
Children's Play in the Shadow of War



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The author demonstrates that war places children's play under acute stress but does not eliminate it. He argues that the persistence of children's play and games during periods of armed conflict reflects the significance of play as a key mode for children to cope with conditions of war. Episodes of children's play drawn from the recent Syrian Civil War illustrate the precariousness and importance of children's play and games during contemporary armed conflict and focus attention on children's play as a disregarded casualty of war. The article compares the state of underground children's play in contemporary Syria with the record of clandestine games played by children in the Holocaust to substantiate its claim that children adapt their play to concretize and comprehend traumatic wartime experience. The article posits that play is both a target of war and a means of therapeutically contending with mass violence. **Key words:** play and trauma; play therapy; Syrian Civil War; the Holocaust; underground play; war play

CHILDREN'S PLAY TYPICALLY becomes one of the first targets of armed conflict. Even before hostilities reach a fever pitch and mortality figures soar to appalling heights, families rush children from vulnerable play spaces, curtail their outdoor games, and interrupt everyday play in many other ways because children's basic safety, obviously, takes precedence over recreational activity. Characterized by the looming threat of physical danger and pernicious scarcity, war puts both the free play and structured games of childhood under intense strain. This attack on the diverse range of play categories (Caillois 2001) typifies modern military conflict: war threatens indoor games and outdoor sport, directed play as well as independent make-believe. "Many of today's conflicts last the length of a childhood, so that from birth to early adulthood, children experience multiple and accumulative assaults," states Ellen Frey-Wouters (1997,

1). Among those multiple and accumulative assaults lies a wholesale attack on play. On a contemporary battlefield that increasingly puts civilians and domestic spaces in the crosshairs, games and play find no safe quarter. Yet despite the significant risk, mass violence does not eliminate children's play. On the contrary, contemporary and historical examples offer compelling evidence that children persist with their games and play during periods of armed conflict, albeit often in modified form. Because war and play appear to be diametrically opposed, the crucial question becomes to what purpose children engage in games and play in times of violent unrest. Although the wretched toll of militant conflict logically appears to preclude the mere possibility of carefree childhood recreation, war forms the developmental backdrop for millions of children around the globe growing up in zones of unremitting hostility. However, children living under war conditions do not cease to play. Instead, they adapt their games to the constraints of conflict and persevere with their play in the face of lethal danger. This article explores how and why.

The nexus of play and war has received scant attention in the field of play studies, and we need sustained further research both on the sociological changes to children's play during periods of mass violence and on its psychological impact on children. This article aims to draw scholarly attention to the phenomenon of children's play in the shadow of war by considering how play becomes not only a casualty of modern warfare but also a means of coping with it. Historical accounts and contemporary reports of children who play in contexts beset by mass violence demonstrate the centrality of play both as a crucial mode for young people to contend with traumatic social conditions and as a way for them to form an initial response to their predicament. Play becomes more precarious as well as more consequential in times of bellicose unrest. For if play is an early casualty of war, it is also a primary method by which children make sense of their reality, even in violent circumstances.

The argument I offer advances discussion of children's play in relation to modern war by coupling relevant theoretical research with evidence from two salient campaigns of mass violence that overwhelmingly targeted civilians, including children. After reviewing the extant literature about play in the context of violence, I describe episodes of children's play drawn from the Syrian Civil War to illustrate both the fragility and significance of children's play during contemporary armed conflict. Maintaining a comparative model, I then contrast the hazards of children's underground play in contemporary Syria with the historical record of clandestine games played by children during the Holocaust to

offer evidence of how children adapt their play to concretize and comprehend traumatic wartime experience. The findings suggest that, although play gets quashed for many children during wartime, those children who, amid violent upheaval, manage to engage in play in any of its forms—games, sport, recreation, and make-believe—convert play into a mode of cognition that seeks to assert juvenile order over chaotic and dangerous circumstances. In the article’s final section, I review the historical links between play therapy, international children’s rights policy, and the evolution of armed conflict to substantiate my broader claim that play forms not only a target of modern war but also becomes a means of therapeutically contending with it.

