

DOI: 10.1017/S0020859003001111  
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SPECIAL THEME:

TWENTIETH-CENTURY IRAN:  
HISTORY FROM BELOW



Figure 1. Iran and the Caucasus.

## Introduction

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In its long history Iran has experienced many eventful moments. The past century was far from exceptional in this respect: the country was ravaged by three major wars (1914–1918, 1941–1945, 1980–1988) in which hundreds of thousands of people died; two coups (1921, 1953) transformed power relations within the political and military elite; and two revolutions (1905–1911, 1978–1979) led to radical changes in social, cultural, and political relationships. The country's appearance has changed completely since the end of the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a large proportion of the population lived in tribal communities; by the end of the century the central state was omnipresent. The capital, Tehran, expanded from a city of around 100,000 inhabitants in 1890 to a metropolis of over ten million.

Historical research into these spectacular upheavals, schisms, and shifts has developed erratically. In Iran itself, the professional historiography remained in its infancy for a long time.<sup>1</sup> It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that a serious trend in writing the history of nineteenth-century Iran developed amongst Iranian historians. For the first time, British, French, and also Iranian diplomatic archives were utilized by local Iranian historians.<sup>2</sup> The Islamic Revolution of 1978–1979 was followed by growing interest in the history of Iran, but, nonetheless, in the two and a half decades since then “the serious study and writing of history in the modern sense” has remained “in its infancy”.<sup>3</sup> In the West, particularly in Britain and the United States, a small community of scholars emerged,

1. The first serious contribution to the social history of Iran related to a much earlier period. See Abdolhosayn Zarinkoub's account of the Iranians' early reaction to the Arab invasion of the seventh century, *Do Qarn Sokut [Two Centuries of Silence]* (Tehran, 1951). Other key references in the social historiography of Iran are Morteza Ravandi, *Tarikh Ejtema'i Iran [Social History of Iran]*, 10 vols (Tehran, 1968), and Said Nafisi, *Tarikh-e Ejtema'i va Siyasi-e Iran dar Doreh-e Mo'aser [The Contemporary Social and Political History of Iran]* (Tehran, 1961).

2. See, for instance, Homa Nategh, *Mosibat-e Vaba va Balay-e Hokumat dar Iran [The Affliction of Cholera and the Calamity of Government in Iran]* (Tehran, 1975), and Fereydon Adamiyat and Homa Nateq, *Afkar-i Ejtema'i va Siyasi va Eqtesadi dar Asar-e Montashernashodeh-e Doran-e Qajar [Social, Political and Economic Thought in the Unpublished Documents of the Qajar Period]* (Tehran, 1977).

3. Abbas Amanat, “The Study of History in Post-Revolutionary Iran: Nostalgia, or Historical Awareness?”, *Iranian Studies*, 22 (1989), pp. 3–18, here p. 17.

especially after the Second World War, which made important contributions, though they revealed a clear preference for certain aspects and issues.<sup>4</sup> In the Soviet Union, there have always been historians interested in Iran, but their publications were necessarily constrained by the Procrustean framework of Marxism-Leninism.<sup>5</sup>

Generally speaking, we can distinguish three fields of interest. First, the macropolitical picture, by which we mean foreign relations, and military, diplomatic, and religious issues. This top-down approach has played a role for at least 100 years, and has led to much interesting research on, for example, the institutional aspects of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), on the northern Iranian Jangali movement (1914–1921), and on the communist movement.<sup>6</sup> Since 1979, the number of interpretations of the Revolution of that year has also grown dramatically, inspired in many cases by theories drawn from sociology and political science.<sup>7</sup>

4. Compare the complaint by Hamid Enayat in the early 1970s, that Western Iranology concentrated too much on military and religious conflicts and “has diverted its attention from the broader features of Iranian history and culture”; Hamid Enayat, “The Politics of Iranology”, *Iranian Studies*, 6 (1973), pp. 2–20.

