

# COMRADES

A REVOLUTIONARY RPG

W.M. AKERS



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*Revolution devours its children mercilessly.*

Alexander Herzen

*Show my head to the people: it will be  
worth seeing.*

Danton, at the guillotine



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**GETTING  
STARTED**

# WHEN DID THE LEFT FORGET HOW TO FIGHT?

What happened to the militant left?

Where are the students dreaming of going into battle with a textbook in one hand and a machine gun in the other?

Where are the soldiers radicalizing the army from the trenches?

Where are the union organizers waging war against the bosses, the strike breakers, and the police for their right to an honest wage?

Where are the bomb-tossing anarchists, the bank-robbing Marxists, and the professional revolutionaries intent on remaking the world one insurrection at a time?

In a historical moment when the right is on the ascendant, when nativists and conservatives and outright fascists have seized power, the left sleeps. This game was built to wake them up.

*Comrades* was inspired by a lifetime fascination with the early days of the Russian Revolution, when workers and soldiers and intellectuals risked their lives for a shot at utopia. It was inspired by the anarchists who defended Madrid and Barcelona in 1936, hemmed in by fascists and betrayed by Communists, willing to die because, without their cause, there was nothing left. It was inspired by Hungary in 1956, and Prague and Paris in 1968, and the Weather Underground and

Sacco and Vanzetti and all the other tragedies of the Twentieth Century left, when perfect ideas were dashed by hideous reality.

It was inspired by art—movies like *Z* and *The Battle of Algiers*, songs like “Life During Wartime” and “Spanish Bombs,” books like *Homage to Catalonia* and *Ten Days that Shook the World*—and by the flood of brilliant games that have sprung from D. Vincent Baker and Meguey Baker’s exquisite *Apocalypse World* system: *Monsterhearts*, *Night Witches*, *Dungeon World*, *World Wide Wrestling*, and *Action Movie World*, to name the ones that have touched me most directly. But most of all, it was inspired by today.

Faced with the rebirth of fascism and the normalization of hate, the left in America and elsewhere has responded by whining, by squabbling, by repackaging the same tired ideas and begging us to believe that they are new. They have responded like the left always does: with an infuriating lack of organization that is permissible only because their ideas are right and their hearts are pure.

I created *Comrades* to remind us how we used to fight. I hope that a few hours on the front lines of an imaginary revolution will steel you for the unromantic reality of fighting for change: calling your representatives, working for charity, running for office, and speaking out, not just against what we hate, but in favor of what we love.

This game asks you to throw cynicism and pragmatism aside and fight for a dream. When reality grinds you down, remember that within your chest beats the heart of a comrade. With a roll of the dice, you can change the world.

# WHAT IS THIS GAME?

*Comrades* is a tabletop roleplaying game about life in the revolutionary underground. It takes place in a country—real or imaginary; historical, futuristic, or present day—on the verge of revolution. It is up to you and your players to push it over the brink.

Intended for 2-5 players and a game master (GM), it is a game about sacrifice, bravery, and the beautiful madness of risking your life for your ideals. It is also a game of consequences, in which violence solves little and no death—even that of a villain—goes unmourned.

This book contains the game's rules and core principles; 10 character types (also called playbooks); a guide to running the game as GM, and a campaign outline set in the fictional empire of Khresht during the early days of World War I. Although mainly addressed to the GM, this book will make interesting reading for players as well.

## WHAT DO I NEED TO PLAY?

Besides this book, you'll need:

- 2-5 players (not counting yourself)
- 2-3 pairs of six-sided dice
- Printed copies of the playbooks and reference sheets, which are available online at [wmmakers.net/comrades](http://wmmakers.net/comrades)
- Pencils
- Scratch paper for your players to make notes



## A NOTE ON IDEOLOGY

This game was inspired by the radical leftists of the 19th and 20th Century, some of whom won revolutions, most of whom never came close. Those people used a host of words to describe themselves: socialists, Marxists, Communists, trade unionists, anarchists, and many, many more.

Because the meanings of these words often overlap or contradict, and because they tend to shift over time, this book largely avoids naming specific ideologies, preferring instead the generic “comrades” or “revolutionaries.” If your players want to get specific about their philosophies, they are welcome to use the list of Khreshti ideologies on page 122 for inspiration.

## OUR MANIFESTO

Like any revolutionary party, the heroes of *Comrades* have certain principles they must uphold.

### 1. FIGHT

*Comrades* tells stories of ordinary people willing to die for their ideals. There is nothing more heroic than that. Respond to injustice not with silence, not with disapproval, but with fury. Sprint into battle, head high and heart open, and do not worry if this day could be your last.

### 2. REFUSE COMPROMISE

*Comrades* is a revolution and a fictional one at that. Forget being civilized. Fight for what you want and don’t let anyone—even your comrades—get in the way.

### 3. DON'T LET THE BASTARDS GET AWAY WITH IT

What bastards? The greedy, the incompetent, the fascist, the racist, the misogynistic, the straight-up evil sons of bitches who rule the world. In real life, no matter how wrong they are, the bastards usually win. Here, they don’t. Name them, find them, and show them what the people can do.

# HOW IT WORKS

## LET'S TALK

Like all tabletop RPGs, *Comrades* is intended as a conversation. A session will consist of you and your friends talking through a jointly-imagined story. When the players attempt something that contains an element of chance, they will roll dice to determine the outcome, but most of the game will be talking.

## THE GM

Each game is made up of a series of scenes, long and short. Most of these will be started by the GM, who begins with a few words of description before turning to the players to ask questions like, “What are you thinking?” “What are you doing?” “What’s your plan?”

The GM introduces complications—a cop, a mob, a Molotov cocktail—but never forces the story away from what interests the players. It is the GM’s job to challenge the players, and the players’ job to answer when the GM asks the all-important question: “What do you do next?”

Many tabletop systems tempt the GM to act as dictator. In *Comrades*, as befits a game about revolution, power must be shared. Based on the *Apocalypse World* engine designed by D. Vincent Baker and Meguey Baker, *Comrades* is intended to be fully collaborative, with the players providing inspiration and the GM offering structure.

The first session is a kind of shared brainstorming exercise, in which players create their comrades, name non-player characters (NPCs),

discuss the setting they would like to explore, and play through a simple, introductory adventure.

After the first session, the GM uses the players' ideas to build out the world, filling some gaps and leaving others. The GM creates a loose structure for future sessions, creating trouble for the players while resisting the urge to script the story in advance. After all, revolution is never predictable.

During subsequent sessions, the GM provides obstacles and opportunities in the form of government threats, rival factions, secret police, and the underworld, and watches as the action unfolds. It is the GM's job to keep the players focused, challenged, and engaged, but it is up to the players to tell the story.

If you haven't GMed using the *Apocalypse World* engine before, you may find it disorienting. After a few sessions, you'll get the hang of it. Sharing power will make your group better role players, and it will make you a better GM.

## FRAMING SCENES

Sharing power starts with the foundation of the game: the scene. Normally, scenes are kicked off by the GM, who describes the setting along with who's there and what's going on. From there, it's up to the players.

Players can also call a scene themselves, naming one or more comrades or NPCs whom they want to interact with and a place for it to happen. If their request is plausible, the GM lets it go ahead—although that doesn't mean the scene plays out how they wish.

**ANYA:** Before we leave, can I get a minute alone with Vasily?

**GM:** He's halfway through his speech.

**ANYA:** Can I grab him when he walks off-stage?

**GM:** Sure, but his bodyguard, Torra, is with him, and that guy does not look happy to see you.

At the end of each scene, it's up to the GM to confirm none of the comrades has anything else they want to do before moving on. Before the next scene starts, the GM should always ask, "Does anybody want to call a scene?"

## MAKING MOVES

Most of a session of *Comrades* will consist of your players describing their actions. When they attempt something simple—peering out the window at the Grand Duke's wedding parade, for instance—let them do it. When they attempt something dicier—like leaping out of the window onto the roof of the Grand Duke's car—they have triggered a move and must roll to learn what happens next.

*Comrades* has three distinct types of move:

- **Basic Moves** govern common revolutionary behavior, from starting a fight to sneaking past a checkpoint. Any comrade can make them at any time. They are described on page 30.
- **Special Moves**, which are listed on each playbook, describe special abilities available only to that character. Some of them are active moves, requiring a die-roll, and some are passive moves, giving an automatic benefit without relying on chance. These are described starting on page 50.
- **GM Moves** guide GM behavior. These are intended to keep the game moving without constraining your players. They never require a die roll and are described on page 80.

To make a move, players don't need to announce it by name. Instead, they describe what they're doing in as much detail as they like and let the GM tell them when a move has been triggered.

This could go one way...

**BRIANA:** I want to jump on to the roof of the Grand Duke's car.

**GM:** It sounds like you're **taking a risk**, so roll with spirit and we'll find out how it goes.

Or another...

**BRIANA:** I want to jump on to the roof of the Grand Duke's car.

**GM:** Actually, the car is stopped in traffic and you're on the second floor, so you don't need to roll for it. You're on the roof. What do you do next?

If a player does announce a move by name, nudge them toward describing their actions—not the game's mechanics.

**BRIANA:** I want to **take a risk** in order to get closer to the Grand Duke.

**GM:** Okay. How? What kind of risk do you want to take?

**BRIANA:** I guess... I guess I'll jump out the window on to the roof.

**GM:** Great! Roll with spirit and let's see what happens.

## ROLLING DICE

When *Comrades* asks a player to roll dice, the procedure is always the same: roll two six-sided dice (2d6) and hope the result is as high as possible. If the result is...

- 10+: It's a strong hit. Things go the player's way.
- 7-9: It's a weak hit. Things go the player's way, sort of.
- 6-: It's a miss. The GM will say what happens. It won't be good.

Nearly every move in the game asks players to “roll with” a stat, which means to roll 2d6 and add the value they have in a particular stat to the result. These stats, which range from -3 to +3, reflect the varying abilities of different comrades and are explained in detail on page 22.

When Briana **takes a risk** by jumping out of the window onto the Grand Duke's car, she rolls with spirit, meaning she rolls 2d6 and adds her spirit score to the result. Briana's spirit is +2.

If she rolls an 8, her spirit increases that to a 10: a strong hit! If she rolls a 5, her spirit increases that to a 7: a weak hit. If she rolls a 2, no amount of spirit can save Briana from a miss. The GM will tell her what happens next.

## MODIFIERS

Certain moves ask players to modify a roll by adding or subtracting from their 2d6 result. The total modifier to any roll, including that provided by the player's stats, can never be higher than +4.

There are four ways a roll may be adjusted:

A character may have a special move that allows them to add 1 to a particular roll when they have met specific criteria.

The patron's special move **code switcher** allows them to add 1 to rolls to **sneak** any time they take advantage of their ability to blend in with rich and poor alike. If a patron attempts to evade the police by slipping into an exclusive club, they add 1 to their roll to **sneak**, in addition to adding their guile.

A move may instruct a player to carry 1 forward as the result of a special or basic move, allowing them to add 1 to whatever their next roll may be.

The student's special move **hopelessly naïve** allows them to carry 1 forward whenever they charge into danger for the sake of their ideals. If a student hurls himself into a burning library to save a first edition of *Capital*, they add 1 to their roll to **take a risk** as they dodge the flames.

A move may instruct a player to carry 1 ongoing as the result of a special or basic move. This is like carrying 1 forward, but instead of lasting only for the next move, the effect lasts for a period determined by the move. If a clear endpoint is not defined, the GM will usually choose to end the bonus at the end of the current scene.

One of the possible results of a roll to **share a quiet moment** is that the comrades involved may carry 1 ongoing while acting as a team. If two comrades make meaningful eye contact before rushing into battle, they may add 1 to all the rolls they make while acting in concert for as long as the fight lasts.

If a player is preparing to make a roll in a situation of extraordinary advantage or disadvantage, the GM may choose to add or subtract from the roll before it happens.

If a comrade is attempting to **sway** a die-hard member of the nobility to donate to the party, the GM may subtract 1 from the roll. If the noble is the black sheep of their family, and has been involved in revolutionary causes since they were a child, the GM may choose to add 1.

## A REVOLUTION ALL THEIR OWN

Revolutions are complex. They may start in parliament, in the barracks, or in the streets. They may finish with riots that terrify a despot into fleeing the country or a coup so tightly organized that few even notice when it happens.

To replicate this variety, *Comrades* offers different pathways to revolution, explained on page 38, that allow your players to seize power in the way that suits them best. Some methods are legal, some are not. Some are moral, some are vile. Your players' behavior during the game will determine the paths that are open to them.

It takes countless moments to make a revolution. No matter how much trouble your players cause, they will only be part of the story. This system turns what happens at the table into a movement and keeps the comrades hurtling toward their destiny.

GETTING STARTED





## WHY PLAY THIS GAME?

Because *Comrades* tells great stories. Your players will create daring, beautiful, uncompromising characters. They will support each other, love each other, betray each other, and die in each other's arms. These will be moments you and your friends will never forget.

Because in real life, you will probably never get to start a revolution. Wherever you fall on the political spectrum, there have been times in your life that you've been angry at the way things are. *Comrades* will let you use that rage to remake a world.

Because fantasizing about fictional revolution will help you cope with a reality in which political change is not so exciting. My hope is that this game will give you the strength to be a little less compromising and free you to demand government live up to your beautiful ideals.

And, finally, because you want to know what happens next. When you set this story in motion, your players will bring it to life and take it places you never imagined. You are lucky to be along for the ride.







# THE GAME

## CORE CONCEPTS

### STATS

A comrade's attributes are represented by five stats: modifiers that range from -3 to +3. When a move asks a player to “roll with” a particular stat, they add or subtract the relevant stat from the result.

- **Body** represents physical strength, toughness, constitution, and fighting ability. Roll with body to **get rough**.
- **Mind** represents intelligence, book learning, critical thinking, and organizational skill. Roll with mind to ask, “**what’s going on here?**”
- **Spirit** represents energy, passion, daring, and devotion to the revolutionary cause. Roll with spirit to **take a risk** or **start something**.
- **Guile** represents trickery, deception, charisma, and all things underhanded. Roll with guile to **sway** or **sneak**.
- **Bond** represents your connection to a specific comrade, your shared history, your affection or hatred, and your willingness to die that they may live. Because people do not always reciprocate feelings, your bond with a comrade need not be the same as their bond with you. Roll with bond to **help or hinder a comrade**, **share a quiet moment**, or **cradle a dying comrade**.

Alya is a big strong Brute. Her body is +2; her mind is -1; her spirit is +1, and her guile is -1. When rolling to **get rough**, which asks the player to roll with body, Alya rolls 2d6+2. When rolling to **sneak**, which calls for guile, she rolls 2d6-1.

## ASSIGNING STATS

For the first four stats, players assign the following numbers as they see fit: +2, +1, -1, and -1.

When creating her Patron, Cordelia imagines a character who is weak, well-educated, eager, and naïve. She chooses to assign the stats as follows: body -1; mind +2; spirit +1; guile -1.

Nathaniel, meanwhile, wants his Professional to be tough, a bit dim, cynical, and ruthless. He assigns the following stats: body +1; mind -1; spirit -1; guile +2.

Players determine bond by asking questions contained in their playbook that are designed to establish the comrade's history with the rest of the party. This is an opportunity not just to fill out the comrades' statistics, but to imagine a back story that ties them together and makes them seem real.

**CORDELIA:** Which of you is constantly begging money from my fabulous Patron, Mariel?

**TOMÁS:** I'm playing Kenyon, an Artist who is flat broke and not shy about it. That's probably me.

**CORDELIA:** Okay, I'm marking our bond as -2. I'm going to keep giving you money, but you irritate the hell out of me.

**TOMÁS:** Great! My first question is, "Which of you has supported my work from the beginning?" I'll put you down and write +3.

**CORDELIA:** You have no idea how much I dislike you.

**TOMÁS:** Or maybe I just don't care.

Beneath the blank section marked Bond, Cordelia writes "Kenyon -2" and Tomás writes "Mariel +3."

## HARM

When a comrade gets hurt, they take harm. This usually happens after a failed roll to **get rough** or **take a risk**, but it could also happen without rolling the dice at all.

When a gang of strikebreakers charges his picket line, Vilya stands his ground, swinging his placard at the first to come his way. He rolls with body to **get rough**, and the result is 5: a miss. The strikebreaker cracks him over the head with his baton. Vilya takes 1 harm and falls to the ground.

What constitutes 1 harm is up to the GM and can be adjusted depending on the situation. Here are some guidelines:

- If you get hit with a fist, take 1 harm.
- If you get hit with a brick, take 2 harm.
- If you get shot from distance, take 3 harm.
- If you get shot at close range, take 4 harm.

Extreme stress, trauma, or exhaustion may also cause 1 harm, although this is better used to push a comrade from no harm to 1 harm than from 3 harm to 4.

Samara has been pushing herself to the limit to produce this week's issue of the party newspaper, even as bombs explode outside her print shop's door. When the paper goes to press, she collapses from exhaustion and takes 1 harm.

Depending on the injuries sustained, a comrade with 2 or more harm may find their abilities reduced, and the GM may choose to subject certain rolls to a negative modifier. A comrade with a broken arm may suffer penalties to **get rough**; a comrade may find it harder to **sneak** if they're trailing blood from their leg.

When a comrade reaches 4 harm, they are dying. As they cling to life, another player may roll with bond to **cradle a dying comrade** and attempt to coax them back from the brink. On a 10+, the dying

player is saved from death and reduced to 3 harm. On anything less, they die. Learn more about this move on page 36.

**Cradle a dying comrade** is not appropriate when the injuries suffered make death inarguable. A gunshot to the temple, a fall from 200 feet—there are some pains no amount of cradling can soothe.

## HEALING

At 1-2 harm, injuries heal with time—maybe one harm per day, maybe more. A broken leg does not heal overnight.

At 3 harm, injuries get worse, and will probably lead a comrade to death's door in a week, a day, an hour.... Again, this depends on circumstances. It is up to the GM to make the decision.

Harm can be healed using certain special and basic moves, most notably **share a quiet moment**. If comrades have the means to apply in-game first aid, that can usually be counted on to heal 1 harm.

When the secret police have finished with him, they dump Abe outside party headquarters, broken and bleeding, as an example to his friends. He has taken 3 harm and is near death.

His brother Brian cleans and bandages the wounds, healing 1 harm. Brian reminisces about the time he broke his ankle playing hockey when they were kids and Abe kept him company until the doctor came. This happy memory allows them to successfully **share a quiet moment**, and Abe heals 1 more harm.

After day or two of taking it easy, Abe can wipe the last harm clean and return to action—bruised and scarred, but ready to fight.

At the start of a new session, let the players wipe their sheets clean of all harm, unless they took a particularly notable injury last time. (Those pesky broken legs!) Healing is a place to be generous with your players, as it will let you hurt them more down the line.

## EXPERIENCE

Experience represents a comrade's ability to learn from failure. There are four ways to gain experience:

- When a player rolls 6 or less, they mark experience.
- When one comrade's bond with another reaches +4, they mark experience and reset the bond to +1.
- When one comrade's bond with another reaches -3, they mark experience and reset the bond to 0.
- When a comrade rolls a 7-9 on a pathway move (page 42), all comrades in the party may mark experience.

Wallis, a Student, is attempting to **sneak** past the guards at the naval base to distribute propaganda. She rolls a 4, and is caught. To represent lessons learned from this catastrophe, she marks 1 experience.

She's freed by her lover Starlin, a Soldier loyal to the cause. Sneaking off the base, they find themselves looking out across a frozen lake so beautiful that they cannot help but **share a quiet moment**. They choose to increase their bond, bringing Wallis' to +4 and Starlin's to +2. Wallis marks experience and resets her bond with Starlin to +1.

