

Nationalism & Revolution in Iran

**The Lessons of the
Revolutionary History of Iran**

**Ahmad Heydari
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Highly distorted reporting by the media can foster the perception that the Muslim countries of the Middle East are particularly susceptible to Islamic fundamentalism or that secular anti-imperialist forces can find no purchase there. However, the truth is very different. At various times, powerful progressive movements have arisen in the various Muslim countries.

Iran is a case in point. This brief sketch clearly shows that Iran has a revolutionary history and at times the secular progressive forces have been very strong. It also outlines the historic default of Stalinism in the class struggle in that country.

This default goes a long way to explaining how, fairly soon after the tremendous 1979 revolution which toppled the pro-Western regime of the shah, Iran came to be dominated by a repressive, dictatorial, right-wing regime, dominated by the Islamic clergy.

The following article is an excerpt from a contribution by two Iranian Trotskyists to the discussion in the Fourth International in the early 1970s. It is taken from the December 1973 *International Internal Discussion Bulletin* (Volume X, No. 26).



Iran is a multinational country composed mainly of Arabs, Azerbaijanis, Baluchis, Kurds and Persians. The largest nationality is Persian, then, in the order of size, come the Azerbaijanis and the Kurds. Although the Persians represent only about 40% of the total population in Iran, they dominate the other nationalities. Persian is the official language of the country, and the shah's regime does not permit the other nationalities to teach their languages in their schools. These oppressed nationalities are denied self-determination and their cultural and economic development is stifled.

The people of Iran are oppressed by the imperialist powers. In fact, the shah was brought back to power as an absolute dictator through a CIA-engineered coup in 1953. His client state has been used for the imperialist domination of the country.

At the same time the shah is an agent for the imperialist domination of the oil-rich Arab Gulf region. He has already occupied three Arab islands in the Arab Gulf and is building up a strong military force to counter not only the Iranian revolution, but to move further against the Arab revolution. It is well known that he has troops in Oman fighting against the Dhofar revolutionists. The shah is also in collusion with the bourgeois leaders of Pakistan in their efforts to suppress the Baluchis, a nationality which lives in both Iran and Pakistan. In fact, all of Iran's oppressed nationalities have links with their people who live beyond the boundaries of the country.

The national question is undoubtedly of crucial importance to the Iranian proletariat in this struggle for the socialist revolution. This proletariat suffers from varying forms — and in different degrees — of national oppression. Its most exploited layers are also the most nationally oppressed. Building a Leninist combat party that can lead the proletariat to power in Iran requires a clear understanding of the role of nationalism in class struggle.

In the first part of this contribution we present the origins of the nationalisms in Iran and the role that they played in the two revolutions the country witnessed in the 20th century. The first revolution came after the 1905 workers' revolution in Russia. The second took place as an outgrowth of the crisis imposed by the Second World War. Although assuming different forms during each revolution, the nationalism of the oppressed helped promote revolutionary developments, reflected the class demands of the workers and illustrated the theory of permanent revolution for Iran. [...]



Iranian nationalism arose in the late 19th century as a direct response to the plunder of the country by foreign capitalist powers, particularly Britain and Russia. These European countries were able to obtain economic concessions from the shah, and, in return, gave him nominal sums, which mainly went to keep up the luxurious Persian court.

Lord Curzon, before he became the Viceroy of India, said of one of these concessions that: "When published to the world, it was found to contain the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that has probably ever been dreamed of, much less accomplished, in history." In fact, this particular concession was cancelled under pressure from both inside and outside the country.

In 1890, when the shah granted the concession and exclusive right to buy and sell tobacco to a British capitalist, a mass movement arose, demanding cancellation of the concession. This single-issue movement was led by the Islamic *ulema* (clergy) and the merchants. Mass demonstrations and confrontations with the army culminated in a complete boycott of tobacco — even in the shah's harem nobody touched tobacco! The cities were in turmoil for more than two years. Finally the shah and the British retreated and cancelled the concession. This was the first nationalist movement in the history of Iran.

The first revolution

The victory of the tobacco movement was the first of its kind, and opened the era of national liberation struggles in Iran. But it did not change the class character of the shah's state. The despotism of the regime and the plunder by the foreign capitalists continued. The court borrowed more money to keep up its luxurious existence, and more concessions were granted. In 1901 an Australian, D'Arcy, was granted an oil concession, which the British Admiralty later purchased. The fight against this concession culminated 50 years later in the movement for the nationalisation of oil.

Foreign banks established branches in the country. In 1903 it was revealed that the Department of Customs, headed by a Belgian named Neus, had made a secret agreement with the Russians, favouring their manufacturers and merchants. In the uproar about it the British were also able to obtain favourable treatment. Only the Iranians lost out.

National oppression bore down most severely on the poor peasants and workers. For example, in 1904 the peasants of Gouchan in the northeast who could not afford to pay their taxes to the shah's appointees were forced to collect the money by selling their daughters to the nearby tribes. Agricultural production declined, tens of thousands left home for neighbouring countries in search of work. The number of workers from Iran who went to the Baku oil fields reached 10,000.

Opposition newspapers began to appear in Calcutta, Cairo, Istanbul, Baku, and London presenting political ideas and solutions to the country's problems. Even revolutionary social democracy found some adherents. At the same time, the arbitrary arrests of the oppositionists and their executions by the shah's regime were also in full force.

Another source of discontent was the hoarding of grain by the landowners, who were courtiers, *ulema* and merchants. The country's industrial development was blocked by the powerful foreign capitalists. And so Iran's possessing classes purchased land. Whole villages were owned by absentee landowners — who would hoard the grain so

that they could sell it later for a higher price. This caused the price of bread to go up, making life more miserable for the poor. In 1898 a *mullah* (low clergy), a newcomer to Tabriz, started preaching against these grain hoarders in the mosques. This led to an uprising of the poor, who stormed the houses of the rich and looted them. But the hoarding of the grain continued. This situation was one of the causes of the revolution.

