

Shahernas Shah

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In my childhood the Shah was a respected person. He appeared in the gossipy columns along with the international jet set. As a somewhat reformed playboy, he was cultured, urbane, fabulously rich and king of an exotic country, no wonder that he generated a certain fascination, spiced by his marriages to a succession of beauties. A kind of an Onassis, but richer, more powerful and of royal provenience to boot. More seriously he was a staunch ally of the West in a turbulent region, devoted to modernize and bring his poor backward country into the 20th century. This was the official picture, and as most official pictures the one you tend to believe, as there are usually no alternatives. Yet there were some mild grumblings, the exaggerated pomp with which he had himself and his wife coronated back in 1967, as well at the 2500th anniversary of the Shahs and their peacock throne, causes some raised eye-brows. Then there were talk of a secret police, but which country does not have a secret police, in fact it is after all unavoidable. Maybe his was a bit more brutal, but after all it was an oriental primitive country. The overthrow of the Shah came to most Westerners as a surprise, especially when it became apparent what kind of regime would come in his place, a regime of religious zealots, led by the legendary Khomeini, most Westerners had never heard of. This was the first taste of radical Islam, the West would taste, and more would come for the next forty years (at least). Iran, which up to then had been a solid pro-Western bastion, now more or less overnight became a mortal foe to the West, a pariah country, not entirely sane. How could it go so badly?

Kapuscinski has a different take on the story than the one fed us through official media with short memories and confined perspectives. But even his, one should take with a grain of salt, just because an account is cynical, goes against received wisdom, does not mean that it is necessarily true, at least not in all of its aspects. And why should it? Kapuscinski is no authority on Iran, he is, as one is tempted to write, a mere journalist, be it in the best of senses, meaning one with an incurable curiosity and the ability to ferret out neglected facts and reporting on them factually, having no axis to grind than that of serving the public. What he can do is to sense the mood and collect hearsay and try to make a picture from fragmentary evidence. And in fact this is how the narrative is presented, not a smooth, know-all approach, but one piecemeally constructed from various scraps, supposedly found on the authors messy table. This should probably not be taken too literally but rather as an artful device emphasizing the modesty of the author and hence increase our trust in him.

One thing should be clear from the start, and which has been clear to all concerned. The Shah, despite the ostentatiousness of his rule and all its trappings, was not the last in a line of Shahs going back 2500 years. He was simply an upstart. The backward country on the edge of the Russian and English colonial empires was a dependency of both, ruled not by law, but by concession from the great powers exercised by local strongmen. Kapuscinski starts out with a picture of the Shahs grandfather, a poor illiterate peasant, leading the

murderer of the present Shah to his execution in Tehran. It was to a large extent a country without roads, if you wanted to get somewhere you had to ride, or more likely walk. The poor peasant gave birth to a big man, Reza Khan, the father of the Shah, who with Russian machinations rose in the ranks and seized power in the early 1920's and became the Shah. By that time he already had a son, the future Shah, born in 1919, who would for his entire life be in the shadow of his physically powerful father, whom he both rejected and admired, and whose ruthlessness he tried, timid at heart as he was, to emulate. His father acquired power and wealth, the latter on an unprecedented scale. During the 30's he was an admirer of Hitler, which of course meant that he admired his power, not his ideas as he was no intellectual. This became an embarrassment, and with Barbarossa in 1941 the English and the Soviets found common ground. The Shah was disposed with embarrassing ease, the proud army that had been formed, fell as a house of cards, even before serious fighting had a chance to begin. Whom to replace him with? The young son of the Shah was not the first choice, but the alternatives were worse. This young man was at least present in the country, was in effect Persian, and spoke, unlike the alternatives, Persian. Thus this Shah of Shahs became a mere puppet in the hands of the allied forces. The aftermath of the war was very interesting due to the rise of Mossadegh¹, seen as the first democratically elected ruler in Persia, enjoying popular support. But he overextended himself and his mandate by proclaiming a nationalization of the oil-industry. This was at the time, as Kapuscinski reminds us, unprecedented, and the Western world was aghast at such a measure. There was a crisis, the Shah fled to Rome with his Soraya, but then the British and the Americans intervened and he could return to power, a power of course contained within the expectations of the Americans, but there never was any danger of his crossing the line.

Now in order to maintain order and power he needed of course a police. But the greatest threat to power is not necessarily that of physical force, but that of free thought, i.e. subversivity. It is one thing to control the actions of people, quite another to control their thoughts. Thus a great deal of the book is devoted to the excesses of SAVAK and reporting on a series of harrowing case stories and a depiction of the mood of fear into which the population was subjected. Kapuscinski is a journalist, he is spending time in Tehran after the Revolution to sense the atmosphere, he is not able, nor does he have the ambition, to collect hardcore statistical evidence. How large a part of the population was actually imprisoned as political prisoners, how many were subjected to fatal or near fatal torture? Kapuscinski is not out to present a systematic picture, his special forte is to look out for the telling detail, the kind people in general would overlook, and therein lies his charm. Still a police force that can torture people to death with impunity and in the most cruel ways to boot, says a lot, regardless of the statistical significance. Power has an ugly underside, one usually not noticeable to those fortunate enough not to be its victims.

