

CHAPTER 7 SOCIAL STRUCTURE: BRITISH AND RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IN IRAN

The Qajar period of governance, from 1795-1925, generally coincided with a decline in the Iranian regional power as the Russians (in the North) and the British (in the South) gained influence in the region. Confronting the increasing power of foreigners within the country, and the conditions that allowed this domination to occur, became a preoccupation of all movement groups in Iran during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The last strong Safavid ruler, Nader Shah, was assassinated in 1747 during a revolt by the *Najaf* tribes who were opposed to his liberalizing policies. Upon his death—after a period of instability—Agha Mohammad and the Qajar tribe assumed control of Iranian governance.

At various times during the nineteenth century the Russians, British and French established strategic relations with the Qajars. At first the Qajars were looking for allies as a means of stopping the expansion of the Russian Empire into the Caucasus, and also for allies to fight their traditional rivals, the Ottoman Turks. First the French, and then the British, formed alliances with the Qajars and provided them with military training and modern weapons to fight the Russians. Soon the Qajars became captive to changes in the shifting alliances negotiated between the Russians, Europeans and Ottomans. For instance, in 1807 an alliance with Napoleon was abrogated once France made peace with the Russians at Tilsit. This led to a period of strategic alliance with the British. But following the defeat of Napoleon, the British and the Russians both vied for political power in Persia for the next 100 years. This period is usually referred to as the “Anglo-Russian rivalry.” (Kazemzadeh 1968).

The Anglo-Russian Rivalry

The Qajars are described—in most Iranian and Western accounts—as weak and corrupt rulers, particularly as it relates to concession agreements negotiated with the British in the late nineteenth century. During this time the Qajars were accused of literally selling the nation to foreigners (Afghani 1972). Still, even a politically astute Iranian leadership would have had difficulty preventing the growing influence of these powers in the region. While this period is often categorized as a “rivalry” between Britain and Russia, there was often cooperation between the Russians and English. At this time, both were warily watching each other in order to protect their respective regional colonial possessions, but they were inclined toward cooperation rather than war. Iran was likely spared the indignity of being formally colonized because the region functioned as a buffer between these two empires. While there were periods of conflict and provocation, the Russians and British also brokered arrangements that increased their authority in their respective spheres of influence (see discussion Anglo-Russian Treaty in chapter 9).

Economic Expansion by the West

The Russian army invaded areas of the Safavid and the Ottoman empires during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The former Soviet Republics of *Armenia*, *Tajakistan*, *Uzbekistan*, *Turkmenistan* and the *Azerbaijan* represent the areas of Russian expansion into both the Ottoman and Safavid Empires that took place at this time. The *Treaty of Turkmanchi* (1828) consolidated Russian gains in the Caucasus and established an uneasy peace between the Russians and Qajars. In this treaty the Russians limited the duty paid to Iran for imported Russian goods to 5% percent. During this same period the British, under a prior agreement with the Qajars, were supposed to have aided the Iranians during any invasion by a European power.

The British did not honor this treaty during the Russian campaign, but did extend a line of credit to the Qajar rulers to finance the reparations negotiated in the *Treaty of Turkmanch* (Kazemzadeh 1968)

British policy in Iran was geared toward protecting the colonial possession of India and developing Iranian markets. They were particularly fearful of a Russian-Iranian alliance. But most British decision-makers did not want to establish a military presence in Iran if it could be avoided. In the late nineteenth century the “scramble for Africa” resulted in four European powers creating 30 new colonies in Africa in less than forty years. This process stretched the British military to its limits and precipitated a policy debate concerning the maintenance of empire. By this time, British foreign policy was focused on the development of markets as the primary means through which the empire could be maintained. The cost of occupation and maintaining an army to control regions in Africa—particularly in areas that were inconsequential in terms of their economic importance (e.g. Somalia)—was a hotly debated topic among British politicians. Even conservative politicians were inclined toward a neo-liberal perspective that regarded the control over markets as primary to the maintenance of empire. In this respect, British foreign policy in Iran tended to focus on the establishment of commerce by pursuing economic agreements with the Qajars. Some British imperialist argued that market liberalism could revive the “moribund” civilization of the former Persian empires. For instance, George Curzon (1892) believed that Persian civilization was not “played out” because, “they are neither sunk in the somber atrophy of the Turk, nor are threatened with the ignoble doom of the Tartar” (Volume 2:633).

The British gained influence in Iran by negotiating concessionary arrangements wherein a British interest controlled the development of infrastructure and communication networks, or

gained access to Iranian raw materials. Initially, this was not a coordinated policy as powerful British financiers, the most famous being Baron Julius de Reuter, acted as free agents in Iran who pursued concessionary agreements for personal gain. Most conservative British politicians, such as Curzon (1892), viewed this free-form negotiation of concessionary agreements with distaste because it lacked central coordination.