## ADVANCES

When a player marks 5 experience, they erase all their experience checks and choose an advance from the list inside their playbook.

Although the possible advances vary slightly from playbook to playbook, most are similar to the list for the Artist shown at right. Each advance can be taken only once.

### ARTIST ADVANCES

- +1 to Any Stat (max +3)
- +1 to Any Stat (max +3)
- +1 to Any Stat (max +3)
- Form a Gang of Artists
- Take Another Artist Move
- Take Another Artist Move
- Take Another Artist Move
- Take a Move From Another Playbook
- Take a Move From Another Playbook
- Depart



- **+1 to Any Stat (max +3)** allows the Artist to increase the value of any stat by 1 to a maximum of +3. When they do so, they should think about how the struggle for revolution has caused them to grow.
- **Form a Gang of Artists** allows the Artist to establish a gang of artistic NPCs who may (or may not) assist them in the future. More on that on page 28.
- **Take Another Artist Move** allows the Artist to choose another of the special moves listed in the playbook. When they take it, they should ask themselves how they learned this new skill.
- **Take a Move From Another Playbook** allows the Artist to adopt a special move from another playbook. This is a way of creating hybrid characters. An Artist with one or two Student moves is a natural fit; an Artist with the skills of the Professional is intriguing and strange.
- **Depart** is probably the last advance the Artist will take. It can mean whatever the player needs it to mean: promotion, desertion, insanity, disappearance, arrest, violent martyrdom, or peaceful death. When this is the last move left, the Artist should either tell the GM how they want to go out or ask for a surprise. When they check it off, that doesn't mean the end is here, but it should come this session. It is up to everyone at the table to make their goodbye magnificent.

When a comrade takes an advance, consider asking them to mark the occasion by doing something like:

- Saying a few words about a comrade who helped or hindered them along the way
- Proposing the group's next mission
- Sharing something about their past
- Adopting a revolutionary sobriquet
- Writing a note about the session on the back of their playbook

## GANGS

Certain playbooks—the Artist, the Professional, the Soldier, the Student, the Brute—contain an advance that allows the comrade to assemble a gang of like-minded radicals to aid the cause.

The comrade can add 1 to rolls when the gang lends a hand. **Get rough, start something, take a risk**, and **sway** are situations where this might apply. **"What's going on here?"** and **share a quiet moment** are probably not. As always, no roll can be modified by more than +4.

If the comrade uses the gang to fight a smaller group, apply the bonus and increase whatever harm they deal. If the comrade uses the gang to fight a gang of equal or greater size, the gangs cancel out and no bonus should be applied.

Marta, an Artist, travels with a trio of hard-boiled symbolist poets. When an encounter with a pair of futurists at a riverfront gallery turns sour, Marta and her gang attack, swinging shattered bottles of room temperature white wine.

Because Marta acts in concert with her gang, and they outnumber the futurists, she adds 1 to the roll to **get rough**. If the roll is successful, any harm they deal will be increased. If her gang did not outnumber the futurists, there would be no bonus, and the fight would go on as normal.

A gang must never be a faceless mob. When the player creates the gang, have them name and describe two or three key members, giving each their own personality, background, and motives. Let these NPCs represent different forces within the movement or within the player's character, and use them to provide conflict as well as opportunity.

Gangs are powerful and that power should cut both ways. Let the effort necessary to keep followers in check balance out the advantage the gang provides. The more powerful a gang becomes—and the less attention the player pays to it—the more likely one of the gang's members will challenge for control.

A gang can range in size from two to two dozen, depending on the character and the world, but it will probably be best to keep it on the smaller side, at least when it is first created.

If it can be restricted only to two or three named NPCs, so much the better.

Keeping track of the various members of a gang can be a challenge for a GM. It may be wise to limit the number of gangs allowed to your players to one or two at a time. If another player wishes to form a gang, consider letting them do so on condition that they first destroy or sideline the other player's gang.



# BASIC MOVES

When a player announces they're taking an action with an uncertain outcome, they trigger a move. That means it's time to roll the dice. The following basic moves will cover most situations that arise in the game and are available to all comrades.

Each move contains the criteria necessary to trigger it, the instructions for carrying it out, and a description of the result. Some moves give a list of possible outcomes for the player or GM to choose from. If a player is given the option to choose one or two positive outcomes—such as with **get rough** or **start something**—it is implied that the outcomes not chosen will come back to bite them.

## GET ROUGH

When you try to hurt someone, roll with body. On a 10+, deal harm and pick two from this list. On a 7-9, deal harm and pick one.

- You deal great harm
- You take no harm
- You disengage

The basic move for combat, **get rough** is employed whether the comrade is throwing a punch or throwing a grenade. It is designed to make violent encounters swift and decisive. One or two rolls of the dice should be sufficient to resolve all but the most chaotic of fights. If you see your players yawning—"I guess I'll **get rough** again?"—something has gone wrong.

Avoid using it any time the outcome is certain or the comrade is not really in danger, since the results of the list don't make sense if the comrade can't possibly take harm. Shooting a gun in a room full of people with guns is **getting rough**; firing a sniper rifle from across a crowded street is more likely **taking a risk**.

A missed roll to **get rough** may trigger the GM moves **deliver trouble**, **deal harm**, **offer a nasty choice**, or anything else that hurts bad.

As the munitions train leaves the station, Esme leaps through the window and attempts to seize control. The engineer reaches for a wrench, and Esme hurls herself at him, attempting to shove him off the train. Rolling to **get rough**, she rolls a 7. Rather than choosing to disengage or deal great harm, she chooses to take no harm. She hurts the engineer, but he manages to stay on the train. The fight continues.

## “WHAT’S GOING ON HERE?”

When you take a moment to assess a person or situation, roll with mind. On a 10+, ask the GM three questions from this list. On a 7-9, ask 1 question. On a miss, ask 1 question and brace for the worst.

- What’s the best way in / out / past?
- What should I watch out for?
- Who is most vulnerable?
- Who is the biggest threat?
- What do they want?
- Who’s in control?
- Are they lying?
- How do I get them to do \_\_\_\_\_?
- What am I missing?

When the comrades attempt to get a grip on an unfamiliar or dangerous situation, they are probably asking, **“what’s going on here?”** Something to suggest whenever they are out of ideas, it is a way to deliver useful information without stopping the story for tedious exposition. Suggest it whenever they get stuck. Your answers to their questions should always be honest and helpful.

A missed roll to ask **"what's going on here?"** may trigger the GM moves **promise trouble**, **test their weaknesses**, or anything that answers their question in the worst way possible.

Undercover in a royalist tavern, Campbell notices a pair of men in black coats watching his every move. He asks, **"what's going on here?"** and rolls a 3. "What's the best way out?" he asks, and the GM tells him there's a door to the cellar behind the bar—a good thing, because the men in black coats are headed his way.

### TAKE A RISK

When you take a mad risk for the revolution, roll with spirit. On a 10+, your gamble succeeds. On a 7-9, your risk pays off—kind of. The GM will tell you what went wrong.

A catch-all for all sorts of dangerous behavior, **take a risk** is appropriate whether the comrades are leaping out the back of a Black Maria or fast-talking their way through a clutch of fascist toughs. It is deliberately vague, allowing the GM to tailor the result to the situation, and it will be used often.

Occasionally, it may be appropriate to switch the stat rolled with this move. If a comrade is bracing a door against a police battering ram, their body may be more relevant than their spirit. Limit these exceptions.

Failed rolls for **take a risk** may trigger the GM moves **deliver trouble**, **deal harm**, **put them in a spot**, **offer a nasty choice**, or anything else that punishes optimism with despair.

Attempting to outrun a gang of white nationalists, Reyna takes a risk, biking through a construction site in search of a shortcut. She rolls a 6. Her bike's chain snaps, sending her sprawling, and the mob surrounds her.

## START SOMETHING

When you try to provoke a crowd to strike, demonstrate, riot, or brawl, roll with spirit. On a 10+, it goes the way you want—at first, anyway. On a 7-9, pick one:

- The mob is large
- The mob is peaceful
- The mob heeds your instructions

**Start something** allows the comrades to manipulate a crowd. As with all moves, it's not enough for the player to announce they want to **start something**—they need to have a clear idea of how they want to influence the mob and what they hope it will do. It is easiest to manipulate a friendly or neutral crowd, of course, but careful preparation can also make it possible to **start something** with a hostile crowd as well.

Use this move to create chaos and bring life to crowd scenes that would otherwise be static. If the players roll well and manipulate the mob thoughtfully, the chaos should benefit them, but even on a strong hit, no mob can be controlled for long.

A failed roll for **start something** can lead to the GM moves **tell them the consequences and let them choose**, **test their principles**, or anything that forces comrades to make a difficult choice.

Wearing a stolen ensign's uniform, Tallulah spreads a rumor across the navy yard that the officers are hoarding rum. Attempting to **start something**, she rolls a 9, and chooses to make the mob large. A violent, uncontrollable mob storms the officer's club, burning it to the ground, and forcing Tallulah to escape or be trampled.

## SWAY

When you try to convince an NPC to do what you want, roll with guile. On a 10+, they ask something small in return. On a 7-9, they ask something big.

An essential move for interacting with NPCs, **sway** is appropriate whether a comrade is begging for their life or bribing their way across a border. As always, a roll to **sway** requires a specific approach. If the player suggests something clever or convincing, consider giving them a bonus to the roll.

Failed rolls to **sway** can lead to the GM moves **promise trouble**, **test their principles**, or anything that suggests things are about to go horribly wrong.

Imprisoned by a corrupt police lieutenant, Eloise attempts to **sway** him to let her go free. She rolls an 8, and he agrees to let her walk out of the station—on condition that she slip into the evidence locker on the way out and plant something that will incriminate one of her comrades.

## SNEAK

When you try to smuggle a message, an object, a person—even yourself—right under the nose of your enemy, roll with guile. On a 10+, it works, no problem. On a 7-9, pick one:

- You waste no time
- You incur no costs
- You draw no suspicion

**Sneak** is intended to replicate all manner of clandestine activity, from sending secret messages and materiel to hiding in the shadows. Call for it whenever the comrades are being sneaky. On a weak hit, use the choices not taken to drive the story forward.

Common GM moves resulting from a failed roll to **sneak** are **separate them**, **put them in a spot**, or anything that punishes the comrades for failing to stay in the shadows.



To slip past the old city wall into the noble quarter, Leona and Antoine attempt to **sneak** through the sewers. They roll a 9, and choose to draw no suspicion. This means that their trip through the sewers takes hours they cannot spare, and comes with a heavy cost as they are separated in the tunnels.

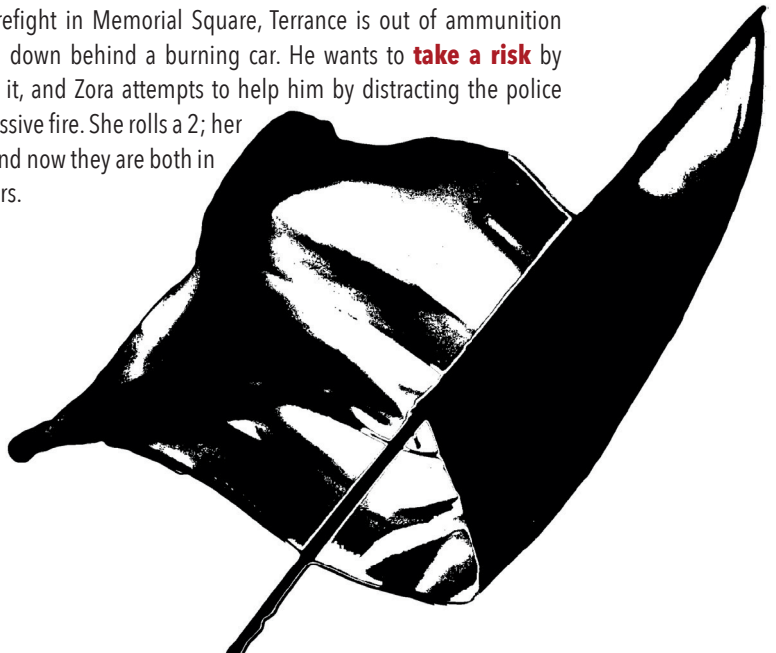
## HELP OR HINDER A COMRADE

When you try to **help or hinder a comrade** before they make a move, roll with bond. On a 10+, adjust their roll by +2 or -2—your choice. On a 7-9, it's +1 or -1.

This move allows players to assist or interfere with a comrade who's about to make a move. Players must announce that they want to help or hinder before the other comrade rolls the dice, and they must do so (as always) by narrating action, not naming the move. They must put themselves in danger or otherwise risk something to attempt this move, so that even if they fail to change the outcome of their comrades' move, they have still advanced the story. In certain groups, this move may be prone to overuse. Discourage that by making the penalties for a failed move hurt.

Natural GM moves to follow a failed roll to **help or hinder a comrade** include **offer a nasty choice** and **tell them the consequences and let them choose**.

During a firefight in Memorial Square, Terrance is out of ammunition and pinned down behind a burning car. He wants to **take a risk** by running for it, and Zora attempts to help him by distracting the police with suppressive fire. She rolls a 2; her gun jams, and now they are both in the crosshairs.



## SHARE A QUIET MOMENT

When you and a comrade share a moment of affection, honesty, or peace, roll with bond. If the moment is romantic, add 1 to the roll. On a 10+, pick two from the list. On a 7-9, pick one:

- Carry 1 ongoing while acting as a team
- Add 1 to bond
- Heal 1 harm

An essential move for building party morale, **share a quiet moment** gives the comrades opportunities to work better as a team, grow closer, and heal wounds. This move provides an opportunity for players to calm down and connect both with their characters and with the other people at the table.

A quiet moment could be a whole scene, or it could be just a few seconds in the middle of something else. Thoughtful roleplayers will often **share a quiet moment** without realizing it—it is up to the GM to give them a chance to reap the reward.

Typical consequences for a failed attempt to **share a quiet moment** are the GM moves **promise trouble**, **put them in a spot**, **separate them**, or anything that pushes the comrades apart at a moment in which they should be feeling closest.

Watching for a police raid from the roof of party headquarters, Celia tells Gabriel about how she used to go stargazing on her father's yacht. She intends to **share a quiet moment**, but she rolls a 4, offending Gabriel by reminding him that she grew up rich. Gabriel walks away, irritated, separating the comrades just as the police swarm inside.

## CRADLE A DYING COMRADE

When you comfort a comrade who has taken 4 harm, but could conceivably survive, roll with bond. On a 10+, they live, barely. Add 1 to bond. On a 7-9, they die, but you hear their last words. Carry 1 forward while acting in their name, and add 1 to any pathways to revolution roll.

As described on page 24, a comrade on the verge of death can be brought back to life by the timely application of comfort and affection. Whether successful or not, this roll always leads to memorable moments, and it is all right to stretch the suspension of disbelief in order to give a comrade a chance to attempt it.

The penalty for a miss does not need to be severe—they already lost their comrade, after all—but it can be a time to **promise trouble** or **put them in a spot**, depending on how badly they exposed themselves in order to reach their dying friend.

Fighting with a gang of nihilist punks, Herman takes a knife in the gut and falls, dying. Barbara sweeps him into her arms, whispers words of comfort and rolls to **cradle a dying comrade**. It's a 12. The bleeding stops; the color comes back to Herman's face. He lives to fight again.

## ADJUST BOND

At the end of each session, name a comrade to whom you feel closer and increase your bond by 1. If this raises your bond to +4, mark experience and reset your bond to +1. If there is no comrade to whom you feel closer, choose one from whom you feel alienated, and reduce your bond by 1. If this brings your bond to -3, mark experience, and reset your bond to 0.

The only basic move not available at any time, **adjust bond** should be performed by all comrades, including those who died, at the end of each session, before the pathway moves described on page 42. Use this time to reflect on the session, and to encourage players to praise each other for their good work during the game.

After the riot, Shai feels closer than ever to Yardenne, who pulled him out of the path of the charging dragoons. He increases his bond with her by 1, bringing it to +3. Yardenne, meanwhile, is disgusted with Orion for bolting when the cavalry arrived and reduces her bond with him by 1, bringing it to -3. She marks experience and resets their bond to 0.

# PATHWAYS TO REVOLUTION

A session of *Comrades* covers a moment when a band of brave individuals changes the course of a revolution. To better understand what's happening “off-screen,” and to keep the campaign moving to its inevitable climax, each party may progress along one or more pathways to revolution. The pathways are:

- **Force**
- **Organization**
- **Zealotry**
- **Mayhem**
- **Fellowship**

Each pathway consists of five levels. When the final level is reached, the revolution is at hand, and the next session will probably be the last. Groups that prefer open-ended play may choose to disregard these pathways, or adapt them to suit their game's style. See page 152 for suggestions on how to customize these rules.

## USING THE PATHWAYS

At the end of each session, a comrade will be chosen to make rolls for the pathway moves on page 42. If they are successful, the party will advance a level in the relevant pathway and the revolution will be one day closer.

Advancing a level reshapes the world, for good and bad. The farther a party gets, the harder their enemies should push back.

When the agrarian Marxist group the Bloody Plow reaches level 2 in Zealotry, their newspaper *Pain & Grain* becomes popular across the country, allowing them to spread their message wider than ever before. As a result, the secret police might crack down on their distribution network, their newsprint suppliers, their printers, or their writers.

Most parties will advance on more than one pathway at once, giving their faction a personality that changes over time. If a party suffers an extreme setback during a session, they may drop a level in one of the pathways, but such penalties should be enforced rarely.

Although all of these traits offer advantages, they are not necessarily advantages your group should feel good about. Be unsparing about the ugliness and pain that comes with your party's march to power, particularly if your players embrace Force or Mayhem. Murder may be effective, but it's still evil.

## FORCE

The preferred approach for parties that lead with their fists, Force represents the ability to fight openly, whether with the police, the army, or rival groups. The more the party relies on overwhelming violence, the more likely they are to advance in Force and reach the point where leftists are mistaken for fascists.

1. Your party institutes weapons training. All comrades become proficient in small arms and basic hand-to-hand combat.
2. Your party establishes a corps of highly-drilled street fighters, around 10 of which are available at a time, who are a match for similar numbers of police.
3. Your party adopts uniforms or armbands. When these are worn, most people are frightened by your appearance, while your enemies attack on sight.
4. During an election, your party may increase its turnout through voter intimidation, violence, and fraud.
5. Your organized shock troops may take to the streets and attempt to seize power in a pitched battle with government forces.

## ORGANIZATION

Perhaps the most difficult pathway to walk, Organization represents a party's infrastructure, communications, and logistics. The better organized a party becomes, the more respect they gain, giving them a chance to take power legally.

1. Your party is tightly structured. When you need help from party headquarters, you can usually get it. When they give you orders, they expect them to be followed to the letter.
2. Your party plans ahead. When you need a safe house, a covert route, or a person on the inside, you have one.
3. Your infrastructure is state of the art. When you require supplies, you get them as rapidly as the era's technology allows.
4. Your party is respectable. Unless your behavior is blatantly illegal, the police tend to leave you alone.
5. You may call for an election and attempt to seize power through legal channels.

## ZEALOTRY

Parties that play to the crowd and take strength from the mob will find themselves at home in Zealotry. Although the bonuses it offers are useful, the further players move along this pathway, the closer the revolution comes to spinning out of their control.

