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From Shah to Supreme Leader

What the Iranian Revolution Revealed

Laura Secor

Days of God: The Revolution in Iran and Its Consequences

BY JAMES BUCHAN. Simon and Schuster, 2013, 432 pp. \$27.99.

Revolutionary Iran

BY MICHAEL AXWORTHY. Oxford University Press, 2013, 528 pp. \$34.95.

There is something irresistible about the story of Iran's last shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The pampered, foreign-educated son of a dour autocrat, Mohammad Reza ascended to the Peacock Throne in 1941, at age 21. He was weak and malleable, surrounded by sycophants and schemers, beholden to foreign powers that treated him with contempt. Nearly unseated by his popular prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, in 1953, the shah retained his throne with American and clerical connivance. That crucible hardened him into something both brittle and shrewd. He fancied himself a nationalist beloved by his people, but in truth he scarcely knew them; he grew Iran's economy and its military, broke up feudal landholdings, and crushed dissent with his notorious intelligence

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service, known as SAVAK and adept in torture. "The boy," as he was known in his father's court, became a man: melancholic, grandiose, lonely, standing athwart titanic forces he could barely recognize let alone contain. No one was ever so blind-sided by the history he had made.

The story of the shah is compelling in the way of fiction: the tragic antihero friendless in his gilded palace, unable, for want of character and common experience, to see the shadow he himself has cast. But if the monarchy is the stuff of literature, the story of Iran's postrevolutionary Islamic Republic calls for sociology instead. Reading Iranian history as written by Westerners, it is impossible to miss this dramatic reversal of emphasis. Inevitably, accounts of prerevolutionary Iran foreground the shah, his court, and its foreign patrons. But the revolution forced Iranian society, with all its cleavages and complexities, its aspirations and refusals, into the light of historical explanation. For all the Western intimacy with the Pahlavi court, and for all the opacity of the Islamic Republic, Westerners see Iran more clearly now.

Two magisterial new books by British scholars of Iran make the best of this historical divide and the continuities that span it. James Buchan's *Days of God*, a survey of the Pahlavi years, with spectacular detail on the revolution itself, includes some deft portraiture and notes of literary grace. Buchan, who lived in Iran in the late 1970s, writes with an irreverence and confidence born of long familiarity, and the Iran of his history feels vibrantly present. Still, his history moves largely from the top down until 1979, when the revolution forces the old protagonists from the scene. Michael Axworthy's precise and judicious *Revolutionary Iran*

carries the country's history forward as a contest among political visions and social forces. Axworthy's Iran is less lived-in and more abstract than Buchan's, but in another sense, more fully dimensional.

To read these two books together is to understand the revolution as something other than a historical rupture. It is to sense that when looking at Iran before and after the revolution, one is turning a kaleidoscope, reconstituting a new picture from the same elements. For although the Islamic Revolution upended Iran's political arrangements, it did not replace the polity. The tensions and energies that animate Iranian society today are not new; they have simply become more visible.

SHAH OF SHAHS

Mohammad Reza, as Buchan portrays him, was a stateless creature of an international aristocracy to which he never properly belonged, perched awkwardly atop a country that never properly belonged to him. His father founded the Pahlavi dynasty from nothing, having seized power as a low-level military officer of obscure origins. An austere, provincial man, the elder Pahlavi confected a crown prince with all the European trappings and manners he imagined a crown prince should have. By the time he took power, Mohammad Reza suffered from desolation at his core, which he tried to assuage with sexual dalliances, European luxuries, and an aviation hobby that terrified his passengers. As early as 1947, he expressed frank envy to the French scholar Henry Corbin, because at least Corbin had his philosophical work and "his life was not empty." The Iranian state seemed in those days an extension of Mohammad Reza's troubled psyche; it acted on his pretenses, his prejudices, his ambitions and anxieties.

Westerners knew Mohammad Reza well. They were visitors in his court, patrons and partners who took the measure of the royal mood. They were also technicians, advisers, businesspeople, and teachers. Between 1970 and 1979, the number of Americans living in Iran, many of them working in the defense industry, increased from fewer than 8,000 to close to 50,000. Foreigners shared the tense and vivid streets of the Iranian capital, which sloped from the city's affluent north to its squalid south, mountain runoff sluicing through the city's roadside gutters and deepening in murk as it neared the desert plain. But for the most part, according to Axworthy, Americans lived in American compounds, sent their children to American schools, and shopped at American commissaries. They took proximity for intimacy and never saw coming the lurch of history that would end with their violent expulsion.

Beyond the palace gates, Iran convulsed with social upheaval that threw its inequities into sharp relief. Hundreds of thousands of rural Iranians, displaced by land reform, swelled the country's cities, many of them settling in slums and shantytowns. Between 1930 and 1979, Tehran's population leapt from around 300,000 to about five million (today it is close to 14 million), poor youth from traditional families living cheek by jowl with the cosmopolitan sons and daughters of the modern middle class and with casually entitled foreigners. The structures of old Iran—the bazaar as the center of commerce, the low houses turned in on private courtyards, the neighborhood cleric as moral arbiter—heaved beneath the pressure of the emerging megacity, the global economy, and the shah's relentless drive toward a vision of modernity that

had incubated abroad. Deep fault lines emerged in a society ill at ease with itself and aggrieved with the West.

