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Iranian Historical Memory of the Soviet Interventions in the 1940s

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Abstract. This study aimed to identify factors during the 1940s that impacted Iranians' historical memory and intensified their distrust of the Soviet Union. The author employed an explanatory design and a case study strategy and found that the Soviet invasion of Iran in late August 1941, its occupation until after World War II in May 1946, and its support of the formation of separatist republics in Iran after World War II in 1946 created an image of the Soviet Union as an interventionist state with hostile intentions among Iranians.

Keywords: Iran, Soviet Union, intervention, World War II, historical memory

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Научная статья

Память о советской интервенции в Иране в 1940-е гг.

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Аннотация. Вовлечение Советского Союза в дела Ирана, обусловленное стратегическими, политическими и экономическими интересами Москвы, стало заметным фактором геополитики XX в. Это вовлечение, от военной оккупации до культурной дипломатии и политических маневров, оставило глубокий след в исторической памяти иранцев.

Целью данного исследования стало выявление факторов, которые негативно повлияли на историческую память иранцев и усилили их скептицизм и недоверие к Советскому Союзу. Автор сосредоточился на событиях середины 1940-х гг., связанных с советским вмешательством в пределах географических границ Ирана.

В статье использован так называемый объяснительный дизайн для выявления взаимосвязи между советской интервенцией и мнением жителей Ирана о СССР. Применен метод кейс-стади к периоду 1940-х гг. (Вторая мировая война и послевоенные годы). В исследовании также использовался метод поперечного среза для сбора данных с использованием нарративного обзора литературы для синтеза выводов из предыдущих исследований и интеграции собранных данных для ответа на ключевой исследовательский вопрос статьи.

В результате исследования выявлено, как вмешательство Советского Союза во внутреннюю политику Ирана в 1940-х гг. отразилось на исторической памяти иранцев. Этому способствовали следующие факторы: советское вторжение в Иран в конце августа 1941 г. и последующая оккупация до окончания Второй мировой войны в мае 1946 г.; поддержка (прямая или косвенная) создания сепаратистских или автономных республик, используя ослабленное состояние центрального правительства Ирана после Второй мировой войны до 1946 г.

Советское вмешательство в Иран включало военную оккупацию и политические маневры. Изначально обусловленное стратегическими соображениями во время Второй мировой войны, советское вовлечение эволюционировало в сложное взаимодействие динамики холодной войны, культурных обменов и экономических интересов. Несмотря на различные неудачи и вызовы, Советский Союз сохранял значительное влияние в Иране, формируя геополитический плацдарм в данном регионе.

В конце статьи делается вывод, что вмешательство Советского Союза во внутренние дела Ирана и ущерб, нанесенный национальным интересам Ирана через внешнюю и военную политику Советского Союза, сформировали образ Советского Союза как интервенционистской державы. Последствия советского вмешательства в Иран (ущерб политической стабильности, территориальной целостности) значительно повлияли на восприятие иранской общественностью намерений Кремля как враждебных Тегерану. Влияние этого инцидента на современную историю Ирана радикально изменило восприятие иранских националистических кругов СССР и привело к усилению недоверия иранцев к целям Москвы.

Ключевые слова: Иран, Советский Союз, интервенция, Вторая мировая война, историческая память

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Introduction

The Soviet Union's involvement in Iran, a significant aspect of 20th-century geopolitics, was driven by Moscow's strategic, political, and economic interests. This involvement, from military occupation to cultural diplomacy and political maneuvering, has left a profound mark on the historical memory of Iranians. Iran's perception of Russia as inheriting the Soviet legacy is rooted in a history of frequent interference in Iranian affairs, including the 1941 Anglo-Soviet invasion [1]. The Soviet Union's violation of the 1927 Treaty of Guarantee and Neutrality during World War II strained relations [2]. The occupation of Iran by the British and Soviet forces in 1941 led to political instability in Iran, with multiple governments forming and falling from 1941 to 1946 [3]. Despite attempts to improve relations, tensions persisted, with Iran rejecting Soviet demands for military agreements and insisting on unilateral assurances [4]. Iran's anti-communist religious principles influenced its foreign policy towards the Soviet Union from 1979-1989, aiming to export Islamic revolution principles to all countries [5]. The disintegration of the Soviet Union removed the threat to Iran's national security that had existed for nearly two centuries, and Iran's relations with Russia became more balanced and less disadvantageous to Iran [6].