5. The major Soviet works on the social history of modern Iran include A.Z. Arabadzyani and N.A. Kuznetsovoy (eds), *Iran. Sbornik Statej* (Moscow, 1973); V.V. Bartold, *Iran. Istoricheski obzor* (Tashkent, 1928); V.S. Glukhoded, *Problemi ekonomicheskogo ravitiia Irana* (Moscow, 1968); M.S. Ivanov, *Babidskie vosstaniia v Irane* (Moscow, 1939); M.S. Ivanov, *Ocherk istorii Irana* (Moscow, 1952); M.S. Ivanov, *Iranskaia revoliutsiia, 1905–1911* (Moscow, 1957); M.N. Ivanova, *Natsional’no-osvoboditel’noe dvizhenie v Irane, 1918–1922 gg.* (Moscow, 1961); I.I. Korobeinikov, *Iran. Ekonomika i vnesniaia torgovlia* (Moscow, 1963); I.I. Palyukaitis, *Ekonomicheskoe razvitie Irana* (Moscow, 1965); N.V. Pigulevskaya et al., *Istoriia Irana* (Leningrad, 1958); and R.A. Seidov, *Agrarnii vopros i krest’ianskoe dvizhenie v Irane, 1950–1955* (Baku, 1963); Z.Z. Abdullaev, *Promyshlennost i zarozhdenie rabocheho klassa Irana v kontse XIX–nachale XX vv* (Baku, 1963).

6. On the historiography of the Constitutional Revolution see M. Reza Afshari, “The Historians of the Constitutional Movement and the Making of the Iranian Populist Tradition”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 25 (1993), pp. 477–494. See too Sabine Roschke-Bugzel, *Die revolutionäre Bewegung in Iran, 1905–1911: Sozialdemokratie und russischer Einfluss* (Frankfurt am Main, 1991); Djafar Shafiei-Nasab, *Les mouvements révolutionnaires et la constitution de 1906 en Iran* (Berlin, 1991). On the Gilan Republic see, *inter alia*, Janet Afary, “The Contentious Historiography of the Gilan Republic of Iran: A Critical Exploration”, *Iranian Studies*, 28 (1995), pp. 3–24. Important studies have been written by Schapour Ravasani, *Sowjetrepublik Gilan. Die Sozialistische Bewegung im Iran seit Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts bis 1922* (Berlin, 1973), and Cosroe Chaqueri, *The Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran, 1920–1921: Birth of the Trauma* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1995). On the communist movement, see, amongst others, Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ, 1982), esp. pp. 281–415; Dailami Pehzmann, “The Bolshevik Revolution and the Genesis of Communism in Iran, 1917–1920”, *Central Asian Survey*, 11:3 (1992), pp. 51–82; and Maziar Behrooz, “Tudeh Factionalism and the 1953 Coup in Iran”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 33 (2001), pp. 363–382. On the process of state formation see, *inter alia*, Stephanie Cronin, *The Army and the Creation of the Pahlavi State in Iran, 1921–1926* (London [etc.], 1997).

7. Charles Kurzman, “Historiography of the Iranian Revolutionary Movement, 1977–79”, *Iranian Studies*, 28 (1995), pp. 25–35. Particular mention should be made of the relatively large number of attempts to analyse the Islamic Revolution in an international-comparative

Secondly, the number of contributions to economic, urban and demographic history has grown since the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> The third field is that of the social history of Iran. This is the most recent and least developed trend, and one which, unfortunately, is not yet taken seriously by all Iranian historians. One example should suffice: the final volume of the authoritative *Cambridge History of Iran* devotes several chapters to economic developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but none whatsoever to social protest or the everyday life and work of subaltern groups and classes.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, social historians have carried out important work since the 1960s.<sup>10</sup> They have written about the history of the guilds, which continued to play a role until late into the twentieth

framework. See Theda Skocpol, "Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution", *Theory and Society*, 11 (1982), pp. 265–283; Nikki R. Keddie, "Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective", *American Historical Review*, 88 (1983), pp. 579–598; Farideh Farhi, *States and Urban-Based Revolutions: Iran and Nicaragua* (Urbana, IL, 1990); Asef Bayat, "Revolution without Movement, Movement without Revolution: Comparing Islamist Activism in Iran and Egypt", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40 (1998), pp. 136–169; Tim McDaniel, *Autocracy, Modernization and Revolution in Russia and Iran* (Princeton, NJ, 1999); Misagh Parsa, *States, Ideologies, and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of Iran, Nicaragua, and the Philippines* (Cambridge, 2000). The earlier Constitutional Revolution has also begun to be the subject of comparative analysis. See Klaus Kreiser, "Der japanische Sieg über Russland (1905) und sein Echo unter den Muslimen", *Die Welt des Islams*, 21 (1981), pp. 209–239; and Nader Sohrabi, "Historicizing Revolutions: Constitutional Revolutions in the Ottoman Empire, Iran and Russia, 1905–1908", *American Journal of Sociology*, 100 (1994–1995), pp. 1383–1447.

