the discipline, which included the rise of critical criminology and attendant redirection of the discipline's gaze to the role of the state as aggressor (Ermann & Lundman, 2002; Rothe & Friedrichs, 2006). Shifting attention to the harms of the government was understandable given the context of the 20th century, a period in which more people died violently as a result of state-sponsored violence and genocide than from all other crimes combined (Branningan & Hardwick, 2003; Maier-Katkin et al., 2009), prompting Ruggerio (2015, p. 28) to describe it as "'unnamable' for its endless chain of destructive moments." Against the backdrop of government perpetrated atrocity, including torture, massacres and genocidal violence, focusing attention on war's potentially criminogenic implications for its most unwitting victims may be construed (understandably) as problematic, but there are important reasons for the discipline to renew its interest in the war-crime nexus.

First, as the number of children exposed to conflict around the world reaches unprecedented levels, the question of how the "invisible traces" of war (Walklate & McGarry, 2015) will manifest over the life course is of pressing concern. The link between contexts of urban violence and violent criminality in urban ghettos has been a focal point of the discipline for more than a century (see, Sampson and Wilson, 1995), giving rise to prominent theories of social disorganization, collective efficacy, and cultural deviance, among others, yet the discipline remains curiously averse to broadening its purview to contexts of war and state sponsored violence around the globe.

Second, renewing criminological attention to the link between exposure to war and criminality provides an opportunity to refine existing theories and to further understanding of the link between macrosocial contexts and individual lines of development. Sampson (2015) has argued that a major limitation of life course criminology has been its failure to incorporate social change or to link explicitly social change to individual pathways of development, including crime. The omission is notable given that life course research has proliferated since the 1980s, alongside numerous conflicts, genocides and periods of sustained intrastate violence around the globe. Yet rarely have these topics converged.

Finally, and most critically, examining how exposure to war and mass violence may catalyze risks for violent and criminal adaptations in the aftermath will further understanding of resilience. A burgeoning scholarship has shown that exposure to even the most egregious forms of war related violence is not deterministic of adverse outcomes (Apfel and Simon, 1996; Betancourt, 2015; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1993). Moreover, scholars note that war and other social crises can paradoxically intensify bonding within families and local communities, concentrating solidarity even as wider social trust erodes (Lieberman, 2006; Fiedler, 2023). Identifying the conditions under which war may lead to what Elder and Clipp (1989) distinguish as "pathogenic" or "developmental" legacies is of critical importance to identifying key interventions in the life course that may mitigate war's deleterious effects.

The aim of this work is to chart new directions in the criminological study of war by focusing attention on its enduring implications for its most vulnerable victims: children. Building on recent scholarship that has assessed the relevance and utility of core criminological theories in explaining the perpetration of genocide and crimes of mass atrocity (see, e.g., Karstedt, Nyseth Brehm, & Frizzell, 2021), this work argues for drawing more heavily on Elder's (1974; 1994; 1998; 1995) life course paradigm, as well as

foundational criminological theories to examine the criminogenic implications of exposure to war-related violence and victimization in childhood. In doing so, it heeds Sampson's (2015, p. 285) call for life-course criminology "to rediscover its roots and step up to the challenge of linking individual and macro-level change" as well as the clarion call for criminologists to engage more seriously with the subject of war (Jamieson, 1998, 2003, 2014).

Following a brief discussion of how war is conceptualized for the purposes of this writing, I begin by evaluating research and theorizing on the criminogenic consequences of war for youth from the early decades of the 20th century to the present context. Next, I turn to the life course paradigm developed by Elder as a foundational theoretical framework for examining war's enduring implications across the life span. Subsequently, I will make the case for the applicability of core criminological theories, specifically control, strain, social learning, to the study of delinquency, crime and violence among war-exposed youth. I conclude by discussing future directions for building theoretically grounded knowledge on war's enduring effects and the pressing need to merge the study of individual lives with macrosocial change.

