



THE KAZAKH INSURRECTION

ILL WILL

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Cover image: Pavel Pavlov.

*In the presence of armed workers obstacles, resistances,
and impossibilities will all disappear.*
—Blanqui

The theory of the state is the reef on which the revolutions of our century have been shipwrecked.¹ During the revolutions of the Arab Spring, the people brought about the fall of the regime, but the institutions of the state remained intact. Elsewhere the revolutions were drained in protracted civil wars. Everywhere that the old regime has seemed to be thrown down, it has found new sources of strength and risen again. What would it look like to finally break with this cycle?

In the past, insurrections have managed to defeat the state, rather than just a particular government. Insurrection is something more than a wave of riots, militant protests, blockades, occupations, and so on. It is the opening of a rupture, the search for that point after which no turning back is possible. If the revolutions of our time haven't defeated the state, we argue this is because there haven't been insurrections: there have been nonviolent uprisings, riots, armed struggles, and civil wars, but not yet insurrection.

In the coming years, we are likely to see experiments in the *art of insurrection* as a new generation of revolutionaries attempts to overcome the obstacles and impasses faced by the uprisings of 2011 and 2019. Kazakhstan, a country many Americans are only familiar with due to the *Borat* film franchise, may provide an early glimpse into this future. Recent events in Kazakhstan are the closest an uprising has come to a full-scale insurrection since the beginning of a global wave of struggles in late 2018. This allows us to imagine what recent movements, such as the George Floyd uprising, might have looked like had they gone further. The course of events in Kazakhstan suggest a possible route by which to navigate the traps that have so far shipwrecked contemporary revolutions. By providing the clearest glimpse of the shape of the coming insurrection, the uprising allows us to interrogate the limits that an insurrectionary process today might face.

The Riot Vaccine

On New Year's Day, 2022, the government of Kazakhstan brought an end to price caps on fuel, causing the cost to nearly double overnight. Protests erupted the next day in western Kazakhstan, the fuel producing region. Significantly, the first demonstrations occurred in Zhanaozen, a city whose name has become synonymous with the violent repression of an oil workers' strike in 2011 that resulted in a wave of riots that spread throughout the region.

This year, as the uprising expanded across the country, it took on a more general character, picking up new demands along the way. When demonstrations reached Almaty, the former capital and largest city, they had begun to reflect a more general social discontent, tapping into widespread frustration over inequality, poverty, and corruption. Demonstrators were now calling for the removal of former president Nursultan Nazarbayev from his position as head of the Security Council. Nazarbayev had been president for nearly thirty years, and was widely believed to still be ruling the country behind the scenes.

So far, these events follow a familiar pattern. The uprisings that shook France and Sudan in late 2018 each began in provincial regions as protests against the rising cost of living.² The same is true of the revolution in

Tunisia that began in late 2010, kicking off the Arab Spring. The French protests were initially in response to a tax on gasoline. In Sudan, they were catalyzed by the end of government subsidies to basic commodities, such as fuel and wheat. Protests in Sudan similarly began in an industrial city famous for its history of working class organizing and its repression. In each country, the protests acquired more demands as they spread. As the strength of the movement grows, its imagination of what is possible tends to grow as well. The capital city each time became the center of gravity of the movement, which now had little to do with the original demand.

In Almaty, things then began to accelerate quickly. Protests began there on January 4. By January 5, they escalated to an armed uprising, aiming not just to reform policy but to topple the government. The police headquarters, police stations, and television stations were stormed. City hall and other government buildings were burned to the ground. The former presidential residence and the regional branch of the governing Nur Otan party were set on fire as well. Crowds then stormed the airport, shutting it down. Police and security forces surrendered to the crowd and were disarmed. Patrol cars were set on fire. Looting spread throughout the city. Videos began to circulate of insurgents distributing rifles looted from gun stores among the crowd. By all indications, power was in the hands of the insurgents that night.

