CHAPTER I

(Iranian society on the eve of World War II)

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A look at the map of the world shows that Iran has a vital geopolitical and strategic position in east-west interaction of culture, trade and commerce. Her contacts with the west go back to the 6th century B.C., and these continued in one way or the other till the times when a series of catastrophic invasions by the hordes of Central Asia engaged the energies of the east and snuffed out the vigour of its cultures. After a long pause of nearly four hundred years, contacts with Europe were revived when the Safavids established the Persian empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (1500-1736). The Qajar rule which began in A.D. 1794 lasted one hundred and thirty years during which period western influence penetrated beyond ambassadorial and court circles and began to be felt in the life of the Iranian nation.\footnote{Benani, Amin; \textit{The Modernization of Iran.} California, 1961, p. 5.}

The increased influence of the west in the nineteenth century followed European political and commercial expansion. The growth of Russian power from the beginning of the eighteenth century had been accompanied by an unconcealed drive for expansion. There had been a conflict over Georgia in ..., 1735, but

\footnote{An excellent description of life in Iran in the early nineteenth century can be found in James Morier, \textit{The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isphahan.} London, 1824.}
It remained within the pale of Russian influence, \(^1\) Napoleon is reported to have sent his ambassador to the court of the Shah of Iran with some fantastic proposals\(^2\), but his efforts were thwarted by England and Russia who acted as comrades-in-arms against Bonaparte certainly for their individual interests. The border conflicts between Iran and Russia from A.D. 1804 to 1813 were settled through the treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchay in 1813 and 1828 permanently. These ended Iran's claims to provinces in the Caucasus and established Russia's control over them. But Russia was a stern reality for Iran and it was Great Britain's skill in maintaining the balance of power in Iran which ensured her sovereignty even if it was only nominal. Britain had her own interests; beyond Iran lay India, and this meant that Britain had to do everything to keep Russia away.

The resurgence of economic imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century and, most fateful to Iran, the discovery of oil intensified the rivalry between Britain and Russia, which resulted in the Anglo Russian agreements of 1907. In order to preserve peace and freedom for the rest of the world, the two powers decided to make a sacrificial offering of Iran. They divided the

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country into respective spheres of influence, and a buffer strip in the middle was left to the dubious sovereignty of the Shah. The agreement was not formally annulled until the end of First World War.

Nationalisms

The twin movements of nationalism and constitutionalism in Iran were both sparked by events in the west. The Iranian constitutional movement, which ended in political revolt that shook the aged and stagnant Cajar autocracy in 1906, fed directly upon the Russian Revolution of 1905. The influence of this revolution seeped into Iran through the Caucasus; for after the failure of their attempt in Russia, some of the leaders of revolution in Transcaspia migrated to Iran, where they founded newspapers and agitated for a liberal revolution.

Likewise, the greatest influence on Iranian nationalism was Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5, which indeed had far-reaching effects on the rise of nationalism throughout Asia. Jubilant epic poems were written to celebrate the Japanese victory. The war and the subsequent revolution in Russia also gave a fresh meaning to the writings of Iranian intellectuals such as Hashem Khan (the founder of Freemasonry in Iran), Ali Khan Aminu'd-Dowleh, Jamalud-Din Afghani and others. They had been voicing liberal,

progressive and patriotic ideas for some thirty years, and their writings now began to take effect. The reports and interpretations of Russo-Japanese War and of the Russian revolution of 1905, both in the Iranian press and in periodicals outside Iran, provided yet another stimulus for political awakening. Most prominent among these papers were Akhtar in Constantinople, Habi-ol-Matin in Calcutta, and Jorayye and Farvarish in Cairo.

Iranian nationalism did not spring entirely from reaction against Western imperialism. The increasing number of young Iranians who went to Europe were impressed with the manifestations of nationalism there. A majority of these students went to France where there was a strong atmosphere of chauvinism in the years that followed the Franco-Russian War, and they came back imbued with glowing patriotism. The spirit of nationalism had made so much possible for these nations; why not emulate them and accomplish the same in Iran?