British Expansion and Early Protest

Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia, Persia—to many these names breathe only a sense of utter remoteness or a memory of strange vicissitudes and of moribound romance. To me, I confess, they are the pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for dominion of the world. The future of Great Britain, according to this view, will be decided, not in Europe, not even upon the seas and oceans which are swept by the flag, or in the Greater Britain that has called into existence by her offspring, but in the continent whence our immigrant stock first came, and to which as conquerors their descendents have returned. (George Curzon 1892, vol.1: 3-4.)

In the autumn of 1889, George Curzon—not yet Baron Curzon of Kedleston—embarked on a six month tour of Persia, largely on horseback, as a correspondent for the *London Times*. Upon his return he spent three years writing *Persia, and the Persia Question* (1892). This work, and Curzon's own ambition, helped establish him as a leading political thinker in Britain concerning foreign policy in the East. "The Persia Question" was, for Curzon, how best to subjugate Persia—politically and economically—to British commercial interests. His work is a

meticulous survey of possible material resources available for exploitation, how these resources might be developed, and how they might be protected from the Russians. Curzon assumed that the Russians would eventually annex north Iran and regarded this as a threat to British commercial interest in India. Curzon did not object to using the British military to maintain empire, but regarded economic agreements as the means to increase British power.

Curzon lamented the fact that concession arrangements in Iran granted to powerful British citizens were undermining stability as the population began to view these arrangements negatively. The most famous of these concessions was granted to Baron Julius de Reuter which gave the development and control of all Persian infrastructure to a single man. In particular, the scheme called for Reuter to build all roads and rail service in the country. Reuter already held the primary interest in the national bank. Curzon (1892) summed up the concession by stating:

When published to the world, it was found to contain the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that has probably ever been dreamed of, much less accomplished, in history (480).

What Curzon found distasteful was that the concession arrangement was granted to Reuter, an individual whose allegiance to the empire was often questioned, rather than coordinated by the British state. From the Qajar perspective, they likely preferred investing this power to an individual rather than to either the British or Russian government. Curzon's argument, indeed his career, was built on the idea that the British government needed to coordinate between British public and private interests in the exploitation of Persian resources. The Reuter concession was abrogated for a number of reasons, among them was that men like Curzon objected to the concession on the grounds that it granted too much power to one man.

Moreover, the Russians also objected to the concession. In Tehran, a preeminent *mojtahed* issued a religious injunction (*fatwa*) calling for the dismissal of the court minister (*sadr-i a'azam*) who had help negotiate the concession (Arjomand 1988:329). Still, while Iranians did not support the concession, it was not accompanied by widespread popular protest comparable to the Tobacco movement.

While the Russians continued to have influence in the north of Iran they were not as aggressive in the expansion of their commercial interests as the British. In this regard, the Russians had not adopted the same perspective regarding economic liberalism as it relates to their philosophy of empire. The Russians were more concerned with gaining control of territory and pursued economic arrangements after territory was secured. Of course, Russian economic and political activity did have a profound affect on north Iran. For instance, Bayat (1991) has shown that there was a migration of workers from northern Iran who sought work in the Russian occupied regions of the Azerbaijan. Bayat also makes a convincing argument that the Azeris in the Russian sphere—as they developed a press and communist political parties—influenced Iranians who read these newspapers and occasionally worked in the Russian controlled region. Later, following the Russian revolution, this exchange would aid in the development of Iranian socialist and communist parties. Of course, the influence of the Russians in northern Iran was consistently countered by the British, and later the Americans.

The British, by way of contrast, if they could avoid committing resources to the costly endeavor of maintaining physical control over territory were happy to have regional interests—first the Qajars and later the Pahlavi Shahs—contend with the messy business of direct governance. As a practical matter, support from Russia or Britain became crucial for any regional group that aspired to govern.

Summary of the Iranian Relationship with the Great Powers

The rise of the West, and the ongoing rivalries between the Iranians, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire and the British Empire were structural conditions that offered both *opportunities* and *constraints* for social movement activity in Iran at the turn of the century. This domination by foreigners (*infidels*) and non-believers (*kafirs*), and what should be done to ameliorate this condition, was the dominant social issue that had to be addressed by movement leaders at roughly the turn of the century. In particular, *bazaari* dissent erupted into a nationally supported movement against a tobacco concession granted to British commercial interest. The following chapter is a discussion of the Tobacco movement and the frames that were negotiated between the *bazaar*, the Islamic elite, and secret societies (*anjomans*) formed by the Iranian intelligentsia during this movement. This movement succeeded in having the tobacco concession abrogated, and movement groups later expanded their goals to include a system of constitutional governance during the Constitutional revolution (1906-09).