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The Waning of Empires: The British, the Ottomans and the Russians in the Caucasus and North Iran, 1917–1921

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ABSTRACT During the First World War, Iran, although not a belligerent, was occupied at different times by Russian, British, and Ottoman troops. After a century of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Iran, an Entente between the two powers had been signed in August 1907, essentially dividing the country into a Russian sphere of influence in the north, a British sphere in the south, and a neutral sphere in the middle. As well as effectively ‘betraying’ the supporters of the Iranian constitution, the general effect of the Entente was to give Russia an even freer hand in Iranian politics than had previously been the case, although for a number of reasons, Britain’s considerable interests in Iranian oil (APOCH’s oilfields were located in the ‘neutral sphere’) were to have a more lasting impact. The situation in the Caucasus was equally confused, especially after Russia’s invasion of eastern Anatolia. After the fall of the Tsarist government in 1917, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia declared their independence from the Russian state at various times in 1918, while Bolshevik, British, German and Ottoman forces attempted to seize or consolidate territory in Iran and the Caucasus. In 1919, seeking to maintain its authority in Iran while the Bolsheviks were thought to be in no condition to interfere, Britain made an unsuccessful attempt to impose a protectorate. Two years later, with the Protectorate now in abeyance, a Soviet-Iranian Treaty was signed in Moscow on February 26, 1921 a few days after Reza Shah’s seizure of power. Under its terms, the Soviet government ‘forgave’ the loans made to Iran by the Tsarist government, and transferred all Russian assets in Iran to the Soviet government. The paper will try to set out the main parameters of this confused and often confusing chain of events.

KEY WORDS: Bolsheviks; Brest-Litovsk Treaty; Caucasus; Dunsterforce; First World War; Iran; Jangali movement; Ottoman Empire; Reza Shah

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.\(^1\)

\(^1\) M. Arnold, Dover Beach, c. 1867.

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Persia, as Sir Henry Rawlinson, Lord Curzon and other men of note reminded us at different times during the nineteenth century, was destined by her geographical situation to play a part in the future history of the East altogether disproportionate to her size or her rank in the scale of nations, while the condition of her people and the temper of her government were further factors, which, for good or ill, might powerfully affect the fortunes of our Indian Empire.2

Conventionally, four fairly longstanding imperial dynasties collapsed during, or as a result of, the First World War, those of the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollerns, the Ottomans and the Romanovs. But perhaps, if we can have a long nineteenth century, we can have a long First World War, and in that case, a fifth empire, that of the Qajars, which effectively fell in 1921 but limped on until 1925, can be added to the list. Of all the dynasties that failed to survive, the Qajars were perhaps the weakest, but their overthrow was only incidentally connected with the fortunes of war. Iran was neither in theory and in fact, a combatant; no Iranian government troops took part in any fighting, and though foreign armies did not respect Iran’s neutrality, they were concentrated in fairly restricted areas, so most of the country was spared the ravages of invasion and occupation (compare, for example, the terrible devastation wrought by Ottoman/Russian wartime struggles in eastern Anatolia).

Iran in the Late Nineteenth Century

Like the Ottoman Empire, the Iranian state had been the victim of constant foreign interference and intervention throughout the nineteenth century, but the experience of the two states had differed in a number of important ways. In the first place, foreign rivalry in Iran was almost entirely confined to the struggle for influence between Britain and Russia, since the territories of Iran and its neighbors were the principal stage on which the ‘Great Game’ was acted out for most of the period between 1828 and 1907.3 Secondly, for all practical purposes, no Iranian government embarked on any systematic reform program comparable to the Ottoman tanzimat.4 Thirdly, although Iran is composed of many different ethnic groups, the question of religious minorities never assumed anything like the proportions it did in the Ottoman Empire, where about 40 percent of the population were non-Muslims, and their manipulation by outside forces was a fact of life from the middle of the nineteenth century.5 Fourth, the Qajar state was in no way as centralized, or as relatively free of threats from over-mighty subjects, as the Ottoman state, and finally, and perhaps principally, neither of the two foreign powers most concerned with the fate of

Iran considered the encouragement of ‘reform’ as a major priority. Of course, the British always claimed that they did, but their pretensions to benevolence were bound to ring a little hollow after the signature of the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907. As part of a package of measures settling the main differences between the two erstwhile rivals, and in face of the menace to both of them posed by the rising power of Germany, the Convention divided Iran into a large Russian zone of influence, a medium sized ‘neutral zone’ in the south west, and a rather small British zone of influence in the south and south east.

Several important contenders for power and influence had emerged in the latter part of Nasir al-Din’s reign. As already stated, both the British and the Russians were apprehensive of the other’s designs. Russia, of course, was Iran’s neighbor, and Iranian/Russian relations were in that sense more obviously immediate and urgent. By the same token, British territorial ambitions were less immediately pressing than those of Russia, and were largely confined to the desire to create (or preserve) a cordon of ‘neutral’ buffer states (essentially Iran and Afghanistan) between Russia and the British Indian Empire. For this reason the gradual southward and south-eastward extension of the Russian imperial frontier throughout the nineteenth century had caused a good deal of nervousness in Britain and India as well as in Iran. This expansion took place both in the Caucasus—Russia had annexed Georgia in 1801, and took most of the area north of the Aras including Armenia and northern Azerbaijan by 1828—and in Central Asia between 1865 and 1881: Tashkent, Khojand, Samarkand and Bukhara were taken between 1865 and 1868; Krasnovodsk on the eastern Caspian in 1869, Khiva in 1873, Kokand in 1875, and Merv in 1881.

In addition, the Russians controlled Iran’s foreign debt until the First World War. In 1900, after Britain had refused a loan, Russia lent Iran £2.4 million at 5% interest, backed by the state’s customs receipts except those of the Persian Gulf, to be repaid in 75 years. In comparison to the vast sums owed by the Ottomans, Iran’s debts before the First World War were relatively modest, although, during and immediately after the war, withholding loans or forgiving debts were among the main weapons used by the British to impose their will. Britain (and British subjects) had significant financial and

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6 According to one historian, ‘On the whole, the British favored those reforms that would facilitate their trade and the lives of foreigners and those tied to them; when genuinely reforming nationalists became strong, as during the constitutional revolution, and wished to limit foreign privileges in Iran, the British opposed them.’ From N. R. Keddie (1981) Roots of Revolution: an Interpretative History of Modern Iran (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 39.

