

**THE
SOVIET UNION
AND ITS
SOUTHERN
NEIGHBOURS**

**Iran and Afghanistan
1917–1933**

MIKHAIL VOLODARSKY



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TO MY WIFE,
LUDMILLA

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Introduction

This monograph is intended to investigate the very earliest period of Soviet Middle East policy. The study of this period makes it possible to trace the way in which the Bolsheviks altered their foreign-policy tactics in accordance with circumstances which developed inside and outside the country, while maintaining inviolable strategic objectives – the inspiration and provocation of ‘global revolution’.

In the first years after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, Lenin and his inner circle were convinced that within a short time all Europe would be overcome by the proletarian revolution. Lenin considered the October Revolution to be only the beginning of the international uprising of the proletariat. What was happening at that time in Germany and Hungary appeared to confirm those prognoses. Where the atmosphere was conducive to such influence, Moscow extended its ‘assistance’ and encouragement, especially in such countries as Poland, Finland and the Baltic states. Moscow also undertook to create a military and political base on part of Iranian territory. However, the changing situation in Europe was unfavourable for the revolutionary ‘romantics’. The dreams of a global revolution and a global Soviet Republic were shattered one after another. The political situation within the Soviet Union was also taking a different turn from what was expected. Lenin’s belief that he could introduce socialism simply by declaring ‘military communism’ was dashed. That policy, which smacked of purely political adventurism, had to be abandoned and replaced by the New Economic Policy (NEP), yet this did not mean that the ‘guard’ headed by Lenin had given up its ultra-revolutionary illusions. The theoreticians of *perestroika* assert that Lenin really intended to create in Russia a society of efficient and civilized co-operative members. Were it so, he would have aspired to a mutually profitable and honest co-operation with the West. The preconditions should have been to cease playing at world revolution and to liquidate the Comintern. But in reality the NEP was part of a manoeuvre leading to that very revolution.

In practice, the introduction of the NEP created a bipolarity in

Moscow's foreign policy – a fact which has been noted by a number of investigators, among them George Kennan (*Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin*, 1960), who pointed out that in the years 1921–34 there were two centres of power in the foreign policy activity of the USSR: on the one hand there was the Comintern, and on the other the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (Narkomindel).

The revision of history which began with *perestroika* and *glasnost* has also dealt with that aspect of Soviet foreign policy. Professor V. Sirotkin, an active supporter of *perestroika*, pointed out in an article entitled 'From Civil War to Civil Peace' that in the first half of the 1920s the subject of bipolarity in Soviet foreign policy was not yet taboo and was openly discussed in the Soviet press. Thus, for instance the *Narkomindel Herald* (*Vestnik NKID*) quoted in detail Poland's reaction to the Riga Treaty as expressed in the Warsaw newspaper *Courier Polski* on 4 October 1921. It contained the following item:

The hard work done by Poland in order to preserve and strengthen peaceful relations with Bolshevik Russia must be properly recognized abroad. It signifies an effort to remain at peace with a state which does not acknowledge any norms of the civilized world; which despises the political organization of the rest of Europe, wishes to see it succumb to conflagration and rebellion. It also means having dealings with a Janus-faced people, whose one face says: 'I am a member of the Government, and I know nothing of the Third International' while the other face says: 'I am a member of the Third International and I am not interested in any obligations undertaken by the Government'.

This bipolarity of foreign policy found expression in constant mutual attacks by the head of the Narkomindel, Gheorgii Chicherin, and the President of the Comintern, Grigorii Zinovyev. The former was constantly accusing the latter of making thoughtless declarations which impaired the possibility of normalizing diplomatic relations with the West. For the same reason Chicherin often complained about the activities of Stalin and Ordzhonikidze in Kirov in the Transcaucasus, and their negative influence on the situation in Persia, Turkey and Afghanistan. In 1921 Lenin acted on Chicherin's repeated requests, and the Politburo issued a special decree forbidding government members and those of the Russian section of the Comintern to make any public declarations concerning foreign-policy problems or the international situation without

Chicherin's sanction. However, Chicherin's proposal to remove Soviet leaders from the Executive Committee of the Comintern was resolutely rejected by Lenin.²

Nevertheless, Lenin's collaborators paid scant attention to that decision as they believed, to an even greater degree than Lenin himself, in a rapidly approaching socialist revolution that would result in the creation of a 'global' Soviet Union. That dual approach was causing difficulties in the day-to-day work of Soviet diplomats not only in Paris, London and Berlin but also in Tehran, Kabul and Ankara.