Studies about Play and War: The State of the Field

Play has been theorized by scholars and clinicians as a key modality in the rehabilitation of traumatized children for over three decades (Gil 1991, 1998; Nader and Pynoos 1991; Terr 1983). Early in the course of these studies, Lenore Terr identified the phenomenon of posttraumatic play as a distinct and problematic pattern of play that warranted therapeutic intervention in the treatment of children exposed to violence. Afflicting some severely abused children, posttraumatic play emerged in clinical studies as a deleterious form of play characterized by an unconscious link between play and traumatic events, compulsive repetition, and a failure to soothe acute anxiety (Chazan and Cohen 2010; Gil 2017). Yet seldom does the copious research about both play therapy and posttraumatic play refer to child survivors of war. Instead, the psychological literature focuses on the extent to which “expressive arts, play, and pleasurable activities within therapy have been found to be helpful and needed in helping traumatized and abused children create their trauma narratives” in the wake of domestic violence, serious illness, or sexual abuse (Drewes 2011, 23). In such therapeutic contexts, play has been found to represent “a medium of change” (van Horn and Lieberman 2009, 214), a powerful means by which children may “transform the anxieties and fears related to traumatic experiences into feelings of mastery and control” (Robinson 1999, 272) and “a vehicle to help children examine the distorted expectations created by trauma, to experiment with different outcomes, and to place the trauma in perspective” (van Horn et al. 2013, 58). Gil, a pioneer in the field, concisely expresses the core rationale for the efficacy of play therapy: “For those young people who have experienced frightening life

events—family disruption, illness, or trauma—play offers a second chance, an opportunity for reworking and rebuilding” (Webb 1999, ix). But the prospects of reworking and rebuilding are clouded when children contend with a traumatic event that renders play itself a risky endeavor. Modern armed conflict makes children’s play and games inherently perilous to all who are threatened by the violent circumstances of war. One consequently wonders whether this danger complicates or even compromises the revitalizing potential of play to serve as a therapeutic means of mending distorted expectations, changing outcomes, and shifting children’s perspectives after combat subsides. When carefree play and untroubled games compose an important share of the losses suffered by children under war, can exposure to play therapy nonetheless restore a sense of agency to young war survivors? Does play still allow children to transform terror into mastery and control, as therapists claim, when play is part of what comes under attack?

Studies of play therapy among child war refugees offer an unqualified “yes, it can.” Tina Hyder’s (2004) book about the adaptive use of play among child refugees argues that play can restore lost childhoods to children of conflict and provide them with a healing experience. Examining the experiences of young refugee children and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom in the early years of this century (well before the massive waves of more recent war refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan), Hyder observes that play suffices to meet the rehabilitative needs of most child refugees. Becoming a child refugee necessarily indicates enduring a loss of play, Hyder writes, but “play can be a key way in which childhood can be restored” after leaving the zone of conflict (13). Other accounts from the field by Ann Cattanach (2007) and Brenda Williams-Gray (1999) report on interventions involving play therapy among refugee children. They suggest an emerging consensus: children’s independent free play as well as guided play therapy can be instrumental in fostering juvenile recovery from crises of war. Williams-Gray writes that through play young Bosnian Muslim survivors of war were able to “act out their worries and express their fears and feelings in ways that are developmentally in tune with their ego development” (463). These isolated studies notwithstanding, the preponderance of research on children of war suffers from a dearth of attention to play as either a target of violence or a key component of childhood rehabilitation and restoration. For example, a pathbreaking 2018 special issue of an academic journal on empirical information about refugee children from Syria yields invaluable data and insights but omits nearly all mention of play as part of a composite portrait of the study

group's behavior (Sirin and Aber 2018). In depth research such as Hyder's that combines the discourses of war, child development, and play remains all too rare. Scholarly attention to play therapy is predominantly restricted to the rehabilitation of trauma visited upon children within the family, at home, or in school.

Armed conflict is similarly given short shrift in the psychological literature about children's war play that delves into the simulacrum experience of war games played in the safety of ordinary childhood environments. Developmental psychologists have thoroughly debated the relative benefits and excesses of juvenile war play and use of war toys, but the more unsettling phenomenon of play among children at war—a behavior far less accessible to scholarly inquiry—has received only limited critical comment among researchers (Levin and Carlsson-Paige 2006; Hart and Tannock 2013; Holland 2003; and Goodenough and Immel 2008).

By contrast, seminal twentieth-century theorists of play broached the general relationship between war and play in foundational terms. Johan Huizinga (1949) paired the two concepts in the fifth chapter of his magisterial *Homo Ludens*, which he titled with the unambiguous, arresting phrase "Play and War." The chapter opens, "Ever since words existed for fighting and playing, men have been wont to call war a game. We have already posed the question whether this is to be regarded only as a metaphor, and come to a negative conclusion" (89). Though couched in Huizinga's characteristic hyperbole, the statement unequivocally insists on the entanglement of war and play. Earlier in *Homo Ludens* Huizinga definitively asserts, "Play is battle and battle is play" (41).

