



COSSACK BRIGADE

COSSACK BRIGADE (*Berīgād-e qazzāq*), a cavalry unit in the Persian army established in 1296/1879 on the model of Cossack units in the Russian army. It began as a regiment but within a few months was expanded to a brigade composed of two regiments; it was expanded still further during World War I and, as a consequence, in 1334/1916 was redesignated a division. Although it remained primarily a cavalry force, it acquired additional components over time: In 1301/1884 the brigade received four pieces of surplus artillery from Russia, and a small artillery unit was established to man them; later a small infantry unit was incorporated as well. The brigade also had its own band.

The formation of the Cossack Brigade was part of a larger process in which the Persian government, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, engaged various European soldiers to train units of the Persian armed forces. Shortly before the Russians were brought in to lead the new Cossack unit, Austrian officers had been employed to train infantry and artillery troops in what proved to be a short-lived and unsuccessful venture. In 1329/1911 Swedish officers began to organize and train the gendarmerie, which grew to 8,400 men by the end of World War I. One departure from this general pattern during the war was the formation of the South Persia Rifles on the initiative of the British government, rather than at the invitation of Tehran, where politicians remained divided over whether or not to recognize the unit. The South Persia Rifles recruited Persian troops and also absorbed the gendarmes in the province of Fārs . By the end of the war it numbered about 6,000 men.

Formation and composition. On his second journey to Europe, in 1295/1878,



Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (1264-1313/1848-96) had been favorably impressed by the uniforms, equipment, and precision drills of the Russian Cossacks who had escorted him across Transcaucasia. He therefore asked the viceroy of the Caucasus, Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich, to send Russian officers to train a Cossack-style cavalry in Persia. The government in St. Petersburg authorized the viceroy to fulfill the request, though at that time there was no clear policy other than generally to promote Russian influence in Persia.

The man selected to organize the Persian Cossack unit was Lieutenant-Colonel A. I. Domantovich, a general staff officer who happened to be in Transcaucasia, having just returned from service in the Russo-Ottoman war of 1878-79. He arrived in Persia knowing little more about the country than some stories of its ancient past and the murder of Ambassador A. S. Griboyedov during the siege of the Russian embassy in 1244/1829. He nevertheless successfully negotiated terms for establishment of the Cossacks, persuaded the shah to provide special funds for startup costs, and made a favorable impression at court during his three years of service in the country. Domantovich and a handful of other Russian commissioned and noncommissioned officers began to organize and train the Cossack regiment in April 1879; the shah was so pleased with the results that in the summer he decided to expand the regiment to a brigade.

The size and composition of the Cossack unit varied considerably over time. Initially it consisted of 400 men. After a few years of expansion, it declined during the late 1880s until, in the early 1890s it numbered about 300 men, of whom only 170 were cavalymen on active duty. The fortunes of the unit began to improve again in the second half of the decade, and it had grown to 1,500 men by 1318/1900. Ten years later, owing to the wartime buildup, the size of the Cossack unit had increased to about 8,000 Persian officers and men.

All of the first group of Cossacks were drawn from a special unit of the traditional cavalry, comprised of *mohājers* (immigrants), i.e., descendants of Muslims who had immigrated from Transcaucasia during the Russian conquest. When the initial regiment was enlarged into a brigade, it began to draw on other Persian military units in order to reach its full strength, for the remaining *mohājers* refused to join. Eventually civilian volunteers were also accepted, including members of ethnic and religious minorities. For example, from the mid-1890s until 1321/1903, the highest-ranking Persian officer in the brigade was the chief of staff, Mīrzā Mādrūs/Mārtīrūs Khan, an Armenian from New Jolfā, near Isfahan, who had been educated at the Lazarevskii



Institute, a secondary school for Armenians founded in Moscow by an Armenian merchant (for him, see Bāmdād, *Rejāl V*, pp. 186-88). The commanders and other Russian officers attached to the unit served on contract for terms of several years, which were sometimes renewed. The commander of the unit was chosen by the Russian military hierarchy in the Caucasus, however, regardless of the wishes of the Persian government. The total number of Russians serving with the unit grew from nine commissioned and noncommissioned officers in the time of Domantovich to more than 120 by 1339/1920, when they were dismissed by the Persian government.

Persians were able to rise through the ranks to become officers, which became a source of tension within the brigade, as the *mohājers*, who had traditionally enjoyed privileged treatment before the creation of the brigade, expected that they would provide all the officers once they had joined it. They were aggrieved that other men, some of humble origins, could also become officers and exercise authority over them. Until the mid-1890s the sons of officers, whether *mohājers* or others, could inherit their fathers' ranks in the brigade without having to work their way up. If the attitudes of one Cossack officer, Režā Khan (later Režā Shah Pahlavī), were typical, then Persian officers also resented the Russians' monopoly of the highest-ranking positions.