Some casual observers were startled by the swift destruction of Almaty. But, as Vaneigem reminds us, “the barbarity of riots, of arson, the people’s savagery, all the excesses... are exactly the riot vaccine against the chill atrocity of the forces of law, order, and hierarchical oppression.”³

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev attempted at first to placate the protesters, giving in to some of their demands. Fuel subsidies were reinstated. The cabinet was dissolved. Former President Nazarbayev was removed from his post as chairman of the country’s security council. Other members of his inner circle were pushed out of office as well. Some were arrested. Tokayev quickly attempted to refashion himself as the Kazakh Bernie Sanders, delivering a populist speech in which he denounced the country’s income inequality and its ruling elite.

But it was too late to slow the momentum. No reforms the president could offer would have stopped the rising tide of anger at that moment. On January 6, the unrest prompted a military intervention in which

Russia led six other member countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Russian equivalent of NATO. The next day, Tokayev ordered security forces to “fire without warning” while retaking Almaty. This was the first time the CSTO was mobilized. In our era of uprisings, these mutual security pacts become little more than the coordinating body of the armed counterrevolution.⁴

President Tokayev proclaimed that these were not spontaneous demonstrations but rather the activity of a “band of terrorists.”⁵ Such claims were echoed in the *New York Times*, incredulous as to how a protest movement could have spread so quickly across such a large landmass.⁶ If the unrest wasn’t the result of a highly organized Islamist insurgency, then it simply had to be an orchestrated coup—in other words, a power struggle between competing factions of the ruling elite. Such perspectives betray a common failure to grasp how struggles spread today, a process that depends more on repetition and resonance than on explicit coordination.⁷

With internet and phone service mostly down, and the airport closed, Kazakhstan was suddenly cut off from the rest of the world. It became hard to get a sense of what was taking place on the ground in real time. Even now, the events of those days remain fairly obscure to us. But on January 8, the government declared that order had been restored in the former capital, and that across the country things were winding down. Over 225 demonstrators and nineteen police officers were killed in the unrest, according to official reports. Nearly eight thousand were detained.

There is a certain historical irony to these events taking place nearly a year to the day after America’s capitol riot. It seems Hegel’s formula may need to be turned on its head: today all great events happen twice—first as farce, then as a tragedy.

Dual State and Revolution

Uprisings since the 2008 financial crisis have toppled governments, but failed to shake the foundations of the state. The revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, and elsewhere have each given way to a military coup. This has been possible, though, because in those societies the military already functions as something of a *dual state*.⁸ From now on, *the people want the fall of the regime* will have to mean not just the toppling of a ruling clique

but the defeat of the dual state as well. This is what is meant in Sudan by the slogan, “victory or Egypt.”

One aspect of this question is tactical. The uprisings that have resulted in the sequence *political revolution–coup–counterrevolution*, such as those listed above, could be characterized as *nonviolent insurrections*. Although that term is unsatisfying, the implicit strategy of nonviolent insurrection is to pressure the military to side with the people against the regime. This situation thus puts the armed forces in a position to broker the outcome of the revolution. This is best exemplified by the complex case of the 2019 encampment outside of the military headquarters in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. But the tactics of nonviolent uprisings tend to lose their potency once the military has taken power and is committed to staying put. The result has been made painfully clear by the aftermath of the coups in Sudan and Myanmar.

By forcing the police and military to stand down, by confiscating their weapons, by storming police stations and looting gun stores, by distributing arms to the crowd, by storming the airport and setting fire to government buildings, Kazakhstan raises the question of *armed insurrection*. Historically this meant that, rather than forcing it to negotiate or compromise, what is sought is the defeat of the state as such. Could this route offer a way out of the particular traps met by 21st century revolutions so far? Nonviolent protests can bring down a regime but not topple the state. Armed insurrection might be able to bring down the state and not just the government.

But this is, of course, not without risks of its own. Not only does an armed insurrection that fails invite the worst manners of repression, but even where it succeeds it always runs the risk of civil war.

There are also likely contingent historical reasons why armed insurrection appears as a preferable option in some countries but not others. Sudan, for example, has been torn apart by civil war for decades. Armed struggle is thus, understandably, seen as something to avoid. Elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, such as in Syria, the turn towards armed struggle transformed the revolution into an apocalyptic civil war. Taking up arms there may have a different connotation than in Kazakhstan. There is also a precedent for armed demonstrations in the surrounding region, such as during the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine.