1. You have supporters everywhere. In any setting in which NPCs are not clearly aligned with another faction, a good number support you.
2. If your party has a media organ, it becomes hugely popular, allowing you to bring your message to the masses.
3. Demonstrations in support of your party happen regularly and with great fanfare.
4. You become a sympathetic cause among the rich, who fill your coffers with money.
5. You may call for a popular uprising and attempt to seize power by flooding the streets with your supporters.

## MAYHEM

Parties who rely on the persuasive power of indiscriminate violence will quickly rise through the ranks of Mayhem. Although useful for players who enjoy combat, this pathway is extremely problematic, and should be handled with care by players and GM alike.

1. Your party institutes basic explosives training, allowing all comrades to handle a bomb without blowing themselves up.
2. When you require explosives or other weapons of indiscriminate destruction, you can get them that day.
3. Your party knows how to use weapons for maximum effect. When you plant a bomb or rake a sidewalk with machine gun fire, the casualties are horrifying.
4. If you wish to assassinate someone important—but who is not the head of state—you can get close enough to plant a bomb or take a shot at them.
5. You may mount a massive campaign of chaos across the capital and attempt to seize power by driving the populace mad with fear.

## FELLOWSHIP

For parties who believe esprit de corps is more important than ideology, Fellowship may offer the clearest path to power. The only pathway that grants concrete mechanical rewards, it is designed to encourage players to value their bonds with each other above all else.

1. Your party recruits friends. Each new comrade starts with an additional +1 bond with someone in the party.
2. Your party recruits talented people. Each new comrade starts with an advance.
3. Your love for your comrades is powerful. Add 1 to all rolls to **cradle a dying comrade**.
4. Your bonds transcend all barriers. A dead comrade returns from imprisonment, exile, or death.
5. The bond of trust between your comrades is so great that you may organize a tightly-planned plot to assassinate the head of state and be reasonably sure that none of your comrades will inform the authorities.

## PATHWAY MOVES

At the end of each session, ask your players to choose a comrade whose efforts today best embodied the spirit of the revolution. This may be the comrade who fought the most bravely or who rescued others from harm. It may be one who died.

Let this comrade make rolls for the pathway moves whose criteria have been met during the session. Roll with the stats indicated for each move. For bond, use the bond altered during the end of session **adjust bond** process.

If any player rolled 7-9 while **cradling a dying comrade**, the dead comrade may choose which party move to influence. If more than one comrade was able to pass on dying words, these bonuses may stack. As always, the total modifier to any roll cannot exceed +4.

### FORCE

When your party uses its strength to crush the opposition, roll with body. On a 10+, increase your party's rank in Force. On a 7-9, the public approves of what you have done. Every comrade gains 1 experience.

### ORGANIZATION

When your party executes a daring plan with precision, roll with mind. On a 10+, increase your party's rank in Organization. On a 7-9, the public approves of what you have done. Every comrade gains 1 experience.

### ZEALOTRY

When your party does something high-profile to inspire the oppressed masses, roll with spirit. On a 10+, increase your party's rank in Zealotry. On a 7-9, the public approves of what you have done. Every comrade gains 1 experience.

### MAYHEM

When your party plants bombs, sets fires, attempts assassinations, or otherwise uses violence indiscriminately, roll with guile. On a 10+, increase your party's rank in Mayhem. On a 7-9, the public approves of what you have done. Every comrade gains 1 experience.



## FELLOWSHIP

When your party members risk their lives for each other, roll with bond. On a 10+, increase your party's rank in Fellowship. On a 7-9, the public approves of what you have done. Every comrade gains 1 experience.

For a faster campaign, give the comrades the option to advance a pathway level on a 7-9 result in exchange for starting the next session in serious trouble. What trouble that form takes is up to you. This option replaces the experience bonus that normally comes with a 7-9 result, and it can only be taken once per session.

## AN EXAMPLE

In a session where the anarchist group the Nine seizes a fascist printing press and uses it to blanket the town in radical propaganda, the group chooses Gregor, who died in the fighting, to make the pathway moves.

Gregor, a Soldier, has the following stats: Body: +2; Mind: -1; Spirit: -1; Guile: +1. He also has the opportunity to add 1 to a single pathway move, because when Janina rolled to **cradle a dying comrade** in Gregor's final moments, the result was an 8, allowing Gregor to pass on his final words. (In this case, "Throw the grenade, not the pin.") The group decides their actions have triggered the following moves:

- Force, because the Nine used their strength to crush the fascist threat.
- Zealotry, because the pamphleteering was extremely high-profile.
- Fellowship, because the comrades risked their lives for each other.

The session fails to trigger Organization, because the attack was a haphazard affair, and Mayhem, because the Nine's violence had a specific target and was not indiscriminate.

For Force, Gregor rolls 2d6+2. Janina chooses to add 1 to the roll, but the result is 6: a failure.

There is no immediate penalty for the failed roll, but the GM may take this as a sign that their show of force backfired. Perhaps the mainstream press savaged them for their use of violence; perhaps the secret police

are investigating the attack; perhaps the fascists are planning a counter-attack. Whatever the GM's choice, this may serve as a seed for trouble in the next session.

For Zealotry, Gregor rolls  $2d6-1$ , and the result is 8—a weak hit.

The party does not advance in Zealotry, but this is a sign that their pamphleteering was successful. Every comrade marks 1 experience.

For Fellowship, Gregor rolls  $2d6+3$ . The +3 is his bond with Janina, which was increased during **adjust bond** at the end of the session. The result is 10—a strong hit!

The comrades rejoice as the Nine advances a level in Fellowship, reaching level 3, and putting them within striking distance of assassinating the head of state.

## THE LAST SESSION

Level 5 of every pathway gives your comrades a chance to seize power. That does not mean they succeed. Most revolutions are a series of coups and countercoups. If your comrades fall short but still have fight left in them, the campaign may continue.

Let those now in power lash out, crippling the party and knocking your comrades back on the pathways, and ask them to try again.







# THE COMRADES



# MEET THE COMRADES

There are 10 character types, or playbooks, included with this game. Each represents a different revolutionary archetype and each offers various special moves and paths for advancement that will allow you to make the character your own.

Each playbook includes suggestions for name, appearance, and personality, but players are encouraged to improvise. Although gendered pronouns are used in the character descriptions, there are no restrictions on gender and race in *Comrades*, for any location or time period. It's your game—make whatever character you want to play.

Instructions for modifying these playbooks or creating your own are available on page 154. Digital bonus playbooks are available at [wmmakers.net/comrades](http://wmmakers.net/comrades).

### THE ARTIST

Creative, impulsive, and vain, the Artist chooses a medium that gives her a bonus in specific areas and has powerful moves to support her comrades through art.

### THE BRUTE

Proudly violent, the Brute joined the revolution partly because she knows it's right and partly because it offers a wonderful opportunity to crack skulls.

## THE DEMAGOGUE

A rabble rouser, the Demagogue uses words to manipulate the masses, inspire his fellows, and gobble up as much power as he can hold.

## THE MYSTIC

Chief proponent of a mysterious new faith, the Mystic uses the language of religion to advance the revolution and dazzle the ignorant.

## THE PATRON

A wealthy revolutionary, the Patron supports her comrades financially and emotionally, in order to shed her guilt at being born with money.

## THE PROFESSIONAL

A veteran of countless revolutions around the globe, the Professional has training and expertise the other comrades can only dream of.

## THE PROPAGANDIST

A master of spin, the Propagandist has the power to see through people, take advantage of their weakness, and turn lies into truth.

## THE SOLDIER

Scarred by her experiences in the armed forces, the Soldier has the deadly skill and tactical ability necessary to take the fight to those who put a gun in her hand.

## THE STUDENT

Fueled by idealism, the Student knows everything a book can teach and absolutely nothing about how to put it into practice.

## THE WORKER

The backbone of the revolution, the Worker brings much-needed technical skills to the group as well as the blue-collar cred no party can do without.



## THE ARTIST

Whether actor, dancer, poet, sculptor, or painter, the Artist is at the bloody tip of the avant garde. Although committed to the cause, her art comes first, meaning some consider her a dilettante or even a fraud. It is up to you to decide if they're right or wrong.

Use her moves to support your comrades and her medium to unleash the full power of her art on the world.



## ARTIST MOVES

### ● MEDIUM

Choose your medium. When **taking a risk**, add 1 to the roll if the situation calls for...

- ☐ Theater: Deception
- ☐ Dance: Dexterity
- ☐ Poetry: Grace
- ☐ Sculpture: Strength
- ☐ Painting: Perception

### ○ FIGHT SONG

When you use your art to inspire a comrade in a dangerous situation, roll with bond. On a 10+, they pick two from this list and carry the bonuses until the danger is done. On a 7-9, they pick one.

- They deal more harm
- They take less harm
- They gain speed

### ○ ART THERAPY

Roll with spirit to soothe an injured comrade. On a 10+, they heal 1 harm. On a 7-9, they heal 1 harm, but you expose yourself to danger.

### ○ ARTISTIC LICENSE

When asking, **"what's going on here?"**, you may make up your own questions instead of choosing from the list.

### ○ NEVER PLAY IT SAFE

Before making a move, you may ask the GM what you could do to make the situation more risky. If you do what they say, add 1 to the roll.

### ○ MIXED MEDIA

Expand your oeuvre. Take another of the medium moves.

### ○ LIKE ONE OF YOUR FRENCH GIRLS

When you lean on your artistic sensibility while attempting to seduce, charm or **sway**, carry 1 forward.



## THE BRUTE

Don't overthink the Brute. She loves to fight and, if you stop there, you'll have a wonderful time. If you'd like a Brute with a bit more shading, of course, fill her in as much as you like. Take moves like **brutally honest** and **a dangerous reputation** to give her things to do outside of a brawl and lean on her bonds with her fellow comrades to ensure she's always close to the action.

Or just fight. That's enough for her.

## BRUTE MOVES

### ○ BRAWL

When you want to push a tense situation over the edge, throw a punch and roll with spirit. On a 10+, everyone starts fighting everyone, and you can slip away. On a 7-9, everyone starts fighting and you're right in the middle.

### ○ ENOUGH TALK

When you tire of a debate, roll with body to force the issue. On a 10+, your opponent must **get rough** or do what you say. On a 7-9, they call your bluff, and you must **get rough** or back down.

### ○ TRAINED FIGHTER

When you roll to **get rough**, on a 10+ you may choose all three options.

### ○ A DANGEROUS REPUTATION

You scare the hell out of people. When attempting to **sway** someone using the threat of force, add 1 to the roll.

### ○ BRUTALLY HONEST

When you say something painfully honest to a fellow comrade, it counts as **sharing a quiet moment**. Add 1 to the roll.

### ○ BIG, DUMB, AND MEAN

Add 1 to body. Subtract 1 from mind.



## THE DEMAGOGUE

The Demagogue is all about manipulation—of friends and enemies, NPCs and comrades alike. It is a role for a player who thrives in the spotlight, and likes encouraging others to act against their own best interest.

The Demagogue should either put his skills fully at the service of the party—drawing new recruits, turning mobs against their rivals—or should try to make the party work for him.

## DEMAGOGUE MOVES

### ○ TROUBLE WITH A CAPITAL T

When you attempt to **start something** by playing on prejudice, small-mindedness, or fear, add 1 to the roll.

### ○ JOIN THE PARTY!

When you invite NPCs to join your movement, roll with spirit. On a 10+, they join. Pick two from the list. On a 7-9, they join. Pick one.

- They are competent
- They are loyal
- They bring their friends

### ○ BODYGUARD

When you ask a comrade to risk their life to protect yours, they carry 1 ongoing as long as you are in danger.

### ○ ST. CRISPIN'S DAY

Before your comrades plunge into danger, make a rousing speech and roll with mind. On a 10+, each comrade can disregard 1 harm taken in the coming encounter. On a 7-9, choose one comrade to receive this bonus.

### ○ AVENGE ME!

When you take 2 or more harm, roll with bond for the nearest comrade. On a 10+, pick two from this list. On a 7-9, pick one.

- They get you to safety
- They get a free attack on the one who hurt you
- Increase your bond with them by 1

### ○ WEASEL

You are slippery. Add 1 to guile (max +3) and subtract 1 from body.



## THE MYSTIC

Inspired by eccentric socialists like Alexander Bogdanov, the Mystic walks the line between cult leader and revolutionary. He has the ability to look through people, to heal them, and to commune with an utterly mysterious deity.

Your Mystic can be guarded or open, generous or cruel. He can be an asset to the movement or a bizarre inconvenience. Is he a fraud, or is his faith authentic? That is between you and your god.

## MYSTIC MOVES

### ● RADICAL FAITH

You are the founder of your own religion. Name it, describe it, and choose its central tenet:

- ☐ Beauty
- ☐ Blood
- ☐ Mystery
- ☐ Poverty
- ☐ Nature
- ☐ Toil

When you take a moment to meditate on a question related to this tenet, your deity will provide an answer through the GM.

### ○ TERRIBLE SWIFT SWORD

Name a weapon related to your religion's central tenet. When you carry it into battle, roll with body. On a 10+, pick two from the list. On a 7-9, pick one.

- You inspire a comrade. They carry 1 forward.
- You inspire yourself. You carry 1 forward.
- You terrify an enemy. The GM decides how.

### ○ HEALING TOUCH

When you convince a comrade you can heal their wounds by laying on hands, roll with bond. On a 10+, they heal 1 harm and it appears miraculous. On a 7-9, they heal, but choose one:

- They think you're a fraud. Decrease bond by 1.
- You exhaust yourself. Take 1 harm.

### ○ FORGIVE ME FATHER

When you make an NPC who is frightened, hopeless, or foolish feel at ease, they tell you a secret.

### ○ CATECHISM

When you ask **"what's going on here?"**, roll with spirit instead of with mind.

### ○ FLAGELLANT

Pain brings you closer to god. When you take harm, add 1 to your next roll.

### ○ LAST RITES

When you **cradle a dying comrade**, add 1 to the roll.



## THE PATRON

A toff in a room full of revolutionaries, the Patron can either be burdened with upper class guilt or blissfully unaware that she doesn't fit in.

More than with the other characters, establishing the Patron's background is crucial. Is she at odds with her family? In danger of being cut off? Is her life in the underground a secret? Whatever her problems, she may simply be too rich to care.



## PATRON MOVES

### ○ RED SHEEP

Name the source of your family's wealth. Whenever you advance the revolution in direct opposition to it, carry 1 forward.

### ○ FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

When the party needs help from someone in power, roll with mind. On a 10+, you are old friends. On a 7-9, you know them well, but they're not happy to see you.

### ○ BANKROLL

When you throw money at a problem, roll with spirit. On a 10+, the problem goes away, more or less. On a 7-9, pick one:

- They want more cash than you have on you
- They want something besides money
- They're horribly insulted

### ○ CODE SWITCHER

You blend seamlessly with the rich, the poor, and everyone in between. When you take advantage of this, add 1 to **sneak**.

### ○ I BELIEVE IN YOU

When you convince a comrade to attempt something they've never done before, roll with bond. On a 10+, they can do it, just this once. On a 7-9, they can do it, but not quite as well as you had hoped.

### ○ UPPER CLASS TWIT

You have no idea what's going on, but it doesn't bother you at all. Add 1 to spirit (max +3) and subtract 1 from guile.



## THE PROFESSIONAL

An archetype drawn from art and history, the Professional combines the talents of spy, assassin, and thief, all in service of the revolution.

He may be an angel of death or a suave jet-setter, depending on how you distribute his stats. Whether he is here for the cause or simply for a paycheck will make a big difference in how he is played and how he is received, but as long as he shoots straight, no one should complain.

## PROFESSIONAL MOVES

### ○ GHOST

When it gets too hairy, roll with guile to disappear. On a 10+, if it's even remotely possible to escape, you're gone. On a 7-9, pick one:

- You have to **get rough** to get out
- You're followed
- Reduce bond by 1 with a comrade you leave behind

### ○ WEAPON OF CHOICE

Name a particular weapon: a gun, a knife, an explosive, a martial art. Describe it. When you use it to **get rough**, add 1 to the roll.

### ○ MACGUYVER

To build a bomb, improvise a weapon, or set a trap, roll with mind. On a 10+, pick two from the list. On a 7+, pick one:

- You make it quickly
- You make it predictable
- You make it extremely dangerous

### ○ LONG RESUME

When there's a language to speak, a machine to operate, or a specialized task to perform, start doing it and roll with spirit. On a 10+, you've done it before. On a 7-9, you've done it before, but that doesn't mean you've done it well.

### ○ WELL-BRIEFED

You have files on everyone. When you meet a prominent NPC, roll with mind. On a 10+, the GM will tell you a secret about them. On a 7-9, the GM will tell you a secret, but pick one:

- The information is old
- The information is fragmentary
- They know a secret about you

### ○ QUITE THE MERCENARY

You didn't come here to make friends. Reduce bond with all comrades by 2 and add 1 to body.



## THE PROPAGANDIST

While the Demagogue plays to the crowd, the Propagandist prefers to work behind the scenes, spreading disinformation and fear to promote the revolution.

It is up to you if he drops the act when alone with his comrades, or if he continues lying even among friends. Some of his moves, particularly **bully**, point toward a sadistic streak. Look for ways to temper that, or lean in, knives out.

## PROPAGANDIST MOVES

### ○ THE BIG LIE

When you tell an utterly outrageous lie, roll with guile. On a 10+, what you said—or a version of it—becomes true. The GM will say how. On a 7-9, what you said is a lie, but some of the people who heard it believe you.

### ○ HOUSE ORGAN

You oversee a small newspaper, pirate radio station, or blog. When you use it to tell the big lie, add 1 to the roll.

### ○ WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?

When you stare into someone's eyes and look for weakness, roll with mind. On a 10+, the GM will tell you what they fear most and how to take advantage of it. On a 7-9, the GM will tell you what they fear and let you figure out the rest.

### ○ TROUBLEMAKER

When attempting to **sway** NPCs to act against their best interests, add 1 to the roll.

### ○ BULLY

When you pick on someone who is weak, different, or defenseless, roll with spirit. On a 10+, pick two from the list. On a 7-9, pick one.

- Nearby NPCs believe whatever you say about your target
- Nearby NPCs attack your target
- Your target does not immediately fight back

### ○ HOT SPOTLIGHT

When you seize the attention of a hostile crowd, carry 1 ongoing as long as their eyes are on you.



### THE SOLDIER

The Soldier may be a veteran; she may be a raw recruit. She may be a conscript; she may have volunteered. She is probably comfortable with violence, even if she hates it, and she is not afraid to wield a weapon.

Most of her moves relate to combat, so find ways—perhaps using **tactician** or **share a quiet moment**—to keep her busy when the guns fall silent.

## SOLDIER MOVES

### ○ MARKSMAN

When you use a projectile weapon to **get rough**, on a 10+ you hit the target wherever you want, including the head.

### ○ I'VE SEEN THINGS

If you mention the horrors of war while attempting to **sway** an NPC, add 1 to your roll.

### ○ TACTICIAN

When you draw a map and hash out a plan, roll with mind. On a 10+, carry 1 ongoing as long as you act according to the plan, and pick two from the list. On a 7-9, carry 1 ongoing and pick one:

- Your map is accurate
- Your timing is good
- You meet no more resistance than expected

### ○ RAID THE ARMORY

When you need weapons or explosives, roll with mind to get them from your military connections. On a 10+, pick two. On a 7-9, pick one:

- You get plenty of guns
- You get plenty of ammunition
- Nobody knows you got them

### ○ ESPRIT DE CORPS

When under fire, add 1 to all rolls with bond.

### ○ TO THE BARRICADES!

When you build a defensive structure, it holds up to almost anything.



