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Letter to the Editor

Editor's Note: The letter that follows was published in CCR 84 Spring 2021; however, references cited by the author were dropped inexplicably. We regret the error and offer the letter in its entirety.

The Pahlavis and the Other Side of the Coins

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It was with great interest that I read “Political Power of Iranian Hierocracies” by János Jany published in *Comparative Civilizations Review* (83, 2020: 67-102). Writing about Iranian history is not an easy task because historical points of view have been highly politicized. Such is particularly the case when discussing the Pahlavi dynasty, particularly its founder, Reza Shah Pahlavi, and his successor, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi. It is therefore of major importance to be transparent and, when feasible, to present the varying views and schools of thought which may exist with respect to the Pahlavi dynasty (Khoshnood, 2019).

Jany's article is one-sided — very biased — regarding certain points that I shall endeavor to clarify by presenting the other side of the coins.

Point 1. As a result of Reza Shah's pro-German policy during the 1930's, British and Soviet forces entered Iran in 1941, and the Shah abdicated in favor of his son (Jany (2020): 76).

For purely political and ideological reasons, the opponents of Reza Shah and the Pahlavi dynasty have attempted to attribute pro-Nazi sentiments and therefore pro-German policies to Reza Shah. Such attributions could not be more mistaken. That Reza Shah had pro-Nazi or pro-German tendencies is a myth. Based on matters related to national interests, Iran had political and economic ties with the German government, just like the ties which the Swedish government maintained with the Germans during World War II (Åmark, 2015, pp. 350 and 353-355). Even though the reasons for the allied occupation of Iran are complex, scholars have argued that the primary reason for the occupation was to secure the Iranian railway in order to enable it to transport supplies to the Soviet Army engaged, as it was, in its war against Nazi Germany, and to secure the Iranian oil fields (Farrokh, 2011, p. 269).

Regarding Iranian Jews, Reza Shah informed Adolf Hitler that these people were Iranians and that any harm to them would be viewed as a direct offense to the Shah himself. Hitler thus refrained from declaring Iranian Jews to be enemies of the Third Reich (Ross, 2019). As a result of the Shah's support, the Iranian Schindler, Abdol Hossein Sardari, who was Iran's consul in Paris during World War II, saved thousands of Iranian Jews from certain death in German extermination camps (Mokhtari, 2012). That Reza Shah was in no way pro-Nazi was also clearly demonstrated by the way he modernized Iran and treated minorities. Orly Rahimiyan (2012) writes that "the Reza Shah era witnessed the repeal of all of the discriminatory laws applying to Jews. Jews were accorded the right to serve in the military and to enroll in state schools."

Point 2. Mossadegh was finally removed from office in 1953 with the help of the CIA, Operation: Ajax (Jany (2020): 76).

Although it is unfortunately and commonly believed among academics that the CIA, through Operation Ajax, and MI6, through Operation Boot, removed Mossadegh from office, the truth is far more complex. Many scholars either reject the view that the CIA and MI6 contributed in any way to the fall of Mossadegh, or conclude that the roles of the CIA and of MI6 were insignificant (Afkhami, 2009; Bayandor, 2010 and 2019; Cooper, 2011 and 2019; Milani, 2009 and 2012; Mokhtari, 2008; Taheri, 2012; and Takeyh, 2013 and 2014).

There is much more to the story than that of Operation Ajax and Operation Boot.

Point 3. The 1970's witnessed an economic boom fueled by rising income from the oil industry, and at the same time, controversies over land reform, which caused millions of people to become unemployed, forcing them to settle in cities to look for jobs, more often than not in vain (Jany (2020): 76).

Here, it is important to mention that the Iranian economy in 1977, just prior to the unrest that contributed to the downfall of the Shah, was in an impressive state. Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) was 65 percent larger than that of Korea and 26 percent larger than that of Turkey. Also, when examining GDP rankings, Iran, in 1977, was ranked as the world's 18th largest economy. Seventeen years earlier, it had ranked as the world's 19th largest economy (Chamlou, 2019).

In regard to unemployment rates, different sources present different rates. For this reason, it is of utmost importance to consult primary sources. Dr. Jahangir Amouzegar (1992), a prominent Iranian economist and former Minister of Finance and Minister of Commerce in Iran, states in an article that "Most specifically, Iran's prerevolution economy was far from stagnant: It was registering positive growth every year between 1963 and 1977, and unemployment was relatively small and localized."