The experience in Kazakhstan provides no simple model for what is to be done. The uprising is only one of a number of contemporary attempts to navigate beyond the impasses of our moment. It is not yet clear how the results of this experience will contrast to the sustained mass nonviolent protests in Sudan or the turn towards guerilla insurgency in Myanmar. But any experiment that reaches a certain threshold of intensity will likely offer important lessons to be synthesized in the next wave of struggle.

Rhythm and Initiative

Insurrection is an art, quite like war. It is subject to certain rules, which, if neglected, will lead to the ruin of the party neglecting them. Those rules, logical deductions rooted in the nature of the parties and the circumstances they confront, are simple enough that the brief experience of January 2022 should suffice to acquaint us with them.

1. Never play with insurrection unless you are fully prepared to face the consequences. When beginning, realize firmly that you must go all the way.

2. Concentrate a great superiority of forces at the decisive point and the decisive moment, otherwise the enemy, who has the advantage of better preparation and organization, will destroy the insurgents.

3. Once the insurrection has begun, insurgents must act with the greatest determination, and by all means, without fail, take the offensive. The defensive is the death of every armed uprising.

4. Take the enemy by surprise and seize the moment when their forces are scattered.

5. Strive for daily successes, however small (one might say hourly, if it is the case of one town), and at all costs retain superior morale.

The party of insurrection must seize and maintain the initiative, imposing its rhythm on events. In the words of Danton, *de l'audace, de l'audace, encore de l'audace*.

An Armed Presence

Insurrection is about a certain relationship to the use of arms. It is neither a question of violence and nonviolence, nor does it bear much resemblance to armed struggle. It is rather about maintaining an armed presence. Power isn't depose through the use of arms, but having weapons may help to maintain the space opened up as police and politicians flee. It is about acquiring arms and then doing whatever necessary to prevent their use. The experience of Almaty is exemplary in this regard: arms were looted and distributed amongst the crowd, seemingly with the idea of defending the space opened by the popular uprising. Yet the use of arms remained secondary, and never gave way to specialized, separate armed groups, the appearance of which often undermines the popular and collective feeling of the uprising.

A political defeat of the police and armed forces is possible. In a deep enough crisis, the military will always be sent to restore order. However, history shows that it's never truly possible to know how they will act until they arrive. A large and determined enough crowd can force the army to stand down and refuse to fire, or even to defect and join the insurgents, especially if it is possible to fraternize with the soldiers. This is what happened, for instance, at the military headquarters in Khartoum in April 2019.⁹ This also explains the historic importance of the barricade, which creates the time and space necessary for fraternization.¹⁰ The political defeat of the armed forces might require some skirmishes, but it must not become a fight to the death. In contrast, the military defeat of the armed forces may not be possible. As recent events in Syria, Libya, and Yemen attest to, the militarization of civil war quickly strips it of any liberatory content.

In Almaty, insurgents managed to quickly defeat and disarm the police and other security forces after only a few brief skirmishes. But the state was able to regroup, and the situation changed quickly with the arrival of armed forces who were willing to fire on the crowd. Nonetheless, asking for foreign intervention highlights Tokayev's uncertainty about his own security forces. The important point is that no one can know ahead of time how a situation like this will turn out, nor is there any fixed rule

stating what circumstances will allow for the political defeat of a foreign military. Insurrection always means making a leap into the unknown.

The Geography of Insurrection

The general task of every insurrection is to become irreversible. But how does this occur? Once it is set in motion, what does an insurrection need to accomplish? If earlier generations of revolutionaries were able to answer these questions in advance with some degree of confidence, this is because they had more of a wealth of experience to draw on. The balance sheet of our own century is insufficient in this regard. However, while Kazakhstan might not provide us with a blueprint to follow, it does offer an occasion to test certain hypotheses currently in circulation.

First, it is often argued that the metropolis will assume a less central role in the revolutions of the 21st century.¹¹ “Today it is possible to take over Paris, Rome, or Buenos Aires without it being a decisive victory,” the Invisible Committee claims. In the past, it seemed as though insurgents simply needed to take Paris, or Petrograd and Moscow, in order for an insurrection to succeed. But revolutionaries who did so would then be faced with the contrast between the revolutionary city and the counter-revolutionary countryside which, in one way or another, would lead to their undoing.

