Introduction

On August 9, 2014, Darren Wilson, a White officer of the Ferguson Police Department (FPD), saw two young Black men, eighteen-year-old Michael Brown and his friend, twenty-two-year-old Dorian Johnson, walking in the middle of the street on Canfield Drive in Ferguson, Missouri. Ferguson is a small suburb of St. Louis where Blacks comprise 67 percent of the population. Both young men had just come from a convenience store, where surveillance video captured Brown stealing several packages of cigarillos and forcefully shoving the store clerk. According to a report from the Department of Justice (DOJ), a dispatch call went out over the police radio for a “stealing in progress,” thereby alerting Wilson to the theft and giving him a description of the suspects, after which he encountered Brown and his friend. According to Wilson’s statement to the prosecutor and investigators, once he’d instructed the teens to move to the sidewalk Wilson suspected they were both involved in the robbery. He called for backup and parked his car at an angle to prevent Brown and his friend from walking any farther. Wilson testified that as he tried to open the door to his vehicle it closed, Brown punched him and reached for his gun, and a struggle for the weapon ensued, during which Wilson fired two shots, one of which stuck Brown in the hand. The DOJ concluded that, after the shooting inside the vehicle, Brown ran and Wilson chased him and shot him after he turned around and charged at him. In total, Wilson fired twelve bullets, six of which hit Brown, two of them in the head.

Though several witnesses asserted that Brown had his hands up in an act of surrender before Wilson shot him to death, the DOJ—pointing to changing statements—determined that these accounts were inconsistent with physical and forensic evidence. The former St. Louis County Prosecutor Robert McCullough, who many protesters argued had deep ties to the police and should recuse himself, brought the case in front of a grand jury to determine whether there was probable cause to indict
Wilson for his actions.³ On November 24, 2014, McCullough announced that the grand jury had decided not to indict. In the wake of several high-profile deaths of other Black men, including Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and John Crawford, the case received national attention and the grand jury announcement sparked civil unrest across the country, including in Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Marie, a Latina protester in Ferguson, detailed her experience protesting immediately after the fatal shooting of Brown:

We were at the police station protesting, and the police were out there in mass with dogs. And there was a woman, and she was yelling at this line of police, saying, you know, “What if this was your child? What if this was your child?” . . . And then that night . . . like twenty-four hours after Mike Brown was shot, a little bit more than twenty-four hours, we went on West Florissant and there were—and I’m not exaggerating, like I’ve never seen that many cops—three hundred police in full riot gear. And I don’t scare easy, but it was one of the moments in my life where I was scared because what I saw was these police, this massive police presence. And I saw unseasoned, angry, primarily young Black kids just angry and trying like some of them were throwing bottles—and then I saw the cops with their riot gear ready to engage. And I got in the middle of that . . . I had held the line for three hours, where I had my back to the police officers and my face to the young people . . . They were righteously mad. They had a right to protest. And when the looting started—and it did—we had to break the line to try—because there wasn’t enough elders out there. There wasn’t, it was all young people. We had to break the line to go and try and stop the looters. . . . [After] QuikTrip burned down . . . that’s like when it started to happen, and then it was just like tanks and rubber bullets. . . . And they’re teargassing the streets. . . . police [were] advancing on us in full riot gear. Police [were] advancing on us with shotguns.

Protesters across the nation rallied for months, outraged about Brown’s death and the use of excessive and lethal force by law enforcement officials toward Black civilians.

Eight months following the death of Michael Brown, on April 12, 2015, officers from the Baltimore Police Department (BPD) attempted to stop and question Freddie Gray, a twenty-five-year-old Black man. After
making eye contact with Lieutenant Brian Rice, Gray fled and was pursued by Rice and two other officers. After police found Gray in possession of an illegal switchblade, he was arrested; however, his request for an asthma inhaler went ignored and he was placed in a prisoner transport van without being secured, which is a violation of departmental policy. En route, Gray screamed for help and one of the officers applied flex-cuffs to his wrists and put shackles on his feet. He was loaded in the prison van face down on the floor. The van made two additional stops and police provided no medical assistance to Gray even though he requested it.

