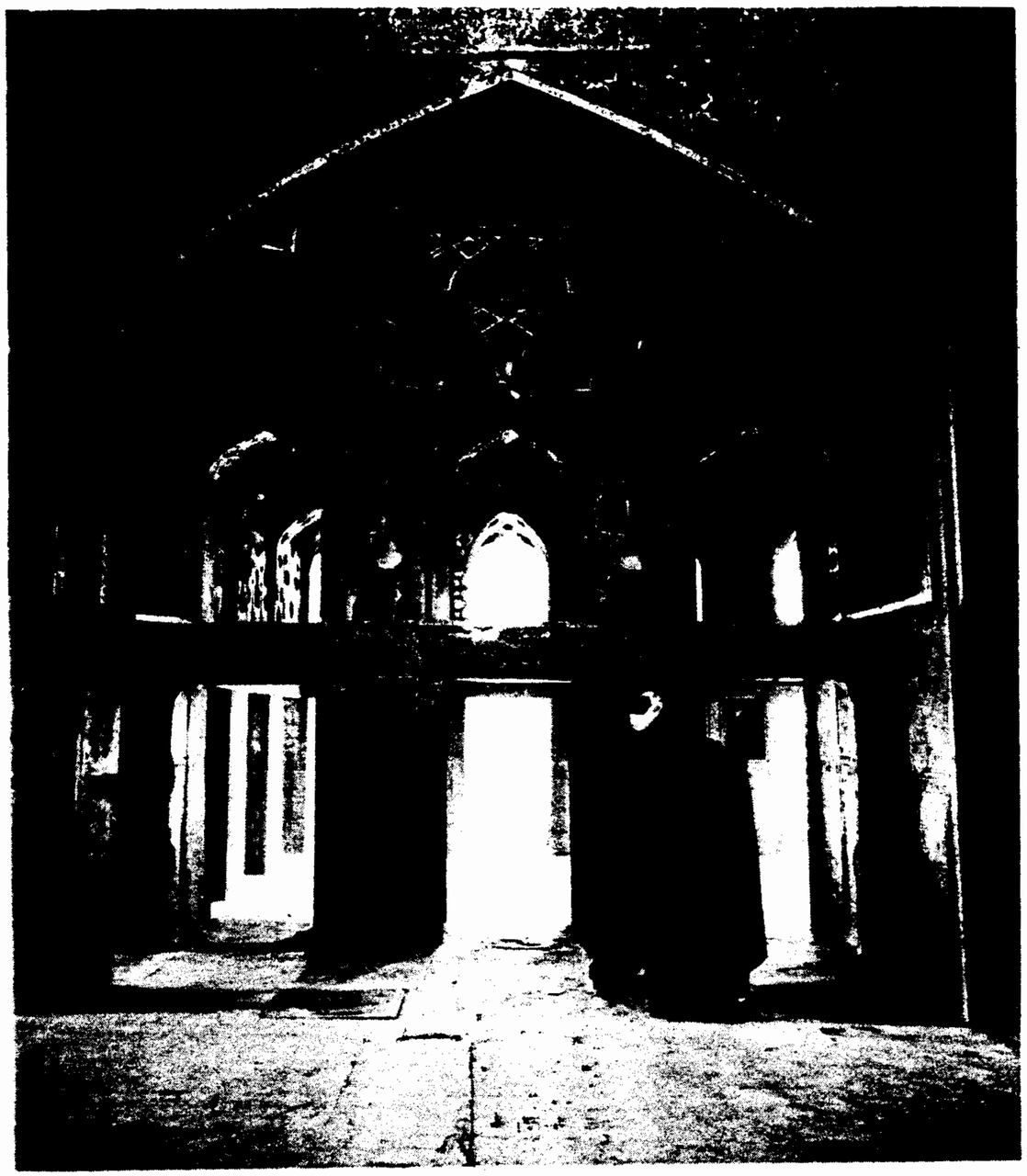

The exquisite decorations in one of the upper chambers of the Ali Qapu, the gatehouse of the Safavid royal palace complex in Isfahan, include fretworked recesses which may have been acoustical, for the playing of music. Ungainly from the outside, the Ali Qapu is full of surprises on the inside. Its verandah overlooks the great *maidan*.