The relation between town and country has undoubtedly been redrawn in the last century. Still, it is noteworthy that the metropolis has maintained a certain privileged position in contemporary struggles. While uprisings often begin in the periphery of a country, the largest city or capital tends to become the center of gravity, setting the tone and rhythm for the rest of the country. This is often where the most advanced experiments and the events with the highest stakes tend to happen.¹² The president of Kazakhstan acknowledged as much when he said, “Having lost Almaty, we would have lost the capital and then the whole country.”

Second, in their balance sheet on the 2008-2012 uprisings, the Invisible Committee argued that the movement of the squares had allowed itself to become enchanted by spectacular representations of power, a fact which eventually worked to disarm them. If so many of the pitched battles of that era’s uprisings were fought in an effort to gain access to

important-seeming government buildings, this is because “the places of institutional power exert a magnetic attraction on revolutionaries.” But when would-be revolutionaries managed to storm the halls of power, they would find them empty. If there are no more Winter Palaces or Bastilles to storm, the Committee concluded in 2013, this is because “power now resides in the infrastructures of this world.”¹³

If we interpret the events of January 5 in Almaty from this perspective, several contrasting readings become possible. It could be argued, for example, that gathering spontaneously at city hall day after day, attempting to storm the various halls of power, and eventually setting them on fire, is simply an intensification of old patterns without breaking with them. But it could also be argued that by simply burning the government buildings down and moving on, the insurgents were showing that they were neither enchanted by them nor shocked to find them empty. They were simply one more facet of this world that will have to be undone.

Certain lessons may need to be learned anew with each wave of struggle, with the difference that this perhaps happens a little more quickly each time. In this case, it may have been necessary for the insurgents themselves to experience storming the halls of power and finding them empty, in order for them to turn their sights on different strategic horizons. It makes sense, then, that the turn towards seizing critical infrastructure such as the airport would follow the arson of city hall in quick succession.

The Limits of Novelty

With insurrection, as with any modern art, there is the temptation to overemphasize novelty. It is easy to lose sight of what remains consistent. Following the 1848 revolution, Georges-Eugène Haussmann was tasked with redesigning the streets of Paris. Having witnessed their use during successive uprisings, he sought to replace the dense and defensible urban neighborhoods conducive to barricades and street fighting with wide-open boulevards. In the opinion of Marx and Engels, his work was largely successful. The era of insurrection was over, they concluded, and revolutionary politics would need to be rethought. Blanqui, the head and the heart of the proletarian party in France, thought otherwise. He argued instead that the redevelopment afforded opportunities for both the party

of insurrection and the party of order. New tactics may be needed, but not a fundamental rethinking. This debate is often treated as settled in Marx's favor, but the actual course of history may have corresponded more closely to Blanqui's predictions. The richest experience of Paris' insurrectionary century would only come later, with the Paris Commune, decades after Haussmannization.

In this light, a brief return to the reflections on insurrection offered by the early 20th century traditions of revolutionary theory may prove instructive. In the mid-1920s, the Communist International distributed a manual entitled *Armed Insurrection*, which combined careful case studies of successful and failed insurrections with practical instructions to prepare for the coming ones. In it they stress the importance of *partial victories*. An insurrection will likely not be won in one decisive moment. Instead, each step of the way should remove obstacles and build momentum for the party of insurrection while draining the morale of the party of order.

This means that care needs to be given to the order in which things are done. The first priority of any insurrection, the anonymous authors argue, is to seize and distribute arms, while neutralizing the armed forces. The second priority is to seize, and either occupy or destroy, both government buildings and technical infrastructure. The finer details will vary greatly depending on the location. For that reason, the authors stress that insurrectionists should put care into developing a plan, or at least a list of targets and their priority, ahead of time.

The weight these authors place on capturing the places of institutional power may seem like the relic of a bygone era. Though it may seem counterintuitive, they emphasize that these sites often have a tactical, and not merely symbolic, role in the unfolding of an insurrection. The importance of storming the Winter Palace during the Russian Revolution wasn't due to the fact that power was centralized then in a way that isn't now. Alongside its symbolic meaning, this event allowed the Party to arrest potential leaders of the counterrevolution while demoralizing the few factions of the armed forces still willing to fight against the insurrection.