War as a Discrete Life Event and Developmental Context

The question of how to define war and other forms of state-sponsored violence, including genocide and crimes against humanity, has filled tomes and is beyond the scope of the present inquiry, but for excellent discussions see, e.g., McGarry and Walklate (2015; 2019), Rafter (2016), and Karstedt, Nyseth Brehm, and Frizzell (2021). Rather, of primary concern here is the conceptualization of war as both a discrete event in the life course as well as a macrosocial context in which patterns of human development and behavior unfold. With respect to the former, war can be construed most simply as an exogenous shock (Rosenfeld, 2018)—a violent and drastic restructuring of social order that marks a critical turning point in the life course for those who experience war, whether as militants or civilians, adults or children. With respect to the latter, war also constitutes an enduring sociocultural milieu, which continues to shape both objective opportunities and subjective worldviews, including notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity, good and evil, and one's sense of identity, among others, long past the end of conflict (see, e.g., DiPietro, 2019; Drožđek, 2020; Elder & Clipp, 1989; Enloe, 1999; 2023). Notably, for those living in contexts of protracted crises (e.g., Myanmar, Israel-Palestine), conflict is less a rupture but a continuity: the macrosocial backdrop of childhood, youth, and adulthood alike. Violence becomes normalized within everyday social life, shaping family and community bonds and inscribing the logics of war into socialization, identity formation, and the intergenerational transmission of culture and trauma.

At its most basic level, war is also an extraordinarily violent activity. Whereas significant distinctions have been made between the "old" Clausewitzean (Clausewitz, ([1832] 2003) conceptualization of war and "new" wars (see, e.g., McGarry and Walklate, 2019 for a thoughtful discussion), the intricacies of these distinctions are less salient here. Before theorizing on war's potentially criminogenic implications, however, some fundamental implications of the transition from "old" to "new" wars should be noted. First, is that "the violence of war is now disproportionately targeted towards civilians" (McGarry & Walklate, 2019, p. 9). This shift coincides with the dramatic rise in intrastate violence since WWII. Wars within countries are now more common than wars between, and the targeted mass killing, sexual victimization, and torture of civilians at the hands their own governments has become increasingly prevalent (Karstedt, Nyseth Brehm, & Frizzell, 2021). Whether such acts are defined legally as genocide is a fraught issue, but is perhaps of less consequence to children coming of age in such contexts than the decimating forces of mass violence itself.

Second, direct exposure to violence (e.g., bombing campaigns, chemical attacks, and gunfire), is but one of the detriments experienced by children in war. The degree of exposure to violence varies widely across geographic region; in 2023, an estimated 14 percent of people in the world were within 5 km of violent conflict, though in some regions, it is far greater (ACLED & WorldPop., 2024). For example, an estimated 81 percent of Palestine's population is exposed to conflict, underscoring how some children grow up under conditions of near-constant threat, while others may live at the periphery of active hostilities (Raleigh & Kishi, 2025). Even where violence is geographically concentrated, its reverberations extend far beyond battle zones, shaping children's lives through displacement, poverty, famine and the systemic dismantling of safe and stable social environments. By the end of 2024, nearly 50 million children were displaced globally due to conflict and violence, with trends indicating further displacement due to intensifying conflicts in Haiti, Lebanon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Palestine, and Sudan

(UNICEF, n.d.). Children make up approximately 30 percent of the global population, but account for as much as 40 percent of refugees and nearly 50 percent of internally displaced people (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025). These dynamics intersect with staggering levels of deprivation: in conflict-affected countries, on average, more than a third of the population lives in poverty, compared to just over 10 percent in non-conflict settings (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). Widespread famine is also increasingly linked to modern warfare—both as cause and consequence of political conflict. Combatants' deliberate weaponization of food production is compounded by food scarcity and dwindling availability of humanitarian aid, driving malnutrition, and heightening the risk for enduring cognitive and social impairment among youth (see, e.g., Oberg, Hodges and Masten, 2022; Raine, 2002).

Taken together, these sobering realities underscore the need for renewed criminological attention to how war's structural and developmental disruptions generate or reshape patterns of harm among its most unwitting victims. The next section turns to theorizing this war–crime nexus.