### THE STUDENT

The Student could be a cocky high schooler, a first-year philosophy student, or a veteran Ph.D. candidate whose academic bubble is about to pop. Over-educated and under-prepared, he makes up for inexperience with raw enthusiasm. It's your choice whether he's utterly clueless or somewhat self-aware.

His moves—particularly **library card**, **extra credit**, and **elective**—give him the chance to do extraordinary things, although he might have to do some growing up first.



## STUDENT MOVES

### ○ HOPELESSLY NAIVE

When you charge into danger for the sake of your beautiful ideals, carry 1 forward.

### ○ LIBRARY CARD

When you spout esoteric knowledge, roll with mind. On a 10+, whatever you said was true. On a 7-9, it's halfway true. The GM will decide which half.

### ○ EXTRA CREDIT

When you ask **"what's going on here?"**, the GM will whisper you a secret about the current situation. Whether you share it with your comrades is up to you.

### ○ ELECTIVE

When you attempt to do something far outside your comfort zone, roll with spirit. On a 10+, you're a natural. On a 7-9, you manage it, but pick one:

- You attract unwanted attention
- You endanger yourself
- You endanger someone else

### ○ CLASS OF '68

Add 1 to the roll when attempting to **start something** if the crowd is youthful.

### ○ IVORY TOWER

You don't understand your comrades, but you still want to help. When rolling to **help or hinder a comrade**, you may roll with mind instead of with bond.



## THE WORKER

Theoretically the key figure in any revolution, the Worker has traditionally been shoved aside by intellectuals and professional revolutionaries who stage insurrections in the name of the proletariat without ever consulting the working classes about what they want. It's your job to stop that.

The Worker is blunt, useful, and wise. Don't wait for the eggheads to give you permission to act. Just do it, and let *them* waste time figuring out what it all means.

## WORKER MOVES

### ○ TOOLBOX

When you need something that could conceivably be in your bag, roll with guile. On a 10+, you find just what you were looking for. On a 7-9, it's almost right, but (pick one):

- It's a little broken
- It's a little dangerous
- It's a little weird

### ○ GOOD WITH YOUR HANDS

To build something, fix something, or alter something far beyond the maker's intent, roll with mind. On a 10+, it works just like you expected. On a 7-9, pick one:

- It's too powerful
- It's too dangerous
- It can't be trusted

### ○ PLAIN SPOKEN

When you strike up a conversation with an NPC who's just doing their damn job, skip the formalities. Ask them an honest question and they'll give an honest answer.

### ○ PROFESSIONAL OPINION

Give a comrade unsolicited advice. When they act on it, they carry 1 forward and you mark experience.

### ○ UNION BROTHERS

When you **share a quiet moment** with another working class comrade, on a 10+ take all three options on the list.

### ○ WORLD WEARY

Work has made you wise and worn you down. Add 1 to mind and subtract 1 from spirit.



# THE GM



## YOUR ROLE

When your players enter a room, you tell them what they see. When they meet an NPC, you name her, describe her, and speak her words. When their actions trigger a move, you ask them to roll the dice, and you tell them what happens when they succeed or fail.

Your players tell the story, but you give it shape. You illuminate the world and fill it with troubles for them to contend with. You hem in their comrades, oppress them, hurt them. You arrange the wood for the fire and ask your players to provide the spark.

Though it is your duty as GM to make life hell for the comrades, you must be kind to your players. You are playing this game with them, not against them. Your role is to ensure everyone at the table has an unforgettable time. Be fair. Be generous. Do whatever it takes to keep them coming back for more.

*Comrades* is a game where pain hurts and life matters. Always show the consequences of your players' actions, good and bad, and never forget this game was inspired by real people, real history, and real bloodshed. Treat this material with extreme respect and your players will do the same.

This chapter is a guide to the fundamentals of GMing *Comrades*. It explains the GM's manifesto, the principles the GM must hew to in order to enact that manifesto, and the moves the GM will use to bring that manifesto to life. For a nuts-and-bolts guide to GMing beyond the first session, consult the chapter titled "More Trouble" (page 103).

## YOUR MANIFESTO

A *Comrades* GM must:

### 1. PLAY TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS

If you knew how the game was going to end before you sat down at the table, there would be no reason to play. Your job is to put the comrades in trouble and give them a chance to fight their way out—not to ram them through a scripted story simply to satisfy your ego.

### 2. OPPRESS THE COMRADES

For the comrades' struggle to have meaning, they need something to fight against. Make their enemies capricious and cruel. Play dirty. Take every opportunity to hurt them in ways they never thought possible. The GM must be fair. The world of *Comrades* should be anything but.

### 3. MAKE THEM HEROES

When the revolution is finished, these comrades will be legends. If they win, their stories will be told in textbooks across the country. If they lose, they will be remembered in story and song as martyrs to the noble cause. Give them the chance to be larger than life—to save lives, fell tyrants, and die gloriously. Make them worthy of legend.

## YOUR PRINCIPLES

These are the rules you must abide by in order to fulfill your manifesto and ensure everyone at your table has a wonderful time:

- Make the pain real
- Talk to the comrades, not the players
- Lead with the fiction
- Ask questions and use the answers.
- Show consequences
- Make NPCs human
- Keep the revolution moving
- Let the world crumble
- Share power freely

### MAKE THE PAIN REAL

*Comrades* is not a cartoon. If you get hit with a truncheon, it hurts. If you get shot, you probably die. If your brother vanishes into a secret prison, it scars you for life. The game should be fun and your players should laugh, but never resist an opportunity to remind them that these comrades are human and they break easily.

### TALK TO THE COMRADES, NOT THE PLAYERS

Say, “Marya, the soldier has you by the throat,” not, “Andy, the soldier has Marya by the throat.” Show them the world as their comrades see it, not as you see it. “The heat from the blast furnace makes you sweat under your greatcoat,” is better than, “It’s hot in the foundry.” Treat the comrades like they’re real people and their players will take them seriously, too.

### LEAD WITH THE FICTION

You ask your players to narrate action, not name moves they want to make. Hold yourself to the same standard. When you make one of the GM moves, don’t announce it. Just do it. Instead of saying, “I’m delivering trouble,” tell them a grenade has crashed through the safe house window. Instead of saying, “I’m delivering harm,” tell them the explosion shredded their clothes, bloodied their eyes, and made their ears ring as pure as the organ in their hometown church.



Sometimes you will have to talk mechanics. You'll tell players to mark experience or check off an advance. You'll ask them to make a move and remind them what stats to roll with. They'll ask you questions about the rules and you'll answer in as much detail as they require, always being transparent about your decision making. But don't let these mechanical interludes slow down play.

Never wait long to get back to the action with those five magic words: "What do you do next?"

### ASK QUESTIONS AND USE THE ANSWERS.

"What do you think the prime minister's bedroom looks like?"

"The arsonist stares like he's met you before. When was that?"

"How many days has it been since you tasted meat?"

The world of *Comrades* will not be built by you alone. Take every opportunity to probe your comrades about their history, their passions, their secrets. Ask for details about themselves and the world, and use what they give to make their game richer and their troubles worse.

If they put a long balcony behind the PM's bed, tell them it would make an excellent escape route—or a place for a guard to patrol. If they say they knew the arsonist in the army, remind them that he remembers the time they stole his cigarette rations. If it's been weeks since they ate meat, give them a taste of beef, but make them pay more than they can bear.

### SHOW CONSEQUENCES

Rare is the bomb that kills only its target. Rare is the victim that did not have a family. Make the NPCs' pain real, just as you would the comrades'. Show the innocent victims mangled in the explosion. Send a mourning father on a mission of revenge.

This goes for the good stuff, too. If the comrades risk their lives to feed the hungry, let the hungry thank them. If they blow the walls on a secret prison, let one of the freed prisoners come back to help them down the line.

Remember that nothing in a revolution is black and white. Noble actions can have evil consequences and evil actions can do unwitting good. Whatever your players do, make sure they see the result.

## MAKE NPCs HUMAN

Every NPC you introduce should have a name, a personality, and a motivation. Never say, “You see a soldier.” Say, “You see a soldier. His name tag says, ‘Callaghan.’ He’s singing to himself, a folk song. He has the voice of a star tenor. He looks sad and mean.”

It doesn’t take much to make an NPC memorable. A surprising detail about their appearance or affect, a compelling motivation, a little internal conflict—this is all it takes to make them human, which will make your world seem expansive and real. You’ll spend most of each session playing the various NPCs. Make the parts worth playing.

Make your NPCs’ motivations simple and attainable.

- Mac, the trolley operator, wants a hot meal.
- Sondra, the surgeon, wants one hour without death.
- Penn, the shell shocked veteran, wants to hear a song he’s been trying to remember ever since the war.

Let your NPCs pursue what they want doggedly. A hungry man chases food. An exhausted doctor sneaks a nap. A dazed veteran asks strangers to sing.

Form triangles between NPCs and player characters.

Comrades Mark and Colford have been feuding over how to incite a strike at the copper mine. NPC Burt Crowley, firebrand leader of the nascent miner’s union, seduces Mark and charms Colford, then pits them against each other to ensure he maintains control.

Let NPCs wreak as much havoc as possible, and do not be afraid to let them die in the most spectacular fashion. After all, what else are humans for?

**KEEP THE REVOLUTION MOVING**

Use the pathways to revolution (page 38) to help your campaign evolve. Take cues from the end of session rolls and use them to inspire the next session.

After a street battle with the local police, the comrades roll for Force. A strong hit will advance them along the pathway. A weak hit could mean that they cowed the corrupt cops, that their fellow radicals were inspired by their bravery, that for the moment there will be no repercussion. A miss could mean the police strike back in force or that the fight has lost the comrades the support of public and press.

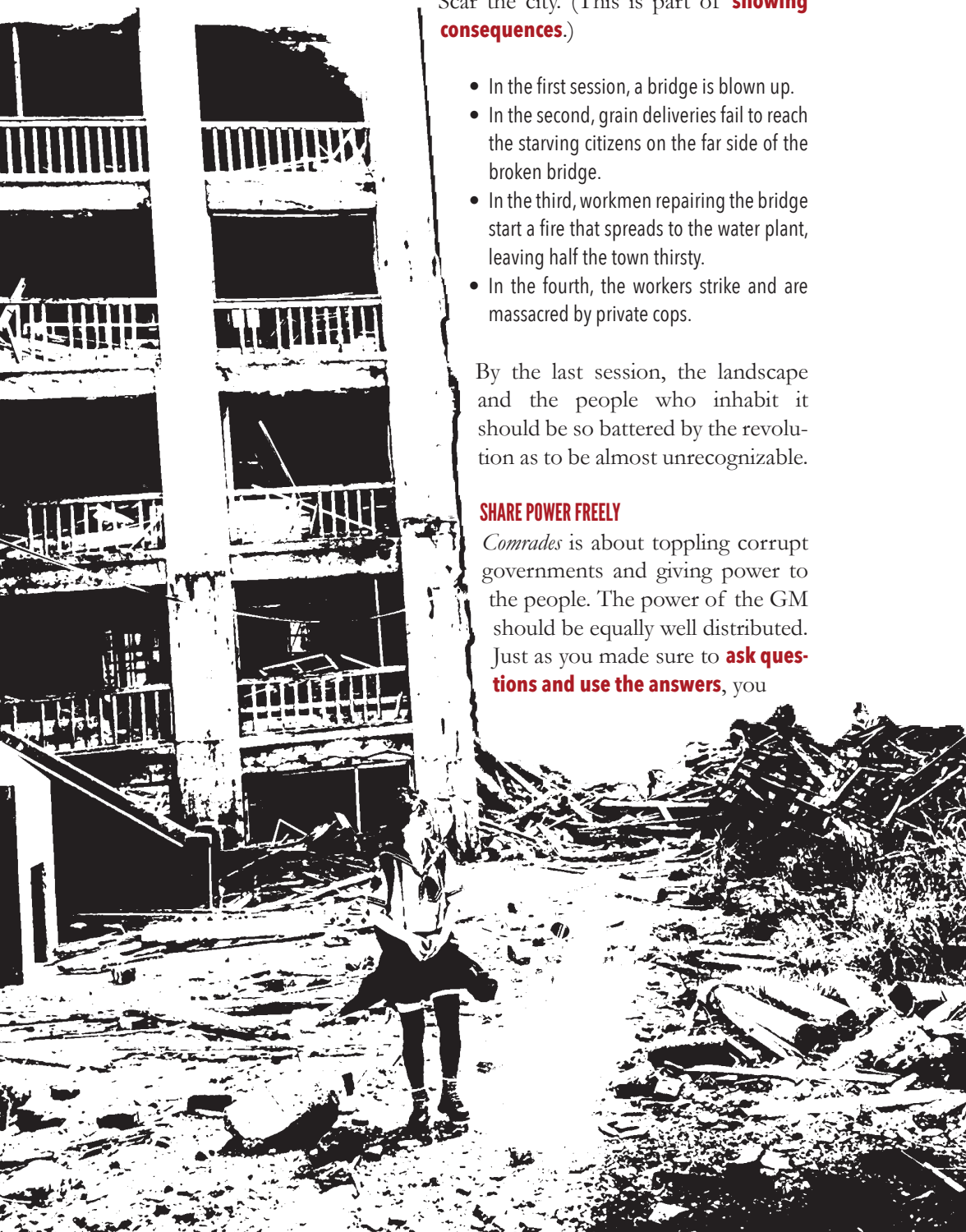
When they do succeed in advancing a step towards revolution, let the advantage gained make a difference in the next session. Level 3 of the Organization pathway gives the comrades “a safe house, a covert route, or a person on the inside.” Give them a chance to use the safe house to lick their wounds or the covert route as a way to infiltrate a building that was hitherto impenetrable. An advance like Level 3 of Zealotry, in which sympathetic demonstrators flood the streets, should totally remake the landscape of the campaign.

Use these bonuses to inspire new obstacles. A party with safe houses must be in danger. A party that inspires massive demonstrations also inspires massive retaliation from their rivals, the army, the police. The stronger your party gets, the harder it must be to hold on.

If you choose not to use the pathways to revolution, use whatever trickery you can devise to ensure the revolution changes week to week, hour to hour, minute to minute.

**LET THE WORLD CRUMBLE**

As the revolution sweeps forward, the nation falls to pieces. The enemy marches on the city. Food grows scarce. Disease spreads. Politicians are assassinated. The people grow desperate. Your players might succeed in propping up one or two things, but everything they do not save falls down.



Scar the city. (This is part of **showing consequences**.)

- In the first session, a bridge is blown up.
- In the second, grain deliveries fail to reach the starving citizens on the far side of the broken bridge.
- In the third, workmen repairing the bridge start a fire that spreads to the water plant, leaving half the town thirsty.
- In the fourth, the workers strike and are massacred by private cops.

By the last session, the landscape and the people who inhabit it should be so battered by the revolution as to be almost unrecognizable.

## SHARE POWER FREELY

*Comrades* is about toppling corrupt governments and giving power to the people. The power of the GM should be equally well distributed. Just as you made sure to **ask questions and use the answers**, you

should invite players to contribute to the decision-making that goes into running the campaign.

At the end of a session, ask where they want to go next and adjust your fronts accordingly. When they meet someone new, ask them to supply details of the NPC's background or personality. When developments in the pathways to revolution suggest a serious shake-up in the balance of power, ask them who they think should come out on top. There are countless ways to do this, and you will find one that works for your group.

Share your power in smaller ways, as well. When they ask you a question you can't immediately answer, turn it back on them.

"Is there another way out of the barracks?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"Has the fire stopped the elevators?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"Will Selby keep her promise, or will she go to the police?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

You don't need to give them full control, and you should never let them make things easier on themselves, but the more you invite them to contribute, the better their suggestions will be.



## YOUR MOVES

Your players make moves when the outcome of their actions can only be determined by the dice. You make moves when your players fail rolls, when the action drags, or when they give you a golden opportunity by wasting time or making a mistake. You never roll the dice and you never say the name of the move you're making. You're the GM. If you want to take action, take action.

Below is a list of core GM moves. Some are gentle, some are nasty. Use the gentle ones to put your players on their guard. Use the nasty ones when it's time to make them hurt.

- Promise trouble
- Deliver trouble
- Deal harm
- Put them in a spot
- Offer a nasty choice
- Tell them the consequences and let them choose
- Test their weaknesses
- Separate them
- Test their principles
- Turn their move back on them

Every move on this list is designed to promote conflict, within and without the group, which will push the story along and force your players to make difficult decisions. No move—neither yours nor the players'—should ever end with the situation as it was before.

These are by no means the only actions you can take as GM, although they should cover most of what you want to do. If there's something you want to do that's not on this list, go ahead—so long as you hew to your manifesto and principles. As long as you put your players' needs first, you can do no wrong.

**PROMISE TROUBLE**

One of the most fundamental GM moves, **promise trouble** warns of danger coming this way fast.

- You hear jackboots in the hall.
- In the distance, the artillery starts up again.
- The guardsman reaches for his knife.

**Promise trouble** any time your players feel safe. It is a natural consequence to failed rolls for **"what's going on here?"**, **sway**, and **share a quiet moment**. Unless your players stop what's coming, it is almost always followed by...

**DELIVER TROUBLE**

Once you **promise trouble**, you had better follow through.

- The soldiers burst through the door.
- A shell explodes through the stained-glass window.
- The guardsman swings his knife at your throat.

**Deliver trouble** is a natural consequence for failed rolls to **get rough** or **take a risk**. As with all moves, although it may be devastating, it is never final. After you have delivered trouble—even potentially fatal trouble—your players will still have a chance to bounce back or fall head first into more misery. If your players fail to handle the trouble, you may have to move on to...

**DEAL HARM**

When your players get hurt, you tell them how bad.

- You divert the blow, but the knife nicks your shoulder. Take 1 harm.
- She overpowers you, and the knife sticks in your gut. Take 2 harm.
- She knocks you to the ground and buries the knife in your throat. Take 3 harm and get help quick.

**Deal harm** follows nicely after failed rolls to **get rough** or **take a risk**. It may also happen without the player making a roll at all, since some-

times they may do something—take a flying leap off a fire escape, say—that simply hurts.

**Deal harm** according to the rules on page 24, and do so thoughtfully. Be aware of how hurt your comrades are, and push them from 3 to 4 harm only when it is essential. Not all comrades will die magnificent deaths, but do what you can to ensure that most do. Your players will thank you.

### PUT THEM IN A SPOT

When your comrades' lives get too easy, put them in a dangerous situation that they have to think, talk, fight, or charm their way out of.

- The glue on your false passport is coming loose. The customs inspector calls your name.
- The people on the breadline see the stolen loaf sticking out of your pocket.
- You can run, but the watchman will follow you unless you stop him.

Whenever your comrades fail rolls to **sneak** or **take a risk**, or attempt to disengage from a fight, you may **put them in a spot**. The wonderful thing about this move is that the situation does not need a clear way out. Your comrades will think of something. If they don't, you get to make another move.

### OFFER A NASTY CHOICE

When there are two or more things in a scene—people, objects, possibilities—that a comrade likes equally, force them to choose between them.

- Surrender to the police or jump out the window.
- Take the money or the gun—there's not time to grab both.
- Confess to the party leader that you failed, or lie and pray she believes you.

**Offer a nasty choice** after players fail rolls to **take a risk**, **help or hinder a comrade**, or **get rough**.



### TELL THEM THE CONSEQUENCES AND LET THEM CHOOSE

When your comrades' actions have more than one possible outcome, it can be useful to let one of your comrades choose.

- The bullet ricochets. It hits either Mitya or Sonja. You decide which.
- The rioters have gotten out of control. They are about to trash either the power station or the phone company. Which do you need more?
- The thieves either took your food or your whiskey. Which was it?

