



DĀ'Ī JĀN NĀPEL'ON

DĀ'Ī JĀN NĀPEL'ON (lit., “Uncle Napoleon”), a satirical novel written in 1348-49 Š./1969-70 by Īraj Pezeškzād, who was already known in Persia for such satirical novels as *Hājī Mamja'far dar Pārīs* (Tehran, 1333 Š./1954) and *Ašgar Āqā Kal Meytī*, as well as the weekly column “Āsemūn o rīsmūn” in the magazine *Ferdowsī* (published in book form, in Tehran, 1343 Š./1964). The theme of *Dā'ī Jān Nāpel'on* is the paranoid behavior of the chief character, representing the widespread conviction in 20th-century Persia that the British were the secret instigators and hidden agents of all events in the country (see [conspiracy theories](#)). The work, first published in Tehran in February 1973, has become a most important cultural reference point in contemporary Persia, popular enough to be reprinted eleven times by 1357 Š./1978. The novel was written in Geneva, where Pezeškzād was serving as a diplomat. In 1355 Š./1976 and again a year later *Televeziōn-e mellī-e Īrān* (National Persian television) broadcast a series of seventeen episodes based on the novel; the script was prepared by Nāšer Taqwā'ī, who also directed it. Although the government of the Islamic Republic banned both the novel and the series in 1359 Š./1980, the former was reprinted in London in 1981, and illegal copies of the video are in circulation in Persia and abroad.

The novel is set in Tehran during World War II and revolves around the narrator's sudden romantic interest in one of the daughters of his maternal uncle. This uncle, a retired lower-ranking officer of the gendarmerie, is so obsessed with the personality of Napoleon that, behind his back, his relatives call him *Dā'ī Jān Nāpel'on*. Taking off from the general belief among Persians



that the British have had a hand in all the affairs of their country, Uncle Napoleon begins to exaggerate his own minor role in helping to subdue mountain bandits and rebels, making it appear that his work was part of the larger Persian battle against British imperial forces. In his reminiscences, to which he repeatedly subjects his family, he elevates the local rebels to British agents and equates himself with Napoleon.

The narrator's romantic hopes are in constant jeopardy, as his own father is plotting revenge upon Uncle Napoleon, who had instigated a rumor among the clergy that his brother-in-law was using alcohol in his pharmacy, thus precipitating its financial collapse. Feeding Uncle Napoleon's flights of fancy becomes the father's only means of revenge. The uncle's seemingly innocent self-aggrandizement takes an ironic twist when the Allied forces actually occupy Persia in August 1941. Fully convinced that the British will not forgive the sins he supposedly committed against them during his years in the gendarmerie and encouraged by the narrator's father, Uncle Napoleon gives in to his paranoia and plans to go into exile. When he begins to suspect his own devoted servant of conspiring with the British, his relatives enlist the help of an Indian neighbor, who disguises himself as a representative of the British imperial forces and tries to arrange a reconciliation between the British and Uncle Napoleon. An unexpected turn of events spoils the plot, and the uncle becomes even more disturbed when, in the autumn of 1321 Š./1942, the British round up a number of prominent Persians whom they believe to have sided with Germany. Uncle Napoleon's pathological preoccupation with his own imminent arrest finally convinces his relatives that he will be satisfied only by confirmation of his own imaginings. They arrange for an impostor in British uniform to appear at his home; Uncle Napoleon surrenders his sword with a great flourish and expires on the spot. The novel ends with the narrator relating how his beloved cousin is then married off to another suitor.

The main character so successfully embodies Persian fascination with conspiracy theories, suspicion of foreigners (particularly the British), and pride that it seized the national imagination and gave rise to Nāpeļ'onism, a general suspiciousness, if not downright paranoia.

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