Roger Caillois (2001) notes that Huizinga's overarching objective is to chart the pervasive ludic spirit that generally informs diverse cultural domains, including the chivalrous "etiquette of war" (4), but Caillois does not dissent from Huizinga's conception of war as an elaborate, if deadly, game. In *Man, Play, and Games*, he too identifies war with play in his own description of the *agôn* (competition) principle of games that obtains, according to him, "in the duel, in the tournament, and in certain constant and noteworthy aspects of so-called courtly war" (16).

These figurative depictions of bygone wars of courtly etiquette bear only a distant and deformed relation to the gruesome reality of modern warfare. Furthermore, as these sources reveal, scholarly literature regarding play and war typically focuses on either metaphorical play or symbolic war. I wish to propose a much closer connection between war and play anchored in the actual games of children threatened by real conflict. My interest lies in what becomes of the play of children at war in both contemporary and historical experience and in

a comparison of children's experiences in war-ravaged Syria and Nazi-occupied Europe illustrates this point.

War and Subterranean Play in Syria

Contemporary hostilities provide a regrettably plentiful store of evidence for examining war's effect on play. The protracted and bloody conflict in Syria, which began in 2011, has dealt a debilitating blow to the nation's children, who have been frequent targets of the internecine violence. Among the fundamental human rights violated by combatants throughout the war has been children's right to play. Enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2010) is "that every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child" (10). The Syrian government, which ratified the treaty in 1993, has grossly abrogated this clause protecting children's right to play. Military air strikes and relentless shelling make it too dangerous to play in many besieged areas of the country. "When the war planes come, there is no place to hide," says Ala'a, a girl from Aleppo (Al Jazeera 2016).

According to reports by international humanitarian groups and news organizations, Syrian children under government assault cite violation of their right to play among their chief grievances and demand that their right be restored and respected. "It is my right to play," Lina, a nine-year-old from Latakia, says in a report by a Dutch human rights group. Faris and Fadi, two boys from an area near Damascus, concur: "We want to play every day. . . . We love to play in the neighborhood. We don't play anymore because of snipers and shelling in our neighborhood" (War Child 2014). Although unschooled in the political vocabulary of universal human rights, these children intuit the urgent quality of their right to play as an essential prerogative of the first rank.

That right, however, has been under constant bombardment since the Syrian Civil War erupted. "I used to play on the roof with my neighbor. A plane would come bomb us," says six-year-old Sara from Aleppo in a BBC dispatch. "Before the war, we used to play and enjoy ourselves. But after the war we became frightened by the sound of explosions and mortar shells. We no longer dared to go out and play," adds Mohamed, a thirteen-year-old from Dera (BBC 2016). "These days, [children] have nowhere to go, not even their homes and yards are safe," says Manal Omar, director of a children's play organization in Aleppo

(Al Jazeera 2016). Images of shell-shocked, maimed, drowned, and poisoned children have been at the center of Syria's vicious conflict eliding any distinction between home front and frontline. A cruel campaign of deliberately indiscriminate government attacks on residential structures and public spaces, schools, homes, shops, and streets over seven years' time imperiled both indoor and outdoor play, planned games, and impromptu sport. Nowhere is safe—this was the regime's objective—and children's play has been a major casualty of the combat since it erupted.

Perhaps nowhere is the assault on play more distressingly apparent than in a play space near Damascus idyllically called the Land of Childhood. Located in Arbeen, a town in Eastern Ghouta, one of the last remaining antigovernment strongholds in the Damascus region and the site of especially vicious attacks including the use of chemical weapons, the Land of Childhood was built in late 2015 as a community playground that is located underground. After years of siege and merciless bombardment, a subterranean play space and indoor amusement park, with the wholesome name of the Land of Childhood—Al Ard' Altufulat—and designed for children to frolic and play in relative safety from the reckless ordnance of the Assad regime and its airborne Russian abettors, was hewn into a complex of basement chambers and tunnels deep beneath street level. There, in a secret sanctuary of a thousand square meters, children are given the freedom to retreat from the terror they face on the embattled urban surface and play without fear.

Syrian children and their parents exult in this liminal pocket of underground freedom. "My mom doesn't allow me to play in the street, . . . but when she learned that this place is underground she let me come here to play," one child says in a briefing from UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund (2016) (originally called the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund). "I wasn't afraid of bombardment because my dad told me we are in the basement," says seven-year-old Massa (2016). Burrowed far into the earth, the underground play space allows children to engage in play and games without immediate worry of the next barrel bomb or mortar attack.

