

HISAR SCHOOL

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“Protecting Freedom in the Global Age ”

Historical Committee

The Islamic Revolution of Iran



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Introduction

The Islamic Revolution took place in Iran in the years 1978 - 1979 and caused the government of the country to change from a monarchy to an Islamic republic. Due to interventions from outside governments such as the United Kingdom and the United States, Iran's government had not been stable since the beginning of the 20th century. After a coup organized by the CIA and MI6 took place in Iran to restore the monarchy to the Pahlavi Dynasty, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi became the shah and established the White Revolution, which was the first step that would eventually lead to the Islamic Revolution.

As much as it was beneficial to the country's economy, The White Revolution struck controversy amongst different social groups. The economy growing rapidly in a short amount of time caused a number of problems for the public including inflation, and on top of economic problems came socio political repression. Not to mention that the conservative culture of Iran was disrupted by the rapid industrialization and modernization under the White revolution, the public was not pleased with the governance of the Shah.

As a result, the restless people came together to overthrow the Shah under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In January 1978, students from religious schools filled the streets to protest the Shah, and after months of conflict between the revolutionists and the Shah's government, Khomeini declared Iran an Islamic Republic on April 1.

Definition of Key Terms

Pahlavi Dynasty: The monarch family of Iran that ruled the country between years 1925 - 1979.

White Revolution: A series of socio political and industrial innovation plans implemented in order to modernize Iran under the rule of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi

Shia Islam: A congregation of Islam where Shia Muslims believe that Ali ibn Abi Talib is the successor of Prophet Mohammed, and that Muslims should always have a leader, or a *caliphate* to guide them

Sunni Islam: A congregation of Islam where Sunni Muslims believe that Prophet Mohammed did not appoint someone as the leader of Muslims, and contrasts with the beliefs of Shia Islam

Clergy: Refers to the Shia Ulama in this context. People whose main duty is related to religion.

Velayet-e Faqih: Translated into English as "Islamic Government", it is a book written to support the Islamic theocratic rule by the Iranian clergy and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

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General Overview

Before the Revolution

Between 1095-1911, Iran was dealing with a Constitutional Revolution. The Iranian people wanted to have a voice in the government and the revolution led to the establishment of a parliament. The Constitutional Revolution left Iran in a chaotic state as the ruling government had lost most of their power. General Reza Khan used the chaos for his own benefit as he quickly established a constitutional monarchy with himself as the new Shah of Iran.

After becoming the Shah, Reza introduced many new policies which pushed the country to westernization. He began changing Islamic laws into Western ones. This included the banning of the hijab and other Islamic clothing. Reza Shah also brutally suppressed rebellions. In the infamous Goharsad Mosque rebellion hundreds were killed. The Shah's actions led to most people in Iran to resent him.

Reza Shah also gave away control of Iran's oil resources to British and American oil companies. The Anglo-British oil company, now known as BP, was the most successful British business in the world at the time. After the Shah was deposed in 1941, Mohammed Mossadegh was democratically elected as Iran's Prime Minister. He became a national hero by finally nationalizing Iran's vast oil resources. His actions angered the United States of America and The United Kingdom. The CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and MI6, the UK's intelligence organization, cooperated to stage a military coup in Iran. The coup took place in 1953 and was a major success.

After the coup, Reza Shah's son, Mohammed Reza became the new Shah in Iran. Mohammed Reza valued westernization and made many reforms towards it. These reforms were called the White Revolution as the Shah attempted to change a lot of major aspects of traditional Iranian life. The reforms lasted from 1963 to 1978. Under these reforms, the economy grew rapidly and the country took a big step towards westernization. However, the reforms also led to hate towards the Shah as many believed that Iran was losing its identity. Many people began seeing Mohammed Reza as a puppet to the US.

However, the Shah brutally suppressed his political enemies by torturing, jailing and exiling them. He founded the infamous SAVAK secret police. With the help of SAVAK, he was able to arrest political opponents in a high rate. Mohammed Reza's controversial ideas and ruthlessness led to many people from around Iran to start protesting against him. Ayatollah Khomeini was one of the main people who were against the Shah's policies. Firstly, he protested the White Revolution but was arrested by SAVAK. His supporters rioted and asked for him to be released. In the riots it's estimated that over 15000 people were shot by the police. Khomeini was released after 8 months in house arrest but was arrested in 1964 again after condemning the Shah publicly. He was exiled to Iraq where he lived for 15 years.

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In the 1970s, Iran's economy was really struggling. The price of oil dropped which led to high levels of inflation in Iran. The middle class was also disappearing, as the royal family kept most of the oil revenue to themselves. Tensions were high in Iran as most people hated Mohammed Reza and wanted a new person in charge.

Beginning of the Protests

After an article written by a "government agent" which labeled the late Khomeini as a British agent and as a person who was conspiring to sell Iran to communists and colonialists, the seminary school students at the city of Qom began protesting. The protests led to the students fighting with the police, which allegedly resulted in seventy of the students being killed and over five hundred of them being injured. However, according to the government only two were killed in the fight.

