

2016

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### Recommended Citation

Curtis, Caitlin N. (2016) "The Policy Regarding Iran: Circumstances Surrounding the Allied Invasion in 1941," *Montview Liberty University Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/montview/vol2/iss1/2>

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The Policy Regarding Iran:  
Circumstances Surrounding the Allied Invasion in 1941

Caitlin Curtis  
December 3, 2015

## The Policy Regarding Iran:

### Circumstances Surrounding the Allied Invasion in 1941

Iran played a very important role during World War II. The allied nations felt it necessary to occupy Iran due to its strategic location, natural resources, and the Iranian government's pro-Nazi stance. When the allies completed the invasion in Iran, problems arose as British and Russian policies clashed. The United States was involved to a lesser extent, but President Franklin Roosevelt also had conflicting plans for the future of Iran. The terms of the occupation were written with the best intentions for Iran but were eventually disregarded by the British, Americans, and especially the Soviets. This mixture of a poor execution of treaty terms as well as British, Soviet, and American interests within Iran destroyed the unity it possessed and allowed Russia to extend massive influence over the newly destabilized country.

Each of the allies had interests in Iran before the outbreak of World War II. According to General Patrick J. Hurley, whom Roosevelt sent to Iran for the purpose of gaining insight, the British wanted to maintain their oil monopoly.<sup>1</sup> The beginnings of the British oil monopoly can be traced back to 1901 when William D'Arcy of Australia obtained concessions from Iran.<sup>2</sup> The largest oil refinery in the world at the time was in Abadan, Iran, which gave Great Britain an immense motive for wanting to protect Iran from Axis control.

The Soviet Union had two plans for Iran. The Russians desired a warm water port, and to influence Iran with Communist ideas. Hurley advised Roosevelt that the Soviets were very

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1. Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 149.

2. *Ibid.*, 136.

interested in obtaining a warm water port.<sup>3</sup> Joseph Grew, an American diplomat, in his memorandum for Roosevelt about the Iranian Free Port and Railway Trusteeship, explained that the Russians were very adamant about having “an assured outlet to the Persian Gulf, to be obtained by forceful means if necessary, in the interests of Soviet security.”<sup>4</sup> Grew insisted that allowing Russia to have this port would be “a thinly disguised cover for power politics and old-world-imperialism” to the Iranian people, and Great Britain would be against this as they had no desire to see Russia become a world power.<sup>5</sup>

The United States also wanted oil. Bruce R. Kuniholm, author of *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, writes that the most important factor for American involvement within Iran “was the pursuit of national interests,” which means oil.<sup>6</sup> To avoid losing oil concessions for The Standard-Vacuum and Sinclair oil companies by Iran, the United States had to ensure that its assets were safe.<sup>7</sup> Between 1939 and 1945, Iran produced over 526 million barrels of oil. This is no small feat considering that Saudi Arabia produced around 45 million barrels of oil.<sup>8</sup>

Other than oil, the United States had an extensive plan for what it would prefer for Iran to look like after the war. Hurley outlined a tentative stance that the United States should take on Iranian policy. To summarize, Hurley insisted that Iran should be converted to a democracy, have free enterprise without imperialism, stop the Soviet Union and Great Britain from giving

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3. Ibid.

4. Memorandum from Joseph C. Grew to Franklin D. Roosevelt on Iranian Free Port and Railway Trusteeship, January 11, 1945, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park: NY, Diplomatic Correspondence, Box 40, 1.

5. Ibid., 2.

6. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War*, 177.