Approximately forty-five minutes after Gray’s arrest, the city fire department received a call about an “unconscious male” at the Western District police station. After paramedics arrived, Gray was transported to a hospital and underwent surgery the next day for three broken vertebrae and an injured voice box. He remained in a coma for a week and died on April 19 as a result of injuries to his spinal cord, which was determined to be 80 percent severed. Civil unrest erupted over what many perceived as an unjustified homicide of another Black man at the hands of the police. Less than two weeks later, Baltimore State’s Attorney Marilyn Mosby filed charges including manslaughter, assault, reckless endangerment, and officer misconduct against the six officers involved in the incident (three of whom were White and three of whom were Black). In September 2015, a $6.4 million wrongful death civil settlement for Gray’s family was approved by the city. However, the trials did not yield a conviction. The first trial ended in a hung jury, three more officers were acquitted after a trial before a judge, and the state’s attorney dropped charges against the remaining officers who were awaiting trial. While the legal system did not convict any of the Baltimore policemen, many Black residents remain convinced that the officers were in the wrong and that these killings were part of an ongoing assault on Blacks across the United States. The death of Freddie Gray sparked protests and looting in Baltimore. Jason, a mixed-race male Baltimorean protester, described what happened at a protest he attended in the days following Gray’s death:

We were out in force, a large group of us . . . super diverse groups came out in support and it started getting tricky when they instituted the curfew, and that’s when it went no holds bar[red]. We were nightly being
berated and like shoved and pushed and people were being arrested and hit and it was really traumatizing. . . . I witnessed a lot of police officers really overstepping their bounds and the excessive use of force when it came to the National Guard and the tear gas. I was shot with a rubber bullet protesting here. I was hit with tear gas. I was laying on the floor in the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue and North because I couldn’t breathe nor see. There was smoke everywhere and all you hear is people screaming and yelling and you feel as though you are in a third world country.

Shared outrage over Gray’s death became a catalyst for collective action. Though the BPD initially responded to demonstrators with restraint, in an attempt to suppress public protests and gain control over a chaotic situation, the police responded with increased aggression toward activists.

In recent years, the killings of unarmed Black men, women, boys, and girls by police officers have captured national and international attention: seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in Sanford, Florida, by a self-appointed neighborhood watchman in February 2012; twenty-two-year-old Rakia Boyd was an innocent bystander shot in the back of the head by an off-duty Chicago police officer in March 2012; Jonathan Ferrell, a twenty-four-year-old former college football player, was shot ten times and killed by a North Carolina police officer in September 2013 after seeking help following a car crash; Miriam Carey, a thirty-four-year-old woman, was fatally shot five times from behind by Secret Service agents during a Washington, DC, chase at the White House security checkpoint while her one-year-old daughter was in the car with her in October 2013; after calling the police to report a dispute between two men, Yvette Smith, a forty-seven-year-old mother, was shot dead in her home within seconds of opening the door to Texas officers in February 2014; Eric Garner, a forty-three-year-old Black man, died after a Staten Island police officer placed him in a chokehold for selling untaxed cigarettes in July 2014; twenty-two-year-old John Crawford was shot and killed in a Walmart store by a police officer in Beavercreek, Ohio, while holding a toy BB gun in July 2014; twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was fatally shot within seconds of a Cleveland, Ohio, officer approaching him as he held a pellet gun in November 2014; Walter Scott, a fifty-year-old man, was fatally shot in the back as he fled a North Charleston police officer in April 2015;
thirty-seven-year-old Alton Sterling was shot several times at close range by Baton Rouge officers while pinned to the ground in July 2016; Philando Castile, a thirty-two-year-old man who was stopped for having a broken taillight, was shot to death in July 2016 while his girlfriend and four-year-old daughter were in the vehicle; sixteen-year-old Aries Clark was killed by police while holding a toy weapon in July 2017; forty-two-year-old Keith O’Neil, a suspected carjacker, was unarmed when fatally shot by a San Francisco police officer on his fourth day of duty in December 2017; 26-year-old Botham Jean was shot and killed in his own apartment by an off-duty Dallas police officer in September 2018. Modern-day killings of unarmed Black men, women, and children have struck a conscious chord across the nation, as much of the public bears witness to the police operating with impunity.

