



RUSSIA V. RUSSIANS AT THE COURT OF MOḤAMMAD-‘ALI SHAH

RUSSIA

v. RUSSIANS AT THE COURT OF MOḤAMMAD-‘ALI SHAH

The presence of Russians at the court of MoḤammad-‘Ali Shah (r. 1907-09) reflected Russia’s efforts to improve her competitive position against the British by strengthening her influence over the Qajar rulers. Gathering information and promoting Russian interests at the court were among the steps taken by Russia at the time of the [Constitutional Revolution](#) (1905-11) in Persia, in which Russia backed the ruling regime while Britain supported the constitutional movement.

The humiliating defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05 and the post-war crisis and unrest of 1905-07 weakened Russia and damaged her international prestige. Russia was forced to reach a settlement with the British, and in August 1907 the [Anglo-Russian Convention](#) was signed that divided Persia into spheres of influence. Russian influence on Persia’s internal affairs was affected by this compromise agreement and by the Constitutional Revolution, which was partly directed against Russian domination.

In January 1907, in the midst of the constitutional crisis, Mozaffar-al-Din Shah



(r. 1896-1907) died and was succeeded by his son, Moḥammad-‘Ali. Immediately thereafter, Russia tried to take advantage of the unstable situation in Tehran to secure control over the new shah.

In early February 1907, Doctor A.Y.Sadovskii, the physician at the [Cossack Brigade](#), was appointed as one of the shah’s physicians. In January 1907, Nikolaï Gartvig, the Russian envoy in Tehran, explained in a secret report that in September of the previous year, Dr. Sadovskii had been invited for a consultation with the ailing Moḡaffar-al-Din Shah and, since he made a favorable impression on the sovereign, he was ordered to appear at the court several times every day along with the shah’s other physicians. However, since Moḡaffar-al-Din died without leaving any orders about Sadovskii, the position of the Russian doctor became uncertain, and he did not dare to appear at the court of the new shah without a special invitation (RGVIA, f. 400, op. 1, d. 3549).

It appears that Gartvig was concerned not about protests by the Persians, but rather about possible reservations from the British who “always and everywhere see Russia’s intention to occupy a dominant position in Persia” (RGVIA, f. 400, op. 1, d. 3549). Gartvig was able to secure the support of his British counterpart after he reminded the latter that “the British physician Dr. Lindley and Dr. Sadovskii, attending to the late shah, were providing us with accurate information about his illness, and while not getting involved in politics at all, they did not have reasons for confrontation and were able to establish a friendly relationship between themselves.” He also mentioned the potential threat of a German physician being appointed instead (RGVIA, f. 400, op. 1, d. 3549).

During a meeting with Moḡammad-‘Ali Shah, Gartvig informed him of the “abnormal situation that there was no Russian doctor among his physicians” and that Dr. Sadovskii had been able to win his father’s trust and favor. The shah agreed to “correct” the situation and appointed Sadovskii as one of his physicians. The status of Sadovskii, who was subordinated to the Russian Mission and nominally attached to the Cossack Brigade at the same time, was coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Military Ministry (RGVIA, f. 400, op. 1, d. 3549)—in accordance with one of the rules the Russians followed in pursuing the Great Game.

Along with other Russians in Tehran, Sadovskii assisted Moḡammad-‘Ali Shah in his coup d’etat against the parliamentary government in 1908. After



Mohammad-'Ali Shah was deposed and exiled in 1909, Sadovskii served Aḥmad Shah (r. 1909-25) until 1910, when he died of a heart attack while on leave in Russia (Smirnov, p. 145).

In addition to promoting the Russian doctor, Gartvig asked Mohammad-'Ali Shah to keep the Cossack Captain Ya.V.Khabaev, who had been assigned to his court in Tabriz, in his palace guard, since "such an outstanding officer will be able to organize an outstanding guard," and the shah agreed (RGVIA, f. 400, op. 1, d. 3549). Khabaev later accompanied Mohammad-'Ali Shah into his exile in Russia, then returned to Persia, and served as the head of Aḥmad Shah's escort (Smirnov, pp. 152 and 315).