Forty days after the protestors' fight with the police in Qom (18th of February), memorial services named chehelom, which are held after forty days after a person's death, were held across the nation, leading to violent riots taking place in the nation, with the largest one being in Tabriz. These riots included the burning down symbols of Western culture such as cinemas and bars. The government responded to the riot with deploying the Imperial Iranian Army. In the aftermath of these riots, the government claims only six people were killed, however according to Khomeini, hundreds were killed in these riots.

Cheheloms were held yet again forty days later (29th of March) and forty days after that (10th of May) this time in at least fifty five cities. Both of these demonstrations concluded with violent riots.

Government's Responses and Continuation of Protests

Instead of responding to the protests with more violence, the Shah tried to negotiate with the protesters whilst still continuing with his liberalization plans. He implemented laws which would decrease censorship and also would instruct soldiers to not use deadly force to control the continuing riots. He also let all the SAVAK officials in Tabriz go, alongside many government officials the public was against and replacing the SAVAK General with Nasser Moghaddam.

Although protests were still being held every 40 days, they were less impactful and less deadly. The protests seemed to stop until August 1978, when they reignited again with one of the largest attacks in history, the Cinema Rex fire, where four arsonists burned down the movie theatre, killing the 422 people inside the building at the time. The people blamed the Shah for this attack, which led to the protests to be reignited which were even more violent and impactful than before.

These protests led to martial law being declared in Isfahan, where the protestors bombed a bus full of American workers and burned down buildings which were symbols of Western culture. Since he couldn't stop these protests, Prime Minister Amuzegar resigned and Jafar Sharif-Emami took his place as prime minister.

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In the following Eid-e-Fitr, (the 4th of September), 500 000 people marched to the center of Tehran, where protests took place the following days. On the 8th of September, martial law was declared in 12 major cities including Tehran. Street protests were banned and a curfew was set. However, protests still took to the street, which led to them clashing with the soldiers, with 89 people dead at the end of these clashes. This day was named Black Friday by the opposition. The Shah spoke against the killings that happened on Black Friday, however since he was responsible for these deaths, the public opinion didn't change at all.

During these days, many people of the working class also went on strikes and near the end of October, the entire nation went on a strike, however, the Shah didn't use force to bring them back to work. Instead, he increased their wages, which didn't stop the strikes, leading to the Shah's government pushing him to use force in order to get the people back to their work.

The violent protests and riots on the streets continued and on the 6th of November, the Shah fired Jafar Sharif-Emami from his position as prime minister and appointed a military general instead of his place in order to stop the chaos. Then, the Shah gave a speech where he apologized for what he had done during his time and that he would work with the revolution to make Iran a better place, however, Khomeini responded by saying that he would not cooperate with the Shah and told the people to overthrow the Shah.

Muharram Protests

On the 2nd of December, 1978, the Muharram protests, organized by Khomeini, began. Two million people stormed the streets, demanding that the Shah would step down. At the end of the Muharram month, the shah stepped down and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran from his exile and took the position of the leader of Iran.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Imperial State of Iran

Rastakhiz Party

The Rastakhiz Party of the People of Iran (The Resurrection Party), Iran's sole legal political party since 1975, was established by Mohammad Reza Shah. Alongside the Rastakhiz Political Party, an affiliated youth wing, Rastakhiz Youth, was formed as well. The party's interference with the political, economic, and religious aspects of apolitical Iranians' lives lead to discontent amongst many. For example, through the youth wing and a special task force, anti-profiteering campaigns were launched particularly to alienate apolitical bazaari merchants.

Imperial Guard

The Imperial Guard of Iran is an elite combat branch, consisting of both cavalry and infantry units, of the Imperial Iranian Army and the personal guard force of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

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Originally formed in 1942 from 700 volunteers, the Imperial Guard has responsibilities such as ensuring the internal and external protection of the royal palaces, and protecting the Shah from any and all threats.

Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar (SAVAK)

SAVAK is the “National Organization for Security and Intelligence” in Iran under the rule of the Pahlavi Dynasty. The secret domestic security and intelligence service was initiated by the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, along with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Israel’s MOSSAD in 1957. SAVAK is described as an extremely feared institution mainly due to its reputation of torturing and executing those who opposed the Shah. SAVAK enabled the Shah to surveil his political adversaries and suppress opposing riots.

Great Britain

While Anglo-Iranian relations can be dated back to the Safavid and Qajar eras, the relations became most prevalent during the Pahlavi era. The discovery of Iranian oil in 1909 ultimately led to the establishment of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, and pronounced relations between the two nations. As Britain’s interest in oil grew, British occupation in Iran became bolstered.

Many believe that the Brits were involved in the 1921 coup which led to the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi in the 1920s. However, when Reza Shah expanded trade and links with Nazi Germany during WW2, despite Iran’s declaration that it would remain neutral, the fearful UK and Soviet Union invaded Iran to force Reza Shah into abdicating his throne in favor of his son, whom they could control better.

