

# JOURNAL OF THE IRAN SOCIETY



# **JOURNAL OF THE IRAN SOCIETY**

**Editor: David Blow**

**VOL. 2 NO. 16**

## **CONTENTS**

### **Lectures:**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Neglected narratives of Nazi subversion         | 7  |
| The memoirs of Prince Arfa                      | 20 |
| The Iran-Iraq war and the sacred defence cinema | 34 |
| What did the Iranians do for Georgia?           | 41 |
| The mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah                  | 54 |

### **Travel Scholars' Reports:**

|                      |    |
|----------------------|----|
| James Scanlon        | 65 |
| Serena Watson-Follet | 69 |

### **Book Reviews:**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Rise and Fall                               | 71 |
| In the Lion's Shadow: the Iranian Schindler | 74 |
| The Bazaar of Isfahan                       | 76 |
| Paradise Lost                               | 76 |

1a St.Martin's House, Polygon Road, London NW1 1QB  
Telephone: 020 7235 5122 Fax: 020 7259 6771  
Web Site: [www.iransociety.org](http://www.iransociety.org) Email: [info@iransociety.org](mailto:info@iransociety.org)  
Registered Charity No 248678

# **OFFICERS AND COUNCIL 2017**

(as of the AGM held on 16 May 2017)

## *Patron*

H.E. Mr H BADIENEJAD  
AMBASSADOR OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

## *President*

SIR RICHARD DALTON K.C.M.G.

## *Vice-Presidents*

SIR MARTIN BERTHOUD K.C.V.O., C.M.G.  
MR M. NOËL-CLARKE  
MR B. GOLSHAIA  
MR H. ARBUTHNOTT C.M.G.

## *Chairman*

MR A. WYNN

## *Hon. Secretary*

MR D.H.GYE

## *Hon. Treasurer*

MR R. M. MACKENZIE

## *Hon. Lecture Secretary*

MRS J. RADY

## *Members of Council*

Dr F. Ala  
Dr M-A. Ala  
Mr S. Ala  
Mr D. Blow  
Hon J.Buchan  
Ms N Farzad  
Dr T. Fitzherbert  
Professor Vanessa Martin  
Dr A. Tahbaz  
Dr Stuart Horsman

# **THE IRAN SOCIETY**

## **OBJECTS**

The objects for which the Society is established are to promote learning and advance education in the subject of Iran, its peoples and culture (but so that in no event should the Society take a position on, or take any part in, contemporary politics) and particularly to advance education through the study of the language, literature, art, history, religions, antiquities, usages, institutions and customs of Iran.

## **ACTIVITIES**

In fulfilment of these objects, the Society, which is registered in Great Britain as a charity, shall, among other things:

Hold meetings and establish, promote, organise, finance and encourage the study, writing, production and distribution of books, periodicals, monographs and publications,

Do all such other lawful and charitable things as shall further the attainment of the objects of the Society or any of them.

The full text of the Rules of the Society may be inspected in the Society's offices.

Those wishing to apply for membership can do so through the Society's website, or by writing to the Hon. Secretary for an application form. Students are encouraged to join.

## ACTIVITIES OF THE SOCIETY 2016-17

### Lectures

- |                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| September 15 <sup>th</sup> | Dr Touraj Nouri<br>A brief history of Ancient Iranian medicine                       |
| October 11 <sup>th</sup>   | Beatrice Campi<br>An introduction to early Safavid jewellery                         |
| November 9 <sup>th</sup>   | Dr Adrian O’Sullivan<br>Nazi espionage in Iran in World War II                       |
| December 13 <sup>th</sup>  | Professor Nile Green<br>When the Mirzas met Mr D’Arcy                                |
| January 24 <sup>th</sup>   | Michael Noël-Clarke<br>Qajar Persia and Imperial Russia: the memoirs of Prince Arfa’ |
| February 16 <sup>th</sup>  | Kaveh Abbasian<br>The Iran-Iraq war as seen in Iranian films                         |
| April 18 <sup>th</sup>     | Professor Donald Rayfield<br>Whatever did the Iranians do for Georgia?               |
| May 16 <sup>th</sup>       | Fuchsia Hart<br>The Sheikh Lutfullah Mosque in Isfahan                               |

## **TRAVEL GRANTS**

This year five grants were awarded to graduates and undergraduates either planning to carry out research in Iran or to spend time in one of the Tehran universities as part of their Persian language degree courses. Of those awarded grants two were from Exeter University, one from Oxford, one from SOAS and one from Kent. A grant was also made to the Edinburgh Iran Festival which opened on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017.

.

## **JOURNAL**

The aim of the Journal is to reproduce edited versions of some of the lectures given over the year, to review books of interest to members and to publish short articles of general interest. The editor welcomes contributions and suggestions. The journal is financed by a benefaction from the Kathleen Palmer-Smith Publication Fund.

## **Neglected Narratives of Nazi Subversion.**

**A lecture given by Dr Adrian O'Sullivan FRHistS on 9 November 2016**

Sir Reader Bullard, who served with distinction in Tehran as British minister and ambassador throughout the Second World War, once said that he didn't wish to '... appear to be speaking of Persia as though it were a stretch of uninhabited land of no importance except to foreigners operating on it for their own purposes. ... Treating [Persia] as an inanimate piece of earth that did not matter except to us and our war aims.' This was definitely not Sir Reader's view of Persia, and it certainly isn't mine. However, I share Bullard's apprehension before speaking to you tonight because, as an intelligence historian, my expertise is not about the Persians, nor about the Persian polity, but about Persia as an operational war theatre. A twilit stage upon which the Germans and the Allies danced their curious cotillions in a determined effort to attack or defend not so much Persia or the Persians as their own particular regional interests and assets.

So, all I can do for you this evening is attempt to tell you the hitherto neglected stories of three remarkable German intelligence officers who came to Persia early in the Second World War, and who failed in everything they attempted. All three were Russia experts, not Persia experts, yet they adapted quickly to their immediate predicament when Persia was invaded by British and Russian forces in 1941. With no specific orders or funding from Berlin, with little knowledge of Persian culture or of Farsi, and with nothing but faith in Germany's ultimate victory over the Bolsheviks to sustain them, these three intelligent but seriously flawed men set about the task of preparing for their vision of a German invasion and occupation of Persia and Iraq from the north, from Asia Minor, and from North Africa. After the collapse of the Soviet Union — assumed to be only a matter of time — the northern invasion forces would link up with Rommel's Afrika Corps in a gigantic pincer movement, and would drive relentlessly south to Abadan and Basra and beyond, across the Gulf to Bahrein and deep into the Arabian peninsula, in Germany's relentless quest for oil. Germany's share of world oil production was only 1%; conquering the Middle East would increase this share to 17%.





cover as attachés and consuls, or under commercial cover as businessmen and journalists. Some agents even posed as tourists.

After war broke out, of course, between September 1939 and June 1941, Germany and Russia were allies. Consequently, many Persians thought that, by supporting the German cause, they might simultaneously appease their old nemesis, Russia, which they genuinely feared much more than the perfidious British. However, as we all know, Hitler surprised the world by attacking Stalin on 22 June 1941. Suddenly the tables were turned: the pro-Hitler Persians now found the Russians to be their opponents, and that the extension of hospitality to the thousands of Germans living in Persia had suddenly become a seriously risky business. Clearly, Stalin would not tolerate such a situation for long. And it is in the context of Soviet alarm at the presence of such a large German diaspora close to the soft, vulnerable underbelly of the USSR, and now to the rear of the Red Army facing Hitler's divisions, that we can understand why the Allies had no choice but to invade and occupy Persia. So, on 25 August 1941, Operation COUNTENANCE was launched jointly by Britain with 19,000 troops and Russia with 40,000. Opposing them were Persian forces numbering over 125,000. Within five days the Allied armies had linked up (at Senna and Kazvin) and hostilities generally ceased. All German women, children, and diplomats were repatriated to Germany; the 500-odd remaining men without diplomatic status were interned and deported to South Australia. Hitler's disproportionate reprisal carried out one year later was the deportation of 825 men, women, and children from the Channel Islands to internment camps in Bavaria.

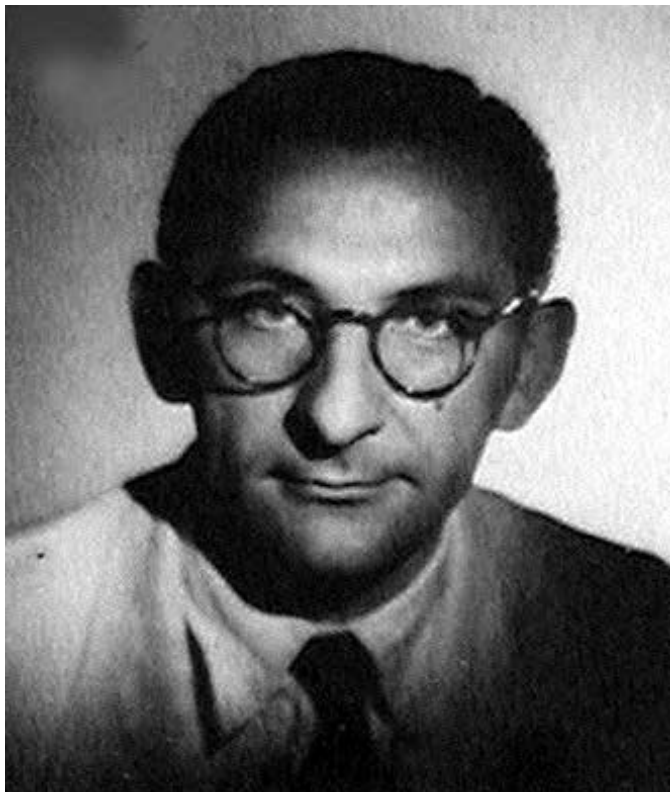
The Red Army occupied the northern provinces of Azerbaijan, Gilan, and Mazanderan; British and Indian forces occupied most of western and southern Persia, while large areas of the sparsely populated centre and east were considered nonstrategic and were virtually demilitarised, though key lines of communication and supply, especially the road to India through Baluchistan, as well as certain strategic assets, were occupied and defended. Tehran became the headquarters for various Allied intelligence, counterintelligence, and security formations, such as the British Defence Security Office (which was essentially a branch office of MI5), the Inter Services Liaison Department (which was the overseas cover for MI6), and the Special Operations Executive (responsible

for propaganda and countersabotage). And so everyone settled down to what promised to be a relatively quiet posting in a neutral country. After Pearl Harbor, things became a little livelier as large numbers of American GIs, mostly African-American non-combatants, arrived to operate the Lend-Lease supply route between the Gulf ports and the Soviet zone. With them came the US Counter-Intelligence Corps and the OSS (the forerunner of the CIA).

By the end of 1941, all that remained of the German diaspora within the British zone of occupation was a handful of stay-behinds, who included two young lieutenants of the SS Security Service (Franz Mayr and Roman Gamotha), and one Abwehr air-intelligence major (Berthold Schulze-Holthus) and his wife. Aided by Persians they had cultivated before the occupation, these individuals all went underground and became fugitives when the Allies arrived. So, let's examine their stories one by one.

The brilliant Roman Gamotha was a highly decorated Waffen-SS officer: a Viennese Austrian of Ukrainian descent, who spoke fluent Russian and was a Russia specialist. Before the Allied invasion, after being warned by an experienced German agent that meddling with the southern tribes was a risky business, Gamotha specialised in Armenian and Azeri affairs and confined his activities to the northern provinces. A few weeks after the invasion, he decided to leave Tehran and head for the Soviet zone. He would not resurface until two years later after escaping from Soviet captivity and making his way via Turkey and Bulgaria back to his Berlin headquarters. There he was hailed as a war hero, was decorated with the Iron Cross First Class, and was promoted to captain. Little did his superiors know that Gamotha's claimed 'escape' from the Soviet zone of Persia was pure fabrication. In reality, Gamotha had been turned by the Russians and had been planted by them as a mole at the very heart of the Reich Security Directorate in Berlin. He spent the rest of the war doing everything he could to scuttle any Nazi plans to operate against Persia. He also embezzled enormous sums of money intended for overseas SS operations, using them to finance his own rackets, which included people smuggling, black-marketeering, and forgery, all the way from Vienna to Amsterdam, Paris, and Madrid. In 1945, he 'defected' (returned) to the Soviets and after the war worked for Soviet intelligence, mostly in the Middle East, until he was liquidated by Stalin in 1952. He was only 35 years old when he

died. His brief career had been eventful to say the least: I think of him as a cross between Kim Philby and the outrageous 'Milo Minderbinder' of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.



**Figure 2.** *Lieutenant (later Captain) Franz Mayr of the Sicherheitsdienst (SS Security Service).*

The second spy, the Bavarian Franz Mayr, was a man of much sterner stuff, who had the potential to influence the entire future of the Middle East, had things gone differently for Germany on the Russian Front and in North Africa. Though he failed ultimately, Franz Mayr came far closer than his two compatriots to playing an effective role as an intelligence officer in Persia. Left alone and fugitive, unable to contact Gamotha or Berlin, Mayr hid for six

months in an Armenian cemetery on the outskirts of Tehran, emerging early in 1942, heavily disguised as a Persian artisan. Then began the most inspired, productive 18 months of Mayr's life: almost single-handedly, under deep cover, and in a formidably alien environment, with no direction or funds from Berlin, and with limited linguistic skills, Franz Mayr succeeded in inventing, organising, and controlling a pan-Persian subversive movement called *Hizb-i-Melliun*, which was formally constituted in July 1942.

In a few months Mayr created an active fifth column by hoovering up all the fragmented anti-Russian and anti-British dissident groups throughout Persia, who spent most of their time squabbling amongst themselves and achieving nothing. He sought to unite them under one umbrella organisation. However, Mayr's fugitive state and his tradecraft dictated that he should have minimal personal contact with the principal actors in his drama. So he designed the *Melliun* as a system of independent subversive cells united under one central executive committee in what Mayr himself described as not a political party but a 'centre of resistance'. Beside him were only three people: his chief organiser Mohammad Vaziri (who later became a KGB spy); Mayr's vivacious half-German fiancée Lili Sanjari (who acted as Mayr's cutout, meeting most of his joes and keeping them at arm's length from Mayr himself); and the fascist *Majlis* deputy from Shiraz Habibullah Naubahkt (who provided an invaluable link with the overt political world and with the tribal leaders in the south). Otherwise, Mayr remained remote from the subversive cells he had created. He used a nationwide network of cutouts and couriers to communicate with the various cells of the fifth column, to keep them united and prevent them from quarreling.

Support for the *Melliun* came from influential people: senior army officers, cabinet ministers, *Majlis* deputies, the police, the gendarmerie, members of the civil service, and such senior clerics as Abol-Ghasem Kashani, whom the British security authorities regarded as one of the most dangerous men in Persia. Besides Kashani, Mayr also enjoyed the patronage and protection of the military governor of Isfahan, Fazlollah Zahedi, who would later replace Mohammed Mossadeq as prime minister in 1953, when Zahedi became the preferred choice of the CIA and MI6. During the war, however, the British authorities regarded Zahedi as an arch-

enemy: the main obstruction to British efforts to maintain security and civil order throughout Persia, not just within his region. Zahedi's hoarding of vital foodstuffs was seen by the British as the primary cause of inflation, shortages, and famine in Persia, for which they were usually blamed. The British concluded that the wealthiest men in Isfahan — merchants, factory owners, and landowners — were all rascals and were all in Zahedi's pocket.

Anyway, it is quite remarkable that Franz Mayr, who had no training as a staff officer, should have evolved a grandiose seven-point master plan for the Blitzkrieg invasion and forcible assimilation of Persia into Hitler's Greater German Empire, single-handedly and at the tender age of 28. The main phases of his plan are shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** *Franz Mayr's master plan.*

The preparations Mayr undertook to implement his master plan were an extraordinary individual achievement. Of course, the plan itself was not original. It was a classic paradigm — a lethal takeover template that had already been used frequently and successfully by the Nazis in their conquest of Europe. However, from

the start, things did not go well for the *Melliun*. The intrigues and the infighting among the disparate constituent groups were incessant; they consumed much of Mayr's administrative time and energy. Deputy Naubakht proved quarrelsome, unreliable, and even treacherous. And then, beginning in the autumn of 1942, everything started to go awry.