8. Ann Lambton was one of the pioneers of Iranian economic history. See her highly original books, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia* (London, 1953) and *The Persian Land Reform, 1962–1966* (Oxford, 1969). Later important studies include Charles Issawi (ed.), *The Economic History of Iran 1800–1914* (Chicago, IL, 1971); Julian Bharier, *Economic Development in Iran, 1900–1970* (London, 1971); Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo-Modernism, 1926–1979* (London, 1981); Manfred Schneider, *Beiträge zur Wirtschaftsstruktur und Wirtschaftsentwicklung Persiens, 1850–1900* (Stuttgart, 1990). An interesting interpretative contribution is that of John Foran, "The Concept of Dependent Development as a Key to the Political Economy of Qajar Iran (1800–1925)", *Iranian Studies*, 22 (1989), pp. 5–56. Several major studies on the demographic history of Iran since 1900 are reprinted in Jamshid A. Momeni (ed.), *The Population of Iran: A Selection of Readings* (Honolulu, HI, 1977). Urbanization is the subject of smaller-scale studies such as Mansoureh Ettehadieh, "Patterns of Urban Development: The Growth of Tehran (1852–1903)", in Edmund Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand (eds), *Qajar Iran: Political, Social and Cultural Change, 1800–1925* (Edinburgh, 1983), pp. 199–212; Eckart Ehlers and Willem Floor, "Urban Change in Iran, 1920–1941", *Iranian Studies*, 26 (1993), pp. 251–275.

9. Peter Avery, Gavin Hambly, and Charles Melville (eds), *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7, *From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic* (Cambridge [etc.], 1991).

10. Historians can also make good use of social science reports, which themselves now serve as historical sources. See for example Eric J. Hooglund, *Land and Revolution in Iran, 1960–1980* (Austin, TX, 1982) on the social consequences of the land reform 1962–1971, a study based on fieldwork conducted in 1960–1980; or Farhad Kazemi's *Poverty and Revolution in Iran: The Migrant Poor, Urban Marginality and Politics* (New York [etc.], 1980), on poor migrants and shanty-town dwellers (based on fieldwork carried out in 1974–1975 and 1977).

century.<sup>11</sup> They have published important monographs on organized labour<sup>12</sup> and investigated several forms of popular protest.<sup>13</sup> They have sought structural explanations for the absence of large-scale peasant rebellions and for the lack of underground labour organizations during the rule of the last shah.<sup>14</sup> And, last but not least, they have raised the issue of the role of women and gender issues in social change.<sup>15</sup> All this constitutes an impressive achievement, the more so when we consider that much of this research has been carried out by scholars living in exile.

In publishing the following three articles we have a dual purpose. We wish to contribute to the dissemination of this new research on Iranian social history outside the circle of Middle-East specialists. And we want to draw attention to three areas that have, hitherto, been insufficiently represented within the new historiography: the social history of the country's most important industrial sector, the oil industry; the transnational aspects of working-class formation; and the detailed reconstruction of employment and labour relations.<sup>16</sup>

11. Willem M. Floor, "The Guilds in Iran: An Overview from the Earliest Beginnings till 1972", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 125 (1975), pp. 99–116; Thomas Philipp, "Isfahan 1881–1891: A Close-Up View of Guilds and Production", *Iranian Studies*, 17 (1984), pp. 391–411.

12. Willem Floor, *Labour Unions, Law and Conditions in Iran, 1900–1941* (Durham, 1985); Habib Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran* (Syracuse, NY, 1985); Asef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran: A Third World Experience of Workers' Control* (London, 1987).