Much has changed over the last century. The Communist International placed a lot of weight on the role of disciplined cadre formations, which (to our knowledge) have not emerged anywhere in this sequence of struggles. But, for now, the claim that seats of institutional power have

less importance in an insurrection than technical infrastructure should be treated as a hypothesis to be tested and refined, rather than a given truth.

The opposite argument could also be made about the novelty of our times. In our society of the spectacle, symbolic sites of power may actually have more importance than they would have previously, which explains their magnetic attraction. The spectacle produced by the storming of the American Capitol, for all its ineptness, is probably more significant than if that same group of people had targeted a site with real material importance. Similarly, the siege of the Third Precinct in Minneapolis mattered as much for the infrastructure it destroyed as the spectacle it created. In the Sudanese revolution, this same spectacular role was played by the burning of the ruling National Congress Party party headquarters in Atbara, although that site had very little infrastructural importance.

Cracking the Glass Floor

In a different register, *Theorie Communiste* argues that the key obstacle facing our sequence of struggles isn't the leap from riot to insurrection.¹⁴ The limit, to them, is that struggles have failed to penetrate the glass floor into the hidden abode of production. Struggles tend to emerge in the sphere of circulation, but will have to find their way back into the workplace in order to become revolutionary.

Nowhere so far have there been serious innovations that point in this direction. This perhaps reflects the current immaturity of our cycle of struggles, the sheer distance between where we stand and the revolutionary horizon. But it might also indicate that *TC* simply isn't posing the right questions. Communist theory often treats capitalist society as a logical problem to which revolution or communism emerges as the local solution. But history rarely unfolds so logically.

In the weeks since the uprising was crushed, Kazakhstan has seen a wave of labor unrest.¹⁵ Like the uprising itself, this began in the oil-producing region of western Kazakhstan and then spread elsewhere. Oil workers at first went on strike in solidarity with the protest movement, as did copper workers in the south east. Then oil workers went on strike again demanding higher wages, as did telecom workers, ambulance drivers, and firefighters soon afterwards. Even couriers in the gig economy be-

gan threatening industrial action. Is the glass floor beginning to crack? At present, it is too soon to tell whether this handful of demonstrations are the beginning of a national strike wave or if they will simply fizzle out. But it's worth remembering, as Rosa Luxemburg points out, that spontaneous strikes are what kept the embers burning between the peaks and lulls of the 1905 revolution.¹⁶

The Eclipse and Reemergence of Geopolitics

Communist theory is an attempt to provide an account of capitalist society and its overcoming. In order to describe how such a revolutionary overcoming might unfold, it pays attention to the struggles that occur within capitalist society and the limits that they encounter. These limits are often seen to be internal to the struggles themselves.

For example, many participants in the George Floyd uprising would likely say that the movement was defeated by the state, through some combination of repression and cooptation. The accounts by pro-revolutionaries at the time tend to tell a different story. Some tend to focus on the composition of the movement, and how separations along lines of race and class reemerged within it, which prevented its ability to extend and intensify.¹⁷ Other accounts described how a *social movement apparatus* emerged that captured the *real movement* of the riot and redirected its energy.¹⁸ In either case, rather than emphasizing how it was defeated, these analyses tend to focus on what obstacles emerged from within the movement that it was unable to overcome.

A certain distance leads to a certain obscurity. But there is little to indicate that the uprising in Kazakhstan came apart under the weight of its own limits. Neither journalists nor comrades on the ground provide much evidence that separations emerged within the struggle or that the riot was somehow contained by a social movement. Things may have simply moved too fast for the internal limits to clearly emerge. But the uprising instead seems to have been simply defeated by the armed forces of the state, backed by foreign intervention.

It may be that our desire for a too-neat, theoretically consistent account of struggle's internal limits has caused us to miss the more immediate obstacles in the way of revolution. Communist theory today will have

to provide an account of these external obstacles, the state and geopolitics, as well as their undoing.

A New International

Insurrection anywhere is immediately a global concern. There are two reasons for this. First, since struggles travel and spread through resonance, a success anywhere can inspire similar attempts everywhere. What begins as a local uprising can very quickly pose an existential threat to the entire global order of capitalist society. This explains why the sporadic explosions of revolutionary contestation today are countered by an international organization of repression operating with a global division of tasks. In the last instance, the full weight of the global party of order will be brought to bear against any local insurrection.

