

Will Dodds

IR 394: Historical Geography

Term Paper

12.7.10

Iran's Role in WWII

Because the Second World War was dominated by large world powers, the smaller, yet significant roles played by other countries in the conflict are commonly diminished in history's writing. Iran is a nation slighted by this bias. Despite its wishes to remain neutral in WWII, Iran's history was forever changed when Allied Powers invaded its borders in 1941. Iran's location with coastal borders along the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman allowed the Allied Powers to use it as a supply route for goods being transferred from the Arabian Sea to Soviet forces just north of Iran. Iran proved to be a vital asset to the Allied WWII victory, as it provided many successful Soviet fleets with their means for competition, and gave Russian Jews migrating south through the Caspian Sea an extended escape route from Nazi persecution. But despite Iran's contribution to the Allied victory, its involvement in WWII led to an inflation of Iranian currency and a drastic food shortage crisis in the country. A lasting resentment for Allied occupation during WWII led to a traditionalist takeover of Iran in 1979 and the Iranian government is still unhappy about its role in the war today.

During the Interwar Era, Iran was a country in transition. The entire Middle East region during the immediate post-WWI history was themed by national resistance efforts against unwanted foreign occupation. This phenomenon was most prominent in Iran and Turkey, both of whom were fighting an Allied presence within their respective borders. Following WWI, Ahmad Shah Qajar was Iran's nominal leader, but real authority in the country was exercised by

foreign powers—Russians in the north and Britain in the south (Cleveland 185). In 1917, Russian forces began gradually withdrawing from Iran to help resolve the Russian Civil War, a conflict fought between the former Russian Empire and Bolshevik communists. Britain, however, remained in Iran to pursue their interests in the region's large oil quantities, and to thwart a lingering Bolshevik movement in Iran, a result of Soviet influence in Iran's northern territory. Although Britain worked to stabilize the Iranian government and reorganize their military, there was a growing resentment for foreign occupation among many Iranian nationalists who wanted autonomy for their country. Because of Ahmad Shah's cooperation with the British, a growing population in Iran became displeased with his regime. In 1925, Ahmad Shah was finally overthrown by Reza Khan Pahlavi.

Reza Shah was removed from his throne by 1941, but his regime had an enormous impact on Iran's role in WWII. Regardless of Britain's rocky relationship with Iran throughout the early 20th century, they greatly influenced Reza Shah's regime. Reza Shah committed himself to modernization. He firstly made Iran a secular state. He disposed of the Sharia as Iranian law and reduced the power of the Ulama, Islam's authoritative scholars, in Iran. He then established an Iranian military, set up a government funded secular school system, and boosted the status of women in Iranian society. Reza Shah wasn't able to completely expel the British from Iranian borders physically, either. In 1933, he extended a contract with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, a British presence in Iran under various names since 1908, that permitted the organization to remain in Iran until 1993.

Reza Shah also developed an alliance with Germany, which had a drastic impact on Iran's fate and ultimately led to the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941 (Changing the Times). Because Britain and Russia had had such an impact on Iran throughout the past half-century, Iran

typically adopted a foreign policy that sought an alliance with a third world power to balance the foreign interest in their country (Burgener). As a result, by 1939, Germany became Iran's primary trading partner. Reza Shah also expressed open admiration for Hitler's anti-Semitic, pro-Aryan propaganda (Burgener). When WWII began in 1939, Iran proclaimed its neutrality, but its comfortable relationship with the Germans remained a concern for the Allied Powers. In June 1941, Nazi troops crossed Soviet borders and subsequently, two months later, Britain and the USSR invaded Iran in an effort to counter the Germans. Reluctantly, Iran was plunged into WWII.