7. Ibid., 177-178.

8. Ibid., 180.

Lend-Lease supplies to other nations through Iran without United States consent, and create better relations with Iran for the sake of oil interests.<sup>9</sup> In response to this list, Roosevelt sent a memorandum to his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, where he explained, to this “backward nation... [that he was] thrilled with the idea of using our efforts in Iran as an example of what [could] be done by the unselfish American policy.”<sup>10</sup>

The allies did find legitimate grounds for invading Iran other than for national interests. According to Sydney Nettleton Fisher, the Iranian government under Reza Shah Pahlavi declared itself neutral in World War II, but favored the Nazis.<sup>11</sup> Fisher also states that “[l]arge percentages of imports and exports were German, and German technicians were assisting in the development of the industry and the natural resources of Iran other than oil.”<sup>12</sup> Pahlavi also held deep resentments towards Great Britain and Russia because of past imperialism.<sup>13</sup> The allies felt that the government of Iran was a danger to their interests there. Basil H. Aboul-Enein, Faisal H. Aboul-Enein, and J.D. Thornton claim that because “the word Iran mean[s] ‘Land of Aryans,’ the Nazis, as part of their philosophy, were in search for the origins of the Aryan people and thus blurred history and etymology to enhance Iranian-Nazi ties.”<sup>14</sup> It is not certain that the Nazis thought Aryans came from Iran, but it is known that the Nazis did alter history to accomplish their indoctrination.

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9. Tentative American Policy for Iran from Patrick Hurley to Franklin Roosevelt, December 21, 1943, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park: NY, Diplomatic Correspondence, Box 40, 1-11.

10. Memorandum for the Secretary of State from Franklin Roosevelt, January 12, 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park: NY, Diplomatic Correspondence, Box 40, 1.

11. Sydney Nettleton Fisher, *The Middle East: A History* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1969), 477-478.

12. *Ibid.*, 487.

13. *Ibid.*, 488.

14. Aboul-Enein, Basil H., Faisal H. Aboul-Enein, and J.D. Thornton. “Axis and Allied Intervention, Collaboration in Iran.” *Infantry* 99, no. 4 (Nov/Dec 2010): 19.

The spark that allowed the allies to justify invading Iran came in June 1941 when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. This halted a coup d'etat that was supposedly in place where the Germans had planned to overthrow Pahlavi. The Soviets made this claim in an attempt to turn Iran away from Germany.<sup>15</sup> The allies became concerned that the Germans would take over Iran for its oil reserves because Germany was low on natural resources. According to Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, the Germans wanted to take over the Middle East as far as India via the Caucasus which was called the Rosenberg Plan.<sup>16</sup>

After the Nazis invaded Russia, Stalin and Churchill urged Pahlavi to oust all Germans from Iran. To this, “[Pahlavi] was furious at such requests, and no action was taken.”<sup>17</sup> According to Kuniholm, “[t]here were 1,500 Germans in [Tehran] in August 1941, and their numbers were steadily increasing.”<sup>18</sup> This was alarming to the allies who knew of the predicament that Germany was in with their insufficient oil supply. The protection of Iranian oil became a top priority.<sup>19</sup>

When Russia was invaded, Great Britain immediately began creating supply lines through Iran to the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> This could only be efficiently achieved if the country was under allied control. According to Ervand Abrahamian, besides ensuring stable supply lines, the allies wanted to overthrow Pahlavi and keep the Nazis from creating a pro-German state.<sup>21</sup> The

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15. Fisher, *The Middle East*, 488.

16. Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 68.

17. Fisher, *The Middle East*, 488.

18. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War*, 138.

19. *Ibid.*, 140.

20. *Ibid.*, 138.

21. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran: Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 164.

people of Iran under Pahlavi were mostly unhappy and desired change which the Nazis could provide.<sup>22</sup>

After Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, the British War Cabinet began to prepare for a joint attack with the Red Army.<sup>23</sup> On August 24, 1941, Louis Dreyfus, the Minister to Iran, was alerted by the British Minister that a letter would be given to Iran the following morning explaining allied motives for the invasion. The four reasons included: disappointment in Iran for not following orders of ousting Germans from the country, regret that Britain had to take matters into their own hands to protect their interests within Iran, a reiteration that Britain had no desire to conquer Iran or remove its sovereignty, and a hope that to reduce bloodshed, Iran would not resist.<sup>24</sup> Dreyfus wrote again the following day that the letter from Great Britain was met with a similar letter from the Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup>

The invasion of Iran began on August 25, 1941 and was called Operation Countenance.<sup>26</sup> General Archibald Wavell of Great Britain instructed General Officer Commanding General Edward P. Quinan to lead the invasion. The objective was to secure the Abadan refinery as well as the Khuzistan and Naft-e shah oil fields by concentrating the British Iraq Command at

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22. Ibid.

