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IN THE 20TH CENTURY

EDITED BY TOURAJ ATABAKI



I.B. TAURIS

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Edited by Touraj Atabaki



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His areas of specialization encompass Middle Eastern history, modernity, nationalism, gender studies, Orientalism and Occidentalism.

Note on Transliteration

Transliteration is always a thorny problem when one is dealing with an edited volume. Through the book, all Persian words and names have been transliterated according to a simplified system that avoids diacritical marks. However, some contributors insisted to adopt different transliteration system. Therefore, a certain degree of variation and inconsistency has been allowed. The only alternative would have been to attempt to fit all contributors into a Procrustean of uniformity; an effort that I felt was bound to be futile in view of perspectives involved in this volume.

Historiography of Twentieth Century Iran: Memory, Amnesia and Invention

Touraj Atabaki

Twentieth century historiography on nation-state correlation to a large extent has been shaped by politically contentious projects. Writing the national history of the people who matured from a passive existence (*Passiver Volkheit*) to a people bound through a modern state with consistent and internationally recognized borders relied decisively on remembered, invented and recorded past which is sturdily and increasingly refashioned by present politics. The quest for roots and for historical background not only becomes essential for the people living in certain territory and for being identified as a territorial nation to claim territorial continuity, but it also often leads them to statehood.

In modern state building, however, it is not only the present politics that reconstruct the past, but it is also the historiography's task to provide recognition to a regime and legitimize its authority by refashioning the political culture through construction of the selected recollection of a certain past. Linking to real or imagined past, appending to genuine or fake ancestries or even fabricating documents are not exceptional in the politics of transferring from a territorial identity or a territorial state to a national identity and nation-state. These are all legitimized in the historiography's agenda in order to shape a significant and unbroken link with the nation's seminal past that could fill the gap between its origin and its actuality.¹

Thus, the practice of such a quest often ends up with a high degree of disorientation and intellectual confusion. This persistently raises the questions

of who is looking for whose roots and writing whose past? Whose memory is it and what are their memories?² Do the class, gender, ethnic or religious affiliations really matter in recording the nation's past? If history, as E.H. Carr argues, is 'a dialogue between the past and the present', then to what extent did the present political culture lead the historians to certain presentation of the past that meets the very political needs of today? Could one talk about history or histories of a nation? Elite history or subaltern history? Gendered history or non-gendered history? Titular history or histories of minorities? These are among numerous questions confronting the historiography that in one way or another intends to refashion the political culture and construct the new identity or identities for the emerging nation-states.

However, we should not delude ourselves that our judgment of the past is not immutable. While the historians are often reluctant to write about the contemporaries; their narration and analysis of the past, their opted agencies and subjectivities in recording of the past are shaped by today's needs and deeds. It is the present that crafts the recording of the past; a certain past, which through our today's prism reaches the present, a selected past. This may be more evident in all-inclusive projects such as writing national history of a nation where each social and political group of the present has its own reading and recording of the past. Accordingly, the reputation of great historical episodes such as a revolution, *coup d'état* or any change of the rule fluctuate in diverse assessments. The historiography of the twentieth-century Iran is among the many verdicts of this assertion.

In the course of her history, Iran has experienced many eventful epochs. The twentieth century was far from exceptional in this respect: the ravages of three major wars (1914–18, 1941–5 and 1980–8) resulting in the death of hundreds of thousands of people; three coups (1908, 1921 and 1953) transforming power relations within the political and military elite and two revolutions (1905–9 and 1978–82) leading to radical changes in socio-political arrangements.

Similar to the European historiography, such drastic changes in Iran were manifested, more than anywhere else, in the new perceptions of historiography. Up to the twentieth century, the historiography of Iran was, evidently, dominated by political, dynastical and genealogical elements as well as by narratives of the lives of the elite. However, around the turn of the twentieth century, and especially in the post-Constitutional Revolution (1905–9) period, Iran witnessed the birth of a new political culture which aimed to form a modern

state; thus paving the way gradually for the establishment of a new school of Iranian historiography.