These incidents represent only a small fraction of the deaths of unarmed Black individuals who have been killed at the hands of the police before and after Brown’s and Gray’s deaths. These killings, however, are hardly outliers. Rather, they are examples of racial hostility, racial bias, legalized racial subordination, and a normative police practice that targets Black individuals. But the issue of racially motivated police killings is not simply a product of individual discriminatory police officers. It is the result of deep historical forces that follow a pattern of social control over Black people that is entwined in the very fabric of the United States. Insufficient attention has been paid to the poisonous legacy of racism that infects not only Ferguson and Baltimore but communities nationwide, and is visible in America’s criminal justice system. This nation has been fittingly termed the United States of Amnesia, owing to its failure to confront and repair the damage created by America’s history of racial injustice. Yet, as novelist Toni Morrison noted in a 1993 essay, it was on the backs of Blacks that America was built. That is, the nation was founded on a system of slavery; however, it has yet to “own up to the way racial bias and legalized racial subordination have compromised our ability to implement criminal justice.” America’s racialized past influences the way that others perceive Black people, including their treatment by the criminal justice system and the police. Without attention to this history, attempts to control crime and improve police-citizen relations will fail or be mediocre at best. In the wake of ignoring or diminishing America’s history and legacy of legally sanctioned racial
subordination, cities like Ferguson, Baltimore, and many others bear witness to this unacknowledged continuity between past and present.12

One of the goals of this book is to shed light on how historical racial oppression continues to play out in modern-day race relations and police practices. By coming to terms with the historical reality of race inequality we can better understand the racialized experiences of Black individuals in this nation. I argue that the systemic legacy of slavery and Jim Crow continues to this day to shape Black peoples’ position in society and how they are perceived and treated by individuals and institutions, including the police. In this book, I will highlight parallels between modern police practices and the overpolicing that occurred in earlier eras of overt discrimination. In addition to making historical and contemporary linkages, I will detail what gave rise to the uprisings that occurred in Ferguson and Baltimore, as well as the conditions that can lead to (or stop) future unrest.

Police are the enforcement arm of government authority and they are one of the few agencies empowered to use deadly force.13 As a result of their power, police officers are often at the forefront of controversial cases related to racially discriminatory use of force. As policing scholar Brian Withrow notes, “One of the most, or perhaps the most, intractable issue for contemporary American police administrators is race, or more specifically race-based policing.”14 Race-based policing, also known as racial profiling, is “the use of race or ethnicity, or proxies thereof, by law enforcement officials as a basis for judgment of criminal suspicion.”15

The consequence of racial profiling can be detrimental. Such police practices can destroy the legitimacy of the police, as many individuals who are the recipients of such aggressive tactics feel distrustful of and cynical toward law enforcement.16 In the cases of both Brown and Gray, protests and social movements (i.e., Black Lives Matter) in large cities, including St. Louis, Baltimore, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, were directly triggered by perceptions of race-based policing.

Race plays an important role in shaping citizens’ attitudes toward the police. Studies have shown that Blacks are less inclined than Whites to believe that traffic stops are legitimate and that police behave appropriately.17 Other studies show that, compared to Whites, Blacks are more likely to believe that the police abuse citizens, treat minorities more harshly than Whites, and are not held accountable for misconduct.18
Overall, Blacks tend to view police as treating them unequally and are likely to rate the police less favorably than their White counterparts.19

Although multiple studies demonstrate that attitudes toward police differ by race,20 few studies account for how individuals’ experiences shape these attitudes. Studies of this issue have found that Blacks undergo a wide range of harms, including disproportionate experiences with surveillance and stops, disrespectful treatment and verbal abuse, arrests, and use of force, including excessive and deadly force.21 Research examining the relationship between perceptions and the context of citizens’ interactions with police suggests that unfavorable views of the police stem from personal or indirect contact with law enforcement that is negative in nature.22 That is, Black citizens, and especially youth, disproportionately experience a range of direct negative police behavior, such as harassment and disrespectful treatment, which, in turn, results in unfavorable perceptions of the police.23 Some experience indirect, or “vicarious” contact, which is knowledge learned about police through family, friends, media, or others. Black individuals’ perceptions of unfair treatment from the police have serious implications for police-community relations. Police stops perceived as racially motivated can very well increase the frequency of confrontations between police and Black citizens, and, consequently, generate deepening distrust of the police among those who have direct personal or vicarious contact with police.24 Citizen distrust of the police can strain police-community relations, as police typically depend on cooperation from the public to solve crimes, and residents are more likely to cooperate when they view the police positively and with legitimacy.25

