

**Anna Ardashnikova**<sup>1</sup>  
Lomonosov Moscow State University  
Russia

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**Tamara Konyashkina**<sup>2</sup>  
Lomonosov Moscow State University  
Russia

## MODERNIZATION VERSUS TRADITION IN THE STRUGGLE FOR A REPUBLIC IN 1920s IRAN

### Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyze the first attempts to establish republic in Iran in 1920s. The revision of monarchical principles brought to life two independent republican projects, one of which, proclaimed on behalf of the traditional leader Kuchik Khan, was essentially a Soviet replica, and the second, initiated by Prime Minister Reza Khan, was the way to establish a dictatorship based on the principles of nationalism. An obstacle to the implementation of both republican plans was not only the denial of the religious authorities, but also a wide popular protest. As part of an interdisciplinary study, the article analyzes the arsenal of propaganda tools used to proclaim their political views by supporters and opponents of the republic. The work is based on archival documentary materials and works of a literary and journalistic origin, which are first introduced into scientific circulation.

**Keywords:** Iran, republic, Kuchik Khan, Gilan, Reza Khan, the Tajaddod party, Eshghi

The Pahlavi dynasty, which ruled Iran for just over half a century, can hardly be called a historical centenarian. Nevertheless, research interest in this period does not fade. Of course, it is largely connected with the search for not only convincing interpretations of the revolutionary explosion of the late 1970s, but also its causes. Even in the late autumn of 1978, when Iran was paralyzed by a general

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1 Associate Professor at the Department of Iranian Philology (Institute of Asian and African Studies) of the Lomonosov Moscow State University. Her field of expertise is the history of Persian literature. She is the author, with Marina Rejsner, of *Persidskaya literatura IX-XVIII vekov* (Persian Literature of the IX – XVIII century) in two volumes, 2019. Contact E-mail: anardash@mail.ru

2 Senior Lecturer at the Department of Middle and Near East History (Institute of Asian and African Studies) of the Lomonosov Moscow State University. Her field of expertise is the history of the Qajar Iran and socio-political processes in the XIX and XX century. Contact E-mail: tamara\_mgu@mail.ru

strike and nothing could be done to preserve the monarchy, not a single expert or major news agency could fully predict the fall of Pahlavi's power. Phasing Iranian Studies from stilted defining the revolution only as anti-monarchist, people's and Islamic, which did not contribute to the formation of an objective social image mode, has expanded the scope of research and identified the growing attention to the subjects, which for various reasons (often – because of the lack of credible sources base) belonged to the number of peripheral<sup>3</sup>.

The first experiments in proclaiming the republic in Iran which occurred in the early 1920s – first in the Caspian region of Gilan province, where it was proclaimed on behalf of the traditional leader, head of the local rebels Kuchik Khan, and soon in Tehran, where it was initiated by the central government, traditionally based on the principles of monarchism – were also left out of sight of the historians. Although spontaneous democratism in Iran, from the early Middle Ages to the 19th century, carried a powerful charge of egalitarianism as social and property equality, it did not, and could not, produce specific forms of "majority power". The question of the republic did not arise during the *mashruteh*<sup>4</sup>, the main task of which was the proclamation of a constitutional monarchy and the formation of its power structures.

The interest of the Russian specialists in the problem of the republican movement in Iran is direct evidence that the research excitement caused by the "archival revolution" in the 1990s has not run out, but gradually freeing itself from hasty politicized assessments, has gone into the stage of careful insight into the huge array of documentary materials.<sup>5</sup> The value of these documents for the period under study is determined by the fact that Russian archival repositories are essentially a monopoly in the possession of a unique collection of historical evidence. This primarily refers to the history of the Gilan Soviet Republic. Turned by the efforts of the Bolsheviks into a closed territory, Gilan province of Iran remained almost inaccessible to Iranian and European bystanders, and this fact largely determined the scarcity and fragmentation of their testimonies.

The First World War and the cardinal changes caused by it in the economy and politics of the warring countries did not either bypass neutral Iran, which since 1914 became the arena for the struggle of opposing blocs. The war consolidated the politically active part of the Iranian society, linking hopes for the establishment of real sovereignty of the country with the victory of German weapons, and the creation of the National Defense Committees in Qom, Shiraz and Kermanshah led to open armed resistance to Entente forces. The end of the war did not lead to the stabilization of the internal situation of Iran. The activ-

3 *The making of modern Iran: State and society under Riza Shah, 1921-1941*, Stephanie Cronin (ed.), Routledge, London, New York, 2003.

4 Constitutional revolution of Iran (1905-1911).

5 *Persidskij front mirovoj revolyucii. Dokumenty o sovetskom vtorzhenii v Gilyan (1920-1921)*, Qadriga, Moskva, 2017 (*Persian Front of the World Revolution. Documents on the Soviet invasion of Gilan*). Hereafter – *Persian Front*.

ity of Gilan insurgents, who relied on military assistance of the Russian Republic, Tabriz<sup>6</sup> which rebelled in 1920 under the autonomic slogans, the actions of the tribes, among which the Kurdish separatists and the powerful ruler of the south of Iran Sheikh Khazal were of the greatest danger – all these seemed to put Iran on the brink of decay and drew a line under the rule of the Qajar dynasty, the last representative of which Ahmad Shah was only a passive observer of the inglorious sunset of the Qajar era.

The explosion of regional movements in the first half of the 20s. pointed out that new loads were added to the load of pre-war problems, which urgently needed solutions. The coming to power of the Bolsheviks and the related foreign policy steps of Soviet Russia, addressed directly to the Iranian government, were a sign of ending the long rivalry in Iran between Russia and Britain and curtailing the so-called Great Game, at least in its previous form. This noticeably shook the familiar balance of power, which the Qajars had used to solve internal problems for almost a century and which, we can say by the way, had given stability to this unpopular dynasty.