Given the tragic situation in Syria, the initiative to create the Land of Childhood and other playgrounds like it in basement bunkers across the country reflects a cruel and devastating truth engendered by the brutal civil war: after years of escalating conflict, children's play in Syria has been driven underground. The ordinary and vibrant activity of juvenile games and children's play exists in some war-torn parts of Syria only in subterranean security, traumatically

repressed deep beneath the violent bloodshed of the horrendous adult war raging on the surface. There, by climbing below ground, children use play and games to escape the war above. The Land of Childhood is an emblem of how contemporary armed conflict targets play, deprives children of their internationally recognized right to recreation, and forces games to go metaphorically and sometimes literally underground to preserve a vestige of normal leisure in abnormal circumstances. In the childhood dystopia of embattled Syria, play persists solely in a bunker.

But it persists, nonetheless. The adults who planned and built the Land of Childhood grasped the vital importance of play for the battle-scarred children of Damascus. One of the project leaders, an architectural student who identifies himself in UNICEF's report as Yaseen, states that he and his colleagues implicitly understood that in a hostile environment such as contemporary Syria, efforts to afford children opportunities to play take on heightened significance. "We wanted to bring them in from the dark, depressing life they are experiencing under siege and be able to play," Yaseen explains. The project leaders perceived that to the traumatized children of Eastern Ghouta, play is a precious and essential activity crucial to their healthy development and psychological well-being. They recognized that if modern war makes children's play yet another civilian casualty, then children's rights activists and care givers must take responsibility for salvaging play as a means of helping children cope with violence. For even during armed conflict—perhaps especially during conflict—play represents a way for children to "express themselves" and "adapt to new circumstances" of capricious violence and volatility (UNICEF 2016).

Subterranean play spaces like the Land of Childhood also demonstrate how war scrambles children's sense of space and normality. "It's safer here than outside. Outside there is shelling and air strikes. My friend was killed in an air strike," says Bashar Abdelhadi, a boy from Eastern Ghouta who was interviewed in the basement play area (Al Jazeera 2016). He draws a distinction not between conventional indoor and outdoor play, but between play "here" in the underground bunker and "outside," everywhere else that is vulnerable to attack.

A staff member of the children's aid organization Space for Hope, which in 2016 built five underground play spaces in Aleppo after many children were killed playing in the street, lamented that children could not play outdoors during the war: "I wish I could see the children playing outside in the future," says Tahany, an Aleppo resident, "but at the moment it has reached a level where the children have no choice but to play underground" (Porter 2016, 13). In the

same article, some Space for Hope care givers express fear that Syria's youngest children, who have known only years of bloodshed, instinctively associate all open spaces with danger.

Likewise, in attempts to master trauma by imitating the stressful events they witness (Webb 2009), Syrian children play heartbreakingly novel games, such as social worker, in which children act out the role of consoling victims of war, or rebel commander, in which children construct makeshift toy guns and deploy against an imaginary enemy (Al Jazeera 2016). During Syria's extended period of crisis, the unusual and artificial play spaces beneath the earth are the only places that ordinary and natural children's play takes root. The example of contemporary Syria demonstrates that scholars of play must literally delve beneath the surface of violence to study the effects of conflict on play. It further suggests that children in combat zones will seek out play wherever they can, even if normal play can only be found under the most abnormal circumstances and space for hope lies buried underground.

Clandestine Games of the Holocaust

The precariousness and significance of play in contemporary war-torn Syria is given historical resonance through comparison with the record of games covertly played by Jewish children in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe. There, too, children played under the most imperiled circumstances. In the ghettos, concentration camps, and secret bunkers of the Holocaust, Jewish children engaged in clandestine games that they used to concretize and comprehend their own traumatic war experiences. The history of play among persecuted Jewish children during the Holocaust substantiates the claim that play helps children cope with the extreme circumstances of war.

In *Children and Play in the Holocaust*, George Eisen (1990) "chronicles the play activities of the young" during the Holocaust (3). Eisen's historical and sociological study proves that, contrary to expectation, "mass murder and play could exist side by side" in Nazi Europe (5). In Auschwitz-Birkenau, for instance, Jewish children condemned to death played games such as Blockältester (Block Elder), Roll Call, Doctor, and even Gas Chamber. The games mimicked a ghastly reality. "They made a hole in the ground and threw in stones one after another," one survivor recounts, to represent the canisters of Zyklon B poison cast into the subterranean killing chambers of Birkenau (81). In their comprehensive survey

of children's sport, Iona Archibald Opie and Peter Opie (1969) similarly attest to the existence among Jewish children in Auschwitz of "a game called 'Going to the Gas Chamber.'" These children were "well aware of the reality" but were essentially acting out their own murder (331).