Do this after failed rolls to **take a risk, start something, help or hinder a comrade**, and just about anything else. Remember that the player who failed the roll is not necessarily the one who should choose what happens.

Such choices give players an enormous sense of power, even though they're choosing between two equally awful options. No matter what shape their doom takes, they will be satisfied with it, because they know it was partly their idea.

### TEST THEIR WEAKNESSES

The closer your comrades come to revolution, the more you should put them in unfamiliar situations and force them to do things they are bad at.

- When the party congress erupts in a brawl, Victor, a Propagandist more comfortable with talking than fighting, must **sneak** or **get rough** in order to escape.
- When the faction's best speaker is stricken with strychnine, Anya, a Brute better at fighting than talking, must address the crowd outside the palace gates.

This move works in almost any situation, but particularly after failed rolls to ask **"what's going on here?"** or to **help or hinder a comrade**.

Their weaknesses may be emotional as well as mechanical. Threaten their families, their loved ones, their prized possessions. Play upon their fears, their insecurities, their trauma.

Testing weaknesses is not about punishing them for having flaws, but about giving an opportunity to overcome those flaws and emerge as stronger, more confident revolutionaries.

## SEPARATE THEM

This move targets your comrades' greatest asset: each other.

- After the police horse knocks him down, Paolo sees Maria has vanished.
- **Sneaking** through the Norse Quarter on their way out of town, Mia and Kyoko wander down different alleys.
- When the party storms the Prince's reception, a waiter hurls Anders into the kitchen, leaving Fritz behind.

This move works well in any fraught situation and is irresistible after failed rolls to **get rough** or **sneak**. When splitting characters up, try not to leave them alone for too long, as that runs the risk of slowing the story to a halt. Breaking them into pairs is always useful, as it gives each player a foil, allowing their relationship to evolve in surprising ways.

A more subtle way to **separate them** is to do so ideologically. During any debate, try to pick out which comrades are falling on either side of the issue. Make points to push them farther from consensus. Divide them and let their naturally tendency for extremity carry them toward a dangerous decision or full-throated conflict. Do this often.

## TEST THEIR PRINCIPLES

By definition, your comrades are people with intense ideals. Ideals are nothing if they are not tested.

- How does Joseph, the pacifist Student, react when violence appears to be the easiest answer?
- What does Ingrid, the bloodthirsty Professional, do when she sees the human toll of her violent fun?
- What effect does it have on Abenayo, the hell-raising Propagandist, when her rabid followers attack someone she cares about?

This move is extremely useful after failed rolls to **start something** or **sway**, but it is something you should be aiming to do at all times. You **test their principles** not to make them feel guilty about acting in character, but because a comrade who has endured such a test and stood firm is the strongest comrade of all.

### TURN THEIR MOVE BACK ON THEM

When in doubt, let a move backfire in a surprising and satisfying way.

- Fitzroy, an Artist, attempts to inspire his comrade, Ruth, with a poem. He botches it, producing something spectacularly offensive in a way the GM lets Fitzroy and Ruth work out for themselves.
- When MacRae, a Demagogue, calls on a crowd of farmers to rise up against their feudal lord, they decide that he is the real enemy and charge the stage with pitchforks held high.

An ideal response to a failed special move, **turn their move back on them** is extremely effective in small doses. Do not overuse, lest the irony become stale.



# THE FIRST SESSION



# INTRODUCE THE GAME

In the first session of a campaign of *Comrades*, you and your players will learn the rules, create characters, imagine the world, and lay the groundwork for the revolution.

Before you start, find two to five friends who are interested in playing and set aside three or four hours to play. Lay out:

- Copies of each playbook, folded so that the picture and playbook title are on the first page
- 2-3 copies of the reference sheets, including copies for you
- 2-3 pairs of six sided dice
- The X-Card (see below)
- Pencils
- Scratch paper

## TEACHING THE GAME

*Comrades* is designed to be taught concentrically. Rather than throwing everything at your players all at once, you will teach them the game as they create characters, imagine the world, and play through a simple adventure.

Start by explaining the premise: that they will play as members of an underground revolutionary cell intent on destroying a corrupt government. The composition of that cell, its ideology, its aims, the nature of that government, and the setting are all up to them.

Explain that this game will be a conversation. They will narrate their characters' actions, rolling dice when the outcome is uncertain, and you will play the people they meet, giving the story structure by providing obstacles and defining the world.

Tell them that their possible actions are not constrained by the moves on the page, but by their imaginations, and that if they want to do something, they need only say so. If it's simple, they can do it automatically. If not, they roll the dice.

Explain that this system invites them to help imagine settings, characters, conflicts, and more. This is their game and they will have a chance to shape it—particularly during the first session, but also in the sessions to come. Warn them that the game deals with problematic content, and that it will be up to them to handle it with respect.

Take a moment to introduce the player's manifesto (page 11). Read it aloud, or simply paraphrase it, and let the players discuss it before forging ahead.

### THE X-CARD

*Comrades* deals with death and destruction in a setting more realistic than that of most RPGs. The game asks players to reckon with the cost of political violence and it is vital that everyone at the table support each other along the way.

In order to keep your players comfortable as they navigate material that could be problematic or upsetting, draw an X on an index card and leave it on the table. During the first session, pick it up and say something along these lines:

“This is the X-Card. It's easy to use. If at any point the game veers into material that you find upsetting or simply not fun, raise the card or tap it and we will edit that content out. You will be under no obligation to explain yourself—we'll just move on to something else and the game will continue.”

As you play, keep an eye on your players. If someone ever seems uncomfortable, ask the table if anyone would like to invoke the X-Card or do so yourself. This game is supposed to be fun. If anyone stops having fun, it's up to you to get things back on track.

The X-Card was developed by John Stavropoulos and is a truly awesome tool. Learn more about it here: <http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg>.

### CHOOSING A SETTING

Before your players can create their comrades, they have to know where the game will take place. Start by asking questions about what kind of game they want to play. What stories are your players interested in telling? Do they want run-and-gun action? Tension and secrecy? A war in the shadows or fighting in the streets?

Do they want the game to tilt toward grave realism or heroic romance? Most of all, what are they interested in fighting for—and who do they want to fight against? While they talk, take notes. Let them know that it's okay if some of their ideas are contradictory, and that after the session, you'll shape the group's thoughts into something playable.

Once you have a general sense of what they want the game to feel like, settle on a time period. Do they want this to take place far in the past, in the Twentieth Century, in present day, in the near future, or in a distant future? Do they want to recreate a real revolution or are they more interested in forging their own path? There is no wrong answer, so long as the setting offers a government oppressive enough to fight against.

Last, choose a specific setting—a country, a city, a neighborhood—and define the nature of the regime they will attempt to destroy. The setting is the most important step you will make in shaping your game, so consider sharing some of these questions with them ahead of time or asking each of them to come to the first session with a few ideas of where they would like the game to take place.



## POSSIBLE SETTINGS

If the players prefer a real revolution, popular favorites include:

- Boston, 1776
- Paris, 1789
- Port-au-Prince, 1791
- Vienna, 1848
- Paris, 1871
- Moscow, 1905
- Mexico City, 1914
- Dublin, 1916
- Petrograd, 1917
- Budapest, 1956
- Algiers, 1957
- Havana, 1958
- Paris, 1968
- Oakland, 1968
- Berlin, 1989
- Cairo, 2011

For present day or near future settings, the United States during the modern resurgence of fascism is irresistible. Many players have chosen to set campaigns in their home towns, using familiar locations to lend realism. This works wonderfully, provided your players can separate themselves from real life and enter into the heightened atmosphere this game requires.

To help them do that, remember the second item on the GM manifesto (page 73): **oppress the comrades**. If the status quo is sufficiently abhorrent, your players will not hesitate to take the decisive action that feels impossible in real life.

For a futuristic or fantasy setting, of course, you are limited only by your imagination. Consult the guide to further reading (page 157) for historical sources that can provide inspiration for futuristic conflicts.

# CREATE THE COMRADES

Draw your players' attention to the playbooks folded on the table. Explain that these are characters based on revolutionary archetypes, each with special abilities, whom your players will use as the basis for their comrades.

Ask your players to pick up whichever playbook catches their eye, and read aloud its title and tagline. Let them read the notes on the back about playing that character. Explain the strengths and weaknesses of each chosen type and answer any questions they have. If they like the playbook they've chosen, they can start creating a comrade. If not, they can choose another.

## NAME THE COMRADES

Character creation starts on the playbook's first page—the one with the picture—where your players will record their comrade's name, appearance, and personality, choosing either from the suggestions provided or imagining their own.

If your players are having trouble choosing names for characters from an unfamiliar country, searching Wikipedia for a list of artists or poets from that nation is a useful way to source first and last names. Your players should not feel constrained to match their character to the nation in play, of course—revolutions are cosmopolitan affairs.

Once they've filled in all the spaces on the front page, including the space to write their own name, they should introduce themselves. A full back story is not yet necessary, but they can share their comrade's name, appearance, personality, and anything else they think they know. They can speak in the first or third person—whatever feels more comfortable.

### DREAM OF A BETTER WORLD

Ask your players to spend a few moments thinking about the injustice, oppression, and evil inherent in the setting they've chosen—and how their comrade wants to set things right. Ask each player a question or two, such as:

- What caused you to embrace revolution?
- Has the regime hurt someone close to you?
- What about life in this country makes you seethe?
- If you could remake this world from the ground up, what would you create?
- What will you sacrifice to make that dream real?
- Are you comfortable using violence for political ends?

Be taking notes all the while.

### CREATE THE PARTY

Before your players finalize their comrades, they need to know more about the party they have decided to join. Although later on they may end up on opposite sides of the revolution, at the start of play it's important for the comrades to all belong to the same party and be working—more or less—toward the same goals.

What kind of group do your players want to belong to? Is it popular? Obscure? Large? Small? Part of a larger political movement or entirely independent?

The party should be tailored to suit the dreams your players discussed during the last phase. Whatever they want, the purpose of

## THE FIRST SESSION

their group is to make it a reality. If the players' dreams are in conflict, encourage them to paper over those differences for now—and plan on having them explode down the line.

Once that's done, you can continue with character creation. Or, if they seem eager to keep imagining the party, you can work with them to fill out the top of the party character sheet, including:

### **PARTY NAME**

Something imperious, martial, poetic, or cryptic.

### **IDEOLOGY**

The party ideology. This can be a real-life strain of revolutionary theology, something made up, or something vague. See the section on the ideologies of Khresht (page 122) for inspiration.

### **PURPOSE**

What is your party's concrete goal? Is it to seize power? To uplift the masses? To smash the ruling class? To cut every noble throat? To end the famine? To end the war? Let your players choose something that satisfies most of their dreams.

### **LEADER**

An entirely optional feature of a revolutionary party, this is the place to write the name of the comrade or NPC who calls the shots. Leave this blank if your party has no patience for leaders or if you'd like to wait until you establish the party NPCs later on.

### **SLOGAN**

Something pithy that sums up the party's purpose and how they intend to achieve it. If they can't come up with anything they love, this can wait.

### **PREFERRED APPROACH**

Based on what your players know about their comrades, what is the party's preferred method? Will they crush their enemies with brute force or exquisite organization? Do they lean on popular support or

the bonds of their fellows? How willing are they to employ terror to get what they want? This is the first choice they're making about the party that will have in-game effects, but don't let them agonize over it. They can always change it down the line.

### SIGIL

If someone at your table likes to draw, ask them to fill in the blank box with the party's logo—something inspiring that speaks to everything they have discussed.

Once you've gotten that far, set the party sheet aside and return the players' attention to their playbooks.



## DISCUSS MOVES & STATS

Ask your players to open their playbooks. Walk them through the game's stats: body, mind, spirit, guile, and bond, leaning as heavily as you wish on the descriptions on page 22. Explain that each is a modifier, ranging from -3 to +3, that adjusts one of the 2d6 rolls at the heart of the game.

Draw their attention to the reference sheets and show them the basic moves. Explain what a move is and how it is triggered, using one from the sheet—probably **get rough**—as an example.

Tell them that when you want them to make a move, you will ask them to “roll with” the relevant stat and make a few practice rolls to demonstrate what you mean. (If the phrase “2d6” makes your players goggle, now would be a good time to explain that as well.)

Make clear the importance of making moves without speaking their name. Give an example, something like:

There's a guard at the palace gate. You want to get inside. If you crack him on the head with a rock, I might ask you to roll with body in order to **get rough**. If you try to slip past him in the shadows, I'd ask you to roll with guile and **sneak**. If you offer him a bribe, I'd call that an attempt to **sway**, and ask you to roll with guile. The important thing is that whatever you want to do, you don't need to start by saying the move. Just do something awesome and I'll tell you what move—if any—you've triggered.

Take the players through every move on the basic moves sheet, explaining when it would be triggered and what its effects are. There's no need to dwell too heavily on the nitty-gritty of each move—your players will learn that for themselves once they get into the game.

## ASSIGN STATS

It's time for your players to assign their comrade's stats, filling in the boxes on the left side of the playbook. For the first four stats—body, mind, spirit, and guile—they have four values to distribute: +2, +1,

-1, -1. The comrade's greatest strength should earn the +2, their weaknesses the -1s.

It's best not to overthink this, particularly for first-time players. Brutes like to hit people—give them +2 body. Students are thinkers—give them +2 mind. And if your players regret their choices, let them switch these around after the first session is done.

### ESTABLISH BOND

While the first four stats symbolize the comrades' innate ability, bond represents their relationship with the others in the party. It can be positive or negative and it need not be reciprocated. Just like in real life, it is possible for one comrade to feel fond of someone who does not care for them at all.

One at a time, each player should ask one of the questions listed under “To establish starting bond...” and mark the comrade who best fits the answer. This is a time to establish shared back story. As always, you should be taking notes on everything the players say—you will use it down the line.

Each playbook offers three questions, but not all need to be asked. Once your players are satisfied with the bonds they have established, you can move on.

### CHOOSE MOVES

On the right side of the playbook, your players will find their comrades' special moves. Some of these work just like the basic moves, being triggered by a specific action, while some are passive moves, giving a universal bonus without the player having to do anything to take advantage of it.

Ask your players to choose two special moves, unless they are playing the Mystic or the Artist. Those playbooks start with one move selected by default, and their players should choose a single special

move. Let them know that if they are dissatisfied with their choice by the end of the first session, they can switch things around.

### EXPLAIN EXPERIENCE

At the bottom of the second page, your players will record experience gained and advances taken. Explain that advances improve their character, that they gain experience every time they fail a roll—as well as other ways—and that five experience marks earn an advance.

Let them read the advances and daydream for a moment about how their character might grow and change as the campaign wears on.

### ESTABLISH RIVALS

Now that you have a firm idea of your party, you can better define who they're fighting against. Ask them to come up with one or two rival groups, either within the government, on the other side of the political spectrum, or within their supposed allies on the left.

A sentence or two will be sufficient, but the more detail they give you, the better. It doesn't matter if they put forth contradictory information. You will polish and streamline this after the first session, when you write your fronts (page 108).

### ESTABLISH NPCs

Go around the circle and ask each player to define an NPC who has some relationship to their comrade. It doesn't matter if they are a friend or an enemy, but the closer the relationship, the better.

Siblings, lovers, mentors, rivals, and nemeses are all useful. Ask them to name the NPC and give a few words describing their personality and desires. If you think your group has the stamina, go around the circle one more time for a second round of NPCs. If not, it's time to leap into the fray.



## THE FIRST MISSION

The first session of *Comrades* should provide a showcase of the game's core concepts and rules. Players will make as many of the basic moves as can be reasonably squeezed in. They will **deal harm**, take harm, and heal. If they fail rolls, they will mark experience. If they succeed, they will strike a blow for the revolution.

But more than a chance to learn the rules, the first session should show players what *Comrades* is all about. Give them a chance to put their manifesto into action—to fight, to refuse compromise, and to not let the bastards get away with it.

So, then, what should the first adventure look like?

It should be short—an hour or so—and you should let the players know that at the outset, since a long stretch of character creation usually drains the energy from the room.

It should be active. Throw them into trouble severe enough that they have no choice but to confront it head on.

It should give them a chance for a win. It doesn't have to be a big win, but something substantial enough that they walk away from the table feeling like they've accomplished something and wanting to come back for more.

The first rule to planning the first adventure is, well, don't. You won't know the setting or the comrades and it's impossible to plan anything substantial without that information at hand. But that doesn't mean you can't prepare something.

## THE FIRST SESSION

Before the session starts, jot down a few ideas for NPCs who might cause trouble—a cop, a soldier, a fascist, a politician—with names and general motivations. Add a few potential situations that will apply in almost any setting—a prison break, a rally, a robbery, a raid—and you'll have enough to get started.

As your players create their comrades, use the back story they generate to inspire a simple idea that expands on one of the situations you dreamt up before, and which launches them right into the fire. Something like...

- The comrades have infiltrated the central prison to free Heloise. Play starts the moment the alarm goes off.
- While marching past the palace to protest bread prices, the comrades realize they are surrounded by the Imperial Guard. Play starts when the cavalry charges.
- The comrades have broken into fascist party headquarters to rob their safe. Play starts when the fascists return, drunk and ready to fight.
- The comrades are sorting their arms stockpile when the police launch a raid. Play starts when the battering ram crashes through the door.

Once character creation is complete, give the group a short break. Write down anything else you can think of about the situation you've sketched out—NPCs, the setting, more danger, a secret to discover—using as much of what they devised at the table as fits. When everyone's seated, toss them into the deep end.

Once they start making moves—and failing rolls—the story will drive itself. Hew to the GM's principles and your first session will be a smash.

### END OF SESSION

When the dust has settled, close the first session by asking each player to **adjust bond**. Next, unless your group is exhausted, take the party sheet back out and introduce them to the pathways to revolution.

Explain that just as their characters can grow and advance, their party can, too. The pathways give bonuses at each level, culminating in the fifth level, which allows the comrades to attempt to seize power.

There's no need to take them through every step of every track, but point out one or two of the more interesting bonuses to get them excited about what lies ahead.

Have them choose the comrade who best embodied the spirit of the revolution and walk that player through the pathway moves described on page 42.

If they successfully advance a step in any of the pathways to revolution, encourage them to celebrate heartily. If they fail any of the pathway rolls, let them know it means more trouble down the line.



# MORE TROUBLE



# FILL IN THE WORLD

After the first session, take your notes and start shaping them into something useful. Your goal is not to create a script for the next sessions, but to provide yourself with the supplementary materials you'll use to improvise conflict during play.

Every GM has different needs in this area. I suggest creating lists of enemy factions and NPCs, locations, complications, and names. I aim for no more than one page, front and back, but some GMs prefer more. The less paper you have, the faster you can work.

## OPPOSING FACTIONS

During the first session, your players created one or two enemy factions. Flesh those out, and name two or three more. These will form the basis for your fronts.

Create factions varied by type and location on the political spectrum. Conservative political parties, government groups, the police, the army, the clergy, and rivals among the left are all suitable subjects. Give each faction a goal: something concrete and attainable, which will put them in direct conflict with the comrades.

- The Neighborhood Watch: The self-appointed guardians of the block, this fascist group is marked by their black windbreakers and extreme hatred for anyone who looks like they're from another part of town. Their goal: to purify their patch of the city.

- **Sisters of the Blood:** A ruthless anti-abortion group, the Sisters became notorious after a series of deadly attacks on women's health clinics, which they carried out in nun's habits with body armor underneath. Their goal: to kill every doctor in town willing to perform abortions.

