For four decades after 1815, civil disorders occupied an unusually prominent place in the political and military history of Europe. Colonial campaigns abounded, but war between nation-states was overshadowed by constant internal strife and political conspiracies. Rapid social and economic changes combined with crowded urban conditions that gave a tactical advantage to insurgents. The standing armies of Europe notably failed to control the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, but once the troops recovered from their initial surprise, they proved remarkably successful in preserving the political status quo in a changing society. This work seeks to identify the patterns of this entire period in France before providing an extended case study of the events of 1848.

One might argue, of course, that the European armies and police forces were doomed to fail, and that in the long run there was a positive trend in favor of a more representative government and social change; therefore, all that the forces of order accomplished was to increase casualties without changing the historical outcome. Such an argument might make sense with the benefit of hindsight, but few contemporaries would have discounted the advantages of disciplined armed forces. In fact, the defenders of order had a remarkably successful record of repressing and limiting the forces of change.

Despite the frequency and magnitude of social and political unrest in France, unrest magnified by the powerful precedent of the French Revolution, the French Army and paramilitary forces had considerable success in controlling insurrections and other disorders. Not only did the French Army help the Spanish monarchy suppress liberalism in 1823–1828, but that same army, in cooperation with the police and militia, thwarted numerous attempts to overthrow the post-Napoleonic monarchy in Paris. Until 1848, the rulers and generals of France regarded the
July Revolution of 1830 as a fluke, a unique combination of an unpopular, blind government and an inadequate garrison. Insurrection was a constant possibility but not an insurmountable threat to the French regime. Most accounts of the great revolutions of Europe focus on the insurgents. Instead, this is a study of the military aspects of a political crisis from the government’s viewpoint, focusing on the organization and use of public forces to control Parisian disorders between February 22 and June 26, 1848. More precisely, this work attempts to analyze the organization, attitudes, and use of French militarized force, including not only the regular army but a host of paramilitary formations such as the Municipal, National, Mobile, and Republican Guards. In each of five successive months, February through June 1848, a crisis arose that might have changed not only the form of government but the social and economic development of France. After the February overthrow of the last king of France, however, the fragile republican government proved remarkably resilient, retaining power while pursuing moderate social policies despite the concerted efforts of a variety of radical and socialist groups. These efforts took numerous forms, ranging from demonstrations to attempted coups to full-scale urban combat.

Looking back at these events from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we may find it easy to dismiss these clashes as a footnote in history, recalling a bygone era of social and military problems. Yet the revolutionary clashes of 1848, and more generally the control of civil disorders in nineteenth-century Europe, illustrate a number of issues that are still relevant in the era of the Arab Spring uprisings and population-centric counterinsurgency. Raising and training military organizations when a government has collapsed, ensuring the discipline and loyalty of these troops when the regime’s legitimacy is in question, and using sufficient but not excessive amounts of force to control domestic unrest represent only a few of the topics addressed by this study.

In order to reach these larger issues, this study begins with more specific questions at a number of social and organizational levels:

1. First, one must examine briefly the experience of the French military and police forces in dealing with civil disorders from the 1780s to 1848. Closely related to this were the public perceptions about the presence and use of these forces in Paris.
2. Second, one must consider the organization, social composition, and political reliability of different military and paramilitary units both before and after the February Revolution. This includes the political leanings and military capabilities of the government’s forces in each crisis—focusing especially on the army, the National Guard, and the newly formed Mobile Guard.

3. Third, at the command level, it is important to assess the organizations, leaders, tactical preparations, and outcome of each month’s crisis. Frequently, accounts of these events focus on the would-be revolutionaries while reducing the forces of order to vague generalizations. To do so is as simplistic as assuming that all would-be revolutionaries had the same economic background and political goals. With the sole exception of General Eugène Cavaignac, the most prominent victor of the June Days, most studies of 1848 neglect the political and professional roles of the commanders in government.

4. Finally, at the governmental level, the author seeks to show the intentions of various cabinet ministers concerning armed forces and popular disorders. This study does not pretend to contribute significantly to the political history of 1848, but governmental factions and intentions were basic to the military policies of the period.

With regard to this last point, and indeed to the entire subject of this study, a word of caution is in order. It would be tempting to portray Parisian public order as the central obsession of all politicians in this period. In a sense that was true since the political and social future of France depended upon the maintenance of order in the capital. Yet to discuss the subject in such a manner would be misleading. Not only were there other demands on the resources of the government, but there were a variety of nonmilitary questions that preoccupied the politicians. Indeed, one of the lesser discoveries of this research is the number of occasions on which the political reliability of troops was completely ignored by men intent upon dealing with other problems.