Theorizing the War-Crime Nexus

The First and Second World Wars coincided with radical shifts in criminological thought, including the waning emphasis on theories of biological determinism in favor of explanations that granted primacy to social factors (see McGarry and Walklate, 2019; Rafter, 2016). Reflecting on this shift, the earliest studies linking war to rising rates of crime and delinquency typically centered on exogenous mechanisms, including family disruption, premature entrée into the workforce, and the cultural shift in normative value systems attendant to periods of violent social disorganization (Bonger, 1936; Bromberg, 1943; Gault, 1918; Glueck, 1942; Mannheim, 1941; Rosenbaum, 1939). Decades before control theorists would articulate the mechanisms by which an individual's tenuous bonds to family and conventional institutions gave way to indulgence in one's natural impulse to deviate (see, e.g., Hirschi, 1969; Nye, 1958; Toby, 1957), scholars attributed spikes in juvenile delinquency during wartime to the "dislocation of home and school life" (Bathhurst, 1944, p. 292) and "the withdrawal from child-life of adult personal influence, and in the curtailment of those social and educational agencies that hitherto have occupied so large a part of the child's life" (Leeson, 1917, p. 22).

Also prominent in early scholarship was the focus on cultural shifts wrought by war. French criminologist Francois Roux (1913) was among the earliest to identify the moral turpitude of war as a potentially criminogenic force that would endure in its aftermath. Writing of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, Roux warned of the state of "moral vertigo" that would be ushered in by "the breaking-up of homes and the perpetual vision of death" specific to periods of war (cited in Abbott, 1918, p. 40). War, he argued, is "a school of courage and sacrifice" not "a school that teaches respect for the person or the property of others" (cited in Abbott, 1918, p. 40). Von Hentig (1947) suggested similarly that people may acquire an "atrocity habit" in times of war, while Bonger (1936) referred to the "spirit of violence" that takes root in contexts of mass violence.

It is notable that the lion's share of early scholarship on the war-crime nexus focused on the "home front" in times of war, emphasizing the impact of social disorganization, demoralization, family dissolution, and child neglect, among other social harms, on rates of domestic—and typically young male—criminality (Gault, 1918; Bonger, 1936). As McGarry and Walklate (2019, p. 38) observe "such a focus on domestic matters of crime and social disorder, occurring as a result of war and thereafter, successfully obscured a wider assortment of critical issues from criminological scrutiny, including…the cultural salience of militarized masculinities and hyper-sexuality; and increase levels of gendered, racialized and ethicized violence directed toward vulnerable social groups during times of war and thereafter." The discipline's potential to expand and refine theorizing on the role of war in shaping pathways of delinquency and criminality among youth specifically, and to broaden its purview beyond the home front was availed by the sustained warfare and mounting intrastate violence that characterized the latter half of the twentieth century. However, in the aftermath of WWII, criminological interest in the relationship between war and criminality slipped into disciplinary torpor (see Jamieson, 1998, 2003, 2014), even as wars raged on and the shifting nature of contemporary warfare engulfed more and more civilians.

While criminology largely neglected broader questions pertaining to war's criminogenic implications in the postwar decades, insights from adjacent disciplines—particularly psychology, medicine, and social work—have filled the gap, producing a growing body of evidence on how childhood and adolescent

exposure to war violence and attendant harms may be linked to criminogenic outcomes (French & Nikolic-Novakovic, 2011; Leavitt and Fox, 1993). Collectively this work suggests that war-related trauma disrupts normative growth and coping processes, leading to aggression, emotional dysregulation, and antisocial behavior, which is often mediated by post-traumatic stress (Keresteš, 2006; Leavitt & Fox, 1993; Qouta et al., 2008). For some youth, violence may become a coping mechanism. Weierstall, Elbert, and Crombach (2013), for example, argue that repeated exposure to violence can normalize aggression, with traumatic stress producing a paradoxical "appetitive aggression" in which individuals come to regulate psychological distress by perpetrating violence.

The link between war and delinquency is also evident at the macro level. Itskovich, Khoury, and Hasisi (2024), for example, found that among Arab youth in East Jerusalem, exposure to political conflict was linked to juvenile delinquency, with attitudes toward political violence serving as a significant predictor. Similarly, Dubow et al. (2019) demonstrated that exposure to ethnic-political violence among Israeli and Palestinian youth predicted serious violent behavior and antisocial outcomes toward both in-group and out-group members, underscoring the long-term impact of political conflict on youth behavior and highlighting the importance of considering both immediate and cumulative exposure to violence. While research underscores the importance of protective factors such as supportive parenting in mitigating risks (Qouta et al., 2008), the evidence suggests that exposure to war violence operates as both a psychological stressor and a structural condition that cultivates criminogenic potential.