On 2 November 1942, almost coincidentally with the reverse of German fortunes at El Alamein, British security raided Mayr's home in Isfahan and discovered all Mayr's papers and diaries, which revealed full details of the *Melliun* organisation. What a windfall! Notwithstanding his normally impeccable tradecraft, Mayr was a compulsive hoarder: he committed everything to paper and never threw anything away. After the raid, Mayr himself escaped to Tehran and would remain in hiding for nine more months, his influence and operational ability having been dealt a crippling blow. The members of his cells were not so lucky. On the evidence provided by Mayr's voluminous notes, British security carried out some important arrests, but wisely decided to allow the *Melliun* to wither on the vine rather than overreact with a nationwide wave of arrests. News of Mayr's blunder was allowed to spread and gradually undermine the morale of his Persian accomplices. They soon realised that the seized documents incriminated them, and that they therefore needed to reconsider their loyalties. And then, on 7 December 1942, the second bombshell struck: a Tenth Army special operation codenamed PONGO, during which Franz Mayr's patron, the pro-Nazi governor of Isfahan, Fazlollah Zahedi, was captured by a company of Seaforth Highlanders commanded by Brigadier Fitzroy Maclean and was spirited away to a Palestinian prison for the rest of the war. And then about eight weeks later, the third bombshell: Stalingrad. Suddenly, there would be no more German invasion of Persia, and Mayr's *Melliun* had been rendered superfluous.

In 1943, after Stalingrad, Berlin's priorities for clandestine Persian initiatives logically switched from pre-invasion subversive activity to sabotage operations designed to do maximum damage to Soviet long-term interests in the region. In response to this abrupt paradigm-shift, Franz Mayr did his utmost to resurrect the *Melliun* movement in the role of a sabotage organisation, but many obstacles now conspired to manifest themselves and multiply. Witnessing the evident turning point in southern Russia, many formerly pro-Nazi

Persians considered their options and switched sides. With ever more informants now working for British security, with increasing numbers of Persians registered in the Defence Security Office index, with observers on every street corner and in every café or nightclub, Mayr dared not leave his room. Consequently, his health, his mood, and his morale began to deteriorate. His relationship with his beloved Lili foundered when the SS refused Mayr permission to marry her, because they suspected she might be working for British intelligence. Mayr now found himself at odds with his own ideological, race-based service.

He begged Berlin for funds and a skilled radio operator. Instead, in March 1943, Berlin sent him an entire squad of oafish Waffen-SS parachutists (Operation FRANZ), bent on causing mayhem and destruction, who proved to be untrained, undisciplined, and technically incompetent. The last thing Mayr wanted! Inevitably, when these SS squaddies were discovered and captured by British security forces in August 1943, before they could undertake any special operations, Mayr too was trapped, arrested at gunpoint, and grilled by interrogators for weeks. His spirits crushed, his youthful ideals shattered, Franz Mayr soon cooperated fully with British security, provided much valuable intelligence, and was then packed off to Palestine to join his former benefactor, General Zahedi, in prison. British intelligence derived priceless insights from the disillusioned Mayr into the organisation and operations of the SS Security Service, about which they actually knew very little at that time.

With the arrest of Franz Mayr, the *Melliun* was finished, and a wave of arrests soon followed. However, Zahedi's friends and co-conspirators, Kashani and Naubakht attempted to keep the anti-British fifth column together for another ten months through the medium of Naubakht's Blue Party (*Hizb-e-Kabud*). But by the spring of 1944, British security had had enough of the two miscreants and finally arrested Naubakht in May and Kashani in June, as well as 164 other Persians, some of whom had been incriminated by Naubakht, charging them with collaboration and liaison with the Germans, and with membership in an organisation affiliated with German SS officers. A communiqué issued by the British Embassy in Tehran after the raids on the German fifth column identified Kashani and Naubakht as the ringleaders of all anti-Allied activities in Persia.



After the war, the ever resourceful Mayr managed to escape several times from prisons and prison camps, possibly even meeting up with his old friend Roman Gamotha in Alexandria. As far as I can tell from my investigations, MI6 seriously considered using Mayr as a penetration agent against the Soviets, but it was none other than the traitor Kim Philby who vetoed the proposal, presumably convinced that Mayr had the potential to become a lethal threat to his interests. By late-1949, he had changed his name to Peter Studer-Mayr and was suspected of being involved in the recruitment of ex-SS officers to work for the Nasser regime in Egypt. He appears to have ultimately made a fortune from arms dealing, probably with the connivance of the West German government, enabling him to create a worldwide technical-goods export organisation based in Hamburg called Terramar GmbH, which is still operational today. Mayr probably also performed some kind of postwar intelligence role, as his activities have been so well concealed. In fact, I have been unable to ascertain anything further about him, not even when and where he died.

Let's finally shift our attention to southwestern Persia and the third German spy in the country. I say German spy, not Nazi spy, because unlike Franz Mayr, this third man was no Nazi and loathed the SS. He was an old-school Prussian: a nationalist officer of the air-force intelligence branch of Admiral Canaris's German Armed Forces Intelligence Service, known as Abwehr I Luft. Unlike Gamotha and Mayr, who were mere striplings in their twenties, Major der Luftwaffe Julius Berthold Schulze-Holthus (let's just call him Schulze — everybody did) was a 47-year-old veteran of the trenches in the First World War; he was a distinguished barrister with a successful Leipzig practice. He was a defence lawyer who specialised in espionage cases, which is no doubt what brought him to Wilhelm Canaris's attention and led to his recruitment by the Abwehr sometime before the war. Schulze certainly looked down on the two young SS officers (Mayr and Gamotha) as social upstarts hardly worthy of commissioned rank and definitely not as espionage professionals. In short, Schulze was a bit of a prickly snob: he did not tolerate fools, and he was definitely not easy to work with. What is curious about his situation in Persia is that, although he had legal diplomatic cover for his espionage activities as German vice-consul in Tabriz, he and his wife Gertrud chose not to be repatriated to

Germany in September 1941, as was their right as diplomats. Instead, the Schulzes decided to go underground and risk arrest by the security authorities. They then attempted to reach Afghanistan, but were arrested and returned to Red Cross custody in Tehran, whence they escaped and went into hiding in a former brothel.

Schulze left his Tehran hiding place in June 1942, disguised as a mullah. He had already sent his wife home to Germany with messages for his Abwehr superiors and a plea for gold, guns, a radio, and a radio operator. Gertrud Schulze-Holthus's courageous escape to Turkey, through the rugged mountains in the depth of winter, accompanied and protected by opium smugglers, deserves a book in itself. Seeing no future for himself in Tehran but imminent capture, Schulze allowed Mayr's accomplice Habibullah Naubakht to take him south to remote and relatively safe Qashgai tribal territory near Shiraz. The Qashgai, who were the most militant, powerful tribe in the country, were anti-Shah, pro-German, armed to the teeth, and more or less autonomous. As a former army ordnance officer and experienced lawyer, Schulze improvised a role for himself as military and legal adviser to the *ilkhan* of the Qashgai, Nasr Khan. A year later, in June 1943, after the Germans had decided to make sabotage their priority, the SS, not the Abwehr, parachuted a three-man sabotage team (Operation ANTON) in to a dropzone that had been prepared by Schulze. Crucially, they failed to bring with them the gold and guns that Schulze had requested for the tribe.

Like the earlier SS team that had dropped near Tehran to reinforce Mayr, the Operation ANTON team achieved absolutely nothing. Led by a mentally unstable former desk-jockey from Amt VI with no military experience, and no knowledge of Farsi or Turki, the team consisted of two simple soldiers: young Waffen-SS radio operators, one of whom had become severely traumatised since witnessing unimaginable atrocities on the Russian front. Like Franz Mayr, Schulze was appalled by the incompetence and unsuitability of the men Berlin had sent him. He was also extremely upset that they were SS instead of army or air force.

As the months passed, and as the gold and the guns failed to materialise, it became clear to Nasr Khan that he had backed the wrong horse in the person of Schulze and the wrong cause in Nazi Germany. In an effort to distance himself from the Axis and begin realignment with the Allies, Nasr Khan arranged with Abdollah

Khan, the *ilkhan* of the neighbouring Boir Ahmadi tribe, to remove Schulze and the Germans from Qashgai territory. So Abdollah Khan effectively imprisoned them in the remote Tower of Alibaz at the foot of the Kuh-e-Dinar range, where they were guarded by 30 trigger-happy cutthroats. The place was so inaccessible that escape was impossible, as was any attempt at arrest by British security, who by now knew exactly where the Germans were. There they remained for six months as idle ‘guests’ of the Boir Ahmadi between September 1943 and March 1944, doing nothing but playing cards and drinking very large quantities of Arak, which seems to have flowed freely, and of course bickering and quarreling until the group became entirely dysfunctional.

Ultimately, events overtook these four men, as Nasr Khan — or more accurately his formidable mother, Bibi Khanum Qashgai — succeeded in negotiating an amnesty with the British, partially conditional upon his surrendering the Germans, which was formalised on 23 March 1944. In exchange, Nasr Khan’s two younger brothers, who were officers in the Abwehr and had fled to Turkey to escape the Gestapo, were repatriated to Persia. Astonishingly, nine months later, Schulze too was repatriated, in the opposite direction, and found himself back in Germany as an intelligence officer at the Abwehr’s Vienna station, newly promoted to lieutenant colonel. This had nothing to do with the Qashgai, but was the result of a unique prisoner-of-war exchange, the only known government-level spy swap between belligerents during the Second World War. After V-Day, Schulze was finally tracked down and captured by the Americans in a ski chalet near Kitzbühel in the Tyrolean Alps on 23 May 1945. After temporary detention, he was permitted to return to his family, to the practice of law, and to normal middle-class life. Schulze also published his memoirs, which are readily available in English and quite readable, though disingenuously misleading in places.

So much for the operational activities and general failure of the three German intelligence officers who elected to stay behind when the Allies occupied Persia: Roman Gamotha, Franz Mayr, and Julius Berthold Schulze-Holthus. There were of course other

operatives and other operations, which are described in my books.<sup>1</sup> However, out of deference to what I assume to be your main interest in what happened on the ground in Persia, I have emphasised the exploits of the three German spies to the exclusion of many other aspects of the wartime narrative. Whatever their shortcomings, all three German officers sought in their different ways to engage directly with the Persian polity, Persian society, and Persian culture. Though they did so in the odious Nazi cause, these three, unlike those SS men who joined them later, were at least willing to work with Persians from all walks of life, to learn various regional languages, to assume Persian identities, to wear Persian clothes, to endure considerable privation, and ultimately to risk their lives for their — to us peculiar — vision of Persia's role in a postoccupational Nazi world order. By contrast, their masters in Berlin knew little or nothing of Persia, and their ignorance largely accounts for the overall catastrophic failure of German covert initiatives in the region.

Of a total of 13 German covert operations actually launched against occupied Persia, none succeeded. The fundamental weakness of all these operations, including both Mayr's and Schulze's missions, was that they were predicated entirely upon the forward momentum of the German armies in southern Russia. When that momentum was reversed during the winter of 1942-43, German subversive activity and sabotage operations became futile. As the head of British security intelligence in Tehran, Lt Col Joe Spencer summarised it: 'To put it shortly and colloquially, the German Army missed the bus in 1942, and the German agents missed the bus in 1943.'

---

<sup>1</sup> *Nazi Secret Warfare in Occupied Persia: The Failure of the German Intelligence Services, 1939-45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); *Espionage and Counterintelligence in Occupied Persia: The Success of the Allied Secret Services, 1941-45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

## **Qajar Persia and Imperial Russia: the memoirs of Prince Arfa’.**

**A lecture given by Michael Noël-Clarke on 24 January.**

It is some years since I stood before the Society in any capacity and this is certainly the first time that I am here in this capacity. Thank you to our chairman for inviting me to speak, and thank you all for coming.

Prince Arfa’ was born the son of a cloth merchant in the Tabriz bazaar, whose stock was swept away, probably in the great flood of 1872. From these modest beginnings, he rose to become Iran’s consul-general in Tiflis, now Tbilisi, the capital of independent Georgia (1890-1895), minister plenipotentiary in St Petersburg (1895-1901) and after the period covered by this book, ambassador in Istanbul (1902-10), briefly minister of justice in 1913-14 and after the First World War Iran’s first representative to the League of Nations from 1920 until 1928. It was a remarkable life, full of wild and wonderful adventures.

Prince Arfa’ completed his memoirs just before he died in 1937, but probably for political reasons they were not published in Persian until 1965. His son, my wife’s grandfather, General Hassan Arfa, gave us a copy in the early 1970s, and my wife suggested that when I retired I should translate them. Seven years later, thanks to the help of many friends and the brilliance of my publishers, Gingkow, here we are.

Who then was the man who from being Aqa Reza rose to become Mirza Reza Khan Arfa’ od Dowleh and was later created Prince Arfa? His family was originally from Erivan, now the capital of independent Armenia, in the Caucasus, where, he says, his grandfather, as minister to the Turkic-speaking Khan of Erivan, had been a member of the bureaucratic class. Following the Treaty of Turkomanchai, which in 1828 sealed the Russian conquest of what were then Muslim khanates in the Persian empire, the author’s father like many pious Turkic-speaking Muslims, not wishing to live in infidel lands, emigrated from Erivan to Tabriz, the chief city of Iranian Azerbaijan.

There Arfa' was born, probably in 1853, though he was always coy about his age, and there he grew up. A clever boy, he received the traditional education for those destined by their family for a clerical career: Islamic Law and Jurisprudence, plus the poets Hafez, Sa'adi and Ferdowsi. When his father was bankrupted by the great Tabriz flood ((no insurance in those days!)) , he had to absent himself from Tabriz for a time, and Reza became the target of his father's ever-more pressing creditors. To escape these gentlemen, Reza was sent off to Istanbul to work for a relative in the Grand Bazaar.

Travel conditions were hard, and Reza had probably never left Tabriz before. There were no carriage roads in Iran at that time. Roads were rutted tracks. The direct route through Anatolia taken by modern travellers from Iran to Istanbul was insecure, so he had to travel north through the Russian Empire. He had to cross the Aras River near Jolfa, the current frontier and from there to proceed by horse or on foot via Nakchivan, now in Azerbaijan, and Erivan, to Tiflis, then the capital of the Russian-occupied Caucasus, a distance of some 400 miles as the crow flies. Equipped only with names of family friends to contact on the way, he successfully avoided bandits and survived yet another flood to reach his destination. From there, travelling with pilgrims on their way to Mecca, he took the newly completed Russian-built railway to Poti on the Black Sea and then a ship to Istanbul.

There he not only kept the books for his relative's trading house but in an early display of initiative, he used his spare time to learn French and English at the Greek school. He was then taken ill, it was thought that the climate of Istanbul did not suit him and he was sent back to Tabriz, once again via Tiflis. There his plans changed: he was taken in hand by the local Qazi or religious judge, a distant relative, who, spotting a promising young man, sent him to the Russian school for Muslims where he learnt Russian, mathematics, geography, world history and some physics. Knowledge of foreign languages in a world in which Iran was threatened by foreign powers but had few men who knew their languages or how they thought, was to become the key to his future success. Just as important, however, was the effect of the Russian education system on local Muslims and on him. Some took Russianised names, some became free-thinkers, one even allowing his daughter to go out unveiled. The most famous intellectual of all was Fath Ali Akhondov, an atheist playwright and

fan of Pushkin who advocated the reform of the Arabic/Persian script and who is today celebrated as the greatest Azeri intellectual of the nineteenth century. Reza, as he then was, tells how he was humiliated by two Russian-educated young Muslims who knew little Persian or Arabic and whom he therefore considered uneducated and uncouth. When, however, they asked him how many countries there were in the world, he gave a reply which any traditionally educated Muslim would have given since the Middle Ages: seven. When asked what had happened to America and Australia, he suddenly realised the huge gap in scientific knowledge between Europe and the Muslim world and vowed that he would henceforth study geography and what he called the “new sciences”.

His first great opportunity arose when in 1878 in the context of Naser-od-Din Shah's second visit to Europe. The two official interpreters appointed to welcome the Shah onto Russian soil, feeling a trifle feverish, succeeded in poisoning themselves with mercury, which they had mistaken for quinine, and Reza, still an adult student of Russian in Tiflis, was appointed to take their place by the consul-general. He was part of the Shah's entourage travelling from the Aras River frontier to Tiflis and having once again survived drowning when the boat transporting the consulate party across the river was swept downstream, for the first time he attracted the Shah's solicitous attention when he was kicked and injured by the consul-general's horse.

On his return to Tiflis, he was appointed a consulate interpreter by royal *farman*, in itself a highly unusual distinction, and received two junior decorations for his role in the Shah's visit. He was always very keen on decorations. Clearly, he had given satisfaction not only to the consul-general but to the Shah himself, the fount of all favour. Instead of becoming a Muslim cleric, as his father had intended for his clever son, he now entered government service and took his first step on the road to fame and fortune.