A year earlier, Amouzegar (1991, p. 59), had stated that “All through the 1970s, even to the very end, there was a shortage of labor in the country, as a whole, of both skilled and unskilled workers. Open unemployment remained very low — at 1 percent of the work force.” He added that “The unemployment rate consequently declined from 3 percent of the labor force in 1976 to 2.9 percent in 1977 [...]”

It is thus not correct to write, as does Jany, that “millions of people” were unemployed.

Point 4. Since the army was not in full control of the situation, the Shah fled the country the next year and made the way free for Khomeini to return (Jany (2020): 77).

Unfortunately, there is a massive lack of studies as to why the Imperial military failed to gather behind the Shah and to bring order to the country. But to claim that the military was not in full control is wrong. Regrettably, Jany’s article does not present any information about this matter.

Many experts consider that the Islamic revolution was the unanticipated outcome of a joint US-UK effort, encouraged by the West in general or made possible by it. The why’s and how’s of these events are beyond the scope of this brief letter. I refer the curious reader to various sources (e.g. Afkhami, 2009; Cooper, 2011; Evans, 2009; Hanke, 1998; Nahavandi, 2005; Shawcross, 1981). To establish an authoritative basis for my criticism, I refer here to Alexandre de Marenches, head of the French External Documentation and Counter-Espionage Service (SDECE), who informed the Shah that the US president, Jimmy Carter, had determined to overthrow him and replace him with someone else. De Marenches states that he “mentioned to the Shah the names of those in the United States who had been given [the] responsibility of seeing to his departure and replacement” and added that he also informed the Shah that he “had even taken part in a meeting where one of the questions for consideration was, ‘How is the Shah’s departure to be managed, and by whom shall he be replaced?’” (Ockrent, 1988, pp. 125-126)

Even if one assumes that the US and the UK were behind the revolution, other inferences can be made. These can be more clearly understood through the words of the former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Wesley Clark, who in an interview with Piers Morgan (2013) stated: “[...] We sent in an American general [Huyser] ...to tell the Iranian generals [to] back off. So for about 60 days we kept the military from intervening in Iran. During that period, the revolution coalesced, the military forces fell apart, extreme Islamists took over, and at that point the Carter administration said, ‘oh my goodness, get the general to take control, don't let this happen.’ And the general said, ‘we waited too long, we have no forces, and a few months later all the generals had been shot,’ and we have Iran today.” In support of this statement by General Clark, Jimmy Carter (1995, p. 457) states: “He [Huyser] had dissuaded some of its [the military] leaders from attempting a coup”.

It would thus, perhaps, be more correct to underline the passivity of the military with respect to foreign interventions.

Point 5. Similarly, advocates of Western thought are believed to be or at least are denounced as Western agents collaborating with foreign powers against Iran, a charge with serious consequences. This reality helps one to understand why leaders of the green opposition demanding more democracy and openness hastened to declare publicly that they respect the underlying principle of the Iranian constitutional system, velayat-e faqih, even though doing so undermines their own program, since this very principle is the most important obstacle in the way of further democratization (Jany (2020): 94).

This paragraph is highly problematic because of its political inferences. Jany states that the leaders of the “green opposition,” its principal one being Mir-Hossein Mousavi, are in reality opposed to the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but that they are forced by fear of persecution to state otherwise. This very political statement is not at all representative of Mir-Hossein Mousavi’s political views.

Mousavi was not only a close assistant of Ruhollah Khomeini, but he was also the Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic during one of its most difficult periods including an ongoing war with Iraq. Mousavi was also involved in the 1988 massacres of political prisoners which still haunt the regime (Khoshnood, 2020). To believe that Mousavi, as the leader of the green movement, is in reality opposed to the constitution of the Islamic Republic is very wrong. On the contrary, both Mousavi and other individuals in the green movement, just as Jany states, have endorsed the constitution of the Islamic Republic. It is very unclear how Jany (2020) can claim to know what the leaders of the green opposition really think. Based on their history as servants of the Islamic regime in Iran and Mousavi’s role in the 1988 massacres, it is fully understandable that they would not only respect but also support the constitution of the Islamic Republic.

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