The refusal of the Soviet republic to conduct the policy of capitulation and the evacuation of Russian troops from Iran by the spring of 1918 significantly strengthened the position of Great Britain, turning it into the mistress of the situation in Iran. Signing in 1919 by the government of Vosuq al-Dauleh<sup>7</sup> of the Anglo-Persian Agreement once again proved that the long rivalry in Iran of the two great powers ended in the unconditional defeat of Russia. The agreement, sharply criticized by France and the United States, the Entente's most influential members, who were not pleased with the strengthening of British position in the region, which was the center of global oil reserves, has never been ratified. Iran's public opinion did not accept it either. The text of the agreement caused heated discussion among Iranian democrats, splitting Iran's most influential socio-political force into two groups, which differently evaluated the political situation in the country and its prospects. Some of the members of the Democratic Party of Iran supported the government's program of cooperation with the UK, believing this would strengthen the position of the center and help maintain the unity of the country, which, in their opinion, was on the verge of political fragmentation. On the contrary, their opponents regarded regional movements as a way to build a state based on de facto sovereignty and truly democratic principles<sup>8</sup>.

The appearance in the port of Anzali in May 1920 of a squadron of the Volga-Caspian flotilla, which fired at the headquarters of the British army on the outskirts of the city and forced the British to retreat inland, gave these theoretical disputes practical meaning.

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6 The administrative center of the province of Iranian Azerbaijan, the second unofficial capital, the residence of the heir to the Qajar throne.

7 Vosuq al-Dauleh (Vossug ed Dowleh) – Twice (1916-1917 and 1918-1920) Prime Minister of Qajar Iran.

8 Gods Reza, *Iran v 20 veke (Iran in the 20<sup>th</sup> century)*, Nauka, Moskva, 1994, pp. 70-72.

## The Republic of “Forest Brothers” and its phantoms

The followed blockade of Anzali by the Red Army in May 1920, which became the spectacular end of the operation to defend the capital of the Soviet Azerbaijan, Baku with its oil fields and port, meant the establishment of Soviet domination over the entire water area of the Caspian Sea and dealt a heavy blow to British positions in Transcaucasia and Iran<sup>9</sup>. But its main result was not a military one, but its consequence - the possibility for the Bolsheviks to hold both in the region and outside it political initiative in their hands. The basis for this became the contacts established by the Soviet military command with Mirza Kuchik Khan, leader of the Jangal (Jungle) Movement – partisans operating in the forests (jungal) of Gilan – the Caspian province of Iran.

Existing since about 1912, the movement retained a focal, enclave character. The rebels were not able to gain a foothold in neighboring provinces and even completely control Gilan. Most of the “forest brothers”, like their leader Kuchik, were local natives: peasants, small traders and craftsmen from the urban centers of the province, joined by Shia Kurds of the northern Kurdistan regions who worked on the rice plantations of Gilan. Feeling the support of fellow countrymen, they were well oriented in the Caspian forests, which allowed them to withstand pressure from Tehran for a long time<sup>10</sup>.

The activity of Gilan movement caused the appearance of its program materials. Saying programs, we mean brief texts that were published in the Jangal newspaper during 1915-1918 under the heading “What do Jangalis want”.

The main goals of the movement were declared as the liberation of the country from foreign oppression, the observance of Islamic law, the creation of the government of “honest patriots”, the protection of the parliament (Majlis) and the throne. These slogans, popular since the time of the constitutional revolution, found a lively response from Gilan peasants, whose support enabled the movement to survive in the guerrilla war. Besides that, the call “Down with the British and the government that has sold themselves to the British” (regardless of which government was in power during the period of 1918-20) provided the rebel leader with popularity outside of Gilan<sup>11</sup>.

The work of Iranian researcher Ibrahim Fahrai<sup>12</sup> mentions the existence of another, later document, which, unlike the previous ones, had a pro-socialist character. Although its content is not specified, it can be assumed that its appearance was the result of a temporary compromise between Kuchik and representatives

9 Telegram dated from May 22, 1920, from Fleet Commander Fyodor Raskolnikov to the Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council Lev Trotsky with the report on the military operation, in: *Persian Front* . . . p. 30.

10 Cosroe Chaqueri, *The Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran, 1920-1921: Birth of the trauma*, Pittsburg University Press, Pittsburg, 1995, p. 34.

11 Ibidem, p. 98.

12 Ibrahim Fahrai, *Sardar-e jangal*, Tehran, 1344 (1965), p. 30.

of the Russian Republic. In any case, a noticeable gap was made in Kuchik's monarchial sympathies: the defense of the throne was the only thesis that he sacrificed, starting negotiations in May 1920 with the Soviet military command<sup>13</sup>.

The indefinite nature of the main provisions of the Jangal program made it possible to fill them with any specific content or even correct seriously, up to a new goal setting, which the Bolsheviks tried to use, though, it was not easy for them to impose their political views on the leader of the Gilan rebels. The traditional leader, undereducated mullah, waging in the Gilan jungle for five years a holy war against the European enslavers, Kuchik began negotiations with the Bolsheviks under the pressure of extraordinary circumstances: by the spring of 1920, he was defeated and considering the conditions for surrender, however, the honorable ones, proposed by official Tehran. The Soviet side was not inclined to give up positions either. The lack of common ground on issues of fundamental importance during the negotiations ended in a compromise, when both sides deliberately went to tricks, avoiding sharp corners, and as a result signed two different texts of the declaration of cooperation<sup>14</sup>.

This paid off in the first months of interaction, when many ambiguous steps and statements were made by both sides to maintain external unanimity. Kuchik categorically refused to carry out socialist reforms<sup>15</sup>, but continued to declare that his government would act in accordance with the principles of comrade Lenin, repeated that he served the motherland and the Shah, but agreed to the proclamation of a republic. The consequence of this was a political hybrid - the Soviet Gilan Republic, which was declared the guarantor of the preservation of private property and Islam<sup>16</sup>. Its government, the Council of People's Commissars, which consisted of local merchants, landowners and provincial officials, on which Kuchik relied, was only a cover for the activities of genuine power — the Revolutionary Committee, headed by Soviet emissaries. The Communists set the tone in it, behind stood the Persian Red Army, staffed mainly by Russian troops, and its headquarters. The appearance in Gilan of Iranian Communists, members of the Edalad (Justice) Party, created on the territory of Russia, finally split the movement. The Edalad strangers, many of whom did not know the Persian language, were the initiators of the communist movement in Iran. The renaming of the Edalad (Justice) Party at the first constituent congress in June 1920 to the Iranian Communist Party, a necessary condition for its admission to the Comintern, could not put an end to the grave internal strife inherited from its predecessor<sup>17</sup>.