7 The neutral zone turned out to contain the oil fields, although oil only was ‘discovered’ a year after the Convention had been signed.

8 In fact the Convention effectively brought the Great Game to an end, by setting clear demarcations of the southward and northward extent of Russian and British influence. See Gillard, Struggle for Asia, pp. 175–176.

9 ‘A good deal of the territory which Russia had annexed since 1869 had been Persian, and the new frontier line from the Caspian to the Tejend river, in addition to giving Russia many more Persian villages, completed the strategic envelopment of Persia from the north . . .’ Moberley, op. cit., p. 29.

10 ‘In order to become Iran’s sole creditor Russia demanded that a loan given by the British Imperial Bank of Persia, in the sum of £500,000, to pay the Tobacco Concession indemnity, be paid off immediately.’ See P. Avery (1965) Modern Iran (London: Benn), pp. 122–123. A number of factors, including the fall in the world price of silver, had brought about massive devaluation of the Iranian currency and correspondingly high inflation over the last decades of the nineteenth century. See E. Abrahianian (1982) Iran between two Revolutions (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press), pp. 54–57.

concessionary interests in Iran, including the Imperial Bank of Persia, Lynch Brothers Company (which had a monopoly of the navigation on the Karun River) and a number of other merchant naval and commercial companies, and most significantly the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, in which the British government bought a majority shareholding in 1914. The company’s operations in Khuzistan were policed by tribal forces (paid by the company) who were generally outside the control of the Iranian government until the early 1920s. Finally, the Anglo-Russian agreement divided the country into spheres of commercial as well as political influence, to the particular chagrin of those who felt most excluded, the Germans.\(^\text{12}\)

In addition to real and attempted encroachments on Iranian national sovereignty on the part of Britain and Russia, a series of internal contenders for power had risen to the surface, and generally disappeared again, in the decades before the First World War. Like Morocco in 1900, Iran before World War 1 (and long afterwards) was not a state over which the government’s writ ran either powerfully or consistently, and state power was a matter of constant negotiation with powerful local actors. In addition, unforeseeable natural disasters, such as rains or droughts that led to bad harvests and then to food shortages would produce constant fears of urban revolt.\(^\text{13}\) Again, there was always a strong sense of local and communal identity, to which must be added that the organs of the state generally did not function in ways that instilled particularly deep feelings of loyalty or patriotism on the part of its subjects. Ties to city, region, or tribe usually acted as a much stronger focus of loyalty than the vaguer and physically much more distant concept of an ‘Iranian nation.’ Tribal leaders were able to withdraw their loyalty from the central state and/or actually take up arms against it with impunity more or less as and when they wished, a state of affairs that continued until Reza Shah’s vigorous and largely successful attempts at centralization in the 1920s and 1930s. Poor communications in a large country with its fair share of mountains and deserts—railways were almost non-existent, as has been mentioned, and there were less than 1000 miles of permanent roads before the First World War\(^\text{14}\)—also contributed to the relative isolation of the provinces from the capital, as did the absence of anything approaching a standing army.

This strong sense of local attachment naturally affected the growth of national sentiment, which was restricted to a fairly small number of individuals and groups. Its more concrete manifestations generally took the form of protest against the monarchy’s practice of giving concessions to foreigners, that is, easing immediate financial crises by permanent alienations of economically significant parts of the public patrimony, the best known being the de Reuter concession of 1872 and the Tobacco Concession of 1891–92, both negotiated with British subjects. In these two cases, the protests succeeded and Nasir


\(^{13}\) Abrahamian, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

al-Din was obliged to cancel the concessions, but he and his successors were widely involved in a whole series of similar arrangements that managed to escape large-scale popular censure.

In general, the sense of national sentiment was weak, especially when compared to the widespread and enthusiastic public manifestations of loyalty at, and after, the restoration of the Ottoman constitution. Furthermore, unlike the Moroccans or (some) Ottomans, the Iranians were not accustomed to thinking of their rulers as ‘naturally’ performing significant religious functions; the Shahs of Iran were not symbolically revered, either as ‘commanders of the faithful’ or as sultan-caliphs. This is not to say that the clergy had a long history of opposition to the monarchy: ‘[u]nder the Qajars, state and clergy coexisted harmoniously until the end of the nineteenth century’ when the rift between ruler and ruled began to widen, and an opposition movement was born out of an ‘alliance of the ulema with the emerging middle classes.’ However, while the Iraq-based Shi‘i ‘ulama’s fairly proactive role in the events of 1891–92 was rather more ‘out of character’ than has sometimes been thought, the juxtaposition of royal absolutism and subservience to foreigners on the one hand, with clerical assertions that the monarch’s behavior was un-Islamic and in some if not yet quite explicit sense unpatriotic, on the other, evidently had powerful resonance. The collective memory of the successful tobacco protest was an important ingredient in the formation of the embryonic national movement emerging at the turn of the twentieth century.

The immediate trigger for the Constitutional Revolution, which brought to the boil a series of associated discontents that had evidently been brewing for some time, was a major economic crisis at the end of 1905, which brought high inflation and a rapid rise in food prices. A series of major demonstrations in the early months of 1906 calling, inter alia, for an ‘adalet khaneh, eventually obliged Muzaffar al-Din Shah to make a series of concessions, and to accept, in August, demands for a constitution (based upon a parliamentary monarchy) and a national assembly; the latter, the majlis, met for the first time in October 1906. The shah signed the fundamental law on December 30, 1906, and died five days later. His son and successor Muhammad Ali’s more despotic instincts ensured that a fierce struggle for control of the Iranian state would follow. An attempt was made on his life in February 1908, and he ordered the bombardment of the majlis building by the Russian-officered Cossack brigade in June 1908, which was followed by the arrest, torture and execution of many of the constitutionalists and their supporters.