Second, in an increasingly multipolar world, every crisis affords an occasion to renegotiate regional and global balances of power. Uprisings quickly become absorbed into the conflicts between different global powers. In addition to confronting the repressive force of the global party of order, they also become a site where different factions of that party settle their scores with each other. Insurrections are thus immediately confronted with the problem of geopolitics.

If the revolutionary endeavors of today are abandoned to repression, this is because it is not in the interest of any existing power to support them. So far, no practical organization of revolutionary internationalism exists to support them.

“Revolutionaries are everywhere, but nowhere is there any real revolution,” the Situationist International once declared in a moment not unlike our own.¹⁹ But it is through this production of revolutionaries, as Camatte called it, that we can imagine a way out of this geopolitical hell.²⁰ This allows us to glimpse the basic coordinates of a proletarian geopolitics, or a new international.

Each attempt at revolution, each mass struggle, leaves in its wake a new generation of revolutionaries. In Cairo, Khartoum, Santiago, and elsewhere, the uprisings leave behind them people who can't turn back from what they experienced. They then try to find each other and to prepare. These new revolutionaries attempt to come to terms with the meaning of

their experience, as well as its limits and lessons.

For the moment, this reflection is often restricted to purely practical questions. Which tactics worked, and should be repeated? Which mistakes led to defeat? Here and there these tactics, and the reflections on them, spread elsewhere, providing each wave of struggle with some informal degree of coordination. But over time, this coordination may need to become more intentional in order to overcome the serious obstacles posed by the global party of order.

The new revolutionary current, wherever it appears, will have to connect these diverse groups and experiences. It will have to find some coherent basis on which to unify their projects. Out of this will have to emerge some force capable of coordinating and supporting revolutionary endeavors wherever they appear.

Waves and Whirlpools

Waves of struggle are often global events, but they tend to be experienced as regional ones. In 2011 or 2019, as with 1968, 1917, and 1848, uprisings happened almost simultaneously nearly all over the globe. At the same time, their participants were likely to experience them in terms of particular regional consistencies. The revolutions of the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa tended to pay most careful attention to each other, drawing on the lessons of each experience, even as they inspired similar uprisings around the globe. In East Asia or the Balkans, a similarly specific constellation of struggles drew lessons from each other first of all. This is true even if, at times, tactics that emerge from one constellation go viral, providing inspiration for far flung struggles as well. These regional waves could be called *whirlpools*.²¹

The most immediate context for the uprising in Kazakhstan is a regional *whirlpool* of struggles in the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. This includes the recent uprisings in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine. These are the experiences that the participants in Kazakhstan are no doubt most aware of. This awareness provided the movement with both a tactical repertoire and a sense of the possibilities and limits. Kyrgyzstan, which has experienced three uprisings in recent decades, including one that burned down parliament and other govern-

ment buildings, appears to be a particular reference point.

The resonance between struggles in this region is not only due to their shared proximity. The former Soviet Republics each share some degree of economic integration, as well as membership in a mutual security pact. This means events in one country fairly quickly have an impact on the others. But most significantly, each country shares a political and economic system modeled after that of Russia. The successful advance of a struggle anywhere in the region thus highlights the vulnerability of all of the authoritarian governments in the region and provides a tactical repertoire which could be replicated elsewhere. Unrest anywhere in the region means the possibility of unrest everywhere, and thus raises the question of Russian intervention to restore regional order.

War and Insurrection

The crisis in Ukraine is best understood as resulting from the turbulence stirred up by this whirlpool of struggle. During the 2014 Euromaidan protests there, the pro-Russian president and much of his administration fled the country. A new government was ushered into power, which began to court a closer relationship with the European Union. At the same time, the Russian military intervened, annexing Crimea and providing support for separatist movements in eastern Ukraine. This set in motion the chain of events that led to the current geopolitical showdown at the Ukrainian border.²² This process was likely accelerated first by the uprising in Belarus, then by the uprising in Kazakhstan. In the words of the *Financial Times*, “As he eyes what is happening to Nazarbayev, a man from whom he has drawn inspiration, Putin may be all the more eager for a diplomatic, or failing that, military success that he can sell to his own public. Or, as *CrimethInc* has eloquently put it:

Powerful governments will not stand by and let common people develop a taste for overthrowing them. They will be pressed to intervene, as Russia has in Ukraine, in hopes that war can trump insurrection. War is a way of shutting down possibilities—of changing the subject. It is a risky business, however—it can help governments to consolidate their power, but history shows that it can also destabilize them.