## CREATING NPCs

Name and describe each faction's two or three most important NPCs. Try to balance each faction's NPCs against each other—you may have a leader and sidekicks, or two enemies who represent opposing groups within that faction. Next, create four or five unaffiliated NPCs: free agents who can help or hurt the comrades, depending on how they're treated. Make them varied, interesting, and real.

Give every NPC a name, personality, and desire. Consult the instructions on page 76 for a reminder of how to **make NPCs human**. It doesn't matter if you don't have a plan for these characters. Just having them on your reference sheet will provide you with a sense of security. When least expected, they will appear and do their work.

- **Martin Hogg:** Leader of the local Neighborhood Watch. A silent, bitter sadist who uses terror to keep his men in line.
- **Joseph Willensky:** Sergeant in the Neighborhood Watch. A soft-hearted fellow who has tired of fighting, but who is too devoted to the uniform to quit.
- **Mother Superior:** Leader of the Sisters, a rotund middle-aged man with an infantile sense of humor and no respect for human life. Real name unknown.
- **Berna Vant:** The Sisters' weapons expert, a former sniper and the best shot on the island.

## LOCATIONS

Name as many places as you can think of. Give specific titles—not just “the river” or “a factory,” but “the Vette River,” or “the Grünewald Breadworks.” Describe them in a sentence or two and link them to the various factions where appropriate. Again, aim for variety. Your comrades should have a chance to explore everything from the city's darkest streets to the shining halls of the palace.

## MORE TROUBLE

Use these places whenever you're about to stage a scene that doesn't call for a specific location. This will make it come alive in a way a blank backdrop could not. Even if your comrades never visit these locations, the world will feel more alive for knowing they are there.

- Greene Avenue Branch Library: a concrete and steel pile lately occupied by the Neighborhood Watch.
- St. Anthony's General Hospital: a venerable brick institution offering free medical care to all, regardless of ideology.
- Murphy's Mondo Storage Center: a colossal building whose countless units have been overrun with refugees seeking shelter.
- The Old Canal: which stinks year-round and vomits bodies in the spring.





## TROUBLE

In addition to the fronts that provide the main conflict for your comrades' story, it can be useful to have a handful of suggestions for conflict: moments of anxiety or stress you can throw at your heroes when the going gets a little too easy.

These can be generic, or you can tailor them to your comrades. Use them whenever the action dies down, or when you worry you are starting to repeat yourself.

- The government freezes the party's bank accounts, meaning there's no money for food, ammunition, or supplies.
- The police double the amount of men they have tracking the comrades.
- Krishna's brother relapses.
- Burt's bad back flares up so much that he can hardly stand.

## NAMES

There's something infernally difficult about coming up with a believable name for a new NPC on the spot. This difficulty is compounded if you're playing in an international setting and are not intimately familiar with the naming conventions of that place.

To avoid the embarrassment of naming every new character Anna or Adam, maintain a list of 10 to 20 names, broken down however you see fit, to use when a new character appears on the scene. If you are playing in an international setting, make the names more convincing by mixing and matching first and last names from lists of famous people from the region.

If you think it will help, maintain lists of characteristics and motivations as well. When you imagine an NPC on the fly, ask your players for suggestions about the new character, and draw the rest from your lists. When you've used something from your lists, cross it off and replace it after the session.

# FRONTS

Your most important task after the first session is to write two to three fronts that express the obstacles facing your comrades as they attempt revolution. Called threats in *Apocalypse World*, and rebranded fronts in *Dungeon World*, these are summaries of the dangers menacing your comrades and their nation, any of which will soon overwhelm and destroy the country.

Anything can serve as a front so long as it is potentially catastrophic and growing worse all the time. The most important quality for every front is that it's something your players are interested in tackling. If the trouble generated by a front ever stops amusing your players, rewrite it or toss it aside.

*Apocalypse World* provides a wonderful threat map you can use to track the various dangers posed to your comrades, while *Dungeon World* offers a mix-and-match approach to building a front that yields truly surprising combinations. I prefer a pared down system for writing fronts, but I recommend looking at those books if you prefer firmer structure.

In *Comrades*, each front consists of:

- A name
- A type
- A motivation
- An approach
- The steps it will take towards realizing its goal
- Associated NPCs

## NAME

The name of the danger threatening the comrades.

- Neighborhood Watch
- Police Anti-Terror Unit
- Influenza
- The War

## TYPE

There are five types of fronts in *Comrades*:

1. Political Faction: A formal political group whose goals are at odds with the comrades.
  2. Government: Representatives of the government, from the secret police and the city guard to the politicians and civil servants.
  3. Gang: Unaffiliated mobs seeking to expand or control their turf.
  4. Pestilence: Disease, hunger, or any other danger else that spreads relentlessly and without reason.
  5. Environment: The weather, mostly, but also anything whose presence is unavoidable and deadly.
- The Neighborhood Watch is a gang, because it is, at present, only concerned with protecting its turf. If its leaders attempted to use its violence as a platform to seize power, it would become a political faction.
  - The Police Anti-Terror Unit is part of the government.
  - Influenza is a pestilence.
  - The war could either be a pestilence—if it is nearby, constantly mutating, and threatening to overwhelm the city—or part of the environment—if it is as far away, static, and oppressive as the clouds overhead.

### MOTIVATION

There are five typical motivations for the different fronts:

1. Power: A popular motivation for political factions, this is appropriate for anyone who kills to control an empire, city, or street.
2. Order: A motivation for those already in power, this represents those who want to destroy dissenters, protesters, criminals, and anyone outside the mainstream.
3. Chaos: The classic motivation for gangs, terrorists, certain types of war, and anyone who simply wants to watch the world burn.
4. Death: The driving urge of most pestilence, death is the motivation for anyone or anything that simply wants to kill.
5. Utopia: Although seemingly harmless, this desire to make the world perfect can still be deadly.
  - The Neighborhood Watch yearns for an imaginary, racially pure utopia.
  - The Anti-Terror Unit desires order, which causes them to stamp out any who might threaten the control of the state.
  - Influenza is motivated by death.
  - If the war is a pestilence, it is motivated by death. If it is part of the environment, however, chaos may be a more appropriate motivation, since it seeks only to grind down society until there is nothing coherent left.

### APPROACH

Fronts can take any of five approaches, or combine more than one.

1. Brute Force: The cracking of skulls, the breaking of necks, marching in uniform, and anything else designed to intimidate, harm, or kill.
2. Terror: The use of indiscriminate violence—setting bombs in cafés, lighting fires, spraying crowded sidewalks with machine gun fire—in order to cow the public.
3. Organization: A catch-all for groups that attempt to succeed either by using a broad, meticulously organized base or by making an immense amount of money.

4. Deceit: The deployment either of widespread propaganda, or more intimate, face-to-face deception.
5. Wanton Destruction: The relentless, unthinking obliteration of cities, people, and things.
  - The Neighborhood Watch employs brute force.
  - The Anti-Terror Unit relies on organization.
  - Influenza relies on wanton destruction.
  - If the war is a pestilence, it may employ wanton destruction, organization or brute force, depending on the nature of the aggressors. If it is an environmental front, it prefers wanton destruction above all else.

## WRITING A FRONT

Once the front has been named and described, it is time to pin down the steps it will take to satisfy its motivation. These can be rendered as bullet points—the more specific, the better—each of which describes a concrete escalation in the front’s activity.

Each front needs between five and ten steps—some of which have already been taken at the start of play—the last of which is the satisfaction of the front’s motivation. It is essential that each step be something that can be shown in-game, helping you **let the world crumble** and giving the comrades something to fight against.

Writing these steps is one of the most challenging parts of GMing *Comrades* and one of the most rewarding. Each step should be dramatic, surprising, and clear, with enough implied conflict to serve as the seed for all or part of a session of play. Each one should follow logically from the one before and lead inexorably to the next.

These steps are not a script for your campaign, but a road map for what the front will do unless your comrades intervene. Intervene they will, and you will be called upon to tweak and rewrite your fronts between sessions. If the comrades shatter the front entirely, you will need to rip it up and replace it with some new, unknown horror.

Here are two very different fronts: the Neighborhood Watch and Influenza. To use them in a campaign, it would probably make sense to check off the first two or three steps before play, to show how much the front has already accomplished before the comrades take notice of it. Note how every step is something the comrades can see, be affected by, and try to stop or contain.

Front: The Neighborhood Watch

Type: Gang

Motivation: Utopia

Approach: Brute Force

1. When an immigrant family moves into his building, Martin Hogg and his neighbors launch a campaign of intimidation to drive them out.
2. Residents in other buildings invite Hogg and his friends, now a uniformed Neighborhood Watch, to do the same in their buildings.
3. Trying to fight back, a young couple is killed by the Watch, and Hogg is arrested for the murder.
4. The Watch invites like-minded gangs from other parts of the city to demonstrate outside the police station, and Hogg escapes in the ensuing riot.
5. The Watch erects barricades around their neighborhood, keeping the police out and the residents in.
6. Hogg leads a house-to-house search, robbing and killing anyone they suspect of being an immigrant.
7. Now armed to the teeth, the Watch declares their block a sovereign, white supremacist state, and the police are too cowed to disagree.

This is a front you might write if your comrades or their families lived on the block or if they had some other direct connection to the people endangered by the Watch.

Your comrades could intervene at any of those stages and change the course the Watch would take. If they stopped Hogg from killing the couple in step three, then you might rewrite step four to make it about the Watch coming after the comrades. The more direct conflict you can create, the better your fronts will function.

Front: Influenza

Type: Pestilence

Motivation: Death

Approach: Wanton Destruction

1. A new strain of influenza appears at the docks, killing several longshoremen, sailors, and homeless people.
2. The city launches a campaign advocating for flu shots, but when the shots prove helpless against the disease, an anti-vaccination conspiracy theory takes root among the wealthy.
3. Anti-vax radicals break into a lab working on a new vaccine, burning it to the ground and releasing the now-airborne virus citywide.
4. The flu spreads like lightning, killing hundreds and infecting tens of thousands more.
5. The state announces a quarantine, blockading all roads, bridges, and tunnels into the city.
6. The anti-vaxxers attack a medical supply lift, destroying the supplies.
7. The illness touches every corner of the city, killing most of the population and leaving the rest to wish they were dead.

This front is an example of building active moments out of something invisible. If you are not interested in turning your game into *The Andromeda Strain*, you could write a quieter front for the disease, letting it kill hundreds instead of thousands. You could still use it to create gripping, active scenes by writing the front to ensure the disease and the efforts to contain it affect the comrades directly.

## NPCs

No front is complete without a list of at least two relevant NPCs, whom you should create according to the suggestions on page 105.

For the Neighborhood Watch, we would start with Hogg and Willensky and fill it out with the names of a few foot soldiers, their financial backers, their victims, and anyone else whom the comrades might encounter while trying to contain this hateful scourge.

For influenza, we would name the doctors and politicians trying to contain the disease, and fill out the hierarchy of the anti-vax group standing in their way. We would also list any friends or family of the comrades who seem likely targets for the illness.

### BEFORE A SESSION

Start by consulting your fronts. If the comrades did not derail them during the last session, then during the coming session each front will probably attempt to take one step forward. Plan to put one or more of those steps into action in a way that will force the comrades to respond. Think about how you can use the fronts to **make the pain real**.

Update your lists of opposing factions, NPCs, locations, trouble, and names, and make a few simple notes about how you think the next session will start. What will happen to show the comrades what has changed about each of the fronts? How will the trouble that has been brewing off-screen erupt?

On the list of possible trouble, make sure you have one or two things directly connected to each comrade, any of which could happen during the coming session of play. You won't use most of these—you might not use any of them—but you'll be glad to have them in reserve.

As always, your goal is not to script the session, but to be sure you have enough potential conflict stockpiled that no matter what your comrades do, trouble will be waiting.

### DURING A SESSION

You can't control what your comrades do during a session, but you can help them get off on the right foot. Reveal the trouble posed by one or more fronts and suggest—as gently as you like—that they try to do something about it.



Subtlety is not always the correct approach. Don't underestimate the efficiency of saying something as direct as, "the Neighborhood Watch is going to go building-to-building rooting out immigrants. Joshua, your sister lives on that block, doesn't she? She's in the line of fire."

There's nothing wrong with giving players such a clear instruction, but if you'd prefer to **offer a nasty choice**, you could reveal the newest step taken by another front at the same time, saying something like:

"You've heard rumors that anti-vax guerrillas are planning a raid on the disease research department at Kebir Labs. If you want, you could try to stop them."

Now you have given them two clear options. If they prefer to go in another direction, let them, so long as they understand that the fronts will gain strength unless stopped.

Once your players start moving, your job gets easier. Every action they take will create more trouble, which will demand more action, drawing them deeper and deeper until the conflict cannot be escaped. As long as you heed your manifesto and principles, and make your GM moves ruthlessly, everyone will have a wonderful time.

## AFTER A SESSION

Exhale.

Thank your players, and congratulate them on their good work at the table and in the game. Remind them to record what happened during the session in the History of Revolutionary Activity section on the back of their playbook.

Clean up and, when you have a moment to yourself, write a few words about the session. When it's time to go again, update your lists, tweak your fronts, and get ready for more.



# KHRESHT 1915



## USING KHRESHT

Khresht: 1915 is a setting for *Comrades*. Depending on how quickly you play it, the campaign could last anywhere from five sessions to 15 or more. It is also possible to use as a setting for a one-shot.

This chapter includes “Welcome to Khresht,” an overview of the fictional empire as it teeters on the edge of revolution in February, 1915. Addressed to your players, it offers a guide to the city, the country, and the ideologies grappling for control. Print it up for them, if you like, and use it to get them in the mindset for play.

Following “Welcome to Khresht,” you will find fronts for a Khreshti campaign, lists of relevant NPCs, and seeds for future conflict and adventure in this sprawling, dying empire. You will not find a map, an itinerary, or an ending. *Comrades* is about playing to find out what happens. It is about giving your players a story and empowering them to make it their own. Khresht has gaps, and you must fill them yourselves.

Run the Khreshti campaign as you would any other game of *Comrades*. Form a party. Imagine the world, using whatever material in this chapter strikes your fancy. Draw a map of the city and, if you wish, the country. Name NPCs, taking them either from the list on page 134 or your players’ imagination, and establish their connections to your comrades. Write fronts or use the ones provided. Put the enemy in motion and watch your comrades fight back.

Based on their choices, the revolution will advance. They will be heroes or they will die.

Even if you choose not to play through the Khreshti revolution, there are elements in this chapter that can be useful in other campaigns. Raid the list of ideologies, locations and NPCs, harvesting anything your game requires. Rip it up. Rename it. Make it yours.

Khresht is a blueprint. You and your players will build the game.



# WELCOME TO KHRESHT

## FEBRUARY, 1915

You are in the city Khresht, on the river Khresht, in the empire Khresht. After 300 years' rule, the Makharov dynasty is on its last legs. The army has been broken by the Great War; the economy is in shambles, and no matter how forcefully the police clamp down, political parties, secret societies, and revolutionary cells spring up like weeds.

You are a member of one of these cells. You have a chance to topple an empire and drag your country into the future. But what future will you choose?

## THE EMPIRE

For 300 years, the Makharovs have used military power, regal pomp, great caches of gold, and strategic terror to hold together the empire they call Khresht. Countless languages, nationalities, ethnicities, and factions have been bound beneath the one-eyed eagle, forgetting their own ambitions and laying down their lives—willingly or not—in service of the crown. But the spell is breaking and the empire is falling apart.

Since the Empress Rachel's disastrous entry into the Great War, the Germans have shattered the blue-uniformed army that was the pride of Khresht. Food runs short. Communications falter. For the moment, the Empress holds on.

## THE CITY

Khresht is a compact city on a sluggish river, the center of an empire that has been dying for more than a century. Lit by gaslight and spotty electricity, it is a warren of narrow streets, winding alleys, forgotten tunnels, and toxic canals. Its citizens toil in tanneries, distilleries, gun works, and the docks. Its upper crust relaxes in ballrooms, cafés, restaurants and the opera. Its small, but vocal, intelligentsia lives in the coffee houses, debating the future over and over again.

Above it all sits the Turquoise Palace, perched on the cliffs above the river, where an Empress struggles to tune out the whisperings below.

## YOUR PARTY

You are a member of a small revolutionary cell affiliated with a larger political party or movement. Where you fall on the spectrum, and how tightly you are aligned with your larger party, is up to you. Your membership will be drawn from across Khreshti society; your activities will range from simply illegal to outright violent.

You will fight the army, the secret police, revolutionary factions on the left and right, and dissenters and traitors within your own ranks. Above all, you will risk your life for your comrades and the revolutionary dream you hold dear.

Your group was formed in coffee shops, classrooms, workhouses, trenches, or the streets of the slums. You loathe the empire. You long for freedom—freedom to vote, to think, to write, to create, to marry, to travel, to die as you see fit.

You have been targeted by the secret police, the *Számok*. They open your mail, threaten your family, smash your printing presses, follow you openly and in secret, and attempt to infiltrate your group. It's possible you have been arrested and served time in the prison fields at the distant reaches of this sprawling, backwards empire. It's possible someone you love has died by their hand.

It doesn't matter. You will do whatever it takes to free your people. Perhaps you will print newspapers, make speeches, convince workers to organize and soldiers to strike. Perhaps you will take to the streets, breaking the bones and spirits of any who disagree with you. Perhaps you will plant bombs and set fires, killing precisely or indiscriminately until this corrupt empire is brought to its knees.

You will bring about a revolution. What sort remains to be seen.

## IDEOLOGIES

At the dawn of the Great War, the political situation in Khresht is nicknamed *volkhrak*, after the traditional peasant stew in which a little bit of everything is tossed in a pot and boiled until vaguely edible. Here are the most prominent ideologies in the winter of 1915, arranged from left to right. Know that there are many, many more.

## THE LEFT

### ANARCHISM

A spectrum of theories advocating for the reorganization of society along voluntary means. Sometimes violent, sometimes not, it always scares the hell out of the people in power.

### ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM

A branch of anarchism that proposes trade unionism as the basis for a new society, one in which cooperative work replaces wage slavery.

### ILLEGALISM

An unsanctioned offshoot of mainline anarchism, popular among the better-read members of the criminal underground, which argues that since all property is theft, there is no such thing as crime.

### OBLITERISM

An ideology that swept through the upper crust for a few heady weeks in late 1914, obliteration's main tenet is relentless, numbing intoxication, kept up as long as the money holds out.



**PACIFISM**

Inspired by American Quakers, Khreshti pacifism was briefly popular in the run-up to the war, but faded from the national stage after its most prominent proponents were shot in Lepai Square.

**IMAGE 89**

Named for a painting stolen from the National Gallery, this cryptic artistic movement calls for the Empress to abdicate in favor of a committee of artists that will put beauty above all else.

**KEDRINISM**

As promulgated by charismatic stage icon Starla Kedrin, this ostensibly socialist philosophy is dedicated to the overthrow of the government, the public execution of all politicians, and the installation of a single-party state overseen by Starla Kedrin.

**UTOPIAN SOCIALISM**

A *volkbrak* in its own right, utopian socialism is a hodgepodge of movements dedicated to their unique idea of perfection. Although some sects are quite ardent, even violent, they typically lack the numbers to make themselves heard.

**ARMCHAIR MARXISM**

A derogatory term for academics who prefer contemplating theory to doing the hard, often violent, work necessary to effect real change.

**BLOOD SOCIALISM**

A socialist movement founded by disaffected veterans of the disastrous Khreshti-Russian War, blood socialism believes radical soldiers, loyal to their people but not their flag, must serve as the vanguard for an egalitarian Khreshti society built on traditional martial values.