Not content, however, with the rewards for his industry, a percentage of consulate revenues from the issue of certificates of Iranian nationality, in his leisure time he wrote a treatise on the reform of the Arabic/Persian script, which he dedicated to the Shah's son and heir, and of which he sent a copy to the Ottoman Minister of Education. As a reward, he was appointed an assistant aide de camp to the Crown Prince and given a uniform and a military rank. To his

credit, while delighting in the uniform, he confessed to some embarrassment at his lack of military credentials and, hilariously, persuaded a local staff colonel to give him lessons in military science.

From then on, his career took off. Following the Russian victory over the Turkomans at Gok Tepe in 1881, a commission was convened to agree the Russian-Iranian frontier between the Turkoman Akhal area and Khorasan. Arfa' was appointed Russian and French interpreter to the Iranian delegation to the Akhal-Khorasan Boundary Commission, where he spent four years from 1883 to 1887 in conditions of great discomfort, often under canvas and accompanied, as he says, by scorpions and snakes., With remarkable initiative he seems to have converted his humble position in the delegation into celebrity status, for as a result of his exploits in the wilderness, at court he seems to have become something of a national hero.

The Russian delegation had been given inflexible and definitive instructions that the frontier was to be drawn in a way which would deprive the inhabitants of the village of Lotfabad, which was in Iranian territory, of all their grazing and agricultural land, which would be on the Russian side of the new border. The Shah had given orders that the agreement was to be signed as it was, that is to say, including this provision. Reza's chief, the marvellously described Saheb e Ekhtiyar, hereditary chief of the Afshar tribe, had already walked out of the negotiations in a rage, slamming down his papers and insulting his Russian colleague to boot, pointing out that if he signed the agreement he would be damned by posterity for having sold Iranian land to the Russians. Reza, quick and resourceful, requested permission to pay a visit to Ashkabad, the seat of the Russian military government in Turkestan, and now of course the capital of Turkmenistan. He had known the ladies of the family of General Komarov, the Russian commander in chief there, in Tiflis. They had invited him to "parties and balls" there, quite a promotion for a junior "Iranian in a felt hat", as he described himself, and on his departure from Tiflis had asked him to come and see them in Ashkabad. In what was to become a hall-mark of his operating method throughout his diplomatic career, through the General's wife and daughters, Reza was able to secure a meeting with the General, at which, seeking to escape the tentacles of the Foreign Ministry and



the Russian Legation in Tehran, he appealed directly through the General to the Russian court and the Russian General Staff, pointing out that if Iran's request was not granted, there was a risk of the whole area rising up against what would be perceived as the tyranny of the Russian government. Three days later, he received a positive reply: the Russian government had in effect backed down. A truly astonishing success for a junior interpreter, who was then charged by his Chief with negotiating the division of the river waters between the two sides. Not for the first time, Reza's success was viewed with envy and resentment by others, who almost succeeded in having him disgraced as a traitor, but in the end he was able to turn the tables on his accusers: he was congratulated by the Shah, made a general adjutant to His Majesty and given a salary of 500 tomans, of which more later.

After a spell at court in Tehran, which he loathed, he was promoted counsellor at the Legation in St Petersburg, but his next real opportunity for advancement arose when in 1889 he was chosen as interpreter to the Shah on his third visit to Europe. This lasted four months and included a month-long visit to Britain, planned, so court gossip said, to secure commercial concessions for British interests. Arfa's delight at his good fortune was unabashed: all favour flowed from the monarch, and he would have continuous direct access to him throughout the tour. The great opportunities presented for advancement were, however, counter-balanced by the jealousy of courtiers and particularly of the household eunuchs, who on two occasions almost succeeded in having him cast into outer darkness. He describes in detail the occasionally absurd but always menacing jockeying for position around the Shah and the perennial uncertainty surrounding the position of a rising star at court. In a marvellous chapter, he describes in lyrical terms the splendour of the parties given in the Shah's honour on this tour: his enchantment with the Scottish landscape and, a recurring theme, the visible charms of western ladies. Indeed the Shah seems to have believed that Arfa' had the gift of hypnotism, which he claimed to have successfully practised on Princess Alexandra, wife of the Prince of Wales, the Shah's official host. Even more important, however, Arfa' was by now trusted by his monarch: when the royal jewel case was mislaid on departure from Buckingham Palace to the huge embarrassment of the Shah, it was Arfa' whom he charged with the task of liaising

with the British police and finding the case, which the author imagined to contain millions of pounds of royal jewels, but actually contained the Shah's travel diary with frank comments on his journey and no doubt on his hosts.

During his visit, the Shah was the guest of the prime minister, Lord Salisbury, at Hatfield, where he flew in a rage when he saw caricatures of himself in the British press but was skilfully calmed down by his host; of the Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild at Waddesdon, where he took an active part in a photography session; and of the Duke of Montrose at Buchanan Castle in Stirlingshire, where the party appear to have fallen in love with the Duke's daughter in law and the Shah was markedly reluctant to sit next to the Duchess, whom he found ugly. In Scotland the Shah showed a marked antipathy to the kilt and commented adversely on the hairy legs of the Scots.

However, it is the author's description of Naser od Din Shah's personal interests and foibles which particularly stand out: the Shah's fascination with western technical devices such as the camera, the gramophone and the machine gun; his weariness with the burdens of kingship which made him long to roam the streets of Warsaw incognito like some latter day Caliph Haroun ar Rashid to see how people lived; his pride in Iran's tribal cavalry and during his visit to Budapest his consequent interest in the manoeuvres of the Hungarian Hussar regiments; and his purchase from Istanbul of a Circassian girl to minister to the royal needs on tour, the trusted Arfa' being charged with the delicate task of transporting her, dressed as a man, from the Paris railway station to the Shah's residence. A dangerous task indeed! As he explains, one glance at the lady, if reported to the Shah by the eunuchs, would have brought his downfall.

When the Shah crossed the frontier from Russia at the end of his tour, however, the essential fragility of his position as a junior courtier suddenly became brutally obvious to Arfa': after the glory of being intimately associated with the monarch for months, for just a moment a chasm opened up before his feet: it seemed that he had been forgotten and that alone, without position, without money and without horse or escort he would have to fend for himself on the long journey back to Tehran. Happily, aided by his usual presence of mind, he was able to attract the royal attention and the sun of royal favour once again shone on him. But clearly this was a moment of

sheer panic which reminded him of the fragility of a courtier's fortunes and which he never forgot.

The backdrop to the Prince's diplomatic career was the so-called Great Game, the rivalry of Britain and Russia for influence over a weakened Iran. Following the victory of General Skobelev over the Turkomans in 1881, Iran and the Russian Empire shared a 1000 km frontier and Naser-od-Din Shah's greatest fear was that Russia would invade Khorasan and occupy further Iranian territory, a move that Iran would be too weak to resist.

As minister in St Petersburg, (1895-1901), therefore, Arfa's principal task was to prevent further Russian moves against Iran's sovereignty by diplomacy and negotiation. While he explains that the purpose of his book is not to give an account of his diplomatic career, he does describe his main professional achievements there:

- a. First, a minor trade dispute with an Italian citizen who had imported goods to Iran had escalated into a major international dispute ranging Italy, Russia and all the major western trading powers against the Shah and his government. The Shah was gravely embarrassed and asked his representatives abroad for advice. Arfa', who was concurrently Iranian minister to Sweden and to Norway, recommended arbitration by a neutral power, the King of Sweden, which had little trade with Iran and was therefore less likely to side with the western trading powers. His recommendation was accepted by both sides, Sweden gave judgment in favour of Iran and Arfa' was given the title of Prince, one of the first commoners to be given this title.
- b. Then, faced with recall from St Petersburg on the succession of Mozaffar-od-Din Shah in 1896, Arfa' bounced back with aplomb. The Russian General Staff planned to send 300 Cossacks backed by other troops through the Holy City of Mashhad to Sistan to protect the Russian quarantine station there, risking a call to jihad by the Shi'a clergy and a major row with Britain. Using his relationship with the imperial family and the Tsarina in particular, Arfa' was able to have the movement orders withdrawn. The crisis was defused, his

recall was cancelled and he was showered with further honours.

- c. Third, in negotiating an agreement for a Russian loan to an almost bankrupt Iran in 1899, Arfa was able to make a successful personal appeal to the Tsar for the lightening of its terms, much to the fury of the Russian finance minister.

The Prince's memoirs are not, however, primarily an account of his diplomatic career. Indeed, he sometimes calls them a "travel diary", intended as a picture of a bygone age, written for the education of the younger generation of Iranians, for whom life in Qajar Iran and Tsarist Russia had faded into myth. As such they include vivid descriptions of political, economic and social life encountered on his travels. The story of his childhood in a traditional Tabriz merchant family is beautifully told. On his early journeys from Tabriz to Istanbul and Tiflis, following the great Tabriz flood, he talks of the close-knit Muslim communities to which he had access. In Russia, he describes the eccentricities of the doomed Tsar Nicholas II's court, the Tsar's disastrous coronation and his own favour with the Tsarina and Princess Galitsin, lady in waiting to the Tsarina, which he was able to use to secure concessions vital for his country.

As one of the few western-educated Iranians, he was in a sense a hybrid: His judgments on his country were often the fruit of his western education, while he had a very Iranian sensibility. He was intensely proud of his country's artistic and cultural heritage and was delighted when foreign guests were also able to appreciate this. On his travels in Iran, however, he sadly but implacably chronicles the inadequacy and insecurity of the roads, the deficiencies of the ill-equipped and under-paid army, the haphazard nature of state finances, the decay of Iran's architectural heritage and latent social unrest, stirred up by the excesses of rapacious tax collectors, ever ready to break into open revolt and, as always channelled and exploited by the clergy. Of all the gems in his memoirs for me the most interesting as well as the most poignant are his descriptions of the political, economic and social conditions encountered by him on his travels within Iran in the later years of Naser od Din Shah's reign, often framed in funny anecdotes but none the less poignant for that. There are in fact contrasting views on the state of the army. On the one hand he recounts the Shah's pride in his tribal cavalry and their

superb displays of horsemanship when they parade in front of him on his return from Europe. Then in striking contrast Arfa' tells the story of how, as a junior interpreter about to join the Russian-Iranian Boundary Commission in Khorasan, with no military experience, he suddenly found himself appointed to command a troop of 200 cavalry in the defence of Khorasan against a reported imminent invasion from Merv by a black-robed seyyed with 30,000 troops. Secretly, he wrote, he was very glad to have exchanged the role of secretary in the consulate-general for this distinguished military role. However, as is often the case in Iran, all was not as it seemed. His underpaid men declined to fight, but were on practical grounds persuaded by the author to fortify their position rather than flee. The large dust cloud on the horizon announcing the Seyyed's army turns out to be not the feared invasion force but a long straggling camel caravan, ..... carrying flour. The Russian officer accompanying the caravan found their story of the threat from a black-robed seyyed exquisitely funny.

Notwithstanding this debacle, without a hint of shame, his men ask him to sign a "victory" report describing a rout of the Seyyed's army, won against huge odds only through the supreme valour of his men. When Arfa protested at the untruth of all this, he is told by his men that he is naïve: on the frontiers "victory" reports are the only way to secure payment or titles from Tehran and if he will not sign, they will leave him where he is to find his own way back to civilisation. He reluctantly signed and sealed the letter, reasoning, so he said, that before any rewards were sent out, he would be questioned and would tell the truth about the "victory". To his astonishment, however, no questions were asked, and rewards duly arrived, including a sum of money for himself, .....which he didn't say he refused.

Government salaries were a source of permanent concern to those who were supposed to receive them. On the Boundary Commission, the local governor declined to pay members' salaries on the grounds that he thought that they were intriguing against him and Arfa' had to sell his boots to survive. We have already seen that by 1899 when Arfa was negotiating the loan from Russia, tax receipts had been so dire that the government couldn't pay the army's salaries, let alone those of other government servants, and feared a mutiny at any moment.

As to what might be called court finances, perhaps the best story is the one in which, following his success on the Boundary Commission, he was rewarded with the title of Adjutant-General to the Shah and a salary of 500 tomans. The offer of a salary, however, didn't quite mean what he, in his naïve western-educated way, thought. He waited and waited for the money to arrive.....in vain. When he asked a friend why he had received nothing, the latter laughed at him and said he would only be paid when there was a "vacancy" that is to say when the current holder of the salary died or left the country. The salary was a mirage. Indeed, a whole sub-industry had grown up around the system, with claimants paying doctors to tell them when current holders were dying, so that they could apply for the salary before other claimants did.

In the end Arfa' was able to lay hands on his money by presenting a petition to the Shah with the aid of his most consistent protector, the prime minister the Amin os Soltan, but he was so poor that in order to travel to Niavaran to present his petition to the prime minister, he had to borrow money from the guards to the chief accountant of the kingdom, who themselves ran an informal pawn-broking business and lent money at interest. The money was however paid to him in "black money", the chief accountant having been granted a concession by the Shah to independently mint 100,000 *tomans* of supplementary, black coinage. To such depths had the Treasury sunk.

The faults of the tax system of the time, when excessive taxes were levied on villages, often with the aid of beatings, by rapacious tax collectors, is demonstrated by stories of villages in revolt. The role of the clergy and the bazaar in orchestrating and directing popular discontent against the Shah, his government and foreign unbelievers is a thread which runs through the book. A presage of the later revolt against the Tobacco Concession granted by Naser od Din Shah in 1890 to a British enterprise, of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and indeed of the Islamic Revolution. One village, where he tried to seek shelter on a very cold night, refused him entry because they thought that he was seeking even more taxes from an already over taxed populace. A show of force was necessary before the villagers, led by their mollas, agreed to allow him into the village. On another occasion, the town of Damghan was in full revolt against its governor. An Armenian trader, a Russian citizen who was

undercutting the local merchants' prices had, conveniently for the local business community, misbehaved with a local Muslim woman. The woman was promptly stoned to death and they wished to do the same to the Armenian. Once again it was to their local *mojtahed* or senior cleric that the people looked to direct their conduct. There is a wonderful passage in which, with the mob howling at the door, Arfa', drawing on the clerical vernacular which he had acquired as a student in Tabriz, flattered His Eminence, pointed out the adverse consequences for him personally of killing a Russian citizen, and negotiated with the cleric to secure the Armenian's safety until the arrival of a government commission from Tehran, which would try him, and incidentally securing safe passage for himself.

Iranian history is full of men who rose from humble beginnings to great power and wealth, but who on incurring the Shah's displeasure were disgraced and often murdered, sometimes with their entire family. The Amir Kabir, the reforming prime minister of Naser od Din Shah's early years on the throne, had been done to death in this manner. All favour emanated from the Shah, when the sun of royal favour shone on a minister life was good but being the Shah's favourite, as Arfa became, was a very dangerous position. Jealousy and deadly intrigue were rife, enemies struck to kill, and the eunuchs, whom Arfa' had humiliated, were particularly dangerous foes. As he says in his memoirs, they had access to the royal person at the time when he was most susceptible to suggestion: before he went to bed and when he got up in the morning. Arfa's rise and rise was astonishing, but the fact that without family support he survived the vicious manoeuvrings of fellow courtiers was something of a miracle.

How then, did Arfa' rise and rise and rise and how did he manage to survive in this foetid atmosphere? First on the way up, so to speak, he had enjoyed remarkable good luck or, as he would put it, divine destiny guided his path. He was in the right place at the right time and had a remarkable ability to convert bad luck into opportunity. Thus, not only did he not drown in the great Tabriz flood of 1872 but if his bankrupt father hadn't sent him off to Istanbul to escape his creditors, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to learn French and English, and still less Russian, and he would never have become the Shah's interpreter, his first step on the path to fame and fortune, itself caused by the extraordinary co-incidence of

the two official interpreters poisoning themselves. If he hadn't been kicked by a horse on that first mission, he wouldn't have attracted the Shah's benevolent attention and so on and so on.