Firsthand sources add nuance to these terrifying games. Children during the Holocaust not only played out their death, they also played with death. Warsaw Ghetto historian Emanuel Ringelblum recorded in May 1941 that children would occasionally play with dead bodies: "The children are no longer afraid of death. In one courtyard, the children played a game tickling a corpse" (Michlic 2010). Similarly, recalling his time as a boy imprisoned in a concentration camp, Otto Dov Kulka (2013) relates the terrifying episode of a lethal game he played in October 1944. In his account of the game in a testimonial memoir of his incarceration as a child in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Kulka writes that he grievously injured his hand while playing "an involuntary upgrading of the games of daring, the games of touching the electrified barbed wire" (34). One day, Kulka says, "I passed the container with the soup through the fence, and at one point I touched the barbed wire. I felt shocks run through every part of my body. . . . I was caught on the electrified fence." Kulka says that, during his harrowing experience caught on the charged wire between two parts of the camp, he was amazed to be struck by a "boundless curiosity" prompted by his gravely perilous condition: "I am dead, and the world as I see it has not changed! Is this what the world looks like after death?" Kulka was accidentally drawn into a deadly but strangely enlightening game specific to Auschwitz about transcending the ultimate border, the line between life and death. "Is this what it is like to be dead?" he recalls asking himself during his turn to play the "game of touching" the wire (34–35).

The extreme play of Auschwitz children's games of daring allowed young people to touch on experiences charged with pathos: they played with death, they played out their own deaths, and they played so as to transcend their deaths. Kulka was not alone in seeing his predicament from the outside. This was play with life-and-death stakes. Although games are always a simulacrum of the real, children's play in Auschwitz afforded persecuted and hopeless youth a rarefied insight into their extreme condition. In this instance, play allowed Kulka to see in a stark new light his circumstances as a boy at the limits of an Auschwitz subcamp and the metaphysical limits inscribed into survival. "Is this what it is like to be dead?" he asked himself. No, the child was engaged in a liminal experience of play under extreme conditions of war. The dangerous game he accidentally played placed him at the border of the camp and at the boundary

of life, both inside and outside his body and within and without his dire experience. His reflections on the game bear witness to the power of play to transport war-ravaged children to a space of insight and heightened awareness, even as it comes at grim cost and appalling danger.

Children's games during the Holocaust also affirm the necessity of preserving play even in the cauldron of atrocity. In 1943 while working in the graphics workshop of the Terezin ghetto, a Jewish artist named Oswald Poeck who had been expelled from Prague to Terezin two years earlier secretly designed and illustrated a handcrafted version of the board game Monopoly with locations and scenes drawn from the ghetto. The Monopoly properties were Terezin landmarks, and other squares on the board depicted scenes from daily life and the brutality of the ghetto. The center of the game board showcased a panorama of Terezin. The clandestine game, produced in the context of activity for the underground resistance in Terezin, featured locations such as the ghetto jail, bakery, warehouse, barracks, and fort and was intended to entertain children covertly while educating them about ghetto life. The most valuable chance card was a bonus day of rest. The Nazis deported Poeck to his death in Auschwitz in September 1944, but the game secretly passed through the hands of several child inmates. Keepers of the game who faced deportation from the ghetto entrusted their belongings to friends who remained behind. Eventually, the Terezin Monopoly was bequeathed to Pavel and Tomáš Glass, young brothers who ultimately survived Terezin and the Holocaust. As adults, the brothers donated their game to Yad Vashem, Israel's national monument to the Holocaust, and the museum there placed an enlarged replica of the Monopoly set at the center of its exhibit on Terezin, turning it into a prominent symbol of childhood under Nazi oppression. Less well known is the fact that few children who possessed the game fully understood how to play it during the war. Pavel and Tomáš Glass, the survivors, stated they never played it. There was no time. Nor at that stage was there any knowledge about how to play it. Many child survivors said that they had to be taught or retaught how to play after the war. One child survivor of the Holocaust reflected on her ludic ignorance: "I don't even feel I know how to play, and I've found it's a very big lack with my own children . . . I couldn't play, because I don't think I ever played, and I really believe play is a learned thing. I mean you have to play to know how to play" (Eisen 121).

