

Review

Kermanshah City and Province, Willem Floor, Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2018, ISBN 978-949445-00-8 (hbk), 591 pp., 60 illus.

Having scoured the Persian Gulf coast, publishing at least five books on its various port cities and one on their hinterland, Willem Floor has now moved inland, with an exhaustive study of the western town and province of Kermanshah between the onset of the Qajar period and the end of World War II.

Floor calls Kermanshah a city usually ignored by historians (with the notable exception of local historian Mohammad Ali Soltani's ten-volume magnum opus on the subject).¹ The likely reason for that is that, for most of its history, Kermanshah was a rather unprepossessing place with little to recommend it. The bishop of Babylon, passing through in the 1840s, called it a very ugly, half-ruined city, without a wall or a fortress. The Russian orientalist Wladimir Ivanow, who visited Kermanshah in 1913, dismissed it as a "dirty place, inhabited by a motley crowd of Kurds, Persians, Azeri Turks, Armenians, 'Baghdad Jews', as they were then called, and all sorts of riff-raff elements." And Constance M. Alexander in the early Reza Shah period concluded that, beyond the bazaar, there was "nothing of much interest" to see in the city.

¹Soltani, *Jogbrafiya-ye tarikh*.

The eyewitnesses cited in this book echo that assessment, reinforcing the impression that until the 1950s, Kermanshah remained a rather underdeveloped small market town. Kermanshah nevertheless was not without importance, if only because it was a frontier town located close to the border with the Ottoman Empire, and later Iraq, on the transit route connecting Baghdad and Isfahan. It was also the center of a large hinterland inhabited by largely autonomous and quarrelsome tribes such as the Sanjabi and the Kalhor.

Floor mainly relies on various British archives, above all the records of the National Archives in Kew Gardens, in addition to the Presbyterian archive in Philadelphia and a plethora of printed sources, mostly European travelogues, to narrate Kermanshah's story, and he does so, following these records, in great, at times excruciating, detail.

Kermanshah is divided into seven chapters, the first of which outlines the little we know about Kermanshah between the tenth century, when the place is first mentioned in the sources, and ca. 1800. Chapter 2 offers an overview of the location of the city, its inhabitants, its religious makeup and its institutions, ranging from the educational system to medical facilities. We learn a great deal about religious divisions, the local Christian population, the type of medical care available and the city's sanitation, the latter a problematic issue in light of the fact that Kermanshah served as a waystation for the traffic in corpses to be buried in the 'Atabāt, the Shi'i shrine cities of Iraq. Further information is offered on schools, the local newspapers and the postal service, as well as the available types of public entertainment. The chapter also contains an interesting overview of local standards of living, fluctuating prices, hoarding and hardship, including conditions during the Allied occupation in the early 1940s.

Chapter 3 examines the administrative structure, the system of government, the branches of the municipality, the gendarmerie, the customs office, the banks, the police forces and its foreign legations, the British, the Russians, Iraq, with lists of the officials in the case of the first two.

Chapter 4 covers the eponymous province. It offers extensive data on climate, the region's population and its composition, as well as the tax system as it evolved in the twentieth century. It also discusses the tribes—the Kalhors, the Sanjabis and others—their divisions and feuds, all with numbers and figures as tabulated by the assiduous British record keepers.

A brief Chapter 5 deals with agriculture and is followed by a much longer one on trade. The town's commercial attractiveness, it turns out, was its location, about equidistant from major population centers such as Baghdad, Tehran, Isfahan and Tabriz. The chapter includes detailed descriptions of the trade routes connecting Kermanshah with the world, as well as information about transportation costs and road security, which was by no means guaranteed in the face of the perennially marauding tribal elements. Chapter 6 also contains an interesting section on the pilgrim traffic to the Iraqi shrine cities, which involved large caravans consisting of up to 2,000 mules and as many people. All in all, it seems that, from a ruinous state in the 1840s, the trade of Kermanshah, mostly to and from Baghdad and much of it con-

ducted by the same city's Jewish merchant houses, increased throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, taking up much of the slack from the Trabzon–Tabriz road, which fell into decline as of the 1870s. Most of the imports, textiles in first place, originated in Britain or in British India. Britain was the destination of most exports, too, predominantly wheat, wool, raw silk and carpets, among other items; the remainder went to Ottoman markets. With the exception of World War I and the years immediately following, a period of extreme misery and deprivation, this increase continued, to the point where, by the early 1920s, Kermanshah was Iran's most important gateway for imports.