Since young minority males are more likely to report having negative encounters with police than young White men, young minority women, and older minority men, most studies focus their examination of police-citizen relations on Black males.26 Yet we know less about women’s encounters with the police, especially marginalized women of color, as their experiences with law enforcement remain underexamined and generally invisible in public discourse.27 Less attention has been given to White individuals’ experiences and perceptions of police, perhaps because they are less likely than Blacks to experience discriminatory policing.28 The lack of attention to the interlocking nature of race, gender, and policing is surprising, because race and gender inequalities
cannot be understood in isolation of one another, as they are intersecting structural positions that result in differences in the nature and effects of inequality. Thus, another goal of this book is to shed light on these differences for race, gender, and policing.

The Communities of Ferguson and Baltimore

While there is an abundant body of research demonstrating that Blacks often bear the brunt of unwelcome police contacts, few studies have compared the relationship of police-citizen encounters across different places. Thus, Ferguson and Baltimore are valuable settings in which to explore how protesters attempt to raise their voices to those inside and outside the minority community to consider how difference is perceived, treated, and reproduced. In fact, both cities are ideal sites in which to conduct this research, because they have a deep history of racial and economic disparity.

Table 1.1 compares Ferguson and Baltimore’s demographic and socioeconomic indicators with their surrounding counties. Both counties have much less racial diversity than the cities of Ferguson and Baltimore—23 and 26 percent of the population in St. Louis County and Baltimore County, respectively, are Black. In contrast, in Ferguson two-thirds of the population is Black and in Baltimore this figure is approximately 64 percent. As table 1.1 shows, Ferguson and Baltimore residents are characterized by relatively high rates of female-headed households and unemployment that exceeds those residing in the county as a whole. The proportion of poverty is more than two times greater in the cities of Ferguson and Baltimore than in St. Louis County and Baltimore County. Ferguson residents have a median income nearly $20,000 lower than those in St. Louis County. Similarly, residents of Baltimore have a median income $25,000 less than those residing in the county of Baltimore. Though the city/county income gap is greater between Baltimore and Baltimore County, both Ferguson and Baltimore are characterized by the uneven distribution of individuals by income level.

Demographic transformation occurred rapidly in Ferguson. From 1900 to 1960, Ferguson grew in population from 1,015 to more than 22,149 residents, an average growth of 5 percent a year.
of the population has remained steady since 1960, the racial/ethnic population has shifted quickly. The racial composition of Ferguson went from 1 percent Black in 1970 to 25 percent in 1990. From 1990 to 2010, the White population of Ferguson shrank from over 16,000 to about 6,200, even as the Black population rose to 67 percent of the town’s residents. As Whites left the city for White suburban communities, Ferguson soon became recognized as a “Black suburban” community.

However, the growth of the Black population has been accompanied by rising unemployment rates. The city of Ferguson was generally split between Black and White with an unemployment rate of 5 percent in 2000; however, by 2010, the population was two-thirds Black, unemployment had risen to 13 percent and the number of residents who lived in poverty doubled from the previous decade. As a result, the poor population in the city remains both large and highly concentrated. This is not specific to Ferguson, as the area northwest of St. Louis became predominantly Black. After World War II, the number of jobs in the city of St. Louis dropped by 20 percent while those residing in St. Louis County increased by 400 percent between 1951 and 1967. St. Louis residents have been in poor economic shape, due to continual disinvestments, since the region shifted from an industrial to a service-based economy. Deindustrialization and disinvestments have hurt the city of St. Louis overall; however, the effects have been particularly salient for Black residents, as they were excluded from jobs or limited to low-skilled, menial, entry-level jobs.
In comparison, Baltimore was once the sixth largest city in the United States. As the city grew, however, large numbers of city residents relocated to areas outside of the city limits. In the 1950s, Baltimore's population peaked to roughly 950,000 residents, yet by 1990, the population had lost 23 percent of its population and had only 736,000 residents. These declines continued in the decade that followed, with the city losing nearly 80,000 additional residents (or eleven percent of its population) by the year 2000. This rapid population loss is significant because it changed the demographic makeup of the city to a disproportionately high minority population. Though Blacks comprised nearly one-quarter of the population in 1970, by 1990 nearly 60 percent of the population was Black, now comprising of two-thirds of the population. In contrast, the White population went from 75 percent in 1970 to 39 percent in 1990 to 29 percent in 2010.