The defeat suffered by the tsar in the war with Japan and the 1905 revolution in Russia helped to regenerate the revolutionary movement in Iran. The price of sugar had escalated. According to the merchants this was the result of the 1905 revolution in Russia, from which the sugar was imported. The shah's autocracy, fearful of a mass rebellion, tried to solve the problem by forcing the merchants to lower their prices. In Tehran, the city's governor, as a matter of course, had some of the merchants whipped. This began a protest movement led by the merchants and the *uleman*. The demand for justice and the creation of a House of Justice evolved into the demand for a constitution and a *Majles* (parliament).

The working class at that time was extremely small, and therefore had very little weight in determining the course of struggle. The leadership remained in the hands of the *ulema* and the bourgeoisie (mainly merchants). Nevertheless, the plebeian masses came out in spontaneous mass demonstrations. These demonstrations differed from the method the *ulema* and the bourgeoisie used. The latter appealed to the monarchy to *reform* the state. Whenever pressure increased or the shah disappointed them, the *ulema* chose to take sanctuary in mosques and in holy shrines outside the city. The bourgeoisie locked up the bazaar and looked to the imperialist powers, at that point to the British, for salvation.

In July 1906, the *ulema* leadership, in protest against autocracy, went to the holy shrine of Gom, outside the city, to take sanctuary. The merchants went to the British Embassy. At first 50 merchants took sanctuary in the embassy, but rapidly different strata of small shopkeepers were attracted to the sanctuary and within three days there were 13,000 men camping outside the embassy grounds. Meanwhile, in adjoining streets demonstrations took place. Women also participated in these demonstrations. In some cases the shah's soldiers also joined demonstrations. The demand was for a constitution. The shah, under the pressure of the British, issued a decree proclaiming the country a constitutional monarchy and calling for elections to the first *Majles*. The *Majles* was to draft a constitution. But in his proclamation the shah had not mentioned the word "nation" and instead had singled out the possessing classes, granting them the right to vote. The peasants and plebeian masses of the cities were excluded from the electoral process. When the shah's decree appeared in the wall posters, the people of Teheran tore them down. They demanded that the word nation be specifically used

in the decree and that the nation be given the right to vote. Through these demonstrations they won their demand.

People all over the country viewed the change to a constitutional form of government as a major victory. In this struggle (1906-09) class conflicts reflected themselves. The bourgeoisie moved quickly to the camp of the counter-revolutionary aristocracy. The masses were the most consistent defenders of democracy and a secular constitution.

An alternate leadership, in opposition to the bourgeois Teheran leadership, developed in Tabriz, centre of the Turkish-speaking province of Azerbaijan. This leadership was forged through the efforts of a small nucleus of an Iranian social democratic organisation — later to be known as Markaze Gheibi (Underground Centre).

Azerbaijanis and Fars (Persians) were the most developed of the nationalities in Iran. Azerbaijan, with its proximity to Turkey and the Caucuses, and with its proletarian centre in Baku — also Turkish speaking — was politically more advanced. Many Azerbaijanis went to work in Baku oil fields and there they were introduced to the revolutionary ideas of social democracy. Despite the absence of a sizable working class on a national scale, the proletariat intervened in the revolution via the nucleus of Markaze Gheibi (M. Gh.).

In Tabriz, an *Anjoman* (council) composed of *ulema*, merchants, and the elected representatives of petty owners and craftsmen appeared for the first time. The *Anjoman* started with supervising the elections of the delegates to *Majles* in Teheran and published the first constitutionalist paper in the country. M. Gh. intervened in this development, and through the *Anjoman* organised a militia, called *Mujahedeen* or *Fedayeen*. At the outset the crown prince Mohammad Ali — who resided in Tabriz — ordered the *Anjoman* to be dismantled. The leaders of the *Anjoman*, who belonged to the possessing classes, accepted the order and disbanded. But the *Mujahedeen* resisted, and held an armed demonstration. They won, and the *Anjoman* was saved.

The further evolution of the *Anjomans* and *Mujahedeen* signalled the development of dual power in Tabriz. *Anjomans* began to supervise the distribution of bread in the city, to administer justice, and later on took over the military defence of the city. Armed *Mujahedeen* attracted the plebeians in increasing numbers, and formed the most militant and advanced section of the revolution. This brought them into conflict with the bourgeois, and landowning, elements of the *Anjoman*. Early in 1907 the *Mujahedeen* expelled Haji Hassan Mujtahed, a landowner and one of the leading *ulema*, because he was implicated in an attack that the government made upon the peasants of a nearby village.

This kind of decisive action on the side of the toiling masses brought in more

radical elements to the leadership of the *Anjoman*.

But the virtual absence of a working class on a national scale prevented its assumption of leadership of this nationalist movement; bourgeois influence remained strong on the leadership. As the elements of this leadership retreated under the pressure of the monarchy, or turned against the *Anjoman* as the revolution unfolded, the *Mujahedeen* became the best fighters in defence of the *Anjoman*. The small nucleus of social democratic M. Gh. intervened in this way not only in Tabriz, but through Tabriz established the framework for an alternate leadership on a national scale for the revolution.

Following the formation of the *Anjoman* and *Mujahedeen* in Tabriz, these organs appeared in other cities and towns. The Teheran leadership resisted giving them recognition — they said they did not want “violence” — but eventually under the pressure of mass demonstrations the *Majles* accepted the formation of local *Anjomans* as an integral part of the constitutional regime. These *Anjomans* came to represent the organs of self-rule for the nationalities. In Azerbaijan they united to form the *Majles Melli* (national parliament). The Teheran bourgeois leadership did not welcome this development. Its insistence on including the Islamic *Shiah* sect as the official religion of the country did not help to win over the Kurds and Baluchis, who adhered to the *Sunni* sect of Islam, to revolution. They also discouraged the women, who had on numerous occasions participated in the struggle.