Farrall and Gray (2024) highlight that understanding crime requires attention not only to individual behavior but also to the broader political, social, and policy contexts in which it occurs (see also, Laub & Sampson, 2003). Their insights are directly relevant to the war–crime nexus, emphasizing that macro-level conditions—such as political violence, disrupted institutions, and structural insecurity—interact with life-course trajectories to shape patterns of criminal behavior in conflict-affected societies. War embeds risk at multiple levels—disrupting developmental stability, fostering coping through aggression, and embedding structural conditions that normalize violence—underscoring the need for criminology to integrate micro- and macro-level perspectives on how war shapes pathways into crime.

Elder's Life Course Paradigm and War's Enduring Imprint Upon the Life Course

Although not intended for the study of crime, or the link between war and crime, specifically, Elder's (1974; 1994; 1995) life course paradigm and its interrelated principles—*historical time and place, timing in the life course, interdependent lives, and human agency*—have proven foundational to theorizing on criminal careers across the life span, including Sampson and Laub's (1993; Laub and Sampson, 2003) theory of age graded informal social control, and holds particular relevance to the study of war's enduring legacy upon the life course. Elder's paradigm, broadly, "views human lives in their changing worlds" (1995, p. 102), and stresses "the social forces that shape the life course and its developmental consequences" (p. 104). Central to this perspective is the concept of the *chronosystem*: an ecological concept that "captures all of these interacting elements over time—the developing person, the nature of the environment, and their proximal processes of interaction" (p. 123). Also fundamental to Elder's paradigm are the concepts of turning points or changes in the life course, which are brought about by key transitions (e.g., marrying, entering the workforce, migrating), and ultimately shape the trajectory of one's life.

To address the question of how war might be expressed in the life patterns of the individual necessitates careful attention first to the essential embeddedness of human lives within multiple interconnected spheres of influence. Analogous to a set of Russian dolls, individuals are nested within multiple levels, ranging from the micro-system, which encapsulates individuals' relationships with their immediate environment (e.g., family, peers), to the macro-system, which includes the broader patterns of culture, custom, and change that interact with more proximate structures to frame one's social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). At the macro-level, few events bring about as radical a shift in structure, culture and social organization as war. From a structural standpoint, individuals exposed to war and other forms of mass atrocity experience major social disruption, including widespread displacement, damage to infrastructure, economic instability, and the erosion of community institutions. From contexts of war emerge marginalized groups, including widows, orphans and refugees, whose diminished social status will continue to shape opportunities and life chances long past the end of conflict. Critically, war shapes hegemonic masculinities and femininities (Goldstein, 2003), and holds the potential to upend or concretize patriarchy in ways that can lead to further violence, particularly against women (Muftic &

Bouffard, 2008). To attend fully to the question of how war imprints upon the life course thus necessitates consideration of the multiple ways in which it fundamentally reconfigures the social fabric of society.

Elder's second principle, timing in lives, asserts that the relative impact of various life events (e.g., losing a parent) and social changes (e.g., economic recession, war) depends on one's location at the intersection of social, psychological, and biological development, with younger children believed to be most vulnerable to stressful life events (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1993). Elder's (1974) study of children during the Great Depression, for example, showed that young boys between the ages of 1 and 8 faced the greatest risk for developmental impairment because the economic crisis occurred at a time when they were "most dependent on their families under stress" (p. 115). Timing in the life course is of particular import to the study of the war-crime nexus for at least two reasons. First, the detriments of war may be especially profound for children, who lack the same reservoir of emotional coping mechanisms as adults or even adolescents (Goldstein, Wampler & Wise, 1997; Heptinstall, Sethna, & Taylor, 2004). The link between exposure to violence and victimization and subsequent aggression has been borne out in empirical research, which demonstrates both its acute and enduring effects upon youth (Kirk & Hardy, 2014; Macmillan, 2001; Wilkinson & Carr, 2008). Second, among the deleterious consequences of war for children is the attenuation of childhood and attendant acceleration of traditional age-graded expectations. In times of war, adultlike expectations and experiences (e.g., providing financially for the family, caring for children) may be extended downward to those of younger ages, effectively denying them the protected, non-responsible experience of childhood (Elder, 1995). Scholarship suggests that precocious entrée into adult roles is harmful for adolescent development (Newcomb, 1996) and may serve as a turning point in the life course, which catalyzes deviant behavior (see e.g., Carbone-Lopez & Miller, 2012). A particularly egregious example is the forcible conscription of children to serve as combatants. Although seldom the focus of criminological scholarship, DiPietro and Baker's (2023) recent case study of Omar, a former "child soldier"[1] conscripted during the Bosnian war and genocide (1992-1995) at the age of 11, demonstrates how Omar's forced entrée into the military served as a key turning point in his life, limiting his identity resources, shaping his adoption of hypermasculine norms, and ultimately setting in motion a pattern of cumulative disadvantage and violent criminality that extended well into adulthood.

