Man of Action

Reza Khan's attitudes and motivations emerge above all from his actions. He came to power not just to be shah or to preside, as the Qajars had done—he disdained their ineffectual style of rule. The Pahlavi monarchy was an odd kind of monarchy, with no real roots in tradition. It was established only after Reza Khan had failed to set up a republic. To him, being shah was a means to an end, not an end in itself. And his underlying purpose was to control the country, to make the country strong, to develop it so that it could be truly independent, to modernize it so that it could deal with the great powers on an equal basis, to have a strong army to resist foreign interventions, and to impose order internally so that, as in other modern countries, the state enjoyed sole control. These aims, and the autocratic methods used to realize them, reflected his military background and the Russian influence he had lived with in the Cossack Brigade. Initially he had to compromise with the Majles, but time would show that he was no friend to free political expression. In addition, he had a model, Kemal Atatürk, who after a successful military career had established himself as the supreme authority in Turkey on secular, nationalist principles, backed by a strong army. With great determination, Atatürk had set about a plan for state-directed industrialization and economic development. Much has been made of Reza Shah's connections with fascism, but this was the age of dictators, whether fascist, communist, or otherwise. Reza Shah had little need to look further afield than Turkey—not in the 1920s, at least.

In 1926 Iran was still a country of peasant villages, tribes, and small towns (in that order), with little industry and an overall population of only twelve million people, the overwhelming majority of whom were illiterate. Patterns of trade and the economic life in the bazaars had adapted to the wider world economy; in Tehran and other major cities, there were some of the superficial trappings of modernity—streetlights, motor vehicles, and paving. But in the great expanses beyond, little had changed since the time of Nader Shah.

Among the transformations imposed by Reza Shah, the first and most central was the expansion of the army. The army was the shah's highest priority and greatest interest, and most of the other developments he imposed can

be explained in terms of the support they gave to the goal of making the army strong, efficient, and modern. The plan for an army of five divisions, with ten thousand men per division, was announced in January 1922, but problems with conscription, finance, and equipment persisted, and the force was still twenty percent understrength in 1926. Despite approval of the conscription law in June 1925, there was great opposition to its implementation, especially among tribal groups. The measure was not properly applied until 1930, and not imposed properly on the tribes until the mid-1930s or later. But by the late 1930s the army stood at more than one hundred thousand men, with reserves theoretically taking potential strength up to four hundred thousand.[2]

Despite these figures, the efficiency of the forces (outside Tehran, where the standard of the central division was rather higher) was not impressive. For local actions against the tribes, provincial commanders still recruited tribal contingents on an ad hoc basis, as had been done for centuries. Morale of the ordinary conscripts was low. They were not well paid—most of the large sums spent on the army went to buy equipment, including tanks (from the Skoda works in Czechoslovakia), artillery (from Sweden), and aircraft (an air force of 154 airplanes by 1936), as well as rifles and other material. Forty percent of government expenditure went to the army, even in the 1920s. Later it received almost all of the growing income from oil, though the overall proportion of state revenue spent on defense fell as the size of the total budget rose.[3] From 1922 to 1927, state finances were organized by another American, Arthur Millspaugh (after negotiations in which the Iranians had tried to get Schuster to return). But although their relationship was initially good, and the American had public approval to a degree no Briton or other foreigner could have expected, the shah eventually grew resentful at the restrictions Millspaugh placed on his military spending. They argued, and Reza Pahlavi declared: "There can't be two shahs in this country."[4] Millspaugh's position became impossible, and he resigned in 1927.

A second major effort by the new regime was in the improvement of transport infrastructure. In 1927 there were an estimated thirty-one hundred miles of roads fit for motor transport, nearly a third of which had been built by foreign troops during the First World War; by 1938 there were some fifteen thousand miles of roads. Whereas in 1925 Iran had only about

one hundred fifty miles of railways, by 1938 there were a little more than one thousand. But by that time, the less expensive highway transport was tending to supplant rail.

Reza Shah invested in industry a similar amount to that invested in railways. This was especially true of industries aimed at substituting domestic production for imports—textiles, tobacco, sugar, and other food and drink products. Over half of the investment came from private capital.[5] It was not a huge transformation by comparison with what was being achieved in Turkey—let alone Stalin's Russia. But it was impressive, nonetheless, especially given the low base point from which Reza Shah had started, and the failures of the past.