As much as these events are the logical conclusion of Russia's role in suppressing unrest in its sphere of influence, Putin's maneuvers also seem intended to deflect the possibility of unrest at home. With unrest circling the core, war presents the possibility of pushing it back into the sphere of international politics. The confrontation with NATO allows Putin to position himself as an underdog standing up to Western imperialism, which may, at least briefly, stir up nationalist sentiment at home. This works at the level of popular sentiment, but it might also function to keep his oligarchic coalition compressed through external pressure. The resulting sanctions also provide cover for Russia's lagging economic situation.

First We Take Moscow, Then We Take Berlin

The impasses of our moment, in one sense, echo those of an earlier era. Here too, historical parallels are not lacking. The threat of foreign intervention hung over the revolutions of 1848 like the Sword of Damocles. Russia, Europe's largest and most conservative country, was the least affected by the ongoing wave of unrest that year, and the most committed to preserving the present order. Revolutionaries feared that if any uprising went far enough in upsetting the current state of things, the Tsarist empire would simply invade to restore order. This threat was eventually realized in Hungary and Romania. Russia, in a sense, functioned as the industrial reserve army of the counterrevolution.

Marx would spend much of the rest of his life attempting to uncover the conditions of possibility of a revolution in Russia itself. The Russian Revolution, he thought, might be a necessary precursor for revolution to return to the European continent. He turned out to be right. It wasn't until the Russian empire itself was torn apart by unrest, in 1905 and then 1917, that another revolutionary wave would wash across Europe and, soon, much of the world.

Might Russia play a similar role today? Each uprising in Central Asia or Eastern Europe occurs under the threat of Russian intervention. Further afield from its immediate sphere of influence, Russia has provided financial, military, and diplomatic cover to the counterrevolutions in Syria, Sudan, and elsewhere. Russia once again appears as the global party of order's insurer of last resort. "Putin is not the gendarme of Europe," a Finn-

ish anarchist recently put it, “but the gendarme of the whole world.”²³

January 2022 was the third time in the last decade that Russian troops have intervened in an uprising in the region. But these are each only pyrrhic victories for Russia. Each intervention has turned the mood of the local population against Russia, as was the case with Ukraine. Most significantly, each time a state that is a mirror-image of Putin’s Russia is proven to be so vulnerable to popular unrest that it requires foreign intervention, it carries this sequence one step closer to its conclusion: a mass uprising within Russia itself.

Russia may no longer be the “weak link in the imperialist chain.” But if Russia is pulled into the whirlpool of struggle in the region, it may be temporarily less able to intervene elsewhere. Russia having to play with a handicap in the game geopolitics is not the end of the game itself. The global party of order is, in the last instance, composed of any number of regional and global powers. But this may allow us to begin to think through a sequence in which the unraveling of the geopolitical order may be possible, which might be a necessary but not sufficient condition for social revolution today.

Without the immediate threat of invasion, the next uprisings in the former Soviet region may give us a better glimpse of what it would mean for an insurrection to become irreversible. The next revolution in a place like Syria or Sudan may have enough breathing room from external obstacles to begin to confront their own internal limits. This significantly increases the possibility of a revolutionary breakthrough. It may also mean the emergence of something like the commune. An innovation anywhere will have immediate consequences everywhere, especially within the context of a new global wave of struggle, as different struggles rush to adapt what resonates with their own situation. Very quickly in this sequence a point at which no turning back is possible may be reached in this global civil war.