13. Ervand Abrahamian, "The Crowd in Iranian Politics, 1905–1953", *Past and Present*, 41 (1968), pp. 184–210; *idem*, "The Crowd in the Persian Revolution", *Iranian Studies*, 2 (1969), pp. 128–149; Nikki R. Keddie, "Popular Participation in the Persian Revolution of 1905–1911", in *idem*, *Iran: Religion, Politics and Society: Collected Essays* (London, 1980), pp. 55–79; Stephen L. McFarland, "The Anatomy of an Iranian Crowd: The Tehran Bread Riot of December 1942", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 17 (1985), pp. 51–65; Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran* (New York, 1997); John Foran, "Dangerous Populations? Concepts for the Comparative Study of Social Movements in Qajar Iran", *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East*, 13 (1998), pp. 3–27; Stephanie Cronin, "Conscription and Popular Resistance in Iran, 1925–1941", *International Review of Social History*, 43 (1998), pp. 451–471. See too Farhad Kazemi, "Economic Indicators and Political Violence in Iran, 1946–1968", *Iranian Studies*, 8 (1975), pp. 70–86.

14. Farhad Kazemi and Ervand Abrahamian, "The Nonrevolutionary Peasantry of Modern Iran", *Iranian Studies*, 11 (1978), pp. 259–304; Asef Bayat, "Capital Accumulation, Political Control and Labour Organization in Iran, 1965–75", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 25 (1989), pp. 198–207.

15. Mangol Bayat-Philipp, "Women and Revolution in Iran, 1905–1911", in Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie (eds), *Women in the Muslim World* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), pp. 295–308; E. Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran* (New York, 1982); Hamed Shahidian, "The Iranian Left and the 'Women Question' in the Revolution of 1978–79", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 26 (1994), pp. 223–247; Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Is Our Name Remembered?: Writing the History of Iranian Constitutionalism as if Women and Gender Mattered", *Iranian Studies*, 29 (1996), pp. 85–109.

16. Drafts of the articles were presented as papers at the conference on "Twentieth-Century of Iran: History From Below", which we organized at the International Institute of Social History,

Social-historical aspects of the oil industry are explored in Kaveh Ehsani's contribution.<sup>17</sup> His article examines the role of labourers, migrants, women, and petty functionaries in the making and shaping of the cities of Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman in the course of the twentieth century. In the urban history of Iran, Abadan, for instance, occupies a unique place. As an oil-company town built by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later National Iranian Oil Company) when oil was first discovered in the Middle East in 1908, it was the country's first designed modern city. From the onset, the urban design of Abadan by the Company had a dual purpose: to house and train its workforce, and to socialize them in a modern industrial setting while keeping them docile. Built around the largest refinery in the world and situated in the midst of an ethnically diverse and geographically remote region, the city's population of half a million (by 1979, when the Islamic Revolution took place) were all migrants. The architectural details and urban design of the city, as well as the labour market and labour discipline controlled by the Oil Company, turned Abadan into the first instance of top-down social engineering by both multinational capital and the national state in Iran. This project of social engineering focused on the migrant urban population, and its instrument was the urban space of Abadan itself.

Using previous fieldwork and historical research, as well as oral and archival histories, Ehsani unearths the resistance of the Abadanis and their struggle to redefine the urban space of the company town and make it their own. His study researches and analyses the acts of subaltern resistance to this project of social engineering, which was etched into the city space itself. It also analyses the untamed and spontaneous spaces created outside the control of the company by urban residents, and shows how they subverted a rigid discipline of control and industrial ethos. The article also looks at the post-Revolution period, when Abadan was badly damaged during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), and worse still during the years of “reconstruction”. The continued struggle of an urban population to turn its urban space into a site of contention and agency, and how this struggle unfolded over a period of a century, how it intertwined with the nation's own attempt to define its modernity, is the subject of Ehsani's article.

Amsterdam, 25–26 May 2001. The conference focused on the history of labourers and subaltern groups in modern Iran, with specific reference to historiography and methodology, gender, ethnicity, industrial and nonindustrial urban labour, rural labour, the unemployed, and immigrant labourers. Of the thirteen papers presented at the workshops, three have been selected.

17. A convenient survey of the economic background can be found in Ronald Ferrier, “The Iranian Oil Industry”, in Avery, Hambly, and Melville, *From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic*, pp. 639–701. Planning aspects are discussed in Mark Crinson, “Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company”, *Planning Perspectives*, 12 (1997), pp. 341–359.