The cornerstone of Elder's model is the principle of linked lives, which emphasizes how "historical events and individual experience are connected through the family and the 'linked' fates of its members" (Elder, 1998, p. 3). This principle is especially salient for understanding how the structural disruptions attendant to war—including the withdrawal of young men from civilian life, the entry of women into the workforce, prolonged separations, and in many cases the permanent loss of family members—fundamentally alter intergenerational relationships. War frequently redistributes caregiving responsibilities, accelerates role reversals in which children take on adult duties, and destabilizes parental authority, thereby undermining the consistency of family routines and the transmission of norms. These shifts reverberate across the family system, reshaping the nature and effectiveness of socialization, children's views of self and others, and the mechanisms of life course regulation or social control (Elder, 1995, p. 118). Congruent with early theorizing on war's deleterious effects upon families, contemporary research underscores how war related trauma and family disruption impact children, even grandchildren (Betancourt, 2015; Leiner, 2009; Miller & Miller, 1991). The children of war veterans, for instance, face elevated risks of post-traumatic stress, emotional and behavioral problems, and other psychological manifestations of parental trauma (Betancourt 2015; Leiner 2009). These findings affirm Elder's claim that "the misfortune and the opportunity of adult children, as well as their personal problems, become intergenerational" (Elder, 1994, p. 6). In this sense, the family is not only a site where the consequences of war are first registered, but also the conduit through which those consequences are transmitted across time, shaping developmental pathways long after the cessation of armed conflict.

Finally, whereas times of abrupt social change or crisis may fundamentally alter the life course, the personal implications of such changes are "contingent on what people bring to the change process as well as on the nature and severity of the change itself" (Elder, 1994, p. 6). By emphasizing the role of human agency, Elder's paradigm avoids deterministic assumptions regarding the way in which even the most calamitous historical events impact human development. Critically, as Betancourt (2015, p. 199) observes, "despite some of the worst horrors imaginable, there are indeed many who manage to show normative health and interpersonal functioning despite substantial exposure to violence." The question of how

1 It should be noted that the term "child soldier" is contested, as it narrowly presents youth as passive victims (see, e.g., Drumble, 2012 for a thoughtful discussion).

divergent life pathways stem from shared contexts of mass violence therefore necessitates consideration of human choice, subjectivity and action within the broader structure of opportunity and constraints of one's particular place in time and geographic space.

At its core, the life-course paradigm endeavors to integrate macrosocial change with the study of individual lives (Ryder, 1965). Although war marks one of the most drastic forms of social change, its potentially criminogenic effects upon the life course have been given limited empirical attention within criminology. The omission is surprising in light of the relevance of the discipline's core theories to the study of the war-crime nexus. In the following section, I turn to three of these perspectives—social control, strain, and social learning/subcultural theory—to articulate how the discipline might engage more fully with the potentially criminogenic implications of war.

Criminological Theory and the War-Crime Nexus

Social Control Theory

From the earliest conceptualizations, control theories wrestled with the question of how and why individuals resist their natural impulse to deviate. Speaking mainly to delinquency, scholars writing in the 1950s argued that social control was rooted in one's attachments to conventional institutions (Toby, 1957). Family was the single most important locus of control for youth and that affectional identification with parents and other non-criminal adults provided a critical buffer between youth and the lure of proscribed activities (Nye, 1958). Building on this early work, Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory became a preeminent theory in criminology, and foundational to Sampson and Laub's (1993; Laub & Sampson, 2003) theory of age-graded informal social control, which extended the perspective to account for stability and change in criminal careers through adulthood.