Baltimore not only suffered population loss but massive job loss due to deindustrialization in the United States. While the economy in Baltimore historically had been dependent on jobs in manufacturing, the reduction in a number of industries since the 1970s resulted in considerable loss of available employment. Between 1950 and 2000, the US economy experienced a net loss of approximately 100,000 manufacturing jobs. With the decline of manufacturing, the service-based economy came to be the dominant base of employment for Baltimore City residents. However, the shift in employment patterns worked against many inner-city residents. Numerous jobs that were created in the downtown business district emphasized high-skilled office occupations that were beyond the education and skill levels of many inner-city Blacks. Those who were qualified often had difficulty accessing jobs, as retail and service jobs were located primarily in the suburbs. Many inner-city residents lacked affordable transportation and networks to connect them to suburban employment opportunities. Overall, the combination of high population loss, disproportionate minority populations, and great disparities between city and suburban income levels left the poor even more socially isolated and their communities further depleted of economic resources.

Table 1.2 provides comparative data on a number of socioeconomic indicators for Blacks and Whites in Ferguson and Baltimore from 2010 to 2014 using the American Community Survey. The median income
of Blacks in both cities is comparable; however, the income disparity between Blacks and Whites is smaller in Ferguson than Baltimore. In Ferguson, Black residents’ median income is about 64 percent of the median income of Whites, while in Baltimore, this figure is approximately 54 percent. More than half of Black individuals live in female-headed households with children in both cities; however, Blacks are two and half times more likely to live in such households in Ferguson and three and a half times more likely than their White counterparts in Baltimore. On the other hand, when we look at the other socioeconomic characteristics, we see that racial disparities are higher in Ferguson than Baltimore. The percentage of Blacks in poverty is three times that of impoverished Whites in Ferguson, while in Baltimore, Blacks are two times as likely as Whites to be poor. In both cities, Blacks are two times more likely to be unemployed than their White counterparts.

Ferguson and Baltimore are similar in that they are both troubled with high rates of poverty and unemployment. The similarities, however, do not end there. Both cities have long, strained histories between police and citizens of color. In fact, the DOJ revealed a pattern of unlawful racial bias in policing that eroded trust in the police. Moreover, the racial composition of Ferguson and Baltimore is two-thirds Black. The deaths of Brown and Gray sparked a firestorm of protests, with hundreds of activists denouncing police brutality, resulting in independent federal investigations of the Ferguson and Baltimore City Police Departments. In addition, while officers involved in the deaths of both men were determined not to be criminally liable, Brown’s and Gray’s families were awarded civil settlements in their wrongful death lawsuits.

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against each city. These similarities are worth consideration with regard to their influences on the nature of policing and protests.

Despite these similarities, there are distinct differences between the two cities. Ferguson and Baltimore differ in their size and composition. Ferguson is a suburban city that is part of the Greater St. Louis metropolitan area and comprised of only 21,000 residents. Located in the northern part of St. Louis County, Ferguson is one of 91 municipalities in the county. In contrast, Baltimore is the largest city in the state of Maryland, with a population of approximately 620,000. The city of Baltimore is the 29th most populous in the United States and is surrounded by but separated from the County of Baltimore. The police departments in both cities have notably different racial/ethnic compositions. While the racial composition of Ferguson and Baltimore is predominately Black, the vast majority of Ferguson police officers are White (approximately 94 percent) while nearly half of Baltimore officers are Black (47 percent). In contrast to Ferguson, in Baltimore the city’s former mayor, the former police commissioner, the state’s attorney, and the judge who acquitted the three officers in the Freddie Gray case were all Black. In Ferguson the grand jury made the decision not to indict Darren Wilson for Michael Brown’s death; however, in Baltimore the state’s attorney made a quick decision to indict the officers involved in Freddie Gray’s death. In Ferguson police came under strong criticism for their use of military-grade weapons trained on unarmed civilians, while in Baltimore police initially used restrained force during the onset of protests but eventually became militarized.