Like individuals at all ages, children at war play to acquire knowledge, but in light of their constrained conditions they must also acquire knowledge about how to play. Ida Vos (1991), in her autobiographical novel about her childhood

as a hidden Jewish child in Nazi-occupied Holland, vividly depicts the risk that armed conflict poses to children's play. In a scene illustrating the collapse of the ludic spirit among children imperiled by violent threat, a nine-year-old Jewish girl who has been secretly sheltered for several years glimpses a child playing jump rope outside and is mystified by the sight. The girl, who has grown up in hiding with hardly any opportunity for play, turns to her older sister.

"Look, a child," Esther exclaims.

"She's dancing with a piece of rope in her hand."

"That's called jumping rope, Esther. Don't you remember that anymore?"

"No," whispers Esther. (85)

Protracted war produces children who cannot recognize play even when they see it.

One final example from the Holocaust attests to the dual use of children's play during armed conflict as both a target of violence and a means of coping with trauma. As a boy, Israeli children's author Uri Orlev was a young inmate of the Warsaw Ghetto. He, too, survived the war as a hidden child, and his texts for young readers portray his ordeal as a boy living with his younger brother in a series of secret attic annexes above tenement buildings on the aryan side of the city as the ghetto fell. Play constitutes a key theme in his writing, as his autobiographical novel, *Lead Soldiers* (*Chayalei Oferet* in the original Hebrew), and young adult memoir, *The Sandgame* (*Mischak Hachol*), richly demonstrate. Play is a juvenile necessity, Orlev writes, "Children need to play—like hunger [makes you] need to eat and need to drink" (Wahrman 2000). Orlev's texts depict the sustaining power of play to offer a means of confronting, comprehending, and even surviving war.

Throughout *The Sandgame* (Orlev 1997) the young protagonist and his brother spend many days engrossed in increasingly elaborate war games in which they deploy vast battalions of toy soldiers across their secret hiding places. They play their way through war while the world outside the walls of their hidden shelters collapses into chaos and murder. "During the six years of the real war we fought our own imaginary one," Orlev says (30–31). Eventually, the boys' play war and the external adult real war collide. One day, during a particularly extensive engagement of imaginary warfare so intense that the protagonist and his brother forget to guard the entrance to their secret shelter, a plainclothes police officer steals upon the door to their attic apartment. Panicked, the boys stop their play; they assume that their long-running game of hiding from the

authorities is finally over, ended by a fit of playful enthusiasm that distracted them from the real perils of war in favor of their pursuit of war games. The narrator suspects that their games have finally betrayed them: “Maybe we had made too much noise playing war,” he muses (35). But in this dynamic and fraught environment of confused adult and juvenile games of war, the boys are not the only ones who play at conflict. The plainclothesman makes his way carefully through the regiments of wooden and paper soldiers on the floor and begins to interrogate the boys as if they were Jews. But to their disbelief, the boys’ play saves them. The policeman, pretending to be a noncombatant, is felicitously charmed by the imaginary war of these hidden boys pretending to be commanders of combatant armies. He decides not to make them casualties of the actual war. “Don’t worry boys. It will be alright,” he says. “Just playing war, eh?” he asks and, miraculously, exits (36).

The episode is baffling. Did the officer’s assumption that games are tantamount to leisure fool him into thinking that children at play cannot possibly be children at war, and therefore, that these boys were not the targets of a genocidal campaign? Or did the evocative array of toy armies and paper soldiers strewn across the floor give the policeman occasion to think about the flimsiness of his own role in acting out the war plans of his superiors? We cannot know. Only through the lens of a game, Orlev insinuates, does this anecdote of anomalous play come into focus. For the story testifies to the life-sustaining power of play even in the midst of a blood-soaked campaign of genocidal savagery. War may be the deadliest game of all, but ordinary children’s play can, even in times of extraordinarily violent carnage, preserve a young person’s life. Play offers the revitalizing possibility of dignity, comprehension, and recovery to children buffeted by the horror and distress of armed conflict. To be a child is to play; this does not change during periods of war. When violent conflict strips children of their right to play, young people innovate new opportunities for play even in the darkest recesses of human behavior, even if their play is pushed to secret annexes above a bombed-out building or to secure underground bunkers deep beneath a destroyed city.