Clive Irving

CROSSROADS OF CIVILIZATION

3000 YEARS OF PERSIAN HISTORY

WEIDENFELD AND NICOLSON
London

ISBN 0 297 77481 6

George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd
91 Clapham High Street London SW4

Printed in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, London, Fakenham and Reading

CONTENTS

While Persia suffered in her sleep, those around her were beginning their own processes of adjustment. Russia in particular, her European nose twitching in the scent of revolution while her Asian trunk remained inert, had to be watched carefully from Persia. Imperial Russia and Imperial Britain were the nineteenth-century predators most likely to exploit Persia's weakness. Britain came to regard and treat Persia as a convenient corridor to India, to ensure that the land was secure for the new telegraph and the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf secure for the Royal Navy. Russia intended to consolidate her hold on the Caspian. Turkey, as yet somnolent to Persia's west, would herself awake and become an important influence.

Persia was taken into the nineteenth century under the prolonged and usually deplorable Qajar dynasty. Fath 'Ali Shah, who ruled until 1834, entertained delusions of grandeur which extended to a love of reflected glory: one wall of the Sasanian grotto at Taq–i–Bustan was freshly cut to depict Fath 'Ali's court, in crudely painted relief, sharing the arena with Chosroes II. It all went much too much to the head: Fath 'Ali sought glory by waging war on Russia, with risible results. As a settlement Armenia had to be ceded to the Russians, all claim to Georgia was renounced and substantial land on each side of the Caspian was given away. Impotent yet rash, the Qajars were caught in the competing tides of imperialism. The British acted with the kind of mentality which made 'spheres of influence' a euphemism for covert colonization.

In 1848 a Qajar monarch did appear who began with better intention – Nasiru'd–Din Shah. He seems genuinely to have tried to consider instruments for a more enlightened rule, but was unable to defuse what rapidly became a dangerous sectarian war between the Shi'a establishment and the followers of a new movement which sprang up in Shiraz, the Babis. The early success of this movement was a reflection, as Mazdakism had been in Sasanian Persia, of the frustrations caused by the reactionary nature of the prevailing orthodoxy. The Babis were martyred and finally, after an attempt on the Shah's life, brutally suppressed. Henceforth 'Babi' provided a convenient label for any dissident and sufficient cause for their elimination.

There had been no real grass roots movement for change; the subject masses remained fatalistic. What had been percolating through, at the privileged heights, was a combined sense of threat and obsolescence. The bureaucrats, especially diplomats aware of the

outside world, realized Persia's paucity of constitutional machinery; which was not the same thing as speculating the merits of constitutional democracy. While power rested in too few hands, it was too easy for outside powers to corrupt it without there being any brake from below. The impunity with which Britain had moved in to Persia and installed its telegraph line to India, with an attendant military protection, showed how contemptible was the notion of Persian sovereignty.

The appalling backwardness of the country needs emphasizing: there was no meaningful Press until the 1840s, and then only a tentative one – those who could supplemented the meagre flow of information with foreign papers, which described ideas and a world beyond the glimmerings of most Persians, and as inaccessible as Mars. The tools of change were pathetically few, and the resistance to change implacable, from both the Shah and the theologians. The simmering restlessness of the bureaucrats was shared by some of the merchant class, who had begun to understand the prosperity that reforms might bring to them. But while Europe discovered how to harness multiplying capital and to concede to ineluctable social aspirations, Persia gained neither the material means nor the political institutions for advance.

There were, however, rich pickings for the predators. In 1872 the Shah gave the ubiquitous Baron Julius de Reuter a concession to create the infrastructure – railways, roads and irrigation – to tap Persia's newly discovered mineral resources. The concession, made on guileless terms for seventy years, had to be withdrawn after public outcry. Nasiru'd–Din Shah was tantalized by the pleasures of European travel and greedy for the income to finance it. He then granted an even more abject concession: a fifty-year monopoly on the buying, selling and manufacture of tobacco, in return for an annual sum of £15,000 and a quarter of the profits, the proposition of an importunate Major Talbot. The Persian tobacco interests rose in revolt and this concession too, had to be rescinded.

In 1896 Nasiru'd–Din Shah was assassinated by a supporter of a faction calling for a modified and liberalized Islam. The next Shah, Muzaffaru'd–Din, merely accelerated the dynasty's proclivities, granted more concessions and, as an invalid, toured European cities and spas in search of relief. The dynasty teetered miraculously on until 1925, though much of its twentieth-century existence was nominal.