Second, he detested court life and preferred to live abroad rather than in Iran. Even when in 1887 he was offered the prestigious and well-rewarded post of Commissioner of the Imperial Bank of Persia, which would have required him to live in Iran and attend court, he humbly proclaimed his unfitness for the post and asked to serve the Shah abroad: he hated the snake-pit of Tehran politics. Apart from short periods, his entire career was spent abroad, at a distance from court intrigue and when he retired, he lived in Monaco, not a player in Iranian internal politics, where the rewards and risks were greatest. His knowledge of foreign languages and foreign ways was of course a key to his success. In addition, however, by his personal qualities, charm, intellectual curiosity, honesty, loyalty, capacity for hard work and flexibility, he had an extraordinary ability to attract and retain the loyalty of senior personages in the Qajar firmament. Naser od Din Shah himself seems to have been genuinely fond of him and to have been amused by his European background. More important, at the audience at which he appointed him consul-general in Tiflis in 1890, the Shah said to him: "On my journey to Europe your honesty, truthfulness and trustworthiness have greatly pleased me". He then gave him fatherly advice on life in Iran: "First you should know that in Iran people think that a man's credibility, the respect due to him and his importance, all depend on his wealth. A man who has no money is of no importance to others. Even though he is the most learned man in the world, people avoid him like the plague, as they think that he might want to borrow money from them." He then awarded Arfa' the totality of the passport fees from the Caucasus consular district to relieve him from financial want, admonishing him not to "waste money on silly things but to save money and become a man of substance", before telling him that if he did well, he would send him as minister in St Petersburg, then ambassador in Istanbul, before recalling him to Tehran as prime minister.

The first of his two chiefs in Tiflis, Mirza Mahmoud Khan 'Ala ol Molk, an ancestor of the Diba family, treated him as a son, particularly after the tragic death of his own son, described in the book; and Mirza Mohammad Ali Khan 'Ala os Saltaneh, his second chief there and later minister in London, remained close to Arfa' all



his life and indeed turned down the opportunity to replace him in Istanbul. Two of Ala's sons, as Iranian ministers in London, were later co-founders of the Iran Society in 1935 and of its predecessor, the Persia Society in 1911, and three grandsons still serve as members of our Council. Last, but by no means least, the long-serving prime minister Mirza 'Ali Akbar Khan Amin-os-Soltan, to whom he writes a moving tribute in the book, protected his interests at court for more than twenty years, and when unable to prevent his removal from St Petersburg in 1901, intervened to have him appointed as ambassador in Istanbul the next year.

Finally, he was a superb diplomatic showman. In Tiflis, as consul-general he celebrated the Shah's birthday in such grand style, with fountains pouring red Kakhet wine, that the governor of Tiflis commented that he now understood the Muslim idea of paradise. (Arfa' himself evaded the Muslim interdiction on drinking alcohol by acting as the Prophet commanded, always carrying around with him a certificate from a skilled physician saying that he could drink alcohol on medical grounds). In St Petersburg in particular, as an oriental who had absorbed western ways, he seems to have been an exotic figure, almost a dinner-party trophy, an image which he himself sedulously cultivated. He was also extraordinarily resilient: few men would have bounced back, as he did, from the humiliation of falling off his horse in front of the imperial carriages at a pre-coronation parade in Moscow, to build a kind of personal relationship with the imperial family.

Arfa' was not, however, just a successful diplomat and courtier. He was also something of an intellectual. Traditionally educated in the works of the Persian poets, as well as in the religious sciences, he had the characteristic poetic sensibility: he loved nature, gardens, trees and running water, and he wrote poetry in Persian and French, in which language he wrote *Perles d'Orient*, published in 1904. A constant theme in his memoirs was the need for a modern western-style education system. As a young man, he had written a treatise on a reformed western style alphabet and in later years he founded a craft school in Tehran. In building or re-decorating houses in the Persian style in Tehran, Tiflis, Borjomi and Monaco, he took care to preserve the traditions of Iranian architecture and decoration. As a product of both civilisations, Arfa' was both modern and traditional, western and oriental. In his private life, he was definitely an oriental

traditionalist. His two wives, both foreign born, whom he scarcely mentions, seem to have lived the lives of traditional Muslim ladies, at any rate while he was *en poste*.

Like all good chroniclers, Arfa' was insatiably curious and he had a keen eye for the rogue and the charlatan, particularly among the self-consciously pious. His humanity, abhorrence of violence and understanding of human foibles shine through. His dual identity as both Iranian and westerner, amused the Shah but once brought down on him a senior cleric's sentence of death as an infidel. His western education may have informed his criticisms of contemporary governance in Iran, but when, in a fit of pique, the new governor of Khorasan stopped paying the salaries of the Iranian delegation to the Boundary Commission, the young interpreter wrote a poem to the governor, lamenting the need to sell his boots in order to eat, and the latter was so moved by the poem that he ordered the immediate timely resumption of salary payments. A wonderfully Iranian touch! And Arfa' was above all a born story-teller.

## **The Iran-Iraq War and the Sacred Defence Cinema.**

### **A lecture given by Kaveh Abbasian on 16 February**

During the 1979 Iranian Revolution, hundreds of cinemas were burnt down by the Islamist crowd. After the revolution, the new Islamic rulers called for purification and cleansing of the film industry. Many film professionals were banned from working and many fled the country. The aim of this campaign was not a complete annihilation of Iranian cinema but a dramatic transformation of it. The state aimed for what they called an Islamic cinema with educational content, in the service of what they called the Islamic Revolution. In order to make this “Islamic Cinema” possible many young Islamic revolutionaries, who had had no previous experience started getting involved in making films. As a result of this campaign a general tolerance towards cinema as an industry and an art form was created amongst the religious sections of the society. Religious people who in the past were completely against cinema gradually started to make peace with a cinema that was now considered to be on its way to become completely Islamic. The growing acceptance of cinema is evidenced in 1981 where in the holy city of Qom a new cinema venue called *Qiyam* (Uprising) started its work by screening *Sarbaz-e Eslam* (Soldier of Islam) (1981). A similar tolerance was created towards TV. People who once (due to their religious tendencies) refused to let TV enter their households, now gladly bought TV sets.

This campaign of Islamisation of Iranian cinema was largely a failure. The number of films produced each year was very low and the ones that were made did not live up to the ideals of the Islamic Cinema. However, the start of the Iran-Iraq War gave new enthusiasm and hopes to the Islamic faction of the revolution. The young Islamic filmmakers found new motivations and subjects for their cinema. The cinema of the Iran-Iraq War came to be known as the ‘Sacred Defence Cinema’.

## Morteza Avini

Although war gave birth to a new movement in Islamic Cinema, the films that were made rarely managed to break the limitations of previous forms and content that were once considered corrupt, West-toxicated and non-Islamic. There is, however, one specific TV documentary series that is arguably the ideal example of what Islamic Cinema could have been like: *Chronicle of Triumph* (1986-1988). Morteza Avini, the director of the series, was one of the young Islamic revolutionaries who started making their own ideological state-funded documentary films. However, unlike many others, he managed to break away from the cinema of the past and develop his own cinematic language. Prior to becoming the director of this series, he had proven himself as a talented filmmaker with strong Islamic beliefs. As the director of the series, he oversaw several filming groups operating on the frontlines of the Iran-Iraq War and in Iranian cities. Their responsibility was to film enough material and send the footage back to Tehran where it was processed and quickly edited by Avini himself. The series included 63 episodes and each episode was broadcast on national TV every Friday night.

In these documentaries Avini managed to create an image of the Iranian fighters that had not been seen before. His characters were nothing like the heroic protagonists of what he called West-toxicated cinema. His fighters were more like Sufis longing for the beloved. They were ordinary people from every corner of the country who would hug each other and easily burst into tears.

He used his literary talent to write the mystic and ideological narration of the series and read them himself. In his narrations the war was depicted as the last battle of history, where the fate of the world was to be determined; Iranian fighters were declared soldiers of the Hidden Imam for whom history had been waiting for centuries; the journey of the volunteers from their ordinary life to the frontlines was considered a spiritual journey through which one lost one's ego and became united with one's surroundings; and in the end martyrdom was propagated as the ultimate sacrifice through which one reached the *ma'shouq* (the beloved) and *haq* (the truth).

*Chronicle of Triumph* was a TV series that not only was a unique example of Islamic Cinema but also carried with it three of the most important aspects of the Islamic Republic's national identity building project:

1. 'Apocalypticism,' which in Shi'a eschatology is strongly connected to the story of the Twelfth and last Imam of the Shia's, Imam Mahdi also known as the Hidden Imam or the Awaited Imam.
2. 'Martyrdom' which in Shi'a ideology is strongly connected to the story of the Third Imam, Imam Hussein, and to Karbala, the place of his martyrdom.
3. 'Vilayat-e faqih' (Guardianship of the Supreme Islamic Jurist) which existed as a concept in Shi'a terminology but was advanced as a political rule by Ruhollah Khomeini and became the centre point of the Islamic Republic's dominant ideology.

Avini strongly believed that the previous forms and techniques of filmmaking carried with them their own non-Islamic content. He was particularly fascinated by Marshall McLuhan's theory of "the medium is the message". In his essays and articles, later published as a book under the title of *Magic Mirror*, Avini argued that to create a cinema capable of reflecting the reality of the revolution and the war, they needed to create a new form. He used techniques such as the use of multi-layered sound and religious music, special effects, freeze frames, handheld cameras, flashbacks, long take eye level shots and spontaneous interviews in order to give a very intimate experience to his audience. For him, his audience were not merely observers of the sacrifices which were captured on film but active participants in the reality of the war – and potential fighters. He declared that his crew, as filmmakers, were also actively involved in that historic event and ready to sacrifice their own lives. Seven members of his crew were killed during the making of the series and he made sure that each "martyred" member received a heroic recognition in the series itself. In this sense, Avini attempted to bridge the distinction between the subject, the filmmaker, and the audience which resulted in an intimate, touching image of the "sacrifices" made during the war. This intimacy, which was a result of Avini's experimental approach towards filmmaking, was the key to the success of the series in gaining public attention. Considering its popularity, the weekly

broadcast of *Chronicle of Triumph* offered a collective experience to its audience, who felt that they were part of the same struggle, for the same cause, against a common enemy. In this sense, *Chronicle of Triumph* played a crucial role in helping construct the Iranian national identity.

Despite Avini's promises of the last battle of history and eternal guardianship of light, the war ended in 1988. But this was not how Avini and many others wanted the war to end. Even Khomeini himself likened the acceptance of the truce to drinking from a chalice of poison. Khomeini's death not long after the end of the war marked the end of an era. However, this was not to be the end of the Sacred Defence cinema. *Chronicle of Triumph* in particular was so influential inside Iran that Ali Khamenei, the new Supreme Leader, praised Avini and ordered the establishment of a cultural institution to be named after the series itself, dedicated to making documentaries about the "Sacred Defence". The institution became a dominant authority in the production of war documentaries and continued its work even after Avini himself was killed by a landmine in 1993 while making a documentary about the "martyrs". After his death, the supreme leader declared him "the master of martyred literati"; the place of his death became a pilgrimage destination and the day of his death was named the day of "Islamic Revolution Art". Avini became what he had always glorified, a martyr, but before becoming so and in fact also by becoming so, he set the foundation for the Islamic Republic's propaganda language.

## **Ebrahim Hatamikia**

Avini was critical of most Iranian filmmakers. In his articles published in the periodical, *Soureh*, he showed no mercy to Iranian filmmakers, old and young. There was however, one young filmmaker whom he praised dearly: Ebrahim Hatamikia. Avini had known Hatamikia when for a short period of time he was a member of his *Chronicle of Triumph* crew. But it was after watching Hatamikia's third film *Mohajer* (The Immigrant), that he truly believed in his potential: "I know no one else who makes films like Hatamikia... Hatamikia blows his whole existence into the frames, and each time he sets himself on fire so that his flames can shed a light, and each time, like a phoenix, he gains life from that fire".

Hatamikia made 18 films of which 13 are directly or indirectly about the Iran-Iraq War. Apart from his first four films that are about the war itself, all his other films except for one are about the aftermath of the war.

Although the war ended in 1988, Hatamikia continued to make wartime films until 1993. In 1993, he released *Az Karkheh ta Rhein* (From Karkheh to the Rhine) in which he dealt with post-war problems. Saeed, a former fighter, who has lost his sight due to Iraqi chemical attacks, is sent to Germany for treatment. He does regain his sight but doctors find out that chemical attacks have caused blood cancer. The film raises many questions about the war and its victims. Saeed goes through a spiritual journey and eventually dies in Germany. *Az Karkheh ta Rhein* is the first film in which Hatamikia faces the reality of the end of the war as the end of an era. The sequence when Saeed, after gaining back his sight, watches the funeral of Khomeini on a VHS tape, represents this reality.

This phase of coming to terms with the past and the fact that the war has ended continued with two other films. In *Booye Pirahan-e Yousef* (The Scent of Yousef's Shirt) Hatamikia reflected on the issue of Iranian prisoners of war and the missing in action from their families' point of view. His other film, *Borj-e Minoo* (Tower of Minoo) is the story of a former fighter who finally faces his past and comes to terms with his memories of his fallen comrade.

In 1999, the year Mohammad Khatami took office as the president of Iran, the year that has come to be known as the beginning of the reformist movement, Hatamikia's new phase also started. His next three films *Ajans-e Shishe-i* (The Glass Agency), *Rouban-e Qermez* (Red Ribbon), and *Mouj-e Mordeh* (Dead Wave) are centred around characters for whom the war had never ended. They are former fighters unable to fit into a post-war Iran. Released in 1999, *The Glass Agency* is about two war veterans, Abbas and his wartime commander Kazem. Despite financial difficulties, Kazem tries to help Abbas to go to London for an operation on a war injury. When they face problem in a travel agency, Kazem loses his temper and takes the whole travel agency hostage. The film ends with Abbas's death.

From *Dead Wave* in 2001 until 2014, Hatamikia made five films of which only one was about the war. *Be Nam-e Pedar* (In the Name of the Father), released in 2006, has a different tone to Hatamikia's

other films, especially in the main character's approach towards the war. Naser, a former wartime commander, has always tried to detach himself and his family from his past. His daughter Habibeh is a student of archaeology. During an excavation on an ancient hill, after finding an ancient arrowhead, she steps on a landmine and is injured. When Naser goes to the hill he recognises it. Years ago, during the war, he had planted the landmines himself. He always tried to keep his daughter away from that past, and in their conversations always insists that the war has definitely, completely, ended. Now his daughter has been injured by the very landmine planted by himself...

After this for years the Iranian Sacred Defence Cinema didn't produce many films. This phase however ended with the start of Iran's involvement in the war in the Middle East. After 23 years of not making a wartime film, in 2014 Hatamikia went back to his roots. He released *Che* about Mostafa Chamran in Paveh. He followed that with another film in 2016: *Bodyguard*. *Bodyguard* is again about a former fighter (Heidar) who has lost his faith in the system. Heidar is played by Parviz Parastoui, the actor who played the other misfit veterans in Hatamikia's previous films. At a certain point in the film he becomes responsible for the security of a young nuclear scientist. The scientist refuses to allow him to guard him. Heidar finds out that the young scientist is the son of his friend who died during the war. They had promised each other that should one of them die, the other would take care of his family. But Heidar had forgotten about this and was preoccupied with his doubts. In a key sequence of the film, when Heidar goes to his friend's grave, the young scientist and his mother also arrive, by accident. Heidar asks for forgiveness and they cry together. With that purifying crying, Heidar, in a way gets back on track. He has found new motivation. The film ends with a scene of assassination. Heidar saves his friend's son's life and - in a reference to Hatamikia's early films - dies himself and becomes a "martyr".

This film finds true importance when we understand it as part of the current policies of the Iranian establishment regarding the current political situation of the world. The whole discourse of the war has been brought back. In this discourse Iran is an island of stability in a turbulent Middle East. But this island of stability is under foreign threat and "Sufi" heroes such as Heidar are the saviours. This approach becomes more apparent when we realise that Heidar's



character and make-up is an immediate reference to Qasem Soleimani. Soleimani is the commander of the Qods Force, a division of the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, which is primarily responsible for extra-territorial military and secret operations. He came under the international spotlight after the start of Iran's involvement in the war in the Middle East. While there were doubts and suspicions about Iran's involvement, low quality photos of Soleimani in Iraq and Syria started to surface. He appeared to be everywhere and nowhere. Soon he became a topic of memes and cartoons and appeared on many front covers.

But *Bodyguard* hasn't been the only film of its kind. These years the Sacred Defence Cinema is going through a transformation. Many young filmmakers have joined in and the number of war films has gone up dramatically. Iran's Fajr international film festival is also giving special attention to these films and awards have been redirected towards them. It is no surprise that this year one of the most talked about films of the festival was a biography of Morteza Avini.