The year 1907 was marked by numerous political confrontations between the monarchy and the revolution. The first part of the year was a period of retreat for the monarchy. Mass mobilisations in Tabriz, followed by demonstrations in other towns, forced the hesitating *Majles* to ratify a bourgeois democratic constitution, over the objections of the monarchy and some sections of the *ulema*. They also forced the government to dismiss such foreign agents as Neus from the directorship of the country’s customs office. The monarchy’s practice of handing over land and taxation privileges to its appointees in the provinces was outlawed. Functions of the central state were being taken over by the *Anjomans*. The Tabriz *Anjoman* extracted from the reluctant *Majles* the right to arm and defend the city in the face of the central government’s inability to fend off the raid that one of the tribes had earlier made. This legalisation of the armed struggle enabled the M. Gh. to turn the whole city into a military training ground. Every day after political agitation by *Mashroote* (constitutionalist) speakers and songs by schoolchildren — on themes of freedom, independence, unity of Iran — the *Mujahedeen* marched off for military training. Other towns, especially the ones in the north, followed the example of Tabriz. And Tabriz followed the example of the soviets of workers in Russia.

On the anniversary of the shah's constitutional decree a victory celebration in Teheran attracted half a million people. But this was to be a turning point. The mounting mass movement accelerated the backward retreat of the Teheran leadership. The frightened bourgeoisie tried to contain the masses, and the counter-revolution went on the offensive. It mobilised the courtiers, their servants and thousands of other parasites around the court. The shah had stopped paying the salaries of those serving in the *Majles*, claiming that they had reduced the court budget. With the help of the *ulema* who had defected to the monarchy the counter-revolution counterposed the Islamic religion to *Mashroote* and nationalism.

The 1907 treaty between Britain and Russia, dividing the country and making it virtually a colony of the two powers, was announced on August 3. This announcement boosted the morale of the counter-revolutionary forces. In December a mass counter-revolutionary camp-in was organised in the central square of Teheran around the slogan of "Islam, not *Mashroote*". It threatened the existence of the *Majles*.

Tabriz took the lead in mobilising the whole country in defence of the revolution. The Tabriz *Mujahedeen* declared, "if *Mashroote* is endangered we will separate Azarbaijan from Iran". Armed detachments began to move on Teheran. The shah retreated and asked his followers to end their camp-in. But in the following six months the shah continued with his counter-revolutionary thrusts, each time retreating under the pressure of mass mobilisations. Azerbaijani soldiers in Teheran were ordered by the Tabriz *Anjoman* not to obey orders that were against *Mashroote* and *Majles*. But the Teheran leadership did not take advantage of these mobilisations: it discouraged the *Mujahedeen* in Teheran from mobilising to defend the *Majles* and it relied on the shah's promises. The shah used the time to his advantage.

The Iranian army had become unreliable. Under the advice of the imperialist powers the shah consented to use the tsar's infamous cossack brigade, which had been stationed in Teheran for some years at the service of the court. In 3 Teer of 1908 they struck. The *Majles* was bombarded, revolutionary *Mashroote* leaders were arrested and executed, the constitution was annulled. The revolution was suppressed everywhere except in a section of Tabriz.

In Tabriz, under the leadership of Sattar-khan, a plebeian *Mujahed*, resistance developed. The shah organised all the armies he could and sent them against Tabriz. They cut the food supplies to the city, and tried to starve the population. Tabriz was surrounded for 11 months, but the resistance was not broken! Revolutionary working-class fighters, veterans of the 1905 revolution, came from as far as the Caucasus to join the revolution. They brought their political and military ammunition with them. They set up workshops to build hand grenades, a weapon which was unfamiliar to the

shah's soldiers.

As the shah's invading armies were defeated in Tabriz, the resistance grew and spread to other parts of the country. The *Mujahedeen* appeared again in other cities, especially in the north. Those counter-revolutionary elements which had aligned themselves with the shah abandoned him, and some even voiced their support for *Mashroote*. Armed detachments began to organise, and to move onto Teheran.

Fearing a victorious revolution on their southern borders, the tsarist army entered Azerbaijan in April 1909 and started to dismantle the organs of revolution, massacring the militants in Azerbaijan. The *Mujahedeen* either perished in unequal fights with the Russians or were forced to flee from the city. The Russian army hanged the leaders of the revolution in the public square.

The armed detachments composed of *Mujahedeen* from the north and tribal elements from the south were on the move to Teheran before the Russians entered Azerbaijan. They continued on, but with diminished momentum, and with the aristocratic and tribal heads gaining control of the leadership. When they entered Teheran the shah fled to the Russian Embassy, and was automatically dethroned.

Teheran was not occupied by the Russians. But under the tutelage of the Russian and British representatives, and independently of the *Anjomans* or *Mujahedeen*, the bourgeoisie joined with the aristocracy, courtiers, landowners and some tribal heads to form a coalition government. It installed the son of the deposed king as the new monarch, and declared itself a constitutional government based on a written constitution. With the Russian army's intervention, and suffocation of Azerbaijan, the national bourgeoisie were able to betray the revolution with impunity.

The new government turned around and suppressed the *Anjomans* and *Mujahedeen*. In one of the armed conflicts between the *Mujahedeen* and the forces of the new regime, Sattar-khan was fatally wounded. The liberal bourgeoisie thus differentiated itself from the plebeian masses whose fighting spirit Sattar-khan — an illiterate Azerbaijani who could not speak Persian — represented. The man in charge of this military counter-revolution was Gavam, a cousin of Mossadegh. Over the years both men have played important roles in Iranian bourgeois politics.

Soon after the central government was appointing the very same men who had served the old shah as the governors and heads of departments in Azerbaijan. These were the very same individuals who had attempted to crush the Tabriz resistance but returned to Teheran humiliated in their defeat. Now, using the Russian boot as well as the method of coopting the revolution, they found success at last.

The national bourgeoisie who began its political career with begging for a constitution at the British Embassy, took fright at the Iranian nationalist movement, drew

back, and ended up suppressing the revolutionary organs of the revolution in alliance with the old possessing classes. It succeeded because this time the Russian troops fully crushed the revolutionary nucleus of social democratic leadership in Azerbaijan.