Social control perspectives may hold particular promise for understanding war's potentially criminogenic impact over the life course. In times of war, nearly everything that anchors the individual to the collective is disrupted. Family systems are fragmented by death, displacement, and military conscription. Community institutions, including schools and religious organizations, are unable to function as agents of socialization, and networks of informal social control are ruptured by forced migration, and in the case of intrastate conflicts, by religious and ethnic divisions that may linger long past the end of conflict. For children coming of age in contexts of war or forced to flee conflict zones to refugee camps, this fragmentation occurs at a time when attachments to family and school are most critical for socialization, rendering as Elder (1974, p. 30) observed "both interaction and social bonds problematic."

Weakened attachments to family and community institutions consequent to war may set in motion a pattern of cumulative disadvantage among youth, including diminished commitment to and involvement in prosocial activities, such as school. Also salient to contexts of war is the detrimental impact of sustained violence on belief. Some of the earliest writings on war's deleterious consequences suggest that it erodes conventional moral and legal norms (Bromberg, 1943). Propaganda, dehumanization, and the normalization of violence may weaken individuals' belief in nonviolence and/or the justice system and breed legal cynicism. This may be especially likely in contexts of state-sponsored violence (e.g., genocide and crimes against humanity), for which the wheels of justice have been historically slow and ineffective, and perpetrators of atrocity may enjoy relative impunity (see, e.g., Rafter, 2016). War also disrupts fundamental institutions. For children in contexts of protracted crisis, including those living in refugee camps, sometimes for the duration of childhood and adolescence, falling behind in education may set in motion patterns of accumulative disadvantage, effectively knifing off opportunities for prosocial development (Barber, 1999; Scheper-Hughes & Sargent, 1999). It flows from the logic of social control theory then, that war-exposed youth would be at elevated risk for delinquency and criminality even in the aftermath of war, as the damage to social bonds and weakened belief systems may persist into adulthood.

Critically, however, research on the implications of war for social cohesion is equivocal, with some work finding that social bonds may actually be strengthened rather than diminished in the aftermath of war (see, e.g., Bauer et al., 2016). Barber's (1999) study of Palestinian youth during the Intifada illustrates this duality: while exposure was linked to depression and antisocial behavior, involvement in resistance was also positively related to religiosity and family values. These findings underscore Erikson's (1994, p. 231) insight that "trauma can create community," forging a sense of identity and solidarity through

shared suffering. In this light, war may not simply dissolve bonds—it may also redirect and reshape them, sometimes in ways that buffer against its most criminogenic effects (see also, Karstedt, 2012).

While the immediate impacts of war often include the disintegration of social bonds, the long-term effects can be more complex, as under certain conditions, war can act as a catalyst for strengthening family and community cohesion. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing interventions that not only address the immediate needs of war-affected populations but also support the rebuilding of social structures that promote resilience and social control.

Anomie and Strain Theory

At the root of contemporary strain perspectives is Durkheim's (1893 [1997], 1897 [2005]) concept of *anomie*, which captures the state of normlessness and social instability that arises in periods of social ferment. Durkheim argued that the collective breakdown in shared norms and values consequent to rapid social change would engender alienation from the collective conscience, and a sense of meaningless, futility and despair.[2] These insights were foundational to Merton's (1938) theory of social structure and anomie (1938), which attributed crime to the disjunction between cultural goals (e.g., wealth, status), and legitimate mean to attain them, and subsequently to Agnew's (1992, 2012) general strain theory, which shifts attention from blocked goals to the presence of "negative stimuli" and the inability to escape aversive conditions, and the negative emotional states that result.

The application of anomie-strain theory to the war-crime nexus should be *prima facie* straightforward. At the macro-level, war brings about anomic conditions, causes damage to infrastructure, economic instability and the marginalization of certain groups (e.g., widows, veterans, orphans) that could conceivably lead to blocked economic goals and subsequent crime, particularly so-called utilitarian crimes (e.g., theft, corruption). At the individual level war introduces intense and chronic "negative stimuli" (Agnew, 1992, 2012)—direct violence, forced displacement, poverty, and the loss of loved ones—while simultaneously removing "positive stimuli" such as safe housing, schools, and community supports. Congruent with Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources (COR) perspective, these dynamics represent cascading resource losses—of material assets, social supports, and future opportunities. These strains are not fleeting. Research shows that traumatic war experiences can produce mental health effects and behavioral adaptations that persist long after the cessation of hostilities (Betancourt, Khan, & Brennan, 2020; Drožđek, 2020; Kibris, Altuntaş & Eren, 2024). Conflict-related sexual violence can amplify these effects, producing long-term disruptions in social cohesion and individual life trajectories, especially among child survivors who, faced with stigma, may struggle to achieve basic social and developmental goals. GST complements this perspective by specifying the emotional pathways through which such losses translate into crime. Anger, frustration, and despair are key mechanisms linking strain to criminal behavior, with crime serving as a form of "corrective action" when legitimate escape or restitution seems impossible. War-related strains—high in magnitude, perceived injustice, and personal relevance—are precisely the types most likely to elicit these intense negative emotions.