Transnational aspects of working-class formation are the subject of Touraj Atabaki's essay. His analysis of the Iranian subaltern on the margins of the Tsarist Empire depicts a migrant community formed within the boundaries of prevailing precapitalist relationships. The mass migration of the Iranian subaltern to the north began in the early 1890s. By the time of the Russian Revolution of 1917, hundreds of thousands of Iranians had settled throughout the margins of the Tsarist Empire. In the Baku oilfields and other industries in the Caucasus and Turkistan, Iranian workers accounted for 30 per cent of all labourers and formed the majority of the foreign groups residing there. In the southern Caucasus these Iranian subaltern were subjected to stunning discrimination. Earning less than 25 per cent of the average standard wage, they lived largely in the ghettos on the outskirts of the big cities. Even though the majority of them were rural Azerbaijanis or Azerbaijani-speakers from the north of Iran, and lived in a region where the local people spoke the same language as they did, these Iranian subaltern did not readily assimilate. By exploiting newly released documents from the archives in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Russia, Atabaki argues that the migrant subaltern in the towns into which they migrated crafted an inclusive culture underplaying any idea of individuality, and consequently constructed a community defined by political loyalty and attachment to a territorial identity that took precedence over their ethnic, linguistic, and class loyalties.

Finally, Willem Floor's article gives a thick description of the work, labour relations, and living conditions of labourers at the brick kilns of South Tehran. These labourers, partly urbanized, partly transient rural, were among the poorest of the Iranian labouring class. At the same time, in terms of sheer numbers they represented 5 per cent of the population of Tehran in 1960. They and their families lived under appalling conditions, but nevertheless they only seldom went on strike. Floor highlights the six known strikes by the brick-kiln workers between July 1953 and April 1979.

These three articles mirror well the development of historical research in other parts of the world. Ehsani's work lends itself to comparisons with similar studies of the almost simultaneous rise and development of other oil industries, for example in Nigeria.<sup>18</sup> Atabaki's essay invites a comparative survey of the emergence of migrant working classes in other

18. See, for example, L.B. Dangana, "Dynamique urbaine de Port Harcourt, Nigeria", *Annales de Géographie*, 89 (1980), pp. 605–613; Mark O.C. Anikpo, "Oil Production and Change in the Nigerian Social Structure: The Case of Port Harcourt", *African Urban Studies*, 17 (1983–1984), pp. 53–65; Max Dixon-Fyle, "The Saro in the Political Life of Early Port Harcourt, 1913–49", *Journal of African History*, 30 (1989), pp. 125–138; Ayodeji Olukoju, "Playing the Second Fiddle: The Development of Port Harcourt and its Role in the Nigerian Economy, 1917–1950", *International Journal of Maritime History*, 8 (1996), pp. 105–131.

centres of rapid economic growth, such as the Poles in the Ruhr.<sup>19</sup> And Floor's contribution refers implicitly to the similarities and differences with regard to comparable employment patterns in many parts of the world.<sup>20</sup>

From Abadan to Tehran and Baku, these studies contribute to the history of subaltern groups in Iran. However diverse in nature they might seem, these three essays add to our knowledge of "the history of the common people",<sup>21</sup> and of how they worked and lived during one of the most turbulent periods in Iranian history.

19. Christoph Klessmann, *Polnische Bergarbeiter im Ruhrgebiet 1870–1945. Soziale Integration und nationale Subkultur einer Minderheit in der deutschen Industriegesellschaft* (Göttingen, 1978); John J. Kulczycki, *The Polish Coal Miners' Union and the German Labor Movement in the Ruhr, 1902–1934: National and Social Solidarity* (Oxford [etc.], 1997).

20. See for example N.V. Voronov, "O rynke rabochei sily v Rossii v XVIII veke: po materialam kirpichnoi promyshlennosti", *Voprosy Istorii*, 3 (1955), pp. 90–99; Inge Adriansen, "Kvinder i teglvaerksindustrien gennem tre generationer", *Arbejderhistorie*, 34 (1990), pp. 2–17; Piet Lourens and Jan Lucassen, *Arbeitswanderung und berufliche Spezialisierung. Die lippischen Ziegler im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Osnabrück, 1999); Jan Lucassen, "La fabricación de ladrillos en Europa occidental y la India: un intento de historia comparada del trabajo", *Historia Social*, 45 (2003), pp. 3–33.

21. Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London, 1997), p. 201.