23. Enein, "Axis and Allied Intervention," 20.

24. Telegram from Dreyfus to the Secretary of State, August 24, 1941, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1941-The British Commonwealth; the Near East and Africa* (United States Department of State) accessed November 28, 2015, <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS-idx?type=turn&entity=FRUS.FRUS1941v03.p0422&id=FRUS.FRUS1941v03&isize=M>.

25. Telegram from Dreyfus to the Secretary of State, August 25, 1941, 2pm. *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1941-The British Commonwealth; the Near East and Africa* (United States Department of State) accessed November 28, 2015, <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS-idx?type=turn&entity=FRUS.FRUS1941v03.p0423&id=FRUS.FRUS1941v03&isize=M>.

26. Enein, "Axis and Allied Intervention," 20.

Basara.<sup>27</sup> The British Iraq Command was called Iraqforce and was later renamed Paiforce. Paiforce was made of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Divisions, the 2nd Indian Armored Brigade, 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade, 21<sup>st</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade, and one bomber and fighter squadron.<sup>28</sup> Paiforce focused on the west and southeast of Iran. The Soviet Union entered the north with the 44<sup>th</sup>, 47<sup>th</sup>, and 53<sup>rd</sup> armies. Within four days, the nation of Iran was mostly occupied by the allies. Abadan fell with few casualties. The 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, led by Major General Sir William Slim, took the city of Khanaqin from the west.<sup>29</sup> The Soviet Union dropped thirty bombs on the village of Mianch where fifteen were killed and twenty-five were wounded, as well as bombed three northern towns of Kazvin, Kazian, and Pahlewl where no casualties were reported.<sup>30</sup> E.R. Noderer also noted that a railroad station was destroyed in Zenjan and the holy city of Meshed experienced an air-raid.<sup>31</sup> By August 30, 1941, the Soviet Union was in a position to take the capital of Tehran.<sup>32</sup>

In a series of five RCA Radiograms from Tehran to Washington D.C., Reza Shah Pahlavi frantically begged Roosevelt for assistance. He claimed that Great Britain and Russia were bombing open cities and called these “acts of assault.” He defended the allowance of Germans in Iran by claiming that he had assured Great Britain and Russia that the Germans were ousted. He

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27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 21.

29. Ibid.

30. E.R. Noderer, “An Eyewitness Picture of Iran during Invasion: Tribune Writer Tells Graphic Story,” *The Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 1941, 1.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.



was shocked that this invasion was so sudden and without notice.<sup>33</sup> Pahlavi pleaded with Roosevelt to take steps in this “humanitarian emergency and efficiently stop these acts of assault.”<sup>34</sup> This correspondence was sent on August 25, 1941 and did not receive the Department of State stamp until August 30, 1941 by which time, the invasion was complete. Roosevelt’s response on September 2, 1941 was less than comforting. Roosevelt believed that to keep Hitler out of the Middle East, some countries had to sacrifice for the good of freedom. He wrote that he was focused on ensuring that Iran would be free, but the United States had no intention of battling Great Britain and the Soviet Union over Iranian occupation.<sup>35</sup>

The ease of the invasion can be attributed to the facts that Iran only deployed nine divisions of infantry,<sup>36</sup> and resistance was only held for two days until Muhammad Ali Foroughi (Furuki) who was named Prime Minister, ordered the troops to submit.<sup>37</sup> According to Abrahamian, “the army...was retreating faster than anticipated even by the Allied high command.”<sup>38</sup> Pahlavi remained uncooperative so Britain and Russia moved troops northwest toward Tehran to occupy it.<sup>39</sup> Pahlavi opposed the occupation of Tehran so he abdicated, citing health reasons on September 17, 1941. He lived in South Africa until 1944 when he died. Reza

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33. RCA Radiogram from Reza Shah to Roosevelt, August 25, 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park: NY, Diplomatic Correspondence, Box 40, 1-5.