Recent empirical work underscores this connection. Using survey data from two large Ukrainian cities, Timmer et al. (2023) show that both direct and vicarious war exposure predict projected interpersonal violence among civilians. These findings provide rare population-level evidence that war-related stressors and routine hardships can ignite the very emotional dynamics—anger, frustration, perceived injustice—that GST identifies as precursors to violence. Historical and qualitative studies likewise reveal the enduring power of war-related strain. Miller and Miller's (1991) interviews with the grandchildren of Armenian genocide survivors document how trauma and perceived injustice were transmitted across generations, motivating acts of political violence nearly seventy years later.

The war environment therefore can generate a multi-layered strain process—macro-level anomie, community-wide resource depletion, and individual-level emotional trauma—that together generate

2 It is noteworthy that Durkheim, who was writing during La Belle Époque, an historical period bookended by the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and the beginning of WWI in 1914, characterized by relative peace, prosperity and optimism in Europe, embraced a functionalist view of war. Viewing war as an aberration that would be dispelled as society shifted from primitive "mechanical" solidarity to the more advanced "organic" form, he posited that war would strengthen, rather than diminish the social and moral fabric of society (see, McGarry and Walklate, 2019 for a thoughtful discussion).

criminogenic pressures extending well beyond the period of open conflict.

Social Learning and Subcultural Theory

Social learning and subcultural perspectives, rooted in Sutherland's (1947) theory of differential association, posit that individuals acquire techniques for committing crime, as well as definitions, rationalizations, and motivations favorable to law violation, through processes of interaction. Central to these perspectives is the idea that behavior is shaped primarily by the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences, captured succinctly in W.I. Thomas' oft-cited theorem, that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Social learning theories therefore emphasize human subjectivities, recognizing that the objective conditions people experience may be less consequential for criminal behavior than the interpretations and meanings they construct from them.

Subcultural theories build on these insights by focusing on the attitudes, norms, and values that support crime and violence within specific social contexts. A voluminous body of criminological scholarship has explored the ways that attitudes governing the use and necessity of violence take root in socially isolated, distressed urban environments (Anderson, 1999; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967; Sampson & Wilson, 1995). Sampson and Wilson (1995) introduced the concept of "cognitive landscapes," or norms regarding standards and expectations of conduct, to bridge ecologically structured tolerances for crime to criminal behavior (see also Sampson & Bean, 2006). Whether or not individuals embrace and act upon violent ideologies depends on a constellation of social and psychological risk factors, but cognitive landscapes are a critical lens through which individuals see and relate to the world.

Whereas subcultural theories have stemmed primarily from disadvantaged urban contexts, emphasizing the structural conditions (e.g., poverty, isolation) that give rise to violent adaptations, there are critical parallels to be drawn between inner-city cultures of violence and "cultures of war" (see., e.g., Garbarino, 1995). In both contexts, violence may be internalized as a means of asserting respect, negotiating social position, and maintaining identity. Gender performances are central to both contexts, as individuals are "held accountable" for enacting socially prescribed gender roles (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In war, men and boys may experience intense pressures to embody mythologized military identities, and failures to meet these ideals can produce profound psychological strain, social sanctions, and further exposure to violence (Baaz & Stern, 2009:505). As Goldstein (2003, p. 264) notes, "cultural norms force men to endure trauma and master fear, in order to claim the status of 'manhood'….cultures develop concepts of masculinity that motivate men to fight." Hypermasculine ideals thus operate as a key mechanism through which violence is normalized and valorized.