This form of nationalism, however, brought with it an increasingly strong tendency towards secularism, with the result that the clergy, who had been among the instigators of resentment

2. Ibid., p. 3.
against Western imperialism and had shared that form of nationalism with other Iranians, now became very suspicious of Western-inspired nationalism.

But rise of nationalism in Iran at this point of time was not only the fall-out of political or social happenings in the west. There was much in the traditions of Iranian history to nurture the spirit of nationalism. It was a nation with a history of 2,500 years of a great empire. Few nations can boast as eloquent an expression of intense patriotism and proud nationalism as the *Shah-namah* of Ferdowsi, the epic poem of Iran, written in the tenth century A.D. A long history of Shia opposition to her Sunni neighbours had prepared Iran for ready acceptance of modern nationalism. A revival of the imperial glories of ancient Iran was the natural form for the new nationalist movement to take. Finally the role of the Muslim revivalist of the period should not be overlooked in a study of the growth of nationalism. The activities and writings of Jamal ud-Din Afghani had a great effect among the early nationalists in Iran.


2. For more details on Jamal ud-Din Afghani, see Behknoda, *Lochat-Nameh*, Teheran, 1962, Vol. J.
Constitutionalism

If nationalism was the product both of Western influences and native Iranian patriotism, constitutionalism was almost wholly inspired by Western ideas. In principle Islam was conceived as a church-state—a true city of God on earth. The moral and spiritual teachings of the Prophet are tightly woven into a pattern of social justice and political order, and it was intended that the Qur'an should remain the foundation of Islamic society. In addition to Qur'an, there were Hadith (the sayings and traditions) of Muhammad, and in the Shia communities, the sayings and traditions of the Imams also, which were of supporting value; and the practices of Ijtihad and Ijma or process of diligent conjecture and consensus, which were entirely subordinate to the supreme laws of the Qur'an.

In nineteenth-century Iran the departure from Islamic precepts was very evident. There were no legal limits to check the misrule of capricious monarchs, they were supported by a parasitical clergy who in turn were sustained by the rulers. Under these circumstances, it was not unnatural that an increasing number of educated Iranians began to look to the West rather than Islam for guidance and for a political system that would guarantee the rights of men. The Iranian constitutional movement which was responsible for the revolution of 1906,1 represents the

height of Iranian admiration for imitation of the West. "The main body of the constitution of Iran, in fact, is a translation of the Belgian Constitution of 1930." The Constitution established the nature of the government and the constitutional powers of the monarch, who rule "by the grace of God and the will of the people of Iran." The constitution has a supplement, which is in effect a bill of rights. It affords fruitful study for anyone interested in the fusion of Western and Islamic ideas and institutions. It sets out to establish a Western liberal democracy with secular institutions but without the basic pre-requisite of such a system, the separation of church and state.

The Intellectual Ferment:

The masses of Iran may not have been influenced widely by the nationalism and constitutionalism outcries, but these created a real revolution among the intellectuals. The intellectual atmosphere in Iran at the end of the nineteenth century was created by a very few people; yet their influence was very great. All the political and physical changes were taking place against a background of intense intellectual curiosity for progress and modernization. The pioneer intellectuals were intensely patriotic.


2. Ibid.
sharing abhorrence of arbitrary rule. They asked for constitutional rights and generally stood for secularization. A vociferous group among them were extremely anti-clerical. The following editorial from a Persian periodical published by a group of Iranians in Cairo in 1876 reveals the anti-clerical stance of the Iranian intellectuals:

"Our purpose in founding this periodical is to create a revolution in ideas, particularly in the ideas of the young who are still receptive to education... In the first place, we should not be afraid of the word "revolution." Revolutions are the educators of mankind. Revolutions breed progress and advance civilization.