In the spring of 1907, retired Captain Kol'man, a tutor to Mohammad-'Ali Shah's sons, was replaced with Captain Konstantin Smirnov. When Mohammad-'Ali Shah succeeded to the throne, he, according to Gartvig, expressed a desire to find another Russian tutor, "reliable and experienced, fluent in Russian, French, and either Persian or Turkish," for his two sons, the eldest of whom (Aḥmad) was now the Crown Prince. Though Kol'man was well bred and fluent in European languages, he "did not have a slightest idea about pedagogy and got fits of hard drinking." According to Gartvig, the shah was reluctant to just dismiss Kol'man, since he did not want it to look as if he were in a rush to get rid of the Russians immediately after his accession to the throne. A letter from the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs (Aleksandr Izvol'skii was the head of the Russian Foreign Office then) to F.F.Palitsyn, the Head of the General Staff, comments on the importance of a tutor who "is in a constant everyday contact" with the shah and could provide various services to the Russians and exercise influence on the future shah. The person selected was expected to possess "outstanding qualities, have a solid background and good education, and be perfect in his morals and politically reliable." He was to be instructed in detail with regard to his behavior and course of action at the court before being sent to Tehran (RGVIA, f. 400, op. 1, d. 3583).

Out of ten candidates, all of whom were military officers, Captain Konstantin Smirnov was selected; he was given a "fake" retirement and arrived in Tehran on 1 July 1907. A prominent scholar of the Orient and an expert on Persia, he would publish a number of works on Persian culture and history. His memoirs *Zapiski vospitatelya persidskogo shaha, 1907-1914 gody* ('Memoirs of the Tutor of the Persian Shah, Years 1907-1914') is a rich and detailed account of his experience in Persia. He had graduated from the Courses of Oriental languages for officers; while in Tehran, he served as an informal mediator between the



Russian mission and Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah and, later, Aḥmad Shah. Information he passed was often extremely secret and sensitive, such as a request by Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah to the Russian Emperor to accept Persia under what would become a protectorate. Smirnov regularly sent reports to the Russian mission and to the Headquarters of the Caucasian Army with valuable information about the situation at the court and his analysis of it. He was among those who helped organize Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah’s exile to Russia, and he stayed as a tutor for the new shah, Aḥmad, until 1914 (Ter-Oganov, Introduction to Smirnov, pp. 4, 9-10).

Smirnov’s memoirs provide unique material about the controversial figure of Sergeĭ Shapshal, yet another Russian in the service of Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah. According to Smirnov, Shapshal was a Crimean Karaim who had graduated from the Oriental Department of Moscow University, after which he went to Tabriz on his own and was employed as a teacher of the Russian language to Moḥammad-‘Ali while the latter was the Crown Prince. In Tehran, he held the title of General Aide-de-Camp, exercised a strong influence on his sovereign, and probably cultivated pro-Russian sentiments in him and his sons (Smirnov, pp. 43, 59, 78, 293). Yet, the famous Russian Orientalist Vladimir Minorsky, who also served in Tehran at that time, accused him of spying on the Russians for his master (Smirnov, p. 242). According to Smirnov, Shapshal was sincerely devoted to the shah and, though not in the Russian service, was highly regarded by the Russian officials in Tehran. When he left in 1908, after a falling out with the court and the shah, the latter lost a loyal, brave, and well-educated servant and adviser (Smirnov, p. 105).

Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah’s Russian connections and support could not save the throne for him, since Russia was not strong enough in Persia at that time—but perhaps they helped to save his life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Rossiĭskii gosudarstvennyi voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv (RGVIA, Russian State Military History Archive), f. 400, op. 1, dd. 3549 and 3583.



K.I.Smirnov, *Zapiski vospitatelya persidskogo shaha, 1907-1914 gody* (Memoirs of the Tutor of the Persian Shah, Years 1907-1914), ed. N.Ter-Oganov, Tel-Aviv, 2002.

(Elena Andreeva)

July 20, 2009