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18 In a foretaste of what was to come in the Great War, Ottoman troops crossed the frontier and occupied Persian territory around Urumiya and Sauj Bulagh (Mahabad) in the autumn of 1905; they stayed there intermittently until the demarcation of the Iranian/Ottoman boundary by an Anglo-Russian commission in 1913–14.
A civil war followed, essentially between the ‘royalists’ on one side and the ‘constitutionalists’ on the other, fought mainly outside the capital, first in Tabriz, where there was a genuine and sustained manifestation of popular resistance to the reassertion of royal despotism, and subsequently in Isfahan, where the Bakhtiari tribe (which was traditionally anti-Qajar) helped the local ‘revolutionaries’ to liberate the city from the Royalists and joined the Tabrizi resistance in its march on Tehran. The Royalist forces besieging Tabriz were assisted by a Russian contingent (sent ostensibly to protect the city’s foreign residents) that entered the city in May 1909. This was not sufficient to save the shah, who was deposed by the majlis in July, and succeeded by his 12-year-old son, Ahmad.

The years between 1909 and the outbreak of war formed a period of continuing upheaval, for a number of different reasons. In the first place, in common with those who would take part in Middle Eastern and ‘Third World’ revolutions later in the twentieth and in the twenty-first century, those who had participated in the Constitutional Revolution knew fairly clearly what they did not want—in this case the arbitrary and capricious absolutism of the Qajars—but they were only rather superficially united around any more positive goals. Secondly, some of the most fervent supporters of constitutional principles were deeply opposed to any widespread extension of the franchise, which inevitably limited the movement’s popular appeal. Thirdly, the fact that the state had been seriously and at least for a time successfully challenged from two important regional power centers (Tabriz and Isfahan) encouraged other provinces to take advantage of the disorder within the country as a whole to stop paying taxes.

Finally, the greater freedom given to the Russians under the terms of the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 in their ‘zone of influence’ in the north of the country (an area which included the cities of Enzeli, Hamadan, Isfahan, Kermanshah, Mashhad, Qazvin, Qum, Rasht, Tabriz and Tehran) meant they were now able to impose their will without having to risk more than the occasional tut-tutting from London or Simla. Inevitably, these new circumstances, in which Britain and Russia were supposedly cooperating rather than competing, and thus could not easily be played off against one another, favored the monarchy and its supporters rather than the constitutionalists, who became greatly demoralized, and, as time went on, increasingly divided and disunited.

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19 The proximity of Tabriz to the Russian oil fields and thus to the Russian and Russian-Armenian social democratic movements, its Azeri speaking population, and its progressive or at least pro-constitution clergy were all factors in its becoming a major centre of revolutionary activity. See N. R. Keddie (1999) *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796–1925* (Costa Mesa CA: Mazda), p. 60; and Avery, op. cit., pp. 135–137.
20 ‘The absence of a regular army meant that both the constitutional regime and the ex-shah were obliged to call on tribal forces to act on their behalf,’ S. Cronin (2009) Re-Interpreting Modern Iran: Tribe and State in the Twentieth Century, *Iranian Studies*, 42(3), p. 360. British influence over certain tribal confederations (the Bakhtiyaris, the family of Shaykh Khaz’al’ayn of Muhammarah, the Qavamis) was also very considerable, while the Russians ‘never exercised a [comparable] degree of patronage.’ p. 362. The British would gradually abandon their tribal allies in the course of the 1920s.
21 Detachments were sent to Enzeli and Qazvin a little later.
22 British sources, and, presumably, many British officials at the time, tended to pooh pooh the sincerity of the reformers and to characterize the reform movement as superficial and lacking in depth. Thus, ‘I have heard that as the crowd was leaving [the grounds of the British Legation after the bast of 1906] a man approached an Englishman looking on and said: ‘Pardon me, Aga, I am ignorant, but a consteetushan, is it to eat or to drink?’’ from C. Sykes (1936) *Wassmuss: the ‘German Lawrence’* (London: Longmans), p. 9; or, more patronizingly,
After the deposition of the shah and the restoration of the Constitution, a second majlis was elected in November 1909. In spite of this, the situation in the capital remained profoundly uncertain, and Russian troops continued to occupy Tabriz and its surroundings. A great deal of infighting took place within the majlis, and several of its most prominent members were assassinated in 1910. No new assembly was elected until 1914, while northern Iran continued to be occupied by Russian troops until (and beyond) the outbreak of war. Between 1909 and 1914 there were revolts of various kinds in many parts of the country, some, as has been suggested ‘conventional’ reactions on the part of more or less remote communities to the absence of any strong central government. In 1910, Britain threatened to send a detachment of police to restore order on the road between Isfahan and Bushehr if the Iranian government could not do so by itself. The Russians continued a harsh occupation regime, especially in Tabriz, but also in Mashhad where they did not endear themselves to local opinion and the Shi’i community at large by shelling the shrine in 1912. On the eve of the outbreak of war, the Russians were evidently determined to continue riding roughshod over the Iranian authorities, both locally and centrally, and the British became so put out by their ally’s activities that there was loud talk of renegotiating the Convention in the general direction of restoring some shreds of independence to the Iranian government. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Russia and Britain embarked upon the First World War as allies, and that in spite of British misgivings, the Anglo-Russian convention was still very much in force.

As has been hinted already, as well as serving to clear the air between the two powers, the Convention was also implicitly directed against the rising power and political and economic ambitions of Germany. To what extent such fears were justified is of course an open question; in 1905, for example, the mere rumor of the opening of German banks in Iran caused sharp reactions in Britain, France and Russia. An important feature of German economic development from the late nineteenth century onwards was the government’s general recognition of the importance of state assistance in overseas trade, both directly to private firms and in finding markets for German products. German economic activity in the Persian Gulf, Iran and Mesopotamia increased considerably in the early 1900s, especially as the construction of the Baghdad railway progressed inexorably eastwards into Anatolia toward its ultimate destination at the head of the Persian Gulf. There was considerable demand for German products in Mesopotamia and Iran, and the trading firm of Wonckhaus had branches in Ahwaz, Bahrain, Basra, and Bushehr. Wonckhaus employees often served as honorary consuls of their government, and the firm itself received a subsidy from the German foreign trade ministry.

Both before and after the Constitutional Revolution, various Iranian governments had sometimes found it useful to be able to enlist the aid of an apparently well-disposed third party against the strong pressures exerted by Britain and Russia. By 1911, however, a German-Russian convention had been signed in which Russia agreed to give Germany a share of the spoils, ‘reserving only railway, road and telegraph

Footnote 22 continued
‘The rise of a national spirit in Persia, which local enthusiasts and foreign sympathizers had professed to discern, proved in effect to be a delusion,’ in Moberley, op. cit., p. iii.