The problems of modernity and authenticity preoccupied Iranian intellectuals. If agrarian society must fall to the machine, reasoned the writer Jalal Al-e Ahmad in his 1962 pamphlet *Westoxication*, at the very least, Iranians should own the machine. Iran's educated classes channeled Marx, Lenin, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Frantz Fanon to university campuses. Ali Shariati, perhaps the most influential Iranian intellectual of the prerevolutionary period, folded these ideas into a religious discourse that reimagined Shiism as a native revolutionary creed—one that promoted social justice in a society riven by inequality and that called for militancy in the face of oppression.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a charismatic cleric distinguished as much by his mystical cast of mind as by his ferocious opposition to the shah, was more reactionary. He first rose to prominence when he organized opposition to a 1963 law conferring on women the right to vote and to run for city councils. Not long after, he tapped into the rich vein of public indignation by speaking out ringingly against the shah's apparent capitulation to American whims. As early as 1943, he had envisioned an Islamic state governed by a learned cleric and with no legislation but the word of God. But this was hardly a revolutionary rallying point. Rather, after the revolution, Khomeini's acolytes imposed his theory of clerical rule on an otherwise liberal constitution. That compromise would prove fateful, a paradox built into the very foundation of the revolutionary state.

Buchan portrays Khomeini as a lifelong radical, an aggressively political man within a clergy that was largely quietistic.

Khomeini exuded a cold-blooded ambition that the head of SAVAK once said made his hair stand on end. In his presence, writes Buchan, one felt "as if some figure of fathomless authority had appeared and with a single glare brought modernity . . . to an end." Forceful and uncompromising, Khomeini conceded nothing to courtesy, to diplomatic niceties, or, in the end, to the softer yearnings of his own people. "Within Creation, he seemed to be but imperfectly detained, like a passenger in an airport lounge in thick weather," Buchan muses. "In the West, having done with Scholasticism long ago, we cannot understand a man who could know so much and, at the same time, so little. His mystical writings pass over our heads and his political statements . . . beneath our notice."

BETWEEN SUBJECTION AND CITIZENSHIP

Axworthy's Khomeini cuts a strikingly different figure. According to Axworthy, as the first supreme leader of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini acted with a detached impartiality, often wincing at the application of violence. Axworthy contends that Khomeini sought to end the Iran-Iraq War in 1982, after Iran regained the territory it had earlier lost, and only reluctantly acceded to the Revolutionary Guards' judgment that it would be better to invade Iraq and pursue the ouster of Saddam Hussein. Axworthy believes that judgment was sound.

These contentions are controversial in light of other scholarship on the era, and Axworthy does not cinch the case for them. But his chapter on the Iran-Iraq War is a masterful showpiece in a book that is on balance edifying and fair-minded. Axworthy reconstructs the battlefield



The emperor's new clothes: replacing portraits in the Niavaran Palace, Tehran, February 1979

through excerpted narratives of Iranian soldiers. These young men turn out to be far more recognizable than the fevered imagery of the time might have led one to believe. "We should not need to displace the fact of their bravery into categories like fanaticism and martyrdom in order to comprehend it," concludes Axworthy. These young Iranian men were not so different from the British soldiers who

fought in World War I, with "much the same patriotism and commitment to their comrades, and encouraged to volunteer by much the same wish for adventure. They were exploited in much the same way by their governments and generals, because governments and generals need naive young men and boys to fight for them."

Throughout the 1980s, the Islamic Republic forged itself in the white heat of

conflict, both foreign and domestic. The Iran-Iraq War cost hundreds of thousands of lives before it ended in stalemate in 1988. At home, the revolutionaries who had toppled the shah found themselves divided over the very fundamentals of the new regime: whether it should embrace theocracy or republicanism, socialism or mercantilism, liberty or justice. As the radical clerics around Khomeini closed ranks, opponents of the new revolutionary order faced everything from firing squads to street combat, culminating in the execution of thousands of political prisoners in 1988. The opposition that the Islamic Republic did not decimate, it intimidated into silence. Prisons that had been built by the shah filled to many times their capacity, such that cellmates had to take turns sleeping because there was not enough room to lie on the floor. Although the new regime discontinued methods of torture deemed un-Islamic, it came up with new ones. By the time of Khomeini's death, in 1989, a stable order had emerged from a level of violence unprecedented in Iranian history.

That order, despite its authoritarianism and fierce policing of the public sphere, never fully ossified. The Islamic Republic retained a surprising degree of responsiveness. This owed partly to the democratic elements in the constitution, which allowed for an elected president, parliament, and local councils, subordinate though these were to clerical councils and the far-reaching powers of the supreme leader. It owed also to the complexity and multiplicity of the instruments of state. Air had a way of filtering through the latticework of factionalism. Constituencies attached themselves to political figures and currents within the system. Revolution conferred ownership on a people,

even one as whipsawed between subjection and citizenship as Iran's.