34. Ibid.

35. Roosevelt, to His Imperial Majesty Reza Pahlavi, September 2, 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park: NY, Diplomatic Correspondence, Box 40, 1.

36. Ibid, 18.

37. Fisher, *The Middle East*, 488.

38. Abrahamian, *Iran*, 164.

39. Fisher, *The Middle East*, 488.

Shah Pahlavi was succeeded by his son, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi as leader of Iran in 1941.<sup>40</sup>

The terms of the occupation were outlined in the Tripartite Treaty of Alliance, which was signed January 29, 1942 in Tehran and reiterated at the Tehran Conference in 1943. Great Britain, Russia, and Iran agreed in Article 5 of the Tripartite Treaty “that Allied forces would be withdrawn from Iranian territory not later than six months after an armistice or peace between the Allied Powers and Germany and her associates, whichever was earlier.”<sup>41</sup> At the Tehran Conference, the United States Ambassador to Iran, Loy Henderson, suggested that the allies “maintain ‘the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Iran’ and that Iran’s economic problems would receive their full consideration.”<sup>42</sup> This was elaborated on in Article 1 of the Tripartite Treaty.<sup>43</sup> The United States never signed the Tripartite Treaty or had any treaty that allowed the stationing of troops within Iran. In order for the United States to have soldiers there, they were technically under the command of British command.<sup>44</sup> In exchange for the allies respecting the integrity of Iran as a sovereign nation, Iran had to allow passage of goods through Iran to the Soviet Union.<sup>45</sup> This was the allies’ original goal in their justification for occupying Iran.

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40. Ibid.

41. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War*, 143.

42. Fisher, *The Middle East*, 520.

43. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War*, 143.

44. Ibid., 82.

45. Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country*, 76.

The terms for occupation did not resolve all issues that arose. According to Joseph Upton, martial law was declared; prisoners were released; a new cabinet of officials was created; roadblocks into Tehran were built which affected how Tehran received shipments of food; communication systems were monopolized by Anglo-Soviet forces; taxes were increased, and price-fixing and rationing were established.<sup>46</sup> The allies brought in non-Iranians to aid these problems. Arthur Millspaugh from the United States was asked to take over the national finances for Iran,<sup>47</sup> and Colonel Norman Schwartzkopf was placed in Iran to reorganize the police force.<sup>48</sup>

The Soviets were far more aggressive in their occupation than Britain and the United States. Kuniholm explains, “[T]he Soviets began to negotiate agreements and contracts which consistently exploited the Iranians. The Soviets imposed arms, financial, manufacturing, and other agreements on the Iranians, and the Iranians, out of fear, had no choice but to accept.”<sup>49</sup> Kuniholm continues, “[T]he Soviets stepped up political activity in Iran.”<sup>50</sup> The creation of the Tudeh party in Iran was the most important idea that the Soviet Union engineered to “prolong their influence over Iran” past what the Tripartite Treaty allowed.<sup>51</sup> The Tudeh party was originally composed of fifty-three students who had studied Communist theory in the 1920s and 1930s. The students were jailed by Reza Shah Pahlavi. During their imprisonment, they were able to further their study. These men were released when the allies took over.<sup>52</sup> Sepehr Zabih

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46. Joseph M. Upton, *The History of Modern Iran: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 89-90.

47. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War*, 171.

48. *Ibid.*, 344n.

49. *Ibid.*, 151.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Enein, “Allied and Axis Intervention,” 18.

52. Upton, *The History of Modern Iran*, 96.

explains that “‘Bread, Health, and Education for All’ became the rallying cry for the party through its extensive media of communication.”<sup>53</sup> The Russians even protected Tudeh rallies with tanks and helped to publish Communist newspapers.<sup>54</sup> The new government of Iran knew how hazardous this radical group was. Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi called them the “most dangerous group” to his government.<sup>55</sup>

There were reasons that the Soviet Union encouraged the radical, Communist Tudeh party. The Soviet Union did not like the Atlantic Charter due to its policy on free trade. Karl Marx believed that free trade was a “brutal exploitation.”<sup>56</sup> Russia also felt that the Atlantic Charter was not “devoid of self-interest.”<sup>57</sup> Kuniholm explains that there was an “emerging American belief that the Soviets were scheming to take over part or even all of Iran.”<sup>58</sup>