Protecting Play in Policy and Therapeutic Practice

Examples of children’s play in the Syrian Civil War and Holocaust underscore both the relevance of armed conflict as a key context for the study of play and

the significance of children's play as a touchstone behavior altered by war. By way of conclusion, I elucidate the longstanding links between children's rights policies, play therapy, and changes in modern warfare. Public recognition of the indispensability of play in rehabilitating children exposed to armed conflict emerged only recently in international children's rights discourse. Over the past decade, UNICEF has issued reports addressed to children's rights advocates that focus on the role of play in helping safeguard children who live under war and restore their well-being. This evolution in UNICEF's line of thinking can be seen by tracing the progressive arc of the organization's position on war and play. In a 1993 document titled "Children in War: A Guide to the Provision of Services," UNICEF entirely disregards play in its discussion of children and militant violence. By contrast, UNICEF's landmark 1996 report by Graça Machel recognizing the profound impact of armed conflict on children makes only occasional and amorphous mention of play. However, UNICEF's ten-year review of the Machel Study, presented in 2007 and published in 2009 as "Children and Conflict in a Changing World," offers several clear and specific recommendations promoting play as a key element in the rehabilitation of child survivors of war.

Despite the bureaucratic tenor of the papers, the difference in language is striking. Whereas the original 1996 Machel report outlines a general need to "provide structured group activities such as play" as part of an overall effort at "integrating modern knowledge of child development and child rights" into best practices "and activities that promote healing" for children exposed to conflict (UNICEF 1996, 42), the 2009 review updates the evidence-based recommendations and is far more direct and detailed: "At the outset of the emergency and in collaboration with the camp management, it is important to identify areas for schools, play, and other forms of recreation" (UNICEF 2009, 118). In addition to explicit calls for protecting children's play in areas of violence, the 2009 review also elevates play to a core juvenile need in the aftermath of war. "Adding stimulation and play activities in the children's early years to nutrition, health, and rehabilitation programs appeared to speed up recovery among children affected by conflict," the report states (109). To satisfy this need, the review calls for "building playgrounds and recreational facilities in schools" as an important point of initial action in response to violent conflict (188). Play activities, the report concludes, are among the key interventions necessary to give "children the right start in life," even in the wake of war (106).

As a declaration of official United Nations policy, UNICEF's 2009 Machel review suggests that play is now seen as a key symbol of the wartime assault

on childhood. In many regions beset by armed conflict, a brighter future cannot be imagined if children cannot play. Reflecting this perspective, the 2009 report includes testimonial statements by several children from locales rocked by violent unrest. Almost all these children forcefully speak to the wartime assault on play: “There are no trees to play under and no playground to go to,” says a ten-year-old displaced girl from Sri Lanka (UNICEF 2009, 111). A Somali boy gives stark expression to how armed conflict corrupts innocent spaces of childhood play into spheres of bloodshed, in his case by transforming a village playground into the scene of exploitative enforced combat: “We were mobilized by our clan militia heads to come to the playground. All of us were young people about the same age. They told us to defend our village. We were in the queue with our guns” (22).

Under such hostile circumstances, the threat of violence forecloses virtually all possibility of ordinary child’s play. In response, children’s rights experts have pivoted over the past decade to protecting and promoting children’s play as part of a comprehensive effort at helping children contend with and recover from armed conflict. Pia Britto, UNICEF’s chief of early-childhood development, affirms the intrinsic value of play as a constitutive part of a child’s world that requires protection in the face of violence: “Conflict robs children of their safety, family and friends, play, and routine,” Britto says, “yet these are all elements of childhood that give children the best possible chance of developing fully and learning effectively” (UNICEF 2017). Play has become recognized as a need that must be met and safeguarded as a crucial part of children’s educational and psychological development.

International policy protecting play reflects emergent ideas in developmental psychology about the therapeutic benefit of play among children who endure armed conflict. Hyder (2005) reviews the clinical argument for the ascendant emphasis on play therapy as a preferred strategy in helping children cope with experiences of extreme violence. “It is through play that children re-create but also come to terms with their experiences,” Hyder writes (59), because play allows children to manipulate past events and test ideas about traumatic reality and, perhaps, to reorder facts in a more sensible and logical way. The ludic capacity to revise the past to come to terms with the course of historically troubling events establishes play as a formative ingredient in children’s recovery from traumatic conflict. “Children’s ability to play and change events, integrating fantasy and reality, is in fact a valuable and important coping mechanism,” Hyder says (57). Changes in children’s rights policy are consistent with this therapeutic view.

The bond between play therapy and the evolution of modern war has a venerable history. For not only does play therapy offer substantial benefits to juvenile war survivors, but the practice of play therapy was itself born from the wreckage of war. Stemming from the early 1940s, the origins of play therapy are inextricably bound up with the collaborative work of pioneering child psychologists Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham during World War II, when they tended to the residents of a British children's home for young war refugees outside London. That work presaged Anna Freud's and Melanie Klein's early theories about the therapeutic nature of play. At the Hampstead War Nursery, a facility for children displaced by the London Blitz, Freud and Burlingham sought to understand the mental distress of children in war. Writing in *War and Children* (1943), they said that observing children's play emerged as the crucial window for them to achieve their professed goals "to do research on the essential psychological needs of children; to study their reactions to bombings, destruction, and early separation from their families" (13).