As Stalin progressively fortified his position as dictator, his view on foreign policy became more visible and dominant. Until the end of the 1920s, Stalin's personal interference in matters of the Narkomindel and in foreign policy in general was not particularly felt by Chicherin and his staff. Stalin was too busy with problems of the Party's internecine struggle. Thus Chicherin remained relatively independent. Paradoxical as it may seem, the weakening positions within the party of Trotsky, Zinovyev, Radek and others worked temporarily in Chicherin's favour. With their gradual disappearance from the scene, the influence of the Comintern as one of the two power-centres of Soviet foreign policy vanished. Stalin's participation in foreign affairs was, until then, minimal and insignificant. He took no part in negotiations, did not receive foreign government officials or ambassadors and confined himself to making occasional analyses of the international situation.

At the beginning of the 1930s the situation shifted drastically. Chicherin was replaced by M.M. Litvinov. The character of Stalin's relations with both prominent diplomats changed. If Chicherin had managed to preserve his relative independence during the era of Stalin's non-interference in foreign affairs, Litvinov, as People's Commissar, was wholly dependent on Stalin. In the 1930s the actual foreign-policy decisions began to come from Stalin, and from that time the term 'global revolution' disappeared from the battery of Soviet propaganda. Foreign policy was gradually re-acquiring many elements of the imperial doctrine, which was so close to Stalin's outlook. That doctrine, dressed in new terminology, was also in the interests of a new class – the *partokratia* or *nomenklatura* – created and endowed with power by Stalin. No one dared any longer to say that once the world revolution succeeded, a victorious Soviet Union would concede the leading role to the more developed states of the

West. Stalin demanded that the international communist movement work for the USSR and not the other way round. The Comintern, having lost the last vestiges of relative independence which it enjoyed in its first years of existence, succumbed to the new situation.

By the mid-1930s the bipolarity of Soviet foreign policy had completely disappeared, and there was unity in word and deed. Something else disappeared for ever from foreign-policy practice: the symbols, illusions and terminology of revolutionary romanticism.

The normalization of Soviet–Iranian and Soviet–Afghan relations in 1921 coincided with the transition to NEP and the increasing bipolarity in Soviet foreign policy. As far as Iran and Afghanistan were concerned, this dualism took the form of diametric opposition between principles and objectives. The principles formulated by the Narkomindel included equal rights, mutual non-interference in internal affairs and mutually beneficial co-operation. However, turning Iran and Afghanistan into bridgeheads for a breakthrough to India, undermining the power of the British Empire and establishing Soviet control over Asia were the objectives defined by the Party, which was increasingly personified by Stalin.

Notes

1. Yu. Afanasyer (ed.), *Inogo ne dano* (Moscow: Progress, 1988), p. 384.
2. V.I. Lenin, *Polnoye sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. 53, pp. 273, 435. Chicherin insisted that 'the predominance of Party over governmental activity signifies the paralysis of governmental activity' (AVPRF, f.04, op.52, pap.344a, d.55405, p.26).