## What did the Iranians do for Georgia?

### Notes from a lecture given by Professor Donald Rayfield on 18<sup>th</sup> April 2017

*The chairman, when on a recent visit to Georgia, had been impressed and depressed by his Georgian hosts pointing to every ruined church and saying, 'Look what Shah Abbas did to us'. He therefore invited Professor Rayfield, emeritus Professor of Georgian at Queen Mary University of London, to find anything other than slaughter and destruction that Iran had contributed to Georgia...*

The Romans brought to their empire sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, public health and peace. This is not what the Iranians are thought to have brought to Georgia: '.....2500 years of tyranny with near extermination on several occasions, notably in 1616 and 1795'. The Georgians got sanitation and medicine from the Greeks; wine and irrigation they devised themselves; their roads were built by the Mongols (briefly), and public health came from visiting Italians and Polish missionaries. As for political organisation, they devised that themselves, either following Parkinson's law with a government of just six ministers, or making King Lear's mistake by dividing the kingdom up among three quarrelling offspring.

Culturally, Iranian music had little influence (except on Tbilisi's urban *ushagh*); cuisine already had much in common with Iran's (walnuts, sheep's cheese, wine). Iranian costume was imitated (even Strabo noted that Iberian lowlanders wore Iranian dress), but later on women dressed more freely and went about in public. Western Georgia favoured Mediterranean costume. Dance and song remained specifically Caucasian.

In religion Islam made few inroads from Iran (unlike Turkey's forced Islamisation in Samtskhe); a Zoroastrian *ateshgah* (fire temple) shows a tendency for co-existence in Tbilisi, which continued even under Safavid occupation.

## What did the Iranians give?

**Above all, the Iranians gave language and vocabulary – from Avestan, Parthian, Medean, middle & modern Persian:**

Because of the alien grammatical structures of Georgian, nouns are the most common imports: e.g. *guman-i* "thought, opinion, suspicion, suggestion"; there are also adjectives —*sust'i* "weak"; *msubuki* "light" (*sabok*) — and a few verbal stems: *šen-* "build" (from Mid. Pers. *šēn*). Imports come from the earlier Iranian, Avestan, Ossetic, Medean, Parthian, and old Zoroastrian religious terms: Georgian *spetaki* (from Mid. Pers. *spêdag* "white, clean"), *eshmaki* (devil, cf. Avestan. *aēšma* "anger"); *dev-i* "evil spirit" (Old Pers. *daiva*); *nišani* "miracle, sign" (Pers. *nešân* "sign,"), *dastur-i* "trustworthy person, minister, true" in Old Georgian, "agreement, consent" in New Georgian (Pers. *dastūr* "minister").

Personal names are Iranian from a very early stage, e.g. the 2<sup>nd</sup> Georgian king (c.200 BC) Saurmag (Scythian Sawarmag "black-armed"); King Gubaz ('cow's fore-limb') of Lazica.

Zoonyms which become Georgian first names include: Varaz, (Pers. *gorâz* "wild boar"); Gurgen (Pers. *gorg* "wolf"). Persian names also came into Georgian from the Shahnameh: Givi (Giv); Zurabi (Sohrâb); Ketevan (Katâyûn); Zaal etc.

Iranian anthroponyms are represented in Rustaveli's *Vepkhistqaosani* (*The knight in the panther skin*): Pridon (Fardûn/Fereydûn from Avestan *ŷraētaona-* < *trita* "of triple strength"); Nestan-Darezhan (Pers. *nîst andar jahân* "unlike any other in the world").

Persian is, of course, a source of many Qoranic Arabic words now part of Georgian core vocabulary.

**Secondly:** The Iranians brought a poetic language full of sweetness, with no consonant clusters as in Georgian; they brought rhyme (but Georgians often prefer their fiendish *aaaa* Rustavelian rhyme scheme to easy Persian *beits*); the weakly-stressed rhythms of the two languages are similar (allowing syllabic verse).

### **Thirdly: the gift of empires — dynastic marriages**

Under the Sassanids Iranian princesses married Iberian Christian kings. Under the Safavids Georgian kings offered the Shah their sisters and daughters (sometimes to become chief wives, sometimes concubines, sometimes strangled), but never the reverse. Generally speaking, Christian male rulers rarely received Muslim brides. The only exception in Georgia is the daughter of the Avar Shamkhal marrying King Levan I of Kakhetia. Even Georgians serving the Shah, like Khosrow Mirza (later King Rostam), married Georgian aristocrats, not Persian brides. So there were few dynastic alliances (except with the Shirvanshah in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and there too, brides went in one direction only, Christian to Muslim). Compare that to the series of Georgian marriage alliances with the Byzantines from the 6<sup>th</sup> century right to the fall of Constantinople. Or with the Alans/Ossetians for 1200 years (from Parnavaz to Tamar). Or with Russia (largely failed): Davit's daughter to Izyaslav; negotiations for intermarriage between Boris Godunov's children and the Kakhetian heirs; King Erekle I (as Nikoloz) being possibly the biological father of Peter the Great; the friendship of Aleksandra Bagrationi and Peter.

### **Iran's claim to Georgia:**

Agha Mohammed Khan Qajar's ultimatum of summer 1795:

*'This order we declare to His Majesty the King of Georgia:  
To whoever expects your mercy, let it be known: the deed the Georgians did seventy years ago in Kandahar and how they disgraced Iran is now well-known, for Shah Sultan Husein has died and he is no longer alive. Now Your Highness knows that for the past 100 generations you have been subject to Iran; now we deign to say with amazement that you have attached yourselves to the Russians, who have no other business than trade with Iran. You are a man of ninety and allow such things: you have brought in infidels, united with them and give them licence! Even though your faith and ours are unlike and different, you have always had a union with Iran. In Iran there are many Tatars, Georgians, Armenians, infidels and men of other religions; so it follows that you should be ashamed in front of all of them and not allow such a thing. Last year you forced me to destroy a number of Georgians, although we had no desire at all for our subjects to perish by our own hand. Now, by God's grace, by the*

*strength of whom we have reached such great majesty, fidelity consists of the following: it is now our great will that you, an intelligent man, abandon such things, since it is the talk of the country, and break off relations with the Russians. If you do not carry out this order, then we shall shortly carry out a campaign against Georgia, we will shed both Georgian and Russian blood and out of it will create rivers as big as the Kura. As it was right to inform you of this, so we have written this decree, to stop you disobeying our orders and make you realise your situation.*

### **History of Iran's involvement in Georgia:**

550–350 BC: In Xerxes' and Darius' times large parts of Georgia were the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> satrapies, including all of Iberia and most of southern Colchis. Georgian indentured labourers worked at Susa. Georgia got coinage, roads, trade in exchange.

By destroying the Iranian empire, Alexander the Great set the Georgians free. After Georgia accepted Christianity circa 317 AD, the Iranian Sassanids either controlled Iberia by intermarriage or by *pitiakhsh* viceroys, or by using Iberia as a battlefield for war with Byzantium. Thereafter the Arabs and Turcomans put paid to Iranian dominance.

From 1100 AD to the Mongols' arrival c.1240: Shirvan, a semi-Christian, semi-Muslim state with Persian as its cultural language became an ally, at times a dependency. It was multi-cultural and tolerant with 5-6 languages (Udi [Caucasian Albanian], Turkic, Armenian, Georgian, Kurdish, Persian), creating for Georgia a new Iranian secular culture and environment, in which flourished Shirvani poets such as Falaki, Khaqani, Nizami Ganjevi.

1500 to 1801: the formation of the Safavid (and later Qajar) kingdoms meant that Iran basically took the eastern part of Georgia and the Ottomans took the west under the Treaty of Amasya and other treaties in the 300-year Ottoman-Iranian conflict. This period saw varying degrees of autonomy, tolerance, cultural and political cooperation and oppression.

1801 to today: Iranian relations with Georgia became better and more equal since Russia became dominant.

**Compensation: Iran gave Georgians the chance of power:**

Georgia's chief benefit from the Iranian empire was power within that structure. Georgians had very little success with the Arabs, and not much success in Byzantium. They had limited success under the Ottomans around 1600 with *kapucıbaşı* Mehmet Paşa Gürcü, and the remarkable diplomat Princess Gulchara, a grand-daughter of King Simon II, who was brought to Yedi Kule in 1601 to care for her grandfather. She was introduced to the Sultan's mother and was later appointed chief peace negotiator with Shah Abbas.

In Russia Georgians, notably the Bagratians, made a career only in the Tsar's army. In all cases, however, except for Russia, the dominant power, whether Byzantium, Iran or Turkey, had the territory it administered or annexed from Georgia governed by ethnic Georgians who spoke the language (Lazica under Byzantium, Çıldır paşalık under Byzantines and Ottomans, Kakhetia under Iranians). Russians were the only exception (hence the administrative chaos because of language difficulties), until Prince Bariatsky fell in love with a civil servant's Georgian wife in late 1850s and his Georgian deputy Grigol Orbeliani took over the administration of Transcaucasia.

**Georgians in Iran:**

At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the King of Kartli was recognized as one of four *valis* (provincial governors, the others being Kurds, Arabs, Lurs). He had financial independence but the Shah expected regular tribute of male and female slaves and wine. Under Shah Abbas I's reform of the administration and army Georgian *ghulams* (slaves) formed the new reformed cavalry. Iranian soldiers were riflemen *tufangchi*; the Turcoman *kizilbash* remained cavalry irregulars. Georgians did not loot, they obeyed the Shah's orders and they owed no tribal allegiances.

The Safavid chronicler Iskandar-Munshi reckoned that Shah Abbas in 1616 killed 60-70,000 Georgians in Kakhetia and deported 100-

130,000. Jean Chardin, resident in Safavid Isfahan for many years, wrote:

*Le sang des Géorgiens s'est fort répandu dans la Perse, non seulement à cause que les plus belles femmes en viennent, et que chacun en veut avoir, mais aussi parce qu'Abbas le Grand et ses successeurs ont pris plaisir à mettre les Géorgiens dans les emplois et depuis qu'ils ont conquis la Géorgie, ils en ont tiré une infinité de gens, qu'ils ont si bien avancés qu'à présent la plupart des charges sont dans les mains des gens originaires de la Géorgie.*

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, another French visitor to Isfahan at the time, remarked:

*Le sang s'est rendu beau en Perse par le mélange des Géorgiens de l'un et de l'autre sexe avec les Persans.*

Georgian women cost money: state annual accounts list 7,892 tumans for Georgian women (according to *tadhkirat al-muluk*, written about 1720).

### **Blind eye to Christianity & the flexibility of the Georgian Bagrations:**

In 1660s Tbilisi under King Rostam of Kartli wine and pork were on sale in Tbilisi; the mosque was hidden in the citadel, but women were veiled. In Iran, the governor Vakhtang, son of Prince Levan, tells Volynsky (1718) he's still Christian, although outwardly a Muslim, and he tells the Carmelites that he would like to turn Catholic. The Catholicos Domenti II was typical in ease of conversion: he was willing to please the Catholic Pope, the Shi'a Shah and his own Orthodox bishops. The disadvantage of the Georgians was that Iranians distrusted Orthodox Christians as agents of Russia, but were easy with Catholics & Armenian monophysites.

**Some Georgian governors:**

Astarabad & Mashhad were governed by Georgians Khusrau-Khan and Manuchichr-Jehan; Safi-Quli was the Georgian governor-general of Baghdad and the *mutevalli* (custodian) of the Shi'a sanctuaries of Iraq. Imam-Quli Khan of Shiraz, was a Tbilisi Armenian. Under Shah Safi, Khosrow Khan (later King Rostam of Kartli) was the commander of all *ghulam* troops. The Dârûgheh (police chief) of Isfahan was always Georgian. The police, who were in charge of suppressing whores, gambling and wine drinking, were entitled to one third of stolen property recovered, but had to pay two thirds compensation on thefts that were not recovered. In the 1700s Iskandar Mirza, son of King Shahnavaz (Giorgi XI) of Kartli was darugheh. After his murder by the Afghans, Khusrau Jehan became chief commander on the Kandahar front and later King of Kartli.

Georgians, unlike Armenians, found living outside their country hard. Shah Abbas created the Fereidan exiles in a small town not far from Isfahan. This was the only real Georgian diaspora (unlike Armenians) —, who still sing in Georgian:

*I've ploughed the earth of Fereidan  
For four hundred years now,  
For four hundred years  
I have sown a thought that helps me  
Mixed with the wheat seed.  
I miss my homeland  
It's four hundred years now.*

In the 1770s Karim Khan Zand favoured them, but enforced Islam. The repatriation of 500 Fereidanis by Shevardnadze in the early 1970s failed: they were rejected in Kakhetia as 'Iranian Tatars', because they refused pork and wine and said Muslim prayers at home. Half of them went back to Fereidan. According to the 1966 census there were 12,000 in Fereidan. They were badly mistreated by local officials.

**Other signs of Georgians in Iran:** Isfahan's Pul-e-Khaju bridge bears the Georgian initials of builders (time of Shah Safi). Georgians were encountered in government service all over Iran, even in 1840s.



The only comparable domination of Georgians in another country is briefly this: Georgians (Mingrelians) under Stalin in 1939: Beria, Goglidze, Tsanava, Rapava, Sajaya, Gvishiani ruling Russia, Leningrad, Belarus, Caucasus, Uzbekistan and Vladivostok as heads of the dreaded NKVD. Hence the fear of Beria in June 1953.

### **Source of Iranian culture in Georgia:**

Shirvani poets in Georgia: Nizami, protégé of Aghsartan II, visited Georgia twice, once for Georgian-Iranian literary contest; Davit the Builder patronised Iranian poets and Sufis (Ibn Al-Jauzi).

Khaqani writes a panegyric (1171) ‘The doors of Abkhazia are open to me, I shall cross the Nacharmagevi and Mukhrani, among the Bagratians I shall find refuge... and if I can’t find protection in Abkhazia, then I shall go on to Byzantium’; uses Georgian words as puns. He celebrated Giorgi in Persian verse as ‘a new Augustus... greater than Heracles... with no peer in the world... supreme defender of the Cross... sword of the Messiah... reincarnation of Christ’.

Falaki (1107-56) wrote an historic ode on the death of Demetre I (his sister Tamar was wife of Shirvanshah Aghsartan). Unique tribute by a Muslim poet to a Christian king (*Persian text with Russian translation by Z Buniatov in Sakartvelo rustavelis xanashi*, Tbilisi, 1966. pp 281-292):

*‘The heavens have torn from his royal throne a crowned ruler  
Grief for whom has cut off worldly joy.  
King of kings of Abkhazia and Shaki, king of horizons.  
Who brought to the east tributes from the west,  
Demetre, son of David, head of the race of Bagratids,  
Who with his seed made the whole country fertile;  
Sword of Christ, who brought the space of the skies  
Under his starry flag.’*

**Georgian literary response to Iran and Iranians was perhaps the most important aspect of Iranian ‘occupation’.**

*Visraminiani* a near contemporary translation of Gorgani’s 11<sup>th</sup> century *Vis u Ramin*, a romantic epic which might have inspired the Tristan and Isolde legend, The Georgian version is a little shorter than the Persian. The apology for Islam in the first two chapters is omitted — this is typical of translations from Persian to Georgian; the evocation of Islamic Persia of the next five chapters is curtailed, but chapter by chapter, and often line by line, the correspondence to Gorgani’s text is so close that the Georgian is of considerable importance in determining an authoritative reading of the Persian (which was not published until 1864). [Dick Davis lectured the society on *Vis and Ramin* in 2010.

Despite his attention to every level of the Persian’s poetics, the translator’s Georgian is very purist — he uses the old native words *iadoni*, (‘nightingale’) and *qvanchi*, (‘polo-stick’), instead of the more commonly used Iranisms *bulbuli*, *chogani* — just as Gurgani avoids Arabisms in his Persian.

**A question of loyalty. Teimuraz I, King of Kakhetia and Kartli at various times from 1610s to 1640s:**

In 1613 Teimuraz was forced to send as hostages to Iran his two young sons and his mother. Over the next four years Shah Abbas’s armies devastated Kartli and Kakhetia, effectively abolishing the kingdoms and deporting 130,000 of the surviving population to the depths of Iran. Abbas had Teimuraz’s sons castrated (both died of the operation), had King Luarsab of Kartli strangled and, finally, demanded that Teimuraz’s mother, Dowager Queen Ketevan, convert to Islam or be tortured to death. On 22 September 1624 Ketevan was subjected to unspeakable torture, supervised (as was the castration of Aleksandre and Levan) by the governor of Shiraz, Imam-Quli Khan, by birth a Georgian, Undiladze. Imam-Quli Khan had close connections to his victims: Queen Ketevan was the mother-in-law to Imam-Quli-Khan’s brother. Arguably, he did no more than his duty and even evaded it when possible: despite his very high rank, he had failed to take part in the Shah’s invasions of Georgia, and for years hidden from Ketevan her grandchildren’s fate.

