Five Ways to Overthrow a Kingdom in Fictional Settings - Part 1

Let's say you have a realm, empire, dynasty, or kingdom - some kind of large-ish conglomerated polity in your story world or rpg setting.

And let's say you want to mix things up a bit and introduce change. Maybe you want to create tumult, because civil unrest yields much fertile ground for drama and adventure. Maybe you want plot threads to yank at significant characters and their changing fortunes, and so need fortunes to, like, change in a radical manner. Maybe you just want to ~~irk~~ challenge established characters and introduce obstacles into their governance or power base, or take things to their extreme conclusion and turn the powers that be on their heads.

How do we go about doing this?

There are many ways to skin those cats, but in this five-part series I'll focus on just one subset. I'm calling it "how to overthrow a kingdom," but you might just as well call it, "how to introduce compelling, believable change in how a governance system works." So let's take to the barricades (like in Lés Miserables) and leap in, shall we?

Armed Conflict

Or, in the words from the movie *Dragonheart* (1996),

Young Einon: *The peasants are revolting.*
Brok: *They've always been revolting, Prince. But now they're rebelling.*

Armed conflict is a very common approach to creating drama in fiction and games, and for that reason I mention it here as one of the ways to overthrow a kingdom. War, rebellion, and armed civil unrest are certainly some of the most frequently used angles in fictional worlds. However, unless it is extremely well motivated and set up, I wouldn't recommend using this as the default mode of forcing change in high places (although it so often is).

War, revolution, people rising up against the established order: it's an obvious way of making change happen, and if I may venture the observation, perhaps more "obvious" to an American audience than to many others. Our country was born from revolutionary warfare, and even today the rhetoric of uprising has a place in our political discourse. Considering our history through the 20th century and into the 21st, it could be argued that that "war as resolution or way to effect change" is central to our national psyche.[1]

That doesn't mean, though, that armed conflict is always the best tool to use to force change and create dramatic tension in game or story. In fact, I think it is both an obvious - and often contrived - ploy, and from a narrative perspective, perhaps too easy to use strife in this manner.

Too often we see these trite things play out: Need regime change? Have an armed incursion. Need raiders in the countryside? Have a civil war. Need the prince and heir running for his life? Have a palace coup.

Used properly, these tactics can be effective and have their place, but because they are popular and *obvious*, writers and game designers often look no further than this simplistic framework: "Need to overthrow a dynasty? Have a revolt." The formula is straightforward, but it overlooks the single biggest argument against it: *it doesn't happen all that often that change at the top is actually **caused** by armed revolt.*

It is true that when revolt or war *does* effect change, the event is dramatic and leaves a lasting impact on our imaginations and collective memories. From rebelling lords forcing King John to sign the Magna Carta, to East Germany being reshaped by the Soviet Union, to Moammar Kaddafi being driven from dictatorship by popular rebellion bolstered by outside interests - when one group takes to arms and forces their will upon the ruling power, it is always memorable.

Certainly wars stand out in our minds for that reason: think of the myriad small principalities and kinglets having at each other hither and yon during the Dark and Middle Ages, a common template for role-playing game design and related fantasy fiction. But simply because something is memorable does not mean it is the prevailing dynamic. Even in the contentious Middle Ages, many kingdoms fell or changed due to other, non-war-related reasons. As polities and governance systems became more complex, neighbor bashing neighbor had a lot less to do with change than other system-impacting events did.

Historically and across many cultures, these other kinds of factors more frequently cause lasting governance change and drive dynasties from power. "Want to overthrow a kingdom? Have a war" may not be the most effective way to achieve the goal, or even the most realistic. Its one advantage is that this is a tactic a disgruntled population (or fraction thereof) can take into their own hands and put into effect (and so, I would argue, particularly noteworthy and memorable to democratic imaginations). Other causes of regime change are very often out of the control of individuals - but can be all the more powerful for that reason.

Still, if you must resort to warfare or armed rebellion to overthrow a kingdom, here are three things to keep in mind when you weave this into your story or game setting:

1. Motivation

Conflict does not happen out of the blue. The clash has to be strongly motivated. What is driving individuals to risk their own deaths, or those of their loved ones? What personal or institutional forces are driving the push to war? Someone has made the decision to wage war, and others have gone along with that decision. Why?

2. Resources

Armed conflict takes money and supplies: weapons, armor, often transportation, and always food. Whether you write about insurgents supported by friendly locals or an invading Mongol horde, ask yourself where they are going to get their supplies from. The availability of such things have a direct impact on the success of the conflict, and quite often on civilians in the area as well. How does this impact your story and your world?

3. Capabilities

Armed conflict plays out on a landscape - literally, a geographical terrain - and on the "landscape" of what is technologically (or magically) possible. If we decide to conquer those people across the sea, how are we going to deal with crossing the ocean? We have both geography (ocean) and technology (ships) to contend with there, but it needs to be considered and addressed in some manner in the narrative. If magic is commonplace in a kingdom under attack, how do they incorporate it into their defenses of cities and armies? What are the constraints and the opportunities afforded by the landscapes in which the conflict will unfold? All meanings of 'landscape' intended here.

Those are perhaps the very basic starting points for creating a believable armed conflict that will be deeply enough rooted in the narrative or game setting to have legs and be sustainable for dramatic purposes. (If you have thoughts on other strategic elements needed to motivate armed conflict in fiction, please share your thoughts in the comments below!) That said, I would encourage writers and game designers to think of other - possibly more likely - ways to force change in a realm.

To that end, the next post in this series looks at one of the most pervasive, potentially earth-shaking, and yet little-used devices for toppling kingdoms: the economy.

Part Two of "Five Ways to Overthrow a Kingdom" will appear around December 19. You can get the RSS feed in your newsreader by clicking the button in the page title banner, or receive posts directly in your email by subscribing (see left side-bar for the form).

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1. Not to say we don't have a pacifist mindset in this country as well; my point is simply that a nation that does not have the capacity or *willingness* to go to war, does not go to war. The fact that we wage war and incursions (and relatively readily, at that) speaks as much to our history and historical mindset, from Revolution through 'rugged individualism' and more, as it does to contemporary military or political necessities.

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