All children in the nursery were separated from their parents; several had been orphaned in German air raids. Freud and Burlingham recorded the children's reactions to these painful events. One of the chief discoveries was that most of the children responded to the trauma of bombardment and aerial assault through play, specifically war games. Nick Midgley of the Anna Freud Center summarizes this salient finding:

Whereas adults are more likely to use speech to help process such complex experiences, Anna Freud describes how children's modes of communication are somewhat different. Few children spoke about the bombings they had witnessed or the deaths they had experienced until months, or in some cases years, after the actual events had happened. War games, however, were ubiquitous, especially games involving raids. Such play could either be a way of mastering anxiety, through repetition, or of denying reality. (Midgley 2007, 946–47)

Anna Freud found in play a juvenile language for confronting the traumas of armed conflict. Where adults speak, children play to express their feelings in the wake of violence.

Play, then, communicates latent childhood feelings of anxiety, defiance, or complex engagement with difficult circumstances forged by war. War play, in this reckoning, becomes a form of speech, a therapeutic channel through which victimized children begin to recover from the traumas of armed conflict. Anna Freud makes her case for the significance of children's play as an outlet

for traumatic experience by drawing on the evidence of numerous case studies. Together with Burlingham (Freud and Burlingham 1943), she writes, “When adults go over their experiences in conscious thought and speech, children do the same in their play” (67). In using speech to voice the play language of children, the adult analyst makes verbal what is, for young people, purely performative. Professional training, Freud says, inculcates in adult analysts the necessary skills to understand the playful language of small children. Children communicate through their play, and what traumatized children say in and through their games has crucial significance for how adults help juvenile victims recover from violent tribulation.

Freud and Burlingham focused special attention on games played by their young wards that evoked the specific experience of their time: “After the [air] raids in March and May 1941, the children, three to five years old, repeated in play what they had seen or heard. The climbing frame in the garden was used to provide a high point for the bomber. One child climbed to the highest bar and threw heavy objects on the children underneath,” they write (68). They also noted variations on the game. “Dolls and teddy bears are used in play as substitutes for missing families” (69). Posttraumatic play evoking violence discomfits and unsettles, but the play of children scarred by war expresses powerful juvenile emotions that the perspicacious and sensitive analyst must decode. By allowing traumatized children to play freely, even when their play takes the posttraumatic form of viscerally troubling games, care givers offer young survivors of conflict an invaluable channel through which to foster a holistic response to the travesties of war and to process their unspeakable experiences. By encouraging, observing, and interpreting children’s play, the directors of the Hampstead War Nursery discovered a vital means of juxtaposing violence with games and thereby helped inaugurate a therapeutic practice that is still used to treat traumatized young survivors of war.

Killing the Clown of Aleppo

The final weeks of the siege of Aleppo, Syria, in late 2016 saw some of the most barbaric acts of state-sanctioned violence perpetrated during the vicious Syrian Civil War. One low followed another. One of the most dispiriting events in this litany of horrors was the killing, in November 2016, of the “clown of Aleppo,” an aid worker named Anas al-Basha who was an area director with the Space for

Hope organization. Al-Basha's antics as a clown performing for the children of the besieged city earned him local adoration and international recognition. Al-Basha was neither a militant nor an affiliate of any rebel movement. Instead, he was a volunteer in a nongovernmental organization promoting children's play. His unique contribution was to don a clown costume and wig, evince a comic air for the amusement of traumatized children, and help the young residents of the terrorized city imagine themselves in better circumstances. He was killed in a government air strike on November 29, 2016 (CBC 2016). The clown was only twenty-four, another emblem of war-torn children's play reduced to a casualty of war.

Like the suppression of Syrian childhood into underground playgrounds, the death of the clown of Aleppo suggests that attacks on children's play may become a baleful and common feature of contemporary conflict. If merciless campaigns such as the Syrian war create a new paradigm of violence, the space for games will be eliminated on the battlefields of the future. From Aleppo to Uganda, Somalia to Sri Lanka, armed hostility in the twenty-first century seems poised to spread patterns of warfare first introduced during the Holocaust to a global canvas. If that is indeed the case, games and play will become a frequent target of war even as the sustaining power of children's play will be enlisted to contend with trauma in conflicts around the world.

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