The most immediate consequence of the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran on August 25, 1941 was that it helped lead to an increase in American participation in WWII. On September 16, a day before the Allied occupation of Iran was completed, Reza Shah abdicated his throne in favor of son Muhammad. Only 21-years-old at the time, Muhammad Shah's first action as leader of Iran was an appeal made to United States President Franklin Roosevelt. The Shah wanted an American alliance to protect Iran from the threat posed by British and Soviet presence within its borders. Initially, President Roosevelt wasn't keen on getting involved with Iran, given the United States' neutral stance on the WWII scene at the time (Rosemaita). But on December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor dragged the United States into WWII and rejuvenated their discussions with Iran (Rosemaita). In late January 1942, Muhammad Shah wrote to President Roosevelt. He had just signed the Tripartite Treaty of Alliance with Britain and the USSR, in which Iran acknowledged Allied presence within its borders and offered them non-military assistance in exchange for respect of the country's sovereignty during WWII. Muhammad Shah reminded President Roosevelt that the Tripartite Treaty was signed in accord with the Atlantic Charter, an agreement between Britain and the United States that outlined plans

for the post-WWII world. It, as quoted by the Shah, gave “all states [the right to pursue] their economic prosperity” and sought to “bring about the fullest collaboration between all states in the economic field” (Rosemaita). Unless the United States wanted to dishonor its word, Muhammad Shah said, it would abide by the Atlantic Charter and protect Iran from British and Soviet harm (Rosemaita).

The Shah’s argument was strengthened by the fact that foreign occupation was indeed hurting Iran. The Soviet and British militaries had divided Iran into two, north-south ruling districts, respectively, and there was a growing element of disregard for the Tripartite Treaty among their troops (Burgener). Also, because foreign militaries were buying grain intended for the Iranian marketplace, Iran began to suffer from a food shortage crisis (Burgener). As a result, resentment for foreign occupation began to spread throughout Iran (Changing the Times). The crisis made Muhammad Shah’s regime look increasingly unstable, which, the Americans worried, might give the Soviets an opportunity to implement a puppet regime in Iran (Changing the Times). Although the Americans were Soviet allies during WWII, the last thing they wanted was an expanded communist, Soviet empire (Weiss). In March 1942, the United States committed itself to stabilizing Iran.

By the summer of 1942, Iran had become a full-fledged force in the Allied Powers’ WWII effort. With the addition of the United States, the Allies’ first plan of action in Iran was to establish the Persian Gulf Command, an operation that used Iran as a supply route for imported American goods being sent to Soviet forces fighting just north of the Iranian border (Burgener). The territory upon which this process operated became known as the Persian Corridor. The United States firstly sent logistic and combat engineer units to design and conduct the transportation procedures due to take place in the Persian Corridor (Burgener). They devoted the

trans-Iranian railway exclusively to Allied use, improved Iran's transportation methods, built a system of new roads wide enough to accommodate American trucks, and put truck assembly plants in Andimeshk, a city in southwestern Iran (Burgener). The United States then imported more than 4.5 million tons of war supplies to a port located at the tip of the Persian Gulf in Korramshahr, Iran, as well as thousands of truckers to drive these goods north (Burgener). Thousands of Iranian citizens participated in this process, as laborers for road building and mechanics at Andimeshk's truck plants (Burgener). Over 30,000 Iranians were also employed by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which had become the country's largest business and continued to supply Allied Powers with oil (Cleveland 190). Finally in 1943, Iran officially declared war on Germany, which made them eligible for United Nations membership and strengthened their ties with the Allied Powers.

With Iranian help, the foreign presence in the Persian Corridor brought great results for the Allied Powers during WWII. Between 1941 and 1942, the Persian Gulf Command provided nearly 90% of Soviet forces with their means for competition, and in one year, nearly 648,000 vehicles were built in Iran to transport these supplies (Burgener). It also gave Russian Jews migrating the opposite direction an escape route from Nazi oppression beyond the Caspian Sea (Burgener). Overall, the Persian Gulf Command was critical in protecting the USSR, Iran, and the entire Middle East region from Nazi invasion during WWII.