The editorial went on to explain that in the past these revolutions were caused by the so-called prophets. Today fortunately, there is no more need for the prophets. Today the revolution must come in the light of science and association with civilized nations, aided by rapid communication and transportation. The leaders of the revolution must be educated and rational men. The editorial continued that there is no question of the need for a change. There is much confusion as to how this change should come. Some so-called mullas want a constitutional regime that is in accordance with the sharie. If they wish to base the government and the rights of people upon the Qur'an, "they must realize that

there is much of great importance in today's society that is unmentioned in the Qur'an," it said. There is no mention of elections, taxation, tariffs, the nature of presidency and so on. Speaking about the European laws, the paper wrote:

"We must adopt these gratefully and establish a civil code for ourselves... If we examine all the fech and Hadith books until doomsday, we shall never find any sensible answers to these problems. Likewise, if all the mujtahids were to put their heads together, their combined intelligence would be inadequate to cope with these matters. Therefore, we must respectfully approach the house of the 'unclean and heathen' farangi and implore them to save us from our ignorance and misery... Mullas and zealots will persecute us and call us irreligious, but the truth is that the true Islam is not opposed to civilization."

During the decade preceding the establishment of Pahlavi rule in Iran, anti-clericalism found strong expression among a group of poets and authors known as motejadded (innovators), whose works were popular among the middle classes. The best known members of this group were Iraj Mirza, Farah and Ashqi. The


methods that they proposed and that were, in fact, utilized in combating the clergy were peculiarly western. Freemasonry, for example, provided a nucleus for organized anti-clerical propaganda. An increasing number of younger intellectuals substituted nationalism for religious fanaticism. The chances that Reza Shah Pahlavi was able to bring in so short a time in the social, economic and political conditions of Iran were accomplished with the support of this group. If the reforms of Reza Shah had an ideological content, it was the spirit of secular nationalism.

The Babi-Bahai Movement

As one is discussing Iranian society in the days preceding World War II, a brief mention of Babi-Bahai movement that shook Iranian society out of its long period of inaction and made it receptive to the impact of modern trends, shall have to be made. Originating in Iran in 1844, claimed immediate attention because of its claim of fulfillment of Shia messianic expectations. Despite severe persecution both by the clergy and by the state, Babism asserted its independence and went far beyond the horizons of Shia Islam. The novelty of its approach and the liberalism of its social teachings, as well as the pravity of


2. For all full account of early history of Babism, see Nabil, The Dawn-Breakers, New York, 1932.
its persecutors, aroused the sympathy of scholars and orientalists all over the world. There was also a surprising wave of interest and curiosity in the press of Europe. A western observer stated, "There can be no doubt that the movement blossomed at an opportune moment for Persia and served to stem the rising tide of Shia bigotry, which was certainly in those days a definite bar to education and progress." The basic principle of Babi-Bahai movement was to bring about the complete spiritual, moral, and political unity of mankind. It advocated universal peace, world government, a world court, equality of rights for both sexes, eradication of prejudices and the agreement of science and religion.

By virtue of their progressive beliefs, Bahais, the largest religious minority in the world, had considerable success in influencing the rest of the world and in getting their ideas accepted by many. An Italian observer in 1941 commented that "in the social field Bahaism calls for... the abolition of polygamy, the restriction of divorce, and the abolition of veils

for women. Indeed these principles today are part of Iranian progressive movement and are triumphing with the national restoration brought about by Reza Shah. By attaching superstition and de-emphasizing the supernatural elements, the Babi-Bahai movement made the Persians more receptive to the scientific spirit of the West. An Iranian Shihahulshid states: "It cannot be overlooked that the appearance of Bahaullah and his concepts of social evolution, denial of miracles, and progressive revelation, made a great impact on Iran. It can be safely asserted that after Bahaullah, the foundations of traditional religion were weakened in Iran."²

Rise of Reza Shah

Society

Iranian society in 1920 A.D. was much the same as it had been a century earlier. There were some signs of western influence among the small minority that constituted the upper class, but there were very few and often none at all, among the vast majority of Iranians. A handful among the upper class used imported good and articles or had automobiles. The wealthier merchants formed an influential minority in Iranian society.