The formation of the coalition government in Teheran assured ascendancy of the Persian bourgeoisie above the bourgeoisie of the other nationalities. In the defeat of the revolution on the one hand, and the weakening of the monarchy on the other, the Persian bourgeoisie found a privileged position for itself. As the Persian bourgeoisie bowed meekly to the imperialist bourgeoisie, and sought to form an economic base for itself, the bourgeoisie of Azerbaijan bowed meekly to the Persian bourgeoisie. During the rise of the first revolution both bourgeoisies had united to oppose the revolutionary movement, both feared the rise of the downtrodden, and both opposed the guns in the hands of the *Mujahedeen*, who increasingly came from the ranks of the toilers. Both bourgeoisies had interest in the land, and were consequently opposed to the emancipation of the peasantry. As far back as 1906, when the social democratic Underground Center M. Gh. proposed a land reform program in the Tabriz *Anjoman*, these same bourgeois elements vetoed the essential measure. Although the Tabriz resistance did receive help from the peasantry during the 1908 resistance, the absence of a working class on a national scale prevented the development of a strong force that would fight for the implementation of a land distribution program, and would win the peasantry to the revolution on a massive scale.

The first Iranian revolution took on the form of a nationalist movement, and developed to an extent that it posed the question of state power in the interests of the nascent proletariat and its allies among the rural poor and urban plebeian masses. The frightened possessing classes in the country, as well as the imperialist powers, intervened to crush the revolution. Yet the revolution made impressive gains, such as the introduction of a bourgeois democratic constitution, and it went as far as smashing the shah militarily. Its defeat meant the defeat of the toilers and the oppressed masses, whose development for liberation expressed itself in the nationalist movement. The revolution's political base was Tabriz, in the Azerbaijani region, its most militant leaders were members of Iran's oppressed nationalities, and it projected itself as a force for dramatically changing the lot of all oppressed peoples. But these forms of nationalism were to unfold differently in the 1940s.

The Bolshevik Revolution had a significant impact on Iran. Trotsky, Commissar of Foreign Affairs, declared in 1918 that the Bolshevik government unilaterally annulled all the treaties that tsarist Russia had imposed on Iran, and ordered the evacuation of the country by the Russian troops. This act of revolutionary honesty eliminated the yoke of Russian imperialism with one swoop from Iran, and gained the sympathy of

the people.

British imperialism moved in to fill the vacuum. They negotiated a secret treaty in 1919 with the central government, which in effect made the country a colony. Only a mass nationalist movement forced the government to annul the 1919 treaty.

Local uprisings against the central government took place in Azerbaijan and Khorasan. A republic was even established in Gilan. The creation of this republic was fostered by the presence of the Red Army, which entered Gilan temporarily while chasing British and white Russian troops. The Gilan Republic was called a soviet republic (in imitation of the republics of the Soviet Union) but there were antagonistic class forces in its leadership. The newly formed Communist Party of Iran tried to share power with a petty-bourgeois leadership; it proved to be catastrophic.

All of these uprisings proved short lived. They also lacked the mass character of the *Mashroote* revolution. The central government was able — often using the traditional despotic methods — to assassinate the leaders. The defeat of Iran's first revolution also led to the destruction of the *Anjomans* and *Mujahedeen*. The M. Gh. was wiped out, and the young Communist Party was unable to develop a transitional program. These uprisings had a spontaneous character; they had no time to develop a mass base or their own armies, such as the *Mujahedeen* had done. Furthermore, having gone through a revolution, a counter-revolution and a world war, the people were exhausted and confused. During these events foreign troops occupied the country at will, parts of the country became battlegrounds of the Turkish, Russian and British armies, and tribal wars and plunderings continued. But civil war in Russia prevented the workers there from giving significant aid. And the revolution needed time.

British imperialism, in order to prevent the extension of the October Revolution throughout Iran, the Arab world, and the Indian subcontinent, began to reverse its policy of favouring a weak Iranian government to one of promoting a strong, centralised state. The British sought to use their foothold in Iran to build a base against the Soviet Union, and to do this it needed a more efficient method of exploiting the resources of the country (e.g., oil). Ever since the national bourgeoisie appealed to them from the yard of their Teheran Embassy in 1906, the British had favoured a parliamentary system in Iran. From the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the British began to oppose the parliament. They also came to oppose the tendency to decentralised rule of local tribal chieftains whom they had earlier patronised as a part of their divide-and-rule policy. A faithful servant of the shahs and imperialism, General Hassan Arfa wrote in his autobiography, *Under Five Shahs*:

Then occurred the unforeseen events of 1920 — the reappearance of Russia under the guise of the Soviet Union as a great power on Iran's northern frontiers and the quasi-

general opposition of the Iranian nation to the [1919] treaty; the last fact precluding any possibility of having it ratified by any *Majles*. On the other hand it was obvious that if Iran was abandoned to its own devices, without money or military force and with a weak central government, it would become the prey of anarchic forces represented by well-armed predatory tribes and leftist revolutionary elements, and would drift towards Bolshevism and eventually become engulfed in the wave of the communist advance towards India and the Arab Middle East.

These considerations led Lord Curzon — whose hands the Prime Minister, Mr. Lloyd George, had left free in this matter — to envisage the coming to power in Iran of a strong government, friendly to Great Britain but not compromised by the 1919 treaty negotiations, which could be helped to apply piecemeal certain of the stipulations of the treaty after they had been watered down.

General Arfa then describes in detail how the British imperialists proceeded to implement Lord Curzon's plan.

As a part of the British plan for Iran's centralised state in 1920 they engineered a *coup d'état*, replacing the old dynasty with the Reza shah, the current shah's father. The first task in the program of Reza shah and his imperialist benefactors was the effective subjugation of all other nationalities to the Persians — something that the Persian national bourgeoisie had tried, but been incapable of carrying through. They accomplished this task through the organisation of a modern army. Of course, the resistance was stiff and it was not accomplished all at once. The army resorted to massacres. Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis and many tribes of the country were thus subdued. The liberal bourgeoisie applauded all this, but as the victory was assured, the Reza shah turned on them and threw them out of the coalition government.

This ended the period of bourgeois democracy — which had coexisted with Asiatic despotism since the first revolution. Basic freedoms were denied, trade unions were outlawed, the Communist Party was declared illegal. This process facilitated the penetration of the imperialist goods and capital, as well as the plunder of oil resources.