1

RUSSIAN-IRANIAN AND RUSSIAN-AFGHAN RELATIONS BEFORE OCTOBER 1917

The beginning of Russian-Iranian diplomatic relations dates from 1586. In that year Tsar Feodor Ivanovich (1584-98), son and successor to Ivan IV, sent an embassy to Iran, with Prince Tyufyakin at its head. His successors, Tsar Boris Godunov and Tsar Vasili Shuysky, carried on these lively contacts with Iran despite the unfavourable conditions of those troubled times. The contact continued during the reign of Tsar Mikhail Feodorovich Romanov (1613-45). Russia and Iran were, at that time, united by their mutual interest in putting an end to Turkish aggression. The Sefevi dynasty came to power in Iran at the beginning of the sixteenth century and towards the end of that century had attained enough power to stand up to the Ottoman Empire. It was for that reason that the Russian Tsars sought to conclude an alliance with Shah Abbas I (1587-1629), and were met with a positive response.¹

After his death the power of the dynasty declined and the switching of Russia's interest from Turkish affairs to relations with Poland and Sweden put a prolonged stop to Russian-Iranian relations. However, they were renewed under the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725) when the Sefevi dynasty came to an end and the Afghan tribes invaded Iran. The disappearance of the Sefevi Empire from the political map of the Middle East disturbed the balance of that region and led to a new wave of Turkish aggression. Sultan Akhmed I considered that a weaker Iran might be a signal for extending his control over the whole of the Transcaucasus, which greatly worried Russia. It was for that reason that the Russian government decided to extend military aid to Iran against the Turks, who had already invaded western Iran. A Russian army was

sent to that country gaining control along the coast of the Caspian Sea between the estuary of the River Terek and that of the River Atrek. Russia's decisive measures stopped Turkey's ambitious designs on Iran. Russian forces remained there for 12 years (1724–36) until a new, centralized power emerged in Iran – the Empire of Nadir Shah (1736–47) – when the balance of power was once more restored in the Middle East.

The second half of the eighteenth century was not marked by any outstanding events in Russian–Iranian relations. However, towards the end of the century some noteworthy events took place in connection with Russia's renewed activity in the Transcaucasus, giving those relations an altogether new character. The strengthening of Russian influence in Transcaucasia and the decision of Georgia to become part of the Russian Empire met with harsh opposition on the part of the already established Iranian Qajar dynasty (1796–1825). Russia and Iran entered into a series of wars, which lasted throughout the first third of the nineteenth century. Now a new political factor emerged in that region – Great Britain – which viewed Russia's movement toward the south as a threat to its possessions in India and its interests in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. During the first (1804–13) and second (1826–28) Russo-Persian wars, Britain backed Iran with arms and money. Despite this Iran was defeated on both occasions. Consequently Iran had to sign two peace treaties with Russia – Gulistan (1813) and Turkmanchai (1828) – by which it gave up all claims to the Transcaucasus and recognized the annexation by Russia of Georgia, Armenia and northern Azerbaijan. The Turkmanchai Treaty gave Russia the right to keep a naval force in the Caspian Sea and Iran had to agree to pay a large indemnity and give Russia the right to establish in Iran the so-called regime of Capitulations: Russian subjects enjoyed special privileges and facilities (consular jurisdiction, extraterritoriality, and the right to own property). Russian diplomatic representatives, consuls and trading agents also had the right to protect those Iranian subjects employed by them. The Turkmanchai Treaty was the foundation of Russian influence in Iran for almost a century until October 1917.

Russian victories over Iran resulted in a change in Iran's foreign policy: instead of relying totally on Great Britain it now manipulated a double-edged policy of manoeuvring between the two, though sometimes with an obvious leaning towards Russia.

Russian Ministers to Tehran (Count I.O. Simonich (1832–38), General A.O. Duhamel (1839–41) and Count A.I. Medem (1841–46) were *de facto* advisers to Prince Abbas, who was the actual ruler of Iran during the reign or the very old Fath Ali Shah (1797–1834) and during the rule of his son, Muhammed Shah (1834–48). Muhammed's son, Naser ed-Din Shah (1848–96) – according to a report from N.A. Anichkov, Russian Consul General in Tabriz (1838–54), later Minister to Tehran (1854–57) – had 'demonstrated a very obvious desire not to withdraw from our influence'.²

London had no alternative but to acknowledge the situation and admit that Russia had acquired a strong foothold in the Middle East. In the 1840s both great powers came to a mutual agreement on policy towards Iran.³