Early difficulties. The Cossacks suffered from several chronic problems in addition to those of internal discipline and social tensions. Meager financing was one of the most important. It resulted both from the general revenue problems of the Persian central government and from occasional opposition by powerful men at court. On several occasions the unit was deep in debt and sometimes even lacked sufficient funds to pay its troops. On one occasion in the late 1890s Colonel (later General) V. A. Kosogovskii (Plate X), the brigade commander, mortgaged his personal estate in Russia in an effort to raise additional money for his bankrupt unit. The biggest improvement in the Cossacks' financial position came in the last phase of its existence, after 1339/1921, when Režā Khan, then minister of war, gave preference to his former unit in the allocation of funds.

Another recurrent problem was antagonism between the Russians who commanded the unit and the diplomatic representatives from St. Petersburg in Tehran. Although individual commanders and envoys sometimes worked together in the brigade's interests or those of broader Russian policy in Persia, on several occasions a Russian representative deliberately undermined a commander's efforts to win Persian government support for the Cossacks or to



deal with his superiors in Russia. The competence and zeal of the commanders also varied considerably. As career officers in the imperial Russian army on temporary posting to Persia, they owed their primary loyalty to their homeland. After the Constitutional Revolution (q.v.) in Persia in 1324/1906, of which the Russian government disapproved, the position was clarified: The authorities in St. Petersburg decided in essence that the Russian officers would not obey any order from the Persian government unless it was deemed consonant with Russian interests.

By the first half of the 1890s the Cossack Brigade had reached its nadir. Owing to the recurrent problems outlined above, which were compounded by the broad disruption caused by a serious epidemic of [cholera](#) in Persia in 1308-10/1891-92, it was substantially undermanned, and its troops presented an unmartial appearance. Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah considered reducing the brigade to a small honor guard or employing German officers in place of the Russians. At that critical juncture, in 1312/1895, the newly appointed commander, Kosogovskii, in an effort to bring the brigade up to military standards of discipline and competence, inadvertently provoked an uprising in the ranks. One of his objectives was to restrain the *mohājers*, whom he regarded as overprivileged and unruly. They reacted by deserting en masse and joining a rival Cossack unit sponsored by the minister of war, Kāmṛān Mīrzā, a son of the shah. Many Cossacks who were not *mohājers* also quit the brigade. After about two weeks in May 1895, when the future hung in the balance, the shah decided to support the brigade, eliminate rival Cossack groups, and endorse Kosogovskii's stance on discipline. Although the immediate crisis had passed, the brigade continued to suffer from periodic shortages of funding and manpower.

Functioning of the Cossacks. During the first seventeen years of its existence the Cossack Brigade had no clearly defined duties. Beginning in 1313/1896 it assumed a number of internal security functions. Small groups were posted to the provinces, where they were placed under the authority of governors, who relied on them to maintain order and at times to oversee the province during the governors' own absences. The first crisis in which the Cossacks participated occurred on 18 Ḍu'l-qa'da 1313/1 May 1896, when Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah was assassinated. [Atābak-e A'zam Mīrzā 'Alī-Aṣḡar Khan Amīn al-Soltān](#), put Kosogovskii, with whom he was on good terms, in charge of maintaining order in Tehran. Kosogovskii sent his men to secure key locations in the city, as well as the Russian legation and the Russian bank, in order to ensure a



smooth transition of power when the new shah, Moẓaffar-al-Dīn (1313-24/1896-1907), arrived in early June. In 1319/1901 the Cossacks suppressed a local uprising in Fārs.

During the [Constitutional Revolution ii](#), the Cossack Brigade was criticized by the Majles for its pro-Russian orientation. The Russian emissary to Tehran, Nikolai Genrikhovich Hartwig, and the brigade commander, Colonel Vladimir Platonovich Liakhov, encouraged Moḥammad-ʿAlī Shah (1324-27/1907-09) to use the Cossacks. On 22 Jomādā I 1326/22 June 1908 the shah appointed Liakhov military governor of Tehran. The next day, with Liakhov and six other Russian officers leading them, the Cossacks, with six artillery pieces, surrounded the [Bahārestān](#), the building where the Majles met. After fighting began they bombarded the Bahārestān and the adjoining Sepah-sālār mosque, dispersing the constitutionalists; several hundred people were killed. Liakhov also sent Cossacks to attack the homes of several enemies of the shah and to prevent surviving nationalists from taking *bast* (sanctuary) in the British legation. Furthermore, in 1326-27/1908-09 some 400 Cossacks joined the siege of Tabrīz which had defied Moḥammad-ʿAlī Shah in support of the constitution. Detachments of Cossacks dispatched to halt the advance of the constitutionalist forces toward Tehran failed in their mission. When the constitutionalists entered Tehran, on 24 Jomādā II/13 July Moḥammad-ʿAlī Shah withdrew, escorted by the Cossacks, to the summer quarters of the Russian legation in a village north of the city. The British sent sepoy to reinforce the Cossacks. When the restored Majles deposed Moḥammad-ʿAlī Shah on 27 Jomādā II/16 July Cossacks and sepoy escorted his minor son and successor, Aḥmad Shah (1327-44/1909-25), from the village to Tehran. Liakhov agreed to serve the new regime. When the Russian government attempted to restore Moḥammad-ʿAlī to the throne by force in 1329/1911, it relied on regular Russian troops, rather than the Cossack Brigade. Nevertheless, the brigade still received at least nominal support from the Russian authorities. Although members of the Majles and the new treasurer-general of Persia, the American W. Morgan Shuster, were suspicious of the brigade's intentions, Shuster had to abandon an attempt to send fifty gendarmes to guard the Cossacks' Tehran barracks in the face of objections from the Russian consul.