**THE FEDOTOV SCHOOL**

Led by septuagenarian Khreshti scholar Vera Fedotov, this strain of scientific socialism proposes a revolution and new form of government determined entirely by the laws of probability.

## THE CENTER

### DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM

An alternative to revolutionary socialism, democratic socialism believes in transforming Khresht at the ballot box: a slow-and-steady approach that has won it respectability from the center and derision from the left.

### SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

A moderate movement that promotes participation in the democratic process to bring about gradual social change. Its members call for corporate regulation, welfare for the poor, public housing, and drastically reduced military spending.

### LIBERALISM

A loose confederation of non-revolutionary reformers, Khreshti liberalism includes human rights activists, civil rights workers, temperance crusaders, and feminists—although there are members of all those groups among the more radical ideologies as well.

### NATIONALISM

Advocating for the break-up of the Khreshti empire along the lines of the ethnic groups subsumed under the banner of the Makharovs, nationalism has come into vogue among those who think the simplest way to save Khresht is to wipe it off the map.

### CONSTITUTIONALISM

The most popular centrist ideology in Khresht, constitutionalism demands a freely-elected parliament and the end of the monarchy.

### CONSTITUTIONAL ROYALISM

A vanishing political philosophy, constitutional royalism believes that the traditions of monarchy and the promise of democracy need not be mutually exclusive. Perfectly calibrated to satisfy no one, it grows less popular by the minute.

## THE RIGHT

### ROYALISM

Once the dominant philosophy of Khresht, the theory that God placed the Makharovs on the throne now finds support only among the most naïve gentry and royals too inbred to know better.

### CORPORATISM

Lately in vogue among Copper Alley plutocrats, corporatism promises to privatize every element of the imperial government, allowing the empire to be run as efficiently—and profitably—as a business.

### FRIENDS OF NEVSKY

A cabal of military officers, old-line merchants, and fearful nobility, the Friends of Nevsky call for a coup staged by military legend General Filipp Nevsky, a widely popular hero of the last war.

### NATIVISM

Popular among the white working class, nativism is a patchwork quilt of racist grievances, promoting racial cleansing, eugenics, and “Khresht for the Khreshti.”

### AGRARIANISM

A radical back-to-the-land movement, agrarianism is dedicated to dragging the country back to an idyllic feudal past, starting by burning the capital to the ground.

### EGOISM

As defined by university professor Semyon Nekrasov, egoism proposes that because it is impossible to be certain that other people are actually real, nothing matters but the pursuit of one’s own desire. A selfish, rancid ideology, it is popular among the useless rich.

### ULTRA-NATIONALISM

Incoherent and furious, the ultra-nationalism now flowering in Khresht packages violent impulses in spotless uniforms, and promises to purify the nation with the blood of the helpless.

# KHRESHTI FRONTS

In this section are five fronts, written according to the instructions on page 108, which you can use to **let the world crumble** as the comrades fight for the future of Khresht.

Each front consists of a name, a type, a motivation, an approach, and a series of steps that it will take if unopposed, roughly at a rate of one per session. The first few steps should be checked off before the first session, in order to give the sense that the world is already in trouble before play starts.

Use this steadily advancing doom to keep your comrades on the back foot. If they spend one session fighting the Sons of Khresht, start the next session with news that the army is close to seizing power and the famine is getting worse.

Adapt these to suit your players and your game. Find connections between their comrades and the NPCs associated with each front, and add more NPCs as well. If none of these fronts suit the story you and your players want to tell, throw them out and write your own. Khresht is a beautiful country. Have fun tearing it down.

## THE SONS OF KHRESHT

Type: Political Party

Motivation: Power

Approach: Brute Force

Fueled by hate, these blue-shirted goons flood the streets at dusk to terrorize the weak, foreign, and strange. How long before their bullying grows into a lust for power?

1. Factories close, and Pyotr Dobbin begins preaching venom to the disaffected unemployed in the main hall of Fiedler's Brewery.
2. The Sons of Khresht attack a leftist demonstration, killing several while the police do nothing.
3. Dobbin's men storm a banquet given by a group of anarchist waiters in honor of their favorite newspaper editor and shoot the man dead.
4. Dobbin leads thousands on a torchlit parade through the streets of the capital.
5. During an election marred by intimidation and widespread fraud, the Sons of Khresht win a minority, and the Empress asks Dobbin to assume the post of prime minister.
6. Dobbin bans all rival political parties and leftist newspapers.
7. Any who have opposed the Sons of Khresht on their march to power are arrested and disappeared in the middle of the night.

### NPCs

Pyotr Dobbin: Local commander of the Sons of Khresht. A bully, a tyrant, a fool.

Vilya Herbst: Pyotr Dobbin's right hand. Soft-spoken, murderous.

Vadym Brodsky: A leftist newspaper editor on a crusade against the Sons of Khresht.

Seregenya Palmov: A wealthy socialite who has adopted Dobbin as her pet cause.

Daniel Blank: An English spy who has infiltrated the Sons of Khresht on behalf of the British government, and who will help the comrades—for a price.

## THE SZÁMOK

Type: Police

Motivation: Order

Approach: Deceit

The *Számok*, the secret police, have eyes in every corner of the empire and dungeons as dark as death itself.

1. After the Comrades' first adventure attracts their attention, the *Számok* begin following the comrades and opening their mail.
2. The *Számok* attempt to recruit an NPC close to the comrades to serve as a mole.
3. A *Számok* informant suggests a plot the comrades can carry out against a rival party—a suspiciously easy operation that turns out to be a trap.
4. The *Számok* arrest the comrades' immediate superior in the party and releases them after a night, no longer trustworthy.
5. The *Számok* attempt to arrest the comrade who has committed the highest-profile crimes, and subject them to hellish interrogation.
6. The comrades' loved ones disappear.
7. The comrades are arrested en masse and vanished, exiled, or executed.

### NPCs

Klement Vock: Head of the *Számok*. Invisible, with informants in every shadow.

Sandor Fust: Senior investigator for the *Számok*. Friendly. A laughter.

Sara Vilnus: Fust's partner. Does not care for his jokes.

Opanas Trush: Fust's enforcer. A bruiser with a love for football, opera, and bad wine.

Chantal Aksinin: Technical expert at the *Számok*, in charge of tapping phones and opening mail. Secretly sympathetic to anarchist causes.

## THE ARMY

Type: Political Party

Motivation: Order

Approach: Brute Force

The officers of the Khreshti army blame dissenters in the capital for their humiliation at the front. As they try to slow the German advance, will they choose to seize power for themselves?

1. The German army shatters the Khreshti army, routing them and forcing a widespread retreat.
2. Mutiny erupts across the front, and the officer class strikes out with a campaign of corporal punishment and execution.
3. Handsome young captain Kristof Arct single-handedly wins a front line battle, stopping the German advance and making himself a hero.
4. Led by Arct, a right-wing officer faction calls on General Nevsky to seize power.
5. When the comrades' action unsettle the capital, the Koshiv Dragoons massacre a group of protestors, and calls for order grow louder.
6. With Arct at his elbow, Nevsky attempts to stage a coup.
7. Now in control, the army institutes a massive conscription campaign, executing any able-bodied men or women who refuse to fight.

### NPCs

Kristof Arct: The Empress's favorite, a charismatic young war hero with a face beautiful enough to keep the army from crumbling.

General Filipp Nevsky: The drowsy, senile, reactionary hope of the militant right.

Major Josef Koshinsky: Commander of the local detachment of the Koshiv Dragoons. A cheerful fellow who has seen too many good boys die.

Sonia Meller: A new recruit not ready to go to war.

Arne Neff: An army explosives expert not shy about selling ordnance on the black market.

## FAMINE

Type: Pestilence

Motivation: Death

Approach: Wanton Destruction

Hunger and war go hand in hand. Hunger is far less forgiving.

1. Punishing drought devastates the fall harvest, emptying grain stores and setting Khresht up for a long, hungry winter.
2. The Germans sweep across the grain belt, burning most of the winter stores.
3. Food shipments to the capital slow to a trickle, resulting in breadlines for the poor and a black market for all who can afford it.
4. Inspired by the comrades, the poor riot for bread.
5. The hunger grows worse, and the old, the young, and the weak die by the hundreds.
6. The rich attempt to flee the city.
7. The last bread runs out and cannibalism reigns.

## NPCs

Fan Storch: The government official in charge of rationing. An unpopular man.

Bela Benedek: Queen of the black market. A fine singer. A snitch.

Nikolai Lunov: The Mire's handsomest thief, always able to find a crust of bread.

Jaroslav Hora: A wealthy doctor sacrificing his health to treat the starving poor.

Milla Graham: A legendary chef who will never, never, never open her larder to those who need food most.



## THE GERMANS

Type: Pestilence

Motivation: Death

Approach: Brute Force

The Kaiser's war machine is an unstoppable force. Barring a miracle, it will bring Khresht to its knees—or hand power to any party willing to make peace.

1. The Germans conquer Halbturn, rout the army, and make for the capital.
2. Halted by the heroism of Kristof Arct, the Germans advance once again.
3. Making a heroic final stand, the Koshiv Dragoons are slaughtered.
4. The Germans surround the capital, cut off the food supply, and lay siege.
5. German sappers infiltrate the city to plant bombs and sow terror.
6. When the Germans demand the city surrender, the Empress vows that her people will fight to the death.
7. The Germans offer to spare the city in exchange for the Empress's head.

### NPCs

Heinrich Döhl: Leader of the German invasion. A lucky general. A terrible fool.

Marina Berlich: A homely German spy infiltrating the heart of Khreshti politics.

Anna Schechtman: A German expatriate terrified of what will happen when the front line catches up to her.

Günter Frisch: Head of the German embassy. Rumored lover of the Empress.

Wolfram von Morungen: A German Junker ensconced in Khreshti society, who advocates for the Khreshti nobility to overthrow the Empress and surrender to the Kaiser.





## OTHER NPCs

### ALICIA RHODOPOLIS

A Greek expatriate and expert in hand-to-hand combat, hired by the Khreshti army to train its soldiers to kill as safely as possible.

### ANTON VLADIMIROVICH MIKHAILOV

A conscript from remote Vrtá, Anton was court-martialed after unionizing his garrison. He escaped, and faces death if caught.

### BOGDAN KAVKA

A *Számok* operative who has begun to sympathize with the radicals he has infiltrated, and doubt his masters in the secret police.

### BROCK BARBER

Thrown out of Irish boxing for fighting dirty, Barber has made a name for himself in Khresht's lucrative bloodsport underground.

### BROTHER JACEK KOBRO

An absent-minded eccentric who leads a small band of religious socialists. His ideals are pure, but his followers can be violent.

### CAPTAIN ALEKSANDR HEVELIUS

A military intelligence officer assigned to the *Számok*, who barely bothers to conceal his sympathy for the left and hatred for Sandor Fust.

### CARMILLA HOLSTEIN

The guiding light of Khrest Central University's philosophy department, Carmilla is also one of the leaders of its queer subculture.

### CHRISTOPHER P. NGUYEN

The Empress's favorite fixer: a man of no certain title who seems to be everywhere at once, and who holds countless lives in his hands.

### D.B. BABIN

The ruthless overlord of Khresht's burgeoning film industry, Babin will destroy anyone who threatens his monopoly on the silver screen.

**ERIN HOLMES**

A brilliant English student who lost her scholarship to the Central University, but who has not let homelessness dim her ideals.

**EUGENE JOVANOVIĆ**

An elderly carpenter whose fingers dance on wood, and who has dedicated his life to teaching the young how, why, and when to revolt.

**ILANAVSKY PETRODOV**

A veteran of battles for indigenous land rights in Khreshti colonial holdings, Petrodov has returned to take the fight to the capital.

**ILSE PETROV**

A former sniper with a deep facial scar, Petrov is a committed socialist, atheist, and pescetarian who never misses a shot.

**ILYA SHMAKOV**

A young soldier with a keen sense of humor and a rich baritone. The sort of man who makes friends everywhere he goes.

**IOKAB SOSALOV**

After he quit the seminary, this die-hard Marxist turned to underground journalism, and makes ends meet by robbing banks.

**JACKSON MAGNUS**

A radical restaurant veteran who has tired of serving food to the rich, Magnus has opened his kitchen to radicals of all stripes.

**JAMES WARD**

This American union organizer came to Khresht an idealist, but years of failure, corruption, and betrayal have made him a cynic.

**JAN DEGROM**

After taking bronze for Khresht in the '20 Olympics, this Dutch-born shot putter became an unwilling symbol of a regime he loathes.

## **JENNIFER POWER**

An American newspaper correspondent who never hesitates to bribe, cheat, threaten, or steal her way into a scoop.

## **KATHARINA MOROSHKIN**

A classicist and rhetorical genius with a love for statement jewelry, Dr. Moroshkin writes searing speeches for anyone who can afford to pay.

## **KONSTANTIN BARTOV**

A hard-drinking party loyalist who passes his nights swilling whiskey and arguing theory—even though he’s never read a word.

## **KRIS HERZOG**

A waifish academic with an encyclopedic knowledge of Khreshti history and absolutely no idea what’s coming next.

## **KRISTOFF PAUL LIN**

A disabled veteran who saw a promising career cut short by injury, Lin ekes out a living working as a bodyguard for the elite.

## **LUCIUS DUFFY**

An amateur pilot and civil rights attorney from Memphis, TN, come to Khresht seeking adventure and a cause to make his own.

## **MAGDA FINDLE**

A legend of the Khresti stage, this “proverbial blonde” is an eloquent champion of feminism, abortion, and security at the stage door.

## **MIKHAIL SARNO**

The universally beloved star of Dinamo Khresht—a coffee shop intellectual with a wicked left foot and dreams of a better world.

## **MILAN GOLUBOVIĆ**

A chain-smoking revolutionary who never gets anything done, and who lashes out furiously at any who question him.

**NIKITA NOVAK**

A mid-level banker secretly undermining Copper Alley from the inside, Nikita hides a red soul beneath a white collar.

**NIKOLAI “KOLYA” ORLOV**

An Anarcho-Syndicalist pacifist who sings songs of revolution, Orlov is a tranquil inspiration to the young.

**PAVEL MIKHONSKY**

A cellist, chain smoker, and hopeless amateur sculptor, Mikhonsky may be the most charming failure in the Khreshti art world.

**RAVABEL BOWIE**

A nursing student whose interest in medicine is an attempt to channel her natural sociopathic tendencies toward useful ends.

**SAMUEL MENEFEE-LIBEY**

An eccentric chemist whose rumpled clothes conceal a radical thinker capable of building astonishingly powerful new bombs.

**SVETLANA YURIN**

Owner of a soup kitchen that gives shelter to all who need it, Yurin is always exhausted, beet-stained, and hungry.

**VASILY EISENSTEIN**

A prominent figure in the teacher’s union, Eisenstein is an expert organizer with a bad habit of spilling secrets when drunk.

**VASKA JAKOVLEV**

A radical Bolshoi Ballet star stranded in Khresht since his passport was seized for engaging in “lewd activities” with the Empress’s brother.

**XAVIER RED**

Forced out of the Revolutionary Socialist Organization after finding corruption at its highest ranks, Red is ready to blow the whistle.

## PLACE NAMES

Although its exact location is deliberately hard to pin down, the imagined empire of Khresht is located somewhere in Eastern Europe between Germany and Russia, between the Baltic and the Aegean sea. Its precise size, neighbors, and ethnic makeup is up to you.

Its place names are inspired by a variety of Eastern European countries and are intended to give the feeling of land that has been conquered and re-conquered, named and renamed, since the world was new. Here are some possible names of cities in the empire and locations in the capital. Use them ruthlessly.

## CITIES

- Ajak: A mining town where the ore is running out.
- Bata: A forest village where ancient superstitions hold fast.
- Dubienka: The empire's second city, where the air is cold and the people are hard.
- Grodek: A resort town in the foothills of the mountains.
- Halbturn: A city on the German border, conquered the day the war began.
- Hevyn: A monastic retreat in the mountains, far above the clouds.
- Kladniv: A market town, center of the grain belt, where the peasants are hungry and enraged.
- Koshiv: The river city famous for producing the Koshiv Dragoons, backbone of the Khreshti army.
- Ludin: A seaside resort whose best days ended a century ago.
- Matz: A pinprick hamlet that has found unwanted fame as the war's front line.
- Olari: The winter port, frozen for nine months of the year.
- Peresika: Birthplace of the Makharovs, a city turned into a shrine.
- Poromiv: Favorite city of poets, dreamers, and thieves.
- Radna: A farming village home to a radical agrarian sect.
- Tadten: Oldest city in Khresht and the empire's spiritual center.



## THE CAPITAL

- Arkady Station: A grand old train station far past its prime, not unlike the empire it serves.
- Fiedler's Brewery: A defunct beer works on the banks of the river, seized by the Sons of Khresht as an unofficial headquarters.
- Lembersky's Café: Across the boulevard from the opera, the beating heart of cosmopolitan Khresht.
- The Bluffs: Where the nobility built their mansions in order to stare down at the city they loathe.
- The Great Bridge: Built and rebuilt over the centuries, it connects the two halves of a city about to crack.
- The Mire: Vilest slum in a city of slums, where the revolution might be born.
- The New Palace: Home to the extended royal family, built a safe distance outside of town.
- The Turkish Quarter: Home to merchants, artists, and the finest theaters in the city.
- The Turquoise Palace: Lately reoccupied by the Empress, it is one of the wonders of Europe.
- The Zulawski Works: The towering factory that casts the army's guns, whose workers are always near revolt.



## SEEDS FOR ADVENTURE

There is no set series of adventures that adds up to the Khreshti revolution, but here are 10 ideas for situations into which you could hurl your comrades and watch them fight, think, or lie their way out. Use them as you see fit.

Remember that it is all right to start a session by telling your comrades how things have changed since their actions in the past session—you must always **keep the revolution moving**—but it is never appropriate to tell your comrades what they have to do about it. Show them a problem, suggest they solve it, and let them determine the particulars in their own way.

1. You are at Arkady Station, where a trainload of unwilling conscripts is about to be dragged to destruction on the front. Stop it, however you can.
2. You are in a barracks of the elite city guard. Convert them to your cause or destroy them.
3. The Grand Duke is throwing a ball to celebrate the arrival of a Parisian opera star. Infiltrate, undermine, or attack.
4. A rival faction has organized a march down the Grand Boulevard. Disrupt it and make them look fools.
5. A rival faction's newspaper slanders you. Find its hidden presses, and deal with them however you wish.
6. An encampment of protesters in the city's main square is about to be stormed by the Koshiv Dragoons. Save them, if you can.
7. The great Zulawski Works teeters on the edge of strike, riot, or worse. Give it a push.
8. The soldiers of the radical 44th Guards Regiment, posted to the front lines just a hundred miles from the capital, are near mutiny. Encourage them.
9. A friend of the party comes from the country, telling stories of atrocities committed by local nobility. Bring justice to the fields.
10. The party's leader is in hiding while the radical and moderate wings vie for control. See that your side wins.

## SEEDS FOR FUTURE CONFLICT

What happens when...

- The food runs out?
- The steamworks fail?
- The Germans reach the outskirts of town?
- The Empress falls ill?
- The centrists demand elections?
- The *Számok* crack down harder than ever?
- The Dragoons take things into their own hands?
- The assassinations start?
- The bombings grow worse?
- The ice begins to melt?