24 See Wilson, Loyalties, op. cit., pp. 74–75.
concessions.’

This arrangement quickly dashed the hopes of those Iranians who had expected better things from the Germans, hopes that were of course revived by the appearance of a new constellation of forces (notably the British-Russian and German-Ottoman alliances) at the outbreak of the war.

### The Ottoman Empire and Iran, 1900–1914

Let us briefly consider the position of the Ottoman Empire vis-à-vis Iran in the decade or so before the First World War. In 1875 an Ottoman-Iranian agreement had concluded, or attempted to conclude, what had been a long period of dispute over the status of the two states’ consuls/representatives in each other’s territory. This generally conciliatory atmosphere continued after the accession of ‘Abd al-Hamid II, partly as a reflection of his pan-Islamic policies, and partly as an attempt ‘to draw the [Iraqi] Shi’is closer to the Ottoman cause . . . ’. In addition, due in part to the activities of al-Afghani, Pan-Islamism alla turca had found some supporters in Tehran, including Amin al-Dawla (Prime Minister, 1897–1898) and his son-in-law, the former Iranian ambassador to Istanbul, Mirza Muhsin Khan Mushir al-Dawla (Foreign Minister 1897–98, Prime Minister 1898, d. 1900). Somewhat later, in 1904, two leading reformers, Shaykh Fadlallah Nuri and Sayyid Abdullah Bihbihani, were reported as having friendly contacts with Istanbul.

On the other hand, Ottoman incursions into north western Iran between 1905 and 1913 (and the handover of Kotur to the Ottomans under the terms of the Treaty of Berlin) tended to muddy the waters, especially after the adoption of a ‘Pan-Turanian’ policy on the part of the Young Turks, which put a somewhat different ideological spin on their covetous gaze on Azerbaijan.

### The Ottoman Empire in Europe and Asia before the First World War

Under the terms of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, which ‘settled’ the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–78, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia, all of which were, broadly speaking, ‘fully-fledged’ Ottoman provinces until the middle of the nineteenth century, immediately, or shortly thereafter, become independent states. In northeastern Anatolia, the three vilayets of Ardahan, Batum and Kars were ceded to Russia. Bosnia-Herzegovina remained part of the Ottoman Empire until its annexation by Austria-Hungary in 1908. Greece obtained Thessaly in 1881 and by the end of the Balkan Wars (1913) it had acquired all the territory in the north of the modern Greek state, together with Crete and the larger islands off the west coast of Anatolia. As a result of these and other contemporary conflicts, in which religious affiliation rather than place of birth became the main criterion of citizenship, several million Muslims either died, or fled from their homes, or were forced out of their homes, and found themselves in the Asiatic part of the Ottoman Empire.

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25 Gehrke, Germany and Persia, p. 111.


27 Litvak, op. cit., p. 166. Ottoman-Iranian relations at this time are treated in G. Çetinsaya (2006) *The Ottoman Administration of Iraq, 1890–1908* (London: Routledge), see especially Chapt. 5.

between about 1870 and 1908. 29 For instance, the Muslim population of Crete, 43 percent of the total in 1832, fell to eight percent by 1910.

In his prosopographical study of the Young Turk elite, Erik Zürcher suggests convincingly that the fact that so many members of this elite were born and grew up in the Balkans, which they realized were evidently ‘forever lost’ to the Ottomans after Berlin and the Balkan Wars, played an essential role in their insistence on the integrity of what remained of the Empire. It seems to have been a very strong motivating factor in their unswerving determination to hold on to territory in eastern Anatolia, and goes a long way to explain the terrible destruction that they would later unleash there. 30

Ottomans, Russians, and Armenians

Events in the Russian Caucasus had considerable influence on events both in the Ottoman Empire and Iran. Relations between the Armenians in Russia and the Tsarist state had been reasonably cordial since the Russian annexation of most of Georgia in 1801. After the conclusion of the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828, under which Russia also absorbed the Armenian cities of Yerevan and Nakhichevan, the Russian government encouraged Armenians still living under Iranian rule to migrate to Russian Armenia, which many did. 31 By the late nineteenth century, Armenian entrepreneurs had become the leading merchants of Tbilisi; later, they would invest extensively in the Baku and Batum oilfields, and were generally the most prosperous members of the growing Transcaucasian bourgeoisie, although the great majority of Armenians were and remained peasant cultivators. However, in the Caucasus, as in the Ottoman Empire, there were no extensive areas where Armenians formed a significant majority. The opinions of nationalists, businessmen and intellectuals were divided; some advocated an Armenian autonomous region, while others were perfectly content with Russian rule over a (fairly small) unified province of the Russian state.

All three of the Ottoman provinces and cities of Ardahan, Batum and Kars in northeastern Anatolia that were handed over to Russia under the terms of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 had Armenian populations. What was left to the Ottoman Empire in eastern Anatolia was the volatile ‘mixed’ (Armenian/Kurdish) area, including the ‘Six Provinces’ of Erzurum, Van, Bitlis, Diyarbakir, Kharpout and Sivas, where Armenians formed a significant minority of the population. Russia had originally been given significant rights of intervention on behalf of the Ottoman Armenians in the Treaty of San Stefano (March 1878), but Article 61 of the Treaty of Berlin later in the year (July 1878), was vague in the extreme and was clearly drafted to foil any such intervention: 32

31 As already mentioned, Georgia and Armenia previously (i.e., before 1801 and before 1828, respectively) had been under Iranian suzerainty.
32 Reynolds, Shattering Empires, p. 16.
The Sublime Porte undertakes to carry out ... the improvements and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by Armenians, and to guarantee their security against the Circassians and Kurds. It will periodically make known the steps taken to this effect to the Powers, who will superintend their application.33