During the 20-year dictatorship of Reza shah the oppression of the nationalities took varying forms. On one hand the Azerbaijanis were to be assimilated into the Persians — they were told that their language was not really Turkish, but Persian. Possessing classes of Azerbaijan found no difficulty in yielding to such a policy, in fact they welcomed it. On the other hand the Arab population of the country, with their ties to the Arab world and its culture, could not possibly be hoped to be assimilated. The name of the oil-rich province where they resided was changed from Arabistan to Khusistan, an old Persian name. They were discriminated in their own province and the towns were Persianised. General Arfa considered this one of the accomplishments

of the Reza shah period. After making a military tour of the province in 1942, he made the following observation about Ahavaz, an old Arab city: “This town had also improved very much since 1936, when I had last seen it. There were many wide asphalted avenues and squares planted with palm trees, and it had lost its Arab character, through the immigration of many Isfahanis.” (Isfahan is a central Persian city.)

After the Second World War the nationalism of the oppressed became once more a revolutionary sword that threw the country into a prerevolutionary situation. Unlike the first revolution — in which the Iranian nationalist movement was combined with the struggles of the nationalities for self-determination — this time the two became separate. First came the movement of the oppressed nationalities for self-determination, which culminated in the creation of workers and farmers governments in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan in 1945-46. Then, four years later, came the Iranian nationalist movement for the nationalisation of the oil industry.

National oppression served the imperialists’ interests. It was a tool to open up the country to more thorough imperialist penetration. At the same time the economic development within these areas was retarded by comparison to that of the Persian areas. The illegality of the nationalities’ written languages caused their cultural stagnation, and the resulting illiteracy hurt workers the most. They became the least skilled and lowest paid of the working class. The differentiation increased as the number of modern factories for consumer goods increased, and the oil industry in the south expanded.

The 20-year rule of Reza shah consolidated and legalised national oppression. At the same time the privileges that were granted to the Persian nation at the expense of the oppressed nationalities brought forth Persian chauvinism. The Persian bourgeoisie, which had earlier developed the ideology that the Persian culture and language was superior, now implemented their ideology. The culture of the Persian nationality was elevated and counterposed to the culture of the other nationalities, very much as Russian chauvinism had been used to suppress the variety of nationalities which made up the tsar’s kingdom. The culture and the language of the non-Persians were henceforth seen as “alien” elements.

The second revolution

Allied troops entered the country in 1941. Reza shah — who had been flirting with the Germans — went into exile and his son, the present shah, came to the throne. A period of bourgeois democracy opened, and political life was rejuvenated. Political prisoners were freed; the working class entered national politics as a militant force.

A heterogeneous group, consisting of ex-members of the then defunct Communist

Party, social democrats and liberals, formed the pro-Soviet Tudeh [Mass] Party based on a minimum reformist program. Being the only party on the left, it attracted large numbers of intellectuals and workers, and became a mass party. The Tudeh Party was not the political and organisational continuity of the Iranian Communist Party, whose leaders, living in exile in the Soviet Union, had perished under Stalin in the '30s. Iran's Communist Party had been thus destroyed.

The reformist program of Tudeh Party failed to attract some of the old communists. In particular, Jafar Peeshavari, who had been a leader of the Communist Party, and had been freed from the shah's prison in 1941, did not join Tudeh. He remained independent until 1944, when he organised the Ferge Democrat (Democratic League) in Azerbaijan. The program of the Ferge was an Azerbaijani nationalist program. It called for national autonomy within Iran, including the right to a separate armed force, the revival of *Anjomans*, and the legalisation of the Turkish language in Azerbaijan. The Tudeh Party had refused to raise the latter demand. Ferge attracted Tudeh members in Azerbaijan until the latter dissolved its branches, and Ferge became the only political tendency with a base in the working class in Azerbaijan. This was a significant development, because ever since the fall of Reza shah, workers and peasants' struggles were on the rise in Iran, especially in Azerbaijan.

The Ferge program did not call for a socialist revolution. But workers and peasants, as well as the ruling class itself, viewed it as a Bolshevik organisation. Its central leadership was working class, under the influence of Stalinism. Ferge declared itself a multi class organisation based on a minimum program. This was also true of the Tudeh Party. The fundamental difference between the two was that Ferge had a nationalist program.

In its struggle to fulfil its program, Ferge came into conflict with the shah's state machinery. Ferge organised *Anjoman* and *Fedayeen*, in the tradition of the first revolution. These were primarily composed of workers and peasants. Three months after its founding Ferge started an insurrection which led to the collapse of the shah's army — without any major battles — in Azerbaijan on December 12, 1944. The *Fedayeen* took over Azerbaijan and a workers and farmers government was established under the leadership of Peeshavari.

Ferge's rapid success in gaining the leadership of the Azerbaijani revolutionary movement was due primarily to three factors: the emergence of the working class in Azerbaijan, the presence of the Soviet troops there because of the war, and the anti-nationalist character of the possessing class of Azerbaijan, i.e., their refusal to struggle against the Persian domination and the imperialists.

When Ferge took power it instituted labour laws beneficial to the workers. It distributed the lands of big absentee landlords, without compensation. It introduced

universal suffrage for both men and women. It took steps to revive the culture and language of Azerbaijan, introducing textbooks in the native Turkish language. All these reforms were being carried out for the first time. Of course, the influence of the Soviet system and the links with Soviet Azerbaijan facilitated the process.

Two months after the victorious insurrection in Azerbaijan, the shah's garrison in Kurdistan was disarmed and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan declared a Kurdish republic under the leadership of Gazi Mohammad. Later Mustafa Barzani came with his tribe from Iraq and joined the republic. The first step in the aspiration of the Kurdish people for national independence became realised.

The example of the Azerbaijan and Kurdish uprisings began to spread. Peasants and workers movements engulfed the whole country, sparking movements among other nationalities, especially the Arabs. The workers movement witnessed sharp and militant struggles. The Tudeh Party became a major obstacle in those struggles. Its class-collaborationist program led to the defeat of strikes, and consequent demoralisation.