By 1920, this struggle had gained regional contours, dividing the Edalad

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13 Ibidem, p. 177.

14 G. Egikjan, *Shouravi va jombesh-e mashrooteh*, Novin, Tehran, 1363 (1985), p. 138.

15 Letter from Kuchik Khan to Vladimir Lenin, dated July 1920, Fond 2, Inventory 2, File 361, pp. 6-7, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (hereafter RSASPH), Moscow.

16 Manifesto of the Persian Soviet Republic in Gilan, RSASPH, fond 532, inventory 4, file 532, pp. 52-54.

17 The First Congress of Persian Communists of the Edalad Party (protocol), June 22, 1920, in: *Persian Front*, p. 73.

(Justice) Party into two wings, each with its own leader - Azerbaijanean led by Avetis Sultan-zadeh and Turkistanean, with energetic and strong-willed Geydar Khan at the head. The struggle between these groups, which had tactical differences, was accompanied by mutual accusations, intrigues, the spread of false rumors and the desire to gain the patronage of members of the Russian Central Committee and the Comintern<sup>18</sup>.

Intraparty rivalry completed the transformation of Gilan into a field for social experiments. The requisition, the introduction of additional taxes on traders and the peasantry, the deployment of an anti-religious campaign and the attempt to close mosques completely embittered the population, who half a year ago had welcomed the appearance of the Russian army, and the local clergy issued a fatwa<sup>19</sup> calling for the declaration of jihad<sup>20</sup> to the "red government".

Three months after its proclamation, by the fall of 1920, the Gilan Soviet Republic had lost the leader on whom the Russian government relied. Leaving Rasht, Kuchik settled in his camp at Fuman, defiantly detaching himself from the actions of the new government<sup>21</sup>. Five governments, which alternated within a year of the Gilan Soviet Republic's existence, could not ensure victory at the front. Two campaigns against Tehran ended in defeat. Attempts to breathe life into Gilan Republic by changing the leadership to a more moderate one were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the Russian government did not stop supporting the Soviet Gilan, instructing the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs to attend to the issue of diplomatic recognition of the republic. The creation of a quasi-Soviet enclave in northern Iran, threatening, if not the collapse of the country, then at least the loss of part of the territory, worried the Iranian government. How real was this threat?

The question of what specific forms Soviet influence might take was not solved immediately. In search for the answer, it is important to determine the center of power in the polyphony of political opinions caused by the clash of departmental and personal ambitions or the disagreement between central and peripheral authorities. Such center is the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party and the government - the Council of People's Commissars, authorized to make decisions on the beginning of the military operation. At this level, the problem was considered differently. The key to the conservation of "Red Persia" was the struggle waged by the RSFSR for the recognition of the Soviet state as a subject of international relations. Signing a trade agreement with Britain was seen as a step to establishing relations with the outside world. It was extremely neces-

18 V. Genis, *Krasnaya Persiya. Bol'sheviki v Gilyane 1920-1921 (Red Persia. Bolsheviks in Gilan 1920-1921)*, Moskva MNTI, 2000, pp. 298-302.

19 Nonbinding legal opinion on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified jurist.

20 Armed struggle against unbelievers in Islam.

21 Telegram from Anastas Mikoyan, member of Iranbureau, to the Central committee of Russian Communist Party, dated August 6-7, 1920, in: *Persian Front*, p. 167.

sary for Russia, which was experiencing a severe economic crisis after the civil war. The military presence in northern Iran was a convincing demonstration of its capabilities and created, in the words of L. Trotsky, "conditions for diplomatic bargaining"<sup>22</sup>.

However, it must be taken into consideration that the Russian military presence in Iran was officially carried out by the forces of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, which had its own opinion on this subject. The Soviet state that was going through the "assembly period" at this time did not yet determine the nature of the interaction between the republics and the center. This concerned not only Azerbaijan. The Turkistan Republic, which was part of the Russian Federation as an autonomy, had rights that far exceeded its official status and, feeling itself an outpost of Russian politics in the Middle East, tried to pursue an independent line of foreign policy behavior in relation to Afghanistan. The example of Moscow, which successfully completed the process of gathering land, could spur the readiness of Azerbaijan's leaders for historical revenge. Moreover, the territory of Northern Azerbaijan was the core, homeland of two dynasties that ruled in Iran - The Safavid dynasty and the Qajar dynasty.

The leaders of Soviet Azerbaijan, who, on instructions from Moscow, were overseeing the situation in Gilan through the specially created structure of the Iranian Bureau, repeatedly stated the appropriateness of incorporating rice-growing Gilan as a valuable food base into the republic. The local leadership did not let Iranian, southern Azerbaijan out of sight either. Hopes for the continuation of the Gilan revolution were revived by a gendarme revolt with Abolqasem Lahuti<sup>23</sup>, in the past - member of the National Defense Committee of Qom, at head, that began in February 1922 in Tabriz. The Azerbaijani communists considered gendarmerie units created in 1909 as Majlis army as "the most susceptible to revolutionary ideology part of the Iranian population". However, a few days later, government troops surrounded Tabriz, and the rebellion was crushed. Its leader and several gendarme officers managed to escape to Baku<sup>24</sup>.

Another soldier revolt, which broke out in the summer of 1921 in Khorasan, a vast province in eastern Iran, was much more dangerous. Its leader, Colonel Mohammad Taqi Khan Pessian, who by chance was involved in the struggle for the prime minister's chair in the capital, tried to declare himself an independent political figure, not a victim of circumstances, and gave the rebellion a character of open opposition to official Tehran, not excluding the possibility of proclaiming the republican Khorasan<sup>25</sup>.

22 Telegram #643 of L. Trotsky, Head of the Revolutionary military council, to G. Chicherin, Minister of foreign affairs, in: *Persian Front*, p. 46.