Controlling Civil Disorder

Urban conflict is a common occurrence in history, and for this reason, its control poses recurring problems for all governments. The first of
these problems is that conflict may assume a multitude of forms, ranging in significance from a peaceful public demonstration to a full civil war between two organized armies. Each of these forms may under certain circumstances threaten the life of a regime, and each form requires different techniques to counter it. When a government’s commanders err in their perceptions and expectations of the danger, attempting to apply tactics and degrees of force that are poorly adapted to the problem at hand, the result may be worse—from the government’s viewpoint—than the original situation.

The second problem in suppressing civil disorders is the reliability of the government’s own forces. An army recruited from the native population is naturally sympathetic to mass movements among the classes from which that army is drawn, even when individual soldiers may be uncertain about the political issues at stake. Some rebel groups are so small and so extreme, either in their expressed beliefs or their use of violence, that the officers and men of the regular army and police will not hesitate to restore order. Under these circumstances, the time involved to suppress open violence may well be insufficient for dissen-

sion to develop in the ranks. An opposition movement may, however, appear to be so widespread, so ideologically persuasive, and so socially respectable that this movement places in question the legitimacy of the current regime. It is not necessary for soldiers to think in sophisticated terms such as legitimacy; if they feel that the opposition is right and the government is wrong, they will disobey or at least hesitate to act. The effects of such an opposition upon troop loyalty may, therefore, topple the government, even while the rebels are decisively outclassed in purely military terms.

The third question, closely related to the first two, is the degree of force that a government employs to repress its opponents. Even if the military commander knows what tactics to employ, the bloodshed and violation of rights involved in such actions, when directed against fellow citizens, may be unacceptable politically and morally. Certain tactics would outrage the soldiers as well as the citizens, especially actions that cause casualties among nonviolent protestors or bystanders. Alternatively, the troops may not be trained and equipped to implement their orders correctly. As a result, these troops may be unable to deal with the situation, delivering insufficient or excessive force in
the crisis. As demonstrated in Paris on February 23, 1848, and again at Kent State University on May 4, 1970, troops who feel threatened may respond with an unintended degree of deadly violence that leaves both their opponents and contemporaries appalled. It is a cliché of modern warfare that no plan survives first contact with the enemy; that cliché applies with even greater force when the “enemy” is composed of civilians and fellow countrymen.

The urban warfare of the later eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries presented these problems in unusual forms. Most aspiring revolutionaries focused their attention on the administrative seats of government, seeking to seize power as rapidly as possible. Whether premeditated or spontaneous, the most prominent forms of internal conflict were the demonstration, the conspiracy, and the barricade insurrection. As this study will suggest, these forms became so stylized and habitual in France that by 1848 the government was unprepared for the amorphous protest that toppled the July Monarchy.

The most remarkable feature of this period, in comparison to current events, was the limited military power available to the government. Military technology had not kept pace with economic and social change, making the army’s domestic task extremely difficult. In the final analysis, the government’s forces had little or no technological advantage over the rebels they faced; the police and army had only discipline and organization, both of which could be shaken by poor leadership and political uncertainty.

By 1848, European armies were experimenting with the railway and the telegraph. These devices greatly improved the operational or strategic communications and mobility of armed forces, enabling them to learn of a threat and concentrate troops against that threat within a few days. In a tactical sense, however, an army still moved at a walk and communicated at a trot, both of which could be duplicated and hampered by rebels. Furthermore, Europe had not yet perfected the details of supply by railway, so that military units might arrive quickly by train only to find themselves cut off from their stores and depots.

Katherine Chorley has asserted that artillery was a decisive advantage to defenders of the status quo, but this was true only under certain circumstances. Direct-fire field pieces were most effective against large, unprotected masses of people, as in Napoleon Bonaparte’s “whiff
of grapeshot” fired at suspected royalists on October 5, 1795 (13 Vendémiaire Year IV in the revolutionary calendar). Yet in most instances, a government found it politically difficult to permit such carnage. It is true that these field guns could dismantle hasty barriers. Yet Parisian rebels quickly learned to construct massive barricades of earth and cobblestones, sometimes in a V shape to deflect projectiles. Against such obstacles, solid cannon balls and even the unreliable explosive shells of the era had little effect, at least in areas where large-caliber siege guns could not maneuver. At best, a field piece firing a relatively small projectile that relied on kinetic energy could whittle down the rock pile by starting landslides from the top or by rupturing the barrels used to contain earth and stones. Moreover, artillery was so inaccurate and city streets so twisting that to achieve even this limited effect the guns had to operate at very close range, exposing the gunners to sniper fire and the guns to capture by sudden raids. Once a barricade fell, the troops had to move the guns across it in order to fire at the next obstacle, often only a short distance away, thereby losing any momentum gained by a single success. Howitzers, with their high angle of fire and larger explosive shells, could be used to kill rebels on the far side of a barricade, but again in a city, these weapons were so inaccurate as to be materially wasteful, morally questionable, and politically unacceptable. Only in the most vicious struggles of the June Days did howitzers appear, and then only as a last resort.