In this book I bring together research on race, place, and policing, along with scholarship on social movements, with the aim of investigating how and why both Ferguson and Baltimore became highly publicized sites for protests against racially biased policing and broader structural inequalities. Specifically, my book examines how Ferguson and Baltimore residents understand their experiences with the police and the impact that those experiences have on their perceptions of the police; what galvanized Black Lives Matter as a social movement; and how policing tactics during demonstrations influenced subsequent mobilization decisions among protesters. This book does the important work of documenting the voices of individuals living under, and trying to raise their voices against, an oppressive system. Protesters are the
focus here because too often their grievances, which run deep, are overlooked and are dismissed as a “mob behavior” mentality. Such perceptions often seem to lump peaceful protesters with violent protesters without distinction. That is, if one bottle is thrown, one window broken, or one person chants, “Kill the police,” then the whole movement is portrayed as violent “cop haters.” The accounts presented here humanize people’s anger, underscoring how a nationwide movement emerged to denounce both racial biases by police and the broader economic and social system that leave young Black civilians feeling the deck is stacked against them. In particular, Black people’s perceptions of unfair and unequal treatment from the police have serious ramifications for police-community relations. These perceptions require policy solutions that address the nature, function, and meanings of racial inequality and offer productive strategies for ameliorating the complex and interconnected problems created by the structural inequalities faced by many Black citizens residing in economically disadvantaged communities.

Overview of the Book

I begin by focusing on police interactions with civilians. Chapter 1 examines the crossroads of race and policing as they have developed historically; it outlines the history of differential policing by reporting the purpose, consequences, and effects of slave patrols, Slave Codes, Black Codes, and Jim Crow laws. I also highlight how the systemic culture of oppression continued into the twenty-first century, illustrating that race coupled with community context shapes residents’ experiences with, and ultimately attitudes toward, the police.

In chapter 2, I analyze how race and place shape police interactions, focusing specifically on direct and indirect experiences that residents had with police within their neighborhood prior to the deaths of Brown and Gray. This chapter notes both favorable and unfavorable encounters that Black and White residents have had with White officers, highlighting problematic policies and practices with police organizations. I call attention to racially biased policing in the neighborhoods of Ferguson and Baltimore, which led to the harassment and assaults of many young Black males. The chapter concludes by accounting for how residents’ experiences with the police shape attitudes toward law enforcement.
Chapter 3 shifts attention from officers in general to Black officers specifically. It focuses in particular on residents’ perceptions of and experiences with Black officers in Ferguson, Baltimore, and elsewhere prior to Brown’s and Gray’s deaths. While many commentators have proposed that hiring more Black officers would be an effective way to alleviate long-standing tension between police and Black citizens, I argue that a shared racial background in and of itself does not guarantee positive police interaction and that Black citizens can be very dissatisfied with Black officers. My findings suggest that the issue is not exclusively about the race of police officers but about the nature of police organizations and how they systematically police poor communities of color.

In the second half of the book, I shift attention from encounters with police prior to Brown’s and Gray’s deaths to experiences of participation in protest events. Chapter 4 provides insight into community mobilization efforts by activists. Protesters in Ferguson and Baltimore demonstrated for months in the aftermath of Brown’s and Gray’s deaths, many for the first time. This chapter accounts for the reasons that protesters came out in large numbers and what they hoped to accomplish, illustrating that Black activists’ negative experiences with and perceptions of the police served as a starting point to participation in activism.

Chapter 5 builds from the findings in chapters 2 and 3 to focus on protesters’ interactions with police, who used a range of repressive tactics while handling protests in both Ferguson and Baltimore. I concentrate on individual protesters who joined the movement with various degrees of commitment, and I examine their experiences with, and perceptions of, protest policing, as well as how such interactions shape future activism in the group. The most involved and committed protesters vowed to engage in future activist efforts even after experiencing high levels of repressive police action, while, for those who were less committed, oppressive tactics by police appeared to serve as a deterrent.

Finally, chapter 6 provides an explanation for how the Ferguson and Baltimore uprisings ignited and gained nationwide attention. This chapter illustrates the complex set of social, cultural, and political factors that led to these outbreaks of public unrest in Ferguson and Baltimore, and the various conditions that can lead to subsequent uprisings in other cities.