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their power and prestige was not based on ownership of land but it was not less than that of the aristocracy. A majority of small merchants and shopkeepers remained unaffected by western ideas of constitutionalism and party system. The large number of villages in inaccessible regions had even less contact with anything from outside. As for the tribal population of Iran (in 1920 nearly 15 percent), it remained completely untouched by modern advances of any kind. The largest class in Iranian society, the peasantry, lived much as they had for centuries.

It is to a small, active, articulate and constantly growing class that we must look for real evidence of a spreading and dynamic progressive enterprise in Iran. It was the nucleus of a modern middle class, it cut across all other sections of society. Many younger members of the upper class, a very large number of sons of the clergy and of young ex-clergymen—generally secular in their outlook—the sons of minor officials, and a few sons of peasants composed the majority of this group. They formed the professional class—journalists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, army officers and government officials. In 1920, they were a minority, but they were both the voice and the political conscience of Iran. They had made significant inroads into the medieval

order of Iranian society and government. They had shown eagerness for education and had established hundreds of schools since the granting of the constitution in 1906. Under their patronage developed a remarkable free press. In short they were anxious to adopt wholesale the political, ethical and business codes of progressive nations.

Political Scene:

In 1907, Muhammad Ali Shah, ascended the throne.

People in Iran had not forgotten the memories of misrule of the Cajars which soon fanned into revulsion against that house. He surrounded himself with all reactionaries, and with the aid of Russian-led Cossack Brigade denounced the Majlis and dispersed the deputies. But the liberal and nationalist forces were able to restore the constitutional regime. The Shah escaped to Russia and the last autocratic Cajar ruler disappeared from the scene. Thereafter, from 1909 till 1925 Iran was struggling for constitutional rule and economic progress in face of a number of obstacles. Successive governments desired to introduce far-reaching reforms and each government thought that in order to


achieve success in bringing about reforms it was unavoidable to "employ a number of foreign advisors... to create an order that is at once scientific and efficient as well as suited to the needs of the country". This was the attitude of governments of Sependar Azam, of Mostowfi-ul-Mamelek and of Moshir-ed-Dowle.

The third session of the Iranian Majlis came to an end shortly after the outbreak of the First World War which forced the Majlis into a long recess lasting until 1921. The political situation during this period bordered on anarchy. The exercise of the governmental authority came to a standstill. Various parts of the country were occupied by Russian, British and Turkish troops. A German agent, Wassmuss, was active in southern Iran organizing tribal resistance to Britain. To supplant Swedish-led Iranian gendarmerie and to counterbalance the Russian-commanded Persian Cossack Brigade, the British organized the South Persia Rifles. Brigandage and tribal lawlessness were alarming, and highway robbery was universal.

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2. Ibid., pp. 598-99.
Evacuation of the Russian forces from Iran following the Bolshevik Revolution created a vacuum which the Iranian government prevented to be filled by Britain. There was a marked hostility towards the British in Iran. There appeared revolts in Gilan and Azerbaijan provinces of Iran. In 1921, the fourth session of the Iranian Majlis repudiated the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919 and in its stead agreed to a treaty with the Soviet Russia. The Soviet government relinquished all the privileges granted to it by earlier agreements. Article 6 of the treaty permitted the Soviet Russia to send her troops into Iran if she considered her security endangered by the presence of a foreign power on Iranian soil. Iranian official circles considered it a desirable lever against Britain.

Such were the political events in early 1921 which brought Reza Khan to power and which he held for two decades to come. He accomplished the task of a coup with the help of a Cossack brigade which he commanded. When the people of Tehran woke up on the morning of February 26, 1921, they found the streets walls plastered with directives. In bold letters they began "I command!" They were all signed by Reza Khan, Commander-in-Chief of all armed forces. Sayyid Zia became Premier.

1. Benani, Amin, op. cit., p. 36.
2. Farman farmaian, op. cit., p. 76.
3. Hosein Makki, Tarikh-i-Bist maleye Iran, Tehran, 1945-46, pp. 146 et seq.
The period 1921-26 was a period of dual sovereignty which means struggle for power rivals as well among competing political visions. The general belief is that in the coup of February 1921, which put an end to the Qajar regime in Iran, Great Britain somehow played a role. Reza Khan, the Commander of the Cossack Brigade had been handpicked by General Ironside, the Commander of the local British force in Iran because Reza Khan's personal and martial qualities had impressed the British General. The coup makers immediately declared martial law and interned nearly all conventional politicians. This was the beginning of an entirely new era in Iranian history. It was a sign of anti-authoritarian nature of the Persian public and of the political atmosphere to which they had become accustomed.