23 Lahuti Abolqasem (1887, Kermanshah – 1957, Moscow) – an Iranian poet and political activist, active in Iran during constitutional revolution and in Tajikistan in the early Soviet period. Moved to the Soviet Union in 1922. Founder of the Soviet Tajik poetry.

24 Houshang Sabahi, *British Policy in Persia, 1918-1925*, London, Frank Cass, 1990, p. 96.

25 Ali Azari, *Qiyam-e colonel Mohammad Taqi Khan-e Pessian dar Khorasan (The uprising of Colonel Mohammad Taqi Khan Pessian in Khorasan)*, Tehran, 1328 (1950), p. 231.

## **The coup d'état of 1921: birth of a dictator**

The Khorasan rebellion, in which the authorities did not see any political motive, was regarded in the capital as an ordinary case of prolonged hostility between the Cossack and gendarme units and was suppressed by the autumn of 1921 with the help of local tribes that remained faithful to the government.

The capital was concerned with other problems. The political calendar of the beginning of 1921 was marked by two important events: the signing of the Soviet-Iranian treaty of friendship and the coup d'état organized by the British on February 20 (Hut 3), which brought to power the "young reformers" led by Seyyed Zia'eddin Tabatabaee. The Russian pressure on Iran, for which the Jangal movement served as a cover, prepared the conditions for the negotiation process, where the Iranian side for the first time was able to declare itself as an equal participant with an independent voice. This meant that in a complex, contradictory situation, both countries managed to find the ground for the solidarity of their positions.

Created to lobby British interests in Iran, the government that came to power as the result of the coup consisted of individuals who were taking their first steps in politics. An exception to this "cohort of the young" was the head of the cabinet, the famous journalist Seyyed Zia'eddin Tabatabaee. The main resource of the new government in the eyes of society was to be its moral authority, not compromised by participation in the intrigues and dubious political combinations of the past. The next morning after the coup, it was explained to the frightened Shah that nothing threatened his throne, but on the contrary, the coup would only strengthen the monarchy, promoting its movement towards progress. The "Great Game" was gaining momentum again. However, the events of the coming years will show that both the USSR and Great Britain are inclined temporarily to transfer the intense competition to the latent stage.

The government of Seyyed Zia'eddin did not come up to the expectations of its creators and three months later fully, except the Minister of War, announced resignation, starting an acute crisis of power: in two and a half years after the coup, 8 cabinet of ministers changed each other by turns. In this series of appointments, displacements and personnel changes, only Reza Khan Savadkuhi, Colonel of the Persian Cossack Brigade, appointed the Minister of War in April 1921, remained stable. Participation in the coup d'état of 1921 — it was Reza Khan who directed the transfer of units loyal to the conspirators to the capital and who was the actual head of the operation — became a reference point in his political biography. Of course, the support of influential mentors from the British diplomatic services contributed to the beginning of the career of an energetic service officer, compensating for the lack of family contacts, so necessary in Iran for a successful public position. Researchers unanimously state that the reasons for Reza Khan's steady political growth are rooted in his activities precisely in the



military field.

Having become Minister of War, Reza Khan in early 1922 presented his plan for building a new army, the preparation of which fell on the shoulders of his fellow officers of the Persian Cossack Brigade, but not on foreign officers. The creation of a modern army was one of the means to eliminate the threat of the country's collapse, highly exaggerated for propaganda purposes<sup>26</sup>, to overcome tribal fragmentation and build a viable independent state. The emphasis on the problem of "autonomous centers of power" represented by the tribes provided Reza Khan with the support of the parliament, which authorized significant budget allocations for military purposes.

Of course, more than a third of the budget – the amount that cost the creation and equipping of the new Iranian army, became a tremendous financial burden. However, the Iranian treasury resorted to such expenses not for the first time: the expenditure accounted for about 70% of treasury revenues with almost zero results had been made during the reforms of the premier Amir Kabir<sup>27</sup>. The funds allocated to Reza Khan were confirmed by his military victories, although the combined military strength of the tribal leaders exceeded the available capabilities of the center<sup>28</sup>. A professional military man with 30 years of service in the Cossack units, Reza Khan successfully used the tactics of targeted attacks on tribes, simultaneously carried out in different parts of the country. Strengthening the impression of the victories of the center, they fully justified the budget expenditures for the maintenance of the army.

The difficulties of tribal pacification, accompanied by mass executions and confiscations in favor of the loyal to the minister officers, were not limited only to military operations. Equally important was maintaining the obedience of tribal leaders after completing military operations. The regime achieved this in various ways: by cooperating with tribal leadership, skillfully using contradictions inside the tribe itself and among different tribes. A typical example of this kind of policy demonstrate the Bakhtiari tribes. Having experienced their political rise during the mashruteh period, the Bakhtiari leaders, who in 1909 played the main role in the dethronement of Mohammad Ali Shah, linked up with the Qajar dynasty. Strengthening the political positions of the great Bakhtiari khans at the pan-Iranian level at the same time weakened them at the tribal level, provoking a kind of generational conflict. The "younger khans" (khan bacha) challenged the "old people", accusing them of abandoning nomadic life and ignoring their fellow tribesmen<sup>29</sup>.

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26 In 1921, the evacuation of the remnants of Russian military detachments from Gilan began. South Persia Rifles under the command of Brigadier-General Sir Percy Sykes curtailed their activities, demonstratively burning uniforms in Bushehr.

27 Mirza Taqi Khan Farahani, known as Amir(e) Kabir (1807–1852) – Iran's reformer and modernizer, chief minister to Naser al-Din Shah Qajar.

28 Stephanie Cronin, *Tribal Politics in Iran. Rural conflict and the new state, 1921-1941*, Routledge, London, New York, 2007, p. 271.

29 *Ibidem*, p. 75.