Some of Ketevan's remains were retrieved by Augustinian missionaries and in 1628 brought, with a full account of what the missionaries had witnessed, to Teimuraz. In 1629 Shah Abbas died; Teimuraz supported the succession of one of Abbas's sons, instead of his grandson Safi Shah. As a result, an Iranian nominee ruled in Tbilisi, while Teimuraz ruled only Kakhetia and inner Kartli. He turned to poetry, and created one of the world's most original and unimaginable poems, the Passion of his Mother.

In some ways it resembles a mediaeval Georgian passion, in which a pious observer relates the obstinate resistance of an aristocratic woman to an ultimatum of convert or die and reports her defiant last prayers, a mixture of phrases from the New Testament and the Nicaean creed. But Teimuraz's approach is different. We have an extraordinary range of feeling, from a wish to share the torture, to an appreciation of the virtues of the chief executioner as opposed to the malice of the Shah's orders. While Shah Abbas is described as a 'merciless king, a torturer of Christians, a spiller of simple people's blood, sitting in Herod's place...', his agent the governor of Shiraz is, in Teimuraz's eyes, innocent:

*When Imam-Quli-Khan heard these horrible things  
He was most amazed and said: 'How can this befit me?  
I know that she won't accept Islam if she is not given time,  
How can I propose Teimuraz's mother something unbefitting?'*

*Wise tongues cannot praise enough the ruler of Shiraz,  
His underlings praise him as humble, sweet and merciful,  
He is deserving of God, for heavenly powers defend him:  
Three months he told her nothing, though he saw her often.*

Imam-Quli Khan is shown proposing to Ketevan a compromise by which she outwardly converts, but inwardly remains a Christian. She refuses on the ground that 'who would show me respect, or let me return to my patrimony or even let me come near them?'

Teimuraz's poem reduces Shah Abbas's motives to those of a cruel fanatic: that in itself tallies with Abbas's genocidal actions in Kakhetia, but it fails to appreciate (as Teimuraz would himself in

1627) Abbas's complexity. Abbas did not hate Christians: Augustinian missionaries were allowed enormous freedom and treated with great respect; a herd of pigs was kept at the Shah's court to supply exiled Georgians and European missionaries with roast pork for Christmas. True, the Georgian Orthodox church came under suspicion as a potential fifth column for Orthodox Russia. The Augustinian Father Ambrosio, the missionary Cristofore de Castelli and the dramatist Andreas Gryphius interpret Abbas's actions as those of a spurned lover, assuming that Abbas was so smitten by Ketevan's beauty, intellect and character that he overlooked her age (she was in her late fifties when martyred).

In a letter to the Pope, written after he had received the remains of Ketevan, Teimuraz did allege a more complex motivation: 'This infidel king of Persia, unable to overcome her firmness and her love of carnal purity, first imprisoned her for her faith...

### **Iranians in Russian-dominated Georgia:**

Alexander, crown prince of Georgia, led a guerrilla rebellion for thirty years, supported by Abbas Mirza, crown prince of Iran and governor of Tabriz. In 1812 he made this proclamation to the Georgian nobility 1812: 'Prince Aleksandre presents to you many greetings, filled with brotherly love and wishes for the best. Your famous and noble bravery has reached all four corners, the east, west, south and north and all nations of Persia are weaving victory laurel wreaths and praise for you... you are merely restoring the fallen imperial house.'

Husein Quli-Khan's message in support: 'We'll show the Russians what peace is... you will see the great favours which your ancestors received from the Persian state.'

### **Tributes by Iran and Iranian-speakers to Georgia:**

For one year (1830) the Russian government newspaper *Tbilisskie vedomosti* had a Persian-language supplement. But Russians were short of Persian speakers, so much so that the 1826 Declaration of War was returned by Tehran because it was unintelligible.

Later, journals such as *Sharq* and *Kashkul* are printed in Tbilisi, and Iranian printing skills and machinery emanate from Tbilisi.

Iranian builders (prisoners of war, refugees) reconstruct Tbilisi. French consul de Gamba (1826): 'Les principaux maîtres maçons étaient Persans. Il était impossible de trouver des ouvriers plus actifs et plus intelligents.'

High number of Iranians (over 50%) are among Tbilisi's visitors (1864) and foreign residents — some 6,000, in Tbilisi province — more, probably than in history, if we discount army occupations.

Mirza Riza Khan Arfa od-Dowleh, Iranian consul, built a spectacular stone house in Borjomi 1892: unfortunately, the architect Yusuf was murdered by a dervish in Tbilisi. Majd os-Saltaneh in his *Description of Tbilisi* 1894 praises education (no illiterate women), health service, baths, agricultural machinery and the superb Iranian consulate (Mojtahedi gardens today). But he deplores the fact that pickpockets were encouraged by the mild judicial system.

The old story in Farid od-Din 'Attar's *Parliament of Birds* (1177) of Sheikh San'an and the Christian (*tarsa*) beauty was reworked by Tbilisi Iranian poet, Mohammad Kazem Sheybani Kashani. In the original the Yemeni Sheikh San'an renounced Islam to look after a beautiful Christian girl's pigs. Sheybani has:

*In this world wisdom from Tabriz, beauty from Georgia... Recalling the times of Sheikh San'an, old Sheybani would like to be summoned by beauties to guard pigs... Let him be slowly raised to heaven to guard the beauties' pigs, to be close to Jesus in heaven. Bow your heads before Christians in this world... A young Georgian girl has robbed me of wits and soul. By day I guard her pigs, by night her door, pouring tears of blood. I adore the cross and go to church. Sometimes in secret, hiding from Muslims, sometimes openly... I shall sacrifice my soul for my beloved Christian, who gives her heart, like Jesus, to her lover.*

*(Poem edited by Arfa'od-Dowleh, Iranian consul at Tbilisi 1888-94).*

Sheybani deplored the departure of Consul Reza Khan Arfa' od-Dowleh: declaring:

*'In the world today paradise is none other than Tbilisi  
There good is realised and knowledge resides.'*

In the Constitutional period Tbilisi became a refuge for Iranian dissidents, including Yahya Dowlatabadi, who nevertheless still thought that Georgia was 'a large precious part stolen from our dear country'.

James Morier in his *Second Journey to Persia* reports: Mirza Bozorg [Iranian foreign minister], during a conversation in which the utility of Georgia to Persia as a possession was discussed, made a remark that was truly characteristic of an Asiatic logician. Taking hold of his beard, he said, "This is of no use, but it is an ornament."

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MOSQUE OF SHAYKH LUTFALLAH, ISFAHAN

BY FUCHSIA HART, BASED ON A LECTURE GIVEN TO THE SOCIETY ON 16<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2017

The Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah, situated on the eastern side of Isfahan's *maydan-e naqsh-e jahan* (Square on the Plan of the World), has long been recognised as significant. It is a building with which many are familiar - the stories and theories associated with its use and form are also well-known. It is primarily famed for its unusual form: the mosque lacks a minaret; is not on the four-*iwān* plan; and has a unique entrance corridor. It is also renowned for its dome and, particularly, for the sublime shower of perfectly-formed lozenges pouring down its interior. The mosque is, of course, also significant for the role it plays in Shah 'Abbas's capital complex, centred around the *maydan*. The mosque serves as one of the four markers on 'Abbas's plan of the world - the other three being the entrance to the bazaar, the 'Ali Qapu and the 'Abbasi (also known as the Shah or Imam) Mosque. The building is also significant thanks to its connection with Shaykh Lutfallah who, at the time of the erection of the mosque, occupied the highest religious seat in the Safavid realm - the position of Shaykh al-Islam.

In this lecture, however, I will argue that the full significance of the building is yet to be wholly uncovered or appreciated. Unfortunately, there will not be enough time to cover every aspect of the building which I have investigated. I will introduce the main existing theories associated with the building, then we will look at the building itself, the texts on its walls and other contemporary writings, bringing together texts which have never been read alongside each other before. These sources will provide the evidence which we will then explore to shed light on the original purpose and role of the building.

This jewel-like mosque with its shimmering tilework initially attracted my attention on a visit to Isfahan during my time studying abroad in Iran. On arriving in the city, I went straight to the *maydan*, and immediately into the 'Abbasi Mosque, as many surely do. A

looming, large space, especially when compared with Shaykh Lutfallah's rather smaller affair (the 'Abbasi Mosque has a footprint of some 19,000m<sup>2</sup>, whereas the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah covers just 2,000m<sup>2</sup>), this mosque is quite awe-inspiring. However, on entering the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah, the visitor is in for a very different experience – equally wonderful, but more intimate. The tilework of Shaykh Lutfallah's mosque is much finer than that of its neighbour, having been executed in delicate faience mosaic. Entering the mosque, going down the corridor, first bending left, then right, relatively narrow and dim, transports the visitor into a realm very separate from the bright, vast expansiveness of the square. The corridor really does feel like the liminal space that it is. On finally entering the main domed chamber of the mosque, the eye is immediately drawn up to take in the spectacular dome. The gaze then drops down again to explore the tilework draped over every surface, with its delicate floral and vegetal details, and gleaming white lettering on the deep blue lapis lazuli ground.

Having been thus captivated by the mosque, and intrigued by its idiosyncrasies, I endeavoured to answer the many questions I had. This, however, proved to be a greater challenge than expected. For such a high-profile building, surprisingly little has been written about the mosque. Most surprisingly, no translations of its remarkable inscriptions have been published. I initially wanted to see if there was any evidence for local claims that the mosque was built for the harem of Shah 'Abbas. No evidence for this was readily available, but in the process of my research, I came across numerous other theories concerning the building, its quirks and its original purpose. A full consideration of the building was long overdue. Thus, my research on the mosque began as something of a myth-busting exercise, with the primary aim of producing a sound and comprehensive appraisal of the building.

My initial research on the building continued and expanded when I chose to focus on Shaykh Lutfallah's mosque as the subject of my thesis for my MPhil degree in Islamic Art and Architecture. I gathered together many of the available sources, both primary and secondary, concerning all aspects of the mosque. The form and decorative aspects of the building were analysed, as were the inscriptional schemes. Evidence from the building itself was then interpreted in conjunction with a picture of the religio-political



milieu under Shah ‘Abbas, viewed through primary sources, helping to draw out meanings otherwise latent in the building. In turn, conclusions drawn on the mosque were able to contribute to a reassessment of aspects of the rule of Shah ‘Abbas, the position of Shaykh Lutfallah and the wider clergy, and, in particular, the legitimacy of the Friday prayer in the Safavid period. It is this factor which will be the focus of this lecture.

Before moving on to focus on the building, it is important to introduce our eponymous hero, Shaykh Lutfallah. He was born in the Jebel ‘Amil region in what is today’s Lebanon. Later in his life, he travelled to the Safavid realm to become one of the many Shi‘i scholars from that region who were warmly welcomed by Shah ‘Abbas, as they contributed greatly to the formation of the still nascent official Shi‘i religion. Lutfallah was a student of many other prominent religious scholars, eventually rising to the position of Shaykh al-Islam of Isfahan. He further cemented his relationship with ‘Abbas by becoming his father-in-law.

Another of the *dramatis personae* associated with the mosque, and another member of the clergy, is Shaykh Baha’i. According to locals of Isfahan, Shaykh Baha’i was the architect of the building. He is known as a polymath, as attested by a recent Iranian serial drama, and architecture is thought to have been one of his many skills. While my research has uncovered no evidence of Shaykh Baha’i as architect, it seems likely that he did compose one of the two poems inscribed on the mosque’s interior walls. The only clue we have as to who the architect may have been comes from another of the mosque’s inscriptions, naming one Baqir Banna’ – Baqir the Builder. It is not unlikely, however, that Shaykh Baha’i was involved in the planning of the building in some way, having been a significant religious scholar of the period and, like Shaykh Lutfallah, very much part of the state apparatus.

Shah ‘Abbas is, of course, another figure who looms large in the story. Ruler of the Safavid Empire from 1588-1629, he was responsible for the establishment of Isfahan as the dynasty’s capital. At the time of his reign, the empire encompassed much of modern-day Afghanistan and the east of Iraq, stretching north into Azerbaijan, Armenia and the eastern-most part of Turkey. The capital was initially moved from Tabriz, in the north-west of the Safavid lands, south-east to Qazvin, and then, finally, to Isfahan.

While the reasons for the move of the capital are the subject of another study, Isfahan certainly enjoyed a more central position in the Empire and was out of harm's way, being removed from border clashes with the Ottomans.

At the centre of 'Abbas's capital was, and still is, the *maydan-e naqsh-e jahan*. The square could, again, be the subject of a separate lecture, and, indeed, has been the focus of much research over the past couple of decades. Construction of the square seems to have been completed in several stages, and may have been begun as early as 1590. The Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah was one of the first buildings adjoined to the square, thought to have been built between 1602-1618/19, although recent research has suggested that building may have been initiated even earlier, a subject to which we shall return later. When considering the position of the mosque on the square, a couple of features are immediately noticeable. The first is the angle between the mosque and the square, said to be 45°. The second is the misalignment between the mosque's portal and its dome, which are offset by 6.5m.

I was, of course, first attracted to the building by its beauty, but it was a closer look that drew me in. This is a mosque like no other. The entrance corridor snaking around the central domed chamber is unique. The building lacks a minaret and its plan is closer to what one would expect to find for a mausoleum, rather than a mosque. Indeed, there have been many appraisals of the building over the past 400 years, with wildly divergent opinions. While I will not be able to comment on all of these, some are of interest, while others will provide some amusement.

Robert Byron is notable for having been particularly strident regarding the architecture, writing that 'the outside of the mosque is careless of symmetry to a grotesque degree', whereas Pope was far kinder, referring to it as 'jewel-like', an 'abode of felicity' and referring to its 'perfection of unearthly beauty'. Robert Hillenbrand was one of the first to approach the building with deeper thought, concluding that the architect 'did all he could to draw attention to the conflicting axes'. He believed that the corridor emphasises this conflict, with the architecture demonstrating how 'the dues of Caesar conflicted with those of God', concluding that 'the layout itself may in fact be intended as a serious call to devotion'.

A selection of interesting notes on the building appear in an unexpected place – Jason Elliot’s travel memoir *Mirrors of the Unseen*. He covers the building in some detail and spends much time musing over the position of the mosque as an indicator for the division of the square on the golden ratio. He also draws attention to the *abjad* values present in the tilework decoration. In another work, Ali Asghar Bakhtiar, in response to the puzzlement as to the alignment of the mosque, claims that it is on the same alignment as the main terrace at Persepolis. While my very unscientific online map experiment did prove this to be the case, it is still difficult to know what significance this might hold.

There are, of course, a number of broader theories regarding the building. When in Isfahan, I was told that it was built for use by the harem of Shah ‘Abbas, evidenced by the somewhat feminine form and decorative schemes, as well as by the privacy afforded by the corridor. The corridor is one of the most hotly debated aspects of the building. Here is not the place where I will dwell on it in great detail, but I would argue for a ceremonial role, bringing the worshipper into the main chamber opposite the *mihrab*, while also acting as a transitional space between the luminous expansiveness of the *maydan* and the closer dappled shades of the chamber.

There are a handful of theories associated with the building which have gained prominence in recent scholarship. The chapel-mosque theory emphasises how the mosque would have been used by Shah Abbas for private prayer, functioning like a *maqsura*<sup>i</sup> on a grand scale. Others have proposed its function as a congregational mosque, while some have emphasised its connection with Shaykh Lutfallah and his *madrasa*.

As I have mentioned, in order to grasp the full meaning of this building, it is vital to consider the religio-political setting in which it was built. A particularly important factor is that at this time, the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Friday prayer was not being officially performed in the Safavid Empire. The debate about the legitimacy of the prayer had been ongoing in various Shi’i settings since the Buyid period (934-1048). The debate hinged on the validity of the prayer in the absence of the Twelfth and last Imam, who is believed by the Shi’a to have gone into concealment after the death of his father, the Eleventh Imam, in 874. Three main standpoints had emerged by the Safavid period. One did not support the performance

of the prayer, while the other two did, but diverged on whether the prayer was the remit of the clergy or the ruling power. Shaykhs Lutfallah and Baha'i were both in support of the performance of the prayer, which gave religious legitimacy to the ruler whose name was mentioned in the sermon (*khutba*).

During the course of my research, the Friday prayer appeared as a more prominent factor in the life of the building than had previously been suggested. When first investigating the mosque, I was particularly surprised, and frustrated, to find that translations of its inscriptions had never been published. The inscriptions certainly have to be significant considering their length and significant role in the decorative scheme of the building. One of my first tasks, therefore, was to produce translations, working from Lutfallah Honarfar's highly useful transcriptions, alongside good quality images of the inscriptions themselves. The texts used on the wall are many and varied, including Qur'anic texts, *hadith* and poetry, presented in a number of styles with varying purposes. Some are very much meant to be read, while others perform more symbolic, apotropaic functions. While my findings were many, there are just a few passages I would like to highlight here.