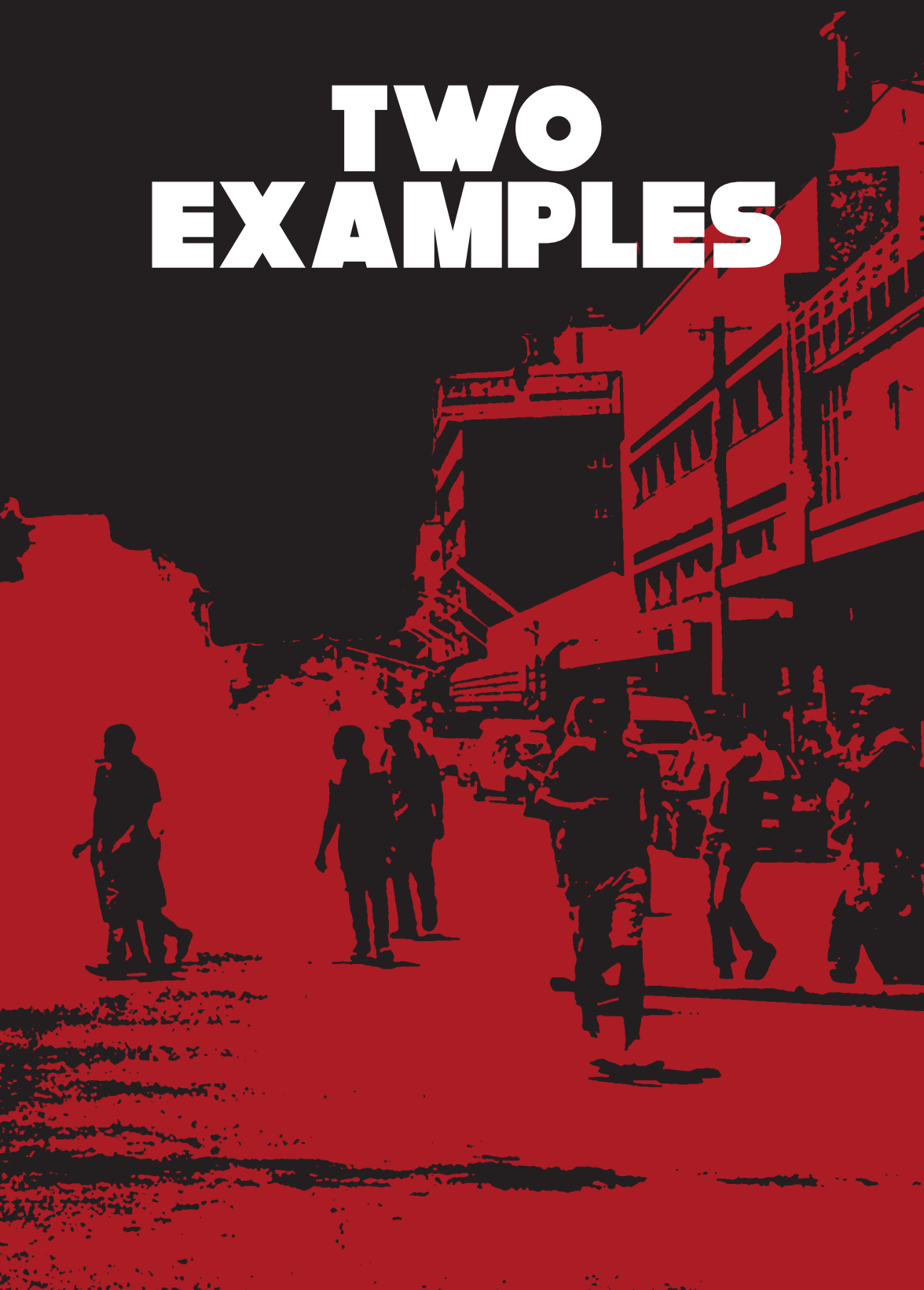
How will your party handle it...

- When moderation fails?
- When people begin killing in their name?
- When the party leadership dies, disappears, goes to prison, or sells out?
- When recruitment dries up?
- When the money/ammunition/inspiration runs out?
- When the movement becomes something they cannot control?
- When dissenters emerge within the party?
- When they hear the *Számok* have a mole inside the group?
- When an old friend goes over to the enemy?
- When the revolution becomes life or death?





# TWO EXAMPLES



# NEW YORK 1777

It is springtime in New York and the British have the city in a stranglehold. Mary Hanneker, a Patron and leader of a faction called the Cortland Street Quilting Circle, has joined with comrades Douglas Stark, a Professional masquerading as a ferry captain, and Thomas Greene, a Worker, to fight the occupation.

Greene's cart rattles down the cobblestones toward the waterfront, his load of rusted scraps concealing Mary and her quilts, whose embroidery contains a secret code detailing British troop movements. When they are a few blocks away from his boat, Stark notices two men standing on the dock. Although she doesn't say so, the GM has just **promised trouble**.

The comrades stop, waiting for the moon to emerge from behind the clouds so Stark can ask, **"what's going on here?"** He rolls an 11, a strong hit, and asks three questions: "What should I watch out for? What do they want? What am I missing?"

"Those are British soldiers in plain clothes," says the GM. "You recognize them from their regular tours of the docks. They want to search your boat. You should watch out for Captain West, the short guy—he's a sadist. You're missing the third soldier, who's out of sight in the ship's hold."



While the other two hang back, Stark approaches the soldiers and asks them what they're up to. Captain West informs him that his boat has been impounded, pending a search for contraband. Stark lets them search—there's nothing out of order on the boat. The second soldier—the lean, utterly silent Private Corcoran—gives him a sickening stare.

Hiding under the scrap, Hanneker hears what's happening and tries to decide if she would rather fight or run. Greene does his best to calm her nerves—attempting to **share a quiet moment**—but rolls a 5, insulting her with his patronizing attempt at comfort.

"Do shut up Mr. Greene," says Hanneker—just loud enough that the British soldiers hear. The GM has just **delivered trouble**. West and Corcoran advance on the wagon, while the third soldier—young, fearful Private MacLeash—holds Stark at the point of his bayonet.

"Do you want the soldiers to go after Greene or Hanneker?" asks the GM—**offering a truly nasty choice**. Stark chooses Greene. West drags Greene off the wagon by his collar, steps on his throat and says, "Where are the quilts?"

"They're on the cart," says Greene. "Who told you about them?"

Greene has taken advantage of his Worker move, **plain spoken**, and because he is honest with West, West is honest in return.

"Your Mister Stark," says West. "Amazing the cooperation you can purchase for a few guineas."

The GM has just **separated them** and Greene doesn't like it at all.

"Bastard!" he shouts at Stark, who only shrugs. West tells Corcoran to search the cart, but before Corcoran can reach inside, Hanneker leaps up, brandishing a hunk of scrap iron. She hurls it at the private's head, attempting to **get rough**, and rolls a 12.

## TWO EXAMPLES

She chooses to deal great harm and take no harm. Even though she knocks Corcoran senseless, she is unable to disengage from West, who snatches Corcoran's musket out of his limp hands and points it at her chest.

"The quilts, Miss Hanneker," he says, finger easing its way toward the trigger.

Hanneker reaches into the pile of scrap iron and produces her change purse.

"How much will it take for you to go away?" she says, attempting to employ her Patron move, **bankroll**. She rolls a 3. West fires the gun, knocking her flat across the scrap, wounded in the gut. She marks three harm.

Greene takes the hunk of iron that felled Corcoran and bashes West in the head. Rolling to **get rough**, he gets a 9, and chooses to deal great harm. West falls, stunned, but manages to jab Greene with the bayonet on his way down, which is good for 1 harm.

Standing over his wounded friend, bloody and dazed and not sure where things went wrong, Greene calls to Stark: "Help us, you mercenary—if you were ever my friend at all."

Stark looks at the two wounded British soldiers and the wealthy woman who's bleeding out and makes the only sane choice. He steps backwards into the river, rolling with guile to use his Professional move **ghost**. He rolls a 7 and chooses to reduce his bond with Greene by 1 in order to disappear.



# CALLISTO 2219

On the fourth moon of Jupiter, trouble is brewing in the ice mines of Callisto. As the underground revolutionary organization Shaft 32 encourages the miners to strike for better wages and improved conditions, Zero Corporation cracks down harder than ever.

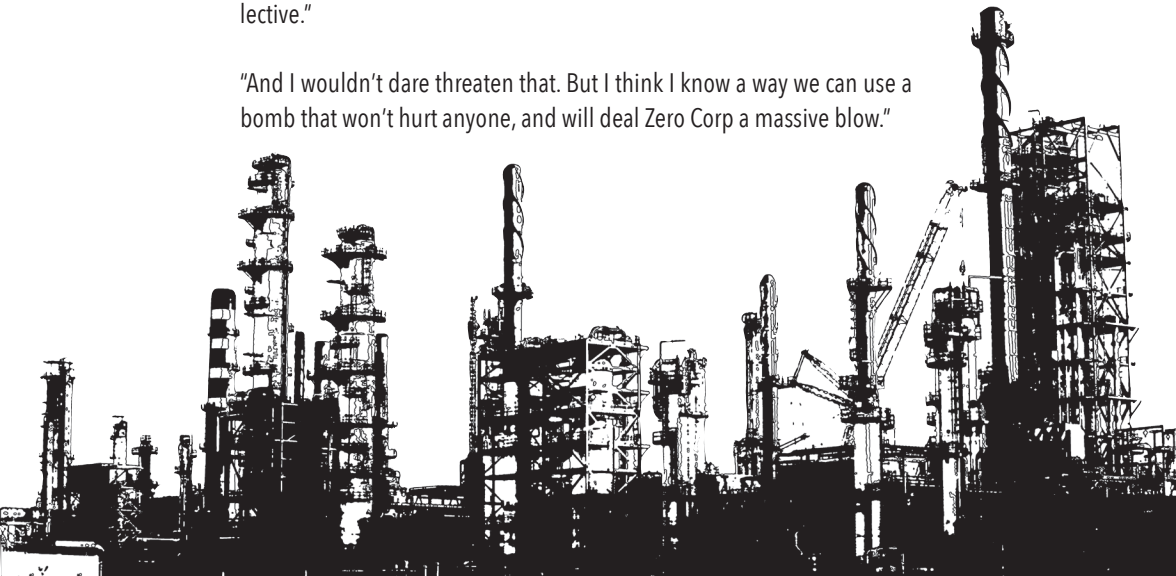
Augusta, a Student who began sympathizing with the miners when her geological research took her to the moon, has fallen in with Mary-Denis, a Demagogue and rising star in Shaft 32, and her bodyguard, Porsha, a Brute.

At the start of the session, the GM informs the comrades that Zero Corp VP Regis Van Dyke is visiting the troubled colony. Augusta has a plan to spoil his trip.

"We're going to plant a bomb," says Augusta.

"Shaft 32 doesn't do bombs," says Mary-Denis. "We are a peaceful collective."

"And I wouldn't dare threaten that. But I think I know a way we can use a bomb that won't hurt anyone, and will deal Zero Corp a massive blow."



## TWO EXAMPLES

The next morning, Van Dyke poses with a carefully-screened group of photogenic miners for a vid-shot to show the board back home. The ground begins to shake as a few hundred miners wearing the sash of Shaft 32 round the corner, with Mary-Denis at the head.

As the miners march down the Boulevard of Ice, Mary-Denis bellows an inspiring speech into her megaphone, reminding her fellows that, although they live in the ice, their future is on the surface. She rolls with mind to execute her move **St. Crispin's Day**. The result is a 7, allowing Mary-Denis to choose Porsha to disregard 1 harm taken during the trouble that is about to come.

The Zero Corp private police form a barricade around Van Dyke. "Another step," says police captain Katarina Duysen, "and we're firing tase gas." The GM has **promised trouble** and the comrades do not flinch.

"Management's flunkies think you're afraid," says Mary-Denis. "Show them they're wrong."

She is trying to **start something** by playing on her followers' prejudice against Zero Corp, meaning that she can take advantage of the Demagogue move **trouble with a capital T**, and add 1 to the roll. The result is an 8. Mary-Denis chooses to have the mob heed her instructions to charge the police—meaning that the crowd is neither large, nor peaceful.

The miners charge and the tase gas knocks them flat, as the GM **delivers trouble**. A shell explodes next to Mary-Denis, sending 2 harm worth of electricity coursing through her, and locking up every muscle in her body.

Thanks to Mary-Denis' inspiration, Porsha only takes 1 harm, meaning that she's still on her feet when her leader calls for help. Mary-Denis rolls with bond for Porsha, using her Patron move **avenge me**, and the resultant roll of 7 allows Porsha to drag Mary-Denis out of the fray.

"You're a goddamned idiot," says Porsha, as they cower behind the police van. Thanks to her Brute move **brutally honest**, this counts as **sharing a quiet moment**. She rolls with her bond for Mary-Denis, adds

1 to the roll, and gets a 10. She chooses to heal 1 of Mary-Denis' harm and increase their bond by 1. This brings her bond with Mary-Denis to 4, allowing Porsha to mark experience and reduce their bond to 1.

Mary-Denis' mob has been routed by the police. Van Dyke seizes the microphone and instructs his private cops to kill anyone who tries to escape. A line of police marching in lock step, rifles set to kill, emerge from the cloud of gas, headed straight for Porsha and Mary-Denis. The GM has **put them in a spot**.

While they look for a way out, Augusta takes advantage of the chaos to **sneak** past the guards watching over the nearest mineshaft. She rolls a 7 and chooses to waste no time. One of the guards, an awkward fellow named Clement Lee, follows her to the mouth of the shaft and watches as she plants her bomb on the elevator.

"Stop doing that!" shouts Lee, who fires a warning shot past Augusta's head. She could try to **sway** him to stop, but she knows that's hopeless. Instead, she sets the bomb's timer to three seconds and runs like hell.

She's **taking a risk** and that's not really her strong suit. The GM has **tested her weakness** and Augusta responds, rolling an 8 and escaping the explosion that kills Lee, collapses the shaft, and turns Van Dyke's photo op into a showcase of the dangerous conditions in the mines. She doesn't know that the mine's cameras recorded her every step.

When it comes time to make their pathway rolls, Shaft 32 will have a chance to advance in Organization, because they executed a daring plan with precision, and Zealotry, because its high profile operation captured the imagination of every miner on the moon.





**MAKE IT  
YOURS**

# OTHER CITIES OTHER TIMES

The beauty of the *Apocalypse World* engine lies in its extreme adaptability. Since *Comrades* is already a chopped-up version of another game, you are encouraged to hack it up even further.

The simplest way to make the game your own is by choosing a setting that's right for you. Page 91 contains suggestions for various settings, all of which should work without any modification to the game's base rules, but you may feel the urge to take things farther, altering the core rules to make the game fit better with your chosen revolution.

*Comrades* is designed for play in a society on the brink. If you want to play in a city or country further from the tipping point, you could rework the pathways to revolution in order to make the journey longer and more difficult, or you could discard them altogether and trap the comrades forever in a hellish status quo.

As written, the game is fairly generous in allowing the comrades the freedom to fight in the open. If you wanted to play a game built more on paranoia and intrigue than outright action, you might find **sneak** too simple, and prefer to break it up into several different moves—one for creeping through the shadows, another for hiding your true intentions, a third for communicating using a secret code, and so on. Rather than having all of them call for the player to roll with guile, you could spread them around several different stats, encouraging comrades of all stripes to keep a low profile.

Set the game not in a city oppressed by a corrupt government, but instead by an occupying army, and *Comrades* becomes about resistance rather than revolution. You could rewrite the pathways to match, and tweak the rest of the rules as you see fit.

Divide the players into opposing parties—possibly playing at the same time, possibly playing in alternating sessions—and it becomes even more ruthless and reflective of real life in the snake pit of the revolutionary underground.

The possible modifications are countless. Rip this game up and make it into something new. It is the revolutionary way.

## WRITING MOVES

As explained on page 14, there are two types of moves that players can make: active and passive. Writing passive moves is simple: think of what makes the playbook special and write a bonus that reflects that, giving players the chance to add 1 to a roll in certain circumstances, to skip rolling altogether in others, or to alter the reality of the game, ever so slightly, in their favor.

Writing active moves is a bit trickier, but comes easily once you get the hang of it. Every active move consists of a trigger, an instruction, and a result.

The trigger is the first part of most moves:

When you want to hurt someone...

When you take a mad risk for the revolution...

The instruction is what follows:

Roll +body

Roll +spirit

The result tells you what happens. On a 10+ the move works out as well as possible; on a 7-9 it mostly works, but there is a complication. Sometimes a success involves choosing one or more options from a

list; sometimes not. If a player is given the choice to choose one or two options from a list of three, it is implied that whatever negative suggested by the option not chosen will come to pass.

Write a move for any action you think your players will take often enough that it needs some clarification. If you are playing in a resistance setting, for example, and you expect your players to spend a lot of time getting arrested, you might want to write a move like...

### WITHSTAND PAIN

When you are on the receiving end of interrogation or outright torture, roll +body. On a 10+, pick two from the list. On a 7-9, pick one.

- You don't talk
- You don't take harm
- You see a way out

As you can see, even on a 10+ the player can't get everything they want. This is by design. In a situation where you have to **withstand pain**, there is no perfect outcome.

## CREATING PLAYBOOKS

If writing new moves isn't enough, you can customize the game further by creating your own playbooks. These could be archetypes unique to your setting—the Black Marketeer, for instance, for a resistance campaign—or more specific refinements of the character types included in the game. You could create an Assassin based on the Professional, for instance, or a Sailor based on the Soldier, who allows you to explore the rich revolutionary history of the navy.

Each *Comrades* playbook consists of:

- A title
- A tagline
- Suggestions for name, appearance, and personality
- Six special moves (or seven for the playbooks that start with one move taken)



- A list of possible advances
- Three questions to establish starting bond
- A 75-word guide to playing the character

Don't be shy about throwing out some moves, keeping others, and calling the playbook something entirely new. As long as you acknowledge the original source, create and share as many comrades as you want.

### TEAR IT DOWN

Beyond that, there is no limit. *Comrades* is about giving ourselves permission to set pragmatism aside and imagine a better world. It is about refusing the status quo and fighting for something better.

Do it with the game.

Do it with the real world, too.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A final thanks to the late Greg Stafford, creator of *Pendragon*, who showed us that games might ask players to be moral.

## FURTHER READING

Aside from the books and movies mentioned in the introduction, the books that had the greatest influence on this game were Ian Davidson's *The French Revolution*, Victor Sebestyen's *Lenin*, Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time*, Stephen Kotkin's *Stalin*, and Rick Perlstein's *Before the Storm* and *Nixonland*.

Other books that may be of interest:

*Wobblies of the World: A Global History of the IWW*

Ronald Fraser's *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*

Frank Fernández's *Cuban Anarchism: The History of a Movement*

Rudolf Rocker's *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*

Gordon Carr's *The Angry Brigade*

From a gaming standpoint, I cannot recommend these books strongly enough:

D. Vincent Baker & Meguey Baker's *Apocalypse World*

Avery Alder's *Monsterhearts*

Jason Morningstar's *Night Witches*

Sage LaTorra & Adam Koebel's *Dungeon World*

Ian Williams' *Action Movie World*

Nathan D. Paoletta's *World Wide Wrestling*

Shawn Tomkin's *Ironsworn*

Buy them. Read them. Play them. Tell your friends to do the same.





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# COMRADES

## A REVOLUTIONARY RPG

*Comrades* is a tabletop roleplaying game about life in the revolutionary underground. Based on the *Apocalypse World* engine, it pits players against a corrupt government—real or imaginary, historical or present day—and asks them to free the people from their chains.

Start a riot. Stage a coup. Punch a fascist in the face. Fight fair or fight dirty—so long as you never stop fighting for what you know is right.

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- Countless examples of play

## YOUR REVOLUTION STARTS TODAY