In August 1946 the papers reported a spontaneous strike involving 100,000 workers in the oil-rich province of Khusistan. The workers demanded an end to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's continual interference in the internal affairs of the country, and also demanded the dismissal of the governor of the province. This strike, the largest in the history of the country, directly posed the question of who shall rule, and opposed the workers to both imperialism and their own bourgeoisie. The fight for national liberation went hand in hand with opposition to the shah. They were asserting their right to dismiss — and consequently to appoint — administrators. The workers were showing their deep opposition to homegrown oppression as well as foreign domination.

These developments were all the more significant because after the Azerbaijan and Kurdistan uprisings the shah's prime minister took office on the basis of a demagogic, but leftist-sounding program. His program included a platform of "friendship" with the Soviet Union. As a consequence, the Tudeh Party leadership, which was in the forefront of the Iranian workers movement, joined with the government in opposing the uprisings of the workers, unemployed and peasants. The government sent the army to crush the striking oil workers — opening fire on the workers, killing 49 and wounding hundreds. But the strike continued until Tudeh leaders went from Teheran and used their authority to break the strike. After this exhibition of their counter-revolutionary capacity, the Tudeh Party was given three portfolios in Gavam's government. With their help the popular front government defused the class struggle in the rest of the country, isolating Azerbaijan and Kurdistan.

Meanwhile the shah made preparations to move against those revolutions. Earlier events had paved the way, and they had obtained Stalin's agreement before the Soviet troops left Iran.

During the Second World War Soviet troops had occupied the northern section of Iran. But Stalin did not see these troops as a mechanism to help the growth of the revolutionary forces within Iran. Instead he pursued a strategy of using their presence in order to pressure Iran to form a joint oil company to exploit the unexploited oil resources in the northern part of the country. The Tudeh Party used its influence within the mass movement to lobby for it both within and outside the *Majles*. In fact this was the object of the first public demonstration that the Tudeh Party organised.

People viewed the Soviet demand for the oil agreement as they had viewed the British oil concessions obtained early in the century. It went against their national aspirations. Mossadegh, then a deputy in the *Majles*, introduced a bill in 1949 prohibiting the government from negotiating any new oil concessions so long as foreign troops were still present in the country.

In 1946, in order to defeat the Azerbaijan and Kurdistan revolutions Gavam then dangled the oil concession in front of the shortsighted eyes of the Stalinist bureaucracy. The deal was made and publicly announced that after the departure of the Soviet troops the government would propose that the *Majles* ratify the oil agreement. Another clause in the agreement stated both governments agreed that the Azerbaijan "problem" would be solved peacefully, according to the "Iranian laws". This meant Stalin had assured the shah that not only would he refuse to defend the Azerbaijan and Kurdistan revolutions against attack, but he would also strongly counsel the Azerbaijan leadership to capitulate. Soviet troops departed in June 1946.

The shah and his ministers ruled out direct military intervention by the shah's troops because they were well aware of the ineffectiveness of their army in a revolutionary war. The history of the Tabriz resistance and the fate of a shah 40 years earlier were well known. Furthermore, in the spring of 1946 the class struggle was on the rise throughout the country. Any military move by the government would certainly spark a civil war in the entire country. So they waited it out and worked to defuse the class struggle. And within this strategy Stalin and the Tudeh Party, which followed Stalin's political leadership, became accomplices.

By fall of 1946 the shah's government felt that the balance of the class forces had begun to shift in its favour. They began to move against the cadres of the Tudeh Party, intimidating and imprisoning the most militant elements. Still later they forced the three Tudeh ministers to resign from the government.

By November the military began to move against Azerbaijan. They used the pretext

that to carry out the elections for the new *Majles* — which were to ratify the oil agreement with the Soviet Union — the army had to be present in all provinces of the country. The Ferge agreed. But when the army moved to the border town, Zanzan, the landlords and the bourgeois elements came along and began victimising the workers and peasants, and massacring the *Fedayeen*. The news caused a reaction throughout Azerbaijan, and a mass mobilisation for defence began.

In Azerbaijan the mass movement in opposition to the shah's invasion included workers, peasants and women. They held rallies in towns and villages in the name of defence of their homeland, Azerbaijan. That nationalist slogan meant the defence of the social gains already achieved. They wanted to be armed and to join the militia. Women's declarations pointed to the oppression of women throughout Iran. The Azerbaijan women saw their fight as a fight for the liberation of all women in Iran. There was confidence that the defeat of the shah's military would bring the liberation of all Iran. Jafar Peeshavari, leader of the Azerbaijan Ferge, in speech after speech, reiterated the will of Azerbaijan to fight the shah's army and to defeat the shah as had the forces of the first revolution. These mass mobilisations continued through early December 1946 and the shah's army did not advance any further than Zanzan. On December 11, workers unions joined the Ferge in a call for a revolutionary war. On December 12 a sharp and sudden turn of policy came.

Ferge's newspaper appeared with the startling statement that the people should "welcome" the shah's army into Azerbaijan! Ferge commanders were ordered to surrender to the shah's officers and the mobilisation for defence was halted. No formal body of Ferge ever made the decision to capitulate, and Peeshavari's name did not even appear in the December 12 statement. Orders for the capitulation had come from Stalin. Stalin, using the authority of the Bolshevik Revolution, and his agents, succeeded in disrupting the internal life of the Ferge and imposed his bureaucratic will on Azerbaijan. Ironically, December 12 was the first anniversary of the Ferge insurrection. On that day the planned celebrations turned into the massacre of the most militant workers and peasants.

Later, when they started to burn the Turkish language books and the executions became legal, imprisonment and exile of the militant Azerbaijanis became widespread. The re-imposition of bourgeois rule took the form of fierce national oppression. And so the shah, with the help of Stalin, succeeded in dismantling the revolutionary government in Azerbaijan.