Russia's influence in Iran and Iran's attachment to Russia were the ruling policies of the Iranian court and it was the Shah's wish to conclude a treaty with Russia at the beginning of the Crimean War. But under pressure from London he was obliged to remain neutral. However British diplomacy could not prevent a Russian–Iranian neutrality treaty being signed on 28 September 1854, which stipulated a 'friendly neutrality' towards Russia throughout the Crimean War. Therefore Iran had a fairly restrained policy with regard to the Russian presence in Central Asia in the 1860s and 1870s. Strong pressure from London did not change Iran's friendly attitude towards Russia.⁴

Anglo-Russian rivalry in Iran during the 1870s and 1890s, created a particular atmosphere in Russian–Iranian relations in as much as Tehran, wishing to avoid repressive measures by Great Britain, was compelled to try to maintain a certain equilibrium, and keep an equal distance between itself and both rivals. However, there were other objectives that determined Iran to strengthen connections with Russia, especially after the abolition of serfdom in 1861, when Russia entered a period of rapid economic and political development. Thus it was that economic factors determined Russian–Iranian relations during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The first concessions were made, and a Russian Discount and Loan Bank was opened in Tehran to finance Russian–Iranian trade. The northern provinces of Iran – the richest and economically best-developed – embarked on an ever-increasing trade with Russia. The Russian railway network reached the very borders of Iran, and the Caspian Sea became a lively trading route.

Russia's position – that of dominance in northern Iran – was acknowledged and accepted by Great Britain, which agreed to consider that region as a monopolistic sphere of Russian influence (Anglo-Russian Agreement of 31 August 1907). This influence originated in 1878 when, at the request of Naser ed-Din Shah, Russian officers organized and trained the Cossack Regiment, the only existing real fighting force in the Iranian Army. This subsequently grew into a brigade, and later into a division. This force played an important role in destroying the main centres of the radical movement during the Iranian revolution in 1905–11, and also during the uprising of 1921.

During the First World War, Iranian neutrality was grossly violated by the aggressive acts of both Turkey and Germany. Russia and Great Britain were obliged to send their forces into Iran in order to prevent its occupation by the Turkish Army, and cut off the eventual movement of Turkish and German forces into Afghanistan, India and Russian Turkestan.

Russian–Iranian relations between 1828 and 1917 were not based on equality of rights, nor could their respective economic potentials be compared. Neither could the levels of their social, cultural and political development be compared. Russia aimed at achieving the maximum benefit from the situation and took full advantage of its geographical position – close to the most economically developed part of northern Iran, which gave Russia easy access to that market.

However, St Petersburg respected Iran's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and in the 1830s defined its own position concerning the demarcation line between the Shah's possessions and the Turkmen areas which the Shah was claiming for himself. During the following decades the Russian government continued to repudiate Iran's claims to that area, until the Turkmen lands were incorporated into the Russian Empire. Russia repeatedly and firmly reminded Iran that the River Atrek forms the border between Iran and Turkmenia. Tehran could not fail to acknowledge the logic and justice of Russia's policy in this, and the Russian–Iranian demarcation line was confirmed in 1881 on the basis of Russia's position. Thus from the 1830s to the 1890s the border between Russia and Iran was the most peaceful of Iran's borders. The incorporation of Turkmen lands into the Russian Empire put an end to invasions by Turkmen tribes into the rich Iranian provinces of Khorassan and Astrabad.