Of course, it is both inaccurate and misleading to depict 'the Armenians' as an undifferentiated mass; suffice it to say that the Armenian communities of Russia, the Ottoman Empire and in Iran were all internally divided, both socio-economically and politically. The clampdown and repression introduced by the Russian government after the assassination of the Tsar in 1881 ensured that the Armenians, along with most other ethnic minorities in Russia, were no longer able to pursue their (generally peaceful, generally vague) dreams of autonomy. In Armenia, a programme of intense Russification took place (the settlement of Russians, the confiscation of the property of the Armenian church, and the imposition of the Russian language), and this and other measures combined to encourage an Armenian revolutionary movement within Russia that was soon forging ties with its rather longer established counterpart in the Ottoman Empire. There were two main nationalist parties: The main aim of the Hunchak Party, founded in 1887, was to liberate (Western) Armenia from Ottoman rule while their rivals the Dashnaks (1889), were active in both the Tsarist and (after 1904) Ottoman Empires, and would set up a short-lived Armenian Republic in the Caucasus between May 1918 and December 1920.34

As elsewhere in Russia, there was violent unrest in Transcaucasia during the Revolution of 1905: More than 2,000 people were killed in clashes between Armenians and Azeris in Baku after a major strike in the oilfields at the end of 1904, which had partly ethnic and partly socio-political origins. The Russians appointed a more pro-Armenian governor,35 and returned much of the property that had been confiscated from the Church. As a result the ‘revolutionary option’ began to look less appealing, and more cordial relations between the Tsarist government and the Armenians began to be forged over the following decade. Needless to say, a similar burying of the hatchet did not take place in the Ottoman Empire. What is important here is that first, Armenian-Russian relations between 1881 and 1914 followed quite a chequered course; second, that it was during this period that the two main Armenian revolutionary parties were formed, which became as anti-Russian as they were anti-Ottoman, and finally that there was no sense in which the Russian authorities ‘automatically’ regarded the Ottoman Armenians as the long-suffering separated cousins of their ‘own’ Armenian subjects on the Russian side of the frontier.

One of the many merits of Michael Reynolds’ truly path-breaking book is his ready familiarity with both the Russian and Ottoman archives, and with the secondary literature in both languages. From his account, as well as from this brief summary, it emerges that

33 E. Hertslet (compiler) (1981) Treaty between Great Britain, Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and Turkey, for the Settlement of the Affairs of the East, signed at Berlin, 13th July 1878, in The Map of Europe by Treaty; which have taken place since the general peace of 1814. With numerous maps and notes, IV (1875–1891) (1st ed.) (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office), pp. 2759–2798.
34 Azerbaijan and Georgia declared their independence from Russian rule at much the same time and established separate republics, both of which were also suppressed and incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1920.
while, as is well known, Ottoman-Armenian relations had long been extremely tense, relations between the Ottoman Armenians and Russia were not especially cordial either, at least not in the sense of the immediate recognition of any profound predetermined amity for the ‘Christians across the border’. However, the Armenian cause did have some advocates (of fair and decent treatment) in the higher echelons of the Russian administration.

Thus, at the beginning of the Caucasus campaign in late 1914, the Russians armed Assyrian and Kurdish fighters, as well as Armenians. Many Anatolian Armenians were aware that the Russians considered them highly unreliable potential allies in any future campaigns against the Ottomans, and they also knew that the Russians were assiduously arming the Kurds, which could hardly be considered a friendly gesture. In fact, the early Russian campaigns in Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus in 1914 and 1915, which could be regarded as ‘successes’ for the Russians, and in which Ottoman Armenian militias (and later Russian Armenian regiments) played a prominent role, caused tens of thousands of Muslim deaths. Russian officials often expressed alarm at the damage to their own reputation caused by their Armenian allies’ savage and relentless pursuit of all Kurds, including non-combatants. There was a major Armenian rebellion in Van in April 1915, and this, in combination with the Gallipoli landings by the Allies, which had begun a few days earlier, seems to have been the trigger for the series of deportations of Armenians from Anatolia and elsewhere that would culminate in the Armenian genocide, and the settlement of Muslims on the lands and houses of Armenians as part of a policy which succeeded in bringing about the almost complete Turkification of Anatolia by the middle of 1916.

Iran in 1914

On the eve of the First World War, the situation in Iran can be summarized roughly as follows. The monarchy had been greatly weakened by the events of 1905–11, but was ‘still there’, largely because of Russian support, and the Anglo-Russian Convention was still in force. The majlis was still functioning, after a fashion; a third majlis was elected in December 1914, although the central government could make little claim to rule over large parts of the country. Large deposits of oil had been discovered in the neutral zone, in southwestern Iran in 1908, and in order to ensure permanent supplies for the British navy, the British government bought 51% of the shares in Anglo-Persian in May 1914. The security of the oil was thought to be too important a matter to be left to the Iranian government, and APOC concluded arrangements with local potentates (Shaykh Khaz’al’ayn of Muhammarah, and various Bakhtiari shaykhs) for the protection of the oilfields and the pipelines. Otherwise, the British generally stayed in their corner in southeastern Iran, occasionally trying to convince the Russians, through diplomatic channels, that greater tact and less violence might yield more positive results. For their part

36 ‘Senior tsarist officials were wary of the idea of annexing Eastern Anatolia because they regarded the Armenians as the “most difficult” of the heterogeneous populations they had to rule.’ See Reynolds (2011) Shattering Empires, pp. 141, 142–143.


38 Ahmad Shah, aged 17, was crowned eight days before the outbreak of the First World War.
the Russians had fairly large numbers of troops stationed in their zone of influence in northern Iran, and were all but running the country from there. Ottoman troops occupied small parts of northwestern Iran, and were clearly looking for some sort of partnership, at the very least, with their ‘ethnic brothers’ in Iranian and Russian Azerbaijan. Finally, the Germans had begun, somewhat tenuously, to breach the economic monopoly of Russia in the north, but these efforts inevitably came to an end with the outbreak of war.

**The War**

The outbreak of war changed the strategic and geopolitical situation completely, and of course there was a further massive sea change after the Russian revolutions of March and October 1917. The entry of the Ottoman Empire into the war on the side of the Central Powers in 1914 caused a major shake-up and opened up a new range of previously unthinkable possibilities. In addition, because of their aversion to the Russians and their distrust of the British, many of the Iranian reformers were inclined to regard the Germans as potential saviors. A significant number of them had taken refuge in Berlin after the apparent failure of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. A plan of epic proportions was developed between Berlin and Istanbul, whose grandiose nature was matched only by the exiguousness of the means available for its execution and the lack of coordination and agreement between the parties involved. In brief, the idea was to send a German (and, subsequently, an Ottoman) mission to Afghanistan, across Iran, to encourage the Amir of Afghanistan to invade India. The possibility of declaring a *jihad* was also mooted.