A TENSE STABILITY

To travel in contemporary Iran is to know that it remains, as Buchan describes the late monarchy, "an uneasy country." The Islamic Republic has in many ways accelerated the very trends that pulled at the seams of the monarchy. Today's Iran is still more modern, still more urban, still more demanding of civil rights and freedoms than the Iran of the 1970s. The postrevolutionary regime has dramatically expanded access to education, partly as a consequence of sex segregation and forced veiling, which have made university life less alienating for the most traditional families, and partly, as Axworthy notes, because Iranian clerics esteem education as a universal good. The expansion of literacy, together with vast improvements in rural infrastructure and social services, has done much to promote social mobility in Iran. But Iran's expanding middle class exerts pressure on the state that nurtured it, and which has failed to make a stable space for it in an economy dependent on oil. The Islamic Republic has vacillated in its response to these and other pressures. The constitution itself sometimes seems to suggest two opposing answers to every question; passionately held contradictory ideas sustain the Iranian state in permanent tension. Tension has become a stability of sorts.

Iran's revolutionaries were young men in 1979. They matured with their Islamic Republic, and with that maturation came realignments that were all but inexplicable to anyone who presumed that ideological commitments had the constancy of character traits. During the 1990s, the most radical Islamic leftists of the previ-

ous decade remade themselves as liberal reformists, advocating free speech, civic engagement, and the rule of law. This agenda was enormously popular. In 1997, the reformists carried the country in the landslide election of President Muhammad Khatami. Once in power, the reformists relaxed censorship, encouraged the development of civic organizations, and reached out to the world by suggesting a "dialogue among civilizations." But they faced implacable opposition from the establishment's hard-line right. According to Axworthy, the hard-liners feared that Iran's hard-won independence would be swept away on a tide of Western cultural imports and bent to the will of Western diplomatic interlocutors. But this explanation passes too quickly over cruder motives, such as the self-interest of an elite fearful of the popular will and determined to protect its prerogatives.

Hard-liners used their dominant positions in the clerical councils, the judiciary, and the intelligence apparatus to veto reformist legislation, gag reformist newspapers, and disqualify reformist candidates for office. They unleashed a campaign of censorship, imprisonment, assassination, and intimidation against intellectuals, writers, student activists, and others. Khatami might have leveraged his popular support in a showdown with the hard-line establishment, but he was not that kind of man. Reform, moreover, was not that kind of project. It was an insiders' initiative, meant not to upend the system but to improve it. No one was less forgiving of Khatami's failures than the constituency that had elected him.

NEW FACES, OLD DIVISIONS

When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad succeeded Khatami in 2005, he seemed to herald a

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return to the Islamic Republic's early days. In truth, Ahmadinejad and his faction were the first, and still the only, new faces to emerge on Iran's political scene since that time. Ahmadinejad's young, populist conservatives had never before held high political office. They tapped into the resentment of the lower classes, which had borne the brunt of the war in the 1980s and made up the ranks of the Basij militia but felt their share of power and wealth to be incommensurate with their sacrifice. They called themselves "principle-ists," because they believed that the revolution's principles were increasingly diluted by political innovation and elite corruption. Ironically, as Axworthy points out, they revived the rhetoric of the most radical faction from the 1980s—the very faction that, as reformists, came to oppose Ahmadinejad.

Axworthy provides a gripping and illuminating narrative of Ahmadinejad's eight years in office, including the suspicious 2009 election that delivered the president a second term and gave rise to the largest protest movement in the Islamic Republic's history. The tensions that held Iran in balance seemed to strain to the breaking point. Caught between reform and confrontation, the opposition Green Movement opted for the former but was forced into the latter. Caught between constitutionalism and violence, the regime chose violence.

"The crisis was not just a confrontation between the regime and a section of the populace; it was also a crisis within the regime itself, and it is still not resolved," Axworthy writes. He might as well have written that it was a crisis within the populace itself. Under the monarchy, Iran's internal tensions—between modern and traditional ways of life, liberal and

authoritarian political philosophies, cosmopolitanism and nativism, expansive and minimal interpretations of Islam—occupied a sort of negative space for Western observers. The shah's court was a conclave of idiosyncrasy and personal ambition compared with the Islamic Republic's rich web of connections to the society it governs—combatively, repressively, but dynamically nonetheless.

Axworthy's book went to press before the election of President Hassan Rouhani, a conservative cleric who has nonetheless promised to open up Iranian society and reconnect his country to the community of nations. Rouhani has transfixed the world by extending the hand of diplomacy to Western powers so long estranged. But his domestic mandate, to which outside observers have paid less attention, might ultimately prove determinative. Four long years of nonrecognition between the hard-line stalwart and a reform movement officially branded as "secessionist" seem to have hardened Iran's divisions into irresolvable hostility. Rouhani has a chance to sow peace among Iran's citizens, at the very least by providing legal outlets for criticism, dialogue, and dissent. For today, as in the past, national reconciliation remains the true test of Iran's rulers, who govern a society cleaved, not always in obvious ways, by ideology, class, and differing notions of identity. There, in the vibrant human space that extends through the Iranian interior, lies the new president's fundamental mandate and his greatest challenge. 🌐