The Russian February Revolution of 1917 created in Iran an atmosphere of great expectation. The Iranian public did not hide its hopes for a speedy abolition of unjust agreements, liquidation of the Capitulations regime and the withdrawal from Iranian territory of all foreign military forces. It became known in Tehran that the Minister appointed to Iran by the Provisional Government – V. Minorsky – had advised his government to withdraw Russian forces from Iran, that is the 1st Caucasian Cavalry Corps commanded by General Baratov, consisting of 60,000 men. He also recommended that Russia give up its sphere of influence there, as defined by the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907.^{5,6} Minorsky's statement – that owing to the Russian revolution not only Russian but also British policy would favour greater liberalization, and that Russia would thus play a more active and progressive role in Iran – made him a popular figure in Tehran. Russia's political status began to soar.⁷ The paper *Jangel*, published in Fumen (in the province of Gilan), with strong pan-Islamic tendencies, wrote in the editorial of its first issue (23 May 1917): 'The victory of the Russians over Tsarism has strengthened the Iranian people's hopes for a better future and made us believe that Russian democracy will extend both fiscal and moral aid to the Iranian people.'

How well those hopes and expectations were founded was confirmed by the contradictory instructions dispatched by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Minorsky. On the one hand, the instructions stressed that 'Russia's policy will not undergo any changes'.⁸ On the other, they contained the following important message: 'We may not act openly against the liberal tendencies in Iran. Owing to our new regime we should not do anything against Iran's liberal ideas.'⁹ And further: 'Nor must we take a position against the convening of the Majlis, since that may cause discontent in Iran as well as amongst our democratic circles.'¹⁰

The result was, of course, that criticism of Russia in the Iranian press virtually disappeared. In return a campaign of anti-British feeling attained enormous dimensions. Typical of that campaign was an article which appeared in the newspaper *Setareye Sorh (Red Star)*: 'All the misfortunes that Iran had suffered from the time of the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 were the result of the intrigues and machinations of British diplomacy.'¹¹

Anti-British feeling was further fostered in the spring of 1917 when a group of Iranian nationalist extremists set up an under-

ground organization called 'Komiteye Modjazat' (Retribution Committee). The Shah himself, his Prime Minister, Vossuq ed-Dowleh, members of the government and other prominent politicians received letters containing death threats against anyone who collaborated with the British. Then began a series of terrorist acts which claimed many victims including a well-known religious personality, Agha Mirza Mohsen, who had praised the pro-British cabinet of Vossuq ed-Dowleh in his sermons; the Vice-Minister of Finance, Montahad ed-Dowleh, known for his close ties with the British ministers in Tehran, Barclay and Marling; the Governor General of Tabriz, Sardar Rashid; and the director of Tehran's granaries, Mirza Ismail Khan.¹² The death threat against the Prime Minister was never carried out, but he was forced to leave his post in May 1917.

The new Prime Minister, Ala os Saltaneh, informed Marling on 12 July 1917, that his government 'was forced, under pressure of public opinion, to declare null and void the decision taken by Vossuq ed-Dowleh's cabinet, by which General Sir Percy Sykes was given the right to form a corps of South Persian Rifles'. He also informed the British minister that the Iranian government considered the continuing presence of British forces on Iranian territory and the recruiting of armed units under the command of British officers as infringements of that country's sovereignty.¹³ No such declarations, however, were made to the Russian minister, Minorsky, although Russian forces continued to remain on Iranian territory. Moreover, Russian-Iranian meetings, organized by Iranian leftist groups together with Soviet soldiers' deputies, were taking place in Tehran, Kermanshah, Rasht and other cities. The orators were shouting declarations: 'Long live Free Russia and Free Iran' and 'We shall go hand in hand with the Russians'.¹⁴

In the meantime, relations between Russia and Afghanistan were taking on a different character. Little was known in Russia about that remote mountainous country. Information about 'Kabulia' had begun to reach St Petersburg more or less regularly only at the end of the eighteenth century, through Bokharan merchants who brought Afghan artefacts for sale in Russia. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Russian government decided to gather information on Afghanistan and establish contact with its ruler.

With that aim in mind, a special group of diplomats was included in the Russian delegation headed by Count Yu. A. Golovkin which was sent to China in 1805. However, Count Golovkin never got to China, nor did the diplomats who were to go to Kabul get there either. In 1823, one of the officials of the Russian Ministry of Finance, who was in charge of trade with the Central Asian countries, had written in his yearly report that 'Afghanistan is hardly worth the attention of the [Russian] Government',¹⁵ although some ten years later the word 'Afghanistan' was often mentioned in Russian diplomatic and interministerial correspondence.