The survival of Persia itself, at a time when whole European dynasties and kingdoms were wiped from the map, is either a marvel or an accident or a combination of both. The country came near to dismemberment several times, from both internal and external forces.

The misery awaiting Persian dissidents in the face of the unblinking orthodoxy was without limit. The social atmosphere is caught in the memory of the writer Mohammed 'Ali Jamalzadeh, whose father was a revolutionary at the turn of the century. The father, Jamal, was a religious orator living in Isfahan who turned to the cause of change after reading newspapers, in Persian and Arabic, imported from abroad. Isfahan was governed by a Qajar prince whose despotism was reinforced by a Shi'a zealot called The Wolf, and by the roaming *jarrash*. The 'underground', composed of people like Jamal, civil servants, teachers, merchants and shopkeepers, held clandestine meetings in which the English language press, also, was translated and read. If dissidents were caught they were branded as Babis and treated summarily.

The young Jamalzadeh saw two merchants soaked in petrol, driven into the *maidan*, and ignited as torches by The Wolf. He saw the headmaster of his school, who had been caught using English books bought from the Christian Armenians in Julfa, hauled before the mullahs and beaten on the soles of his feet with whips and sticks. The use of English books qualified as both sacrilege and sedition. Eventually forced to flee Isfahan, Jamal became a mesmerizing leader of the movement for constitutional reform in Tehran. A crowd of ten thousand assembled in a mosque for one of his speeches, and ended by chanting the letters which spelt 'law' in Persian – 'qaf, alef, nun, vav, nun, qanun, qanun ... law ... LAW!' The cry echoed across the city and into the royal palace, where the enraged Shah rushed outside to a pond and systematically shot each of his goldfish, naming them after the revolutionary leaders. Law was not a Qajar strongpoint; Fath 'Ali Shah had asked a British ambassador how many wives he had. 'One wife,' said the ambassador. 'Why don't you take more?' asked the Shah. 'The law doesn't allow it.' 'Oh – what is law?'

Muzaffaru'd–Din Shah, the hedonistic invalid, had more on his mind than distant voices. He had not recovered his health and his European bills had to be underwritten in 1900 by a loan from the Russians, for which he gave as collateral most of Persia's customs revenue. In 1902 he raised another ten million roubles by granting

Russia the concession to build a road from south-western Russia to Tehran, virtually an open corridor for the Russian army to pass through the key cities of northern Persia. To the British, who had assiduously colonized southern Persia, this suggested that the Shah was preparing for his country to become a vassal state of the Czar. This fear turned British sympathies pragmatically towards the rising constitutional movement.

What kind of movement was it, in a country without any experience of political suffrage? Its target was easier to identify than its motives. The decadence of the monarchy, the corruption of officials, the overall sense of institutions failing and resources draining away – these made common cause for attack. But what was the alternative, and whom would it serve? Western labels of 'liberal', 'radical' and 'revolutionary' have little meaning. With the monarch discredited, the one remaining force embracing the majority was the religion. But the theologians were themselves divided. Many were implicated in the repressions. *Status quo*, for them, was understood far better than change. And because change came with ideas borne on a western wind, secular and materialistic, its effect on many mullahs was (and continued long after to be) to intensify conservatism and reaction. Those theologians who were in the 'reform' movement did not want a western-flavoured revolution but something quite different: a revised Islamic state in which the pure tenets of the faith and the religious laws would predominate.

What might now be superficially taken as the familiar cry of its time, of a people rising, was in truth an alliance of convenience between diverse interest groups who, in the smelting, would not prove to be reconcilable. Where the sentiment was genuinely popular, there was the impediment of a total lack of experience in the practice of adversary politics. Strong class allegiances remained unbroken and jealous of their privileges. There was no vestige of a galvanized proletariat. The 'revolution' that convulsed Persia from 1906 to 1925 was led and dominated by the élites; the articulate body politic was formed of merchants, civil servants, landowners, tribal chiefs, clerics, aristocrats and journalists – western words provided the banners, but ancient Persian instincts shaped the motives. In the end, the effective agency of lasting change was none of them, but the army.

First, Persia's fate lay not in Persian hands but those of the major powers, the most contiguous and menacing of whom was Russia. It