Historical research into Iran's spectacular social upheavals in the twentieth-century has developed very erratically. Basically, one can distinguish three areas of historical research. The first area depicts the macro-political picture, i.e., foreign relations, military, diplomatic representations and patterns of belief system. This top-down approach has played a significant role for at least a hundred years, leading to interesting research on the institutional aspects of the Constitutional Revolution. The second area consists of a number of research contributions to economic, urban and demographic history that showed growth during the second half of the twentieth century. The third area is that of the social history of Iran. Although the latter is the least developed trend in Iran, the worldwide prevalence in sociological theories led to the recognition of the Iranian social history by some academics.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, a significant trend in the Iranian historiography, focusing mainly on the events of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, developed among the Iranian and non-Iranian historians, during which time the British, French and Iranian diplomatic archives were utilized by historians. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1978–82, which caused a momentous rupture with the political past, there has been a growing interest in reading the country's past, both the immediate and distant. The availability of new archival materials, on the Qajar and the Pahlavi periods, has encouraged this emerging desire. Moreover, many scholars have extensively dealt with the historical interpretations of the roots and causes of the Islamic Revolution while inspired, in many cases, by theories drawn from sociology and politics. Outside Iran, particularly in Britain and the United States, a small community of scholars emerged, especially after the Second World War, which made important contributions to the Iranian historiography. Nonetheless, they showed distinct preferences for certain aspects and issues. In the Soviet Union, there have always been historians interested in Iran but their publications were constrained by the Procrustean framework of Marxism-Leninism.

A careful study of the Iranian historiography in the last 150 years, especially during the course of the twentieth century, reveals the integrative endeavor by both native and non-native historians to craft the Iranians' new identity by observing selected memories and recollections in recording the past. The amnesia and recovery of selected past was accomplished by powerful ideological motivations,

both in the era of monarchy as well as during the rule of the Islamic Republic, in order to furnish a new form of self-awareness. Such awareness was essential for the political establishment, both in the case of the ancien régime and the newly established Islamic political system in Iran, to disassociate themselves from the certain past, to which they assume not to adhere. It was equally important for both of the establishments to craft a new apocalyptic culture in the determinist form of the prediction and ultimately controlling the future. In such historiography, history was seemingly reconstructed in an attempt to build a new vision of the past, securing the aspirations for the future.

The collection of the essays in this volume is the outcome of a conference that I organized at the University of Oxford on the Historiography and Political Culture in Twentieth Century Iran. In my preliminary call, while I urged each contributor to opt for a certain sphere in the Iranian modern historiography, I emphasized that our common denominator would be to examine the way the present has refashioned our reading of the past. At the same time, I highlighted the need to investigate how the Iranian historiography interacted with the political culture of the country in the twentieth century. The conference made a significant contribution to the reading of modern Iranian historiography, such as Islamist, fatherland-nationalist, conspiratorial, Marxist, peripheral and gendering. It prepared the ground for future projects on the role of historiography in shaping the country's political culture.

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Historiography and Crafting Iranian National Identity¹

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi

The crafting of a modern Iranian identity was linked to the configuration of history and restyling of language. The nationalist ‘employment’² of Iran’s ancient history as a tragedy was based on the comprehension of the Muslim conquest as a force engendering ‘the reverse progress of Iran’ (*taraqqi-i ma’kus-i Iran*).³ Linking the end of the ‘enlightened’ pre-Islamic times to origins identified with Iran through Mahabad or Kayumars, a new memory, identity, and political reality were fashioned. By inducing the desire and the will to recover ‘lost glories’ of the past, the nationalist struggle for a new social order became intrinsically connected to the politics of cultural memory and its de-Arabizing projects of history and language. Juxtaposing Iran and Islam, these projects prompted the emergence of a schizochronic view of history and the formation of schizophrenic social subjects who were conscious of their belonging to two diverse and often antagonistic times and cultural heritages.⁴ During Iran’s Constitutional Revolution of 1905–9, these autonomous ‘Iranian’ identities prefigured into the line up of political forces to antagonistic ‘Constitutionalist’ (*Mashrutahkhwah*) and ‘Shari’atist’ (*Mashru’abkhwah*) camps. The shift in the 1970s from a regime glorifying Iran’s ancient civilization to a revolutionary regime extolling Islamic heritage is only the most recent example of the creative possibilities and insoluble dilemmas engendered by the contested memories of pre-Islamic Iran.

Informed by *dasatiri* texts and inspired by the *Shahnamah* of Firdawsi, modern historical writings harnessed the Iranian homeland (*vatan*) to an immemorial past beginning with Mahabad and Kayumars and pointing toward a future unison with Europe. Iran’s pre-Islamic past was celebrated as a glorious and