The same is true of infantry firepower. Massed fire by platoons, the basic technique of infantry for over 150 years, was effective only at relatively short ranges against area targets, dense concentrations of the enemy; such fire against crowds would usually disgust both the populace and the troops. In a war of barricades and fortified houses, the soldier has almost no advantage over the rebel except a potentially greater supply of ammunition. Infantry muskets and the knowledge of how to use them were widespread in a population of militiamen and discharged soldiers. In 1848, the French Line infantryman or Mobile Guardsman was more likely than his rebel counterpart to have a musket fired by a percussion cap, which enabled the bearer to reload without the difficulties of priming powder for a flintlock. Such weapons were to be found on both sides, however, and the slight advantage was offset by the possibility of running out of percussion caps.
Introduction

All of this is not intended to argue that the established government could not defeat an urban insurrection in the nineteenth century, any more than it implies that such a rebellion is hopeless in the twenty-first century. The point is that armies before the 1850s had few technological advantages in communications, mobility, or firepower over their insurgent opponents. This goes far to explain both the danger of revolution and the redoubled importance of troop loyalty, morale, and leadership.

These problems of controlling civil disorders are important to an understanding of the events of 1848. In February, the royal government was reluctant to recognize the danger of—and reluctant to use force against—a peaceful political demonstration. This misperception of the situation and reluctance to use violence, combined with political uncertainty and disaffection in the military forces, goes far to explain the sudden collapse of the July Monarchy. Similarly, on May 15, 1848, a large and peaceful political parade became an improvised coup d'état because the republic deployed uninspired, uncoordinated, and inadequate forces to contain that parade. The political reliability of the republican armed forces was a continuing question throughout the spring of 1848. Even when the June insurrection finally produced civil war in Paris, governmental and military leaders sought a peaceful solution by parlaying, while the rebels consolidated their defenses. Once battle was joined, the army and its auxiliaries experienced considerable difficulty in defeating the barricades.

In a classic essay, “The Pattern of Urban Revolution in 1848,” William Langer argued that the European governments failed to control opposition because those governments did not rapidly and energetically either placate or repress the crowds. Langer was undoubtedly correct to emphasize governmental indecision, and as we shall see, the forces of order found the large, peaceful crowd to be the most difficult problem to control. Yet, as already indicated, there is some question about the ability of armies to repress opposition even if those armies had been given free rein and adequate leadership.

There was one factor that was almost unique to France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the political and administrative significance of Paris. Whatever its other weaknesses, the Bourbon government had centralized administration and the control of armed forces to a degree unknown in other countries of the era. Elsewhere
on the continent, rebels tended to concentrate upon rapid victory in the national capitals, but in France, as opposed to Prussia or Austria, the government found it very difficult to withdraw from a rebellious capital, regroup, and return in force. Such a withdrawal was frequently considered by Frenchmen from Louis XIV to Adolphe Thiers, and the governments of 1848 were not exceptions in this regard. Yet the political prestige and bureaucratic centralization of Paris were so great that, except in unusual circumstances when the government was already outside the walls (1871), any regime that left Paris ceased to be a legitimate government, and any group of men who could hold the city for more than a few days became the de facto center of authority. It is for this reason that disorders in Paris appeared so important to contemporaries and to this writer.

This study is, therefore, oriented toward the characteristics of French military organizations and civil-military relations in a period of persistent urban disorder. It does not pretend to the depth of detail that some other historians have devoted to individual military institutions and political crises, although in many cases such monographs omit important aspect of their topics. Similarly, historians of individual events in 1848, such as Albert Crémieux on the February Days and Peter Amann on May 15, have not by themselves dealt with the context of institutional and political-military problems for the entire period. More recently, Mark Traugott has done superb research on specific aspects such as the insurgent barricades of history and the political reliability of the Mobile Guard. The approach here is not to duplicate or contradict these works but rather to integrate them into an analysis of revolution from the military viewpoint. Only a consideration of all the armed forces, leaders, and confrontations of 1848 can place these units and events in their historical context.

Paris in 1848 represents a crucial trial of French civil-military relations and the control of civil disorders. The motivations and political reliability of armed forces, the planning undertaken by the military commanders, and the interactions between those commanders and civilian politicians help to explain both the course of French politics and the governmental repression of major social and political unrest.