This study aimed to identify factors during the Soviet Union era that had a detrimental impact on the historical memory of Iranians and intensified Iranian skepticism and distrust towards the Soviet Union. The researcher focused on the mid-1940s, examining events related to Soviet interventions within the geographic scope of Iran. This study sought to answer the question: "How did Soviet interventions in Iran's affairs impact the memory of Iranians and heightened their skepticism and distrust towards the Soviet Union?"

Studying the effects of Soviet interventions on Iranian historical memory is important because by examining how Soviet interventions influenced Iranian perceptions of themselves and their history, researchers can gain insights into the complex factors that have shaped modern Iranian national identity. Iran's historical experiences with foreign powers, including the Soviet Union, influence its relations with neighboring countries. Understanding these memories can provide insights into current diplomatic tensions and alliances.

The nuanced effects of Soviet interventions, particularly during World War II and the early Cold War period, may not be as thoroughly examined. A gap exists in understanding how these interventions have been integrated into Iranian historical memory compared to other events.

This study's innovation focused on identifying critical Soviet interventions in Iran to understand the roots of Iranian skepticism in contemporary history toward the Soviet Union and Russia. Its contribution to knowledge expansion is in helping to understand the reasons and origins of society's skeptical behavior and distrust in Iran's foreign policy toward the Soviet Union.

Reviewing the Literature. Soviet involvement in Iran dates back to 1920-1921 when they established the short-lived Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran in Gilan province. Persits discovered that it was driven by Bolshevik ambitions to spread revolution and reshape Iranian nationalism [7].

According to Nejad, this experiment aimed to reorient social democratic movements towards socialism and advance regional decolonization efforts [8]. The Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran (SSRI) in Gilan (1920-1921) was an early attempt by the Soviets to promote socialism in Iran. However, internal factionalism and the collapse of the SSRI impeded Soviet designs in Iran and the broader region.

In his research, Volkov argued that the USSR initially supported leftist groups like the Tudeh Party, hoping for a socialist transformation of the Iranian revolution [9]. However, as he stated, the failure of these initiatives and the collapse of the Tudeh Party in 1983 led the Soviet Union to reconsider its ideological approach and adopt more pragmatic policies towards Iran.

The Soviet Union's interest in Iran persisted, leading to another invasion in August 1941, alongside British forces, under the pretext of expelling German influence and the need for supply routes to the Soviet Union [10]. According to Eshraghi, this joint Anglo-Soviet occupation was motivated by strategic concerns, including securing Allied interests and establishing a supply route to the USSR [11]. The Soviet approach to Iran during this period was influenced by various factors, including traditional Russian ambitions in the region, Lenin's vision of global revolution, Stalin's aspirations, and the pan-Islamic goals of Soviet Muslim radicals [12].

Although Mossaki and Ravandi-Fadai indicated Soviet cultural diplomacy in Iran and increased cultural ties from the Late 1940s to the 1960s [13], Zubok demonstrated that during the Cold War, the Soviets attempted to expand their influence in Iran, particularly after the 1945 withdrawal of Allied forces [14]. These interventions significantly impacted Iran's internal politics and sovereignty.

Method. This study used an explanatory design to clarify the relationship between Soviet interventionism and Iranian opinions of the USSR. The researcher utilized a case study approach, focusing on the temporal framework of the 1940s concerning World War II and the initial years of the post-Cold War period. The current research involved cross-sectional data collection, utilizing a narrative literature review to synthesize findings from previous academic studies and integrate collected data to address the research question.

The author employed pre-existing secondary qualitative data from diverse academic works that analyzed different facets and changes in the relations between the Soviet Union and Iran. The researcher identified key events that shaped the relationship between the two countries over a decade, analyzing sources that provide critical information to clarify the Iranians' distrust and dim view of the Soviet Union as an intervening neighbor.

Invasion and Occupation during the World War II

The joint invasion of the neutral State of Iran by the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom between August 25 and August 31, 1941, is known as the Anglo-Soviet Invasion of Persia. The Trans-Iranian Railway's creation of the Persian Corridor provided one of the most straightforward routes for sending Lend-Lease commodities from the then-technically neutral United States by sea to the Soviet

Union as the Wehrmacht advanced inexorably across the Soviet Union.