The fact is that the coup of 1921 was given an enthusiastic, even euphoric, reception by many younger political activists and literatures belonging to a revolutionary trend in Iranian nationalism.

Dual Sovereignty

Reza Khan became Prime Minister towards the end of 1923. He tightened his grip over the administration and consolidated his position. He put down tribal and regional rebellions, he gathered around himself younger of civil service and western educational

background. He dug deep into Iranian political elite who
had been engaged in their conventional cut-throat competition.
The clash of ideas, and the unfolding of events at this period
of Islamic history have been little understood in relation to the
time and place in which they occurred. For example, according to
some models Reza Khan appears as a strong nationalist leader
determined to effect social progress in a country not yet ready
for western style parliamentary democracy. Indeed this was the
view of the British Legation in Tehran and through them the
Foreign Office in London. According to some other models, Reza
Khan was a bourgeois national leader confronting reactionary
feudals and their religious supporters; this was the view of the
Soviet Embassy in Tehran. In fact there is very little difference
in substance between the two views; they are both generalizations
from European social and intellectual experiences, merely touched
in different ideological terms.

In order to formulate a clear picture with well-defined
contours of Iranian society in the couple of decades preceding the
commencement of World War II, one shall have to give due thought

1. Ketouzian, ibid., p. 541.
to the appearance and upsurge of acute nationalist trends in
Iranian Society. It has been thought by some analysts that Iranian
nationalist movement at this point of time drew inspiration from
European cultural and historical sources which had lately impressed
the Iranian consciousness. It was acutely conscious of the pre-
Islamic glories of Iranian Empire and wanted to remove the
barriers which it believed religion had put in the way of Iran's
cultural and technological progress. This nationalism was
contemptuous of old aristocratic and religious values. The
fountain-head of this nationalism comprised an amalgam of
journalist, political poets and essayists, westernized bureaucrats
and military leaders. They were heterogenous in their educational,
technical and Marxist socio-economic background. The literati
filled in books and journals about the bygone Iranian glories.
They popularized the stories of ancient Iranian empires, their
military and cultural achievements, and, in the process they
stumbled upon Iran's historical defeat by the Arab nation, which
in turn they held responsible for all the religious superstition
and obscurantism that plagued the country at the time.2


2. Full account of outstanding nationalist poets and
writers of this period can be found in Perikh-i-rashyast-
wa-adabiyyet-i-Iran dar dauran-yi mashrutiyyat, 2 vols.,
Tehran, 1958.
But the perception of politicians and administrators does not always fall in line with the wishful ideas of political poets and writers. They are confronted with hard realities of the situation. Thus gradually a dividing line began to appear between the pragmatic realism of the politicians, and the abstract idealism of the intellectuals within the nationalist political tendency, and as always happens, these two groups eventually became estranged and inimical towards one another. It was under this socio-political situation that Reza Khan had appeared on the Iranian scene.

During his sixteen years reign (1925-1941), Reza Khan attempted a radical transformation of Iranian society. His policies emphasized creating an Iranian nationalism that would be distinct from Islam, weakening the power of clergy, adopting the material achievements of the west, and establishing a highly centralised state and administration backed by a large modern military. The reforms of Kemal Ataturk in Turkey directly inspired many of Reza Shah's actions, and in imitation of Ataturk, he ordered the wearing of western dress and outlawed the veiling of women.