More impressive, and in the long run probably more important, was the expansion of education. Total school attendance went from 55,131 in 1922 to 457,236 in 1938. In 1924 there were 3,300 pupils in secondary schools; by 1940 the number had risen to 28,200. The school system was far from universal, and it neglected almost all the rural population (though there was a small but successful initiative for schools in tribal areas). The system has been criticized for being overly narrow and mechanical, teaching through rote learning and lacking in intellectual stimulation. But this reflected its main purpose: to educate efficient and unimaginative army officers and bureaucrats. Reza Shah did not want to educate a new generation of free thinkers who would oppose his rule and encourage others to do so. But as elsewhere, education proved a slippery thing, and many educated in this way nonetheless went on to dispute Reza Shah's supremacy in just the way he had sought to avoid. Through the 1930s, a small but significant elite were sent on government-funded scholarships to study at universities abroad (especially in France), and in 1935 the foundation was laid for a university in Tehran. In 1940 there were 411 graduates, and in 1941 the university awarded its first doctorates.[6]

From the point at which he became shah, Reza inexorably strengthened his own position and the autocratic nature of his regime. Although he came to power with the agreement of the Majles, opponents like Mohammad Mossadeq (a future prime minister) and Seyyed Hasan Modarres (the leading representative of the ulema in the Majles) had predicted that he would

erode the liberal elements of the constitution. Mossadeq held firm to his position and was later imprisoned. But after Reza Shah's coronation, Modarres and others attempted to make a compromise with him that would leave some space for the Majles, and for constitutional government. Constitutionalists took office as ministers, including, later, Hasan Taqizadeh, who had been prominent in 1906–1911. But few of them had happy careers in office. A series of ministers were sacked, imprisoned, or banished, sometimes for no clear reason other than the shah's suspicions—or his need to assert his personal authority. Modarres himself did not accept office, but his compromise failed, he was arrested in 1928, sent in custody to Khorasan, and was murdered there at prayer in 1938. Loyal ministers such as Teymurtash, Firuz, and Davar were arrested and murdered in prison or induced to commit suicide. Taqizadeh was fortunate to be sent overseas in semi-banishment instead.

Writers and poets also suffered, as censorship was tightened and freedom of expression curtailed, strangling the burst of literary output that had emerged in the early decades of the century.

Sadeq Hedayat was one of the most distinguished writers of the twentieth century in Iran. Born in 1903 in Tehran, he studied in France in the 1920s. As a young man, he became an enthusiast for a romantic Iranian nationalism that laid much of the blame for Iran's problems on the Arab conquest of the seventh century. His short stories and novellas—*Talab-e Amorzesh* (*Seeking Absolution*), *Sag-e Velgard* (*Stray Dog*), and his best-known, *Buf-e Kur* (*The Blind Owl*)—combined the every day, the fantastic, and the satirical. Hedayat's work rejected religion, superstition, and Arabic influence in Iranian life (sometimes in unpleasantly vivid terms) but in an innovative, modernist style that through its relentlessly honest observation of everyday life reaches the highest standards of world literature. He translated Kafka, Chekhov, and Sartre into Persian and was also an enthusiast for the poetry of Omar Khayyam. Hedayat committed suicide in Paris in 1951; his works were banned in their entirety by the Ahmadinejad government in 2006.[7]

Another literary figure to die in 1951 was Mohammad Taqi Bahar, himself a poet but also the great critic of Persian poetry. Putting forward a theoretical structure for the literary history of Persia, Bahar identified in particular a revival (*bazgasht*) in the latter part of the eighteenth century, in

which poets deliberately rejected the Safavid style in favor of a return to the style of the tenth and eleventh centuries. In Bahar's own lifetime another new wave of poetic style came in, linked like the innovative prose of Hedayat to the change in attitudes in the period of the Constitutional Revolution. The first great exemplar of this change was Nima Yushij, who lived from 1895 to 1959. Nima wrote in a new way, breaking many of the rules of classical Persian poetic form. He used new vocabulary and new images drawn from direct observation of nature. For many years his freer style of poetry was resisted by the more tradition minded. But later it found acceptance, becoming the model for younger poets—notably Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–1967).[8]