WWII, however, was not nearly as beneficial for Iran. Although Allied imports, specifically large amounts of lumber, sparked a small industrialization movement in Iran following the war's conclusion, foreign occupation was otherwise detrimental to the Iranian wellbeing (Burgener). Along with the food shortage crisis, an inflation of currency crippled the lower and middle Iranian classes (Bakhash 38). Iran was also thrust into a changing social scene,

which the country was not prepared to accept (Bakhash 38). Because of foreign industrialization, large fleets of rural migrants came to Iranian cities seeking employment with Allied industry, and the mixture of social classes led to further instability throughout Iran. Having three sources of foreign influence in Iran also encouraged a variety of political ideologies to develop, butt heads, and disrupt the country (Bakhash 38). The Shah and those close to him were generally pro-American, while a nationalist, anti-Western trend of thought began to develop amongst Iran's suffering lower and middle classes. Also, the Tudeh Party is an example of an Iranian communist group that rose to prominence in the northern, Soviet controlled portion of Iran during WWII.

In 1944, unrest throughout Iran threatened to destabilize Allied relations, though it was not enough to cost them the war. Late that year, the Majlis, Iran's Parliamentary body, terminated all oil negotiations with Allied Powers for oil concessions until after the war. They were upset with the state of their country and wanted to focus on seeing out the end of WWII before it further harmed Iranian society (Bakhash 38). The Soviets reacted angrily and used their relationship with the Tudeh Party to bolster demands for Iranian oil concessions. This embittered Soviet relations with Britain and the United States, both of whom wanted the USSR to exert as little communistic influence on Iran as possible (Bakhash 38). By this time, Allied Powers had gained enough of a stronghold on the war to prevent this rift in their alliance, but it ultimately served as a key factor in the American-Soviet Cold War, which began to develop upon the conclusion of WWII in 1945 (Weiss).

Allied troops eventually left Iran, but following the war, Iran was never the same. Although the Soviets finally withdrew from Iran in 1946, their legacy did not. With the help of the Tudeh Party, in 1951, the Iranian Parliament nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

But two years later, in an effort to suppress any communist movements in Iran, the United States sponsored a coup that launched dictatorship rule over Iran and gave control of the oil company back to the British. From this point on, Iranian-American relations soured and Iran's traditional resentment towards the British for their continuous, unwanted presence in the country throughout the early 20th century developed into a full-fledged hatred for Western society. Finally, with the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran disposed of Muhammad Shah, instituted traditionalist, Islamic rule, and rid itself of all foreign occupation.

Iran is still an Islamic society today. It has cut ties with all connections to Muhammad Shah's regime and his efforts at modernization, but Iranian's haven't forgotten about the Allied occupation of their land during WWII. In 2009, Iran's current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, began a series of demands that Iran be compensated for the damages it suffered during WWII (FoxNews.com). He complained that Iran was thrust into the war unwillingly and despite its contributions to an Allied victory, was never rewarded. Ahmadinejad's claims have a great deal of validity. Iran proved to be a significant player in the Allied Powers' victorious WWII effort as a supply route for Soviet reinforcements; but Iran's participation in the war crippled its people and has since been a major factor in shaping their national identity as it is today.

Bibliography

“Ahmadinejad Demands Compensation for WWII Invasion.” 9 January 2010. *Fox News*. 6

December 2010. <<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2010/01/09/ahmadinejad-demands-compensation-wwii-invasion/>>

Bakhash, Shaul, Eric Hooglund, Angus MacPherson, Joseph A. Kechichian, and Houman

Sadri. Iran: A Country Study. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1989.

Burgener, Robert D. On Borrowed Wings. New York, NY: Washington Square Press,

2007. <<http://www.iranian.com/History/Nov97/WWII/index.html>>

Cleveland, William L., and Martin Bunton. A History of the Modern Middle East. Boulder,

CO: Westview Press, 2009.

“Iran in World War Two.” 21 November 2010. *Changing the Times*. 6 December 2010.

<http://www.changingthetimes.net/resources/iran_in_world_war_two.htm>

Rosemaita, Gregory J. “Strange Menagerie: The Atlantic Charter as the Root of American

Entanglement in Iran, & Its Influence Upon the Development of the Policy of

Containment, 1941-1946.” 25 May 1999. 6 December 2010.

<http://www.hicom.net/~oedipus/us_iran.html>

Weiss, Bernard J. “Turkey and Iran in Revolution.” HIST 254: The Modern Middle East.

Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA. 22 September 2010.