

THE SOVIET UNION AND REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

Aryeh Y. Yodfat

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THE SOVIET UNION

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REVOLUTIONARY

IRAN

ARYEH Y. YODFAT

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PREFACE

This book reviews and analyses relations between the Soviet Union and Iran, from the time of the overthrow of the Shah's regime and the establishment of the Islamic Republic up to mid 1983. It begins with a brief survey of earlier periods in Russian-Persian relations, with a focus on the developments which served as a background to the current events.

While much has been written about Iran during the Shah's regime, very little has been published about the period since 1979, and almost nothing about the USSR and Iran — what relations were actually like between them and how these relations were viewed by either side. Here the subject is dealt with extensively in an attempt to present both facets, together with views and a commentary.

Extensive background material is given on both internal Iranian developments and wider Middle Eastern politics. Emphasis has been placed on matters which attracted the Soviets' attention, and to which they attached considerable importance. These influenced their policy and views in regard to Iran. Both Iran's 'neither East nor West' policy, and the Soviet attempts to attract Iran and influence it, are examined in depth.

The term 'Russia' is used when dealing with the period of Russia's old regime. The expression 'Soviet Russia' represents the country during the first years of the Soviet regime; and the terms 'Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR), 'the Soviet Union' or 'the Soviets' refer to the same country after the adoption of the Soviet constitution in 1924. The term 'Iran' became current in Western usage after 1927. In this book the term 'Persia' is generally used until the late 1920s and from that time onwards the country has been referred to as 'Iran'.

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Aryeh Y. Yodfat

ABBREVIATIONS

ADP	Azerbaijani Democratic Party
AFP	Agence France Presse, Paris
AIOC	Anglo-Iranian Oil Company
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency, USA
Cong.	Congress
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DPK	Democratic Party of Kordestan, Iran
	Democratic Party of Kurdistan, Iraq
FBIS	Foreign Broadcast Information Service, USA
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GCC	Gulf Co-operation Council
GDR	German Democratic Republic
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party
IRNA	Islamic Republic News Agency (formerly PARS)
IRP	Islamic Republican Party, Iran
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, Committee for State Security, USSR
ME	Middle East
NIOC	National Iranian Oil Company
NVOI	National Voice of Iran
NY	New York
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PDRY	People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen)
PRC	People's Republic of China
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Iraq
Sess.	Session
Supp.	Supplement
TASS	Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
US, USA	United States, United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Russia's Moving Frontier

Russian history has been characterized by constant expansion – from the principality of Moscow to an empire. The movement was in all directions: east and west, north and south. The frontier was a moving one similar to that of pioneering America, a frontier of the hunter, fisherman, trader, miner, bandit, freebooter, military conqueror and colonizer.

The conquest of Transcaucasia by Russian forces began in the late eighteenth century. Its western part, the Black Sea coast, and its hinterland were at that time in the sphere of influence of the Ottoman Empire. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Eastern Georgia (Gruzia) in the east were under Persian control. The rivalry between Persians and Ottomans was much to Russia's advantage and facilitated its conquests. Generally, the Russians had to fight only one of these powers at a time; only from 1806-12 did they fight Persia and Turkey simultaneously. Tbilisi, the capital of Gruzia, was captured by the Russians in 1801, Baku in 1806, Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, in 1828. The Russian frontier advanced to the river Araxes, where it has remained. The occupation of the Caucasus was accomplished only in 1864.

The conquest of Central Asia by Russia was similar to the colonial history of West European powers in Africa. In both cases trade came before the flag and traders before soldiers. Deserts played the same role for the Russians as the sea for the West Europeans in separating metropolis from colony. The remoteness and the unfamiliar climate made Central Asia a place more for exploitation than for colonization. The Russians (adopting a strategy similar to that of the British in India) made the weaker states of Kokand and Khorezm a part of their empire. The more productive areas, such as the Fergana Valley and Samarkand, were put directly under Russian control with the intention of growing cotton. Bukhara and Khiva were left as native states, nominally independent, with the freedom to control their own affairs.¹