Reza Shah visited Atatürk in Turkey in 1934, and the visit symbolized the parallels between the two regimes. The nationalist, modernizing, secularizing, Westernizing features shared by both were obvious. Reza Shah's education policy supported the founding of girls' schools, and he banned the veil. He wanted Iran and the Iranians to look Western and modern—men, too, had to wear Western dress, and at one point he decreed that all should wear Western headgear, with the result that the streets were suddenly awash with fedoras and bowler hats.[9] As in Turkey, the shah set up a language reform to remove words not of Persian origin, and to replace them with Persian words. Then, in order to differentiate his regime from the decadent style and national humiliations of the Qajar period, in 1935 he ordered that foreign governments should drop the name "Persia" in official communications and use instead the name "Iran"—the ancient name that had always been used by Iranians themselves. In 1927/1928 he ended the capitulations, according to which, since the treaty of Turkmanchai, foreigners had enjoyed extraterritorial privilege in Iran, being free from the jurisdiction of the Iranian authorities.

But Reza Shah did not pursue the Westernizing agenda as far as Atatürk. For example, despite the language reform, there was no change of alphabet to the Roman script, as was done in Turkey. And although he achieved the removal of some of the worst abuses of foreign interference in Iran, he eventually had to accept the continuation of British exploitation of oil in the south—a deal that brought a poor return (sixteen percent of profits) in proportion to the real value of such an important national resource. In 1928, the

court minister Teymurtash—the shah's closest adviser at the time—wrote to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, announcing that the terms of the original D'Arcy oil concession had to be renegotiated. The negotiations swung back and forth over the next few years, and in 1932 the shah intervened, unilaterally canceling the concession. The British sent additional ships to the Persian Gulf, and took the case to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Shortly afterward the shah, frustrated by the failure of the negotiations, sacked Teymurtash, imprisoned him, and in October 1933 had him murdered there. Eventually a deal with Britain was patched up, only modestly increasing the Iranian government's share of the profits to twenty percent. The duration of the concession was extended to 1993.[10]

Atatürk's Turkey was not subject to any such foreign exploitation. And whereas Atatürk retained his personal popularity to the end, by the end of the 1930s Reza Shah had alienated almost all of the support he had been given when he took power. The ulema had seen much of what they had most feared in the Constitutional Revolution—especially in education and the law—enacted without their being able to prevent it. By the end of the 1930s, their prestigious and lucrative role as judges and notaries had been reformed away. They hated the rulings on Western dress and the veil, and a protest against these developments in 1935 had led to a massacre in the shrine precincts of the Emam Reza at Mashhad: several hundred people were machine-gunned by the shah's troops, further deepening the regime's unpopularity.[11] The bazaar merchants disliked the state monopolies on various items that the shah had brought in to boost state revenue. Liberals and intellectuals were alienated by the repression, censorship, and the closure of newspapers, let alone the murders in prison of popular politicians. There was even dissent within the army. So when a new war brought a new crisis, Reza Shah had few friends left.[12]

New Masks, Same Old Ugly Sisters

It is usually said that the British and the Russians took over in Iran in 1941 because Reza Shah had shown himself to be pro-German and pro-Nazi,

and the Allies feared that if they did not move in, then the Germans would. But the situation was more complex than that. At the time of the Anglo-Soviet intervention of 1941, no German armed forces were threatening Iran directly. The German push to take Baku and the Caucasus oil fields only came later, in the summer of 1942. The shah himself, despite having encouraged the Germans earlier to a certain extent, had been resisting German influence within the country.

But when Britain and the Soviet Union were thrown into alliance in 1941 by Hitler's invasion of Russia (in June), Britain's position in the Middle East was looking uncertain. The crucial interests for Britain were the Suez Canal and the Iranian oil fields. Having defeated an Italian effort to break into Egypt from Libya in 1940, British forces in North Africa were put on the defensive by the arrival of Rommel and the German Afrika Korps. In the spring of 1941 they had to retreat back toward Alexandria, leaving a garrison to be surrounded in Tobruk. At about the same time, in April, there was an anti-British revolt in Iraq, encouraged by the Germans and assisted by Luftwaffe aircraft. This necessitated an intervention by British troops, who completed their occupation of the country by the end of May. In June, rattled by these developments, Britain sent British and Free French troops into Lebanon and Syria to unseat the Nazi-aligned Vichy French governments there.