The German mission eventually reached Afghanistan, but was distracted on the way by what it came to regard as the ‘seeming ease’ of fomenting a rising in Iran. German agents were despatched throughout the country to assist in this enterprise, which was masterminded from the Legation in Tehran by the military attaché, Graf Kanitz, and Captain Oskar von Niedermayer, in collaboration with the anti-Russian Swedish instructors of the Iranian gendarmerie. In addition, beginning in February 1915, German diplomats tried to press the Iranian government to abandon its neutrality and throw in its lot with the Central Powers. How this would have benefitted Iran is difficult to imagine, since neither Austria, Germany nor the Ottomans had any means of providing it with military matériel or other supplies. Eventually, both the British and Russians got wind of the discussions, and in November 1915 the Russians threatened an attack on Tehran; the shah tried to leave for Isfahan, and the missions of Austria, Germany and Turkey left the capital along with their Iranian supporters. At the last moment, the Russians managed to get to the shah and persuaded him not to sign a treaty with Germany and not to leave the capital, and after that this particular ‘house of cards’ collapsed, with Russian troops subsequently driving the pro-Germans toward the Ottoman/Iranian border. In March 1916 the British authorities in India sent Sir Percy Sykes to Bandar Abbas to form the South Persia Rifles, which eventually consisted of some 11,000 Indian troops and tribesmen recruited from pro-British tribes in southern Iran. The SPR were supposed to put down rebellions in the British zone of influence which were being inspired by the activities of Wilhelm Wassmuss, the so-called ‘German Lawrence.’

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40 Ibid, p. 115.
On the Ottomans’ ‘Arab front’ the tide turned decisively in the Allies’ favor during 1917, when British forces captured Baghdad in March, and invaded Palestine and Syria in the autumn. It looked as if equilibrium might be reached in Iran, maintained, as before, by the Russians in the north and the British in the south. However, after the abdication of the tsar in March 1917, the Russian front slowly began to collapse (in the Caucasus, as elsewhere); morale was low, desertions were commonplace, and pay and supplies were at best intermittent. Russia eventually capitulated to the Central Powers after the October revolution, and sued for peace. As part of the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed in March 1918, the Ottomans demanded (and obtained) the return of the three vilayets of Ardahan, Batum and Kars, their only permanent gain from the various campaigns in the East. 41

The Caucasus and Northern Iran after Brest-Litovsk

Early in 1918 various bodies in (‘Russian’) Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia declared their independence of the central government, initially forming a Transcaucasian Republic, whose immediate priority, given that the Russian administration had collapsed, was the defense of the region against the Ottomans. By this time the Ottomans were in full control of eastern Anatolia, and the Azeris, whose sense of national identity was far less developed than either the Georgians or the Armenians, began, albeit somewhat half-heartedly, to lean toward their Turkish co-religionists. The Georgians for their part saw their best interests in coming to an understanding with the Germans, with the result that the Transcaucasian Republic broke into its constituent ethnic/regional parts by the end of May.42 By this time Armenia had signed the Treaty of Batum under which the Ottomans had demanded (but did not actually receive) Tbilisi and most of Armenia, as well as the railway connecting Batum and Baku. However, by the end of May, costly but decisive Armenian victories at Sardarabad and Karakilise stopped the Ottomans from advancing further into Armenia. They now focused their energies on capturing Baku, the source of almost all Russia’s oil, in which the Germans were also keenly interested.

Britain and the Ottomans in the Caucasus

In the spring of 1918, with the war still showing no signs of abating, the British sensed that the most immediate threat to their newly acquired gains in Mesopotamia and the Levant would come from the fact that the Ottomans had suddenly become relieved of the obligation to pour men and money into the Russian front. It was also widely believed by Britain and France in particular that the Muslim peoples of the region (as well, eventually, as those on and beyond the eastern shore of the Caspian) would be keenly receptive to the appeal of Pan-Islamism. Partly, perhaps, because of the evident secularism of the Unionists, and partly because the conditions of the Muslims in Russia were far from universally dire,43 such fears proved largely groundless. Also, the Allies feared that the

41 After its seizure by the Red Army in April 1920, the port of Batum became part of Georgia, where it has remained.
43 Although this is too broad a topic to deal with adequately here, many (though by no means all) members of the Muslim communities of Russia, who numbered about 20 million in 1897, were fairly thoroughly integrated into the Russian state. For example, Muslim deputies from all the Imperial territories including Central Asia
Ottomans would overrun the whole of Transcaucasia, although, as we have seen, the realities of the situation on the ground, and the sheer length of their line of supply, meant that the Ottomans’ freedom of manoeuvre was actually quite limited. The British also had begun to assist anti-Bolshevik elements, both non-Russians locally in the Caucasus and more generally on what had been the front in Eastern Europe, including General Denikin’s ferocious White Army, which had terrorised the northern Caucasus for much of 1918 and remained a major obstacle to the Bolsheviks before its final collapse in January 1920.44

More generally, the withdrawal of Russia had also freed hundreds of thousands of German troops from the Eastern front (where Germany had stationed 76 divisions), and the British and French feared that these troops could be transferred to the Western Front, with all the disastrous consequences that this might entail. ‘It seemed vital, therefore, to keep the Germans and their allies occupied in the East’ (of course in Europe as well as in the Caucasus).45 At this stage Baku, the economic centre of the region, whose oilfields were of crucial significance to the local and to the Russian economy, and had a relatively large industrial working class, had been taken over by the Bolsheviks. The city also had a substantial Armenian minority, mostly Dashnak sympathisers with close ties to Armenia, on whose superior fighting skills the Bolsheviks gradually became obliged to rely. Both groups turned against the city’s Muslims on March 24, and in the ensuing chaos the Bolsheviks were the main gainers. At the same time the Ottomans were steadily marching toward the city, where they were anxiously awaited by some of the city’s Muslims.