The fate of Kurdistan was essentially no different. After the fall of Azerbaijan, the Kurdish republic was completely isolated. It quickly fell. There was, however, one exception. The Barzani tribe did not surrender, but retreated to Iraq. But the British

puppet regime opposed their entry there. Then, under the leadership of Mullah Mustafa, they fought their way back through Iran, and through the regiments of the shah's army to the Soviet Union. This heroic fight kept Kurdish nationalism aflame among the Kurdish people of Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. More than a decade later, when the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown, the government invited them to come back to Iraq and live. The Kurdish people, living as an oppressed nationality in these several countries, are continuing their fight for full self-determination.

The defeat of the Azerbaijan and Kurdistan revolutions resulted in demoralisation and confusion, enabling the central government to consolidate its rule. The number of working class strikes dropped to almost zero. The elections were rigged and the new *Majles* refused to ratify the oil agreement that Gavam had worked out with Stalin. By 1948 the Tudeh Party was declared illegal. Imperialist economic, military, and political penetration intensified. For the first time American advisors came to reorganise and re-equip the shah's army. The liberal bourgeoisie, having served its usefulness, was again thrown out of the government.

The defeat of the oppressed nationalities strengthened Persian chauvinism, and the intimidation and discrimination against the other nationalities became widespread. All over the country schools were forced to use *only* Persian textbooks, and were instructed to speak Persian exclusively in the classrooms. The psychological oppression resulting from being forced to learn a foreign language without first mastering one's native language was a deliberate and calculated attempt to destroy the nationalist identity and to suffocate any nationalist cultural development. It was an attempt to prevent any challenge to the authority of the centralised bourgeois state. And it was most damaging to the working class of the oppressed nationalities. The implications of this policy, including the relative increase of illiteracy, pushed those workers to the lowest levels of economic life. To the Persian ruling class, the call for freedom of languages became identified with communism — with some justification. Such a call became a *form* of the class struggle.

The movement for the nationalisation of oil

The defeat that the revolutionary movement suffered in 1946 was overcome within four years. Once again the revolutionary movement appeared as a nationalist movement, this time as an all-Iranian nationalist movement, similar to the anti-tobacco movement which arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As before, the movement was in opposition to the much-hated British imperialism. Leadership of this movement fell into the hands of the liberal bourgeoisie, by default. Those sympathetic to Stalinism had discredited themselves by insisting that the northern oil

concession be handed over to the Soviet Union. They had no program relating to the nationalist movement, except a tendency to downgrade it. The defeat in 1946 isolated them, demoralised the cadre, and enabled the regime to suppress the Tudeh Party. Incapable of evaluating their defeats, they were not even capable of organising a movement to defend their own democratic rights.

Despite the victory that it had scored against the revolution, the regime was not able to consolidate itself. In opposition to the course that the regime was following, a movement began for political democracy — one of the unsatisfied demands of the first revolution. Each small gain in this sphere widened the movement, and soon other demands were posed, deepening the struggle.

This national liberation movement crystallised around the slogan of the nationalisation of oil. Nationalisation meant the expulsion of the British interests as well as breaking the chain of economic and political oppression which they imposed. As the movement progressed, the monarchy, as the native base of imperialism, became threatened. The country's class structure was threatened by the democratic demand of the masses.

All these struggles, starting with the one for political democracy and the struggle for the nationalisation of oil, coincided with the immediate and historic struggles of the proletariat. While there was no objective basis for the national bourgeoisie to assume leadership of the movement, there were subjective factors: the lack of a Bolshevik party and the previous Stalinist betrayal. On the other hand, Mohammad Mossadegh, a liberal bourgeois politician, had, over the years, gained a reputation as a nationalist leader who fought for democracy and defended the interests of the Iranian people. When the movement revived in the early 1950s Mossadegh and his cothinkers were looked to for leadership. The national bourgeoisie feared the independent mobilisations of the masses. But even the timid fight around democratic demands which the bourgeoisie was prepared to lead leapt over the narrow barriers of reformism.

Mossadegh's first major political move was to lead a procession of notables to the shah's palace to seek sanctuary there and to ask the government to pledge nonintervention in the coming *Majles* elections. Mossadegh was thus following in the tradition of his bourgeois forerunners who went, in the early 20th century, to the British Embassy to ask for their intercession on the question of an Iranian constitution. Mossadegh's procession to the shah's palace gave birth to the *Jebhe Melli* (National Front), a loose liberal bourgeois formation.

Under mass pressure the regime annulled the rigged election, and, in the new elections, Mossadegh and some others from *Jebhe Melli* were elected to the *Majles*.

The masses viewed this as a victory, and it, in turn, helped the growth of the opposition movement.

Within two years the movement developed to such a scale that the massive demonstrations for the nationalisation of oil forced the generally reactionary *Majles* to ratify Mossadegh's bill for nationalisation. This was seen as a victory by the masses against national oppression — it inspired them. Almost immediately after this the oil workers went on strike over economic demands. The spectre of the combined national liberation struggle and the struggle of the proletariat so frightened the regime that they felt compelled to bring Mossadegh forward as the new prime minister. Mossadegh, whose Jebhe Melli group in the *Majles* was a tiny minority — and always at odds with the others — was elected to premiership with a unanimous vote. The shah promptly and formally endorsed the decision.

Mossadegh's rise to the head of the state was viewed by the masses as a victory. They saw this government as their own, and went to sacrifice their lives for it when it came under attack. When the imperialists imposed a blockade on the marketing and sale of the nationalised oil, the masses understood the source of the economic scarcity imposed by the blockade, and accepted it as a part of the national struggle. This blockade lasted for two years.

The major confrontation took place in July 1952, when the shah appointed Gavam once again as the new prime minister, in order to “solve” the oil “crisis”. Mossadegh resigned and chose to react by merely staying at home. Jebhe Melli deputies likewise refrained from calling on the masses to defend their government. Instead they engaged in parliamentary manoeuvres, with occasional visits to the shah, trying to persuade him to change his mind by warning him about the possibility of revolution.