It is important to emphasize that wherever the regime succeeded to gain the obedience of tribal leaders, the government resorted to establishing direct military rule. The creation of parallel power structures, appropriating the functions of a civil administration, was alarming not only for the government, but also for the Majlis, which had finally gathered after a seven-year break. The beginning of the election campaign, the preparation of the work of the parliament revived the party life, which had died out after the end of the war. However, the new political blocs appearing in the walls of the parliament turned out to be the twins of their predecessors – bloc of the moderate Ejtemaiyun-e e'tedaliyun (the term "moderate" was withdrawn from the political vocabulary by this time) and of the democrats of the 2nd Majlis (1909-1911), only under other names and with minor correction of programs and members. All of them, paying tribute to time, even in the names of the factions appealed to the progress and revival of Iran and did not bypass social issues, but remained the political cuisine of the capital, as the vulnerability of all the groups without exception was the lack of provincial structures. A comprehensive description of Persian parties of that period was given by V. Osetrov, an employee of the Soviet People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, who claimed that "although they all have an official program, usually translated from the European prototype, more or less corresponding to the name of the party, this program in most cases does not play any role. The Persian party is a community of several people who want to conduct a particular campaign, often by appointing a certain person to a minister, governor or deputy. Sometimes the goals set by such a party are broader and more general, for example, the struggle against the existing cabinet"<sup>30</sup>.

The government programs of the reformers of both directions remained just declarations of intent, since the government had neither the opportunity nor the time to implement them. These circumstances, together with the presence of socially significant problems being solved mainly by military methods, turned Reza Khan into an influential political figure, and it was well understood in the Majlis. The range of opinions in estimating the political role of Sardar Sepah<sup>31</sup> is quite wide. The Minister of War was considered, not without reason, to be the future dictator – a direct threat to the achievements of the mashruteh, or the savior of the fatherland, with a firm hand suppressing the independence of the nomads. The most neutral position was taken by the leader of the majority faction in the 4th Majlis, the influential religious leader Seyyed Hasan Modarres, who positively estimated Reza Khan, considering him "a useful worker, but only if his activity is restricted by submission to the constitution and the Majlis, what is more – remains limited by the tasks of military construction"<sup>32</sup>.

It is well known that until 1922, Reza Khan stayed out of any political pro-

30 V.P. Osetrov, *Persidskie partii: (Pis'mo iz Tegerana)* (Persian Parties. Letter from Tehran), *Novyj Vostok*, No. 1, 1922, pp. 147-148.

31 Title Commander-in-Chief of the Army, by which Reza Khan was known until he became Shah.

32 Fond 495, inventory 90, file 93, p. 17-a, RSASPH.

grams and platforms, busy creating his own group of influence in the parliament. Not just a militarily significant figure, but a serious political player, he becomes with the help of Hezb-e Tajaddod (Revival Party).

### **“Imposed republic”<sup>33</sup>**

The beginning of the formation of Hezb-e Tajaddod can most likely be dated the summer of 1921, when future leaders of the party organized a small group for studying the cultural heritage of Iran. Minister of War Reza Khan Savadkuhi, taking his first steps in politics, became one of its members and later the head<sup>34</sup>. By 1923, this alliance had taken the form of a stable political union, rallied to the struggle for the post of prime minister.

The only serious opponent of Reza Khan was Qavam al-Saltaneh, one of the few Qajar dignitaries who managed to maintain his position after the coup d'état of 1921 and twice in 1921 and 1922 headed the government. He was the first of the Iranian public officials to establish ties with political and financial circles of the United States. At the initiative of Qavam, the American financial mission of Arthur Millspaugh<sup>35</sup> was invited to Iran. This alerted the British, who in such a situation did not consider it proper to provide Qavam with the necessary support in his struggle for premiership. Feeling the shaky position of Qavam, who was arrested and expelled from the country in October 1923 on a false charge of organizing an attempt on the life of Reza Khan, the Iranian press welcomed the Minister of War as the only possible candidate for this post. Sardar Sepah was seen not only as the future prime minister, but also some “ra’is-e doulat” – an obscure “head of state”, thus diminishing the importance of the Shah’s throne and constitution.<sup>36</sup> “A young, strong power is urgently necessary for Persia,” - Tehran newspapers were saying, - “this power should be organized in full accordance with the spirit and historical way of life of Persia. The country’s national characteristics do not fit the framework of constitution, written off from the French-Belgian samples and stupidly applied to Iran. Persia was strong only when the helm of the government was in the hands of a powerful national hero”, who, following the example of such “great dictators,” as: Napoleon, Lenin and Mussolini<sup>37</sup>, would lead Iran out of the crisis. Russian observers noted that obedient to Reza Khan’s will press verbatim, word for word reproduced statements and phrases, “heard from Min-

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33 Mirzadeh Eshghi, *Jomhuri-namah*, in: Eshghi Mirzadeh, *Kolliyat-e mosawwar*, 8th ed., ed. Salimi Moshir, Tehran, 1357 (1978), p. 282 (hereafter Eshghi, *Jomhuri-namah*).

34 Talinn Grigor, Recultivating ‘Good taste’: the early Pahlavi modernists and their society for national heritage, *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2004, pp. 18-45.

35 Arthur Chester Millspaugh (1883–1955) – a former adviser at the U.S. State Department’s Office of the Foreign Trade, hired (1922–1927) to re-organize the Finance Ministry of Iran.

36 Fond 495, inventory 90, file 87, p. 6, RSASPH.

37 *Ibidem*, p. 7-a.

ister of War himself by the people who met him<sup>38</sup>.

We can assume that the stakes in this struggle had prospects that far exceeded the post of head of the executive branch. This was convincingly demonstrated by the example of neighboring Turkey, which with the declaration of the republic on October 29, 1923 completed the gradual evolution from the sultanate to the republican state.

Fearing Minister of War and risking losing “the last miserable remnants of his position as shah”<sup>39</sup>, Ahmad Shah Qajar hesitated as much as he could and had to agree to the premiership of Sardar Sepah, only obeying open blackmail – in exchange for his departure to Europe. Having experienced a shock in his childhood because of the deposition and expulsion from Iran of the father, Muhammad Ali Shah, at the age of 22 he still remained a frightened teenager, afraid of attempts on his life. Dreaming of a safe and comfortable life in Europe, he left Iran in November 1923, but, prone to wasteful spending, continued to hold on to power as the main source of income<sup>40</sup>. By this time, the appointment of Reza Khan as prime minister “did not raise any doubts in anyone and seemed a natural inevitability”<sup>41</sup>. In the absence of the Shah and the Majlis<sup>42</sup>, Reza Khan was becoming the only one who held power, combining the functions of the Prime Minister, Minister of War and Commander-in-Chief.