Tehran, Qazvin, and other cities were bombarded by the Soviet Union, which also dropped leaflets pleading with the Iranian people to submit [15]. Additionally, they bombarded targets in the cities of Rasht, Ardabil, and Tabriz, which resulted in the destruction of civilian and residential areas and the deaths and injuries of several hundred people [16]. At least 200 civilians were murdered as a result of the Soviet bombers' attacks on military installations and civilian targets throughout Gilan, including Bandar-e Anzali (Pahlavi) and Rasht. They bombarded targets in Orumiyyeh, killing around a dozen people and injuring many more. A short bombing strike on Hamadan resulted in the death of one civilian, and the intermittent resistance was crushed. The Mashhad Airport was bombed by the Soviet Air Force, which also destroyed multiple military facilities and numerous Iranian fighter planes. This invasion led to Reza Shah's abdication in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi [17].

After World War II, the British started to leave in 1946, but the Soviet Union held off due to perceived threats to its security. Soviet reinforcements, including a minimum of 200 tanks and 3,500 trucks, landed in Tabriz and were dispatched southward to Qazvin, westward toward the Turkish border, and southwestward toward the Iraqi border [18. P. 318–319]. It was not until Iran officially complained to the newly formed UN Security Council that the Soviet Union finally left in May 1946, which caused the Azerbaijan Crisis in 1946. The first confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States occurred over Iran in 1946, when the Soviets refused to evacuate their forces and attempted to establish puppet regimes in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. This incident marked the beginning of Cold War tensions and the West's efforts to contain Soviet influence in the Middle East [19].

By taking advantage of the ethnic diversity and central power vacuum in Iran during the Soviet Union's three-year occupation, the Azerbaijan People's Government (November 1945–December 1946) and the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad (January 22–December 15, 1946) [20] strengthened and organized separatist forces in the Turkish and Kurdish regions of northwestern Iran, respectively, and created circumstances that had detrimental effects on Iran for decades to come.

Supporting Separatism after the World War II

Following World War II, the USSR encouraged separatism in northern Iran, particularly in Azerbaijan, leading to a diplomatic crisis in 1945–46 [21]. The Soviets used Azerbaijan as a tool for political and ideological penetration into Iran, galvanizing local separatist movements [22]. This strategy was part of the broader Soviet influence in the region, which included the formation of Iran's Communist Party, the Tudeh [23].

The Soviet Union pursued a policy of permanent presence in northern Iran and demanded a concession from the Iranian government in September–October 1944 to extract oil in the north. To this end, it established the Azerbaijani Democratic Party under the leadership of Ja'far Pishevari in northern Iran to put pressure on the central Tehran

government [24]. The Soviet press condemned the Pahlavi regime's oppression of the Iranian people and supported the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP) government in Tabriz in 1945 [25]. After many weeks of bloody fighting, the breakaway People's Republic of Azerbaijan was established on December 12 with support from the Soviet Union; however, Moscow denied that allegation.

Following Iran's pleading to the Security Council in 1946, the Soviets obtained a promise from Iranian Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam to propose legislation for establishing a Soviet-Iranian Oil Company to exploit Iran's northern oil reserves. In exchange, the Soviet Union consented to negotiate on Azerbaijan: the Iranians retracted their grievance to the Security Council, and Soviet troops departed from Azerbaijan by May 9, 1946 [26. P. 92]. The Iranian Parliament, however, voted 102 to 2 to reject the oil agreement with the Soviet Union [27].

The Republic of Mahabad, a Soviet Union puppet state, emerged concurrently with the Azerbaijan People's Government, another ephemeral, unrecognized Soviet-supported state [28. P. 136]. Analysts often overstated the Soviet influence in the Republic of Mahabad. Kurdish nationalist leaders Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou and Jalal Talabani emphasized Soviet camaraderie and assistance, whereas figures such as Robert Rossow, Jr., the American chargé d'affaires in adjacent Azerbaijan, and historian William Linn Westermann labeled the republic a Soviet puppet state [29. P. 45–47].

In the absence of a central government, the Soviets endeavored to annex northern Iran to the Soviet Union and fostered Kurdish nationalism [30. P. 27–28]. In western Azerbaijan, the Soviet commander at Mandoab convened the Kurdish chieftains and conveyed them to Baku in southern Russia. In late September 1945, the Prime Minister of the Azerbaijan SSR advised them to pursue their objectives within Azerbaijani autonomy and to designate themselves as the Democratic Party of Kurdistan [31. P. 43–46]. On December 15, 1945, Qazi Mohammad, a hereditary judge and leader of Mahabad, established the Kurdish Republic [32. P. 60].