The advances in Central Asia brought the Russians close to the sphere of British interests. The Russian occupation in 1844 of Merv, from which a road was open to Herat and further south to India, led to British

reactions described at the time as 'mervousness'. A period of Anglo-Russian tension followed, and negotiations concerning Afghanistan: the British attempted to define the northern frontier of Afghanistan as the southern limit of the Russian sphere of influence. Afghanistan was declared to be a neutral buffer state, separating the Russian and British areas.²

In Persia, the Russian presence and influence steadily increased. The Treaty of Turkmenchai in 1828 ceded the provinces of Erevan and Nakhichevan to Russia, imposed a heavy indemnity on Persia, and forced it to grant commercial privileges and extraterritorial rights to Russian subjects. This was the beginning of the Russian economic and political penetration of Persia, and it was particularly predominant in Russian-controlled territory in the north.

Towards the Persian Gulf

To consolidate their gains in Central Asia, the Russians built a number of railways. The first was officially opened in 1888, commencing at the Caspian Sea eastward, from Krasnovodsk, via Ashkhabad to Merv, Samarkand and Tashkent, continuing to Kokand and Andizhan. Plans were made to continue Russian railroads through Persia to the Persian Gulf, facilitating Russian access to the Indian Ocean. However, the plans never got beyond the discussion stage. At a Russian government meeting on the subject, on 4 February 1890, the head of the Asian Department in the Foreign Ministry claimed that a railroad from the Russian border through Persia to the Gulf would necessitate complete security and undisturbed movement. The situation in Persia did not meet this requirement, and the further one went from the Russian frontier, the harder it would be to achieve this. In the Persian Gulf, he said, 'we do not have any point of support, while the British have their agents and navy there'. He further stated that there was a need to establish a Russian military naval station in the Gulf, strong enough not to fear British rivalry, and able to command the respect of the littoral population.³ However, no decision was taken.

The Persian Gulf at that time was still quite distant from the Russian border and Russian control. However, there was a constant Russian advance in that direction. Northern Persia was almost completely under Russian control and the Caspian Sea became a 'Russian lake'. The Trans-Caspian railway enabled the Russians to transfer troops close to the Persian border and Russian steamers were available in the Caspian Sea

for the transfer of troops to northern Persia. The Russian and British forces were at some distance from each other, and Britain proposed to maintain the situation by declaring Persia a buffer state – like Afghanistan – between the Russian and British spheres of influence. Such proposals were viewed with disfavour in Russia since they would mean an end to Russian advances southwards.

Tsar Nicholai II said in 1897 that he did not believe in buffer states 'unless they were strong and independent, and Persia . . . was too weak to play the role of such a state with advantage'. As regards British-Russian relations, he remarked to a British diplomat that they 'would be far more friendly and satisfactory were there no Persia between us'.⁴ This statement could have meant a proposal to divide Persia between Britain and Russia, but generally the Tsar and most of his advisers rejected such proposals since they were interested in controlling *all* of Persia.

On 25 November 1899 the Ottoman Porte granted Germany the right to construct what came to be known as the Baghdad railway, from Konia to Baghdad.⁵ This plan gave rise to much concern in Russia. It was believed that the railway would extend through southern Persia to Baluchistan, thus impeding Russian access to the Persian Gulf.⁶ The Russian press published opinions stating that, since the Germans were building a railway to the Persian Gulf from the west, Russia should immediately commence construction of a road to the Gulf from the north. Plans existed to construct a Russian railway which would reach Bandar Abbas in the Strait of Hormuz, Bushire (further north, opposite Kuwait), or Chahbahar (eastwards, in the Arabian Sea). Russian plans included either having a port there or the use of existing naval facilities, particularly in Bandar Abbas.

In a memorandum to the Tsar in January 1900 the Foreign Minister, Count M.N. Muravyov, stated that the Russian government had decided to forgo these plans, for both political and financial reasons. First, it would have opened northern Persia to British commerce, whereas at present the Persians were purchasing mostly Russian goods. Secondly, it might also have brought about the construction of a British railway from southern to northern Persia.