The Shah’s departure was a signal to the anti-Qajar campaign in the press that had already begun in December. However, as early as February 1924, the meaning of newspaper publications began to change. Continuing to scold the shah, the heir and all the Qajars in a more intensive regime and “recall the atrocities committed at different times by this dynasty, the main newspapers of Tehran “Iran”, “Setara-ye Iran”, “Shafaq-e Sorkh”, “Kushesh” and “Qanun” with many echoes are turning into a unanimous and republican friendly choir<sup>43</sup> requiring the deposition of the monarch. Trying to prevent the possible return of the Shah, “Kushesh” frankly threatened him with the court and retribution that awaited him at home and to enhance the effect published reproductions from French lithographs depicting the execution of Louis XVI. The flow of telegrams and letters from the province marked a new stage in the struggle for the republic. Soon there was little doubt in the capital that the voice of the people was the result of the administrative zeal of the local military authorities or the publishers of the newspapers. The similar content and tone of the messages unmistakably made it possible to guess who the real author of these inspirations was<sup>44</sup>.

38 Ibidem.

39 Ibid, p. 17.

40 Konstantin N. Smirnov, *Zapiski vospitatelya persidskogo shaha, 1907-1914 gody* (Notes of the Persian Shah’s Upbringer, 1907-1914), Tel Aviv, 2002.

41 Fond 495, inventory 90, file 87, p.7-a, RSASPH.

42 The 5th Majlis, the elections to which began in the spring of 1923, opened its meetings on February 11, 1924.

43 Fond 495, inventory 90, file 93, p. 6., RSASPH.

44 Hosein Makki, *Tarikh-e bist sale-ye Iran* (Twenty-year history of Iran), Vol. 3, Tehran, 1325 (1946), p. 19.

The Tehran nobility also hastened to declare their attitude to the upcoming changes, although their republicanism arouses serious doubts. This was followed by “a series of oral and written statements from various groups of the population up to the delegation of city gardeners”, and even some part of the clergy declared itself adherents of the republic<sup>45</sup>. Street processions were as well supposed to demonstrate solidarity with the authorities. Sanctioned by the prime minister and his entourage, they were quite formal.

Perhaps solely a rally organized by the Socialist Party<sup>46</sup> had the element of improvisation. People with red flags, calling “Long live the republic” and “Down with the Qajars” began to appear in the streets of Tehran. Cars decorated with red cloth drove around the city. “Some of the republic’s adherents, supporters of Sardar Sepah and the military close to him, wearing red cotton shirts over their uniforms... came to the Majlis to advocate for the republic”<sup>47</sup>. Hosein Makki calls the participants of these events “dressed in red”, referring this visual sign to the Iranian tradition of people’s movements, in this case – to the so-called “holding red flags” led by Mazdak<sup>48</sup>. Although color symbolism was repeatedly used in the socio-political movements of the early Middle Ages – for example, “dressed in white” supporters of al-Muqanna or the rebellion of Abu Muslim under black banners, it never occurred in Iran later. In the case of the republican movement, we can rather see a gesture of solidarity with the Soviet republic and imitating the system of its state symbols. Both Iranian socialists and Tajaddod were in contact with the Soviet diplomatic mission, which tried to unite the elements of the left-democratic movement into a single National bloc in order to create a strong central authority, independent of nobility and foreign influence.

The single unconditional success of the prime minister’s propaganda campaign was the performance of the famous poet Aref Qazvini who called on the people to support the republic: “May the time of the Qajars pass away! May their tree become barren! May justice be done till the Last Judgment // by a Powerful Hand of the Republic!”<sup>49</sup>. Public recitation of poetic works in Iran, with its logo-centered culture, is associated with mourning celebrations commemorating Imam Husayn<sup>50</sup>. The speeches, accompanied by poems, were also deeply rooted in everyday life as one of the common forms of entertainment. “Ahl-e-sohan” – “men of the word” - storytellers and reciters with their art compensated for the

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45 Fond 495, inventory 90, file 93, p. 11, RSASPH.

46 Led by the Qajar prince Mirza Soleiman Eskandari, this small group worked closely with Tajaddod during the Republican campaign. The so-called “socialism” of this party was limited only to the requirement of maintaining more solid relations with the USSR.

47 Hosein Makki, *Tarikh-e bist sale-ye Iran*... p. 320.

48 Mazdak (VI c.) – a Zoroastrian priest and religious activist, claimed to be a prophet, instituted social welfare program.

49 Qazvini Aref, *Kolliyat-e Divan (The Complete Works)*, Tehran, 1336 (1957), p. 423.

50 Husayn ibn Ali – grandson of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, killed and beheaded on 10 October 680 (10 Muharram according to the Islamic calendar) in the battle of Karbala along with most of his family and companions. In remembrance of the martyrdom of Husayn, Shia Muslims observe the first 10 days of Muharram as days of lamentation.

lack of literacy even among urban residents. At the beginning of the twentieth century, poetry as well became a form of political propaganda. Almost all the newspapers of that time, without exception, contained topical poetic passages the most successful of which were memorized, becoming the property of the bazaar.

Perhaps the only problem for Reza Khan could be parliament. The 4th Majlis completed its work in June 1923, and one of the main concerns of the government was to get a majority on which the prime minister could rely in the new parliament<sup>51</sup>. The elections to the 5th Majlis took place alongside the widespread interference of the military and ended with a convincing victory of the main political ally of Reza Khan the Tajaddod party, although the course of the campaign subsequently became a serious reason for demanding a review of its results.