But, on the other hand, people started going into the streets from the moment Mossadegh resigned, demanding his reinstatement. After four days of such political agitation all over the country, the major confrontation took place in Teheran on the 30th of Teer (July 1952). Unarmed masses confronted the army. Hundreds were killed, but the persistence of the people affected the army. Military discipline began to crack and even some of the officers joined the demonstrating population. The shah retreated, Gavam was dumped, and Mossadegh reinstated as prime minister. For a few days the police did not dare to show up in town, and such things as directing traffic were taken over by the youth. In embryonic form the *Anjomans* began to appear in some districts. With proper leadership a situation of dual power might have begun to develop. However, this development was frustrated by the Jebhe Melli leadership. They told people to go to their homes and, later, used the police to forcibly disperse those who stayed. Thus Mossadegh the “democrat” revealed just how far his belief in

democracy would stretch.

Mossadegh's overthrow took place in August 1953, 13 months after the 30th of Teer uprising. The conduct of the national bourgeois leadership has proved to the masses that the bourgeois government was not their government. After having sacrificed so much for it, the masses were unwilling to give their lives in order that the same police, military, landowners and capitalists rule over them. When the CIA-engineered coup came in 1953 the masses did not pour into the streets to defend Mossadegh. And no other party existed to organise and lead the masses against the reaction, as the Bolsheviks had fought against Kornilov during the Kerensky government in Russia in 1917. On the day of the coup people looked to the Tudeh Party to call them into action and Tudeh militants waited for the orders from the central committee. But the orders never came.

The role of the Tudeh Party

The Tudeh Party, while still an illegal organisation, was able to operate more or less openly because of the generally democratic atmosphere that the movement had created. But from the inception of the struggle for the nationalisation of oil, it had taken an ultraleft, sectarian attitude toward the movement. Its ultraleftism was partly due to the turn the Soviet bureaucracy had taken in reaction to the initiation of the cold war by American imperialism. It was also a cover for their opposition to the nationalist movement, and for their betrayal of the 1946 revolution. They called Mossadegh an agent of American imperialism, and concluded that a movement under such leadership could not be progressive. They identified the *leadership* with the *movement* and *abstained from the struggle* when the movement for the nationalisation of the oil industry developed. The Tudeh Party taught its cadre that nationalism in the colonial world was a reactionary phenomenon. They called for "internationalism".

They continued to tie themselves to the narrow interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy. They did not call for the nationalisation of *all* Iranian oil, but simply that under the domination of Britain, in the south. They were aware of Stalin's continuing interest in the northern oil, and wanted to reserve it for him. Their opposition to the nationalist movement was thus a recognition of the antibureaucratic edge of that movement.

The Tudeh Party's refusal to support the nationalist movement, which was making strikes against the imperialist interests in the country, precluded the possibility of their coming to the leadership. It also significantly undermined the development of the struggle, as the incapacity of the bourgeoisie to victoriously lead the national liberation struggle became increasingly clear, the other alternative — a working class leadership — became so much more obvious. Especially after the 30th of Teer, young students

and workers began to look toward and join, the Tudeh Party under the mistaken assumption that it was a revolutionary working-class party. Under the pressure of the masses, the leadership changed its line and gave verbal support to the nationalisation of oil throughout the *entire* country. Tudeh militants participated in specific actions. But the leadership developed no transitional program relating the ongoing struggle to the struggle for the socialist revolution.

The party was unable to see that the class struggle was presenting itself in the form of a nationalist struggle. Consequently, when the struggle of workers as workers began to develop, the Tudeh Party had no perspective of how to link up these two aspects of the class struggle. They kept the struggle artificially separated, thus preventing the possibility of the proletariat from exposing and discrediting the bourgeois leadership in the nationalist movement and winning the leadership for the working class forces. The Tudeh Party did not fight for, or even propose, a program for the emancipation of the peasantry. Wherever the peasants started to radicalise, the leadership of the Tudeh Party opposed it. The same was true in the case of the oppressed nationalities.

The August 1953 defeat, just like the December 1946 defeat, was inflicted upon the revolution without a battle. The gains of the revolution were once again wiped out. The shah's military dictatorship consolidated itself and the revolutionists were imprisoned or executed by the thousands. The constitution was trampled upon, workers organisations were eliminated, and the oil was, in effect, denationalised and parcelled out among the various imperialist powers, with the US monopolies getting the lion's share.



The revolutionary potential of the nationalism of the oppressed in Iran can be seen in the fact that now, after more than 20 years since the defeat of the Iranian nationalist movement, and more than a quarter of a century after the defeat of the oppressed nationalities, the shah continues to build huge military bases in the heartland of the oppressed nationalities. His current concern for Pakistan's "stability" is based on the understanding that any nationalist struggle there, particularly by the Baluchis, may unleash the revolutionary forces in Iran once again. Yet the defeats of the late 1940s and early 1950s were so severe, and the repression so deep, that those movements have still not revived on a mass scale. Revolutionaries must absorb some of the lessons of those defeats. Betrayed by both the national bourgeoisie and Stalinism, these revolutions have written in blood the incapacity of these forces to provide political leadership.

Neither the oppression of the nationalities nor the liberation of Iran has been

resolved over the last 20 years of the shah's rule. The shah, brought back to power by the imperialists, is kept there to serve imperialism's interests. He has spent a pittance of what the imperialists pay for the oil in order to imitate the empire of Cyrus, and to make a "White Revolution", as if these meagre attempts to play the great shah will stave off the revolutionary needs of the masses. In order to protect the imperialist oil interests against the revolution, especially the Arab revolution, the shah is carrying out a military buildup that is the biggest since the American buildup in Vietnam. Concentrating his forces on the Arab Gulf in order to dominate the region, the shah is extending his father's policy of uprooting the Arabs from their lands and Persianising the region. He has already occupied three Arab islands in the Arab Gulf. In Baluchistan he is making deals with Bhutto to suppress the nationalist movement on both sides of the border. In Azerbaijan and Kurdistan the ever-present military sees to it that movements for liberation are nipped in the bud. Meanwhile they are introducing projects to change the language of Azerbaijan in the near future. Yet even in the censored press of the shah the voice of Azerbaijani nationalist writers can be heard demanding their language rights and their identity. The struggle of the oppressed nationalities in Iran is beginning once again. ■

Resistance books