Critically, social learning and subcultural perspectives provide a framework for examining how exposure to war related violence may impact behavior by shaping systems of meaning, normative values and cognitive scripts pertaining to the use and acceptability of violence (Qouta et al., 2008) during children's most formative developmental period. Hypermasculine ideologies that equate power with violence may be filtered through discourses to shape the world views of children coming of age in contexts of atrocity. Articulating a "culture of war" is a formidable task, and one that is beyond the present scope, but as a baseline can be considered—much like cultures of violence—a complex mosaic of attitudes, identities, institutions, and beliefs that espouse violence as a necessary means to an end. That children bear no responsibility for war or mass violence does not insulate them from its cultural infusion or its potentially criminogenic implications. The way in which individuals ascribe meaning to their experiences and its implication for identity and behavior across the life span marks one of the most critical directions for the future study of war's imprint upon the life course, and may hold the keys for unraveling intergroup variation in life trajectories stemming from contexts of shared atrocity.

Moving Forward

More than 25 years have passed since Jamieson (1998) entreated the discipline to engage more critically with the topic of war, yet criminologists have been historically slow to heed the call. The aim of this work is to chart new directions in the study of war's enduring implications by providing an overview of the life course paradigm as well as core criminological theories and concepts that hold particular relevance for examining how exposure to war and other forms of mass violence early in life may produce enduring behavioral effects over the life course. Elder's life course paradigm and some of the discipline's most

well-trodden criminological perspectives provide a baseline for theorizing war's potentially criminogenic impacts, but deeper engagement with the subject would benefit from expanding our repertoire to consider novel analytic approaches, including those rooted in phenomenology, which grants primacy to human subjectivities and reveals linkages between individual lives and macro-social contexts (see, e.g., Barnum and Jennings, 2021; Farrall and Gray, 2024; Manning and Raphael, 2012).

As Betancourt (2015, p. 199) reminds us, the effects of war are not deterministic." This paradox highlights the importance of examining not just harm, but also resilience and post-traumatic growth. Future research should prioritize children as a central population of interest, investigating how exposure to violence, displacement, and other war-related adversities intersect with developmental stages, gendered expectations, and social supports to shape behavioral trajectories. Longitudinal and life history approaches could illuminate pathways linking early exposure to war-related strain with both criminality and resilience. Gendered analyses are particularly critical, given evidence that militarized masculinity and socially imposed gender performances influence identity, coping, and vulnerability among war affected youth (see, e.g. DiPietro, 2025). We must also attend to what Jamieson (1998) describes as the *cultural inscription of war*—the ways that war's legacies are etched into collective memory and social life long after formal hostilities have ceased. One manifestation is the persistence and continuing appeal of militarized masculinities in peacetime, which sustain gendered hierarchies of power and valorize aggression, discipline, and domination as markers of manhood. These cultural residues shape children's developmental contexts by normalizing militarized gender ideals within families, schools, and communities, reinforcing patterns of inequality and channeling young men in particular toward specific identities and behaviors.

Taken together, these insights suggest that the study of war within criminology should attend simultaneously to its destructive and generative dimensions. Studies of the war-crime nexus offer a critical opportunity not only to trace the unintended deleterious consequences among its most vulnerable victims, but also to understand patterns of resilience, adaptation, and growth in its aftermath. A rich historical literature documenting the implications of war for human development and behavior (including crime) remains a largely untapped resource within criminology, as do relevant insights from psychology, sociology, and social work. Integrating insights from other disciplines will strengthen these efforts. Psychological and social work research on post-traumatic growth, parenting, and intergenerational resilience—(see., e.g., Irakoze and Sinalo, 2022)—offers concrete examples of how families and communities can support adaptive development and buffer the criminogenic effects of war-related strain. Linking criminological theory with such practical interventions can highlight mechanisms for mitigating risk, fostering resilience, and informing evidence-based policy and humanitarian programming in current war-affected regions.

As Assmann and Clift (2016, p. 165) note, "One of the distinctive features of historical traumas is their belated reappearance long after the decisive events occurred." The consequences of conflict are rarely confined to the immediate period of violence; instead, they reverberate across social structures, cultural norms, and individual life courses. Ultimately, we must adopt a long view of war's imprint upon the life course—one that considers its enduring structural, cultural, and psychosocial effects over time and across generations.

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