The Soviets orchestrated and facilitated the establishment of the Kurdish Democratic Party and the autonomy of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad. They supported Qazi's administration through pragmatic philanthropic initiatives, including providing motor transport, keeping out the Iranian army, and purchasing the whole tobacco harvest.

On January 19, 1946, Iran requested an inquiry into Russian intervention in its domestic affairs. The Soviet Union withdrew its support for the Mahabad Republic after securing an oil treaty with the Iranian government, eliminating the republic [33].

Discussion

This research drew a question and explored the contemporary historical relations between the two countries to identify the most critical Soviet involvement in Iran's affairs in the 1940s, which intensified Iranian skepticism of Moscow. The study revealed the impact of the Soviet Union's interference in Iran's domestic politics during the 1940s on the Iranian historical memory. Two primary fac-

tors contributed to this skeptical perception: 1) The Soviet invasion of Iran in late August 1941 and its subsequent occupation until after World War II in May 1946, and 2) The support, either direct or indirect, for the creation of separatist or autonomous republics by exploiting the weakened state of Iran's central government in post-World War II until 1946.

This study, in line with Soghomonyan's findings [34], discovered that the Soviet Union's plan during World War II included the occupation of Iran. The Soviet Union's political maneuvers and military actions in Iran led to violating national sovereignty and destabilizing the internal political situation, which Eshraghi previously confirmed as having geopolitical motivations [35]. The researcher, consistent with Blank's findings [36], stated that Moscow's regional ambitions influenced Russia's foreign policy toward Iran.

Russia sought to expand its influence in Iran during the Cold War, a finding that aligns with Zubok's research [37]. In this context, as the researcher discovered, Moscow supported ethnic divisions and exploited the weakness of the central power, backing republics within Iran that opposed the central government. This finding is consistent with Farhadov's claim regarding the Soviet government's exploitation of Azerbaijani nationalism in Iran to support separatism [38].

However, the present study challenges the findings of Orishev et al. [39] regarding the Soviet military command mediating conflicts between Persians and Kurds in Iran during WWII but not supporting Kurdish separatism. Similarly, Vali's study challenged the researcher's findings [40]. He claimed that the Mahabad Republic was not solely a result of Soviet conspiracy but rather the culmination of developing a modern Kurdish national identity in response to the construction of the Iranian nation-state.

Conclusion

The Soviet interventions in Iran involved military occupation and political maneuvering. Initially driven by stra-

tegic concerns during World War II, Soviet involvement evolved into a complex interplay of Cold War dynamics, cultural exchanges, and economic interests. Despite various setbacks and challenges, the Soviet Union maintained a significant influence in Iran, shaping the region's geopolitical landscape.

The research concludes that Soviet involvement in Iran's internal affairs and the damage inflicted on Iran's national interests through Soviet foreign and military policies painted the Soviet Union as an interventionist power with hostile intentions toward Iran's territorial integrity.

The image of the Soviet Union among Iranians was further exacerbated by Iran's political differences and the Soviet Union's opposing alliances during the Cold War. The consequences of these Soviet interventions in Iran and their damage to Iran's political stability and territorial integrity significantly impacted the Iranian public's perception of the Kremlin's hostile intentions and the Soviet Union's separatist objectives. This incident's effect on Iran's contemporary history altered the perception of the Iranian nationalist circles towards Russia radically and led to an increased distrust of Iranians of Moscow's objectives.

Suggestions for Future Research. Interdisciplinary approaches, such as merging historical research with psychological insights into memory formation, to analyze Soviet manipulations on Iranian historical narratives have research gaps. Iranian literature, cinema, and art should be studied to determine how Soviet interventions affected them. Qualitative research could distinguish between Soviet-era survivors' individual memories and national narratives' communal memories. The Soviet interventions harmed Azerbaijanis and other Iranian ethnicities. Studying how these interventions affected regional identities and memories can better understand Iranian nationalism and ethnic relations. Finally, studying how Iranian governments and political organizations have used or concealed Soviet intervention memories for political goals could elucidate the importance of historical memory in Iranian politics and identity.

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