Self-interest for the allied nations was a motivation for occupying Iran but there were cooperative benefits as well. The Soviet Union needed access to the Trans-Iranian Railway and Persian Gulf to receive supplies from the Persian corridor into Russia from the American Lend-Lease plan and British aid. According to Kuniholm, “[b]etween 1941 and 1945, more than 7,900,000 long tons of imports crossed Iran into Russia...4,159,117 tons were lend-lease goods, carried to Iran on approximately 700 ships...British contributions numbered over 14,000 different items, including: 3,000,000 pairs of boots, [and] 360,000 tons of foodstuffs.”<sup>59</sup> The

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53. Sepehr Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 77.

54. Fisher, *The Middle East*, 489.

55. Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country*, 77.

56. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Joseph Katz (New York, 1964), 62.

57. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War*, 161.

58. *Ibid.*, 155.

59. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War*, 146.

Trans-Iranian Railway helped the survival of Stalingrad during Operation Barbarossa because it could be constantly supplied.<sup>60</sup>

The end of 1943 welcomed many changes to Iranian foreign policy. As per the request of Patrick Hurley, Iran officially declared war on Germany on September 9, 1943 and signed the United Nations Declaration on September 10, 1943.<sup>61</sup> The Declaration of Iran, which was signed December 1, 1943, was in the words of Louis Dreyfus, “merely a pious wish.”<sup>62</sup> The Declaration of Iran was signed by Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt. It listed three specific provisions: Iran would be part of the war effort, economic assistance would continue in Iran, and it guaranteed Iran’s sovereignty and territorial integrity according to the Atlantic Charter again.<sup>63</sup>

With the encroachment and eventual domination of Iranians into Azerbaijan by the Soviets through the Tudeh party, the Russians became increasingly powerful in Iran as the war drew to a close. By 1945, nine Tudehs were elected into the Majlis, the Iranian legislative body, and by 1946, three Tudeh members were elected to the cabinet.<sup>64</sup> Joseph Upton writes that “[f]or the first time in twenty years the Soviet Union had an opportunity to pursue unhampered political activities in Iran.”<sup>65</sup> Pahlavi writes in his autobiography that by “1945 [Russia] sponsored the formation of not one but two puppet governments within my country...known as the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad, while the other was styled the Autonomous Government of Azerbaijan.”<sup>66</sup>

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60. Ibid., 147.

61. Ibid., 165.

62. Ibid., 168.

63. Ibid., 167.

64. Upton, *The History of Modern Iran*, 96.

65. Ibid.

66. Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country*, 114.

On March 2, 1946, six months after World War II had officially ended with the surrender of Japan, all American and British troops had left Iran as stated in the Tripartite Treaty. The Soviet Union did not leave.<sup>67</sup> They justified this by citing Article 6 of a 1921 treaty between the Persians and the Russians.<sup>68</sup> Pahlavi testified that instead of leaving, on March 3, 1946, three columns of troops started marching toward Tehran towards Iraq and Turkey, followed by hundreds of tanks and infantrymen in the following weeks. The sovereignty the allies had promised was gone. These actions, preceded by what had already been done, were the beginnings of what would become the Cold War.<sup>69</sup>

The treatment of Iran can be summed up in one sentence: “While the Americans appealed to principle, the British used the velvet glove, and the Soviets the bludgeon.”<sup>70</sup> In retrospect, the increased influence and power of Russia can be traced through every policy and action they took within Iran. The ideal of occupying Iran to keep the Nazis out until the end of the war was destined for failure from the beginning. Russia and the other allies did not have the same intentions for Iran. While Britain and the United States truly desired for Iran to be sovereign with the promise of maintaining their oil concessions, Stalin desired full control, which he gained.

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67. Ibid., 116.

68. Enein, “Axis and Allied Intervention,” 18.

69. Ibid., 21.

70. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War*, 203.

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