On the question of Russian occupation of a port in the Persian Gulf, Foreign Minister Muravyov said he saw no reason to occupy ports

whose defence could not be fully guaranteed. In addition, the building of strategic positions and coaling stations at great distances from the operational base disperses the country's forces and is so costly

that, in most cases, the strategic advantages are outweighed by the material sacrifices.

A declaration that Russia would not tolerate any violation of Persia's territorial integrity, Muravyov stated, would 'to some extent moderate England's expansionist designs'. A Russian promise 'to come to the defence of Persia's territorial rights at any moment' had some disadvantages, however. It would 'place upon us the fairly heavy necessity of maintaining troops in perpetual war readiness on our borders . . . deprive us of freedom of action in the north of Persia, where we are at present the only and complete masters'.

The Tsar was advised to oppose an agreement with Britain to divide Persia into Russian and British spheres of influence. Such a division would grant Russia the north and Britain the south, but:

the north of Persia is in Russian hands anyway, and is completely inaccessible to foreigners; by officially acknowledging England's right to act unilaterally in the south . . . we thereby . . . voluntarily block any further movement by us beyond the limits of Persia's northern provinces.⁷

Commenting on the above, Naval Minister P. Tyrtov said he fully agreed 'about the usefulness of our acquiring coaling stations or any bases outside the Empire's borders which do not justify the expenses of strengthening and maintaining a fleet there, without which they would become easy prey for the enemy'. He did not mention the Persian Gulf by name, but that was his intention. His preferences lay in the Far East.

For War Minister General A. Kuropatkin the Bosphorus was more important. He stated his opinion that its occupation was 'the most important task for Russia. Until this came about, all the other tasks had relatively small significance.' He agreed in general to what was said about Persia, but insisted that sooner or later Russia would have to reach an agreement with England on this question. He was bound to add that as long as a railway connecting European Russia with Central Asia was not completed, the military would refuse to support negotiations with England regarding Persia.

Finance Minister S. Witte said that an implementation of the Muravyov proposals would cost a great deal. Strengthening Russian military forces in Turkestan and the Transcaucasus required sums of money which the army and the country needed elsewhere. It would force Britain to increase its armaments, putting Russia in a financially inconvenient

position, competing with a much richer England, without bringing about a commensurate increase in power. As regards Persia, the Finance Minister was considering building highways and assisting the development of Russian enterprises.⁸

All the above recommendations were made to the Tsar, who was, however, unable to decide either way and left most of the options open. This meant, in fact, that nothing was done. Efforts were concentrated in other directions. A Trans-Persian railway or any other extensive investments in that country would divert resources from the expansion and further development of the Trans-Siberian railway and other Far Eastern projects. Persia and the Persian Gulf were not at the top of the list of St Petersburg's priorities. But there were also some less influential and lower ranking officials who allotted Persia and the Gulf a much higher priority.

In February 1900, at the same time as the Naval Minister was speaking about the 'uselessness' of Russia's acquiring distant coaling stations or bases, a small Russian gunboat anchored off Bandar Abbas. Its commander had ordered coal from Bombay; when it arrived, he took part of it, intending to leave the remainder. This would require Russian guards to watch over it, but the local governor refused permission. 'Thus the attempt failed to create a nucleus store from which a coaling station might develop.'⁹ In the following years Russian warships toured the Gulf but they made no attempt to acquire a foothold there.¹⁰ This incident was probably an exception, perhaps an attempt to test local, and perhaps even more, British, reactions.

British naval supremacy in fact made the Gulf a British preserve and blocked Russian attempts to establish a presence there. In the House of Lords on 15 May 1903, the British Foreign Minister Lord Lansdowne gave what might be taken as a warning to Russia and Germany, a sort of 'Monroe Doctrine' for the Gulf:

We should regard the establishment of a naval base, or of a fortified port, in the Persian Gulf by any other power as a grave menace to British interests, and we should certainly resist it with all the means at our disposal.¹¹

The Division of Persia into Russian and British Spheres of Influence

British influence predominated in the Persian Gulf but in Persia itself the situation was different. Britain, even if it could bring naval forces

to the Gulf, was far away. So was British India. Russia, however, was much closer, thus increasing its power and influence inside Persia.