Notes

- 1 We are using the term “theory” here in a more expansive sense than it is often used. As mass struggles emerge, debates take place amongst their participants and society at large about what they are doing and what it means. As these struggles repeatedly collide with their limits, those limits are formalized. They are given a name and posed as questions to be answered. Debate then revolves around how these limits will be overcome. Theory is the term we used to describe this whole process of mass public and private discourse. The writing published in theory journals, such as this one, make up one moment of that unfolding process.
- 2 On the Gilets Jaunes in France, see Paul Torino & Adrian Wohlleben, “Memes with Force,” *Mute*, February 26th 2019. On the revolution in Sudan, see Anonymous, “Theses on the Sudan Commune,” *Ill Will*, April 17th 2021.
- 3 See Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (PM Press, 2012).
- 4 The present confrontation around Ukraine joining NATO though seems to indicate that the original geopolitical purpose of these pacts has yet to be fully exhausted.
- 5 See Dan Bilefsky, “Revolt in Kazakhstan,” *The New York Times*, January 7th 2022.
- 6 For example, see Ivan Nechepurenko, “Russian-Led Alliance Begins Withdrawing Troops From Kazakhstan,” *The New York Times*, January 13th 2022.
- 7 Due to the speed at which things escalated and were then repressed, it is hard to say much with confidence about the movement’s composition. The crowds in Almaty were described by one observer in the following terms, “[the] initial demonstrators were people who traditionally protest... [but] they were joined by the youth from the outskirts... the poor that are unhappy with the staggering social gap that exists in Kazakhstan.” See Nastassia As-trasheuskaya, “Kazakhstan unrest: ‘bandits’, foreign ‘terrorists’ or messy power struggle?” *Financial Times*, January 11th 2022.
- 8 See Tom Hannen, “Is QAnon a game gone wrong?” *Financial Times*, October 16th 2020.
- 9 See Anonymous, “Theses on the Sudan Commune,” *Ill Will*.
- 10 See Eric Hazan, *History of the Barricade* (Verso, 2015).
- 11 For example, see Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Semiotexte, 2009).
- 12 This is not to say that significant experiments haven’t taken place in movements based outside of the city, such as the ZAD and No-TAV. It is just to say that nationwide uprisings tend to congeal in major cities.
- 13 See The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends* (Semiotexte, 2015). For a similar discussion see “Belarus: ‘When We Rise,’” *CrimethInc*, June 30th 2021.

- 14 See Theorie Communiste, “The Glass Floor,” *LibCom*, May 11th 2010.
- 15 See Joanna Lillis, “Kazakhstan: After civil unrest, industrial unrest spikes,” *Eurasianet*, Feb 7th 2022.
- 16 See Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions* (1906).
- 17 For example, see New York Post-Left, “Welcome to the Party,” *It’s Going Down*, June 24th 2021.
- 18 See Adrian Wohlleben, “Memes Without End,” *Ill Will*, May 17th 2021.
- 19 See Situationist International, “Address to the Revolutionaries of Algeria and of All Countries,” *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006).
- 20 See Jacques Camatte, “De la révolution” *Invariance*, April 1972. For a further discussion on “the production of revolutionaries,” see “Onward Barbarians,” *Endnotes*, December 2020.
- 21 *Endnotes* provides an example of this in their discussion of the 2014 uprising in Bosnia: “Protesters in Bosnia understood themselves as part of a larger wave of movements in the region, using forms and ideas first developed in neighboring states such as Serbia and Croatia. Such sentiments of solidarity were reciprocated: during the protests, there were demonstrations of solidarity with the Bosnian movement in almost all ex-Yugoslavian countries, including Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro. Revolts in ex-Yugoslavia seem to have been watching each other closely and influencing each other’s modes of action in recent years. Indeed, before the Bosnian movement itself, many observed a wave of protests in the region, comparing it to the 2011–13 global wave of struggles, and even raising the prospect of a Balkan Spring. In Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Serbia, commentators noted the rise of new modes of protest with—albeit on a smaller scale—similar aspects to recent squares movements.” See “Gather Us From Among the Nations,” *Endnotes 4* (2015).
- 22 For a longer discussion on this, see “War and Anarchists: Anti-Authoritarian Perspectives in Ukraine,” *CrimethInc*, February 15th 2022.
- 23 See “Ukraine: Between Two Fires,” *CrimethInc*, February 3rd 2022.

Insurrection is something more than a wave of riots, militant protests, blockades, occupations, and so on. It is the opening of a rupture, the search for that point after which no turning back is possible.