After the collapse of the Russian monarchy in March 1917 discipline and morale among the Cossacks in Persia suffered, but the division did not collapse. Many of the Russian officers, all members of the tsarist army, were intensely anticommunist. Some returned to Russia in 1336/1918 (in some



instances in order to join the Whites in the civil war), but many remained with the division. They were willing to support the Persian government in quelling domestic revolution and opposing Soviet intervention in the north. Eventually, the British began to subsidize division finances, at the rate of 60,000 tomans a month in 1338/1920; they hoped to use the Cossacks to combat communist activity and antigovernment uprisings in northern Persia.

The Cossacks fought local revolutionaries and the Red army along the Caspian coast in 1337-38/1919-20 and in Azarbaijan in the latter year. In Azarbaijan they achieved rapid success, defeating the *Ḳiābānī* uprising in September (see [communism](#) i). Along the Caspian the situation was more difficult. After some initial successes in both *Māzandarān* and *Gilān* in 1337/1919, notably at *Rašt* and *Mašhad-e Sar*, the Cossacks were defeated in *Gilān* and withdrew to *Qazvīn*. Rumors that the Russian divisional officers were disloyal spread in *Tehran*, raising the fear that they were in collusion with either the British or the Soviet army. Throughout 1338/1920 British officials wavered between seeking the ouster of the Russian officers and supporting them as a useful counterforce to the Soviet army, which invaded *Gilān* in May. British pressure to dismiss the Russian officers met with strong resistance, particularly from *Aḥmad Shah* himself. He considered the division his best military force and perceived it as loyal to him; he was also worried that violence might result within the division if he dismissed the Russians. By October the British in Persia were convinced that the Cossack commander, Colonel *Starosel'skiĭ*, whom they believed to be anti-British, had claimed fictitious victories while accomplishing nothing in the fight against communist forces. They intensified their campaign to oust the Russian officers. Soon after taking office in October Prime Minister *Sepahdār-e A'zam* dismissed *Starosel'skiĭ* and approximately 120 other Russian officers. After their departure the division was put under the command of *Reżā Khan*, a career Cossack officer with the rank of brigadier general (*mīrpanj*). British officers were also attached to the division.

The [coup d'état](#) that brought *Sayyed Zīā'-al-Dīn Ṭabāṭabā'ī* and *Reżā Khan* to power in 1299 Š./1921 was effected by 1,500-3,000 Cossacks commanded by the latter. Most of the division had been concentrated at *Qazvīn* since the retreat from *Gilān*. On the night of 11-12 *Jomādā II/20-21* February 1921 they occupied key locations in *Tehran* and seized a number of probable opponents. For the next three days they looted the city without obstruction. *Reżā Khan* assumed the post of commander-in-chief of the army and soon after that of minister of war. In those capacities he continued to rely heavily on the Cossacks as a



fighting force. Later in the year he sent them back to Gilān, where they defeated both Soviet army troops and the Jangalī revolutionaries. The Russian army withdrew in September, and the Cossacks completed the process of retaking Gilān from the Jangalīs. Soon afterward, with the help of the Cossacks and other military units, Reżā Khan secured control of Kurdistan and Azarbaijan.

Once Reżā Khan had taken charge of military affairs, he began the gradual process of creating a centralized army, based on European models, to replace the separate traditional and European-trained units. The Cossacks formed the core of this new army in its initial phase (Plate XI); their uniform was adopted for the entire force, and there was an attempt to integrate the gendarmerie into the Cossacks. The latter move met with strong opposition, not only from politicians who feared the concentration of power in Reżā Khan's hands, but also from the gendarmes themselves. In 1340/1922 gendarmes in Tabrīz rebelled, ousting the governor and attacking the Cossacks stationed there. Reżā Khan sent loyal troops from his new army, and the uprising was crushed. The rapid influx of new soldiers into the centralized army changed its character and rendered all the old units obsolete. By 1304 Š./1925 the new army consisted of about 40,000 men, including former Cossacks, gendarmes, and members of the South Persia Rifles.

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Plate X. Portrait of General V. A. Kosogovskii by Moṣawwer-al-Molk. After *Šerāfāt*, *Ḍu'l-qa'da* 1319/February 1901.

Plate XI. Coronation procession for Reżā Shah, Maydān-e Mašq, Tehran. The shah is mounted at left center, General Amīr Aḥmadī just behind him; the Cossack Brigade rides ahead, and the gendarmes are at the rear. Oil on canvas, 83 x 1.34 m. Artist unknown. After Drouot Rive Gauche sale catalogue, Paris, 16 November 1978, no. 316.