One of Russia's instruments in Persia were the Cossack units. Trained by Russian officers, they dealt directly with the Ministry of War in St Petersburg, and during the 1880s became the most efficient military force in Persia. Russian Cossacks were selected by the Shah in 1878 as a model for the Persian cavalry. A Persian Cossack brigade was organized in 1879,¹² soon growing to three regiments. They became 'a powerful instrument for furthering Russian influence in Persia'.¹³ According to George N. Curzon:

The only Persian troops of any value in the capital are the so-called Cossack regiments, under Russian officers, and in the event of political convulsion it is doubtful whether they would not prefer the country of their uniform to the country of their birth.¹⁴

The situation which developed, and Russian aims in regard to Persia, were summed up on 30 September (13 October) 1904 in instructions from Russia's Foreign Minister, Count V.N. Lamsdorf, to his Minister in Persia, A.N. Shteyer. Lamsdorf said:

Our principal aim, which we have pursued by various ways and means during the long years of our relations with Persia, can be defined in the following manner: to preserve the integrity and inviolability of the possessions of the Shah, without seeking for ourselves territorial acquisitions, and not permitting the hegemony of a third power. We have tried gradually to subject Persia to our dominant influence, without violating the external symbols of its independence or its internal regime. In other words, our task is to make Persia politically obedient and useful, i.e., a sufficiently powerful instrument in our hands. Economically — to keep for ourselves a wide Persian market using Russian work and capital freely therein . . .¹⁵

Russia's defeat by Japan in the war of 1905 made it reconsider relations with Britain. Domestic instability, the 1905 revolution, limited resources, increasing German influence in the Near East — all these were contributing factors.

Japan's increasing strength checked Russian advances in the Far East and the Anglo-Japanese alliance covered India, provided for joint action in its defence and made Britain less fearful of Russian advances in that direction. British control of Egypt guaranteed its domination of the

Eastern Mediterranean. Although Britain had for years tried to contain Russian advances in the Near East, Britain now began to change its mind and even saw certain advantages in the Russian presence. It might bring about a deterioration in Russia's relations with Austro-Hungary and Germany, restricting their expansion in the Balkans and eastwards.

As Britain and Russia moved closer together, the British made another attempt to define the two spheres of influence in Persia. The subject came up on 1 February 1907 at a meeting of Russian ministers. Most of the speakers, especially Foreign Minister A.P. Izvolsky, connected it with the German Baghdad railway project which was seen to threaten Russian interests. As to the British proposal, Izvolsky said:

until now that idea has not received much understanding from Russian public opinion. In leading circles the conviction prevailed that Persia must fall entirely under Russian influence and that we must aim for a free exit to the Persian Gulf, building a railway across all Persia and establishing a fortified point on that Gulf. Events of the last years have, however, made clear the infeasibility of such a plan.

The Minister of Trade and Commerce said that the Baghdad railway would harm Russian interests. A branch line to Persia would harm those interests still further, leading to the development of a transit trade from Europe to the Persian Gulf, 'bypassing Russia'. Such a branch to northern Persia would endanger exclusive Russian economic interests there. In talks with England and Germany, the Minister requested assurances that no such branch lines would be built and that the prohibition on the construction of a railway in northern Persia would be extended for an additional ten years. He also demanded that any such lines be built only with Russia's consent and in keeping with its interests.¹⁶

The Russian-British *rapprochement* reached its peak with the signing of the convention of 31 August 1907 between the two countries. Among its provisions was the division of Persia into British and Russian spheres of influence, with a neutral zone between them. The richer northern part was in the Russian sphere and Bandar Abbas was east of it, while Afghanistan was in the British sphere. The Gulf area to the west was in the neutral zone.¹⁷

The convention was criticized both in Britain and in Russia. Count Witte, the Russian Finance Minister during the period 1892-1903 and Premier until 1906, said in his memoirs that in the division of Persia, Russia received what she already possessed. 'The northern part of Persia was naturally destined, so to speak, to become a part of the Russian