The first is a short verse, something of a warning, from Sura 62 of the Qur'an, found on the lower of the two inscriptional bands around the base of the interior of the dome:

*Oh Believers! When [the adhan] is called for the prayer  
on Friday, then proceed to remembrance of Allah and  
leave trade. That is better for you, if only you knew.*

While research on the selection of Qur'anic texts for mosque inscriptional schemes has proved somewhat inconclusive, I would argue that the choice of this verse must be a telling one. Bearing in mind the contemporary debate regarding the Friday prayer, it is likely that this reference to Friday would have been seen through the lens of that discussion. This passage can therefore be seen to be promoting performance of and attendance at prayers on Friday.

The second text I would like to quote also refers to Friday in two places, within a beautiful description of prayer:

*According to Abu ‘Abdallah, peace be upon him, on Friday night, angels descend from the heavens amongst numerous tiny specks of dust and in their hands are golden pens and silver papers. Until Saturday night, they write nothing but prayers for Muhammad and the family of Muhammad. Most say that, according to the Sunnah, they pray for Muhammad and his family every Friday a thousand times and on other days, one hundred times.*

The first comment to be made on this passage is that it is strongly Shi‘i in tone, referring as it does to the family of the Prophet and the practice of praying for him and his family. Secondly, we again see the emphasis on Friday, and the importance of prayer on that special day. In addition to these passages, a number of others used on that wall refer to the importance of visiting the mosque, including phrases such as ‘make me one of your guests and a builder of your mosques...’ and ‘the mosques and their people love God’.

As well as translating the mosque’s texts, I also approached the earliest writings which make mention of the building. The text which proved to be most significant was that written by Shaykh Lutfallah himself. I was guided to this text, the *Risala al-I’tikafiyya* by Rula Abisaab in her work *Converting Persia*, where she uses it to draw conclusions regarding the religious and political situation of the time. There are two short passages which I will focus on here, but a brief introduction to the text is necessary first, which is ostensibly a defence of the practice of *i’tikaf* - seclusion in the mosque. Lutfallah indicates that he has been facing criticism for this practice taking place in his mosque. He outlines the requirements for *i’tikaf* to be valid – one of which is that it be performed in a congregational mosque. He then goes on to define a congregational mosque, to support this criterion. Towards the end of the piece he writes:

*... the Master of this lofty government [Shah ‘Abbas]... when he ordered the building of it [the mosque] he made it clear to me with this statement: I want you to build a congregational mosque for yourself, spacious enough for a thousand or two, opposite my house, in*

*eyesight, so that I, the Turks and servants, and whoever else wants to, may gather around you at any time.*

The important word both for Shaykh Lutfallah's purposes, and mine, is 'congregational'. Here, we know he is talking about the mosque which now bears his names, as he describes it as being opposite what must be the 'Ali Qapu. There is, however, one anomaly here, which is the number of worshippers which the mosque can hold. I have, again, conducted some highly unscientific tests, and am sure that the mosque would not be able to hold two thousand. There is no hard and fast explanation for Lutfallah's statement here, but those who have worked with such texts will know that numbers are often more symbolic than empirical, generally indicating concepts such as 'not very many', 'quite a few' and 'lots'. However, one might ask oneself, if the mosque was built to be congregational, then why does it not look like a congregational mosque? Shaykh Lutfallah even has an answer for this:

*The meaning of a congregational mosque is one in which a Twelver Shi'i Imam prays communally – even if it is not the mosque of the people or the market... and even if it is not the largest mosque in the region.*

This statement suggests that he has been facing critics who have been claiming that the mosque is too small, or not in the right part of town. Indeed, here we see a reference to the market, and we have already seen a mention of trade in Sura 62. These references may be in response to criticism which we know came from the Isfahani elites, particularly the guildsmen connected with the old *maydan* and the bazaar, which was being superseded by 'Abbas's new *maydan* complex.

After I had finished my MPhil research, I was later introduced to a little studied but highly significant Safavid history by Charles Melville. In the *Afdal al-Tawarikh*, Fadli al-Isfahani describes the construction of the *maydan* and the associated buildings. He places the founding of the mosque much earlier, in 1593-4. He also writes:

*... bring it to completion and to call it the Masjid-i Shaykh Lutf-Allah. The great Shaykh himself was*

*appointed to supervise the rooms and nighttime prayer halls (shabistāns) and the places allocated for ascetics and worshippers. After it was completed, the Friday prayer and other religious obligations would be performed there...*

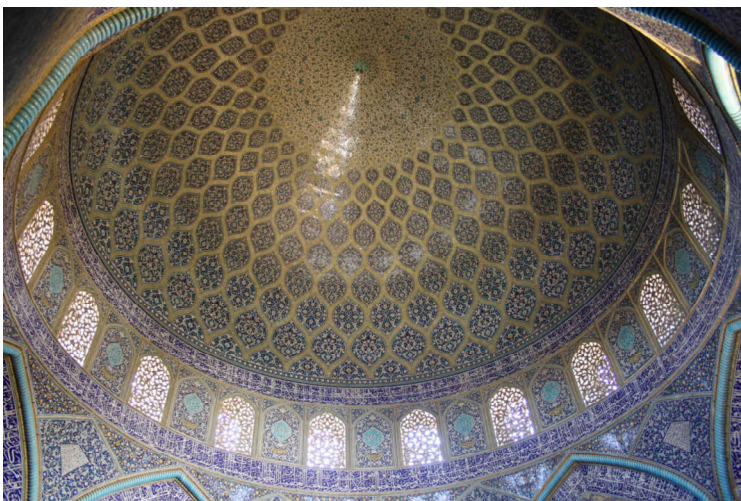
This quotation, especially when considered in light of the evidence I have already presented, adds even more weight to the possibility that the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah was built as a congregational mosque to facilitate the performance of the Friday prayer. We must, however, consider what congregational means in practice. It does not mean that the whole population of Isfahan was trying to squeeze into the dome chamber, overflowing down the narrow corridor, at noon every Friday. What it does mean is that this mosque may have had a greater, or at least different, role in the political and religious milieu of its time than previously thought. Shaykh Lutfallah's writings, indicating the criticism he was receiving, suggest that it was a controversial building. We can still appreciate that it was certainly highly experimental, both in its form and in the use of that form as a congregational mosque. Its role in the support of the Friday prayer also makes it something of a testing ground.

In this way, the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah can provoke interesting and important thoughts about our understanding of the relationship between form and function, a matter so key to all historians who work with buildings. My research on the mosque has also highlighted the importance of approaching buildings with a holistic methodology. The reading of inscriptions, in conjunction with the other relevant texts, is crucial for the understanding of buildings of this type. This article shares a section of my holistic study of this building, but I hope that it demonstrates the ways in which it is even more significant than previously thought, and also shows that it was certainly a very exciting building.

<sup>1</sup> A *maqsura* is a small enclosure within a mosque for use by a ruler or other member of the elite.

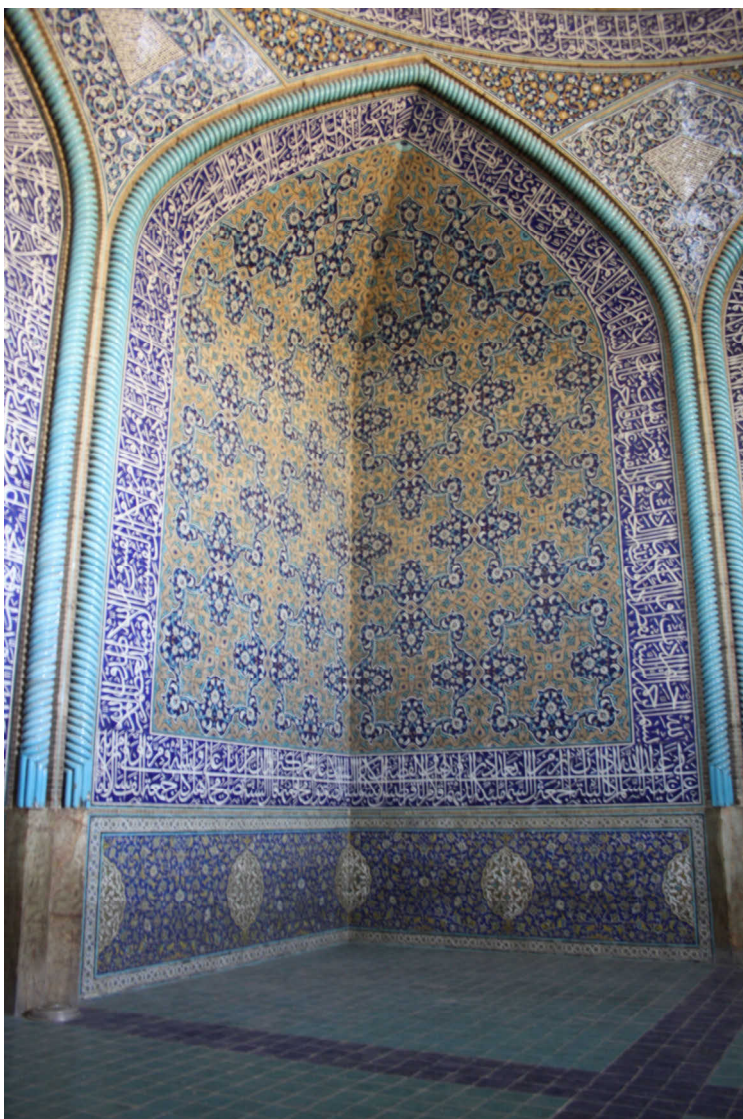


View of the Shaykh Lutfallah Mosque across the maydan.



Inside the dome of the mosque.





Squinch to the west of the mihrab

## Report by Travel Scholar, James Scanlon

In August 2016, I was fortunate enough to study Persian in Tehran with the Saadi Foundation. And thanks to the grant from the Iran Society I was able pay for my plane ticket at very short notice, something I would not have been able to do otherwise. The trip was brief but extremely eye-opening and beneficial to furthering my passion for studying Persian language and literature.

My first impression of Tehran, as is most people's, was the roads. In my case, it was thanks to the airport driver swerving over to the hard shoulder from the fast lane of the motorway to show me a photo of him skiing. The various gasps, screeches and beeps made it a bonding experience. Indeed, it got me my very first Iranian friend. Having learnt Persian in a purely classroom environment for the past three years, it was a shock to the system to be in such an immersive environment, hearing and speaking the language every day. Nevertheless, I quickly became attuned to the differences between the spoken and the written language and enjoyed putting this into practice. We had classes every day in the mornings and cultural visits in the afternoons. These ranged from the bizarre (watching a 3D documentary about dinosaurs dubbed into Persian at the national planetarium), to visiting various palaces (as well as the unmissable National Tableware Museum), and climbing to the top of Azadi Tower for the breath-taking view over Tehran and the Alborz mountains.

We studied a range of topics from Hafiz and Saadi, to Iranian jokes and even some modern, satirical poetry by Nasir Fays. His Divan, 'Fays Book', takes verses of Hafiz and alters every other line to something relating to contemporary life, yet keeping the rhythm and metre of the original. The classes were very interactive with a range of students, and focussed on improving all the skills of writing, reading, listening and speaking. English was not readily spoken by my classmates or teachers, thereby forcing me to improve my Persian. During our literature classes, we read and discussed the book "the Urn" by Houshang Moradi Kermani. And, in the final week, the author himself came and gave a talk and read from some of his other works. This was a unique opportunity to hear from a well-regarded current author of Iranian literature. Indeed, since being back in the classroom at Exeter I feel able to engage more readily with the poetry

we study. This is not simply thanks to my improved Persian but more due to seeing statues of the great poets in public parks, finding their works for sale on street book stalls and interacting with Iranians who would invariably end our conversation with a short couplet or two.

Having had the opportunity to visit Iran was certainly beneficial when doing a module on modern Iranian History last term. For example, there is no substitute for actually walking around the Grand Bazaar to get a sense of the scale of the institution that has been so influential throughout Iran's recent past – not to mention visiting the University of Tehran and walking along Inqalab road. A personal highlight was seeing Naser al-din Shah's photography collection at the Golestan Palace, which included the picture of his court clowns all pulling suitably clown-like faces.

In the afternoons and weekends, I was able to meet up with an Iranian Skype friend I had made whilst in the UK. He showed me various parks in North Tehran (including Tehran's own Jurassic park), introduced me to traditional Iranian food (my favourite dish being *ash reshteh*) and even took me hiking at sunrise in the Alborz. Though he raised a sceptical eyebrow at my suggestion that we walk the length of Vali Asr as a way of getting a true impression of the city. At other times, along with some course mates we would usually head to Darband, to wander up the winding path that criss-crosses the stream before collapsing in a cafe to drink tea, smoke shisha and, if we were lucky, share fresh walnuts with Iranians returning from a hike.

It took a bit of time to get used to dealing in *tomans* and *rials* (with much help from passers-by on the street). Still, this and haggling with a few taxi drivers, was great conversation practice. Only once was I forced to pay a driver extra to convince him not to break my nose (a misunderstanding over the price of the fare). I learnt some interesting phrases along the way, although I hope not to need them in my final oral exam. On my second day in Iran, eager to please, I agreed to be interviewed by a couple of student journalists. My face subsequently appeared in the university newspaper under the headline: "It was poetry that drove me to study Persian", with the subtitle: "Persian is a more beautiful language than English". For the next few weeks I had to live with being a pretentious traitor in the eyes of the fellow Brits on the course. Still it got me some friends amongst the Iranian journalists. On a high from my newspaper

interview, and in a moment of panic, I agreed to go along to the headquarters of Iranian state TV to take part in a live broadcast. It was a cultural show called, *Iraniha*, and in a short segment about foreigners learning Persian, I, and several other students, were invited on to present ourselves to camera, answer some questions about our love of Persian and then recite a poem. It was a surreal experience, especially since the presenter had only thought to mention that we should recite a poem a minute before going live. The millions of Iranians watching this broadcast at 11.30 pm must have been on the edge of their seats, as a flabbergasted Englishman painfully racked his brain for a suitable snippet from Saadi. Thankfully, my Persian teacher from Exeter's dogged insistence on the importance of poetry in Iran paid off. I managed to remember a short piece of verse, got my round of applause, a well-done cup of carrot ice cream and a thank-you selfie, before being driven home.

The Saadi Foundation has close links to the Iranian government so I was not too surprised by the trips to Ayatollah Khomeini's house and the weekly publicity flyers put in the dormitories to remind us of Iran's place as the fastest growing economy in the world. Not to mention the general over-the-top-ness of much of the programme (e.g. the closing ceremony included motivational videos set to the Game of Thrones theme music, and we were constantly filmed by student journalists during classes and on every afternoon excursion). Nevertheless, they housed us, fed us, taught us and carted us around the country all for free, so I could not really complain.

At the end of the three-week language course we went by bus to Isfahan. Unfortunately, this was only a brief day-and-a-half trip, but we managed to see most of the major sites. I listened to local men sing folk songs beneath the Si-o-Seh Pol bridge, witnessed the shaking minarets of Monar-e-Jonban, and visited the Sheikh Lotf Allah Mosque, the Jameh Mosque and the Chehel Sotoun palace. Though, somewhat bizarrely, they made sure we had time to visit the Isfahan aquarium for three hours. However, my lasting memory of Isfahan was eating *biriani* as the sun set over Maydan-e Naqsh-e-Jahan with the son of one of my teachers who had kindly given me a tour of the bazaar. In true Iranian style, we sat on the grass and ate our food, chatting about a shared fondness for rugby, poetry and Instagram as the light slowly faded. I was only in Iran for a short time but it left a lasting impression. Now in the final year of my

undergraduate degree, my passion for Persian has certainly not diminished. I am in the process of applying for further study at Tehran university, partly so I can walk the length of Vali Asr, but mostly to return and develop my language skills, visit Shiraz and other cities and get an even deeper appreciation for Iranian culture. Once again, I am very grateful for the Iran Society grant, without which I would have had none of the above experiences.

## **Interim Report by Travel Scholar Serena Watson-Follett**

I was very grateful to receive a grant of £750 from the Iran Society before I came to Iran in October last year. I study European and Middle Eastern Languages at the University of Oxford, and since my chosen Middle Eastern language is Persian, I have to spend the second year of my degree studying at the Dehkhoda Language Institute in Tehran. I came here on the 15th October and am now in my third term of Farsi language lessons. I attend lessons five days a week.