In a somewhat quixotic attempt to prevent or delay further German and Ottoman penetration into the Caucasus and Central Asia,46 and to rally the disaffected peoples of the region to the Allied cause, a British military mission, comprised initially of 12 officers and 44 men transported in 41 Ford vans commanded by Major-General Dunsterville, had been sent from Baghdad to Enzeli on Iran’s southeastern Caspian coast early in 1918.47 ‘Dunsterforce’ was further augmented over the ensuing months both by British and Imperial officers and Russian refugees recruited in Britain, and by a crowd of more or less colourful anti-Bolshevik renegades, mostly from within Iran. In May, General Dunsterville asked his superiors in Baghdad if he could use his own and other British troops in the area to assist in the defense of Baku against the Ottomans. The British high command temporized, since they did not want Dunsterville to be seen to be cooperating

Footnote 43 continued


46 According to one source, there were about 100,000 German and Austrian prisoners of war in central Asia at the time of the Russian capitulation; see Brig. Sir Percy Sykes (1923) The British Flag on the Caspian: a Sideshow of the Great War, *Foreign Affairs* (Dec.), pp. 282–294.

47 As General Dunsterville explains in his memoirs, he was appointed British representative in Tbilisi, but never reached his original destination: see *The Adventures of Dunsterforce* (London: Edward Arnold, 1920), p. 8. The memoirs are extremely entertaining.
with the Bolsheviks (a judgment which matched that of the Bolsheviks’ superiors in Moscow, for exactly the same reasons), but de facto cooperation did in fact take place.48

Another small British ‘column’, the Malleson force, entered Iran by road from Bombay in June 1918, and then went through Meshed as far as Merv on the Krasnovodsk railway.49 Like ‘Dunsterforce’, it penetrated a fair distance inside Russian territory, in an attempt to prevent the Central Asia Railway and its railhead at Krasnovodsk (the main port on the eastern side of the Caspian) from falling into enemy (i.e., Ottoman) hands.50 A month or so later, Commodore Norris’ naval mission (two officers, 22 men), which had travelled overland to the Caspian from Baghdad, arrived in Enzeli, and proceeded to neutralize the Bolshevik naval presence in the Caspian over the next several months with the help of five commandeered steamers that he and his small band had fitted out with improvised guns.51

Meanwhile the Ottomans were edging ever closer to Baku, and the city’s defenders sent an official invitation to Dunsterville to join them, although he had far fewer men at his disposal to defend the city than his ‘hosts’ thought. Dunsterville agreed to do so, but soon realized that the sheer numbers of Ottoman troops meant that this would put his small force in an impossible position and withdrew them to Enzeli on September 14. That same night the Ottomans broke through the city’s defenses, and took Baku in the name of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Half the Armenian population of a total of some 35,000 managed to escape, but the Ottomans and their local allies killed some 9,000 Armenians.52 As has been noted earlier, a curious feature of the whole episode was that both the Bolsheviks and the British were united in wanting to keep the Ottomans out of Baku. It is interesting to speculate how things might have turned out if this essential commonality of purpose had been accepted and acted upon much earlier. Of course, since the Ottomans were obliged to come to terms with the Allies under the terms of the Armistice of Mudros concluded some six weeks later, it so happened that the capture of the city had no appreciable impact on the course of the war. In November/December 1918, British troops occupied Batum, Tbilisi and Baku, extending a de facto protectorate over Transcaucasia for the next two years.53

Iran 1918–21

Meanwhile, in the spring of 1918, German successes in France had convinced a number of elements in Iran, with local German encouragement, that the Allies would lose the war. Further east, the Germans were moving swiftly through the Ukraine towards the Volga. The government in Tehran apparently issued orders to its supporters to attack the South Persia Rifles and ultimately to drive the British out of the country. In May and June, a substantial

51 Sykes, The British Flag on the Caspian, pp. 283–287.
53 Rose, Batum as Domino, pp. 282–286.
tribal force under Sawlat al-Dawla attacked Shiraz. However, only a few months later, with the arrival of American reinforcements and striking Allied successes in France and Flanders, the likelihood of a German victory had receded, and an alliance with Britain soon seemed more attractive than anything the Germans could offer. In addition, when the Armistice of Mudros came at the end of October, two of its conditions were the evacuation of Azerbaijan by Ottoman forces and the withdrawal of all Ottoman forces behind the pre-war frontier, although, as has already been mentioned, the Elviye-i Selase, the provinces of Ardahan, Batum (minus the port) and Kars, remained in Ottoman, and subsequently in Republican Turkish, hands.

At the end of 1918, the Iranian government under Vusuq al-Dawla (which had been formed in August) found itself in an entirely novel and in many ways fairly uncomfortable position; it no longer could play its main tormentors off against each other, but in spite of Britain’s profound weakness after four terrible years of war, it was still able to exert an appreciable influence over Iranian affairs. Faced with secessionist movements in Gilan and (Iranian) Azerbaijan, and with tribal revolts in the northwest and elsewhere, the government had no ready money to pay what few troops it had at its disposal, and Britain was its only possible source of funds. Nevertheless, as would soon emerge, the Iranian government did have one important ace up its sleeve, Britain’s profound hostility to Bolshevism, which the great landowners who featured so largely in all Iran’s post-war cabinets shared with as much if not even greater urgency. The idea of Iran, then Afghanistan, then India, falling before the Bolshevik tide inevitably aroused fears in Whitehall that the Qajar aristocracy and its hangers-on were shrewdly able to exploit, albeit not without incurring considerable indignity in the process.

Lord Curzon, whose name appears in the quotation at the very beginning of this essay, always imagined, and often claimed, that he had special insights into Persia and the Persians. He had travelled extensively in Russia, Central Asia and Iran in the late 1880s, and published Persia and the Persian Question in 1892, which was quite favorably received at the time. He had served as Viceroy of India between 1899 and 1905, and was passionately concerned with the defence of India, which, in the aftermath of the war, he felt would be compromised if the Bolsheviks were to take over the Caucasus. To this end he argued vigorously as Foreign Secretary (1919–24) that the British garrison at Batum should not be withdrawn, on the grounds that the advancing Bolsheviks would not risk a direct confrontation with British troops. However, Azerbaijan fell to the Bolsheviks in April 1920, and Batum became part of Georgia in June. As both Lloyd George and Winston Churchill had predicted, Bolshevik forces were almost certainly either far too stretched or not sufficiently interested to contemplate an advance beyond the old Tsarist frontier in the southern Caucasus. Of course, this did not prevent Curzon using similar arguments to block cabinet efforts to withdraw British troops from Iran between 1918 and 1921.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Curzon felt it desirable to press the government of Iran to make an agreement with Britain, which, if ratified by the Iranian majlis, would

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55 Rose, Batum as Domino, p. 280.