When Mohammed Mossadegh was elected prime minister in 1953 with plans to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, British and American intelligence agencies planned Operation Ajax to oust the democratically elected Mossadegh. The MI6 and CIA backed coup resulted in the fall and arrest of Mossadegh.

Primarily, Great Britain’s interests have been in keeping its Anglo-Iranian Oil Company within safe reach, and ensuring that the pro-Western Shah continues to “Westernize” his country through the White Revolution.

United States of America

Like Great Britain, relations between the United States and Iran can be traced back to the Qajar Dynasty, however ambassadorial relations were not established until 1944. The Anglo-Soviet Invasion of Iran in 1941, which removed the pro-Axis Reza Shah, led the pro-Western Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to claim his father’s throne. Throughout his rule, the Shah kept close ties with the USA, implementing many pro-Western foreign policies, and launching the White Revolution. Some even believed that the Shah was merely a pawn of the USA. Due to the friendly relationship between the

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two states, many Iranians sustained positive attitudes towards Americans. However, the 1953 coup d'état organized by the US and UK against prime minister Mohammed Mossadeq was what initially led to the rise of the anti-Western sentiment amongst revolting Iranians. By the end of the 70s, much of the Iranian population viewed the pro-American Shah's arbitrary rule to be increasingly autocratic, hence the riots that followed.

Timeline of Events

Date of Event	Description of Event
1921	Military commander Reza Khan leads a coup that causes the Persian government to be overthrown
1925	Reza Khan declares himself as the Shah — Reza Shah Pahlavi.
1935	The nation's official name is changed from Persia to Iran
1941	Due to the shah's WW2 pro-Axis allegiance, the Anglo-Russian occupation in Iran forces Reza Shah Pahlavi to abdicate his throne in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi
1951	Parliament votes to nationalize Iran's oil industry (which is dominated by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company). Britain imposes an embargo causing the halt of oil exports and thus devastating the economy. The Nationalist prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh coerces Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi to flee.
1953	Mossadegh is overthrown in the 1953 Iranian coup d'etat orchestrated by the CIA and UK's MI6, enabling the Shah to seize back his power and throne
1963-1964	Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, an outspoken critic of the shah's regime who inspired many anti government riots, is imprisoned and then forcibly exiled from Iran.
1963	The Shah launches the White Revolution, a campaign of reforms which aimed to modernize and Westernize his country. This campaign was engineered to specifically weaken the classes that were in favor of the traditional system.
1963-1978	The clergy and various leftists feel antagonized by the shah's policies; social injustice, and Western Imperialism generated under the Shah's rule continue to provoke opponents of the Pahlavi regime.

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January 9, 1978

Thousands of protesters unite in the main bazaar in Qom to protest the disparaging of Khomeini in the Iranian newspaper Ettela'at; several are killed by security forces, inciting further protests and violence.

Treaties and Events

After the revolution took place in 1979 by overthrowing the system of the despotic monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, there was a conflict between the major factions of the pro-revolution side. Along with his staunch supporters, Khomeini changed the regime of the country by implementing the system of Islamic government and appointing himself as Supreme Leader. In March, the establishment of the Islamic republic government happened after a referendum to alter the monarchy with an Islamic republic. The voter turnout was high even though some groups, such as the National Democratic Front, Fadayan, and several Kurdish parties, objected to voting. At the end of the referendum, 98.2% of Iranians had voted in favor of the Islamic Republic. While Khomeini was in exile in France before the revolution, the Freedom Movement started to draft a new constitution for the new system. The first draft of the revolution was indeed conservative and Khomeini believed that there should be some changes made on it to make the constitution a pure representative of Islam. With new changes offered by Khomeini, the role of clerics and religious authorities in the government were increased. Although the voter turnout was low, the new version of the constitution was also approved by the majority of Iranians. The United States and Iran signed the Algiers Accords in Algeria on 19 January 1981. The Algeria Declaration officially ended the hostage crisis by releasing 52 American citizens who were previously working in the embassy and allowing them to leave Iran. The declaration states that the United States would not intervene politically or militarily in the internal of Iran and remove the sanctions that were already implemented.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Before the uprisings, Iran was changing with a quickly growing economy and a quickly modernizing infrastructure. But the shift from a traditional, conservative, and rural culture to an industrial, modern, and urban culture happened in a period of little more than a generation. The feeling that too much had been tried too quickly in both agriculture and business and that the government had failed to achieve everything promised, either through bribery or incompetence, was expressed in protests against the regime in 1978. Moreover, affected by the new thought of an Islamic state in which Islam could be actualized completely, along these lines finishing the dominion of the pioneer West, Khomeini contended it was incumbent on Muslims to set up an Islamic government dependent on the Qur'an and the case of the Prophet Muhammad. Although the shah approached with a seemingly peaceful manner at first, he was weakened by cancer and shocked by the sudden outpouring of hostility toward him. Later on, as he wavered between concession and repression, he assumed that the protests were part of a global conspiracy against him. Therefore, there are no records of any mediative methods followed or coming together of both parties.

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