Whereas Chapters 2 to 6 are all rather static, Chapter 7, the final and longest one, discusses change and development in the period between the early Qajar period and the end of World War II. Mostly relying on British consular reports, it enumerates its governors from 1794 onwards—all eighty-four of them. The most interesting of these is surely the formidable Mohammad 'Ali Mirza Dowlatshah, Fath Ali Shah's oldest son and governor of not just Kermanshah but a large swath of western Iran between 1806 and 1821. A poet as well as a potentate, he steered the town toward prosperity while seeking to engage French military assistance in his quest for autonomy from Tehran. In this chapter Floor also details the intermittent tribal uprisings, the factionalism in town, the turbulent years of the Constitutional Revolution, marked by recurring periods of insecurity, crime and tribal violence in the city and the surrounding countryside. He pays particular attention to the role Kermanshah played in the bizarre attempt by Mohammad 'Ali Shah's brother, Abu'l Fath Mirza Salar al-Dowleh, to create a separate kingdom, first in the name of the exiled shah and then, when Mohammad 'Ali Shah had been definitively defeated, in his own name. First launched in 1907, Salar al-Dowleh's project in the next five years turned into an interminable series of skirmishes with government troops involving multiple forays in and out of Kermanshah, which the Qajar prince considered his capital—until 1913, when he was defeated and had to leave the city under Russian escort, allowed a pension on condition that he would go to and stay in Switzerland. All these disturbances were accompanied by much plunder and bloodshed. This part of the story is retold, much of it verbatim, in a separate book that Floor published on Salar al-Dowleh.²

A lengthy part of the same chapter is also devoted to World War I, another turbulent period in the history of Kermanshah. Tribal unrest broke out again and the city, formally in the Russian sphere of influence, became a hotbed of foreign political activity, and in particular the center of German activity and influence in Iran following the arrival of their overbearing consul, Max Otto Schöne-mann, in early 1915. Taking advantage of strong anti-British and anti-Russian sentiments among the Iranians, the Germans made alliances with various tribal leaders as well as the nationalists, until Russian forces occupied the city in early 1916. In the summer of the same year, the Turkish army took over. The

²Floor, *Salar al-Dowleh*.

arrival, later that year, of the Turkish and German-supported provisional government led by Nezam al-Saltaneh finally brought some stability to the city. Law and order was reestablished, taxes were collected, local stamps were printed, and a newly opened branch of the Deutsche Bank issued German imperial treasury notes that were backed by German silver. Changing conditions in Iraq caused by the final fall of Baghdad to the British in early 1917 forced the Turkish to vacate the city and the Russians to move in again. They did not stay long, for soon the Russian October Revolution left them bereft of any support, allowing the British Dunsterville Force to take over a weary city, where they were faced with continued tribal support for the Turkish–German cause, and soon with a stream of mostly Armenian refugees from the Urmiyeh region. Here, as elsewhere, the sheer volume of detail told in staccato fashion at times swamps the narrative, making it hard for the reader to follow the course of events in any other than a strictly linear fashion.

For reasons that remain unclear, almost no written information about Kermanshah city and province has been preserved from the Reza Shah era. Soltani's work reflects this in the mere six pages it dedicates to the city in this period, and Floor confirms that the British archives, having been misplaced or lost, do not add much. This means that the period 1921–41 and the attendant modest modernization that took place at that time is summarily treated here as well.

World War II, by contrast, receives ample attention. Much of this goes to the interesting topic of Allied propaganda by way of public broadcasts, films, the advocacy of proper military behavior and, in the case of the British, poverty alleviation by way of the Anglo-Iranian Relief Fund—all of it designed to create goodwill and sway the populace against the Nazis. The British, having only short-term objectives, were less successful in this than the Russians, who, thinking beyond the war, were much more focused and successful in their efforts to establish a presence in the parts of Iran where they operated—as is evidenced in the strong, albeit initially rather muted, showing of the local Tudeh party from 1944 onward.

Kermanshah concludes with fourteen appendixes on themes as varied as petitions by merchants, sanitary conditions surrounding the pilgrimage to the 'Atabat, and the elections of 1947. By far the lengthiest, most important and informative one concerns the state of the city's Jewish community.³

This book, a doorstopper at nearly 600 A4 size pages, tells you everything you always wanted to know about Kermanshah, as well as many things you never thought of asking. Floor has certainly made Kermanshah, currently no longer a small market town but a city of around a million, more interesting than it appeared at first glance. The book comes with sixty-five illustrations. It is just too bad that, with some exceptions, these are not credited.

³The author meanwhile has co-published a separate article in Persian on this topic: see Floor, Mohammadi, and Beygi, "Jame'eh-ye Yahudan-e Kermanshah."

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Rudi Matthee

University of Delaware

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