At that time, Russia's growing influence in the Middle East (after its victories in the Russian–Iranian and Russian–Turkish wars) caused Britain to take its own steps in that area. Numerous British agents infiltrated Central Asia with the purpose of preparing the ground for turning this vast region, bordering Russia and presenting a natural market for Russian goods, into a market for British goods. Britain also wanted a base for direct anti-Russian political and military activity. The Russian government, wanting to set up an obstacle to Britain's thrust into Central Asia, began to pay attention to Afghanistan, whose geopolitical situation was ideal as a natural barrier between India and Central Asia.

Count I.O. Simonich, the Russian minister to Tehran, was ordered to send to St Petersburg as much detailed information about Afghanistan as possible. Simultaneously the Russian government began receiving important information from the Orenburg Governor General, Count V.A. Perovsky, provided by Bokharan and Khivan merchants travelling to Russian fairs. Knowledge of Afghanistan began to widen. It became clear that the strong Afghan power – the Durrani Empire – created in 1747 by the outstanding military commander, Ahmad Shah Abdali, had crumbled in 1818. By the 1830s there existed merely four medium-sized principalities with the cities Kabul, Kandahar, Herat and Peshawar as their capitals. The first two were ruled by members of the aristocratic Barakzai clan of the Abdali tribe. Herat was ruled by the descendants of Ahmad Shah (Sadozai clan). Peshawar was seized in 1833–34, with the silent approval of the British Indian government, by its ally, a Sikh ruler, Ranjit Singh.

Count Simonich's dispatches home advised that the British should not hide their intention of turning the whole of Afghanistan

into a British protectorate. He wrote that in April 1836 his British colleague in Tehran, Sir G. Ellis, had declared that Great Britain considered Afghanistan as 'the border of our Indian Empire'. He also said that his government insisted on 'no other European state having any trade or political dealings with Afghanistan'. Simonich rejected the doctrine of 'limited sovereignty of Afghanistan' and declared that Russia considered all the Afghan principalities as independent states, with Russia having the right to normal relations with them.¹⁶

In the 1830s the ruler of Kabul, Dost Muhammad Khan, initiated the idea of unifying the four principalities into one state. The idea met with strong opposition from the British government, and Dost Muhammad Khan turned to Russia for help. An Afghan mission was sent to St Petersburg, arriving there in the spring of 1837. Negotiations began with the Vice-Chancellor, Count K.V. Nesselrode, and the Director of the Asian Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, K.K. Radofinikin. The result of these talks was that a Russian diplomatic mission would be sent to Afghanistan to help Dost Muhammad Khan reach an agreement with his brothers, the rulers of Kandahar. After that, steps would be taken to work out an alliance for Iran, Kabul and Kandahar against the pro-British ruler of Herat, Kamran Mirza. Russia promised Dost Muhammad and his Kandahar brothers help in their struggle for the unification of Afghan lands.

The Russian diplomatic mission, sent to Afghanistan in May 1837, was headed by a young diplomat and orientalist, Lieutenant I.V. Vitkevich, who was an adjutant to Count Perovsky. The joint efforts of Count Simonich and Vitkevich bore fruit. The rulers of Kabul and Kandahar succeeded in overcoming their feud and signed, together with Iran, a treaty guaranteed by Count Simonich in the name of Tsar Nicholas I. This was immediately and forcefully opposed by the British government. For them the presence of a Russian diplomatic agent in Kabul was worse than a blockade of the Thames estuary by an enemy squadron. London exerted such pressure on St Petersburg that Nicholas I had to give in. It should be borne in mind that in the 1830s Russia's foreign policy was almost exclusively centred on the notorious 'Eastern question', and to a much lesser extent on Central Asia. Simonich and Vitkevich, who had provoked the wrath of London, were recalled and their pet project – the Iran–Kabul–Kandahar alliance – was not ratified by