56 Especially after the Bolshevik attack on the British garrison at Enzeli in October 1920, which Curzon considered as much an attack on Britain as on Iran. See Sabahi, British Policy, pp. 61–89.
have turned Iran into a British protectorate. This agreement, which was negotiated in great secrecy, was signed in Tehran by the British ambassador and the Iranian prime minister in August 1919, but never ratified. It became irrelevant after the rise to power of Reza Shah, whose seizure of power in May 1921 indicated a tectonic shift in Iranian politics.\(^57\) One important reason for its failure was that although Anglo-Russian rivalry no longer formed a black cloud hanging over Iran’s foreign relations (and its domestic politics), it soon became clear to the British that once the Bolsheviks had concluded—fairly early on—that Iran was not, and would long not be, ripe for revolution, they had no particular reason to interfere in Iranian affairs unless their own interests were going to be directly threatened.\(^58\) Thus by the middle of 1921 they unceremoniously dumped the Jangali movement in Gilan, whose leader Kuchik Khan had proclaimed a ‘socialist republic’ at the time of the Bolshevik raid on Enzeli.\(^59\) Previously, the Jangalis had cooperated with Dunsterforce in its attempts to reinforce Baku, and also supported, or at least did not oppose, his retreat to Qazvin. After this, Dunsterville was recalled to India and his troops were augmented and reformed under the command of Major-General Thomson. This new group was called Norperforce, and together with Commodore Norris’ improvised armed steamers on the Caspian, it gradually cleared the area of Bolshevik and pro-Bolshevik elements. Of course, this was not without cost; in late 1918 and early 1919 Norperforce was costing the British and Indian Treasuries about £2.2 million a month. For Curzon, providing this kind of deterrent was money well spent,\(^60\) but many of his cabinet colleagues were more skeptical.

In addition, Bolshevik Russia had already done quite a lot, and would do more in the future, to endear itself to Iranian public opinion. In 1918, it declared that it would repudiate ‘all Tsarist privileges and agreements that are contrary to the sovereignty of Persia’, and in September 1919 it refused to recognize the Anglo-Persian Agreement that had been concluded a month before. In addition, the Bolsheviks declared that they would write off the entirety of Tsarist loans to Persia, which amounted to about £6 million.\(^61\) Late in 1919 a British mission arrived in Tehran to negotiate the military part of the Anglo-Persian Agreement, but when the purpose of the mission became known its presence caused widespread public hostility, and the Iranian government faced bitter opposition to any attempt on Britain’s part to create a British-officered Iranian Army. In May 1920 the Bolsheviks landed 2,000 men at Enzeli, the headquarters of Norperforce.\(^62\) This caused great embarrassment in London, since Norperforce’s small size, isolation and indefensibility meant that its commander’s only recourse was to ask the Soviet


\(^{58}\) The Bolsheviks themselves soon realized that the Adalat Party, the precursor of the Tudeh, was most unlikely to be able to bring about a socialist revolution in Iran, with or without external assistance. Given their other much more pressing concerns, the Bolsheviks showed little interest in over-extending themselves in a situation where the achievement of a positive outcome was far from likely. Hence, despite the obviously ‘reactionary’ nature of the governments in Tehran (both under Vusut q al-Dawla and his successors and under Reza Khan), the Russians’ main interest was in the achievement and maintenance of ‘good neighbourliness,’ a state of affairs that held fairly consistently until 1941.


\(^{60}\) Sabahi, *British Policy*, p. 41.

\(^{61}\) For the repudiation of the Russian debt, see below and ibid, p. 24.

commander for an armistice to enable him to retreat to Rasht (which was granted). At this, Churchill, then Secretary of State for Air, and Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the General Staff, called in Cabinet for the immediate evacuation of all British troops from Persia:

If we cannot resist the Bolsheviks in these areas it is much better by timely withdrawals to keep out of harm’s way and avoid disaster and shameful incidents such as that which has just occurred.63

In what was evidently a face-saving diplomatic ploy, Moscow sent a note to the Iranian government three days later claiming that the Enzeli operation had been carried out on the initiative of the local military command, that is, without any prior agreement with the central government. By this time it was becoming clear that Britain’s position in Iran, and with it the Anglo-Persian Agreement, was becoming increasingly untenable. The only other serious challenge to the authority of the Iranian government would be from Bolshevik and/or Bolshevik-inspired activity in the far north, and when this threat was no longer active, the need for British assistance, and more specifically British military assistance, was greatly if not completely diminished. Accordingly, after many months of preparation, a Soviet-Iranian Treaty was signed in Moscow, a few days after Reza Khan’s coup, abrogating all Tsarist loans, handing over all Russian-owned facilities in Iran to the Iranian government, and regulating transit trade.64

Of course, this by no means marked the end of British influence in Iran, as was clearly indicated by the forced abdication of Reza Shah in 1941, and even more by the intervention in Iranian oil affairs in the early 1950s. But after 1921, Iran could no longer be made out to be the lynchpin in a grand imperial design, a domino which could not be allowed to fall because of the extensive damage this would portend for the defense of the British Empire. With Reza Khan’s coup, Iran could no longer be a pawn between Britain and the Bolsheviks on the level of international relations. It was also clear that even if he had been inclined to do so, which must be fairly doubtful, Reza Khan was unlikely to risk initiating a social revolution in Iran. In spite of his campaigns to bring the tribes to order, he made no concerted attempts to deprive the great landowners of their estates; of course, given the armed might that many of them had at their disposal, this would have been extremely unwise. It is significant that it would take a situation in which Russian and British interests were fully aligned to cause those two powers to intervene decisively in Iranian affairs once more, which they did of course with great effect in August 1941.

References

63 Cabinet 20 May 1920, quoted in Sabahi, British Policy, p. 74.
64 In essence, it was the first equitable treaty for Persia, and it was even more profitable to Tehran than to Moscow. See N. M. Mamedova (2009) Russia: II. Iranian-Soviet Relations (1917–1991), in Encyclopedia Iranica.


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