My main aim while I am in Iran has been to improve my spoken and written Farsi, and needless to say I've seen a massive improvement in both. I make a conscious effort to spend time with Iranian friends rather than other international friends. This has been very important since there's such a difference between the language used in the classes at Dehkhoda and the language that Iranians use on a day-to-day basis.

In my spare time, I try to take advantage of the huge variety of opportunities in Tehran - cinemas, parks, museums and constant art exhibitions. I teach English to three students in the form of one-on-one, private lessons. This feels very rewarding as I'm aware one of the best ways Iranians can improve their job opportunities is to learn English. Thanks to the grant I received I don't depend on this teaching to fund myself, so I can offer my classes at an affordable price and I know that if it was higher some of my students would not be able to continue lessons.

I recently started volunteering at an unofficial school for Afghan refugee children in the west of Tehran. For various reasons, these children cannot attend official Iranian schools. I go to this school once a week and stay for three and a half hours, teaching them English and also helping with an after-school poetry and music class. This school has very little funding and resources and a shortage of teachers. This week the current teacher of the class that I help with told me that he is going travelling and asked me to take over the class for the next couple of months, so I now have responsibility for this class, which is made up of girls of a mix of ages from about eight to thirteen years old. I think it's going to be very interesting to get to know this Afghan community. When I came to Tehran I was shocked

by the difference in status and wealth of the Afghan refugees in Iran. I was very touched to meet these schoolgirls, most of whom have never left Tehran but who dream of one day going to Afghanistan.

Between each six-week term we have a ten-day holiday, which I always use to travel. The grant has been very helpful in terms of paying for transport and other costs. So far, I've visited Shush, Shiraz, Bandar Abbas, Kashan and the Persian Gulf islands of Kish, Qeshm and Hengam. Iran is a beautiful and varied country and I can't wait to see more of it - in my next holidays I'd like to see the northern province of Gilan, to see more of its ancient cities like Yazd and Esfahan, and to hike in the Alamut valley. Travel in Iran is completely unlike the travel in Europe that I had experienced, thanks to the Iranians' unending hospitality. I'm yet to stay in a hostel, since Iranians are so willing to offer you their homes. In this way, I've got to know many Iranians, from traditional, strictly religious families with multiple generations living in one household, to young, educated Iranians who aren't interested in many of the traditional Iranian ways of life.

Meeting and talking to Iranians has taught me that any preconceptions I had about the people as a whole were wrong, because it is impossible to generalise about Iranians. People have a huge range of views on Islam, the Supreme Leader, the Shah's time, America, Israel and just about every other topic that I've discussed with them. I think it's a shame that in countries like England we know so little of the Iranian people. There are a lot of misconceptions and general ignorance about Iran, for instance the belief that the majority of people are strict Muslims, or that they hate all Westerners. In reality, most Iranians seem disappointed by the relations between their own and Western governments, are very interested in meeting Westerners and have no bitter feelings towards them. I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to live in Iran and gain an understanding of the country for myself. I think the Iran Society grant is vital to allow people to continue to come here, build international ties and dispel misconceptions that people on both sides might have. I know that when I return to England I will take any chance to talk about my experience in Iran and to encourage others to go to Iran and see the country for themselves.

***Rise and Fall*, by Abdolreza Ansari. I.B.Tauris, 2017, 305 pp index.**

*Reviewed by Hugh Arbuthnott*

Abdolreza Ansari had a long and important career in Iran. He began it by working for Point 4, the US aid programme, and finished it as the Head of Princess Ashraf's Imperial Organisation for Social Services (IOSS) with spells in the Ministry of Finance, Governor General of Khuzestan, and as Minister first of Labour and then of the Interior in between. This is an oral history of his years working in the Iranian Government under the Shah. The interviews he gave were conducted by Gholamreza Afkhami in the early years of the new millennium. Given that the story of his time working for the Government or quasi-governmental organisations starts to all intents and purposes in 1951, Ansari gives an extraordinary amount of detail even, for example, quoting the times of meetings ("The Board of Trustees... were meeting as scheduled at 10 a.m. on 19 August 1953..."), as well as the names of those who attended which meeting and what they said. He presumably at the time kept a detailed record of his official life with the "support and encouragement" of his wife to whom the book is dedicated. His accounts of events that took place long before the interviews must mean too that Ansari wrote (or read out) the answers to the interviewer's questions; he cannot have been replying spontaneously.

So we do not have to suspect that Ansari's long-term memory may have let him down. In this case, one of the major interests in the book is his choice of what he has not recorded. He mostly steers clear of international politics and their effect on Iran. The USA, where Ansari studied, is mentioned almost entirely in the context of his work for Point Four. There is no suggestion that the US Government interfered in Iranian domestic affairs during his time in government. The British government, held by so many Iranians even to this day to wield a malign influence on Iranian politics, is scarcely mentioned. He refers to the economic damage done to Iran by the occupation of Iran by Britain and the USSR during the war, and also to the affair of the oil nationalisation but doesn't make a meal of it. He does refer to difficulties with the Oil Consortium over revenue but the book as a



whole is remarkably free of the sort of polemics or politics (the riots of 1963 and Khomeini's exile are mentioned no more than a couple of times) which one might have expected.

Ansari portrays himself as a technocrat, a manager, trying to make government work for the people of the country, not a politician. He claims that thousands of young people of his generation in Iran believed like him in the Shah, as a "strong, capable, forward-thinking and patriotic ruler" who wanted to modernise his country. This may be true, but the only way the Shah thought he could do it was if he took all the major decisions, and also a great many minor ones, himself. There are examples all the way through the book. Ansari was fully aware that the administration, the bureaucracy, needed to be overhauled and that this meant not only eliminating corruption but also persuading civil servants and Ministers to take more responsibility themselves. Yet throughout the book, Ansari describes how he or the Prime Minister or other Ministers had to ask the Shah to agree to this or that measure. When he was Governor General of Khuzestan, for example, Ansari saw that the prisons were overcrowded and met in one prison an old man who had been put there for failure to pay a debt of 300 tomans. To reduce overcrowding and be more humane, Ansari thought that only failure to pay a debt of 2000 tomans or more should carry a prison sentence. He writes that he knew he would get nowhere with the "Justice Department" or the national police so he had to get the Shah to instruct him to ask the Minister of Justice to introduce legislation into the Majles.

Surprisingly, although the lower House passed the bill, the Senate turned it down because, according to Ansari, many Senators were landlords and against it. So the Shah couldn't always get his way. This was true also for the political parties he created. Ansari writes that they were used by unscrupulous politicians to get positions of power for themselves and their friends. One influential and knowledgeable political operator, for example, was able to get anyone he supported into the Majles; it was rumoured that he had thousands of birth certificates without pictures which he gave to people to vote, for a fee, for his candidates.

Nevertheless, if the Shah wasn't all powerful, he held most of the reins of power firmly in his hands and all of his Ministers, including the Prime Minister, waited for his decisions. Ansari was

Minister of the Interior for a time. When he was appointed to the post, the Head of the Police (the urban police) and the Head of the Gendarmerie (rural police) called on him as he was nominally their chief “but we all knew where their orders came from”. Similarly, the security organisation, SAVAK, “operated in its own right and reported directly to the Shah”. There was no close relationship between the Ministry of the Interior and the country’s intelligence or security agencies as exists in other countries and the Minister had no responsibility for their actions.

The book’s title, “The Shah’s Iran”, has the subtitle “Rise and Fall”. The Rise refers to the Shah’s ambition to make the Iran he inherited into a modern state and the measure of success he achieved in infrastructure, agriculture, education etc. Ansari contrasts Churchill and Roosevelt’s lack of respect for the young Shah when they came to Iran for the Tehran Conference in 1943, with the respect he was accorded by all the distinguished international personalities who came to Persepolis in 1971 for the celebration of the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Persian monarchy. On the other hand, the Fall is far from being an account of what happened in 1978 and 1979 and why.

The revolution came for Ansari and other top Iranian government officials as a bolt from the blue, as it did for the rest of the world. He and they “had paid little attention to religion as a possible focus of opposition”. Ansari does not mention Iran’s arms build-up nor the 1973 oil price rise nor does he speculate about any other of the factors which may have contributed to the revolution but he does describe what many believe were some of them – over centralisation of power with the Shah, financial corruption, rigging of elections, cronyism in government. He also gives a full account of the change from the Islamic calendar and back again, and of the details of the preparations for Persepolis and the celebrations themselves. So while Ansari describes these various aspects of the regime, he draws no conclusions from them and we are left with a fascinating account of how he saw government working under Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and of the disinterested labours of himself and of many of its officials - but no analysis of why it all went so wrong.

***In the Lion's shadow: The Iranian Schindler and his Homeland in the Second World War***, by Fariborz Mokhtari; The History Press 2011, 176 pp incl. notes and illus., £9.99

*Reviewed by Antony Wynn*

Abdol-Hossein Sardari was a junior diplomat in Paris at the beginning of the Second World War. Blessed with independent means, he led the life of a convivial bachelor, making many friends in all the right quarters by giving lavish parties. When the Germans occupied France, Iran was a neutral nation, favoured by the Nazis as being fellow Aryans. There were a few hundred Iranian Jews in France, mostly engaged in the carpet, antique and jewellery trades, who of course were required to wear the yellow star. In brief, Sardari, who had trained as a lawyer, turned Nazi logic on its head to produce an argument that Iranian Jews were in fact not of Jewish descent but Iranians who had converted to 'Mosaic belief'. They were therefore Aryans and should not be subject to the treatment meted out to the other Jews in France. Since the Nazis wished to cultivate Iran as an ally, this argument carried some weight in the various Nazi organisations devoted to the racial question, although it did not convince Eichmann. Until the Allies occupied Iran and Iran declared war on Germany, all went well and Sardari managed to save all the Iranian Jews in France from expropriation and deportation.

With Iran as a belligerent, the Iranian Legation had to close and Sardari was ordered home. He refused to leave and set himself up as the representative of Iran in the Swiss Embassy, at his own expense. He kept a large stock of blank Iranian passports, which he issued to as many Jews as he was able to. He even persuaded the Zoroastrian chief *mobed* in Iran to declare that the Sassoon family were originally Zoroastrians called Sassan.

At this point of the narrative the author takes up the second half of his title to berate the Allies at great length for their occupation of neutral Iran, for expelling Reza Shah and the Germans, and for bringing famine and affliction on the country. He heaps praise on Reza Shah for his many reforms and the development of the country

but admits that his lust for other people's land might have been a failing. It is refreshing to see the Iranian side of this story, but he makes no allowances for the necessities of wartime, nor does he acknowledge the efforts of the British, in particular, to alleviate the famine, which was caused as much by bad harvests and lack of transport as anything else, not to mention some landowners hoarding stocks of grain in order to raise the price.

After the war Sardari was charged with malpractice for issuing false passports, but the charges were eventually dropped. He went on to serve in Baghdad and later joined NIOC in Tehran. He lost his property in France and, after his retirement from NIOC, lived in reduced circumstances in Croydon, where he died in 1979.

This book is an intriguing read, fluently written, albeit with occasional lengthy asides – which are nevertheless interesting. We are given a vivid picture of France under German occupation and, above all, of an extraordinary unsung man who saved many lives out of sheer humanity, and who suffered for his pains.

***The Bazaar of Isfahan***, by Ali Asghar Bakhtiar, John Donat and Paul Oliver, edited by Marcel Vellinga, Argumentum, Lisbon, 2016, 170pp. ISBN: 978 972 8479 97 8. £25.00. ***Paradise Lost***, by Georg Gerster, Phaidon, London, 2008, 184pp. ISBN: 9 780 7148 4884 6. £35.00

*Reviewed by James Buchan*

The two books under review, though as different as could be, share certain features. Both arose from surveys conducted in or above Iran in the 1970s under the patronage of Queen Farah. Both sat in filing-cabinets for half a lifetime. Neither has a text of consuming interest. Both are beautiful beyond description.

The Isfahan book had its origins in 1956, when a party of students from the Architectural Association in London visited Isfahan at the invitation of a former graduate, Ali Bakhtiar, who entertained them as only Iranians and Bakhtiari can.

One of the students, a young man named John Donat, one scalding afternoon in the courtyard of the Shah Mosque (now the Imam's Mosque), took a photograph on colour film that ranks only a little behind Antoin Sevruguin's "The Cemetery and the City of Qum" (1885), the greatest photograph ever taken by a foreigner in Iran. Donat, alas!, died in 2004 and never saw his picture printed on a full page here.

Ten years later, amid growing anxiety for the future of the bazaar, Bakhtiar and Arthur Upham Pope, the American scholar who was then director of the Asia Institute of the Pahlavi University in Shiraz, gained the backing of the Queen for a thorough architectural survey.

The survey began in 1968 and with Pope's death the next year, was taken over by Bakhtiar with the help of two Iranian civil engineers (M.A. Maravasti and M. Rayhani) and several of his pupils. Remembering the amateur photographer of twelve years earlier, Bakhtiar invited Donat to make a photographic record of the bazaar's buildings, people and crafts. To write an English text,

Bakhtiar commissioned Paul Oliver, the head of the graduate school at the Architectural Association. Donat made visits to Isfahan in 1971, 1972 and 1973, on the last of which Oliver accompanied him and spent a couple of months in the bazaar.

The Isfahan bazar is large and complex, the project became bogged down, and in 1978 Heinz Gaube and Fritz Wirth published *Der Bazar von Isfahan* (Wiesbaden, 1978). It was the old, old story. By the time the Brits stumble onto the beach, the Germans have taken all the sun-loungers. Then the Iranian Revolution occurred and any association with the Queen in exile became suspect. No publisher could be found. I do not know what happened to allow this edition, but the authors acknowledge support from Harley Street Cosmetic and the Barakat Trust.

Paul Oliver is an expert on vernacular architecture and on the music of the Blues, but no particular Persianist. The text is full of inaccuracies, which the editors have left to stand, correcting a few in notes at the end of each chapter. He writes very well about architecture, and particularly the unseen parts of buildings, such as the domes that support the arched halls known as *ivans* or the view of the city from the minaret of the Ali Mosque.

He also, as it were, writes *architecturally* about merchandise, as in this representative passage: "Boxes are made from biscuit tins and metal cans that have been opened out, beaten flat, cut to shape, soldered and decorated with lacquered patterns between a fine chasing of lines. Finished boxes are piled on larger chests and wooden crates with tin and nail decorations. An apprentice, his mouth bristling with copper nails, hammers in a new studded pattern."

Oliver's recommendations for conserving the bazaar have more than stood the test of time. As the Isfahan *shahrdari* or Municipality says on its website, taking too much blame to itself: "Construction of new streets, particularly in [the] historic axis, [was] an unforgivable mistake." The bazaar has shown it can adjust. In the 1920s, for example, it was one great opium factory whereas in the 1970s its principal business was textiles. Foreign tourists have greatly helped.

Donat's photographs are beyond praise. Like Sevruguin, he peoples his photographs and the clothes, hair-styles and head-gear of the early 1970s are quite as interesting as the architectural record. He is no Robert Byron. who seemed to detect no connection between the

Iranians under Reza Shah and the men and women who raised such stupendous monuments as the Hakim Mosque. Donat's interior of the Shah's Bath, with a single attendant posing like Rostam by a plastic bucket in the gloom, takes the breath away.

Dr. Georg Gerster, who still lives at an advanced age in Zurich, cut his teeth, so to speak, on the troglodyte churches of Ethiopia (*Churches in Rock*, London, 1970). In 1975, he petitioned the Queen to allow him to make an aerial survey of Iran. She passed down the request to Iran Air, who made available to Gerster a Britten-Norman BN-2 Islander, and two pilots. Between April 11, 1976 and May 30, 1978, Gerster made rather over one hundred flights over Iran in the company of the German archaeologist, Dr. Dietrich Huff (who is the expert on Firuzabad.)

In Gerster's pictures, all taken with Nikon lenses on Kodachrome film, there is a sort of battle to the death between document and abstraction, as with the watercolours of his countryman, Paul Klee, in Tunisia in 1914, and with effects not very much less beautiful. In a sign that bygones are becoming bygones, Gerster was invited last year to show this series of photographs in Tehran, Isfahan and Kashan. Only his title, *Paradise Lost*, is unfortunate.

The snare or trap of Iranian studies, for both foreigners and Iranians, is nostalgia: the melancholy sense that there existed an Iranian Iran that disintegrated at the moment one began to study the place; or even that it was one's glance that dealt the death-blow. The two books under review show that there is something to be nostalgic about.

---

### **Sir Clive Bossom (1918-2017)**

We were sorry to hear of the recent death of Sir Clive Bossom, a former chairman of the Iran Society. An obituary will follow in the next edition of the Journal.