The most enduring myth of the reign of the Shah is his modernization of the country, a myth which has rather gained ground in retrospect when comparing his reign with what would follow. Kapuscinski is unsparing in his sarcasm. First the Shah enriched himself, no doubt feeling that to be his prerogative. He surrounded himself by a court, whose

¹ The book 'Patriot of Persia' by de Bellaigue was reviewed in these collections (Book Reviews Xb) in July 2013

members also could exploit their privileges. There arose an upper class of great wealth, fed by corruption. This became even more pronounced as money started to flow in at an unprecedented rate in connection with the oil crises. To the Shah this must have become a godsend, suddenly everything was possible. He had visions, which he freely shared, that in ten years time or so he would rise the standard of living in his poor country to that of a Western nation. But he had no idea of how to get about it. He made huge purchases, not only for the benefit of the armed forces - his special fondness² - but such to raise the quality of living, without understanding the problems of an undeveloped infra structure. The ports were not dimensioned for such a huge importation of goods, causing ships long costly delays, nor were there storage facilities up to par, so much of the perishable goods was simply wasted. Furthermore there were not enough roads or railroads to distribute the goods, not enough freight cars and trucks to transport them, not enough skilled drivers to operate them. Iran was a country of primitive villages and a few big cosmopolitan cities. There simply was a discrepancy which he was not able to fathom. Any development of the country has to start slowly from the bottom in a piecemeal way, for that he had neither patience nor understanding, but simply thought that he could cut corners by simply paying his way. The White Revolution he talked so much about turned out to be his fall. Iran was a Muslim country in which religion played a very important role, not so much as a religion but as a social cohesive. In the Mosque the ordinary Iranian could find peace and self-respect away from a repressive regime, and in fact SAVAK had limited access to the Mosques thus providing some degree of sanctuary. His forceful way of implementing his White Revolution in the end only made for an alienation of the populace, and those modernizing reforms so much applauded in the West, such as increased rights for women, were seen as a betrayal of the country's culture and traditions and only led to antagonization.

It is in the Iranian's psyche to be self-centered, to put his own ego on top, and impose that on those around you. If you fail there is always the possibility of being top dog in your own family. Such generalizations are more embarrassing than illuminating, and belong to Kopuscinski's less felicitous ruminations. In what sense does this not apply to the population of any nation? True there is in the Arab world (from which the Iranians being non-Arabs stand apart, yet being Muslims are connected to) a deep sense of resentment and feelings of inferiority visa-vi the West, which can to a large extent explain what the author tries to convey by simply-minded clichés. More interestingly though is his brief historical resume of Shia in Iran. In recent years we have been treated to the irreconcilable conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites, which we originally were blissfully ignorant of. Conflicts that appear more deep-rooted consequently more bitter than those that have ravaged external relations with a non-Muslim outer world³. But what is what, and where do the Sunnis predominate and where the Shiites? The Shiites, Kapuscinski explains stem from the very start of Islam after the death of Muhammad. The Shiites have ever since been in opposition to mainstream Islam and regarded themselves as downtrodden and marginalized. So when

² Kapuscinski describes him as one who spent his time most fondly when perusing all the periodicals that the arms industry publishes, and finally being able to fulfill his schoolboy enthusiasm of collecting in style.

³ A phenomenon which is not unusual on a wide scale of human relations.

the Arabs conquered the old Persian empire, which had managed to stay free from Roman domination, and imposed their creed, the Iranian came in contact with the Shiites and took to them and their attitude of victim-hood, and thereby made Shia as their form of Islam, thus managing under domination to retain their independence and spirit through this act of commendable flexibility. Whether this is true or not, it sounds too much of a creation myth, it makes it possible, at least for me, to get some purchase on the division by making it more concrete. It does illustrate how Iran is an outsider in the Muslim world, as well as the subversive influence it can yield throughout it.

There are two kinds of Revolutions, Kapuscinski muses; the planned one and the spontaneous one. The planned one is more in the nature of a Putsch and it is imperative that it in its first push, so to speak, embraces as much territory as possible, because sooner or later it will come against resistant forces and a period of negotiations is bound to occur. The unplanned, spontaneous revolution, to which the Iranian should be classified as, only gains momentum. If there ever was a spark that ignited it, it was the newspaper article initiated by the Shah attacking the religious idol Khomeini as a foreign agent, not even Persian. It stirred up resentment and demonstration, which were not, as previously, easily dispersed by the authorities. The author speculates that it could have been enough that a single participant, maybe even a mere bystander, was not intimidated to move, because the prevalent fear did not take hold. Just as cowardice is contagious, so is courage. There is an automatic feedback. The more who stand up, the easier it becomes to stand up, and there is an unstoppable chain reaction. Just as one swallow does not make a summer, one demonstration ending in a massacre does not topple established power. But each massacre feeds forty days later a new demonstration honoring the dead as well as awaking a mood of avengement. A series of such massacres and new demonstrations leading to new massacres unfolds, and in the end the position of the Shah simply gets to be untenable. A house of cards tumble. The Shah was indecisive, is a typical explanation, he lacked a vision and a will to survive. According to the author this is not true. The Shah very well knew what was up and what had to be done, namely by all means available, maintain his power, trying out the one after the other available option⁴.

Kapuscinski wrote his book in the aftermath of the toppling of the Shah. There was much he did not know, nor understood. For most Westerners the Islamic Revolution was a case of getting out of the pan into the fire. More than thirty-five years have lapsed in time, more than the post-Mossadegh tenure of the last Shah, and more or less as long as his entire reign. Every Revolution brings with it a great relief as well as excitement, but a Revolution also creates a desert in which not necessarily the best survive. SAVAK certainly did not find itself out of vocation after the Revolution, professionalism of that kind is always welcomed by any power. As is so often the case, in the end the bad guys will prevail.

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⁴ As it would turn out the Shah was diagnosed with cancer already in 1974 and the treatment made him listless and unpredictable in mood. In the final years he was not just up to par to deal with the situation, and was too proud to let his wife, a mere woman, take the reigns, as she volunteered. After his fall he became an international pariah, only Sadat took pity on him, and accorded him a state funeral, after he died shortly into his exile.