Reza Shah attacked all traditional centres of power that might challenge his authority, and in 1927, he greatly expanded the role of the Iranian state, which traditionally had

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consisted of little more than an army and a treasury. To build his new army, Reza Shah replaced the old tribal levies with universal conscription, and the ordinary Iranian universal conscription, and the ordinary Iranian peasant and townsman found himself with a new burden of military service. Centralization modernization, and a change in groups having power were thus the primary characteristics of the Reza Shah regime. The ulama and tribal leaders were reduced, while both old families and new men entered the increasingly powerful army, bureaucracy, and modern economic sector. The new working class grew, but was as yet essentially powerless. As for the peasantry, available evidence indicates that its economic position worsened and its dependency on landlords increased both through the nineteenth century and the Reza Shah period. The growing commercialization of agriculture increased the exploitation of many peasants.

The period between the Anglo-Russian deposition of Reza Shah and invasion of Iran in 1941 and the fall of Mossadegh in 1953 marks a new stage in the Iranian power structure in some ways comparable to the significant years from 1905 to 1921. For a second time there was an oriental type of parliamentary system.


2. Lambton, A. R. C., p. 97.
however, influenced by old families, cliques, and rivalries. Once again the relatively peaceful balance among foreign powers was undermined, and foreign powers began to vie rather openly for influence; at first through British and Russian backing of their friends in their respective zones, with the United States increasingly. Taking over from Great Britain, first in forcing the withdrawal of Russian troops from the north, and later in the oil negotiations.¹

It will be noted that the social and economic changes that have occurred in Iran in the 1960's are in many ways a continuation of trends in operation since Reza Shah came in power in 1921. On the eve of World War II, there was the strengthening of the central government, including the growth of bureaucracy, a build up of military forces and the emergence of a new elitist class.²

In foreign affairs, Reza Shah had continued the traditional Iranian policy of seeking the friendship of another world power of his times to offset the predominance of Russia and Britain. To this end, he established close economic and cultural relations.

¹ Nikki R. Keddie, op. cit., p. 10.
² On the subject of changes in Iranian society since the rise of Reza Shah see Amin Banani, The Modernization of Iran, 1921-1941, Stanford, 1964. Also see Nikki Keddie, Nationalism in Iran, Pittsburgh, 1964, p. 169.
Centralization of Administration

After ascending the throne, Reza Shah gave first importance to a unified and centralized army which was the most effective instrument for establishing his own authority. In June 1925, the law was passed by virtue of which military service became essential. Three branches of armed forces were created on regular basis and Reza Shah made use of this machine in suppressing the rebellious tribes. In 1937, two destroyers and four gunboats were purchased from Italy to build up Iranian naval strength in the Persian Gulf. This was followed by stationing some more ships in the Caspian Sea. The feudalist elites in the higher military posts, gave place to officers who arose from middle class and had served with Reza Shah in the Cossack brigade in their early career. The total number of armed forces was estimated to be 150 thousand, much more than Iran's actual requirements at that time. According to the statistics released by the Iranian government, the country bore an expenditure of 33.5 percent on the maintenance of armed forces out of its total budget in 1921-41.

Reza Shah centralized the administration and began a campaign against the upper class feudalist representatives and Khans, particularly the heads of the tribes who wielded immense influence among his people but behaved with a defiant mood towards him. Many of those tribal chiefs were executed or exiled to distant

1. Ivanov, M. S. *Terikh-i-Navin-i-Iran*, Moscow, 1921, p. 68.
places or put behind bars. Their armed bands were liquidated and strict orders regards disarming the tribes were implemented. This naturally curtailed the possibilities of extension of imperialist influence among the Khans and the tribes. At this point of time, Great Britain had been pursuing a policy of counteracting the influence of the Soviet Union in the neighbouring Asiatic countries, and as such, it found the centralization of power in Iran conducive to its interests.

Reza shah diverted his attention towards the necessity of building roads in the length and breadth of the country and linking up the remote places with the capital city of Tehran. The powers and authority of the provincial governors were recast so as to leave more of them in the hands of the central authority. Accordingly laws passed in this behalf by the Iranian Parliament on November 7, 1937 and November 9, 1939. The division of the country into districts was abrogated and now Iran was distributed into 10 provinces, 49 divisions and each division was further distributed into sub-divisions.

1. Ibid., p. 69.