Seen in that context, the British and Soviet takeover of Iran in August 1941 looks more like part of a rounding-out of strategic policy in the region, at a particularly dangerous and uncertain moment for the Allies—part of the inexorable totalizing logic of the war itself. But Iran did have major significance in another aspect. Hitler's successes—from Norway to Denmark to Poland to France to Yugoslavia to Greece, in 1940 and the early part of 1941—meant that the avenues for Britain and the Soviet Union to support each other were restricted to the hazardous Arctic route to Murmansk in the north, or some southern alternative. And once Hitler's *Barbarossa* offensive had swept all before it in Byelorussia and the Ukraine, the Soviets urgently needed supplies from the West to help equip the new armies to replace the Soviet troops that had been herded off into German camps or

slave-labor factories as prisoners of war. The route from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian, arduous and long though it was, appeared to be an answer. By the end of the war, more than five million tons had been taken to Russia through Iran, by both road and rail—though this was a relatively small part of the overall effort.

Reza Shah had flirted with the Nazi regime in the 1930s, and German diplomats had encouraged what they saw as the shah's Aryanization of the language. Through the 1930s more German technicians and engineers arrived in Iran—the shah favored them as an alternative to the British, who were disliked and suspected by many Iranians. But the shah was as hostile to possible German meddling in Iran as he was to foreign meddling of any other kind. He also had a strong dislike for any nascent political movements—fascist *or* communist—that might oppose his government. A small group of apparently pro-fascist students were arrested in 1937, and their leader was later murdered in prison. In 1940 the police shot a prominent Zoroastrian in the street because his son had made pro-Nazi broadcasts in Germany. A group of Marxists were also arrested in 1937; most of them were given harsh prison sentences, and later went on to form the pro-Communist Tudeh party.[13] These developments reflected the bitter polarization of politics between fascism and communism in Europe at the time. Some of these radicals were from that small elite who had been educated at European universities at the government's expense. An upsurge of ugly anti-Semitic journalism contributed to a period of increased anxiety for Iranian Jews in the 1930s—and may have contributed to an increase in Jewish emigration to Palestine—but the notion of a rising tide of pro-Nazi and pro-German feeling among people and government before August 1941 has sometimes been overstated. The historian Ervand Abrahamian has suggested that the Allied intervention may have been not so much to remove a pro-Nazi shah as to forestall a pro-German coup *against* the shah, as had happened in Iraq.[14]

The Allied demand that Iran should expel German nationals was nonetheless the immediate *casus belli*. After the demand was refused, the Allied invasion of Iran in August 1941 met only token opposition from the army on which Reza Shah had spent so much attention and money (this is

where a comparison with Nader Shah finally breaks down), and after three days he ordered his troops to cease further resistance. British and Soviet forces met in central Iran and entered Tehran on September 17, 1941.

The shah abdicated in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza, and the Allies maintained their control over the country until after the end of the war in 1945. It seems that Reza Shah's relationship with his son had been something like that between a senior officer and a subordinate. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was educated in Switzerland in the 1930s, which did not bring him any closer to his parents or to the people he was going to rule. Mohammad Reza had a sharp mind but was socially shy and diffident—a legacy from his education and his relationship with his harsh father.

The Allies were the immediate cause of Reza Shah's abdication, but his removal was welcomed by most Iranians, and some have suggested that his unpopularity would have made it impossible for the Allies to rule with him still on the throne—even if he had accepted that arrangement.[15] Reza went into exile in South Africa (where he died in July 1944).

In December 1941 the United States joined the Allies against Germany and Japan, and in 1942 American troops joined the British and Russian forces occupying Iran. At the end of 1943 Tehran hosted the first great conference of the leaders of the three Allied powers. Among the arrangements that Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt agreed upon for the conduct of the war—including opening a second front in western Europe in 1944—was the commitment to withdraw from Iran within six months of the war's end.

Ripples from the terrible events of the Holocaust also reached the country. In 1942 a group of orphaned children—refugees from the Jewish ghettoes and *shtetls* of Poland who had escaped into Russia only to be interned in Siberia and then sent by train southward—arrived in Iran on the Caspian coast, after many bitter hardships. They were brought to Tehran, where they were given help by the Iranian Jewish community and by Zionist organizations. Having recovered from the poor condition in which they arrived, 848 children eventually made their way to Palestine.[16]

At the same time, a descendant of the Qajar royal family—Abdol-Hosein Sardari Qajar, who has been called the Iranian Schindler—was looking after