The government already had the experience of mobilizing their subordinates to solve practical and political problems both in Tehran and in the province. This was convincingly demonstrated by the organization of the election of the prime minister. Even preliminary data on the distribution of votes in the newly elected 5th Majlis (over 50 supporters of the Tajaddod and the socialists united with them)<sup>52</sup> were encouraging. This meant a practically guaranteed victory for the government bloc, which even with a minimal response from the "street" could consider itself a winner. The confidence in the success was so great that Reza Khan chose the date of his own inauguration as the President of Iran - the first day of the Iranian New Year, which falls on March 21. By this date, gold coins of a new, republican type for a traditional New Year's gift had been already issued<sup>53</sup>. The last task was to get the support of the Majlis on the proclamation of a republic, and the Tajaddod party was ready for this, having adopted a decree at its meeting on March 15, more likely to remind of a military order: "Firstly, from this hour Ahmad Mirza has been deposed, the monarchy has been abolished and a republic has been established in Persia. Secondly, it gives the Majlis the right to amend the constitution and to change the current regime, replacing it with a republican one. Thirdly, party members in the capital and in the provinces are obliged ... by all possible means to implement the aforementioned decree. Fourthly, the deputies of the Majlis, members of the faction of independent democrats<sup>54</sup>, as soon as possible are to carry out the aforementioned resolution in the legislative order"<sup>55</sup>.

However, the majority got by the Tajaddod in the Majlis was unreliable. According to the apt observation of the employee of the People's Commissariat of

51 The widespread use of administrative resources in the election campaign was dictated by the character of the law on universal suffrage for men, adopted by the 4<sup>th</sup> Majlis, that ensured the dominance of traditional forces, opponents of Tajaddod.

52 Hosein Makki, *Tarikh-e bist sale-ye Iran* ... p. 306.

53 Ibidem.

54 Independent Democrats is the second name of the Tajaddod Party.

55 Fond 495, inventory 90, file 93, p. 9-a, RSASPH.

Foreign Affairs in Iran, Osetrov, such political unions are brought to life by solving practical problems, they are short-lived and can serve as the basis for the new parties that have nothing to do with the previous ones, or, as we can easily add, stick to the exactly opposite point. Besides rather disturbing were the rumors, that the influence of the British was guessed to hide behind the curtains of the republican campaign<sup>56</sup>.

Of course, both Great Britain and the USSR, which was gradually recovering its positions in Iran, had their own groups of agents of influence: party functionaries, representatives of the nobility and large merchants, whose business interests were connected with both sides. However, this cannot be regarded as an argument in favor of the British special interest in the success of the republican party. Both the British and the Russian sides linked their own perspectives, political and economic, with Sardar Sepah and were interested in establishing a centralized government in Iran, which only Reza Khan could represent at that time. Nevertheless, in relation to the republican campaign, both sides preferred a restrained and cautious position<sup>57</sup>.

Both opponents and supporters of the republican campaign skillfully operated on rumors about the behind-the-scenes participation of external forces, exchanging mutual accusations. These rumors fell on the prepared ground: in the public mind the image of the European imperialist was personified precisely by England, which had dominated in Iran since the First World War. Such speculations were in favor of the opposing Reza Khan parliamentary minority and its permanent leader Seyyed Hasan Modarres, who "in his personal moral qualities and as a political figure could not be compared to any other political figures of Iran ... He had political influence and religious authority among the majority of the population and, if it were not for his individual weaknesses, such a person could stir up the whole of Iran"<sup>58</sup>. Characteristics and political weight of Modarres, reinforced by his high position of a cleric, made him a worthy opponent of the premiere.

However, the conflict of Modarres and Reza Khan was not merely the rivalry of two authoritarian leaders seeking power. Directly connected with the figure of Reza Khan, secular tendencies of the program for the renewal of the society were in contradiction with the political beliefs of Modarres as the leader of the traditional type. Reza Khan was for him the second Mustafa Kemal, who abolished Caliphate 4 months after the proclamation of the Turkish Republic<sup>59</sup>. Modarres was a conservative of the post-revolutionary era and his fidelity to tradition was

56 Mirzadeh Eshghi, *Jomhuri-namah*... pp. 278-280.

57 Michael Zirinsky, Imperial Power and Dictatorship: Britain and the Rise of Reza Shah, 1921-1926, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 1992, pp. 639-663.

58 Hosein Makki, *Tarikh-e bist sale-ye Iran*... p. 4.

59 S.A. Kirillina, A.L. Safronova, V.V. Orlov, Halifatizm v epohu krusheniya Osmanskoj imperii (Caliphism in the era of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire), *Vestnik Rossijskogo universiteta druzhby narodov, Seriya: Vseobshchaya istoriya*, RUDN, Moskva, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2018, pp. 327-337.

based on the requirement of observing the inviolability of the constitution, the guarantor of which should be the most respected Shia theologians. An active participant in the *mashruteh*, Modarres in 1910 was elected to the council of five *faqih*s<sup>60</sup>. In accordance with the Constitution of 1907 this council was to supervise the activities of the *Majlis* and the Shah, having the authority to annul any decision of the legislative power, if it was contrary to *sharia*<sup>61</sup>.

Chosen by Modarres tactics of counteracting assertive republicanism by delaying decision-making, demanding verification of the powers of deputies, etc. – was quite successful. The statement that the *Majlis* had made unlawful decisions on changing the state system crossed out the efforts of the “Reza Khan escort”, who did not want to realize that “telegrams and statements are not sufficient grounds for changing the regime”<sup>62</sup>. Modarres suggested another way to resolve the issue – through a referendum<sup>63</sup>.

The experienced politician Modarres sensed the mood of the bazaar, which changed from calmly expectant to distrustful and hostile. One of the catalysts for the open protest of the bazaar against the republic was the insult inflicted to him in the heat of parliamentary disputes by close to Reza Khan Yahya al-Saltanah, and “the sound of this slap in the face, like a thunder, was heard in Tehran and its outskirts”<sup>64</sup>. “The day after the historical slap in the face, – as an informant of the Soviet embassy states, – everyone knew that there would be no republic by the New Year. Reza Khan himself seemed to realize it earliest of all. With a bitter grin, playing with the words that make up the title Yahya al-Saltanah [Yahya - revival, Saltanah - empire, A.A., T.K.] he said - Yahya al-Saltanah truly revived the monarchy”<sup>65</sup>.

One careless action of the authorities – an attempt to close the bazaar to make people attend a pro-government rally – was enough for the explosion to follow. The angry crowd moved towards the parliament building, and the order of Reza Khan to disperse the protesters by opening fire deprived him of hope to establish republic. “The shops closed, the noise rose. On Saturday, the *Majlis* turned into *Karbala*”<sup>66</sup>. The government saw the face of the townspeople,<sup>67</sup> – commented the “*Twentieth Century*” newspaper on these events. Reza Khan was not the first to face the power of the Tehran bazaar. During *mashruteh* in 1906 the pressure of merchants and craftsmen on the authorities had forced Mozaffar al-Din Shah Qajar to sign a decree introducing the constitution. This time,

60 Islamic jurist.

61 *Sharia* – religious law, forming part of the Islamic tradition.

62 Bulletin of the USSR embassy in Persia, fond 495, inventory 90, file 93, p. 6, RSASPH.

63 *Ibidem*, p. 23-a.

64 Hosein Makki, *Tarikh-e bist sale-ye Iran* . . . p. 319.

65 Fond 495, inventory 90, file 93, p. 17-a, RSASPH.

66 *Karbala* is the place of fierce battle which took place on October 10, 680 and in which the grandson of the Islamic prophet Muhammad Husayn, commemorated as a martyr in Shia Islam, was killed.

67 Mirzadeh Eshghi, *Jomhuri-namah* . . . p. 292.



too, the government stepped back: after a meeting with authoritative theologians of Qom, the prime minister recommended the adherents of the republican idea to give it up. Further, on the way to the throne, Reza Khan will coordinate his political steps with the opinion of Shia clerics<sup>68</sup>.

The parliamentary minority opposing the republic expressed the opinion of the majority of Iranians, on whose behalf also spoke an independent journalist, publisher and poet Mirzadeh Eshghi. A nationalist and pan-Islamist, obsessed then with socialist ideas, Eshghi can be considered the personification of the political uncertainties of the generation of war and, at the same time, of sincere patriotism. "Listen and do not believe,"<sup>69</sup> he called on his compatriots from the pages of his newspaper the "Twentieth Century" and continued: "The holy child of freedom turned out to be a miscarriage," while the republic is "sheep dung in sugar."<sup>70</sup> Against the background of the semi-official pro-republican press, which spoke with the people in the language of political technology, Eshghi's opposing voice was the only one, which received people's response. His poems were purposely composed in a low style register with the use of rude expressions and colloquial forms. In a series of publications, which included a poetic chronicle of parliamentary meetings, he drew a gallery of poetic caricatures of the most famous supporters of the republic, including the prime minister himself: "He [Reza Khan] said: "I'll establish the republic and take it for the reins. The people that demand it will be a donkey. ... Then I'll give them some oats and curb them, and if everything goes smoothly, I'll also saddle them!"<sup>71</sup>. "Alas, [in vain - A.A., T.K.] a long way has been traveled and numerous sufferings have been experienced!"<sup>72</sup>, - such a verdict Eshghi announces as a public figure and concerned citizen<sup>73</sup>.

## Conclusion

This story has an open ending. The public request for strong and independent state, and in fact for a strong personality as its head, formed by Iranian journalism since the First World War, was realized in its standard monarchical form. In October 1925, the 5th Majlis deposed the Qajar dynasty, and in December Reza Khan was declared the hereditary Shah of Iran under the name of Reza Shah Pahlavi.

Examples of neighboring Turkey and Soviet Russia, attracting Iranian nationalists with the possibility of a political figure with the ambitions of a leader of

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68 *Safar-nama-ye Reza-shah-e Pahlavi be Khuzestan wa Mazandaran (The Travel Account of Reza Shah Pahlavi through Khuzestan and Mazandaran)*, USA, 2007.

69 Mirzadeh Eshghi, *Jomhuri-namah*... pp. 295-297.

70 *Ibidem*, pp. 298-299.

71 *Ibidem*, p. 280.

72 *Ibidem*, p. 286.

73 Shortly after the publication of these verses, Eshghi was assassinated. His funeral turned into a mass march of Tehran people who buried the journalist as a martyr for the faith (shahid) in his bloody clothes.

a national level coming to power, turned out to be unclaimed by society. The proclamation of the Soviet socialist republic in Gilan was perceived in Iran quite indifferently. It was seen as the example of military expansion with the possibility of the collapse of the country. However, the activity of the Bolshevik emissaries meanwhile stimulated the formation of the left-democratic and trade union movement, which became the adherents of the republic in 1923-24.

The republican campaign launched by Reza Khan and his entourage provoked a clash of two forces that had the ability to mobilize their supporters quickly and effectively: a new candidate for power, who, unlike the members of the Qajar family, could confidently rely on the army, and such traditional institution as the clergy, supported in cities by tradesmen and craftsmen. These two forces represented quite opposite principles and hidden behind them values – a secularly oriented nationalistic approach and the inertia of tradition, which at the beginning of the 20th century reinforced its positions by the text of the constitution, giving prominent Shia theologians the right to control the legislature. Having defeated their opponents during the republican campaign, the traditional forces at that time were not able to offer the society, searching for a way to break the deadlock of the Qajar rule, a promising political counter-project.

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**Ана Ардашникова, Тамара Конјашкина**

## **МОДЕРНИЗАЦИЈА ПРОТИВ ТРАДИЦИЈЕ У БОРБИ ЗА РЕПУБЛИКУ У ИРАНУ 1920-ТИХ ГОДИНА**

### **Сажетак**

Циљ овог чланка јесте анализа првих покушаја успостављања републике у Ирану 1920-тих година. Ревизија монархистичког принципа довела је до рађања два независна републиканска покрета. Један од њих водио је традиционалистички лидер Кучик Кан, који је заступао совјетске идеје, а други је вођен од стране премијера Резе Кана, који заступао идеју увођења диктатуре на принципима национализма. Препреке за успостављање оба модела било је одбијање верских ауторитета, али и самог иранског народа. Користећи мултидисциплинарни приступ, овај чланак анализира пропаганду обе стране. Чланак се заснива на архивског грађи која се по први пут износи пред научну јавност.

**Кључне речи:** Иран, република, Кучин Кан, Гилан, Реза Кан, Таџадод партија, Ешхи

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